

4. Ingesting the Corpse: The Cannibal's Taste for Death – *American Psycho* and *Hannibal*

He's a myth, a monster, a mortal man.
Scott McGrath, Nightfilm, Prologue

Before we begin you must all be warned.
Nothing here is vegetarian. Bon appétit.
Hannibal Lecter, Hannibal

If we accept the previously established *death paradox*, which builds on Foucault's "Language to Infinity" and suggests that the inability of language to grasp death results in an overt productivity of texts that either capture or consume imaginations thereof upon stagnation, then the proposition of the hunger metaphor governing this book exposes the American soul as being deeply riddled with murderous desires. In essence, there lies a killer at the root of the American soul, as asserted by the external British eye of novelist D.H. Lawrence who, in his reflection on James Fenimore Cooper, states that "[a]ll the other stuff, the love, the democracy, the floundering into lust, is a sort of by-play. The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted" (68). Connecting this observation to the overt production of an imaginary that is not only haunted by its canvas, but also continually projects death onto it, the American soul is not only marked by a killer's isolate stoicism but, furthermore, seems inherently insatiable. It appears, then, that not only is there a murderous undercurrent to "all the other stuff", the love and democratic hope which characterizes an American optimism, is classified by Lawrence as mere "by-play"; the textual productivity of this murderous undercurrent is also classified by its relentless desire for more (death) which then manifests itself in the figure of the *serial* killer. In its cultural imaginary, American optimism comes to fetishize an American pessimism; this is a pessimism which seems eerily absent in the American narrative trajectory of the reiteration of the American Dream. This lack or absence comes to be over-compensated for in its cultural unconscious; specifically, in the literary depiction of the figure of the serial killer, someone who is compulsively plagued by an endless desire for more death.

Linnie Blake states that, “since the earliest days of the republic, the popular arts in America have displayed a lurid preoccupation with the figure of the murderer” (197). Consolidating her claim, she echoes the previously outlined proposition of seriality, adding the following nuance:

The mass, multiple or serial killer has, moreover, been creatively deployed for some two hundred years as a means of articulating a sense of social dislocation and, specifically, as a means of examining the relation of the lone and often alienated individual to the purportedly democratic society that he or she inhabits. (197)

Blake roots this form of “social dislocation” in the inherent binary on the basis of which the American project is built: the tension between public and private which must be continuously negotiated by the American individual. In his seminal examination of American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville repeatedly voices his bafflement at this binary, stating, for instance, that “[a]n American attends to his private concerns as if he were alone in the world; a moment later, he devotes himself to public affairs as if he had forgotten his own” (628), thereby teasing out the core paradox which haunts the American individual, the seemingly impossible maintenance of a balance between self-reliant individualism and community-driven public affairs. If the figuration not just of a killer, but of a *serial* killer, comes to articulate an American anxiety with regard to the binary opposition between the private and the communal geared towards a blatant prosperity which seems to disregard the killer’s own “by-play”, then what seems to be at stake is a form of lack (of death) which results in a serial desire for death, as desire, according to Lacanian psychoanalysis forms in “relation to a *lack*”:

Unlike a need, which can be satisfied and which then ceases to motivate the subject until another need arises, desire can never be satisfied, it is constant in its pressure, and eternal. The realisation of desire does not consist in being ‘fulfilled’, but in the reproduction of desire as such. (“desire”, 38)

As outlined, desire, *per definitionem*, hinges not on its fulfillment, but in the reproduction of itself (i.e., in its own inability to be satisfied renders the nature of desire intrinsically serial). This serial aspect of murderous desire exposes the fact that it will remain eternally unfulfillable, which results not only in insatiability but in a conjoined incessant hunger for that which is perceived as lacking. What is amiss in the American narrative trajectory of optimism and prosperity is death, which then symptomatically (re-)appears in a plethora of figurations of the serial killer, or as Blake suggests, “[...]t seems that threats posed to the cohesiveness and integrity of the American civic body were symbolically located in the figure of the mass or serial murderer” (198). In accordance with the claims outlined in previous chapters, Blake also locates the cornerstone of this deployment in the American Gothic, iso-

lating Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* as exemplary; this is a text which “set out to explore ideas of murderous criminality as a psychological dysfunction predicated on the individual's inability to reconcile personal perceptions with the democratically agreed empirical norms” (197). In this sense, the literary depiction of the serial killer comes to act out the irreconcilable American binary which was outlined by Tocqueville. If the fictional serial killer epitomizes an American psychosis, then the serial cannibal marks a refinement and literalization of this metaphor that places the focus specifically on that selfsame insatiability-turned-hunger. The fetishization of death, manifested in the cannibalistic devouring of the corpse, forms an additional pillar in this analysis that this chapter in particular will address by expanding on the American Gothic and its implications, which lay the cornerstone for the specifically American insatiability or hunger for death alongside its physical manifestation in the form of the zombie myth as well as the recipe-esque, formulaic serialization of murder in the form of revenge, as discussed in previous chapters; the attempt to overcome death by means of its physical ingestion (i.e. cannibalism), given agency by the serial cannibal, a specific form of the serial killer who adequately literalizes the hunger metaphor.

The concept of fetishism offers a useful lens to read cannibalism as an unfulfilled desire for death. In its simplest form, the fetish mourns an absence which it overcompensates for by means of a substitute that fills the space of the original absence. In his essay “Fetishism”, Freud contextualizes this in terms of castration and asserts that “[t]o put it more plainly: the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and – for reasons familiar to us – does not want to give up” (153). Abstracting Freud's elaboration on castration, the fetish in its purest form denotes a form of disavowal of something conjoined with the excessive substitution by means of another. Freud ties this to the horror of castration which, in essence, is the horror of something valuable being taken away:

When now I announce that the fetish is a substitute for the penis, I shall certainly create disappointment; so I hasten to add that it is not a substitute for any chance penis, but for a particular and quite special penis that had been extremely important in early childhood but had later been lost. (152)

In fetishizing, a memorial to desire itself is built as a form of substitute which redirects a desire initially formed towards an absence; overcoming said absence, towards which desire was initially directed, another object takes the place of a previously authentically desired one: “Something else has taken its place, has been appointed its substitute, as it were, and now inherits the interest which was formerly directed to its predecessor” (Freud, 154). In this sense, a memorial is built that not only honors its predecessor, but also compensates for its lack; in so doing, the attention which is brought to the fetishized object is overt because it carries a form of over-com-

penetration which obfuscates the disavowal of the initially desired, in addition to its intrinsic, inherited desire.

In *Fetishism and Culture: A Different Theory of Modernity*, Hartmut Böhme asserts that, ultimately, the fetish boils down to an absence or empty space: “After endlessly ploughing the field of fetishism, one seems to arrive back at [...] the “empty space” that fetish occupies [which] can also be a wound¹, an absence, a negation, a hole, a lack, a vacuum [...]” (359). Attempting to fill said vacuum, the fetish is manifested as a subject-object relationship in which the object is endowed with an unusual element of power; this can extend to the point where the subject can become completely engrossed by the object as “[t]he relationship to the fetish is therefore compulsive [...] it functions, but it is a delusion; it is a consciously handled mechanism whose internal structure remains unconscious” (Böhme, 4–5). It is significant that the element of power ascribed to the object not only substitutes, but over-compensates, a loss or absence, thereby serving the purpose of protection and, more often than not, sexual gratification. This characterizes the relationship between fetishizer and fetishized as deviant, as “[...] ‘fetishism’ has been a term used to describe a corrupt relationship to objects [...]” (Böhme, 4). The fetish marks a corrupt relationship which produces a memorial in lieu of an absence, filling the place of something that has been lost or is absent, which highlights the implication the fetish intrinsically carries; an act of over-compensation in which desire or “[...] interest suffers an extraordinary increase as well, because the horror of castration has set up a memorial to itself in the creation of a substitute” (Freud, 154). While recognized as a deviant (sexual) desire by the subject, according to Freud the fetish carries an erotic component which facilitates eroticism:

For no doubt a fetish is recognized by its adherents as an abnormality, it is seldom felt by them as the symptom of an ailment accompanied by suffering. Usually they are quite satisfied with it, or even praise the way in which it eases their erotic life. (152)

It can be stated that the desire for the figuration of the serial killer exposes a lack of death in American optimism, which comes to fetishize death in lieu of this absence, by leaning on the trajectory of Lacanian desire and fetishism and theorized against the previously outlined symptom of the serial killer which comes to characterize the American cultural imaginary. While the fetish as such is already driven by over-compensation, it is significant to note here that death itself marks an absence and, in this sense, doubles the desire to fetishize. We find the literalization of this dynamic in the figure of the serial cannibal, which is marked not only by insatiability but further by

1 See chapter 5 for the development of this absence as wound in the context of the spectacular serial killer that Mark Seltzer theorizes as being rooted in *wound culture*.

a form of overcompensation of internalizing the corpse into the subject. Contextualized with cannibalistic desire, the fetish comes to mark an abnormal or corrupt relationship with the corpse, the corpse itself becoming the absence (of life) which is over-compensated for through the ingestion thereof. On a structural level, the implementation of a fictionalized serial cannibal fetishizing the corpse comes to place visibility on what is culturally absent and overcompensated for: the abject reality of corporeal demise.

If the fetish is rooted in eroticism, then the figure of the serial cannibal's agency can be seen as governed by said undercurrent of "eroticism" which, according to Georges Bataille, paradoxically, "is assenting to life even in death" (11). In the foreword to his seminal work *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, Bataille claims that he does "[...] not think that man has much chance of throwing light on the things that terrify him before he has dominated them" (7), thereby making an argument for the necessity of dominance over terror. This form of dominion, according to Bataille, is tied to elevation and he goes on to state that "[...] man can *surmount* the things that frighten him and face them squarely" (7). Bataille further argues that erotic desire, with regard to death, is rooted in the fact that humans are:

[...] discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. We find the state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear. Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is. (15)

In order to compensate for the yearning for our lost continuity, Bataille asserts that it is the eroticization of an intrinsically non-reproductive death that paradoxically results in continuity, thereby bridging the gulf which marks us as discontinuous: "This gulf is death in one sense, and death is vertiginous, death is hypnotizing. It is my intention to suggest that for us, discontinuous beings that we are, [eroticizing] death means continuity of being. [...]" (13). By eroticizing death it becomes continuous, which exemplifies the desire to eroticize death and to fetishize the corpse. While death may highlight our discontinuity in isolation, it still reverses this aspect and places an emphasis on our continuity when it is tied to eroticism. The eroticization of death, the marker of an absence in itself, can only be sustained by means of the fetish which creates the illusion of continuity or immortality. Bataille goes on to solidify this notion by stating that, through its eroticization, the "[...] fear of death and pain is transcended, then the sense of relative continuity between animals of the same species [...] is suddenly heightened" (99). Leaning on Freud's elaborations on the totem and the taboo in his argumentation, Bataille expands Freud's elaboration on touching the corpse as a palpability "[...] by which we are made aware of the surfaces and textures of objects" (Brillat-Savarin, 37) tying it to a desire for con-

sumption which he highlights as the next logical step: “If [Freud] goes on to discuss the taboo on touching the corpse he must imply that the taboo protected the corpse from other people’s desire to eat it” (71). This marks the sense of touch as a predecessor of a desire for physical ingestion. As exemplified by Lacan, an excessive desire to surmount death can never be satisfied, however, thereby rendering the fetishization of the corpse perpetual, which is to say serial. While the corpse’s tangibility may be protected by means of a culturally implemented taboo, Freud also outlines the desire to eat it as an epitomizing of mere touch, placing his finger on an insatiability, the literalization of which becomes he who cannot stop devouring the dead: the serial cannibal.

The figure of the ‘cannibal’ is defined as “[a] person who eats the flesh of other human beings,” (OED) which, in broader terms, can come to denote “[a]n animal that feeds on flesh of its own species”. In the form of agency, ‘cannibalism’ is “[t]he practice of eating the flesh of one’s own species” (OED). The figuration of the cannibal can be seen as echoing the zombie as a reversal – while the zombie marks the dead craving life, the cannibal marks the living craving death; both are equally characterized by an incessant hunger. Reflecting on the symbolism of food in contemporary culture in *The Rituals of Dinner*, Margaret Visser comes to assert that “[s]omewhere at the back of our minds, carefully walled off from ordinary consideration and discourse, lies the idea of cannibalism – that human beings might become food, and eaters of each other” (3). Although it is “walled off”, the idea of cannibalism still lurks beneath the surface of the culinary ritual, albeit, as previously outlined by Freud, carrying an almost universal cultural acknowledgment of taboo as Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund confirm in their examination of the grotesque:

Dreadful, hideous and macabre, cannibalism is seen to be the taboo desire par excellence, for it breaks down artificial distinctions between the human and the animal [...] and figures the flesh of the human body as meat. Such conceptions of human consumption blur the boundaries between civilization and savagery, not just in the discontents of civilization, but through a rupture in the relationship between self and other. (7)

Cannibalism, then, not only exposes the abject fear of consuming a corpse, but also that of being consumed by an agency enacting the fetishization of death through the ingestion of the corpse. Christina Lee quotes notorious serial killer and cannibal Jefferey Dahmer who stated that his compulsive agency was driven by a desire that transferred objectivity onto subjectivity, thereby allowing him to fetishize his victims: “My consuming lust was to experience their bodies. I viewed them as objects, as strangers” (105). The element of experience, as a form of identity formation, links back to the chapter on the figure of the zombie which brought the fact that compulsion seems inherently tied to a consumption geared towards the generating and

stabilizing of subjectivity to the fore.² The serial cannibal becoming the zombie figure's reversal translates to life consuming death in order to uphold the boundaries of one's subjectivity in which the consumption of the corpse becomes a form of generating stability for the (living) self. Consuming the dead, in this sense, paradoxically becomes an act of abjecting death by means of which the boundaries of subjectivity are reinforced.³ As such, the repetitious killing and consumption of the deceased forms an act of identity formation for the American soul which, at heart, lies divided and therefore produces the figuration of the serial cannibal which becomes “[t]he cultural construction of the serial killer as yet another fetish commodity” (Lee, 106). Fetishizing death in the form of cannibalistic desire allows for the corpse to become nourishment, because “[...] in eating we experience a certain special and indefinable well-being, which arises from our instinctive realization that by the very act we perform we are repairing our bodily losses and prolonging our lives” (Brillat-Savarin, 53). At the same time, the physical ingestion of the dead shatters any previously established distance from the extreme and, in this form of approximation, literally internalizes the flesh of the dead into the living body; in this sense, this becomes a desired rehearsal of death through the body of another.

These cannibalistic desires, which seem so deeply cemented into the American cultural imaginary, find a voice in Bret Easton Ellis' notorious 1991 novel *American Psycho* as well as in Bryan Fuller's serial adaptation of Thomas Harris' novels *Hannibal*. While Ellis' iconic protagonist Patrick Bateman comes to fetishize death, triggered by the empty space which remains leftover following the achievement of an alleged self-perfectibility, he fetishizes by means of extreme violence and perverse sexuality. Nevertheless, it is, in fact, cannibalism towards which he is eventually driven, which ties him to Fuller's *Hannibal*, the protagonist of which can be read as the evolution of Bateman in which extreme violence and perverse sexuality come to be substituted by an elevation of erotic desire to the level of the high arts and ritualization. Hannibal Lecter is the productive repetition of Patrick Bateman, the evolution from cannibalistic savagery to cannibalistic sophistication. Both figures are serial cannibals whose agency is geared towards dominating the corpse in its synecdochical stance as death and mark different degrees of the fetishization of the corpse. *American Psycho* and *Hannibal* figure the serial killer as cannibal, albeit to different degrees, thereby literalizing an insatiable desire to consume death in which “[t]he serial killer experiences euphoric transgression through the medium of commodity consumption” (King, 122), a notion which Anthony King exemplifies with Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*, with which he analogizes the serial killer, stating that “[l]ike the sleek and shiny shoes ranked in that picture, the serial killer represents a flattened

2 See chapter 2 for the way in which the consumption of the corpse is staged as nourishment and how this sustains the subjectivity of the zombie-as-protagonist in *iZombie*.

3 See Kristeva, “Approaching Abjection”.

self-constituted in repeated acts of euphoric and commodified consumption” (122). In connection to *American Psycho*, this comes to denote that carnage becomes entertainment in Bateman’s hyperreal pastiche world and that experimentation with the corpse is endowed with spectacle. When read against *Hannibal*, Lecter takes this aspect one step further; not only does he craft the corpse as entertainment, but he also elevates the carnality of the corpse to a level of the fine arts, cultivating cannibalism in the process. If Bateman marks the immediate carnality of cannibalistic desire which asserts itself in a form of tyranny as “[w]e have seen that physical desire is part of all sciences; it asserts itself in them with that tyranny which always characterizes it” (Brillat-Savarin, 41), then Lecter marks the refinement of such tyrannical cannibalistic desire by means of taste, “[...] a more cautious and prudent faculty although no less active one, has arrived at the same goal with a slowness which guarantees the lasting quality of its triumphs” (Brillat-Savarin, 41). The corpse in *Hannibal*, reminiscent of the American Gothic’s Laura Palmer,⁴ comes to signify “[a] grandeur, through its appearance of supreme authority, [which] may well bring to mind the great images of classical art” (258) which is consolidated in Lecter stating: “I transferred my passion for anatomy into the culinary arts” (“Sorbet”). These culinary arts lean on cannibalism which in turn rest rather uneasily with the composition of Lecter as a serial cannibal of sophistication, or taste, as “the taste for art becomes a method of consuming the life it fixes in time, and killing becomes a lunge to possess the inef-fable of humanity that it destroys” (Bayman, 156). While the zombie was driven exclusively by savagery and needs, the sophisticated cannibal becomes a poet, driven by aesthetic desire. Bateman positions himself somewhere in between, marking an evolutionary development towards the cultivation of an American insatiability for death. Ultimately, whether cultivated or not, a compulsive cannibalistic desire in the figure of the serial cannibal comes to manifest the proverbial carnal appetite for death which is so inherently woven into the American cultural trajectory.

4 See chapter 1 for a detailed analysis of the way in which the genre of the American gothic features the corpse as an aesthetic moment in adherence to classical art.

4.1 Fetishizing the Corpse: Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*

Man goes constantly in fear of himself. His erotic urges terrify him.

Bataille, Erotism: Death and Sensuality

“Why, she wouldn't even harm a fly.”

Norman Bates, Psycho

The character of Norman Bates attempts to assert his/her harmlessness vis-a-vis the law at the end of Hitchcock's 1960 seminal film *Psycho* and we overhear Norman Bates' thoughts in the form of a voice-over voiced by his deceased mother who, having claimed his body, states that “she wouldn't even harm a fly”. Intended to illustrate his/her benevolence, (s)he lets the fly calmly rest upon her hand. The scene is endowed with the symbolism of the fly as a harbinger of death; often associated with the corpse, and commonly read this way, the fact that Norma(n) Bates asserts his/her innocent nature by means of not swatting away death bears significance. The fly, in this sense, is reminiscent of Dickinson's “I heard a fly buzz – when I died” which places the fly into a chiasmic relation with the speaker's own demise in which death has become entangled with the buzzing of the fly. Leaning on this symbolism, the eponymous psycho of Hitchcock's film concludes the motion picture by rendering an American psychosis visible; while the American individual is fueled by an idea of hope which parenthesizes death, a myth upon which the American project is inherently built, the more deviant, psychotic American subject nevertheless allows death to rest upon his/her hand. The interruptive buzz of the fly, in this sense, becomes the position that death comes to obtain in the American project; the fly is embraced by the deviant subject, whereas the well-adjusted subject would swat it away.

Picking up not only on Hitchcock's title, but arguably also on the film's final claim, this dynamic is exemplified in Ellis' *American Psycho* which immediately shatters preconceived notions of optimism when its opening lines urge the reader to “Abandon all hope Ye who enter here” (3). While this might be a tale of an *American Psycho*, the opening lines place the focus on the flipside of optimism: the *American Psycho(sis)*. Designed as a character study, the novel's style also unveils the superficiality of its protagonist's personality profile as “the recordings of empirical details [are] pushed to baroque extremes, while character, plot and epistemological and ethical commentary are reduced to fragments that seem even more unfinished and contradictory [...]” (Leypoldt, 250). A collage of citations, the satire on the superficiality which ultimately seems to characterize the American Dream exposes an American psychosis, the other, dark side of the coin which appears to be such a deeply ingrained undercurrent in the American cultural imaginary.

Leaning on American literary tradition, Blake comes to a similar conclusion with regard to Brockden Brown's *Wieland*, often considered to be the first American novel. Published in 1798, the text is riddled with a gothic spectrality throughout and a sermesque tone that eventually frames its protagonist as a murderer, and spectacularly so, as according to Blake:

Wieland [...] is effectively driven mad by voices in his head, voices that lead not only to a questioning of his hitherto idealistic vision of American social life but incite him to act out the murderous impossibility of his position as citizen of the new republic by taking a carving knife and purposefully butchering his wife and little children. Th[e] gory deployment of the figure of the murderer [becomes] a means of questioning ramifications of American-style democracy on ideas of selfhood [...].” (198)

Wieland's murderous desires are a product of American idealism, in a similar fashion to *American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman's violent fetish, which comes to represent the result not only of the American Dream, but of Emersonian self-perfectibility gone awry. The novel specifically places itself within the epitome of the American capitalist enterprise of Wall Street, a historical as well as geographical landmark, outlining a prosperity which has grown deeply infested with corruption by the beginning of the early 1990s. At the tender age of only twenty-seven, Bateman is figured as the handsomely tailored Vice President of investment bank Pierce & Pierce; wealthy, Harvard-educated, intelligent, he has molded his physical body to perfection and enjoys an impeccable reputation amongst his Wall Street peers. His lifestyle is lavish while his morals are conflicted as “[a] militantly conservative and *laissez-faire* mentality finds its staunchest supporter in the unapologetic Bateman” (Lee, 109). Once the excessive luxurious opulence that he indulges in on a daily basis fails to satisfy his insatiability for more, he begins to nurture his obsessive desires with exceedingly violent behavior, becoming “[...] the embodiment of a desire marked by an aesthetics of nothingness in which the act of consuming becomes in and of itself the necessity, that is, consumption for consumption's sake” (Lee, 114). These “aesthetics of nothingness” come to reveal a lack of substance that ties the character to the fetish in which, in the absence of the desired, there is compulsive substitution by means of an other. When there is nothing left to materialistically consume except for the human body, Bateman does exactly that. What begins as extreme sexual behaviour, which layers violence with eroticism, soon evolves into murderous agency, a form of aimless “[w]ilding [which] is defined as brutal, apparently motiveless attacks committed by malefactors on luckless strangers” (Simpson, 135). Philip L. Simpson ties this type of serial killing, which lacks direction, to the backdrop of American optimism in particular onto which the wilding serial killer inscribes his murderous fetish:

In his individual assertion of violent control, the fictionalized serial killer remains recognizably American in ideologies both subversive and conservative. Thus, the serial killer is a socialized (even over-socialized) individual. For a multiplicity of reasons both accessible and inaccessible to others, the serial killer chooses to write an identity on the body politic through what came to be known [...] in the 1980s as “wilding”. (135)

Similar to the previously quoted Christina Lee, Simpson also identifies Bateman as both conservative as well as subversive with regard to his American ideologies. The balancing act between “individualism and patriotism” (Tocqueville, 628), the psychotic synthesis of private and communal prosperity, relies on a binary reciprocity that ultimately seems to produce death rather than life, over and against the irreconcilable tension between communal responsibility and Emersonian self-perfectibility.

The American project, which was initially constructed as an experiment in prosperity, rests uneasily on its parenthesis of death, thereby rendering its optimism *cruel*.⁵ It is this absence of death that comes to be fetishized by the psychotic, murderous subject that this tension eventually produces. In “Consuming Cannibals: Psychopathic Killers as Archetypes and Cultural Icons”, Joseph Grixti contemplates the celebrity status⁶ that the serial killer has the ability to obtain within the American cultural imaginary and references the notorious Ted Bundy who “[...] seemed to epitomize many of the most cherished American notions of wholesomeness” (89) which eerily rings equally true for Patrick Bateman’s profile. A symptom of the irreconcilable binary that governs American optimism, “[s]erial killers are [...] fragmented subjects, emblematic figures indicating the rupture of the unitary subject under the pressures of modernity, particularly in an American context” (Baker, 129). It is thus, then, that the *American Psycho(sis)* results in an embodiment of a wilding serial killer, marking the isolate and un-meltable American soul which becomes the manifestation of Bateman’s inner Norma(n) Bates.

Taking a second glance at the protagonist’s name, within ‘Bateman’, we find not only a reference to Norman Bates but a further resemblance to Bob Kane’s iconic comic book hero *Batman*. In the same vein as the character of Norman Bates, Batman also proposes an intrinsic doubling, as the vigilante alter ego of the successful upper-class billionaire Bruce Wayne. The name ‘Bateman’, then, is “uneasily positioned between the poles of “hero” and “villain” (Simpson, 150) and becomes a referenced double in itself which references two further doubles, Norma(n) Bates and Bruce Wayne’s Batman. As such, the titular American psycho is placed not only

5 See introduction for a reflection on Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*.

6 See chapter 5 for an in-depth analysis of the way in which the American cultural imaginary figures the serial killer as spectacular, thereby endowing them with celebrity status.

within a duality but within a serial duality that comes to perfectly describe Patrick Bateman's social position as well as his surroundings; not only is he caught between two poles, at once the epitome of Emersonian self-perfectibility and simultaneously consumed by insatiable murderous desires, he is also the mere copy of previous characters and peers, a scavenger of referentiality, even metaphorically cannibalizing himself. It comes as no surprise, then, that one of the cultural references which is repeatedly quoted throughout the novel is Brian de Palma's 1984 film *Body Double*, towards which Bateman carries an almost mechanical attraction as he states that "[t]hen, almost by rote, as if I've been programmed, I reach for *Body Double* – a movie I have rented thirty-seven times [...]" (Ellis, 112). This notion of mechanical copying can be positioned into context with Walter Benjamin's seminal "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility", in which Benjamin remains concerned with the authenticity or *aura* of a work of art when technology allows for its endless reproduction: "In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art – its unique existence in a particular place" (103).

In *American Psycho*, all of the characters depicted can be regarded as mechanical in this sense; drawn as an endless list of copies or reproductions, for which the original has been lost, and Bateman in his name alone comes to epitomize this dynamic. This excessive doubling comes to signify a fetishization in itself within this thoroughly homogenous society that the novel sets in place. Conflated with a self-referential citationality in which signifiers have abandoned their signifieds, Bateman's characterization, for which the horizontal doubling of the name becomes a synecdoche, not only compensates but over-compensates for an absence, thereby exposing the character as an absence himself:

Owen has mistaken me for Marcus Halberstram (even though Marcus is dating Cecilia Wagner) but for some reason it really doesn't matter to me and it seems a logical faux pas since Marcus works at P & P also, in fact does the same exact thing I do, and he also has a penchant for Valentino suits and clear prescription glasses and we share the same barber at the same place, the Pierre Hotel, so it seems understandable; it doesn't irk me. (Ellis, 89)

Bateman being mistaken for Marcus Halberstram illustrates his underlying homogeneity, while what is particularly significant in this instant is his reaction. The narrative in this instance makes a point of the fact that what is in essence a marker of him as an absence, rather than as a presence, does not "irk him" but appears instead as a "logical faux pas". A dynamic of serial doubling is not only drawn but dismissed as trivial and comes to stand for the underlying binary as an inherent, intrinsic part of American history. A nation built upon a paradox, its cultural imaginary equally draws upon the motif of the double which is so deeply inscribed into the fabric of a nation. Blake solidifies this aspect in her assertion that "a range of binarisms [...] had

lain at the heart of the American “murder industry” for nigh on two hundred years,” (202) adapting an Emersonian core argument in this sense, in which the individual’s struggle for authenticity within his or her position as a member of society hinges excessively on binary oppositions that “[...] pitted the transgressive individual against the common good, the lone frontiersman against the machinery of urban-industrial life under capitalism, the autonomy of the American individual against the judicio-moral imperatives of the state” (Blake, 202). Taken to extremes, Bateman becomes a figuration of this irreconcilable binary which is ultimately manifested in a form of absence rather than presence in which signifiers are so plentiful that they have consumed their signifieds; however, these signifiers remain ever-insatiable and it is an insatiability which comes to lust for that which remains: the corpse.

Reflecting on Otto Rank’s elaborations on the motif of the *doppelgänger* in “The Uncanny”, Freud highlights the notion that the double was initially “an insurance against the destruction of the ego” in quoting Rank who isolates the double as an “energetic denial of the power of death” (235). In duplication, it appears at first glance that there is a reaffirmation of substantiality. However, Freud further asserts that upon overcoming the stage of primary narcissism “which dominates the mind of the child and of primitive man [...] the ‘double’ reverses this aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death” (Uncanny, 235). Rather than a reaffirmation of substantiality, the double becomes the fragmentation thereof and marks its dissolution rather than substantiation. Inherently rooted in the motif of the *doppelgänger*, we see this exact dynamic performed by Bateman throughout *American Psycho*. While in an initial step, his narcissism comes to overshadow the corpses he produces as harbingers of (his own) death, in his eventual confession he attempts to assert a self or presence, and as such, acknowledges his own mortality. In so doing, he recognizes the ‘double’ in its thoroughly uncanny dynamic; the mirror of an absence which marks his own lack of immortality. Increasingly confronted with his doubles, which only serve to highlight the absence in himself, Bateman’s “identity is constructed solely from whatever pieces of 1980s consumer society he can integrate into his public persona” (Simpson ,150). As such, Bateman’s absence can be read as the doubling of the society that he represents, in which his deviance also lacks acknowledgment as his psychosis remains utterly unheard: “[Evelyn] “Patrick is not a cynic, Timothy. He’s the boy next door, aren’t you honey?”, “No I’m not,” I whisper to myself. “I’m a fucking evil psychopath.” (Ellis, 20). Overshadowed by self-perfectibility, the violence and death that he produces as a byproduct remains parenthesized. This notion becomes even more significant towards the end of the novel when Bateman’s confession to all of his crimes remains equally unheard: ““Now Carnes. Listen to me. Listen very, very carefully. I-killed-Paul-Owen-and-I-liked-it. I can’t make myself any clearer.” My stress causes me to choke on the words” (Ellis, 388). This moment, in fact, marks the third reiteration of Bateman’s confession; however, rather than being acknowledged by his counterpart,

Bateman is left to choke on his psychosis. Bateman's doubling, wilding, and the repetition of his final confession all perform the novel's serial format in which chapters, characters, and murders horizontally repeat themselves.

This conjunction of seriality and death can be read alongside Elisabeth Bronfen's reflection on the femme fatale in film noir, which consolidates the view that a compulsive seriality producing death is ultimately based on a lack of visibility, in not being seen, "[f]or the tragic corpses, whose production is the inevitable conclusion of a refusal to put a stop to a narrative of avoidance, only cement the fact that not seeing the other is tantamount to denying his or her humanity" (104). Bateman, in this sense, becomes a mimetic absence which merely imitates as he "[...] had all the characteristics of a human being – flesh, blood, skin, hair – but [his] depersonalization was so intense, had gone so deep, that [...] [he] was simply imitating reality [...]" (Ellis, 282). This lack or absence of substantiality is then fetishized by the novel through the implementation of seemingly endless doubles while, on the level of diegesis, the character himself comes to perform the fetishization of the corpse as a means to compulsively over-compensate for the absence he cannot *but* locate in his doublings. As such, Bateman's eventual turn to cannibalism marks the logical step in his misguided Emersonian quest for an authentic self; a lacking, unseen self, overwritten by the very doubles which define it for which he erects a memorial as a substitution as, "[...] there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory [...]: *I simply am not there*" (376–77). Synthesizing himself as an abstraction which ceases to be present links to the fetish, in which Bateman's lack of identity creates a compulsion based on desire; tied to the substantiation of an absent self, he seeks to gratify his craving through the erotization of the other by means of fatal sexual encounters. In an article called "Children of the Pied Piper" written for the March issue of *Vanity Fair* in 1991, Norman Mailer addresses the sexual politics of the novel as a way to shock the unshockable in which "[...] the murders begin to read like a pornographic description of sex." Once Bateman's fetishization of eroticism is rendered unsatisfactory, it becomes ultimately reevaluated in the erotization of absence-avant-la-lettre, death. The literal manifestation of all of this becomes cannibalism which shatters any remnant of distance between the living and the dead through not only touch, but ingestion; its fetishization of the flesh of the corpse is marked as an excessive overcompensation.

While in academic discourse, Bateman's notoriety does not seem to be rooted in his cannibalistic escapades per se, but rather remains more generally tied to his serial killing involving extreme sexual deviance and necrophilia, it becomes all the more telling that his cannibalistic desires surface only towards the end of the novel. While his sexual perversions, often involving the fragmentation of body parts, along with his explicitly extreme and deviant violent desires govern the novel from the very beginning, cannibalism serves as the final taboo to break. Similar to Bataille, in questioning cannibalism as a taboo, Visser also references Freud who questions

a seemingly inherent aversion towards cannibalism: “Freud pointed out, as Montaigne had before him, that it is curious we should feel so badly about eating people, when we frequently kill them and often sense only gratification for having done so” (5). Visser roots this aspect in cultural categorization, in which humans are strictly not categorized as food. However, the fact that cannibalism not only entails eating a human body, but a dead human body, demands a further layering of this notion. One not only breaks the rules of ethical categorization, but also becomes intrinsically linked to the dead body after consuming a human corpse. Feeding into the notion of the corpse, which rests uneasily on the *death paradox*, death's inability to be grasped properly by language, the conclusion which Visser draws comes as no surprise when she states that “[c]annibalism is a symbol in our culture of total confusion: a lack of morality, law, and structure; it stands for what is brutish, utterly inhuman” (6). This is reflected in the way in which Bateman's violent behavior peaks in his cannibalistic desire which is neither sophisticated nor ritualized; rather, he is drawn as an uncultivated serial cannibal following an urge in which his cannibalistic desire becomes a marker for his disorientation. Breaking the final taboo of consuming the flesh of his own species, it is thus a form of extreme obscenity towards which he turns as his unsubstantiated self not only disorients, but deteriorates.

The chapter that introduces Bateman's development from serial killer to serial cannibal highlights the aspect of experimentation, termed “Tries to Cook and Eat Girl” (Ellis, 343). Bateman's descent into cannibalism is further marked as relatively gradual (if not slow) in juxtaposition of his exponentially increasing acts of sexual violence and necrophilia. Before he experiments with physical ingestion of the corpse, Bateman initially only elevates the corpse to the level of food without consuming it yet: “I start by skinning Torri a little, making incisions with a steak knife and ripping bits of flesh from her legs and stomach [...]” (Ellis, 304). Instrumentalizing violence as experimentation throughout the text, Bateman begins with initially aimless violent acts which allude to the kitchen as exemplified by the steak knife that he uses; however, Bateman remains unaware of his desire to eventually consume what he is essentially concocting. Visser asserts that “[v]iolence, after all, is necessary if any organism is to ingest another. Animals are murdered to produce meat; vegetables are torn up, peeled and chopped; most of what we eat is treated with fire [...]” (3). It is, however, the final step to “[...] chewing [which] is designed remorselessly to finish what killing and cooking began” (Visser, 3) which Bateman prolongs when he continues his aimless experimentation in the allegorical dark as “I turn off the lights and [...] rip open her stomach with my bare hands. I can't tell what I'm doing with them but it's making a wet snapping sound and my hands are hot and covered with something.” (Ellis, 305). It is this dynamic of procrastination which renders Bateman an uncultivated serial cannibal, his desire is bestial, rather than colored with a sophisticated precision and purpose. According to Brillat-Savarin, taste “helps us choose from the variety of substances [...] those which are best adapted to nourish

us" (45), an instinct which Bateman follows only subconsciously. While the element of violence is overtly present, what remains underdeveloped is the element of a specific taste for the corpse which Bateman convolutes with a general immersion into his murderous desires as his culinary endeavors are marked with a lack of differentiation, stating that: "[m]ost of her chest is indistinguishable from her neck, which looks like ground-up meat, her stomach resembles the eggplant and goat-cheese lasagna at Il Marlibro or some other kind of dog food [...]" (Ellis, 344–345). Immersing himself he describes his tentative dabbling in cannibalistic desires nevertheless as "[...] my reality. Everything outside of this is like some movie I once saw" (Ellis 345) and, as such, is indirectly attesting himself as a serial cannibal whose overcompensation for the lack of self, which the corpse ultimately signifies, is marked by means of a sexually driven violence which seemingly aimlessly peaks in the form of cannibalism. A form of cannibalistic desire that is inherently tied to the senses, but which is not yet attuned to taste.

While the intrinsic absence of an identity becomes increasingly traceable throughout *American Psycho*, the moment Bateman that first begins to cannibalize one of his victims explicitly fractures his self:

I spend the next fifteen minutes *beside* myself, pulling out a bluish rope of intestine, most of it still connected to the body, and shoving it in my mouth and it's filled with some kind of paste which smells bad. [...] I want to drink the girl's blood as if it were champagne and I plunge my face deep into what's left of her stomach, scratching my chomping jaw on a broken rib. (Ellis, 344, my emphasis)

Marked as a transgressive act between normal and abnormal, the passage highlights Bateman's desire to drink the girl's blood "as if it were champagne" illustrating a shift into pure deviance, the consolidation of his American psychosis. Visser asserts that "eating other people can seldom, perhaps never, have been ordinary" (4), which isolates the step to cannibalism, rather than necrophiliac sexual perversion, as the epitome of Bateman's insatiability, cannibalistic desire becoming the proverbial hunger. The fact that Bateman is *beside* himself attests to the extraordinariness of his deed in which "Bateman as cannibal conflates the unbridled consumerism in a late capitalist society with the voracious appetite of the serial killer" (Lee, 115). Fetishizing the corpse as such, in an act of ingestion, his cannibalistic urge becomes a substitution for his lacking self. The extension of his eroticism is developed into a cannibalism that flags his sexuality not only as deviant, but also that positions his fetish within the realm of the obscene. Bataille ties the concept of obscenity to a perceived continuity that we create for ourselves, stating that: "[o]bscenity is our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self-possession, with the possession of a recognized and stable individuality" (18). While *beside* himself, Bateman's desire is rendered obscene, removed from any remnant of stability. Written

into his deeds remains only the desire to consume; sexually, murderously, or through literal ingestion, the fetishization of which, however paradoxically, only pushes him further into fragmentation. As Lee points out with regard to 1980s America in particular, “[s]haped by the ideology of individualism, conservatism, and aggressive economic and social policies [which resulted in] solipsistic materialism – the pursuit of happiness [was] translated to the pursuit of hyper-consumerism” (108). What remains at the end of the American Dream, it seems, is the fragmentation of an inherently absent self which, is taken to extremes, in an attempt to find a substitute, over-compensates by means of the literal consumption of the corpse, the fetishization of cannibalism. It is then that the substitute, rather than the self which Bateman is able to hold onto, states that “[h]eaving the rest of her body into a garbage bag – [...] I decide to use whatever is left of her for a sausage of some kind” (Ellis, 345). While his self may be marked by an absence that produces his fetish, it is also the fetish which he is unwilling to discard. Which is to say that while a lack of recognition does not “irk him”, illustrating his compliance in acknowledging the substantiality of himself as absence, his resourcefulness regarding the fetishized, then designates the value that he ascribes to the corpse; it is the over-compensation, the fetishized memorial of his absence that he desires to preserve.

Bateman's urge to cannibalize is inherently rooted in his own absence which he compensates for by means of said “brutish and utterly inhuman” (Visser, 6) agency. As such, the way in which he conducts his fetish also obtains a narratological stance. By consuming a corpse, he attempts to make another person's flesh his own, writing death into his own body as “[a]fter all, cannibalism plays out, materially and figuratively, the integration of the self into the other, the other into the self [...]” (Edwards & Graulund, 7). Once he has succumbed to his fetish, Bateman begins to write cannibalism into the fabric of society when “[i]n the kitchen I try to make meat loaf out of the girl but it becomes too frustrating a task and instead I spend the afternoon smearing her meat all over the walls [...]” (Ellis, 345). By smearing “her meat” all over the walls, he is simultaneously smearing her meat all over the pages of the novel; what immediately follows this rudimentary form of writing is not only the ingestion of the corpse, “chewing on strips of skin [he] ripped from her body” (Ellis, 345) but an explicit reference to the CBS sitcom *Murphy Brown*, one of the endlessly repeated citations which characterize the novel. By sequencing the act of rudimentary writing with the governing principle of a reduplication of cultural references, Bateman is writing cannibalistic desire into the American cultural imaginary. As a consequence, and constructed as such, he becomes the “[...] serial killer as a monstrous cultural artifact” (Lee, 108). Bateman's authorial act seeks that exact attention which the framing through the novel's epigraph, quoting the band the *Talking Heads*, already dismisses as destined to remain unnoticed, stating that “And as things fell apart / Nobody paid much attention”. While Mailer's assertion that at the end of the novel “Bateman [...] remains a cipher” (*Vanity Fair*) rings true, it is all the more signif-

icant that we simultaneously find “[i]n the character of Patrick Bateman, [...] a nightmarish manifestation of our greatest aspirations” (Lee 119) which points towards the irreconcilability of the American subject, who is left to fetishize that which has been omitted in the promise of a New World. In the character of Patrick Bateman, Ellis crafts cannibalism as a form of urged speculation that is overshadowed by an excess of aimless perversion. While Bateman succeeds in writing cannibalistic desire into the fabric of American culture, it is then only in his successor, Hannibal Lecter, that cannibalistic desire will not only come to be acknowledged but ritualized. Veiled with the sophistication of manners that are geared toward the obfuscation of the fact that “[...] [b]ehind every rule of table etiquette lurks the determination of each person present to be a diner, not a dish. It is one of the chief roles of etiquette to keep the lid on the violence which the meal being eaten presupposes” (Visser, 3), Lecter will not only come to carry on Bateman’s legacy, but will even cement its signification through an elevation not only to culture but to the high arts.

4.2 Le cannibalisme pour le cannibalisme: Bryan Fuller’s *Hannibal*

I was gazing at a marvel.
Its perfection, its lack of cause and
object, filled me with a strange awe.
Hermann Karlovich, Despair

While Bateman’s cannibalistic urges form the cornerstone of the evocation of an intrinsic American desire to consume the corpse, its fully developed figuration comes to life in the character of Hannibal Lecter, rooted in Thomas Harris’ series of novels. In 2013, Bryan Fuller adapted the literary text for the television screen in the serial *Hannibal* performing the seriality which the narrative sets into place on both level of form as well as content. Notably, throughout the entirety of its three seasons, the opening credits of *Hannibal* remain the same: a red liquid falls on a white canvas into figurations of what appear to be bodies only to then dissolve again; upon encountering the human physique, the liquid begins to gather and take on the shape of the protagonists’ heads – John Crawford, Will Graham, and Hannibal Lecter. The first two, however, remain unfinished in their figuration, blurring into one another, and it is only Hannibal Lecter’s head which is ultimately sculpted to perfection and displayed at a straight angle at which point the sequence cross-dissolves into the white canvas displaying “Hannibal” in sharply defined red letters. While the reference to blood and the implied convergence of life and death is overtly written into this opening, these credits also shine a light on the inherently aesthetic argument which the show makes throughout. Their repetition signaling a red thread that runs throughout the entirety of the show and these opening credits seem to echo Mary Harron’s

2000 adaptation of *American Psycho*. Harron's film, which makes the salient point of placing the desire to consume at its very core, opens in the same fashion as *Hannibal*, with "a white background, an ominous soundtrack play[ing]. Red droplets begin to fall from the top of the frame, accompanied by a subdued *Psycho*-like discordant violin" (Lee, 11).

Initially directly referenced, it is in this instant that the two openings begin to diverge; while *Hannibal*'s red droplets begin to artistically figure its protagonists, Harron's adaptation solidifies a previous ambiguity with regard to the red liquid as "[...] the music transitions to a knowingly playful classical score, [and] it becomes apparent that the droplets are the decorative *jus* on a plate" (Lee, 111). Playing with the ambiguity of (human) blood and *jus* which, dependent on the side of which this *vexierbild* falls, propose either horror or pleasure, the opening sequence of *American Psycho* exposes "the fragility of the veneer that the rituals of polite behaviour provide to the all-too-human nature of animalistic physicality" (Bayman, 148). Cited in the opening credits of *Hannibal*, the repetition of the red droplets developed into artistic abstraction come to signify the cultivation of cannibalistic desire; while the droplets remain significant of gastronomonic pleasure, Harron's opening merely hints at a fetishization of cannibalistic desires only to then break the created tension by anchoring the droplets in *jus*, rather than blood. Juxtaposed with the opening credits of *Hannibal*, we find a literalization of that which Harron only evokes; red droplets on a white canvas come to signify an actuality of blood which will be consumed. Quite significantly, while the novel does not explicitly focus on cannibalistic desire, it is nevertheless that quality which Harron chooses to play with in the opening of her picture, thereby setting the tone for the ambiguous implications of taste which become the undercurrent of Bateman's desires and the reason for his insatiability. Transposed onto the opening of *Hannibal*, it becomes all the more suggestive that the red liquid which forms Crawford and Graham also forms Lecter, thereby highlighting the similarity rather than difference between all three; this is a figuration which will be solidified in the series when Lecter locates the stain of human nature in the masses, not the individual, stating that "[t]he essence of the worst in the human spirit is not found in the crazy sons of bitches [serial killers]. Ugliness is found in the faces of the crowd" ("... And the Beast from the Sea"), which isolates the serial killer as symptomatic for a universal psychosis. The fact that the opening credits are staged in adherence with an aesthetically pleasing manner hints at the cultivation of the aforementioned ugliness. It is then also this notion of aesthetic principle which comes to differentiate the manifestation of the cannibalistic desires of Bateman and Lecter. While Bateman's cannibalism develops as a disoriented urge out of his necrophilia, Lecter comes to stand for the sophisticated ritualization of cannibalism. Accordingly, Harron's opening isolates the desire to consume, while *Hannibal* isolates aestheticism in the figuring of the consumer. This is a differentiation that is reflected in the juxtaposition of the adaptations of these two narratives; in

American Psycho, insatiability is made explicit, as opposed to *Hannibal*'s referencing thereof which points at the obfuscation of murderous desires towards a form of consumption by means of artistic appreciation.

Formally speaking, the claim that *Hannibal* makes is purely aesthetic, rather than mimetic. The text displays little interest in realism; rather, it performs an aestheticism which artistically stages the corpse by means of which it is elevating itself to the realm of sublimity through its visuality, thereby continuously juxtaposing the beautiful with the horrific. This can be read alongside Thomas De Quincey's infamous 1827 essay "On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts" in which the author makes a similar argument for an aesthetics of the immoral, claiming that "[m]urder, for instance, may be laid hold of by its moral handle, and that, I confess, is its weak side; or it may also be treated aesthetically, [...] that is, in relation to good taste" (7). De Quincey's dismissal of moral principle in favor of artistic *jouissance* references murder not simply in relation to taste, but explicitly emphasizing *good* taste and raising the notion of connoisseurship. Inferring this form of superiority vis-à-vis the subject also holds true for the refinement of murderous desires that we find in *Hannibal*. While Ellis' Bateman may have displayed his cannibalistic desires in a disoriented manner, alluding to the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, *Hannibal* remains thoroughly sophisticated in form as well as content, staging an aestheticized and artificial visuality which is reflected in the cultivation of its protagonist who comes to actively juxtapose any remnant of the carnivalesque. As such, *Hannibal* is marked with the elegance of the high arts, itself becoming a De Quincian "great gallery of murder" through which the audience is guided "in delighted admiration, while [*Hannibal*] endeavor[s] to point your attention to the objects of profitable criticism" (De Quincey, 12). Placing an emphasis on the cathartic element of murder as "[...] the final purpose of murder, considered as a fine art, is precisely the same as that of Tragedy, in Aristotle's account of it, 'to cleanse the heart by means of pity and terror'" (De Quincey, 51), *Hannibal* is riddled with a sophistication that is synthesized by its titular serial cannibal. The series crafts aestheticized renditions of death explicitly as works of art in an attempt to strip death of its savagery. Tied to its cinematic claim, it is the camera that paints, as "the mechanical [which] produces [...] the human, it produces it ex nihilo, so to speak, and what it produces is a corpse" (7) and while an assertion which Elsaesser makes regarding Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, it rings equally true for *Hannibal*. The series not only produces the corpse ex nihilo, but furthermore molds it into an aesthetically pleasing element which is exclusively geared towards consumption, locating cannibalistic desire in the spectator. This notion is further reflected in the individual titles of the episodes, which comprise a meal in each season; feeding the audience's desire to consume the dead, *Hannibal* crafts the corpse into an allegorical meal for the spectator.

Similar to Bateman, Lecter's murderous escapades are not governed by an externally ascribable rationale, which is to say that he follows no identifiable motivation

save for the gratification of his personal pleasure. While Bateman succumbed to a bestial immediacy which layers his killings with a savage undercurrent, Lecter exemplifies a much higher level of self-control. Governed by corrupted relationships with the corpse, both characters fetishize the corpse as a means to overcompensate for an intrinsic absence of death through a form of hyperbolic consumption. In opposition to Bateman, however, Lecter's desires are impeccably cultivated, a level of sophistication which is mirrored in his character as "[b]esides being [...] a monster, [...], Lecter [...] also has something of the charm and enigma of Iago as well as the epic grandeur of Milton's Satan. He is also a bit of a vampire" (Baker, 94). Seemingly difficult to grasp, Baker's characterization of Lecter appears as a collage of celebrated antagonists; while he might be monstrous, he is tantalizingly monstrous. Hannibal Lecter displays a charismatic nature which is inherently tied to his profound interest in art and culture, of which he is a connoisseur. Reflecting on the connection between art and murder(er) Bayman states that "[f]requently, representations offer an image of the serial killer as a figure who is as disproportionately interested in culture as culture already is in it", a claim which Bayman consolidates in the recurring motif in which the cultural imaginary crafts the image of the serial killer as "tasteful [...] the Romantic proposition that the killer is an artist" (145). This notion Baker attributes to Lecter specifically, not only as a character trait but as the quality which allows to sympathize with him is "[...] the quality that ultimately heroizes Lecter: taste" (129). If it is in fact taste that elevates Lecter to grandeur, so its twofold implications deserve attention. On the one hand, taste comes to denote a form of cultural literacy which revolves around the binary of good and bad, thereby inferring a hierarchy between the respective conductors of taste; on the other hand, taste also alludes to a form of hunger in which taste becomes the unit of measurement for appetite. When woven together, these two aspects come to form an appetite which not only needs to be satisfied, but must be satisfied in the proper manner, in specific relation to good taste. Leaning on De Quincey again, it becomes evident that a dismissal of a moral principle with regard to good taste, then, bears dangerous implications. A shift in the framing of good taste, which dismisses juridical encoding in favor of pure aesthetics, shatters a seemingly axiomatic inhibition with regard to the consumption of the corpse. This is an ambiguity which, in *Hannibal*, is cemented in the first conversation between Special Agent Will Graham and Dr. Hannibal Lecter. In reference to murders committed by serial cannibal Garret Jacob Hobbs, Graham utters "tasteless" to which Lecter's "Do you have trouble with taste?" is filled with that palpable dramatic irony which the notoriety of his cannibalistic tendencies presupposes. When Graham responds that "[m]y thoughts are often not tasty" Lecter's ambivalent response of "[n]or are mine" ("Apéritif") exposes taste as riddled with ambivalence or, as Bayman points out, potentially "as both cannibalistic and cultivated" (148). Cultivating his tastes as those of a sophisticated serial cannibal, "Lecter is a particular type of serial killer [...] distinct from the fractures, unstable, transformative, or masked sub-

jectivities of other fictions, [...]thers do not assume his grandeur [...]” (Baker, 130). This notion of grandeur that Baker identifies in Lecter is rooted in his elitist refinement, the agency which becomes a marker for his singular (but relentless) pursuit of art.

It is thus the television serial’s ekphratic nature that is explicitly mirrored in its protagonist. Lending his name to the narrative, Hannibal Lecter, is above all a man of good taste, a connoisseur of the aesthetics of murder whom De Quincey would term “enlightened” given that he is governed by that gluttonous refinement which marks “[...] the enlightened connoisseur [a]s more refined in his taste” (De Quincey, 53). Fetishizing not only the absence which the corpse signifies but also its abject nature, the way in which Hannibal carries out his cannibalistic desires is also actively deviant from any animalistic savagery previously exemplified by the figure of either the zombie or Bateman. Lecter’s cannibalism, unlike Bateman’s, is stripped of all bestiality and this elevates him to a level of cultivation that teases out a form of humanity which stands in direct opposition to the animal as, according to Visser: “The active sharing of food – not consuming all of the food we find on the spot, but carrying some back home and then doling it systematically out – is believed, [...] to lie at the root of what makes us different from animals” (1). It is the ritual, then, rather than the materiality of the meal itself which fashions, as well as serializes, the cultivation of cannibalistic desire. Impeccably dressed, sophisticated, and eloquent, Hannibal Lecter is depicted as a man who quotes Goethe where he “was rooting for Mephistopheles and contemptuous of Faust” (“Secondo”), paints his own Botticelli pieces and spends his leisure time composing operas. Executing control over nature, his governing force is the aesthetics, and he is above all, “preoccupied [...] with style” (Elsaesser, 4), which classifies Lecter as a Dandy figure.

Illustration 19: Hannibal Lecter’s dandyism, Hannibal, “Coquilles”



Often framed in his immaculate kitchen, concocting corpses to become the most exquisite dishes, Lecter rejects savagery and oozes sophistication and this feeds into the “compellingly supernatural, mythic and indeed almost god-like in effect. [...]” (135) which Simpson locates in the fictionalized American serial killer. Dismissing any claim for ethics, Lecter reappropriates his cannibalism into a plea for artistic pleasure. Lecter’s aestheticism follows the paradigmatic encoding of fetishism. It is not only an absence, but an absence that is riddled with the abject which death creates that is compensated for through the performativity of aestheticism. Smitten with Lecter’s skill, Crawford maintains: “Have you seen him cook? It’s an entire performance” which Lecter confirms when he adds the necessity for inspiration, “[a] feast is life; you put life in your belly and you live” (“Sorbet”). Ultimately seeking life through the consumption of death, Lecter’s performance peaks in the orchestration of the culinary arts through the fetishization of the corpse, which further aligns him with the figure of the dandy who seeks to assume control over nature.

Echoing Oscar Wilde’s dandyism at the fin de siècle, Lecter not only “[...] makes a cult of clothes and manners” (Elsaesser, 4) but also adheres to the other characteristics that Elsaesser ascribes to the dandy, a figure who:

[...] prefers fantasy and beauty over maturity and responsibility, he pursues the perfection to the point of perversity. He is, to quote an authoritative study, ‘a man dedicated solely to his own perfection through a ritual of taste ... free of all human commitments that conflict with taste [...] and he despises everything that is vulgar, common, associated with commerce [...] and a mass public.’ (4)

Repeatedly solidifying his preference for beauty over maturity, Lecter is presented throughout the series as a man ‘dedicated solely to his own perfection through a ritual of taste’, which in his case becomes the cultivation of the cannibalistic fetish. In *The Physiology of Taste*, Brillat-Savarin teases out the doubled function that taste comes to serve. On the one hand, “[t]aste is the sense which puts us in contact with our savourous or sapid bodies, by means of the sensation which they cause in the organ destined to appreciate them” (44) which isolates taste as a generator of pleasure; on the other hand, pleasure hinges on desire and desire is rooted in insatiability. As such, taste “[...] which can be excited by appetite, hunger, and thirst, is the basis for several operations which result in a man’s growth and development, in his self-preservation [...]” (44). Tied to aesthetic principles, taste becomes a signifier of immortalization as taste and “[...] invites us, by arousing our pleasure, to repair the constant losses which we suffer through our physical existence” (Brillat-Savarin, 45). The creation of art is not only an act of immortalization, but also the agency which feeds taste in its own volition. The dandy’s excessive prioritization of aesthetic principles is formed against a perceived lack of beauty. Geared towards the production of beauty, by means of the corpse, cannibalism becomes a compulsion to re-create

and consume death through a lens of good taste which ultimately involves the manufacturing of immortalization by means of aestheticism.

Constructed as a dandy, Lecter is not only fashioning the corpse but also thoroughly fashioning himself, something that becomes evident in his therapist's Dr. Bedelia Du Maurier's observation that "[y]ou are wearing a very well-tailored person suit" ("Sorbet") which classifies his entire personality, not only as performative but also inscribed with a level of control which is "well-tailored". While his intentions are murderous, they are simultaneously geared towards artistic rendition and the inherent shift of a seemingly universal morale being facilitated through his fetish, which may veil his psychosis, but which ultimately also marks it. Attempting to find the root of his deviance, he is psychologized by Du Maurier who repeatedly interrogates his past. Lecter, however, asserts that: "Nothing happened to me, I happened" ("Secondo") which is not only "a declaration of an identity self-begotten, free from the taint of 'influence'" (Baker, 131), but also a reaffirmation of his inclination to control and subdue external influences, a dandyesque "revolt against nature" (Elsaesser, 5). This element of control is then consolidated in his cannibalistic desires in which he assumes a perceived superiority vis-à-vis the corpse. Emerson asserts that "[l]ove of beauty is Taste. Others have the same love in such excess, that, not content with admiring, they seek to embody it in new forms. The creation of beauty is Art." (47), which, read against Lecter's exquisite concoctions marks his cannibalism not only as artistic, but also as excessive. While cultivated, Lecter's serial cannibalism is simultaneously insatiable, his psychosis Bateman's equal in compulsion. Hinging on good taste in its fetishization of death, exemplified by the exquisiteness of his concoctions, the corpse may be elevated to a level of the fine arts; however, it is then artistic principle that becomes the mere substitute for the absence which death intrinsically produces. Lecter essentially substitutes absence with beauty in the quest for artistic gratification, thereby compulsively transforming the corpse into a work of art. While Bayman is correct in asserting that "the very concept of serial killing confuses questions of purpose: through seriality, serial killing necessarily offers us a structure, but one that does not point to a particular direction" (155), Lecter nevertheless not only fetishizes the corpse but also the lack of direction into pure artistic purpose; in this sense, Lecter also cultivates the aimless, wilding serial killer. To Bateman's disoriented cannibalistic desire, Lecter, adds the confinements of control through ritualization, which is to say, in relation to good taste.

Loosely structured as a police procedural, *Hannibal* further frames a doubling of Lecter, reminiscent of (albeit less excessive) than *American Psycho*, by means of the plethora of serial killers the show examines. Serving as the backdrop for the exemplification of Lecter's cultivation of cannibalism, the artistic component which Lecter is so inclined to maintain in his unconventional dinner habits, is specifically mirrored by the introduction of serial murderer Tobias Budge. Similar to Lecter, Budge is driven by pure aestheticism and connoisseurship. A fellow dandy and serial can-

nibal, Budge fashions corpses as instruments which can be played and thus, not only consumed but consumed as fine art. Termed “Fromage” which, read as the allegorical meal for the spectator, marks a brief culinary excursion before returning to the main dish, the episode centring on Budge opens with the crime scene in which the corpse of his unnamed victim is displayed in midst of a stage.

Illustrations 20 & 21: Tobias Budge's victim, Hannibal, “Fromage”

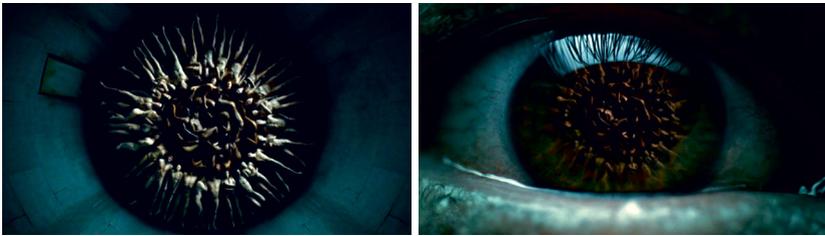


In accordance with the series' artistic undercurrent, the staging of the victim in this manner points towards spectacle (i.e., public acknowledgment and appreciation). This is solidified in Graham's observation which isolates Budge's desire to “put on a show” (“Fromage”) and which also echoes De Quincey's claim of “[d]esign, gentlemen, grouping, light and shade, poetry, sentiment are now deemed indispensable to attempts of this nature [a fine murder]” (5). When faced with the details of the crime, Lecter seems to immediately recognize a peer in Budge stating that Budge is “a poet and a psychopath” (“Fromage”). Asserting his like-mindedness, Lecter further inquires whether there was olive oil massaged into the vocal cords of the corpse, fashioned as strings of a cello. While Graham seems notably baffled at Lecter's correct speculation, he affirms Lecter's suspicion. As a connoisseur of the high arts, Lecter self-sufficiently states that “whatever sound he was trying to produce it was an authentic one” as the olive oil not only references the culinary backdrop, but also aids in “increase[ing] the life of the strings and create a sweeter, more melodic sound” (“Fromage”). What becomes evident is that it is the creation of aesthetics by means of the corpse, rather than the act of killing, which is central. It is spectacle and, hence, the resulting communal appreciation thereof which comes to mark Lecter's fetishization of death by means of the substitution of the high arts, a point which the series itself compulsively reiterates and, as such, ritualizes.

Hannibal's second season introduces an unnamed serial killer whose criminal profile appears dependent on targeting different shades of skin, an interest in color which later comes to expose that the uses corpses to produce a mural which resembles the human iris. Following his own agenda of artistic principle stripped of morals

and ethics, Lecter finds this serial killer before the police does and upon meeting his peer, Lecter voices his shared appreciation of fetishizing death as artistic principle stating “Hello. I love your work” (“Sakizuke”). Examining the as yet unfinished mural, the show frames the mural as a reflection in Lecter’s own iris, implementing a mirror which highlights the sublime undertonality of a horrible crime scene fashioned as a beautiful image.

Illustrations 22 & 23: Elevation of murder to the high arts, Hannibal, “Sakizuke”



Reminiscent of Friedrich Nietzsche’s infamous assertion that “[...] if thou gaze long into the abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee” (91), Lecter finds himself irked by the mural’s unfinished state and locates the missing shade of human skin in the original serial killing artist. Murdering him in the name of artistic principle, Lecter takes his peer’s authorial place and stitches him into the mural, concluding it to perfection and murmuring that “I finished it for you” (“Sakizuke”), making a plea for his good taste which, for Lecter, is coded as the implementation of death which becomes a triumph over nature.

The fetishization of death in the form of artistic consumption hinges on the conjunction of sensuality and death under the governing principle of erotism, geared toward generating continuity beyond death. Bataille further ascribes this notion to poetry’s artistic reproduction. With regards to this dynamic, Bataille in reciting Rimbaud, concludes that poetry can be analogized with eroticism because both concepts seek continuity: “Poetry leads to the same place as all forms of eroticism – to the blending and fusion of separate objects. It leads us to eternity, it leads us to death, and through death to continuity. Poetry is eternity” (25). This immortalization through the poetic is manifested in the series when, while profiling one of Lecter’s murders, Graham states that the deceased’s “death isn’t personal. He is merely the ink from which flows my poem” (“Hassun”) denoting the entire serial of murders as a poetic indulgence. Highlighting the eternal stance of the poetic, which is tied to the production of art as an act of immortalization, Lecter isolates the consumption of the artistically rendered corpse as valuable when, referencing himself, he asks Gra-

ham “this killer wrote you a poem. Are you going to let his love go to waste?” (“Has-sun”) Phrasing his question as such, Lecter aligns the murder with the tradition of the sonnet. In this instant, Lecter has staged the corpse as a confession of love for Graham in which the proper appreciation of its aesthetics becomes the conquest of the desired. This dynamic becomes all the more significant as Graham will ultimately be seduced by Lecter and this solidifies Lecter’s skill as a poet, while simultaneously trivializing the corpses on which his oeuvre rests, a trivialization which hints at the naturalization of cannibalistic desire.

Thus, the aesthetics of the show ultimately point towards the universality of cannibalistic desire as written into its cultural backdrop of American history, for which Lecter’s counterpart Graham becomes the metaphorical placeholder. Inferring cultural literacy, the serial profits from the notoriety inscribed into the figure of Hannibal Lecter and initially prioritizes Graham over of Lecter. The series’ pilot, “Apéritif”, opens with a crime scene; we meet special agent Will Graham whom we learn is a ‘pure empath’, profiling a crime scene and in doing so essentially *becomes* the murderer in his imaginary and this marks Graham’s method of deduction. What is emphasized in this opening is the question of subjectivity in which boundaries between murderers and imaginary murderers are blurred through the figure of identification presented. While the series notably refrains from centering on the murdering cannibal who lends his name to the television show, the pilot episode of the serial immediately aligns Graham and Lecter as doubles of one another, placing the letters Hannibal upon Graham’s body, above whose head towers the corpse, the first image displayed after the opening credits.

Illustration 24: Alignment Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter, Hannibal, “Apéritif”



Cutting from the artistically saturated opening credits to Graham teaching a class on serial killers, the statement which opens the serial is his assertion that “everyone has thought about killing someone, one way or another” (“Apéritif”). Endowed with the momentum of opening the serial, it is this form of murderous desire which frames the serial. The fact that the show initially characterizes Graham with the occupation of thinking about killing someone, the act of carrying out an imaginary murder, while also positioning him as the character of identification hints at a ubiquitous desire for murder within humanity. This argument finds its solidification in the conclusion of the first season when Lecter’s indirect insinuation that “[p]erhaps you didn’t come here looking for a killer. Perhaps you came to find yourself.” (“Savoureux”) is presented in a chiasmic structure which exposes the killer within Will Graham and, by extension, the spectatorial stance identifying with him. The diegetic Hannibal Lecter himself, then, is only introduced halfway through the first episode by his counterpart Will Graham who is still profiling the crime which led to the introduction of his character. Concluding his profile, he asserts about the serial cannibal they seek (Garrett Jacob Hobbs) that “[h]e’s eating them” (“Apéritif”) which introduces the cut to the titular Lecter, framed mid-meal, engorged with pleasure. Breaking the fourth wall when looking directly at the spectator with seemingly equal pleasure, Lecter holds the spectator’s gaze for an eerily long time, which marks him as consciously deviant. It is Lecter, rather than Graham, who becomes the signifier of stability in the serial, even though Graham serves as the spectator’s figure of identification. Not only aware of his deviance, but in control thereof, Lecter is the dandy and seducer under the spell of whose cannibalistic charms Graham eventually falls. Thus, it is deviant cannibalistic desire that comes to mark that stability against which Graham, standing in for the norm, cannot define himself and instead becomes devoured by.

When in the pilot episode Lecter’s cannibalistic desire is mirrored in the serial cannibal Garret Jacob Hobbs, Graham comes to characterize the cannibal’s consumption as an act of love in which consumption becomes the implementation of another’s flesh into one’s own: “He doesn’t want to destroy them, he wants to consume them and keep some part of them inside him” (“Apéritif”). This isolates the act of consumption as an act of generating proximity between the consumer and the consumed. While the mirroring of Lecter is evident, the assertions which Graham makes about Hobbs (as an echo of Lecter) are reinforced through the staging in which Graham’s elaborations on the individual pieces of the cannibal’s victim are crosscut with Lecter’s meticulous preparation of the lungs that Graham references into a tasteful dish crafted to perfection. What is highlighted throughout *Hannibal* is the aesthetic principle which governs the actions of these cannibals; artistic production rather than the vulgar destruction of the corpse. While the traditional figure

of the zombie savagely devours,⁷ the sophisticated cannibal combines a gothic aesthetic⁸ with the meticulous act of killing which, rather than remaining a metaphorical form of vengeful cooking⁹ actually becomes an act of cooking and devouring the deceased in an attempt to approximate, and simultaneously elevate, the deceased to pure aestheticism. Through the implementation of taste, *Hannibal* frames cannibalism with etiquette. In refining Bateman's cannibalistic desire, Lecter is rendering the equation in which the corpse equals food formulaic; a cultivation of cannibalism does not merely render the flesh of the deceased edible, but even as concoctable provided that certain artistic principles are conformed to. This notion is exemplified by Lecter's rolodex of recipe cards, which he pairs with the individual business cards of the deceased whose flesh serves as the ingredients for the sketched dish. This fosters an alignment of the corpse with its culinary potential, something which is ultimately geared towards structuralization. The future use of these recipes for the crafting of nourishment not only writes cannibalism into the cultural imaginary, but also endows cannibalistic desire with sustainability.

The ritualization of cannibalistic desire through aesthetics and formula further renders it public, rather than private. While Bateman's cannibalistic urges remained both personal and private, Lecter's refinement of cannibalistic desire places the consumption of the corpse in a more public sphere, a notion which becomes allegorized by means of the serial's protagonists. While Lecter is doubled in the serial killers that the police procedural examines, he is explicitly aligned with Graham. As such, the show offers a morally unambiguous figure in Graham for spectatorial identification, only to let him gradually be seduced by Lecter. Cementing their similarity, rather than difference, the couple's final fall into the abyss which concludes the serial not only echoes Nietzsche but also exposes the underlining cannibalistic desire which is written into the fabric of the American cultural imaginary; what Bateman merely smeared upon the walls, Lecter not only concocted to perfection, but served his unwitting albeit smitten guests. Bon appétit.

7 See chapter 2 for an in-depth analysis of the zombie's hunger.

8 See chapter 1 for a discussion of the way in which the American gothic renders the corpse a work of art.

9 See chapter 3 for a detailed alignment of the politics of death with the politics of food as embedded in the structurally serial revenge plot.

