HUNKS OF MEAT: HOMICIDAL HOMOSOCIALITY AND HYPERHETERNORMATIVITY IN CANNIBAL HORROR

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Cannibalism and male homosexuality are inextricably linked in modern cannibal horror. The associations between male homosexuality and cannibalism in horror films from the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century are the result of a twofold drive. On one level, these films profoundly “Other” narratively-irredeemable villains, while at the same time providing another point of deviance for sympathetic villains to discard. At the same time, these films have a dramatic interest in creating villains and situations that maximize the audience’s revulsion and discomfort (and thus the catharsis via confrontation in a controlled setting, and transcendence through leaving the theatre). These films depict cannibalism as a homosocially transgressive act—a transgression that may not be immediately apparent to the victim of cannibalism. Cannibal horror depicts a threat to the presumed-normal and socially-accepted heterosexual and homosocial relationships that transcends mere moral panic or anti-gay hysteria. This genre develops cannibalism into a taboo even more horrifying to the viewer than societal mores would already have him or her believe. This abjection-association attempts to make monsters of those whose homosocial relationships in any way deviate from the heterosexual standard—most notably, homosexual men. Modern cannibal horror decries any sexual expression beyond tightly-constrained and strictly-defined heterosexuality as not only socially deviant, but also intensely repugnant, morally transgressive, and, ultimately, punished by death.
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HUNKS OF MEAT: AN INTRODUCTION

Why are the majority of cannibal antagonists and victims in modern horror male? Where are the women in these films? And when there are women in cannibal horror (as either victims or antagonists), what about their presentations or situations makes their presence so exceptional? These questions led to this thesis’s formulation and have led me to a further conclusion: cannibalism and male homosexuality are inextricably linked in modern cannibal horror. I argue that the associations between male homosexuality and cannibalism in horror films from the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century are the result of a twofold drive. On one level, these films profoundly “Other” narratively-irredeemable villains, while at the same time providing another point of deviance for sympathetic villains to discard, a la Hannibal Lecter and his developing professional/personal relationship with Clarice Starling. At the same time, these films have a dramatic interest in creating villains and situations that maximize the audience’s revulsion and discomfort (and thus the catharsis via confrontation in a controlled setting, and transcendence through leaving the theatre)—an audience that is historically 18-34-year-old straight males. These films depict cannibalism as a homosocially transgressive act—that is, an act that twists the male bond of friendship as defined by Sedgwick by making it decidedly one-sided—a transgression that may not be immediately apparent to the victim of cannibalism. In doing so, these films wear on their metaphorical sleeves just what’s so horrible about the horror contained therein. Cannibal horror depicts a threat to the presumed-normal and socially-accepted heterosexual and homosocial relationships that transcends mere moral panic or anti-gay hysteria. This genre develops cannibalism into a taboo even more horrifying to the viewer than societal mores would already have him or her believe. This abjection-association attempts to make monsters of those whose homosocial relationships in any way deviate from the heterosexual
standard—most notably, homosexual men. Furthermore, the limited presence of female antagonists in cannibal horror is noteworthy specifically because of its limitations. As cannibalism in these films is largely relegated to male-on-male violence, presentations of cannibalistic women involve a number of compensatory techniques to reinforce heteronormativity—techniques I will identify and analyze in “Nuclear Families and Home-Cooked Meals: Hyper-Heteronormative Misogyny in Cannibal Clan Films.”

While there have been a number of recent academic works examining the interrelationships of cannibalism, desire, hunger, and sexuality in popular culture, my thesis will address connections which have thus far been unaddressed in the academic literature. Judith Halberstam’s *Skin Shows* examined presentations of skin in modern horror (of the psychological, slasher, and splatter subgenres), but is limited to assessments of how those presentations frame identity in terms of race and gender. I seek to look at the consumption of flesh in modern horror films, and how presentations of it reinforce heteronormative identity. Numerous works by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have addressed such diverse concepts as the conventions of gothic horror, male homosocial desire, closeting, and shame. I seek to unify the discussion of cannibal horror conventions, male homosocial desire, closeting, and shame within this thesis. Cannibal horror conventions are rooted in prevailing cultural assumptions about homosocial desire; the “horror” in cannibal horror would not function without this transgression. Yet the construction of the sympathetic villain (or, conversely, the unlikable hero) in a number of these films requires introducing closeting and shame into the mix, so as to humanize such characters without making them sympathetic—they *are* monsters according to the narrative, after all. Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight* examined homogenizing images of women in popular culture and presentations of male hunger as it related to marginalizing female desire in general. I will
examine presentations of male hunger as it relates to the marginalization of non-heteronormative desire. Kevin Ohi’s “Devouring Creation” interrelates sodomy and cannibalism in Oscar Wilde’s “Suddenly Last Summer” as a means of analyzing the play’s presentation of the homosexuality of one of the central characters. I will examine how this interrelation is implicitly present throughout significant portions of cannibal horror. Finally, significant amounts of the existing anthropological literature on cannibalism have focused on how historical accounts and research on anthropophagous groups have served to Other or otherwise dehumanize those groups. As this convention is employed consistently within this horror subgenre as a similar means of Othering and dehumanizing its subjects, it is appropriate that I will consult such anthropologically-grounded studies in my work. In particular, the work of Frank Lestringant in his Cannibals provides numerous examples of historical accounts of cannibalism emphasizing the taboo nature of the practice. I would be remiss to exclude contributions from scholars such as Peter Hulme, whose statement “Cannibalism does exist. It exists as a term within colonial discourse to describe the ferocious devouring of human flesh practiced by some savages”\(^1\) describes this entire perspective with remarkable precision. As a whole, my intention with this thesis is to bring a new perspective to the examination of a horror subgenre, while also making connections between existing perspectives on popular culture that have not yet been fully explored.

Before proceeding further into this analysis, it is necessary to state my position relative to my subject matter and its connotations. As a straight middle-class male in my late twenties, I was a member of the target market for the majority of the films I examine in this work (at the time of their release I was in my late teens to early twenties). However, as a student of cultural studies interested in horror and a fan of theoretical frameworks like Sedgwick’s (herself a married,

\(^1\) Hulme, *Colonial Encounters*, p. 183
monogamous heterosexual who frequently wrote about queer issues and theories), I feel I would be doing a great disservice to the discipline and my critical role models by not critically interpreting films marketed largely towards me and mine during my formative years. The repugnance with which I regard the (homophobic, conflating-male-homosexuality-with-cannibalism, poisonously intolerant) message of these films may make it difficult at times to present my analysis without appearing too vitriolic. These films were released during the era of the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy in the military, before gay marriage had been legalized in virtually any states, and when the most progressive depiction of male homosexuality in widespread popular culture was the television show *Will and Grace* (problematic in ways articulated by Denis Provencher far better than I ever could)\(^2\). I am hesitant to appear complacent towards the intolerant and regressive nature of such a genre message (the fear here being that bringing attention to the topic without criticism may be tantamount to acceptance of the topic)—and, as such, I ask that the reader accept my apologies in advance for any instances in which this work is, by turns, either too vitriolic or insufficiently antagonistic towards its primary sources; my intention is far more analytical than polemical.

This analysis begins with an examination of presentations of rural in-groups of cannibals, or “cannibal clans.” It remains a hotly contested issue within anthropology (and to an extent in cultural studies as a whole) whether cannibalism as a historical event existed outside of isolated accounts, and that attributions of cannibalism by explorers and anthropologists have been used in anthropological disciplinary history to Other people and reduce them to subhuman status \(^3\). I argue that cannibalism in modern horror does something else altogether. In the cases of the remade/rebooted *Hills Have Eyes* and *Wrong Turn* franchises, such texts have turned Othering

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\(^2\) Provencher, “Sealed with a Kiss”

\(^3\) Lestringant, *Cannibals*, p. 7
from cultural to sexual. This Othering is crucial to understanding my argument, and thus, the inclusion of “Nuclear Families and Home-Cooked Meals: Hyper-Heteronormative Misogyny in Cannibal Clan Films” near the beginning of my thesis is necessary to establish such a connection early, so that I may develop it further in the remainder of the text. The cannibalistic clans portrayed in these films are differentiated from the protagonists because of their cannibalism, yet their familial structures and interactions are frequently hyper-heteronormative. I examine three facets of these films in which a hyper-heteronormative ideology is present: (1) the (limited) presentations of cannibalistic women; (2) the exaggeratedly normative familial structures of the cannibal clans; and (3) the value placed in these films on the “to-be-bred-with-ness” of their female characters by the antagonists. The antagonistic groups in these films employ this hyper-heterosexualization to compensate for the overarching homosexual connotations of the cannibalism in which they engage. This examination makes heavy use of Sedgwick’s work on homosocial bonds. Throughout this chapter (and others), I will also use Mulveyian analyses of audience perspective and the aesthetic and narrative presentations of the characters/groups examined.

In “Hannibal Lecktor/Lecter and Other Monsters: Definition by Opposition in Three Films,” I examine how Manhunter, its remake Red Dragon, and Silence of the Lambs connect devouring flesh to expressing one's internal identity (though in each case this identity is presented as criminally deviant). Furthermore, these films provide an antagonist whose mannerisms demonstrate a bridge between cannibalism and homosexuality, as Hannibal Lecter is presented with mannerisms, tastes (excepting the obvious), and aesthetic interests that would be typically associated in popular culture with effeminate, if not outright homosexual, males. This connection also provides an interesting contrast between Lecter and the antagonist Francis
“Tooth Fairy” Dolarhyde in *Manhunter* and *Red Dragon*, and Jame “Buffalo Bill” Gumb in *Silence of the Lambs*, a point of contrast that, as it develops, clearly advances my argument. While the two serial killers on the loose in these films are presented as being deviant beyond their killing pathologies (Dolarhyde is possibly schizophrenic *and* rapes women and murders their families, Gumb is “something beyond transsexual” *and* keeps women in his basement and makes a skin suit from them), Lecter’s explicit deviance is solely his appetite (which was also his modus operandi in serial murder); homosexuality is an implicit deviance. In addition, I demonstrate that these films present Hannibal Lecter as assured in his decision to practice cannibalistic murder, yet ultimately depict him as less effective than family man Will Graham (in *Manhunter* and *Red Dragon*), specifically because of Graham’s ability to rely on his family (in particular, his wife). In *Silence of the Lambs*, however, Lecter is presented as significantly more competent and successful, though I argue that this is less due to any positive connotations to his cannibalism or character, and more as a result of his adversary —Clarice Starling, who as a woman in cannibal horror is marginalized, despite being the ostensible protagonist. Where "Nuclear Families and Home-Cooked Meals" identified the marginalization of women within the examined films as a consequence of compensatory techniques that reconcile female presence in cannibal horror through hyper-heteronormativity, Starling is marginalized in a different way altogether. Her actions repeatedly endanger her own life as well as the lives of those around her (indeed, interacting with Lecter leads to one death after her first visit and at least two others in a subsequent trip), and her attempts to manipulate Lecter allow him to achieve his goals throughout the film. Indeed, Starling is presented as having succeeded in her case through equal parts Lecter’s help and dumb luck. Recall, after all, that she catches Buffalo Bill after realizing too late that the man she’s interviewing about the previous tenant of his home is in fact the
person she’s looking for. In this chapter, I contrast her uncertain, coincidence-driven success with Lecter’s calculated, gradual planning—planning that, as I will argue in the following chapter, make his cannibalism / sexuality (and how the two are intertwined) seem all the more deliberate.

“Dinner for Two: Revenge and Romance in Hannibal and Hannibal Rising” concludes my analysis of the Hannibal Lecter pentalogy with an examination of both revenge cannibalism and Hannibal Lecter’s variable sexuality in Hannibal and Hannibal Rising. In particular, I examine the ways in which these films present Hannibal Lecter’s sexuality as an expressed, deliberate choice (one which vacillates between explicitly heterosexual acts with female partners and implicitly homosexual, explicitly cannibalistic acts with male victims), which bookends the series with two moments: one in which Lecter avoids sexual congress with a woman in favor of carrying out sexually-charged cannibalism (against men) in Hannibal Rising, and one in which Lecter attempts to share in cannibalism (of a male) with a woman. I will explain that the overarching message of this series, exemplified by these scenes within the context of their respective films, is that cannibalism is a choice; thus, so too is the homosexuality with which it is associated. This chapter will also include much of my consideration of the connections between homosexuality (and other such homosocially transgressive behaviors) and cannibalism. While these connections will indeed be explored in every chapter of my thesis, this chapter is particularly important for making this case, because it will consider the bookends of the Lecter series in its diegetic chronology, and thus will identify themes present throughout the fictional life of one of popular culture’s best-known figures in cannibal horror.

This work concludes with a chapter on a lesser-known film: Antonia Bird’s Ravenous. Within ”Eating to Live, Living to Eat: Cannibalism and Sexual Appetite in Ravenous,” I will
examine the film’s treatment of frontier desperation cannibalism, drawing parallels between its presentation of Boyd’s reluctance to face his inner identity in the presence of Colqhuon’s devil’s-advocacy with the presentation of a homosocial relationship developing into a homosexual one. This analysis is largely indebted to Sedgwick’s work with shame, as well as her aforementioned work about the importance of demonizing homosexual relationships in the development of homosocial ones. As a result, this film frames the conclusion (in which Boyd commits suicide in order to restrict cannibalism to himself and Colqhuon) as a shame-suicide by a man in denial—one that, nevertheless, the film presents as an act of great heroism. I argue that the film proposes that the only way for a man to reclaim himself after succumbing to a hunger for the flesh of men is to kill himself, and that such an act is noble. As such, this chapter will be the one in which I attempt to make my most damning case against the conservatism of cannibal horror: that as a genre it is not simply content to demonize cannibalism (and by association, homosexuality), but that it advocates suicide over mere renunciation (as the Hannibal Lecter pentalogy attempts to articulate).

Taken holistically, I identify and enumerate the ways in which cannibal horror is one of the most socially conservative subcategories of an already extremely reactionary genre. Where slasher horror argues against teen sexuality and experimentation with substances, and classic monster horror makes the case that adolescent sexuality is something monstrous that must be deeply controlled and regulated, cannibal horror goes one step further. In cannibal horror, the marginalization of women removes the possibility of the slasher-style “final girl”—Clarice Starling survives the Lecter pentalogy as much through his efforts as through her own, and Nina in Wrong Turn 2 survives by following a plan devised by the hyper-masculine athlete Jake.

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4 Hills, The Pleasures of Horror, p. 188
whereas the typical final girl survives entirely through her own resolve and action. Where the zombie subgenre of horror points to the importance of community in triumphing over man’s inhumanity to man, cannibal horror says that merely being in a communal unit is not enough: the community must be heteronormative and any deviation from that is itself monstrous. Where vampiric horror films echo Victorian notions about the unacceptable nature of social discussions or recognition of any forms of sexuality, cannibal horror’s demonization of male homosexuality and privileging of heteronormativity make only non-heteronormative sexuality unacceptable. Modern cannibal horror is its own beast altogether: one that decries any sexual expression beyond tightly-constrained and strictly-defined heterosexuality as not only socially deviant, but also intensely repugnant, morally transgressive, and, ultimately, worthy of punishment by death.

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5 Bishop, “Dead Man Still Walking,” p. 2
NUCLEAR FAMILIES AND HOME-COOKED MEALS: HYPER-HETERONORMATIVE MISOGYNY IN CANNIBAL CLAN FILMS

The interconnections of cannibal horror and presentations of sexuality do not exist in a generic vacuum. Before I can examine the ways in which cannibal horror provides connotations of male homosexuality with the end result of demonizing queer sexuality, it is important that I articulate the means by which this subgenre elevates the societally-acceptable alternative—simply put, how these films position heterosexuality as the norm to be reinforced, and heteronormativity as the standard against which any deviation is judged and punished.

Furthermore, it is crucial that I identify those movies that do not attempt to correlate cannibalism to male homosexuality directly, yet nevertheless serve to reinforce heteronormativity while employing cannibalism as a central vehicle for the horror of the films themselves. It is for these reasons that I present here an examination of a selection of horror movies from the early 2000s that I will henceforth collectively refer to as “cannibal clans” films—films in which the cannibalistic villains operate as a family unit and are diegetically identified as blood-relatives. Through the familial structures of the cannibal clans of these films, the ways in which the narratives of these films demonstrate the success of the antagonists, and the importance these narratives place on their female characters’ to-be-bred-with-ness, these films represent a thematically consistent horror film subgenre, one whose perspectives on heterosexuality and interactions between the sexes are as culturally regressive and unwaveringly brutal as its antagonists.

Be they the backwoods Virginians of the Wrong Turn franchise, down-home Texans from the so-named chainsaw massacre, or the radioactive mutants who lend eyes to the Hills Have Eyes franchise, the anthropophagic clans of cannibal horror all share a number of
similarities in terms of their familial structures. These similarities include an emphasis on firm-handed patriarchal leadership, a view of women as breeding stock, and a strict codification of the hierarchy of parents and children within the family unit. These similarities serve to unite the cannibal clans subgenre as a distinctly identifiable category of movies—while they do share broad categorical similarities with slasher subgenre movies and horror genre movies, cannibal clan movies have far more in common with one another than they do with other slasher films. As a result of these similarities, this subgenre can be discussed as a body of work whose defining characteristics can then be analyzed.

More important, however, is what these similarities say about the cannibal horror subgenre’s presentations of heteronormativity: namely, that those monsters who enforce heteronormativity ultimately “win” more often than not. These films may present their cannibal clans as monstrous antagonists, but at the conclusion of each entry I will examine here, they remain antagonists whose perspective is diegetically reinforced through their continued existence. The message then becomes not only that the family unit itself persists in perpetuity regardless of outside interference, but further that heterosexuality’s greatest strength is its sustainability: the cannibal clans repopulate, whereas the protagonist-survivors merely flee. The antagonists remain a threat through their repopulation; the protagonists win by pairing off. The perpetuation of the antagonists through repopulation in particular repeatedly demonstrates a brutally dehumanizing misogyny that places paramount importance on viewing women as breeding stock alone (as I will address in more depth later in this piece). In either case, the message remains clear: in cannibal clan movies, heteronormativity is the order of the day and no deviation survives.
In nearly all of the cannibal clan films, enforcement of heteronormativity within the family unit begins with a strong patriarch. Here I will be defining “strength” as both physical superiority (over younger men in-clan and outsiders without, as well as demonstrable physical superiority over any cannibalistic women when they are present) and force of will or demonstrated leadership ability (or at the very least, the quality of being looked up to and listened to by others within the family unit).

In both 2006’s *The Hills Have Eyes* and 2007’s *The Hills Have Eyes 2*, the expeditionary war leaders of the clans (that is to say, the characters in positions of authority who lead the clans as they attack and subdue the protagonist-survivors) are the fathers of the current generations of their respective clans—Papa Jupiter in the former film, and Papa Hades in the latter. In each film, its respective Papa leads the cannibals to kill the men they target and capture the women—Jupiter and the Carter family, and Hades and the National Guard reservists. In each film, the first appearance of the patriarchal character shows that character employing violence to assert dominance: Papa Jupiter attempts to kill the father of the Carter family (presumably to destabilize the Carters and make their consumption—in a number of ways—easier for the mutants), and Papa Hades kills the mother of his stillborn infant child (part of the presentation of women as breeding stock in these films, which I will address later) in retaliation for (his perception of her) failure to provide him with a child. *Wrong Turn 2: Dead End*’s “Pa” follows similar trends, leading the assault on the survivors and, in a scene near the end of the film, presiding over a family meal (at an arranged dinner table, television on in the background, as his wife serves him and their children their meal) from the head of the table. Even Old Monty Hewitt, family patriarch of the 2003 version of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, dictates orders to his family, directing Leatherface who to kill and where, serving as a force of will alone (as
Hewitt is wheelchair-bound at the beginning of the film and without legs by the end—at his own direction). In each of these films, the identified patriarch of the particular cannibal clan leads his family in hyper-heteronormative ways: the dinner tableau with Pa is almost a parody of a 1950s sitcom family; Papa Hades’s first victim in the film is a woman who could not bear him a child; Papa Jupiter first attacks the patriarch of the “opposing” family, while, simply because he is the patriarch, Monty Hewitt barks unquestioningly-followed orders at a man with three feet and a few hundred pounds on him.

The presentations of women as breeding stock within cannibal clans movies carries with it not only obvious connotations of misogyny, but implications of homophobia as well (or at the very least, marginalization of non-heterosexual sex to the point of absence). After all, if the procreative act is so privileged in these films, non-procreative sex is implied to be a lesser deed—and while non-procreative heterosexual sex is presented and punished within these films (most notably in Wrong Turn 2, as I will discuss), homosexual sex is by its very nature non-procreative and its non-representation in these films altogether (there are no openly gay protagonists in these films, nor are there homosexual survivor-pairs) can be seen as a marginalization, if not an outright condemnation, of vast swaths of the spectrum of sexuality. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in writing about homosocial desire, said:

> Homophobia directed by men against men is misogynistic, and perhaps transhistorically so. (By “misogynistic” I mean not only that it is oppressive of the so-called feminine in men, but that it is oppressive of women.)¹

¹ Sedgwick, Between Men p.20
I would argue that in the case of these cannibal clan horror films, the relationship can cut in the other direction: misogyny on film is, in the cases I shall present, implicitly homophobic. By presenting women as breeding stock (going even further than the Mulveyian woman-as-to-be-looked-at/object,\textsuperscript{2} to woman-as-to-be-bred-with/vessel), these films frame the interactions of men and women as being procreative first and foremost. One could argue that the antagonists of these films are the ones with this gender-relational perspective; however, I cannot stress enough that while this may indeed be true, the narratives of these films time and time again present the cannibal clans as a persistent threat. Also, while the protagonists may in some cases escape from the clans with whom they clash, these families persist and are sustained through their treatment of women. The antagonists’ perspective on gender relations is thus diegetically and narratively reinforced as ultimately correct, in that their actions in keeping with such a perspective are effective and successful for perpetuating their line.

Consider the Virginian mutants of the 	extit{Wrong Turn} franchise. In the first film, the male survivors are dispatched quickly, but the sole (successful) female survivor of the film only lives because the cannibals do not kill her immediately. Jessie is taken back to their cabin in the woods and, when found by impromptu partner (and eventual survivor-pair-mate) Chris, is tied up to a bed and gagged, making her intended violation clear. Before this point in the film, the cannibals have not been shown to keep any live victims to speak of; anyone vulnerable enough to be captured has been dispatched and butchered for food. Jessie, as the sole living woman at this point, has obviously been set aside for another fate. Given that there are no female cannibals presented in the original 	extit{Wrong Turn}, the question of perpetuation of the species is answered.

\textsuperscript{2} Mulvey, 	extit{Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema}
through implication: women are kept as breeding stock and die after being used as vessels to incubate new additions to the cannibal clan.

*Wrong Turn 2* explicitly answers the question of perpetuation, as well as providing additional reinforcement of the genre prohibition against non-procreative sex. Elena and M are killed after the cannibals’ offspring observe the former performing oral sex on the latter. Soon after, the remaining survivors stumble upon the aforementioned brother and sister mutants (referred to in the credits as simply “Brother” and “Sister”) engaged in intercourse, with the sister-cannibal wearing the late Elena’s scalp as a wig. The cannibals here reenact a sexual act in the way they deem “right,” using the props of the fallen as needed (in a previous scene, Sister had observed Brother becoming aroused at the sight of Elena). That incest is the prevailing mode of perpetuation of the cannibalistic species in this film is not a coincidence. Incest is commonly related to cannibalism in historical accounts; Frank Lestringant identifies this in his *Cannibals* when he notes:

“…what the Cannibals lost in myths, they gained in evocative power. Detached from a fabulous prehistory, they immediately fed on what is easily identified as repression…Hence, also, the ancillary sexuality of these man-eaters, which effectively weds incest to anthropophagy”

The previous scene is not the only one in which cannibal-clan-women are used as breeding stock. Indeed, the first interaction any of the characters have with a female cannibal in this film (and as a result, the franchise as a whole) is when two of the characters, hiding in a cabin, stumble upon the clan’s mother (“Ma”) giving birth to a mutant child. The very first appearance

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3 Lestringant, *Cannibals*, p.27
of a female cannibal in a franchise about a cannibalistic family presents her more as an animal giving birth than a new mother (even for the largely dialogue-free cannibals, the birthing mother’s ordeal is presented as heavy on guttural wails and grunts). There is no maternal instinct presented here; the scene follows the escape of the survivors rather than the interactions between the newborn and its mother; the only time in the film the infant cannibal is tended to as an infant is by a male cannibal during the cliffhanger/postscript/sequel-fodder conclusion of the film, wherein the baby is being suckled (on a severed thumb) by one of the cannibals from the first movie. There are no mothers among the monsters of cannibal clan films; they are breeders only. Yet this presentation of cannibals valuing the breeding of children over their rearing is by no means unique to cannibal clans films; Frank Lestringant, detailing the commentary surrounding a sixteenth-century woodcut purported to portray cannibal tribes of the Lesser Antilles, writes:

> The commentary, which owes something to the exaggerations of [Florentine explorer Amerigo] Vespucci… asserts that these cruel people prefer human flesh to any other food, and that to satisfy this preference they fatten up young boys and breed from female prisoners of child-bearing age...⁴

Sedgwick’s suggestion that homophobia is misogynistic can be inverted, to suggest that misogyny can also be homophobic. In depicting women as breeding stock for the cannibalistic antagonists (who are ultimately more successful and plentiful than the survivors), those who would participate in non-procreative sex are removed from the equation altogether. The cannibal clan films of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries offer no space for non-normative sexual practices or sexualities. Even the monstrous Others of these films, the cannibals

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⁴ Lestringant, *Cannibals*, p. 19
themselves, are deviant only in their eating habits and their incestuous partnering (as we saw with Brother and Sister, such pairings are heterosexual). Where Nick Fiddes notes:

Defining other people as cannibals… is generally an instrumental act whereby the alleged perpetrators are placed outside the realm of civilised culture. Cannibalism is often thus an unwarranted, but widely useful, instance of collective prejudice...

we may observe that even such a prejudiced placement beyond civilized culture fails to consider sexual orientation beyond the most traditional heteronormativity. In nearly all of these films, women are either abducted with the implication that they will be raped to create new cannibals (in Wrong Turn 2 and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre), or explicitly sexually assaulted on camera (in both The Hills Have Eyes and its sequel), presumably towards this end. In addition to the voyeuristic misogyny of the male gaze that students of Laura Mulvey could identify in such instances, this objectification and dehumanization of women calls to mind early accounts of cannibalism by explorers, where “Cannibals, subjected to a hostile environment and bereft of all liberty, become no more than eaters, predators without conscience or ideal…”

Women in these films become valued for their to-be-bred-with-ness more than even their to-be-looked-at-ness. In the original Wrong Turn, the only narrative reason that Jessie survives to be the slasher-convention “final girl” is because the cannibals intend to keep her around for breeding stock. Her survival is thus directly tied to her value as a means of breeding; if they had no such use of her, the cannibals would have slain her at the first opportunity, as they did with the other women, and attempted to do with all of the men in the survivor-party. In Wrong Turn 2 a similar trend emerges, as Nina is apprehended by the cannibals but not killed, and is instead

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5 Fiddes, Meat, p. 123
6 Lestringant, Cannibals p. 6
positioned to sit as a guest at their dinner table—a guest they intend to dine with, not on. Once again, the alternative to swift death is conversion. Given that the cannibalistic family attempts to feed Nina the human-meat slop they produce in the factory, it is very much a situation of conversion. In both *The Hills Have Eyes* and *The Hills Have Eyes 2*, such a narrative thread is present again and again: women survive, for a time, when they are kept by the cannibalistic antagonists as breeding stock.

If characters are not viewed by the antagonists as viable (if they struggle too much, in the case of the majority of the female survivor-party members in *The Hills Have Eyes 2*, or are male), they are killed when convenient. Taken holistically, this trend reflects that for the final girls of these films, in order to become a “final” anything, they must first be viewed as worthy of sexual attention by the antagonists; otherwise, they are guaranteed to die. Their to-be-bred-withness keeps them alive long enough to fight back—a message with implications that could be most charitably described as unsettlingly misogynistic. The final girls of these films are presented as not only objects for the male-gaze-holding audience to look at, but to want to breed with (as these films do vindicate the sexual politics of the cannibal clans through their success at perpetuation, recall). They are explicitly to be considered as sexual objects, to be used for sexual purposes. Female survivors of these films are, by design, those with whom breeding is intended. In these films, there is no place for women who won’t copulate with men (or male cannibalistic mutants), and no place for men at all—save as part of a survivor pair.

Be they the non-maternal mothers of the cannibal clans themselves or the unwilling victims of cannibalistic male predations, women in these films are largely portrayed simply as breeding stock. Where Lestringant identifies historical presentations of cannibals as “no more than eaters,” their desire for sustenance reduced to a base urge to feed, these films consistently
diegetically reduce women, through the antagonists’ desires, to no more than breeders. The dichotomy in these films is not even the “Madonna/whore” position employed in presentations of the traditional final girl of slasher films. Rather, their representation is framed around whether or not they will eventually breed with their antagonists. The ever-present fear of capture and rape—a fear realized for both Brenda in *The Hills Have Eyes* and Missy in *The Hills Have Eyes 2* and heavily implied for *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*’s Erin (given the case of the woman hitchhiker, whom I shall address shortly)—reduces the women in these films to such a dichotomy of misrepresentation. Even in victory over the cannibals, the final girl (a la slasher film convention) tends to either be an Eve-looking-for-Adam character or a surrogate mother.

As stated earlier, these films tend towards a final pair just as often as they do a final girl, and this is not a coincidence. As we see in *Wrong Turn*, *Wrong Turn 2*, and *The Hills Have Eyes 2*, the only way for the protagonists to survive their confrontations with cannibal clans is to pair off and watch out for one another. While the details may be different—in *Wrong Turn*, Chris and Jessie repeatedly rescue one another from captors, while in *Wrong Turn 2* Nina and Jake save one another from fatal attacks, and Amber and Napoleon survive *The Hills Have Eyes 2* through multiple instances wherein one of them ambushes a mutant about to ambush the other—the overall message remains consistent: the only way for disparate individuals to survive a confrontation with a unified clan-family-unit is to pair off and unify themselves. Through this narratively-dictated monogamy, these pairs are formed and pitted against the antagonists, ultimately triumphing through the strength of heteronormative unity.

Even those films that don’t include final adult pairs of survivors include another type of pairing: mother and infant child. In both *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *The Hills Have Eyes*, the female lead makes it a goal to escape from the cannibals while also rescuing an
infant—the character’s own in *The Hills Have Eyes*, and a presumably-adopted child in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The original *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* does not include an infant to rescue; the final girl runs away, escaping successfully albeit alone. The remake adds a subplot involving a hitchhiker killing herself in front of the protagonists (in the original film the hitchhiker attacked one of the protagonists before being ejected from the van), a lost child (the hitchhiker’s), and the infant’s rescue. Unlike later entries in the original series, this film does not recycle or transform femininity into a “new and different gender regime,” but rather serves only to reinforce a traditional woman-as-maternal-caregiver regime (and, with it, the implied patriarchal structure in which men direct the family unit).

In both the 1977 and 2006 versions of *The Hills Have Eyes*, final girl Brenda endeavors to save her deceased (after contact with the cannibals) sister Lynn’s infant daughter and escape, yet the original is far more forgiving of the cannibal child Ruby’s participation in the rescue effort. In the original *The Hills Have Eyes*, Ruby is the only member of the clan to survive, largely because she acted to help Brenda recover the baby. In the remake, Ruby sacrifices herself to allow the survivors to flee, while more cannibals yet remain—an important departure from the original.

While the message of these films may indeed be that the heteronormative family survives and thrives, the particular case of Ruby in remake-versus-original points towards the importance of sticking with one’s own family above all else—or, perhaps, argues that assisting survivors, whose children are treated with love and affection, is less-good than siding with the dehumanizing breeding-force clans. As this is one of the few points in which the remake departs from the original (all other changes are in either character names or manner of death), the

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7 Halberstam, *Skin Shows* p. 146
sacrificial death of the sole survivor of her kind in the original bears further examination. While one could argue that this presentation of Ruby represents some sort of stand for feminine empowerment—the sole character to speak out against her cannibalistic clan’s murderous ways is their young daughter, who gives her life to save outsiders—such an argument would fall flat because Ruby’s sacrifice accomplishes nothing. Her death allows the Carter family to reclaim the infant Catherine, but the end of the film depicts the survivors being surveyed from afar by another desert scavenger—one garbed in the same attire as the mutants of this film. The implication is, then, that Ruby’s death only delays the inevitable. The valiant stand she makes is a Pyrrhic victory at best: now the survivors have no one who knows the lay of the land. Short-sighted rage is the legacy of remake-Ruby.

It is no coincidence that the cannibal clan films of the early 2000s present heteronormative familial structures among the (again, ultimately successful) antagonists. These films present the clans as led by powerful males, to contrast with the survivors’ weak male leadership—leadership that falls apart at the first contact with the enemy (as when the survivors of Wrong Turn scatter and ineptly stumble through the woods after the older Scott, ostensibly a father-figure, is injured), or is destroyed outright (as when Papa Jupiter quickly dispatches father Bob Carter in The Hills Have Eyes). The cannibals as an extended family survive from entry to entry in each of these franchises. Though individual antagonists may die, all of these films end on the note that there are always more family members out there. Continued heterosexual relations ensure the perpetuation of the species; strong patriarchal leadership more often than not leaves the clan with fresh meat (both literally and figuratively).

It is no coincidence that these films present their women as breeding stock; it both dehumanizes the female survivors and completely removes any queer representation from the
survivor cohort. Male survivors are depicted as complimentary Adams to the final girls’ Eves; there are no male-male survivor pairs in any of these films. Nor do any surviving men raise children alone; this is the sole province of the woman survivor.

And it is no coincidence that the films in which these issues arise present cannibals as their primary antagonists. With their anthropophagia situated as an anthropologically Othering practice with a historical basis (or at least, a popular understanding of such), the message of this subgenre becomes clear: man’s natural state is at the head of the family, while woman’s natural state is beside and beneath him. No deviation from this is permitted. No alternatives to this view of gender roles are presented by successful protagonists or antagonists. Success only comes as part of a heterosexual male-female pair (for survivors) or as a rigidly-enforced patriarchy that uses women—successfully, as multiple films featuring cannibals from the same clans indicate—for perpetuation of the species (for cannibals). In cannibal clan horror, there are eaters and there are breeders, be they explicit or implicit. No one and nothing else remains.
HANNIBAL LECKTOR/LECTER AND OTHER MONSTERS:
DEFINITION BY OPPOSITION IN THREE FILMS

The films of the Hannibal Lecter pentalogy seem to have two patterns: either they follow a government agent consulting with Lecter to solve a heinous series of crimes on some sort of dire time limit (stopping the killer before he kills again,), or the film follows Lecter as he exacts revenge on those by whom he thinks he has been wronged. In this chapter, I discuss the cultural significance of the former pattern (and I will discuss the latter pattern in chapter three). Also in this chapter, I identify and analyze the ways in which one of the films (Red Dragon, made in 2002) modified another (1986’s Manhunter) so that it is significantly more in line with the concepts I am identifying throughout this thesis—perhaps most crucially, the idea that the dehumanization of people whom we do not understand is a concept with significant institutional support. Finally, I examine the ways in which The Silence of the Lambs, despite not being the first of these films chronologically (in either the timeline of film releases or the diegetic chronology of the characters) defines the entire franchise, both in terms of the iconic character of Hannibal Lecter and the thematic significance of his interactions in that film.

Taken holistically, this progression serves to establish three things. First, the generic pattern of investigation in these three films serves to place Lecter as not only an equal to the investigators he assists, but also to the criminal-monsters whose captures he aids. Second, that Red Dragon’s adaptation and recreation of Manhunter modified a number of facets of the original film (not the least of which was Lecter’s importance to the film) in order to emphasize the centrality of Lecter’s character to the story (and indeed, the centrality of Lecter’s characterization to the overall message of the film). Finally, the definition of the franchise by The Silence of the Lambs serves to take my analysis from a microcosm of one, two, or three films
to a representative analysis of an entire franchise (which was itself, I argue, a mirror of the cultural moment in which the franchise was produced and released).

*Manhunter*, directed by Michael Mann and released in 1986, occupies an interesting position in the Hannibal Lecter pentalogy for a number of reasons, not the least of which being that it was remade sixteen years later—a remake that is emphatically not the same movie. *Manhunter* is also notable in the discussion of Hannibal Lecter (or Lecktor, as this film spells it) for being the only movie of the series in which the middle-aged, adult Lecter is not portrayed by Anthony Hopkins. Given that Hopkins’ performance of the character—first in *Silence of the Lambs*—has become the iconic presentation of the character, it is unsurprising to note that Brian Cox’s performance in *Manhunter* has received significantly less attention. But this begs the question: What did Cox do differently in his performance compared to Hopkins? Why did a different take on this character four years later (in 1990’s *Silence of the Lambs*) become the icon, while the original became a footnote?

In considering these two interpretations of the same story and characters in parallel, the titles of the films themselves are immediately striking in the ways in which they position their respective films. *Manhunter* is, first and foremost, investigator Will Graham’s story—it is a crime thriller, the story of a manhunt. *Red Dragon* pays far more attention to its monsters—Hannibal Lecter and Francis Dolarhyde get almost as much screen time as Will Graham does, though the film fundamentally explores the same narrative as does *Manhunter*. *Manhunter* does not introduce the audience to either of its killers in frame for almost half an hour, and even then, Lecktor is neutered and neutralized by incarceration. Compare this to *Red Dragon*, which opens following Lecter through an early slaying, a cannibalistic dinner party, and his capture by Graham.
Cox’s Lecktor and Hopkins’ Lecter are very different individuals, and as befits a study of cannibals, their differences are exemplified in how they employ their mouths. During conversational lulls, Lecktor’s jaw hangs slack; his lips cover his teeth and leave open a loose void. In comparison, Lecter is all control and rigidity—whether gritting his teeth in a rictus grin or clacking rows together to indicate frustration or aggression, Hopkins portrays a man whose motions are at once tightly efficient and feral. By comparison, Cox’s loose, slack hangdog seems simply ill-disciplined. The faint New England/English accent each affects comes off as just that coming from Lecktor: an affectation, not an extension. Taken holistically, such qualities paint Hopkins’ Lecter as an urbane, collected individual fit for a test of wills, while Cox’s Lecktor strikes one as simply a thug with a particularly gruesome modus operandi.

These distinctions in depictions of Lecter are important because the change in presenting the character as a vaguely ominous, undisciplined brute with pretensions to a controlled, calculating intellectual shows a crucial transformation in how the audience is supposed to regard Lecter. The Hannibal Lecter of Red Dragon and The Silence of the Lambs is as much a colleague in criminology to the agents he assists as he is an antagonist for them to confront. And so, the threat he represents to these characters is a far more credible one. The possibility is very real in Red Dragon and The Silence of the Lambs that Lecter can and will outwit Will Graham and Clarice Starling, while in Manhunter the tension of the narrative is focused more on whether Graham can stop Dolarhyde before he reaches his next victim.

Francis Dolarhyde, the “Tooth Fairy Killer” or “Red Dragon” of Manhunter and Red Dragon, is also portrayed by different actors in the two films, but their performances are far more consistent between the two tellings. However, the props and trappings of this character in each film differ in one particular aspect that offers significant insight into the ways in which
these films frame their monsters. Once again, the truth is hidden in the mouth—specifically, Dolarhyde’s teeth. In *Red Dragon*, Dolarhyde’s teeth—both the “normal” set and those he wears as his signature in his killings—are dentures. In *Manhunter*, Dolarhyde has a perfectly normal set of teeth, and wears a set of plaster castings over his teeth during his killings.

This distinction reveals two things about how these movies depict their monsters. First, *Red Dragon* indicates that monsters come about through simple choice: Dolarhyde here can be normal, or he can be a monster; the default state is toothlessness. By contrast, *Manhunter* implies that the choice is between being normal and being some aberrant modification: without his special teeth, Dolarhyde’s natural state is as a normal person. Second, the difference between prosthesis and orthosis in these films is an important one. For the Francis Dolarhyde of *Red Dragon*, monstrousness replaces a loss—there is a sense that his attempts to transcend his humanity through monstrous inhumanity are a compensation for something absent, rather than a state of absence in and of itself. By contrast, *Manhunter* presents monstrousness as something unnatural and aberrant that must be added to a man in order to make him something else—to be a monster is to be more and less than human, not simply different.

Applied to Lecter and the greater context of the franchise, this difference makes sense. Monsters in *Manhunter* are something above, beyond, and separate from humanity. Monsters in *Red Dragon* (and the rest of the Hopkins-as-Lecter films) are simply different in parallel—and, crucial to my argument in chapter three, different by choice. As the Will Graham of *Manhunter* says in a discussion of Francis Dolarhyde’s psychology, “someone manufactured a monster.” In *Manhunter*, monsters are a matter of manufacture; in *Red Dragon* and *The Silence of the Lambs*, monsters simple are (or, in the cases of both Jame Gumb and Francis Dolarhyde, are trying to be, of their own volition). While the narratives of *Red Dragon* and *Manhunter* both imply that a
childhood of abuse makes an adult monster (with Red Dragon devoting entire scenes to Dolarhyde reflecting on his past youth with an eye towards the perceived necessity of his future transformation), Graham’s statement—and its inherent judgment—is unique to Manhunter.

That is all that is said, either in narrative or in dialogue, in Manhunter on the topic of the development of monsters. By contrast, both Red Dragon and The Silence of the Lambs spend significant time following both Francis Dolarhyde and Jame Gumb in their quests for transformation and self-realization through ritualized murder with cannibalistic overtones (as Dolarhyde bites his victims repeatedly and in his monologues to a captured reporter talks about taking his victims into him as sacrifices, while Gumb fashions his victims into a suit he wishes to wear). Given that the rest of the Lecter pentalogy follows its monstrous subject at length, with both Hannibal and Hannibal Rising concerning themselves largely—if not exclusively—with Lecter’s past and present deeds, Manhunter is again something of an odd man out in the franchise.

The reason for this is simple: as the first Thomas Harris adaptation, Manhunter can be seen as a rough draft for presentations of Hannibal Lecter and the character’s interactions with law enforcement. But there is certainly value to be gleaned from examinations of how the Manhunter story was adapted and altered for the Red Dragon remake—a remake that both emphasized the Lecter character and that was released during the prime time period this thesis seeks to analyze. Every departure from Manhunter that was made in the production of Red Dragon can be viewed in terms of how the presentations of the characters and story (and any associated cultural significance to their symbolism) changed in the intervening years. Although I will readily acknowledge that the cast and crew of these films may have had their own artistic agency to recreate the Manhunter story as they saw fit, the message of the whole here is far
greater than the sum of its parts. The recreation of *Manhunter* in *Red Dragon* is a case study in how the cultural climate of the late 1990s and early 2000s viewed people it did not understand as monsters-by-choice, willing aberrations. While both are based on the Thomas Harris novel *Red Dragon*, my analysis here will be restricted to the differences in these films from one another, rather than bringing in additional questions of the adaptation of literature to film.

As stated in the introduction to this thesis, the films I analyze here were released during a time when gay rights were coming to the forefront of social consciousness. The United States military’s adoption of the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy in 1993 made homosexuality a point of silent omission in military culture. The passage of the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996 enshrined heteronormativity as the only valid form of civil union on a federal level. To have a franchise of films that states that those people we do not understand are not only monsters, but monsters by choice, is to open the door to an interpretation of these films as a mirror to the pervasively dehumanizing atmosphere of the era in which these films were produced and released. In adopting this perspective on film, this fascinated revulsion, perhaps the most successful (certainly, the best critically received) example is that film which introduced audiences to the iconic depiction of the urbane cannibal Hannibal Lecter: *The Silence of the Lambs*.

For this thesis to adequately dissect of the ways in which cannibal horror at the end of the previous century and the beginning of the current call to mind cultural fears and uncertainties, a discussion of *The Silence of the Lambs* is all but mandatory. Hannibal Lecter provides an opportunity to examine a cinematic monster going through a transformation, as (in real-world chronology) he first appears to audiences as an antagonist/mentor and concludes his story (both diegetically in *Hannibal* and real-world chronologically in *Hannibal Rising*) as an odd type of
anti-hero—a discussion that, again, will be dealt with in full measure in the following chapter.

As Judith Halberstam wrote on the subject of *The Silence of the Lambs*:

> When *The Silence of the Lambs* was released at the end of the Reagan/Bush era, America had seriously reinvested in such equivalencies as family and normal, perfect and criminal, sexual deviance and disease. A horror film like *The Silence of the Lambs* exploits the eschatology of such a universe and depicts the terror of the norm, with a vengeance.¹

Where the other films discussed throughout this work “exploited the eschatology” of an America that instituted a Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy in its military (enacted in 1993) and at its most charitable was only indifferent—rather than outright intolerant—of gay marriage and the rights of domestic partnerships, the position of *The Silence of the Lambs* chronologically serves as an excellent bridge between the equivalency-heavy Reagan/Bush era Halberstam diagnoses as concluding, and the hyper-heteronormative era this work recognizes as having just begun.

If Hannibal Lecktor’s first appearance in *Manhunter* was in a well-lit, sterile white environment that rendered him a declawed, idle threat, Hannibal Lecter’s first appearance in *The Silence of the Lambs* presents the audience with an aberration within an already horrific milieu. As Clarice Starling descends into the basement of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, the scene makes literal the idea of a descent into madness: inmate-patients lurk in their cells, mutter, and snarl at Starling as she makes her way to Lecter’s cell, where his demeanor is at once welcoming in comparison and utterly alien and unnerving in its misplaced congeniality given the context. Given that Freud’s articulation of the uncanny states that the uncanny is the

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¹ Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, p. 167
familiar, made just unfamiliar enough as to evoke horror,\(^2\) then Lecter’s presentation here is meant to work on two levels. Lecter is the familiar figure of the incarcerated criminal, made unfamiliar in his professional bearing and even tones (especially jarring given the context of those Starling has passed on her way to Lecter’s cell). At the same time, his position in the narrative is as a mentor and advisor to Starling—a familiar convention made unfamiliar by Lecter’s status as an aberrant criminal. At numerous points during this and other interactions does (Hopkins’ performance as / director Jonathan Demme’s presentation of) Lecter walk a line that is balanced between both familiar-unfamiliar positions. From Lecter’s now-famous anecdote about interacting with a census taker (his iconic line, “I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice chianti”) to his taunting Senator Martin about breastfeeding and her daughter’s imminent demise—only to quickly turn over all relevant details about Jame “Buffalo Bill” Gumb—this portrayal of Lecter as a consistently uncanny person gives *The Silence of the Lambs* a character that the audience cannot be comfortable with in any context; he is neither easily loathed nor trusted, nor is Lecter simply a villainous antagonist or a mentor to the protagonist.

This uncanny depiction is crucial to understanding how this presentation of Lecter within *The Silence of the Lambs* (and, to an extent, in *Red Dragon*) frames the character—and the intersection of homosexuality and cannibalism that I argue he represents—as something horrific and monstrous, despite the fact that his actions are narratively vindicated through their lack of punishment. Where the other monstrous killers of these films are lethally punished for their crimes—Jame Gumb dies by Starling’s gunshot in *The Silence of the Lambs*, and Francis Dolarhyde is slain either by Will Graham (in *Manhunter*) or Graham’s wife (in *Red Dragon*)—Hannibal Lecter is, at worst, still incarcerated (in *Manhunter* and *Red Dragon*) and at best

\(^2\) Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’”, p. 4
completely free to stalk new prey (in *The Silence of the Lambs*). Yet in spite of this, Hannibal Lecter is rendered a monster in parallel to the other killers he helps agents catch in these films, precisely because he is brought in to assist in the investigations because he is regarded as the most intelligent and civil of the monsters: the one that does the best job of hiding its monstrousness.

This idea of the monster hiding in plain sight provides a window through which the correlative implications of these films—Lecter may be gay and is a cannibal (and certainly there is a degree of sexual non-normativity to the other killers of these films, as I shall discuss), cannibalism is monstrous, therefore perhaps there is something monstrous inherent to male homosexuality according to this film—can be examined at length. To place Hannibal Lecter and Jame Gumb on even footing as colleagues in deviant crime—and that is precisely what *The Silence of the Lambs* does in sending Clarice Starling to consult with Lecter in the investigation—encourages explicit comparison between the two. This fact that also holds true for Francis Dolarhyde and Hannibal Lecter in *Red Dragon* and *Manhunter*, as I will address subsequently, and is no less significant than the even footing upon which Hannibal Lecter and Clarice Starling are placed as collaborators in this investigation.

What are we told of Jame Gumb in *Silence of the Lambs*? For one thing, the audience is informed (via Lecter, no less) that, while Gumb’s killings are motivated by a desire to become a woman by making a suit from their skin, he is not a transgender individual, but “something else.” That Gumb’s criminal pathology is so indelibly linked to his gender identity is a crucial thread in this narrative. The information that leads the FBI to discover that Jame Gumb is the

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3 My use of “he” in reference to Gumb is out of a desire to remain consistent with the dialogue of characters within *The Silence of the Lambs*, which consistently identifies Jame Gumb as a male individual without exception.
Buffalo Bill killer comes from viewing hospital documentation of rejected applications for sex reassignment surgery. Quite literally, Gumb’s first attempt to establish what he felt was his inner identity ends up leading to the discovery of his criminal identity by the authorities. This only reinforces a pattern implicitly established by law enforcement in this film. By calling Gumb “Buffalo Bill,” a name given because, as a character explains to Starling, the killer “skins his humps,” Jame Gumb is officially and institutionally designated male—a sexually voracious and deviant male by virtue of the explanation of his nickname, no less.

In considering how these designations parallel Hannibal Lecter in the same film, an interesting trend emerges. Lecter’s sexuality is not addressed in The Silence of the Lambs. Aside from the implicit heterosexuality that comes from a sort of until-indicated-otherwise mindset, the only person to explicitly speculate on Lecter’s sexual orientation is Paul Krendler in Hannibal, who only does so in terms of slurs and pejoratives. Hannibal Lecter (as the audience learns in Red Dragon and Manhunter) was caught due to his hobbies (cooking in Red Dragon, and war wound photography in Manhunter, respectively), not an attempt at a dramatic life change. Lecter’s nickname, “the Cannibal,” is chosen as much for the convenient rhyme with his first name as it is for its simple summary of his modus operandi. In each case, Lecter is marked as less deviant than Jame Gumb—but what does it say, then, when the narrative positions him as just as monstrous as the primary antagonist, if the individual markers of his identity in the film are either ignored or positioned as less deviant than Gumb’s?

The answer cannot be found within The Silence of the Lambs at all, but rather, in Red Dragon. That film’s antagonist, too, has a law-enforcement-inside-joke nickname: the “Tooth Fairy,” so named in equal parts due to the bite marks he leaves behind on his victims and the connotations of a homophobic slur in the late 1980s—absent in both films is an overt statement.
of the idea that such a name would suit an uncaught nocturnal visitor. In order to make Francis
Dolarhyde less of a threat, law enforcement assumes a degree of sexual deviance or presumed
dysfunction, and labels him as such; the implication being that this killer must not be that scary
(in spite of breaking into homes, killing families, and committing necrophilia), because he is
probably doing it out of sexual frustration or inadequacy. In the eyes of the investigators in Red
Dragon (and Manhunter), the easiest way to neuter a monster is to call him gay (a statement
which, again, is echoed in Paul Krendler’s comments in Hannibal). And so, to answer the
question stated previously, by not explicitly identifying Hannibal Lecter as non-normative
beyond his criminal misdeeds (and certainly not as a gay man), Hannibal Lecter can still be an
effectively horrific character. He does not kill people in order to affect a transformation; he
simply does so because he wishes to do so. Lecter does not kill in order to make a new form to
embody (as does Gumb) that emulates those he kills; if anything, he kills people he dislikes and
consumes them out of contempt (more than once in the pentalogy is it suggested that Lecter eats
his victims in order to make something useful of them). And, where Francis Dolarhyde bites his
victims as a part of sexual aggression and a reclamation of his own frailty as an expression of
power (as his cleft palate marked him as different-weak as a child and he now seeks to make
himself different-strong as a killer and as the “red dragon”), the only time Hannibal Lecter bites
anyone on screen is in the course of an escape plan. Lecter’s aggression is more a part of a plan
than it is an aspect of ritualized pathology.

    Hannibal Lecter’s bite does bring up another interesting point, however: is Hannibal
Lecter supposed to be seen as a vampire? Judith Halberstam notes definite parallels to that
Gothic monster, both implicit and explicit, when she says Lecter is “a vampire…[and] also a
psychiatrist who drains minds before he starts on the bodies.” Yet Halberstam’s analysis stops just short of diagnosing the value of the vampiric metaphor in Hannibal Lecter, and especially in *The Silence of the Lambs*: that Hannibal Lecter’s status as an ambiguously transgressive character strengthens the horror inherent in his presentations. Large portions of Cyndy Hendershot’s analyses of Dracula could just as easily be applied to Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*. She points out that “The phallic masculine metaphors [used to describe Dracula in the novel] —hard, sharp—are complicated by the ‘red lips,’ with their connotations of feminine beauty.” One can find a parallel in the poster for *The Silence of the Lambs*. Though Hannibal Lecter makes the most use of his mouth, and an integral clue to the identity of Buffalo Bill is found in the death’s head moth found in the throat of a victim, the poster covers Jodie Foster’s mouth with that same moth. Is Foster’s character meant to be implicitly a victim on this poster, then, or is her presence simply a stand-in because of the complications that would have been inherent in presenting the masculine face of Anthony Hopkins obscured by the moth? If the former is true, then, it merely shifts the focus of the film’s patriarchal reinforcements from Hannibal Lecter’s ambiguous sexuality to Clarice Starling’s possible victimhood. Consider Sandra Tomec, in discussing those other vampiric figures of the early 1990s:

...the sexuality [of Anne Rice's vampires] in fact bears little resemblance to the forms of gratification conventionally associated with the interactions of men's bodies. Rather, the vampire's body is something entirely new. It represents a type

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4 Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, p. 173  
5 Hendershot, *The Animal Within*  
6 Ibid, p. 24
of polymorphousness and androgyny founded on the disappearance of the markers of sexual and reproductive difference.\(^7\)

Lecter’s sexual orientation is unstated throughout *The Silence of the Lambs*; the only gratification he appears to derive is from a test of wills and a fine meal. The above quotation could also just as easily be applied to Jame Gumb and the discomfort that the law enforcement characters (and thus, the audience who is supposed to identify with them) feel towards him. The state and federal officers who so readily dismiss both Lecter and Gumb as incomprehensibly deviant are narratively the “good guys” in these films. Though Clarice Starling may come off as more sympathetic to such characters (especially to Lecter), she is the outlier; the majority of the characters arrayed on the side of good are intensely hateful of those on the side they diagnose as evil.

As to Clarice Starling’s possible victimhood (a narrative thread that serves to both humanize Starling and mediate her power-position in the film), two items of note arise: her stories of childhood, and the narrative of her success in *The Silence of the Lambs*. The eponymous anecdote, first revealed to Hannibal Lecter as a part of their mentor-mentee arrangement (he helps her with the Buffalo Bill case, and in exchange she tells him about herself), is all about Starling’s inability to save animal victims in her youth. Turning to Carole Adams’ *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, we can see that this anecdote can be rather easily turned towards discussions of violence and masculine power:

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\(^7\) Tomc, ”Dieting and Damnation,” from Blood Read, p. 98
The killed and slaughtered animal yields…[an] imagery of ferociousness, territorial imperative, armed hunting, aggressive behavior, the vitality and virility of meat eating.⁸

As Elspeth Probyn notes when employing the previous quotation, the equation of sexual sadism and butchery⁹ does have some merit—both tasks involve physical exertion of some sort to the end of deriving pleasure, as the sadist punishes the victim in order to satisfy sexual cravings, the butcher slaughters and dresses the meat-animal to the end of making a meal to satisfy hunger pangs. In a discussion of a series of films about sexual deviance and ritualized killing, few things could be more apropos.

Starling’s victimhood is narratively attenuated by her eventual success, both in her location and identification of Jame Gumb, and his defeat at her hands. However, even these sequences are not without their unflattering gendered comparisons to other entries in the Lecter franchise. Starling only identifies Jame Gumb as the Buffalo Bill killer (or even suspects him of such) after she has already been invited into his home while canvassing his neighborhood. By contrast, Will Graham—in both Manhunter and Red Dragon—identifies Francis Dolarhyde as the Tooth Fairy long before ever meeting him, and first finds him in a situation that puts Graham at the advantage, whereas Starling and Gumb’s moment of mutual recognition comes at an ambush at his hands. Even the final interaction between the investigator and perpetrator is painted far differently between Graham and Starling. While Starling’s eventual success over Gumb comes in an unlit basement through skill and a well-timed shot, it demonstrates more than anything else

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⁸ Adams, The Sexual Politics of Meat, p. 189
⁹ Probyn, Carnal Appetites, p. 73
Starling’s ability to compensate for and adapt to a situation her own failings as an investigator put her in. And even leaving aside questions of basic competency posed by this narrative, the arc of Starling’s overcoming her own victimhood in the past and present only further serves to make her stand out from her federal compatriots—again, marking her as an outlier and implying that the sympathy she displays towards Lecter (as opposed to the disgust and outright antipathy of her coworkers) is not necessarily supposed to be representative of the feelings of the prevailing culture. Her sympathy towards Lecter is the emotion of an outsider; the institutional response to Lecter (as well as Jame Gumb in *The Silence of the Lambs* and Francis Dolarhyde in *Red Dragon* and *Manhunter*) is one of revulsion, dehumanization, and contempt.

The closest comparison comes in *Red Dragon*, which (compared to *Manhunter*, where Dolarhyde dies definitively to a hail of bullets in front of Graham) concludes with Will Graham’s wife shooting and killing Francis Dolarhyde in the Graham home after Dolarhyde, thanks to a tip from Hannibal Lecter, stalks the investigator to his home. In *Red Dragon*, Molly Graham succeeds where her husband failed; in *The Silence of the Lambs*, Clarice Starling overcomes her own failure. While a significant part of this difference can be attributed to the differences in the production of *Manhunter* and *Red Dragon* (as in the former, Lecter’s tip-off to Dolarhyde was intercepted before any action could be taken against the Graham family), the fact remains that *The Silence of the Lambs* concludes with its female protagonist’s triumph being tempered by her own failure-to-that-point, while *Red Dragon* ends with Molly Graham, who otherwise has few lines in the film, killing the villain in order to save her husband from the consequences of his organization’s own shoddy policing of criminals over which it claims dominion.
So what are we to take away from this? Fundamentally, this discussion comes down to an issue of narrative respect—of a very specific, heterosexist variety. Hannibal Lecter can be successful in his plans in *The Silence of the Lambs* because his sexuality is ambiguous, whereas Jame Gumb’s explicit (and Francis Dolarhyde’s nickname-implicit) sexual deviance dooms him to narrative failure. Will and Molly Graham both catch Francis Dolarhyde at a fatal disadvantage in *Manhunter* and *Red Dragon*, respectively, but Clarice Starling succeeds in spite of, not because of, herself. These three films are just as much about the triumph of heteronormativity and normalcy over deviance as they are about criminals and investigation. That Hannibal Lecter is the cannibalistic villain/mentor in all of them provides not only a consistent narrative thread, but also adds an angle of the horrific (but not too horrific, recall) and the implicitly sexual to the character. In the following chapter, I will explore how *Hannibal* and *Hannibal Rising* make explicit such sexual connotations, and what these diegetic bookends to the series mean for the overall meaning of the franchise.
DINNER FOR TWO:
REVENGE AND ROMANCE IN HANNIBAL AND HANNIBAL RISING

“It started with revenge,” the tagline for Hannibal Rising informs the viewer. This statement seems to demand clarification. The story of Hannibal Lecter, told first on film in Michael Mann’s Manhunter and to most critical acclaim in Jonathan Demme’s The Silence of the Lambs, starts in Hannibal Rising with revenge in response to cannibalism. This revenge utilizes cannibalism itself, a sort of two-wrongs-making-right sort of moral logic. Yet the story of this character does not only start with revenge; it also starts with love—love lost, love denied, and love forsaken. All these elements are present in the story that ends the diegetic chronology of Hannibal Lecter, Ridley Scott’s Hannibal. This chapter seeks to examine these two threads—cannibalistic revenge and unattained love—in order to better understand the overarching point of the Hannibal Lecter story. As I will demonstrate throughout this paper, these two threads are inextricably bound in these films, and indeed in the story of the character himself. Through these two films’ uses of cannibalism as a motivation for—and means by which Lecter achieves—revenge, these films’ repeated instances of positioning heterosexual love in direct opposition to the employment of cannibalistic revenge, and the presentations of Hannibal Lecter as a tragic hero driven to horrific extremes by his base desires in these films, Hannibal and Hannibal Rising ultimately present a scenario in which cannibalism and male homosexuality are inextricably bound.

Cannibalism and male homosexuality are interwoven in these films, through their presentations as an escalation and violation of homosocial relations and as a sexually-charged component to revenge. The opportunities for cannibalistic revenge are positioned diegetically as choices that prevent Hannibal Lecter from interacting sexually with women with whom he shares
an attraction. Thus, Hannibal Lecter is presented in these films as having to make a choice between engaging in acts of heterosexuality and committing acts of cannibalistic revenge—a choice whose outcome marks him as a villain and a monster for siding with the latter. Put simply, the narrative resolutions of *Hannibal* and *Hannibal Rising* implicitly argue that not only is the choice between heterosexuality and non-heterosexuality (specifically, male homosexuality) a choice in the first place, but that such a decision has a right and wrong answer—and that Hannibal Lecter’s decision to not side with heterosexuality is what makes him a monster, lending him the “Hannibal the Cannibal” appellation with which he is repeatedly branded throughout the rest of the franchise.

That cannibalism and homosexuality can be interlinked in popular culture texts is by no means a unique claim to this work. In Kevin Ohi’s analysis of *Suddenly, Last Summer*, he states “Cannibalism in turn seems to be a figure for gay male sex acts, whether that means anal sex or, perhaps more to the point in this relentlessly oral film, analingus or fellatio.”¹ In relating cannibalism to sodomy, he further notes

In the language of *Suddenly, Last Summer*, [cannibalism and sodomy] are related through their imagined operation as nonregenerative, self-consuming, and self-reflexive acts.”¹ Just as cannibalism is notoriously vitamin-deficient… sodomy is a nonprocreative "spilling of seed." Sodomy and cannibalism, in other words, are forms of what [a character in the play] calls a devouring creation.²

The phrase “devouring creation” can apply to Hannibal Lecter in a number of ways. First and most obviously, the cannibal devours humans directly as flesh and blood. Lecter himself is a

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¹ Ohi, Kevin. “Devouring Creation,” p. 39
² Ibid, p. 40
creation-that-devours; as the plot of *Hannibal Rising* outlines, Lecter’s first experience with cannibalism was in being forced to eat his sister by the soldiers squatting in his home. He then goes on, compelled, to kill and eat those men in turn. Lecter also attempts to create others-who-devour; witness the autocannibalism he causes Paul Krendler to partake in after excising a portion of that man’s brain and frying it in front of him. That same brain is fed to a young boy on an airplane at the conclusion of the film—the point at which Lecter delivers the closing lines of *Hannibal*, and indeed the concluding lines of his franchise: “After all…it is important…always to try new things. Open up.”

Hannibal Lecter, the creation-that-devours, the devourer-of-creations, the creator-of-devourers, is treated in equal turns as a fascinating horror (in *Hannibal*) and an odd sort of anti-hero (arguably in *Hannibal*, and certainly in *Hannibal Rising*). Yet the fact that the narrative follows him does not mean that it attempts to vindicate him. At many points, these words from Nick Fiddes seem relevant: “There is simply something that seems not quite right about eating another predator.” And certainly, the films in which Lecter is portrayed with some soupçon of heroism are those in which he eats other predators, or at the very least encourages the eating of those predators by others. If Hannibal Lecter is to be considered a hero at all, it is only in the frame of revenge-upon-predators. This ambiguity is not foreign to the field of cannibal studies—discussing the works of Montaigne, Frank Lestringant notes:

> By playing cunningly with the taboo, by setting it at the heart of his reflections on Otherness, Montaigne seeks to attract the attention of readers to this strange half-desire, half-repulsion which men feel for the flesh of their fellows: a

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3 Fiddes, *Meat: A Natural Symbol*, p. 139
desire/repulsion which underlies, in the most fundamental ways, the mythic thinking of the West.\textsuperscript{4}

The connection of revenge to cannibalism is also well-remarked by Lestringant. In evoking Jean Léry on the subject of cannibalistic peoples and their uses of revenge cannibalism in times of war:

...cannibalism means vengeance, and gives the classic formulation of it....The sensory pleasure, though undeniable, is secondary: “Although all of [the Tupinambas] confess human flesh to be wonderfully good and delicate,” they devour it “more out of vengeance than for the taste.”\textsuperscript{5}

\textit{Hannibal Rising}, as stated, follows the story of his revenge on the soldiers who preyed upon his family. \textit{Hannibal} has at least two such predators: Paul Krendler, who propositions Starling (and, rebuffed, is quite rude to her throughout the film) from a position of authority above her within law enforcement, and Mason Verger, the primary antagonist of the film (if we are not to consider Hannibal himself as such).

Mason Verger’s story is an interesting case for all the ways in which it highlights Lecter’s deviance, and for those ways in which it further accentuates the homosexuality/escalated-homosociality/cannibalism connection. Sent to Lecter (who was a respected psychiatrist and not yet known to be a serial killer) as part of court-mandated therapy for Verger’s repeated molestations of children at a summer camp his parents owned, Mason Verger represents everything Hannibal Lecter is not. Where Lecter’s sexuality is for the most part unstated throughout these films (though, again, \textit{Hannibal} and \textit{Hannibal Rising} certainly have a

\textsuperscript{4} Lestringant, \textit{Cannibals}, p. 97
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid, p. 69
number of implications to make), Verger’s sexuality is central to his involvement in the story. The revenge he attempts to take on Lecter is due to his hideous disfigurement at his own hands: Verger attempted to lure Lecter up to his apartment for sex, and Lecter proceeded to drug Verger and convince the man to cut off his own face and feed it to a dog. Here, Lecter made a sort of anti-cannibal of Verger: Rather than eating the man’s flesh or encouraging him to do the same, Lecter pushed him to give his flesh up to another, making prey of the predator.

That Mason Verger is established as a rich, hedonistic youth is also important for Hannibal in understanding that it means the character can be looked at much as one would an aristocratic “dandy” of Gothic literature— one whose explicitly homosexual overtures to Lecter result in his disfigurement. The whole of Hannibal, in fact, works well for an application of scholarship about Gothic literature and male-to-male interactions. The following passage, summarizing Gothic literary conventions as they pertain to vampires, could just as easily describe most of Hannibal (and indeed Hannibal Rising):

Each of these texts first invites or admits a monster, then entertains and is entertained by monstrosity for some extended duration, until in its closing pages it expels or repudiates the monster and all the disruption that he/she/it brings...Within its extended middle, the gothic novel entertains its resident demon...and the monster, now ascendant in its strength, seems for a time potent enough to invert the “natural” order and overwhelm the comforting closure of the text.

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6 Sedgwick, Between Men, p. 94.
7 Craft, "Kiss Me With Those Red Lips", p. 107-8
*Hannibal* and *Hannibal Rising* do just this with Hannibal Lecter. In each film, Hannibal Lecter is presented to the audience. His actions are presented without narrative judgment against their morality (while he may be pursued by authorities, he is neither caught nor punished for his deeds). In both films, I would argue, Lecter’s strength proves enough to “invert the ‘natural’ order and overwhelm the comforting closure of the text,” with *Hannibal* concluding with Lecter on a plane for parts unknown, and *Hannibal Rising* ending with successful revenge and Lecter moving to America, where he can begin his life anew.

So what does this mean for revenge, cannibalism, and sexuality in *Hannibal*? Mason Verger’s reason for plotting revenge is that he was coerced into an act of displaced autocannibalism when he intended to escalate homosociality to homosexuality. The means by which he attempts to resolve his revenge are similarly coded: he has Lecter abducted—the archaic linguistic use of the term “rape” referred to the mass abductions of women during war—an important parallel to note, as it presents Verger’s attempt at vengeance on Lecter as a sexually-charged violation rather than just a matter of revenge)—and wants to feed his seduction-reverser/devourer-creator to trained boars. The resolution to that situation in Lecter’s favor comes in heterosexuality-reinforcing terms, at that. Clarice Starling (whose relationship with Lecter I shall discuss shortly) frees Lecter from the boar pit. Lecter is saved from death through a heterosexual relationship. Lecter then appeals to Verger’s assistant, Cordell, telling the man—whom Verger has emotionally abused throughout the film—that he could, and should, dump Verger in the boar pit and blame Lecter for it later. Verger is doomed by the destruction of a homosocial relationship—albeit one that was decidedly unhealthy in the first place.

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8 Papaioannou, “Charite’s Rape” p. 316
Such a reading is complicated, however, by the scene that follows the escape. Clarice, injured in her assistance of Lecter, awakens in Paul Krendler’s home. She has been dressed in eveningwear (she went to the Verger estate in practical clothing, and awakens in a small black dress), and is groggy from a morphine drip. Entering the dining room, she finds Lecter and Krendler sitting at the table as Lecter prepares a meal. Specifically, Lecter has removed the cap of Krendler’s skull, and is systematically lobotomizing the man to make dinner, piece by piece. In a reinforcement of Lecter’s Verger-defined role as an initiator into (auto)cannibalism, Lecter fries a piece of Krendler’s brain and feeds it to him, as Starling, in a stupor, looks on in horror. Lecter does this as much to spite Krendler as he does to indulge his own cannibalistic appetites. As Frank Lestringant notes:

The flesh of the prisoner who is to be devoured is in no way a food, but a sign. It is this sign that the vanquishers absorb into themselves. Eating the body of another person does not provide nourishment or strength, or put on flesh; in the last analysis it is a purely verbal transmission: “They require no other ransom of their prisoners, but an acknowledgement and confession that they are vanquished.”

As the characters move into the kitchen, what follows is one of the most bizarrely sexually charged exchanges in the franchise. Starling, recovering from the effects of the morphine, attempts to overpower Lecter. He turns the struggle around and catches her ponytail in the door of the refrigerator, pinning her in place. Then:

Lecter: Tell me Clarice, would you ever say to me “Stop. If you loved me, you’d stop?”

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9 Lestringant, Cannibals, p. 103
Starling: Not in a thousand years.

Lecter: Not in a thousand years. That's my girl.

This exchange makes explicit the implicit sexual tension between the characters, just as Lecter’s initial inquiry casts a direct parallel between rape and cannibalism (as both involve the irreversible violation of another being). Starling’s response indicates not scorn, but reciprocity. Julianne Moore does not deliver the line contemptuously, as a “not in a thousand years” of dismissing the idea of the entire preamble to the situation. Rather, this is a “not in a thousand years” of “not in a thousand years would I say no to you, nor would you put me in a situation where I would have to do so.” The two share a kiss, a distraction which Starling utilizes in order to handcuff Lecter (though he initiates the kiss after first feigning that he was going in to bite her). Lecter, then, is left with a decision: Stay with this woman, facing life imprisonment again, or escape. Lecter implies that he is about to chop off Starling’s hand—he asks her “above or below the wrist?” and then notes that it will hurt—but he removes his own hand and escapes. I will not dwell on the fact that this is the same hand with which he was feeding Krendler pieces of his own brain earlier, save to note it is a brief and clever inversion of the idea of one “biting the hand that feeds.” But the fact that Lecter departs, off to presumably continue his cannibalistic deeds, is the important point: given the choice between virtue and staying with a woman, and vice and departure to cannibalism, he chooses vice. This dichotomy is, as stated earlier, the crux of the matter.

*Hannibal Rising* strips the connections between revenge, cannibalism, and sexuality down to bare simplicity. In a scene near the end of the first act of the film, a young adult Hannibal Lecter confronts a butcher who had been harassing Lecter’s aunt-by-marriage, the
Lady Murasaki, in the market moments earlier. The butcher, upon seeing Lecter, asks him if Murasaki’s genitalia run “crosswise”—an inquiry to which Lecter responds by slicing the man’s stomach open and asking “crosswise like that?” Lecter’s first response to a question of sexuality is to commit violence upon the inquirer—violence that inscribes that person’s assumptions about sexuality back onto his body. Lecter then decapitates the man and, in his first act of willing cannibalism, cooks and eats the butcher’s cheeks. It is interesting that Lecter’s cannibalism is motivated here by his close relationship with a female relative-by-marriage, while the whole of the revenge narrative of Hannibal Rising concerns itself with Lecter attempting to kill those who were responsible for his cannibalism of his sister; the message here seems to be that Lecter is only comfortable with cannibalism (and indeed, with women) when he can set his own boundaries.

An even more obvious presentation of the intersections of sexuality and cannibalism occurs later in the film. Murasaki and Lecter share an embrace as he considers whether or not to carry out revenge against the soldiers who killed his family (and forced him to eat his sister, with them), having discovered their whereabouts. Murasaki pleads with Lecter to abandon his course and stay with her, and Lecter does not. The scenes immediately following this moment are a procession of revenge-killings, after each of which Lecter partakes of some of the deceased. Quite directly, the decision between a heterosexual relationship (albeit an incestual one) and cannibalistic revenge is presented, and Hannibal Lecter chooses revenge. Even in the climactic final confrontation of the film—in which Lecter rescues Murasaki from the sole remaining soldier, who had kidnapped her in order to bait Lecter into an ambush—Lecter is again given a choice: pursue revenge, or stay with Murasaki. Lecter reveals and revels in his monstrousness,
horrifying Murasaki as he mutilates the soldier in front of her, incinerates the houseboat they are on, and escapes to America.

The cannibal as a mythic figure is exemplary of excess: he is after all the only human being who can eat everything, who is truly omnivorous, but who practices restraint. Hannibal Lecter’s restraint in both *Hannibal* and *Hannibal Rising* is in choosing to refrain from romantic contact with women, and instead exercising his cannibalistic excesses on any he deems worthy. He indulges in excesses of revenge, not only killing those he feels have wronged loved ones or personally insulted or annoyed him, but going so far as to eat and claim a portion of his victims, the “acknowledgement…that they are vanquished.” Yet Hannibal Lecter does not do this from a position of asexual, gender-agnostic hunger, either. Over the course of the franchise, at no point does he kill and eat women, only men. The only relationships Lecter allows himself are either strained ones between himself and women whom he eventually deserts in order to continue his anthropophagic work, or, in the case of Mason Verger, brief feints of interest in men long enough to commit violence upon them. If cannibalism is coded as male homosexuality in another arena—as nonprocreative as sodomy and concerned with devouring creation—then the choice between cannibalism and heterosexual relationships in *Hannibal* and *Hannibal Rising* is a choice between homosexuality and heterosexuality (mirroring a discussion in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries about whether one’s sexual identity is essential or a choice). Hannibal Lecter is framed as a villain for choosing the former over the latter, and the already-taboo nature of male homosexuality (especially in the time period in which these films were released) is yoked to cannibalism, the ultimate taboo act. These films argue that not only is Hannibal

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10 Probyn, *Carnal Appetites*, p. 99
11 Lestringant, *Cannibals*, p. 103
Lecter’s cannibalism/implicit homosexuality/non-heterosexuality a choice, but that it is the wrong choice. His decision makes him the monster.
EATING TO LIVE, LIVING TO EAT:
CANNIBALISM AND SEXUAL APPETITE IN RAVENOUS

Hunger is as much emotional as it is physiological. We feel hunger, and with it come any number of other sensations. Hunger brings anger at the pangs of a lack of physical fulfillment. Hunger brings frustration at one’s inability to provide for one’s self. Hunger brings desire for food, desire at seeing food, and, at the extremes, desire for things that may do as food with a bit of effort. And so I come to cannibalism, a satisfaction of hunger in moments of life-and-death desperation. In the film Ravenous, cannibalism is not simply about desperation, however. Cannibalism here brings with it vitality and virility, an elimination of weaknesses of the body and a clarity of purpose for the mind. Yet the desire component of cannibalistic hunger in this film is not simply a need to fill one’s stomach. As I will demonstrate, Ravenous presents cannibalism and the hunger for flesh as a metaphor for homosexual desire, both in order to indirectly demonize homosexuals, as well as to make a greater point that the only heroic response to discovering that one’s essential nature is socially repugnant is to commit suicide.

Cannibalism in Ravenous begins for each of its participants as an unspeakable act, but is quickly established not as a one-time experimentation, but rather, an act that reveals to the cannibal his true, ineffable nature—a hideous nature denied by the just and accepted by the truly monstrous. Through accepting this nature, a cannibal grows stronger, more confident, healthier, and nigh invulnerable—the Faustian bargain paying dividends in the short term. In virtuously denying his true self, a cannibal grows weaker, unable to enjoy anything at all in life, and finds his thoughts occupied with a constant struggle with the temptations of the flesh. Ultimately, denial of the (cannibalistic) inner self leads to suffering and death—a heroic sacrifice compared to the alternative of an unnaturally long life. Where Hannibal Lecter’s choice (as identified in the
previous chapter) was between heterosexual relationships with women and cannibalistic revenge, the choice in Ravenous is between life as an abomination and a heroic death.

Cannibalism is a particularly apt metaphor for male homosexual desire, in particular, because of how it frames denial, desire, and the act of consumption. In Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight*, she identifies the blatantly sexual coding of male hunger in advertising:

In commercials that feature male eaters, the men are shown in a state of wild, sensual transport…Their total lack of control is portrayed as appropriate, even adorable …¹

As male hunger is framed in commercials as a means of deriving sexual pleasure and an act of sexual pleasure in and of itself, so too is male hunger presented within the context of the fulfillment of cannibalistic hunger in *Ravenous*; there are no female cannibals in the film. Rather than simply partaking of the small and measured sips of the vampire, lapping at puncture wounds on the neck or wrist, cannibals take large, meaty bites out of their victims. They cook them in hearty stews or gnaw meat right off the bone. There is no demurring consent here; any act of cannibalism is an act of murder and devouring. Never does the cannibal negotiate a little nibble with his victims. This, too, is a way in which the hunger of cannibalism is made to be more brutish and masculine than the thirst of the vampire. Rather than acquiring sustenance through seduction or bargaining, the cannibal must hunt and kill his prey each and every time. Yet the film is surprisingly supportive of this necessity, echoing Bordo yet again. She says:

The use of a male figure is one strategy, in contemporary ads, for representing compulsive eating as “natural” and even lovable. Men are *supposed* to have

¹ Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight*, p. 111
hearty, even voracious, appetites. It is a mark of a man to eat spontaneously and expansively…\(^2\)

Cannibalism is thus presented in *Ravenous* as an aberration with historical precedent; as I will elaborate upon later, the introduction of the Wendigo myth serves to naturalize and contextualize this hunger as a persistent specter haunting civilization. Just as Bordo describes the ways in which numerous advertisements’ representations of male hunger/desire as naturally rapacious (in contrast to the restrained and tightly regulated hunger/desire of the female) naturalize and contextualize the perception of insatiable male hunger—hunger here turned inward, toward one’s own gender.

Yet the sexual component of cannibalism here is not to be understated in favor of male hunger. Even (*Ravenous* protagonist) Boyd’s first experience with cannibalism, in which all he partook was blood, is described in sexually-charged terms: “My commanding officer’s half-shot-off head in my face; his blood running down my throat.” Even when committing a reluctantly vampiric act, male hunger is still rapacious, evocative, and indulgent; never mind the connotations of a low-ranking officer gaining power and status as a result of having the bodily fluids of his superiors poured down his throat after having said officer’s “half-shot-off” head in his face. Kevin Ohi’s analysis of *Suddenly, Last Summer* (a 1959 film based on the Tennessee Williams play of the same name) works remarkably well in this context; he states “Cannibalism in turn seems to be a figure for gay male sex acts, whether that means anal sex or, perhaps more to the point in this relentlessly oral film, analingus or fellatio.”\(^3\)

\(^2\) Ibid, p. 108
\(^3\) Ohi, Kevin. “Devouring Creation,” p. 39
However, the cannibalism in *Ravenous* is not strictly nonprocreative; as I shall demonstrate later within this paper, cannibalism is presented in this film as being a community-building (and insidiously contagious) activity. While Colonel Hart may note sardonically within the film, “It’s lonely being a cannibal. Tough making friends,” it is, in fact, remarkably easy to swell the numbers. When one considers that cannibalism may be a stand-in for homosexual desire, the film thus presents the dangers of an odd sort of gay contagion.

That cannibalism in *Ravenous* is coded for male homosexual desire is a political accommodation as well as a theatrical one. It has been suggested that Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* similarly coded its cannibalism to present the violence of political upheaval. I suggest that *Ravenous* does so to present the violence of sexual and cultural politics and the often messy results of the ideological clashes in a culture at war with itself, as well as an external representation of the internal struggle that *Ravenous*’s Boyd has between the acceptance and denial of his true self. That this struggle takes place on the frontier is not a coincidence, either. In an anthropological sense, the cannibal Other has been presented over and over as a way for the rest of the dominant culture to present itself as more civilized in opposition to the hungry savage.

In a directly historical context, it makes particular sense for *Ravenous* to be situated within the Sierra Nevada mountain range in 1847. The screenwriter was inspired by the tale of Alferd Packer (a Colorado prospector accused of cannibalism of an ill-fated expedition west), and Colqhoun/Ives’s story itself evokes the Donner Party story. In addition, the position of the film’s Fort Spencer within the mountain pass presents the characters themselves as dwelling at a

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4 Ibid, p. 688
5 Ibid, p. 679
6 Griffin, Ted. Audio commentary on DVD
crossroads. The dramatic personae exist in order to facilitate the journey west, enabling the progression of settlers through that liminal state (between immigrant/resident of an eastern state) to that of the settled western homesteader. So, too, does it fit that Boyd comes to the fort at a crossroads of his life, certain that he cannot return to his old life, but uncertain where his new life actually is. The climate change highlights this difference between Boyd’s old life and his new one: he leaves the dust and the sweltering heat of the Mexican sun to come to the mountains in winter. The bleakness of the surroundings serves to emphasize the fact that the only things out there are other people. We see no animals at the fort beyond the pack-horses, used for travel, and the chickens, unnoticed until they are used to dispose of the unsavory bits of the cannibal meals. There are limited resources (harking back to the Packer/Donner party tales) and limited opportunities for contact with the outside world. In both diet and social fulfillment, all anyone has at the fort is other people. But how does Boyd find himself there, surrounded by these people, in his liminal state?

Ravenous opens with two quotes: A Nietzsche quote about the perils of fighting with monsters (lest the speaker himself become a monster, etc.), and “eat me.” While the screenwriter himself did not include these in his treatment for production,\textsuperscript{7} they serve to foreshadow a few of the movie’s themes. First, that Boyd is constantly struggling with himself and his cannibalistic desire, knowing that acceptance of his condition would either obviate his struggle with Colqhoun/Ives, or, at the very least, make him stronger for the eventual confrontation. This inner struggle is echoed in the psychosexual confrontation between the characters: if Boyd would just give in to Colqhoun/Ives’s numerous offers of companionship in the cannibal community, there would be no struggle at all. Boyd’s loneliness would be over. Second, the juxtaposition of a

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
heady Nietzschean sentiment with an unattributed (it is credited to “Anonymous”) utterance of “eat me” highlights the off-kilter, intentionally irreverent tone of the film. The audience is intentionally made uncomfortable throughout the film, as scenes of violence and gore are interspersed with humorous interludes, and Robert Carlyle’s over-the-top, scenery-chewing (no pun intended) performance as Colqhoun/Ives repeatedly calls into question the seriousness of the film. The score also contributes (as I will note numerous times in this analysis). Finally, the quote “eat me” works in a literal sense in two ways: one, as a presumed reassurance that the cannibals must give themselves when justifying their hungers (the victims were asking for it); and two, in Colqhoun/Ives’s invitation to Boyd at the conclusion of the film.

The opening scene of the film serves to immediately establish Boyd’s background and allude to his primary personality conflict. His promotion following the heated battles of the Mexican-American War suggest bravery (which, as we will see, is not at all the case); more important, however, is his reaction to the meal of his comrades at arms. While they all dig in to the bloody rare steaks before them, Boyd shivers and looks back and forth, unable to bring himself to indulge in this meal. The sight of blood brings to mind his first vampiric/cannibalistic experience, his awakening into the world of cannibals, and the thought sickens him. It is more than just that the steak itself is a poor substitute for his true desire, but also, that it reminds him of the shame of his awakening and rebirth. So, then, does it transpire that he leaves the table and promptly vomits (displaying yet another bodily fluid repeatedly seen in the film). In establishing the reason for Boyd’s departure to Fort Spencer (and thus forcing Boyd into confronting his liminal state) his commanding officer is aware of the cowardice that facilitated Boyd’s survival on the battlefield and permitted the deeds that allowed for his promotion. Yet, his commanding

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8 Bird, Antonia. Audio commentary on DVD
officer does not ask for Boyd’s assessment of the situation; nor does Boyd tell him the truth. It is only inferred. Thus Boyd’s reassignment “as far from [the commanding officer’s] company as possible” echoes the circumstances of a modern American military man whose sexuality is called into question under the recently-overturned “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy: the commanding officer cannot directly ask Boyd about how he came to take the fort (and thus expose either his cowardice or cannibalism), and Boyd, clearly, cannot directly state those circumstances to the man either. They skirt the issue with a reassignment, and Boyd’s commanding officer reaps the benefits, as we see with his direction to the men in his command to move his belongings to “the largest office on the left.” In covering up the situation, Boyd is punished—albeit somewhat indirectly—and his commanding officer is directly rewarded.

Boyd’s journey to Fort Spencer is itself uneventful; he travels in silence with the only female character with a speaking role in the film (though it will be quite some time before anyone hears her speak). Much as the steak was a poor simulacrum of the meal Boyd really wanted, so too is a woman a poor simulacrum of the sort of human interaction Boyd wants; although he is a quiet man throughout the film, he is especially reluctant to say anything to Martha, the sole woman at the fort. However, her departure isolates Boyd and leaves him to his thoughts, permitting him his first instance of reflection (literally, as he stares at himself in the mirror) on his cowardice on the battlefield. This moment leaves him similarly quiet when he meets Colonel Hart, offering conversation only in response to Hart’s asking him about his hobbies. Boyd’s response: “Swimming.” While intended as a joke (and the screenwriter says as much9, given that the surroundings are hardly conducive to a leisurely few laps), the comment is telling. Swimming in the upper reaches of mountainous terrain, especially in winter, calls to

9 Griffin, Ted. Audio commentary on DVD
mind nothing more than that stereotypical sexual-desire-killer, the cold shower. The shallowness of the rivers, coupled with the jutting rocks and frequent rapids/waterfall-breaks, allows for fans of aquatic activity to do little more than stand in place while the frigid water crashes over them.

The introduction of the dramatis personae at the fort presents a number of interesting moments that will later prove significant. Private Toffler, their “personal emissary from the Lord,” presents himself as soft-spoken, clumsy, yet well-meaning; he could be seen as an example of the homosexual trope of the closeted clergyman (as he avoids eye contact with the others, shuffles softly around the camp, and, stereotype of stereotypes, is musically inclined). Major Knox is introduced as having “never met a bottle he didn’t like.” This portrayal is noteworthy for two reasons: the possibility of self-medicating to suppress urges, and for the quote the phrase references. It is itself a paraphrase of the Will Rogers line, “I’ve never met a man I didn’t like,” which, in the context of this film, could serve equally well for an assessment of the non-discriminating cannibal as well as a voracious (or just gregarious) homosexual. In addition, that Knox enjoys the bottle brings to mind liquid ingestion, which puts an invocation of the Rogers original in a whole new light. Private Reich, their “soldier,” is a blond-haired, blue-eyed, clean-cut Aryan, first seen screaming while standing shirtless (and possibly nude) in a rushing chill river (and we remember what that means)—his particularly hostile interactions with the cannibals of the film makes him a representation of the outwardly-homophobic, self-loathing closeted gay. Col. Hart even cautions Boyd to “steer clear of him,” perhaps because of this? Martha and George are introduced next, though dismissively referred to as locals who “sort of came with the place,” establishing them less as characters and more as features of the setting itself; their use in the story as conveyors of exposition of the Wendigo myth reinforces this assessment. Private Cleaves, finally, is the only character presented as genuinely happy, though
this is in equal parts due to his “overmedicated” condition as well as the fact that it is strongly
implied that he frequents prostitutes whenever he goes into town. His purpose at the camp is to
cook—the fulfillment of hunger is, yet again, tied directly to joy—it is just that Cleaves gets to
indulge his hunger directly and without moral judgment. Yet as Col. Hart says, “I’d tell you
‘don’t eat,’ but most of us have to.”

Boyd’s recollection in the following scene is a second-order flashback; he is not simply
recalling his cannibalistic awakening, but, furthermore, is recalling how he first told the
command of that moment. It is important to note that, although he does imply that, following the
blood running down his throat, “something had changed,” he never voices what had changed, or
how. He leaves unstated his cannibalistic awakening, save for mentioning the basic mechanics
and (presumably) narrating how he dragged himself out from under the pile of bodies and
captured the Mexican command. The American military’s (?) response to his actions is
predictably in keeping with a Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell-style dismissal: they inform him that they
could shoot him outright after outing his cowardice, but instead of asking for the specifics, they
just promote him and make him someone else’s problem, leaving the particulars of his adventure
mere speculation for anyone not in the know. Colonel Hart comes close to discovering the truth
soon after, when he asks Boyd what he got his medal for; Boyd responds, simply, “Cowardice.”
Yet Hart lets it drop and asks Boyd if he would like to get a drink—which ends in Hart’s cheer,
“To escape, in one form or another.” Once again, the fort is situated as a physical representation
of Boyd’s (and, presumably, many of the others’) liminal state: it is an escape from other climes
(both geographical and psychological) that got him (and the rest of them) to Fort Spencer, and it
is the hope of escape to somewhere better that keeps Boyd and Hart going while they are at Fort
Spencer. As he says, “Funny thing. You escape the world and come here, and then we turn right
around and try to escape this place. Frightening thing about escape, though: Chance you might end up someplace worse.” The liminal state, while ripe with potential, is also terrifying in its uncertainty. It offers no guarantees about the future, only that there is a future—one which requires a rite of passage of some sort, some crucial event the purpose of which is to help mark and guide the transition from present to future, out of liminality.\textsuperscript{10} And it is on that note that we first espy Colqhoun outside a fort window.

Colqhoun’s first interactions with the crew of Fort Spencer foreshadow a number of moments to come. In their attempts to warm Colqhoun up after his exposure to the elements, they strip off his clothes and put him in a bath, rubbing his extremities vigorously. They allow him to stew in the hot water for a time while gently tenderizing his limbs (in order to stave off further frostbite). The only woman at the post is long gone for supplies at this point; the men of the fort, Reich (who is inexplicably and confidently shirtless throughout the scene) and Boyd in particular, eye Colqhoun with fear and inquiry as they rub him down. And then, they put him to bed, nestled snugly by the fire, as Boyd, unseen, plays with Colqhoun’s stripped-off, bloody clothes hungrily.

Returning to the narrative (?), Colqhoun is quick, yet evasive, in his description of how he came to Fort Spencer. He first says he has gone three months without food; yet in response to Pvt. Reich asking him how he survived, Colqhoun clarifies: “I said no food, I didn’t say there was nothing to eat, do you understand? Do you understand? I suppose I owe you gentlemen a story.” At this point, the camera turns to Boyd, in the corner, upon whose face plays a mixture of revulsion and fascination at finding a possible kindred spirit (and, no doubt, Boyd’s own internal

\textsuperscript{10} Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage,” p. 5
conflict as to whether he should be fascinated or repulsed by himself, in turn). It is quite clever that Colqhoun says he owes them a story, as that is what they are given: a fabrication.

The tale itself establishes a number of elements that allude to the truth of the story. First, we have Mr. and Mrs. Macready of Ireland, whose presence in the West would have likely been due at that time to the Great Famine taking place in Ireland. Next we have a Mr. Janus, whose name would better fit Colqhoun himself (being so named for Janus, the two-faced Roman deity). Colqhoun does not make eye contact with any of his audience whenever he mentions the fictional(ized) Colonel Ives, the cause for the wagon party’s isolation and the champion of their eventual cannibalistic decline. In describing the order in which they devoured their non-foodstuffs, Colqhoun also provides a path to cannibalism as the decline of the civilized self. First went the oxen and horses, domesticated beasts of burden, man’s mastery of the natural world. Next went his own dog, standing in for companionship and empathy. Following the dog went the belt—fashioned restraint of the mid-section (hunger and desire)—and shoes—a worn and worked barrier between man and the ground upon which he walks. The first to die (and so, be eaten) is Jones, Janus’s servant (who was black)—man’s mastery over his fellow man is the next to go. Colqhoun admits: “When I stepped inside that cave, the smell of meat, cooking. I thanked the Lord. I thanked the Lord. And then, things got out of hand.” Here, the implication is that it is not simply cannibalism that is the aberration, but that the real crime is its rampant indulgence. Colqhoun points out that the meat (note that the victim is no longer Jones, but simply, “the meat”) lasted no more than a week, and soon they were hungry again. The message here, that restraint and moderation are the keys to survival, is echoed by Colqhoun himself later in the film. As Colqhoun relates the subsequent deaths of the rest of the party—save Ives, Mrs. Macready, and himself—it is worth noting the language which he uses. He calls her simply “Macready’s
wife,” not “Mrs. Macready”—her position is defined in terms of how she relates to a man, albeit one already deceased. Colqhoun saves mentioning himself for last, saying, “and I, alone,” which, taken chronologically, can be a mistake of his that hints at the fact that he was the sole survivor. His mention of cowardice at flight serves as an interesting parallel to Boyd’s cowardice earlier; where Boyd simply lay down to die on the battlefield, and was later (quite literally) carried to glory, Colqhoun (as the story goes) fled. It is by “pure providence” that he made it to Fort Spencer, though not for the reasons his audience assumes. Another clever moment before they move on: Col. Hart asks Colqhoun if Mrs. Macready is “still there” at the cave-shelter; Colqhoun agrees and adds that Ives is as well, though neither man mentions if Macready or Ives are still alive, only that they are still present at the cave.

The following scene demonstrates George’s expository purpose. In presenting the Wendigo myth as an “old Indian myth,” (as Hart calls it) conveyed through translation, Ravenous allows us as an audience to situate cannibalism as a natural (albeit supernatural) and contextualized (though extremely situationally so) occurrence. This sets a precedent for cannibalism in a mythic sense, making Colqhoun’s actions seem like the modern echoes of a mythic practice, rather than simply the act of a desperate man. The wording used by Hart here is also particularly relevant: cannibalism is an act wherein “a man partakes of another’s flesh…and takes, steals his strength, his essence,” which brings to mind those earlier connections to Suddenly, Last Summer and the cannibalistic act as a parallel to acts of homosexual congress. There is a partaking of flesh in both instances, and a tendency for one partner to take in the “essence” of the other. The image used in this scene in Ravenous provides additional support: a hulking man, nude, looms over another man, slight of build, with a bloody opening in the latter man’s back being savaged by the former, bodily fluids everywhere.
It is here, however, that the myth begins to bring in an oddly nuanced portrayal of cannibalism: it is not just that the more one eats, the hungrier one becomes; the more one eats, the stronger he gets, as well. Cannibalism and the acceptance of the cannibalistic lifestyle embolden the individual, who in turn wishes to seek out further reinforcement of his lifestyle choice. In order to make the idea of cannibalism more palatable in a modern context, George (via Hart’s translation) points out that “the white man eats the body of Christ every Sunday.” The idea of transubstantiation as divinely-sanctioned cannibalism is one with a curious pedigree; John Milton argued against Catholicism for just such a reason, writing that “If flesh is literally eaten, one is transported out of the sacramental and into the superstitious, the irrational sphere of sheer idolatry.”11 As Nicholas Williams says in reference to the Derrida quote which I used as an epigraph (which was employed there in discussing Blake, who was discussing Milton), “As the context of Derrida’s argument makes clear, the matter of eating always bears upon the question of the subject.”12 When it is transubstantiation, eating the flesh of man to gain a measure of his power may be sanctioned by the church or state; when it is literal flesh, it’s no longer sacrament; it is taboo. This scene cutely draws this comparison explicitly: George has a cartoonish drawing of the crucifixion painted on the back of the same piece of leather upon which the wendigo myth was inscribed; two sides of the same coin, two sides of the same scrap. Yet as the narrative bears out when Boyd consumes Reich (and the former hallucinates back to this scene), just because such cannibalistic behavior has been present throughout history and coopted by contemporary religions, it is by no means culturally sanctioned—acknowledgement is emphatically not approval.

11 Gigante, Denise. “Milton’s Aesthetics of Eating,” p. 90
12 Williams, Nicholae. “Eating Blake…,” p. 147
The march to the cave, though largely uneventful, provides further grist for the “Colqhoun is guilty and savage and different” foreshadowing-mill. As the team treks through the wilderness, the audience’s eyes are drawn to the stark differences in the attire of the men in the group. While Hart, Toffler, Reich, and Boyd all wear their military uniforms—drab blue, white straps across their chests like ribs, the occasional flash of red on a scarf around the neck—Colqhoun is garbed in fur-rimmed boots and raw-hewn leathers. Where George, as the “native guide,” is wearing leather as well, his poncho is tightly-stitched and patterned; Colqhoun looks like he flayed a man-sized beast, tanned the remnants, and threw them over his back. This way Ravenous manages to subvert the aforementioned old school anthropological model of cannibalism as a purely savage Othering; Colqhoun’s attire is similar only to the garb of George (the only non-white in the group) in that they are both made of leather—and George is wearing finely-pressed dress clothes underneath his poncho, to boot. Colqhoun’s clothes beneath his tattered leathers also speak to his nature (or at least, that nature as he chooses to reveal it to the group): they are the drab blacks of a businessman or lay priest, but torn at the shoulders and joints, frayed by time and wear; Colqhoun is a man garbed in the decaying shreds of civilization, with a layer of functional raw savagery over-top. As the men settle into their tent for the night, Colqhoun’s word choice in helping Toffler with his abysmal hymn is telling as well: he is quick to offer “fervent” (to rhyme with Toffler’s previous line’s “servant,” naturally), which is a word that rather succinctly describes his devotion to satisfying his hunger.

In the following scene, we are treated to a brief, awkward interlude when the men stop to catch their breath. As the rest of the Fort Spencer crew swaps drinks, Boyd approaches Colqhoun and, with the reluctance of a boy at his first middle-school dance, asks him if he would be willing to talk about what it felt like, “when you ate the man.” Boyd continues his line of inquiry before
Colqhoun can interrupt, asking if he felt physically changed; his hunger was “wanton” (Boyd’s word, not Colqhoun’s), and if he (Colqhoun) felt physically stronger. When he says “stronger,” there is an almost lusty breathiness to his voice—while the camera does not allow us to see Boyd’s face at this utterance, it does allow us to see the faint trace of a smile cross Colqhoun’s face as he recognizes a kindred spirit. Colqhoun responds in kind, saying, “I seem to remember something like that, a certain [breathy pause] virility” as he looks up at Boyd, who has taken to shifting his weight from foot to foot, again bringing to mind the aforementioned awkward middle-schooler. Colqhoun then says, “Why do you ask?” but before Boyd can summon up a response, Toffler comes charging over the hill, evidence in hand, announcing to all assembled “It’s a bone!”.

Toffler’s subsequent clumsy tumble down the mountainside brings me to two points: First, that every mortal wound in the movie, save one, is a stomach wound. The site of power and vitality in this film (be it for cannibals or the rest) is in the abdomen; death comes only after the rupture of the stomach. Second, that Toffler’s convalescence, and Colqhoun’s response, soon demonstrate the Toffler’s fear revulsion of Colqhoun’s appetites. In the middle of the night, Colqhoun begins licking at Toffler’s wound—when the man wakes up, he begins screaming, “He was licking me! He was licking me!” It is unclear what is most alarming to Toffler: that it was “he” licking (though again, there are no women on the trip, so this point cannot bring itself to much development), that the act itself was “licking” (a gentle, almost intimate act, as much about taste as eroticism), or that, as a whole, he was being licked by Colqhoun. Toffler’s emphasis in each repetition of the phrase is consistently “all of the above,” which clouds matters. It is also curious to note that this exploratory, almost experimental bit of cannibalism is the only instance of gentility in the cannibalistic acts depicted in the film; it is almost vampiric in its emphasis on
the gentle supping over the previously-mentioned voracious, masculinized hunger. And yet, it is this act that first explicitly alerts the assemblage to Colqhoun’s true motives. Colqhoun attempts to explain away his actions as a bad dream, but nevertheless acquiesces to being physically restrained (and begs constantly to be released).

The arrival at the cave and the exploration/revelations contained therein are rich in symbolism and develop the metaphor of hunger and desire (going together as caves and allegories so often do). Boyd and Reich descend into the yawning mouth of the cave, guns in hand (the phallic murder weapon their sole comfort), looking for answers. They follow a trail of blood into a smaller section of the cave, a sort of cubby or closet. They emerge from this subterranean closet knowing the truth about Colqhoun: he killed and ate everyone there. The truth about Colqhoun was literally in the closet. When they discover this truth, Colqhoun attacks, having neither the inclination nor the opportunity to disguise himself any longer. Casting off his bonds and dropping to his knees, Colqhoun digs like a dog in the dirt to come up with a knife with which to attack the search party, completely discarding his disguise as both an upstanding, civilized man and as a participant in, not the sole survivor of, a cannibalistic incident.

The dissolution of Colqun’s identity in this way (which is revisited later in the film) is reminiscent of Elisa Glick’s discussion of gay “dandy” identities in Oscar Wilde:

…gay identity takes material shape in a phenomenal form that conceals its real relations. This is not to say that the forms of gay identity are illusory or in some sense false, but rather that they wear a disguise.¹³

Colqhoun casts off the performative aspects of his disguise here, stomping around and skulking like a beast, then, finally, rushing forth to penetrate Hart with his knife (in the stomach, of course). Taking Hart’s gun, he shoots George (stomach, again), and turns to Toffler. The gun jams (performance anxiety?), prompting Colqhoun to snarl, “That’s so annoying,” while the private winces and shivers. Colqhoun discards his cloak of tattered leather (and with it, the last softness of his disguise), readies his bloody knife, held erect, and suggests to Toffler, with sadistic glee on his face, “Run.”

The chase scene that follows loses much of its significance if the viewer is not familiar with the movie *Deliverance*. In that film, there is a scene in which one character is menaced, chased (uphill, scrambling), and eventually sodomized (on screen) by forest-dwelling hillfolk who implore him to “squel like a pig, boy” for their own sadistic pleasure. In *Ravenous*, Colqhoun chases Toffler (uphill, scrambling), muttering, “Run, run, run,” brandishing the knife with which he will eventually penetrate Toffler, killing him (Boyd and Reich find him with his stomach splayed open); all the while the score plays a tune of jaunty banjos and warbling nonsense remarkably reminiscent of that iconic *Deliverance* theme, “Dueling Banjos.” According to the screenwriter,14 the director,15 and one of the main composers,16 this scene was an intentional homage throughout. By referencing a scene about male rape (one of the best-known scenes of male rape in cinema) as a chase scene about cannibalism and murder, the production staff demands a reading of one action as being extremely close to the other. The chase concludes with a number of moments that have already been well-established for the film: Boyd wants to flee back to the fort with his tail between his legs; Reich threatens his life and

14 Griffin, Ted. Audio commentary on DVD
15 Bird, Antonia. Audio commentary on DVD
16 Ibid
calls him a coward; Colqhoun hits Reich with a knife (thrown, into his stomach). Boyd manages to muster up the fortitude to raise his rifle and fire on Colqhoun, hitting the man solidly in the chest. Yet Boyd’s denial of the other cannibal (and thus, himself) is fruitless (it is not a stomach wound, so of course it is not fatal); Colqhoun just sits up, laughing and spitting blood, and advances on Boyd, who keeps backing towards a cliff, muttering “Get away from me.” It is interesting to consider whether Boyd is so afraid here of violence, or a lack of thereof: both men are unarmed, and we have seen no unarmed combat skill from Colqhoun, yet Boyd easily dispatched a Mexican guardsmen handily (and empty-handed) at the start of his story. Boyd wants Colqhoun to stay away not because he is afraid he will be killed and eaten, but because perhaps he will not be. Colqhoun glares menacingly, yet when Boyd finally takes action, he balks. Boyd characteristically takes flight, in this case literally, jumping from the cliff to a likely death below. Colqhoun’s expression goes blank for a moment; it brings to mind a cat at play whose mock-prey lashes out when cornered. His intent here becomes clear in the flash of expression across his face: he was just playing with Boyd; he had no intention of killing him in earnest. Colqhoun is left to pace atop the cliff, whistling and shaking his head at the presumed loss of Boyd (be it his life for companionship or his body for meat, it is unclear).

When Boyd emerges from the forest pit into which he fell (and wherein he devoured Reich post-mortem), the score of the film once again serves to explicitly demonstrate what is going on in the narrative. The main theme of the film, which first played when Boyd arrived at Fort Spencer (“Boyd’s Journey” on the soundtrack), plays again as Boyd stumbles through the snowy woods back to the fort. Just as his arrival at the fort the first time was a new beginning of sorts, so too is his arrival this time around. Before, he was a coward seeking to run away from his larger problems as he had run away from smaller ones; this time, he stands firmly upright (in
spite of a shattered leg) and marches confidently into camp, reborn as a man who is, at least briefly, cognizant of who and what he is.

Unsurprisingly, this comfort is not to last; Boyd is soon dragging himself to Martha’s tent, begging for a cure to the wendigo condition. Martha, sharing George’s purpose of providing exposition and explanation, explains that the only way to stop wendigo is to give yourself to it, to die. Yet, I would argue (and Colqhoun later does) that there is another way to end the problems of the wendigo compulsion: giving yourself to it and accepting the change of life that comes with being a cannibal.

As Boyd adjusts to the new status quo at the fort, with most of the original staff dead and Colqhoun now in the guise of “Colonel Ives” (and showing none of his injuries from their earlier altercation), Boyd does little beyond quietly suffering, lurking like a sullen teenager, and vividly fantasizing about gutting Cleaves and eating him for meat (again with the stomach wounds). His brief moment of acceptance and deliverance from his hunger only days earlier has given away to another bout of self-loathing and denial, and he looks all the worse for wear for it. While Colqhoun/Ives is meticulously-groomed, flush with vitality, and light-spirited (having spent the time up until his assumption of the Ives disguise feasting on the remains of the search party), in his acceptance of how to regulate his condition while “passing” as a normal person, Boyd does not eat, sleeps fitfully at best, and does not socialize, save to threaten Colqhoun/Ives with a knife whenever the man makes a sudden move.
Boyd eventually confronts Colqhoun/Ives alone outside, however, and it is there that the latter man lays out the ideology behind his hunger. He explains, while puffing on a cigar:

“You know, not too long ago I couldn't do that. Could barely take a breath without coughing up a pint of blood. Tuberculosis. That along with fierce headaches... depression... suicidal ambition... I was on my way to a sanatorium to convalesce when a native scout told me a curious story. Man eats the flesh of another, he steals his strength, he absorbs the other man’s spirit. Well, I just had to try. Consequently I ate the scout first; and you know, he was absolutely right. I grew stronger...I ate five men in three months. Tuberculosis? Vanished. As did the black thoughts. I reached Denver that spring happy. And healthy. And virile.”

Cannibalism has cured all Colqhoun’s ills, both physical and psychological. In embracing his hunger, he has overcome all that troubled him. Boyd’s immediate response is not “why did you do it,” or “how could you live with yourself,” but rather, “did you eat [the woman, Mrs. Macready] too?” Colqhoun’s response, that he did indeed (and with a smile on his face as he says it), is what disgusts Boyd—it is not that he has been eating people to steal their strength, it is that he ate a woman, that bothers Boyd the most. In this way, not only does the film draw out parallels between homosexuality and cannibal consumption, but it also serves to articulate the essential Otherness within Boyd—diegetically-referenced inborn inhumanity that the narrative dictates can only be rectified through suicide.

The rest of the group’s confusion over this altercation—Colqhoun/Ives claims that Boyd attacked him—allows the situation to escalate rapidly. In short order, Knox is killed, and Colonel Hart returns, brought back from the precipice of death by Colqhoun’s induction into the fold as a
cannibal. Much as Colqhoun was rejuvenated by his dietary regimen, Hart looks decades younger: there is color to his hair, he no longer needs glasses, and he even crushes walnuts (which, at the start of the film, required the creative utilization of extremely heavy tomes) with his bare hands.

And so it is that Colqhoun and Hart outline their plan for Fort Spencer. They will turn the fort into a cannibal community, selectively killing stragglers through the mountain pass and creating a small band of like-minded individuals to live out their days with a near-unlimited supply of rapidly-replenishing foodstuffs. Colqhoun’s offer to Boyd at this point would provide Boyd passage out of his liminal state: no longer would he be a half-fed, reluctant cannibal, denying himself and his passions in favor of trying to live a life that others would consider normal; no, instead Boyd and the others would embrace their new lifestyle and be the better for it. As noted earlier, Hart says that it is lonely being a cannibal, but the truth of it—as presented in this film—is that it really is not at all lonely. The benefits are numerous: longevity, virility, vitality, contentment. The drawbacks are that it requires a lack of morality, and a steady supply of people who would not be missed were they to become dinner. As for the former, Colqhoun’s plan would take care of that handily; as for the latter, Colqhoun has confronted Boyd with the statement, “Morality. The last bastion of a coward” so clearly, there are no problems for him here. He even parrots the doctrine of Manifest Destiny to reinforce his point, noting that “the country is seeking to be whole, devouring all in its path—and we simply follow.” The monsters here are presented as making an informed, rational (in their minds) decision: be as the nation, and be whole. The cannibals of Ravenous are not only presented as born to the life (as is implied of Boyd numerous times throughout), but as having made a conscious decision to embrace a cannibalistic lifestyle. A tendency towards cannibalism (and all it connotes) may be an inherent
quality; *Ravenous* argues, however, that what makes monsters of people with such inclinations is their tendency to embrace those urges, rather than deny them. Boyd’s actions at the conclusion of the movie, then, present the only possible means of reconciliation for such creatures with the greater society—removing themselves from it utterly by death.

Don Adams, in discussing James Purdy’s *Allegories of Love*, offers remarks that I feel are apropos to Colqhoun’s desire to form a community where he and others like him can be themselves:

The challenge is not to alter one’s nature—to change oneself from evil to good—but to alter one’s world so that one’s nature can thrive. Human nature admits of no judgment—no limit—but itself. It loves what enables its fulfillment and hates what hinders it.  

Although we cannot control our loves and hates, we can work to create a world in which our loves are given the opportunity to thrive and our hates are disempowered.

Colqhoun wishes to do just this: to alter his world so that his nature can thrive. He very clearly loves what enables his fulfillment and hates what hinders it. He is only asking that Boyd join him in doing the same. Colqhoun is fully aware that he cannot control his loves, or his hates, but he *can* work to create a world in which his love is given the opportunity to thrive. He and Hart would just like Boyd to join them in the endeavor. As Colqhoun tells Boyd, “Just. Give. In.” It is a kindness that he asks Boyd to join them, as well. Although cannibalism has been presented throughout the film as a harsher, more brutal vampirism, here it begins to demonstrate some of

17 Adams, Don. “James Purdy’s Allegories of Love,” p. 16
18 Ibid, p. 17
the more subversive and coercive aspects attributable to the latter. “The idea of draining another’s substance is common enough…but the additional vampiric element of collusion or collaboration can be powerfully suggestive.”\textsuperscript{19} Hart and Colqhoun, and the cannibalistic community they represent (which, if cannibalism stands in for male homosexuality, means these two are representatives of a homosexual community), are asking to be given the opportunity to live their lives as they see fit—in a fashion the film deems monstrous and possibly contagious.

Naturally, Boyd (as the eventually right and moral protagonist) does not join them in their new community. He talks some doubt into Colonel Hart—so much so that the man acquiesces to death by Boyd’s knife (a remarkably sudden death, without hesitation; odd, considering Boyd’s previous reluctance to shed blood). In this moment, we see the only instance of a fatal non-abdominal wound in the film: Boyd slits Colonel Hart’s throat. In addition to making a more grotesque tableau for Colqhoun to observe from outside (Hart’s blood splatters across the window he is standing in front of), this death comments on where Hart’s true power lay: unlike the other men, and indeed the other cannibals, Hart’s strength in the group was that he was a man of words and letters; when he got his new eyesight, he lamented that he no longer had all his books to read. And yet, in destroying the monster, the film is careful to make Boyd attack the source of his true danger to the world at large: his ability to articulate the benefits of cannibalistic conversion. The fear here is not death, but conversion.

The final, inevitable confrontation has little dialogue, just the thrum of the score, the sickening sound of blades plunging into flesh, and the guttural groans and grunts of mortal combat. Boyd and Colqhoun deal one another numerous blows (most of them to their

\textsuperscript{19} Sceats, Sarah. “Oral Sex…,” p. 109
abdomens), and finally collapse, together, covered in bodily fluids, in a bear trap ambush of Boyd’s design (pinned around their stomachs). That they die in a bear trap is fitting: Boyd’s final act is to sacrifice himself to kill Colqhoun in a metal mouth that he has prepared for just that moment. As Colqhoun taunts Boyd, telling him that the latter’s death will mean consumption by the former, Boyd is tight-lipped, offering no remark save a sigh of relief as he collapses atop Colqhoun, laying his head on the man’s chest after Colqhoun expires (first).

So is Boyd’s ultimate refusal to indulge in life-saving cannibalism bravery or cowardice? He refuses a chance at a longer, stronger life, surrounded by people who want him there and see him as a kindred spirit. Colqhoun even notes that if he himself dies first, he expects Boyd would eat him, bidding him “Bon appétit.” Yet Boyd refuses and lets himself die rather than living on as a cannibal, and is the hero of the film (not just the protagonist, the hero) for it. Boyd’s refusal tells us as an audience that control of baser impulses is the right and just act of a finally brave man. Boyd’s suicide as a result of this refusal articulates to us as an audience that accepting death is preferable to living a monstrous life. Where Colqhoun, during his offer of community to Boyd, said “It’s not courage to resist me, Boyd. It’s courage to accept me,” the narrative presents heroic courage in that final act of self-denial. The characters most comfortable with themselves in this film are the monsters; the only character to get what he thinks he wants out of his cinematic life is the one who denies what he would need to survive. So it is that Ravenous gives us a clear articulation of a point it has circled throughout the running time: if what you need to survive is considered wrong by society, your only recourse is to deny yourself—and thus, not survive at all. It is more important for society to operate in a traditional and civilized manner than it is for individuals in that society to be happy in the margins.
Through the presentation of cannibalism as an affinity discovered through experimentation and refined through practice that enriches the lives of its practitioners through indulgence in the flesh of men by other men, *Ravenous* codes homosexual desire as a practice demonized by outsiders but which benefits insiders through acceptance of their true (monstrous) selves. Yet, that acceptance, rooted in monstrousness (with acknowledged historical precedent) is thus morally wrong and only redeemable to society if the individual dies in the end. The message of the film, then, is that the only recourse for these “secret monsters” is suicide. Boyd and Colqhoun’s story could have been a comedy (and indeed, their interactions in the film are some of its most comedic moments); Boyd’s decision to end it all, for the both of them, presents him as a hero, Colqhoun a villain, and their interactions ultimately as a villainous seducer’s actions being at last rebuffed at great cost to his victim. A double murder and a suicide are, in the world of *Ravenous*, the last brave acts of a lifelong coward.
CONCLUSION

This thesis opens with three questions, and so it is only fitting to bring this work to a close by revisiting those questions. I asked, “When there are women in cannibal horror (as either victims or antagonists), what about their presentations or situations makes their presence so exceptional?” In “Nuclear Families and Home-Cooked Meals,” I identified the extreme of the cannibal horror subgenre’s misogyny through a consideration of the narrative value of female survivors to these films. Female survivors in these films (The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, the Wrong Turn franchise, the The Hills Have Eyes franchise) survive because the cannibal antagonists, when given the opportunity to kill them, opt to spare them with an eye towards raping them later in order to perpetuate the species. That female survivors last long enough to attain “final girl” status is due to the high value the antagonists place on their “to-be-bred-withness.” Even in survival, women’s successes are mitigated by presentations that define them by the company they keep. No “final girl” in these films is the final survivor; she is either part of a survivor-pair (a surviving Eve with her surviving Adam), or a surrogate mother to an infant or young child found or reclaimed in the course of the film. The women who live among the cannibals fare little better; they are either victims of abduction and rape who die over the course of the film (in The Hills Have Eyes 2) or illiterate, inert breeding objects who exist to copulate with the male cannibals (in Wrong Turn 2), again in order to perpetuate the species. These narratives ultimately vindicate the cannibals’ sexual politics through their continued existence: the cannibal clans’ numbers are never fully depleted by their deaths at the hands of the survivors. Rather, there are always more cannibals to the clans (of each of these franchises), precisely because they view women in such dehumanizing, utilitarian terms. Yet in each of the latter cases, the presence of misogyny is not the only point worth noting; homophobia by omission is
prevalent throughout these narratives. There are no same-sex survivor pairs in the cannibal clans films (there are no dual Eves, nor are there dual Adams). There are no non-procreative cannibals in these clans. There is no place for homosexuality in these films.

The women in these films are victims and narratively marginalized. Cannibal horror films are ultimately about the thoughts and interactions of men (which further complicates the issue when there is no place for homosexuality within a large segment of this subgenre). In “Hannibal Lecktor/Lecter and Other Monsters,” I identified the ways in which Clarice Starling’s victimhood is framed in order to marginalize her competency and further present her as an isolated individual within the institutional systems she serves. Clarice Starling is less a strong woman in The Silence of the Lambs, and more a just-sufficiently-competent agent whose opinions are presented as colored by her outsider status. Will Graham, the investigator in Red Dragon and Manhunter, has no such qualifications placed on his competency; his opinions are those of his superiors, and his competence is largely unquestioned.

I also asked, “Why are the majority of cannibal antagonists and victims in modern horror male?” In “Dinner for Two,” I explained how Hannibal Lecter’s character arc is defined by two instances of choice. In each, he could choose between pursuing a relationship with a woman and pursuing cannibalistic revenge. In each, he chooses cannibalism and revenge. Where Ravenous may have argued that the cannibal-homosexual identity is an essential one (albeit an essentially horrible one deserving of death), Hannibal and Hannibal Rising frame the construction of such an identity as just that: a construction, a choice. Given that the time period in which these films were released featured extensive rhetoric surrounding the idea of homosexuality as a choice rather than an essential feature of a person’s being, the fact that Hannibal and Hannibal Rising not only frame Lecter’s decision in such a way, but as a decision with a wrong choice
(specifically, the option that does not involve women is the evil, monstrous decision), these films further evoke the sexuality-as-choice rhetoric of their era. As I demonstrated in “Eating to Live, Living to Eat,” cannibalism in *Ravenous* highlights the film’s homosexual overtones. The film is about Boyd realizing that his hunger for flesh (and, within the context of his environs, only male flesh will do) leaves him with no choice but to kill himself, and thus spare the world his continued abominable existence. Boyd’s refusal to accept his cannibalistic, flesh (-of-men)-loving identity is framed as heroic, the last brave act of a coward.

These films share a common thread that unites them not only with one another, but with popular media as a whole: that which the majority does not understand or wish to understand is anathema. Homosexuality during the period in which these films were released—and continuing to today—is an especially misunderstood, misrepresented, and maligned facet of human experience. Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell may have been repealed officially in 2011, but the undercurrent of homophobia in American culture that that policy made explicit remains. Marriage licenses between individuals of the same sex are only granted in six of fifty states at the time of this writing. President Barack Obama may have said as recently as May 2012 that granting civil unions to same-sex couples is “not enough” in the pursuit of equality regardless of sexual orientation, but little has come of that. President Obama’s statement came the day after voters in North Carolina approved a constitutional ban on gay marriage in that state. Progress on gay rights has been, to this point, a game of too little, too late combined with small steps forward in the face of massive, institutionally supported steps backward.

The films I have examined within this thesis are, unfortunately, by no means unique in their positions—they are simply a representative sample of popular media of this era. The narratives of cannibal clan films attempt to justify marginalization, dehumanization, and
objectification of women. Three-fifths of the films in the Hannibal Lecter pentalogy place
deviance from the heterosexual norm on par with serial murder and ritualized torture, and
possession anyone who disagrees with the institutional support of such a view as weak and
unreliable. *Hannibal* and *Hannibal Rising* articulate a dichotomy between monstrousness (in the
form of cannibalistic revenge) and heterosexual relationships; a dichotomy that would make little
sense on its face, save that the implication is that other, more obvious opposites of heterosexual
relationships (for instance, homosexual relationships) are concomitant with monstrousness. And
*Ravenous* makes explicit the homosexual overtones of cannibalism, while arguing that the
morally just thing for an individual to do if he feels himself overcome with urges towards such
things is to commit suicide.

The cannibal horror films examined here are poisonously closed-minded and culturally
insensitive in the extreme, substituting a misguided moral Manicheanism for anything
resembling nuance or tolerance in the name of presenting easily-vilified monsters. There is little
subversive to be found in these films—and to be sure, fans of horror frequently like to believe
that their tastes place them outside of the mainstream, what with all of the violence and nudity.
Those things alone must be markers of rebellion and subversion, mustn’t they? But the politics of
cannibal horror are the politics of the hell house. Disagreement with the right and moral way—as
defined by those in positions of (white, wealthy, male, heteronormative) authority—guarantees a
brutal end for the dissident. The immoral among the group in cannibal clan films (and indeed,
most slasher films) are winnowed out first for their indiscretions, but by the film’s close, the
monsters who administered such rough moral justice are dispatched as well, and frequently by
means no less gruesome than those they employed in punishing their earlier victims. The
antagonists of the Hannibal Lecter pentalogy (save Lecter himself) are beaten, shot, burned, cut,
blown up, and—in one case—crippled and fed to trained boars. Every willing cannibal in *Ravenous* dies by the film’s end, either by suicide or murder. Cannibal horror introduces its monsters, allows them to disgust the audience for a time, and then kills them to remind the audience of the way of the world (as these films present it): those things that “good” people see as evil must be, and will be, punished.

But why does this matter? Why is it significant to the study of popular culture that I identify themes of heteronormativity and obliteration of deviance in cannibal horror specifically? It all comes down to a lie.

To bring my own positionality back into the discussion for a moment: I first viewed the majority of the films I examined here in my late teens and early twenties, and I certainly thought at the time that I was seeing something subversive and rebellious. Cannibal horror (and much of the horror genre as a whole) is often marketed as as subversive and in violation of the social order, but the truth of the genre is far from its marketing. Horror films are anticipated and dissected by fans online, and whole cable channels exist to cater to the fans of horror—channels which deluge the viewer with reminders that what they are watching is some dark guilty pleasure. It not only commodifies rebellion (and as a result encourages complacency—people need not rebel in earnest if they feel they can affect change through posturing and consumption), it does so while ultimately advancing extremely socially conservative views of gender politics and sexuality. Further examination has demonstrated that I was clearly wrong. But correcting the folly of youth is not my motivation in this work. Recognizing that cannibal horror is a genre that hides misogyny, homophobia, and the marginalization of Others beneath a mask of human skin is, in and of itself, not enough. This thesis aims to say to fans of horror: You are being lied to.
Cannibal horror as a subgenre is not trying to shock its audience into new and radical ways of thinking; it is trying to cow them into submission, into acceptance of the existing social order. Who would you rather side with, these movies ask: the monsters or the heroes? The monsters lose. The monsters die. They may come back for the sequel (and will exist in perpetuity through merchandising), but their individual stories end with their defeat—each cannibal horror film is a case study in the triumph of perceived-good over decried-evil. Victory comes in upholding the social order. And would you, the audience, like to be a winner?

Further inquiry into this subject is ripe with opportunities for support or refutation of the arguments I have raised here. As this thesis is an examination of only a small selection of the horror films out there—and an examination of a relatively small subgenre of horror films at that—a question arises: Are all horror films featuring cannibalism similar in theme and tone to those I have identified here? Further research into this topic could examine if cannibal horror films outside of the time period of my topic have a different message. The version of *The Hills Have Eyes* I examined here was a remake; the original film was itself the genesis of a franchise with multiple entries, as was the original *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. If the originals were significantly different, did they reflect their era as the films I discussed here reflected their own?

What of vampires? I addressed the scholarship on the idea of Hannibal Lecter as a type of vampire, but could the association not go in the other direction? Can cannibals be seen as vampires who go a step further in consuming their victims, or might vampires be cannibals with a tendency towards conversion rather than full consumption? Existing scholarship on sexuality and vampires in popular culture tends to focus on the imagery of the mouth and lips, and of oral transmission and a hunger for partial consumption of the victim. How does cannibalism fit into this interpretation? Both cannibals and vampires are sustained by interactions with those beyond
their number, and, at least in the case of *Ravenous*, seduction and conversion is possible among cannibals in popular culture. How do depictions of vampirism in popular culture treat full consumption of victims? I briefly mentioned interpretations of Anne Rice’s vampire novels earlier in this work; does bringing cannibalism into this discussion significantly alter how her works could be perceived? It would also be interesting to see if, in light of the inclusion of considerations of cannibalism into an analysis of vampires, any of this could apply to analyses of the popular *Twilight* franchise. Some scholarly work has already been done on the ways in which the series deemphasizes the significance of domestic violence in young adult relationships, but the heteronormative assumptions underlying the series have yet to be examined at length. The (heroic) vampires and werewolves of the series both abstain from human flesh for the most part; is this simply a matter of defanged monsters making for desexualized monsters? And if so, does that mean that the message to the young adult audience is that nothing is as scary as sex?

And what can yet be said of zombie movies, that shambling elephant in the room with regards to a discussion of horror movies about people eating other people? I purposefully avoided discussion and analysis of zombie movies within this thesis because I perceived there to be numerous complications to attempts at comparison between zombie movies and cannibal horror as I defined it here, but another scholar could attempt to reconcile those complications. Zombies are presented as unthinking beasts driven by hunger beyond death, while the cannibals of the films I examined here are both sentient and certainly capable of dying. Zombies approach their targets in innumerable hordes—hordes that are themselves aggregations of individuals who succumbed to conversion. Further inquiry could explore this fear of mass conversion as it pertains to both cannibal clan films and the value of “to-be-bred-with-ness;” what happens when any individual can perpetuate the species, rather than just the women? Is there a different sort of
misogyny involved when the fear is that men will be placed on the same level as women in such a context (such an analysis could also examine science fiction like the *Alien* franchise)? Is it some new breed of gay panic when one’s best friend could be a monster hiding in plain sight, ready to pass his or her disease (and predilections) on to anyone whose guard is down? And what does the popularity of zombie films say about such an interpretation? Is the viewing public at large ready to turn on one another at a moment’s notice? Are zombie movies a gay witch hunt in the making?

Numerous avenues for expansion of the ideas I have articulated here present themselves with regards to all manner of topic with regards to horror films, but that should by no means imply that the ideas I have articulated within this work should be consigned exclusively to discussions and analyses of horror—or films, for that matter. I mentioned my own positionality earlier as a partial motivation for this work; it would be interesting to see ethnographic work done among horror fans (or indeed fans of other media deemed subversive by either its supporters or detractors) to see if their feelings mirror my own. Stephen King may offer his own reasons for why we crave horror movies in his essay of the same name, but I think that asking horror fans themselves why they crave horror movies could yield helpful insights into both fan culture and genre studies. Further inquiry could also more robustly address my claim earlier in this piece about the marketing of horror movies to their audience: just how much of a lie are horror fans being sold? And, to tie this to the ethnographic suggestion previous, how much of the lie are horror fans buying? In addition, films of the horror genre are likely not the exclusive champions of the social order at the theatre. Examinations of heteronormativity in hero narratives in action films, comedies, and romance could just as easily expand on some of my research here—any narrative with a protagonist and an antagonist has in some way its monster.
The cannibal horror films of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries I have examined here are woefully consistent in their overall message: Deviance from the norm is unacceptable. In the Hannibal Lecter pentalogy, all deviance is monstrous (and nearly all of it is sexually-tinged). In cannibal clan horror films, deviance from heteronormative choices is altogether unheard of by both protagonists and antagonists alike. And in *Ravenous*, deviance from the expected norm is only mitigated or reconciled in death. The cannibal horror subgenre intertwines cannibalism and homosexuality. It renders all deviance irreconcilable with continued existence. It classifies everything beyond strict male-female, exaggeratedly heterosexual interaction as deviant, and then argues for death before deviance. These films argue that anyone and anything not in line with strict heteronormativity is monstrous, and then slay their own beasts. It is okay, these films tell us. Our monsters were never really human anyway.
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