Aesthetic enjoyment and repugnance in *Hannibal:* character engagement, temporal prolongation and mise-en-scène

Placer estético y repugnancia en *Hannibal:* identificación dramática, prolongación temporal y puesta en escena

Prazer estético e aversão em *Hannibal*: identificação dramática, prolongamento temporário e posta em cena

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the television series Hannibal (NBC, 2013-2015) conveys a deep aesthetic delectation, despite presenting numerous repulsive or uncomfortable scenes. The article analyzes how the very serial nature of TV fiction enables a specific way of negotiating the paradox of aversion through three textual strategies: a protracted character engagement, a suspense that articulates the aesthetic possibilities of "temporal prolongation", and a beautiful mise-en-scène for abhorrent visual motives and actions. These three strategies generate an intense fascination in the spectator, allowing to subvert the features of the repugnant.

RESUMEN

El artículo explora cómo la serie de televisión Hannibal (NBC, 2013-2015) provoca una honda delectación estética, a pesar de presentar numerosos contenidos repulsivos o incómodos. Se analiza cómo la naturaleza serial de la narración televisiva habilita una manera particular de negociar la paradoja de la aversión mediante tres estrategias textuales: un dilatado character engagement, un suspense que exprime las posibilidades estéticas de la prolongación temporal y una bella puesta en escena de motivos visuales y acciones horripilantes. Son estrategias que generan una robusta fascinación en el espectador, lo que permite subvertir las características de lo repugnante.

RESUMO

O artigo explora como a série de televisão Hannibal (NBC, 2013-15) provoca um profundo deleite estético, apesar de apresentar inúmeros conteúdos repulsivos ou desconfortáveis. Analisa-se como a própria natureza serial da narração televisiva possibilita uma maneira particular de resolver a paradoxa da aversão por meio de três estratégias textuais: um expandido *character engagement*, um suspense que expressa as possibilidades estéticas do prolongamento temporal e uma bela encenação dos motivos visuais e ações horríveis. São estratégias quce geram um forte fascínio no espectador, o que permite subverter as característi-cas do repugnante.

Keywords: Hannibal; television; aesthetics; narrative; repugnance.

Palabras clave: *Hannibal; televisión; estética; relato; repugnancia.*

Palavras-chave: *Hannibal;* televisão; estética; narração; aversão.

INTRODUCTION

In "Takiawase," the fourth episode of *Hannibal*'s second season (NBC, 2013-2015), Dr. Hannibal Lecter says the following to a patient who wants to take her own life: "I've always found the idea of death comforting. The thought that my life could end at any moment frees me to fully appreciate the beauty, and art, and horror of everything this world has to offer" (Nimerfro, Fuller, & Semel, 2014). Beauty, art, horror, and the paradox of enjoying life by ending it: the quote summarizes the contradictions of the bloody and sophisticated *Hannibal* series, which we will analyze in this paper.

The series, created by Bryan Fuller, is part prequel to, and part remake of, the fictional universe established by the novelist Thomas Harris and popularized by the film The Silence of the Lambs (Jonathan Demme, 1991). Though the audience for Hannibal was not very large, the three-season series was a favorite with critics[1] and also drew the attention of the academic world. Thus, despite its relatively short duration, it was not a marginal product. Moreover, even short-lived network shows may win new viewers when made available on streaming services, DVD, or reruns.

For ordinary viewers and critics alike, aesthetic appreciation can take a number of forms: it can be narrative, formal, political, cognitive, or educational. The nature, limits, and possibilities of aesthetic enjoyment are enduring issues in the philosophy of art, and the medium of television introduces its own questions and peculiarities (Nannicelli, 2017, pp. 181-208). In this article, we want to narrow the aesthetic focus to a specific aspect of television consumption and critical appreciation: the negative emotions derived from the encounter with distasteful and shocking images. We will investigate the ways that viewers navigate their emotional and narrative engagement with these images in televised fiction and, specifically, in *Hannibal*—a show that highlights a trend that can be described as "the rise of repugnant television." As a program that has helped to legitimize the repulsive on the small screen, *Hannibal* presents an opportunity to explore how it is possible to derive pleasure from representations of the disgusting.

After providing some theoretical and historical context, this article examines how *Hannibal* delivers very uncomfortable sections —its repulsive scenes—and suggests that these scenes are tolerable precisely because of the specificity of the long-form narrative. The aim is to shed light on how the nature of television narration enables particular ways of negotiating the so-called "paradox of aversion." Specifically, we identify three textual strategies: protracted character engagement, the use of suspense in a way that expresses the aesthetic possibilities of "temporal prolongation," (Nannicelli, 2017) and the production of beautiful, fascinating mise-en-scènes for the most horrifying scenes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The contemporary academic discussion about the dissonant relationship between aesthetic pleasure and disgust has been addressed both from the perspective of neuroaesthetics—for example, by Brown and Dissanayake (2009), or by Wagner, Menninghaus, Hanich and Jacobsen (2014)—and from the perspective of the philosophy of art more traditionally construed. Although there is a dialogue between the two approaches, as in Julian Hanich's even-handed treatment (2009), academics working in screen studies have drawn mainly from traditional philosophy of art, including the work of Winfried Menninghaus (2003), William Ian Miller (2009), Colin McGinn (2011), and Carolyn Korsmeyer (2011). Against this august group, Matthew Kieran stands out for his attempt to enlarge the concept of aesthetic value beyond traditional conceptions of beauty. In his seminal paper "Aesthetic Value: Beauty, Ugliness and Incoherence," he writes, "artistic works or movements devoted to the grotesque or incoherent are concerned to provoke certain attitudes or *explore our fascination* with certain anomalies that violate our standard social and moral categories" (Kieran, 1997, p. 387; emphasis of the authors). His work thus offers a useful framework for analyzing the contradictory proposal—that disgust can be pleasurable—made by Bryan Fuller in *Hannibal*.

Given its aesthetic ambition and moral complexity, *Hannibal* has already been the subject of numerous academic articles, despite its relative "youth." Notable is the volume of the series Popular Culture and Philosophy devoted to *Hannibal*: edited by Joseph Westfall (2015), it features an array of contributors addressing issues such as cannibalism, psychiatry, Nietzche's notion of the superman, and empathy. In a different vein, the *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* produced for its sixth issue of 2018 a monograph dedicated to the series: *Hannibal Lecter's Forms, Formulations, and Transformations*. That volume, edited by Balanzategui and Later, focuses on questions and issues common in screen studies, such as the relationship of quality television with adjacent concepts like authorship (Naja

Later, 2018), criminal drama (Jessica Balanzategui, 2018), taste (Andrew Lynch, 2018), and genre (EJ Nielsen & Kavita Mudan Finn, 2018). Beyond these two compilations, the academic work on *Hannibal* has been varied, but three central concerns stand out: the show's stylistic excesses and the audacity of its mise-en-scène (Ndalianis, 2015; Abbott, 2017; Crisóstomo, 2018; Medina, 2018), the dramatic and narrative peculiarities of the character's serialization (Scahill, 2016; Abbott, 2018; García Martínez, 2018b), and the convoluted questions regarding the protagonist's morality and the viewer's identification (Carroll, 2015; Logsdon, 2017; Fuchs & Phillips, 2017; Stadler, 2017; Elliott, 2018).

Moral engagement and viewer identification is also central to this article: how does a show like *Hannibal* depict explicit horror and maintain viewer engagement? What Carl Plantinga (2018) has recently called the "ethics of engagement" has been a fruitful trend in television studies in recent years. Several academics have focused on this issue by exploring the reasons behind anti-heroism in the television fictions of the past two decades (Vaage, 2015; Bernardelli, 2016; Buonanno, 2017). In the case at hand, it would be problematic to catalog Hannibal Lecter as a mere anti-hero, since his villainy is evident. However, viewer strategies of dramatic engagement with the character are similar in the cases of the villain and the antihero; also similar is the problematic hinge between morality and identification. Because what *Hannibal* proposes is to stretch the limits of the "sympathy structure" generated around television protagonists by following the classic formula described by Murray Smith (1994) and later extended by authors such as Plantinga (2010) and Smith himself (2011).

Although the phenomenon of stretching the sympathy structure had previously been studied—for example, by Nöel Carroll (2004) concerning Tony Soprano—it was Smith himself who coined the term *perverse allegiance* in order to expand the application of his original sympathy structure to the study of characters like the Hannibal Lecter played by Anthony Hopkins on film. In his article "Gangsters, Cannibals, Aesthetes," Smith wondered, "Do we feel an allegiance with—a sympathy for—a character *because of* the perverse act that they engage in or *in spite of* that act?" (1999, p. 223). Margrethe Bruun Vaage (2014) has analyzed in-depth the complex and often contradictory feelings that the actions of morally murky characters provoke in the viewer. Her thesis that familiarity with the character primes the audience to excuse the character's moral

transgressions has recently been discussed by Turvey, in his "Familiarity Breeds Contempt" (2019). In an argumentative line similar to those of Smith and Vaage, Jason Mittell discusses *operational allegiance* (2015, pp. 74-92) and Alberto N. García goes one step further, articulating the notion of *cyclic re-allegiance* (2016, pp. 52-70). (More on these later.) However it is theorized, contradictory and ambivalent allegiance is precisely what feeds the plot of a series like *Hannibal*, as we will argue.

METHODOLOGY

This article follows a form of critical analysis that authors such as Jason Jacobs and Sarah Cardwell have called "TV aesthetics" (Cardwell, 2006; Jacobs, 2006). TV aesthetics is concerned, as Nannicelli puts it, "with criticism and appreciation," but without overlooking the "theoretical questions at a high level of generality that are raised by our critical and appreciative practices" (2016, p. 10). Thus, following approaches in art history and analytic philosophy, TV aesthetics treats television shows as art objects; it thus differentiates itself from the dominant cultural studies model of television analysis. This does not imply falling into an excessively simplified formalism. As Sarah Cardwell explains, the task "is not to 'apply' theory to a text, using the text as a case study, but to examine and explore the text in itself, and to investigate what broader questions arise from that process of examination and exploration" (2006, p. 73).

An aesthetic object is always expressive, and its creators—and not merely discursive forces—shape its meaning and effect. The TV aesthetics approach aims to articulate the experiential value (i.e. the nature of the artistic work itself) that a television series provides. This aesthetic stance can be highly generative because it provides television viewers with useful skills related to artistic evaluation, thus giving them greater cultural capacity as an audience and greater aesthetic pleasure as consumers.

DISCUSSION

THE RISE OF REPUGNANT TELEVISION

Unlike cinema[2], television, both in reality TV formats and on television series, had traditionally avoided repulsion as an essential part of aesthetic appreciation. There are exceptions, such as *Beavis and Butthead* (MTV, 1993-1997), *JackAss* (MTV, 2000-2002), and *Fear Factor* (NBC, 2001-2006). The reason is likely that television

was traditionally consumed in an environment where a variety of audiences coexisted, from children to the elderly. However, nowadays, the television audience is more fragmented, and there are channels and streaming options devoted to specific audience niches. Therefore, it makes sense that in recent years there has been a significant increase in images challenging to digest due to their perturbing nature: television series have expanded the limits of what can be said and shown on the small screen (Leverette, 2008; Akass & McCabee, 2007). This has occurred not only in the premium cable and streaming platforms (which are outside the controls of the Federal Communications Commission) but has also affected open-to-air networks and basic cable channels.

This being said, horror series are not new to television fiction; while they had a niche audience, several early horror series paved the way for the gradual acceptance of repulsive scenes in television programs (Jowett & Abbott, 2013, see esp. chapter 7). These include the sinister faces of the characters in "The Eye of the Beholder" (*The Twilight Zone*, 2.6.), the demonic Crypt Keeper of *Tales from the Crypt*, the horrifying creatures faced by *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* (the boogeyman, the mummy, the zombie, the succubus), and the viscous creatures of the *Monsters* anthology series. Also notable is the mixture of anxiety, terror, and disgust provoked by memorable chapters of *Twin Peaks* (for instance, the death of Maddy Ferguson in 2.7.) or *The X-Files* ('Home,' 4.2., would be a paradigmatic example).

More recently, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (CBS, 2000-2015) familiarized general audiences with images of unprecedented explicitness in general television fiction (García Martínez, 2018a, p. 97). The forensic drama showed crime reconstruction scenes in which the camera seemingly entered the human body to reveal broken bones, torn muscles, damaged tissues, or bloody biological processes. *CSI* dodged the feeling of disgust by presenting the narrative using an aesthetics of clinical asepsis, and a distanced, scientific, anti-emotional approach. Since then—and in parallel with the rise of what Lotz (2009) called the "post-network era" and FX executive John Landgraf later named "Peak TV" (Rose & Guthrie, 2015)—repugnant images have progressively entered television fiction. Sometimes, the repulsion has been linked to wild violence, as in *Deadwood* (HBO, 2004-2006), *Spartacus* (Starz, 2010-2013), *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO, 2010-2015), *Black Sails* (2014-2017), or *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-2019). In other cases, the unpleasant scene involves bodily

effluvia: for instance, the moment when Adam urinates on Hannah in *Girls* (HBO, 2012-2017), the depiction of a variety of bathroom scenes in the opening sequence of the third season of *Broad City* (Comedy Central, 2014-), or *Louie*'s sketch (FX, 2010-2015) in which a painful "pregnancy" ends up being only flatulence.

Beyond these premium dramas and cable comedies, horror has, of course, been the genre that has traveled the most through the grounds of the abject, since by its definition it embraces the interstitial and the impure, origins of the emotion of disgust. Thus, recent TV horror offers plenty of scenes capable of delivering a disgusting shock to the viewer: from the sadistic Negan hitting heads with his "adored" Lucille in *The Walking Dead* ("The Day Will Come When You Won't Be," 7.1.), to the live immolation of the paranormal investigators in *American Horror Story: Roanoke* (Chapter 9, 6.9.), to the sex that ends in cannibalism in the presentation of Bilquis in *American Gods* ("The Bone Orchard," 1.1.). The sinister inventory could occupy pages, given the success of series like those cited and others such as *Slasher* (Super Channel, 2016-), *Ash vs. the Evil Dead* (Starz, 2015-), *The Strain* (FX, 2014-2017), *Penny Dreadful* (Showtime, 2014-2016), *Hemlock Grove* (Netflix, 2013-2015), *Z Nation* (Syfy, 2014-2018), *Helix* (Syfy, 2014-2015), *True Blood* (HBO, 2009-2016), and *Fringe* (Fox, 2008-2013), among others.

All these series have proved that transgressive, uncomfortable or taboo images can become commonplace among television lovers, across genres, channels, and audience targets. To explain in greater depth how the viewer negotiates his/her emotional and narrative engagement with stories where the discomfort of the repugnant comes into play, we will focus on one of the most notorious examples: *Hannibal*.

POSITIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH THE MONSTER

As mentioned, , television was a domestic and accessible medium, intended for the whole family, so it avoided risky content—moral, aesthetic, or political— that could repel its viewers or its advertisers (Newman & Levine, 2012, pp. 133-152). With some exceptions, which usually came from public channels (which were less subject to commercial logic), the broadcast of controversial content could lead to boycotts by angry spectators, a decrease in the audience or even the cancellation of the series (Kelso, 2009). Since the Third Golden Age of television, that has changed. There have been channels, including HBO, FX, and Starz, that have made provocation and visual explicitness

one of the features of their brand image (Leverette, 2008; Cascajosa, 2011).

However, crucial series in the qualitative legitimation of contemporary TV series, such as *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), *The Shield* (FX, 2002-2008) and *Deadwood*, expanded the boundaries of the visible with the explicitness of their violent and sexual content, but combined those visual excesses with a "structure of sympathy" (Smith, 1994) that emotionally predisposed the audience to side with those sometimes detestable characters. That is, the audience sympathized and identified with characters that combined admirable traits (intelligence, bravery, or charisma) and detestable ones (violence, greed, cruelty, deception). To understand this complicity with or loyalty (allegiance, in cognitive terms) to the morally problematic protagonists of these stories, it is necessary to understand that the structure of sympathy generated by any story does not imply a suspension or annulment of moral criteria, but rather a reconfiguration of moral judgment for emotional (character-related) and circumstantial (situation-related) reasons (Smith, 1994, p. 41).

This same notion of sympathetic investment in the narrative makes the repugnant scenes more tolerable for several reasons: the scenes may be a necessary price to pay to reach a dramatic goal (a greater good), for instance. Or perhaps the disgusting scenes imply the suffering of a loathed antagonist, and the viewer experiences them as a kind of poetic justice. In any case, the important thing is that the story allows for the restoration of *good taste* in later scenes. In previous work we have called this *cyclic re-allegiance* (García, 2016, pp. 63-66). *Hannibal* presents a series of dramatic peculiarities, which together generate that structure of sympathy that short-circuits not only the aversion caused by the most horrifying murders but also the feeling of anguish typical of the horror genre.

First, while an in-depth treatment falls outside the scope of this article, it is necessary to mention the use of comicality in *Hannibal*. The subtle and recurring use of black humor by Lecter—through sentences with double meanings or mischievous self-references to his cannibalism—also loosen the viewer's moral reticence, easing some identification by adding positive traits (wit, sarcasm) to the barbaric character played by Mads Mikkelsen.

Second, the fact that the viewer sees the events of the narrative through the eyes of FBI criminal profiler and psyquiatric-troubled Will Graham enables a more complex moral contemplation of the crimes, both those committed by Lecter and those perpetrated by the constellation of lunatics that populate the series. The viewer is not aseptically exposed to the shocking crime scenes; rather, the viewer's contemplation is mediated by Graham's re-creation. This has the effect of decreasing the plausibility of the scenes, since what is shown is literally the delirium of a disturbed person whose disorder allows him to feel extreme empathy.

Third, as Logsdon has pointed out, Graham's ubiquitous point of view also forces us, as spectators, to see Dr. Lecter as an ally, not as a threat (2017, pp. 52-53). The degree of intimacy between the two characters—during the first season Lecter is Graham's psychiatrist—helps viewers mitigate their evaluation of Lecter's perverse and criminal activities, which they know from their extratextual memory (that is, previous novels and movies about Hannibal Lecter). Even later, once the story has explained Hannibal's murderous character, the generous, lovingly ambiguous intimacy between Hannibal and Will forces the viewer to see his more human aspect, thus further problematizing the aestheticization of terror that the series proposes. Alexandra Carroll describes this dichotomy between the human and the monstrous side of the character:

> If Lecter were solely monstrous, everyone would be able to identify him because he would stand out against ordered humanity. However, because Lecter 'looks normal and nobody could tell' [the way in which Graham refers to Lecter in the novel] what lay beneath that normality, spotting Lecter was more difficult (2015, p. 47).

The viewer's extratextual memory is in fact cleverly exploited to create narrative tension, since the series starts long before the imprisonment of Hannibal, something that had only happened in the minor installments of the saga (both in the 2006 novel *Hannibal Rising* as in its film adaptation a year later). Viewers meet a Hannibal whose future guilt is assured, but of which no example is given until well into the first season. We do not see the first violent act of Dr. Lecter (the choking of Miriam Lass) until the sixth episode. In this regard, it is important to note how the series, given the horrifying and very explicit standards to which it accustoms its viewers, often leaves the bloodiest moments related to the Hannibal murders elliptical. This is something Murray Smith (1999) already detected as one of the keys to the viewer's partial allegiance towards the Lecter played by Anthony Hopkins in the films.

There are some exceptions to this concealment of the violence perpetrated by Hannibal, such as the ice pick nailed to Professor Sogliato's temple ("Secondo,"

3.3.), inspector Pazzi's intestines ("Contour," 3.5.), and the brief moment in which we see him swallow Frederick Chilton's lip ("The Number of the Beast is 666," 3.12.). These exceptions are concentrated in the third season, not by chance. At that point, the viewer, thanks to the narrative expanded for more than two years and almost thirty chapters, has already built a solid emotional bond with Mikkelsen's Lecter. These abominable scenes act as a counterweight and always appear among other actions that favor our cyclical re-allegiance (García, 2016). In "Secondo," for instance, Hannibal Lecter narrates to Bedelia Du Maurier how his sister was killed and cannibalized when they both were children. In "Contour" he receives a brutal beating at the hands of Jack Crawford shortly after having gutted Pazzi. Finally in "The Number of the Beast is 666" Lecter's brief act of cannibalism—the devouring of Chilton's lip, sent to him by the Red Dragon while he is imprisoned and physically incapacitated—pales before the savage torture that the brutal Francis Dolarhyde inflicts on Chilton during the episode. But until those events in the third season, it is typical for the violence perpetrated by Hannibal Lecter to be dry and devoid of any aestheticism (e.g. the breaking of Franklyn Froideveaux's neck in "Fromage," 1.8.), or to remain unseen but inferred (the audience understands that Beverly Katz has been murdered after hearing three shots in the dark in "Takiawase," 2.4.).

This is not to say that blood does not appear in the series before these events; it appears profusely, but in a context of savage brawls in which Hannibal Lecter is perceived by the viewer as the lesser evil. He faces villains that the audience considers even more perverse than the psychiatrist himself, like Tobias Budge, Francis Dolarhyde or the vicious tandem formed by Mason Verger and Cordell. There are other bloody moments starring Hannibal Lecter, especially the fights against Jack Crawford (and, eventually, Will) in the second and third seasons. These tussles, however, do not mirror the structure of a predator cornering its prey, but are depicted instead as ruthless physical struggles between equals. This equality places these scenes, despite their explicit fierceness, in a setting different from disgust. They are more characteristic of the thriller's physical roughness.

Moreover, against the background of the viewer's unexampled knowledge of Lecter's cannibalistic behavior, the story shows only the most admirable features of Lecter's character: his extreme elegance, his cultivated artistic sensibility, the refinement of his cooking or his professional competence as a

psychiatrist. This disharmony generates a cognitive motivation, as Turvey explains:

> Fascination with their complex, even contradictory traits, as well as discovering the psychological and other motivations for them, is a major source of the appeal of the antiheroes, I contend, and our struggle to understand them gives rise to much of the pleasure we derive from them. We are captivated by the riddle posed by their personalities, and seek to solve it even when we find their actions deplorable (2019, p. 239).

In the face of the assumptions viewers might bring to the series, Fuller proposes a much more ambiguous character: in a significant action of the pilot episode, Hannibal saves Abigail Hobbs' life by preventing her from bleeding. Later, we even see how a sleeping Hannibal holds Abigail's hand in the hospital where she fights death. These empathetic and compassionate gestures contradict the viewer's expectations, which predicted a sadist who enjoys cruelty to the point of physically savoring his victims. During the first half of the first season, it is difficult to reconcile the bloodthirsty preconceived image of the character with the peaceful restraint that Dr. Lecter exhibits in the series. Scenes like that not only make not only the character much more twisted, but also complicate the emotional engagement of the viewer with him. Hence, as Jane Stadler has argued, the whole *Hannibal* narrative "invite[s] reflection on empathy's mechanisms and its ethical effects" (2017, p. 413).

Beyond meta-representational readings like Stadler's, this positive presentation of Hannibal plays a narrative role in the very background mystery that the series presents. As Alexandra Carroll has written, "Lecter's human mask allows him to blend in with, and deceive, a society seeking a monster that stands apart from humanity, rather than a being in whom monster and human mingle" (2015, p. 49). However, beyond the mystery of unmasking and capturing Lecter, the suspense in *Hannibal* has some peculiarities that surpass the simple resolution of the structure of the cat and mouse or the whodunit, which can be summed with the concept "temporal prolongation" (Nannicelli, 2017, p. 65).

SUSPENSE AND TEMPORAL PROLONGATION

Nannicelli has coined the concept "temporal prolongation" to designate, more precisely than is possible using only the label of *seriality*, the specific temporal nature of the television medium, as well as the artistic possibilities it allows. It is a theoretical

notion applicable to fiction and nonfiction television, entertainment and news formats, soap operas, dramas, sitcoms, and sports broadcasts: any format or genre in which duration is a relevant and distinctive aspect of the artwork. The notion of temporal prolongation is relevant in the case of *Hannibal* because suspense does not rest solely on solving the crime of the week or exposing Hannibal Lecter (the main narrative arc of the first two seasons) but also on the extended duration of Fuller's series, which allows another type of narrative enjoyment, one specific to television adaptation.

As Nannicelli says, suspense is one of the aesthetic features that enables temporal prolongation: "Although suspense is generated by a narrative question raised within a particular episode –just as suspense is generated by a narrative raised within in a particular film– the interludes between episodes sustain and, in some cases, amplify suspense" (2017, p. 74). In the case of *Hannibal*, as usual in a serial narrative, the story combines a double narrative structure: the anthology plot (the case of the week) and the running plot (the unmasking of Dr. Lecter's criminal identity). Only in the third season does the structure change to be divided into two long consecutive story arcs: that of the capture of Hannibal in Italy and his imprisonment at the Mason Verger mansion in the first seven episodes, and the remake/adaptation of *The Red Dragon/Manhunter* in the last six episodes. In all cases, the suspense of each episode is increased by the serial plot, with the aforementioned addition of a sense of inevitability: we know that Lecter will eventually be taken to prison. In this sense, *Hannibal* works meticulously the tension between the inevitable and the surprise that O'Sullivan has studied in television stories: "Suspense contains the seeds of the inevitable" (2017, p. 205). In this case, narrative anxiety comes from when and how Will Graham and Jack Crawford will arrest Dr. Lecter (the unavoidable goal of this prequel-remake).

However, suspense does not end with the narrative mystery and the approach of the inevitable. In *Hannibal*, the use of temporal prolongation also fosters aesthetic pleasure by repeating a structure. Especially in the first season, the murder of the week is one of the attractions for the viewer, since the staging is so original and careful that it serves, as Brinker has written, to channel the "emotional intensities, whose experiences create a bond between the viewer and the program" (2015, p. 322). That is, they are scenes that encourage the viewer's engagement, even more so in an era in which the internet facilitates satiating intellectual curiosity

about the details of the murders and social networks encourage niche dialogue. Thus, beyond the weekly mystery, part of the appeal of the story has to do with the sinister inventiveness of the murders shown on the screen. The temporal prolongation of the story makes the viewer anxious to discover the next *tableaux vivant* that *Hannibal* will offer. Therefore, there is some appetite for the repugnant, but not so much for the disgusting quality of the represented object, but for the originality[3] that the viewer expects of each new exhibit in the series' museum of horrors.

In addition to the intrigue of the serial story, we should make note of what we could call the intra-textual suspense, characteristic of diegetic derivations such as remakes, sequels, and reboots. In this case, we share with Scahill (2016, p. 322) the idea that *preboot* (a portmanteau formed from *prequel* and *reboot*) would be the most accurate designation for the Bryan Fuller series. The creators of narrative universe expansions are aware of the intertextual appeal to viewers familiar with the original text, so they work the counterweight between novelty and semantic winks, as Sutton writes: "The sequel is designed precisely to provoke the spectator into recollection and retranslation while at the same time providing pleasurable repetition" (2010, p. 50). The redundancy or familiarity, of course, should not render the story impenetrable to viewers who are discovering the story for the first time. The remake operates according to a dynamic similar to that of the sequel: if it is too close to the primary text, the viewer might well prefer the original. Leitch synthesizes this discrepancy in his *Twice-Told Tales*: "The fundamental rhetorical problem of remakes is to mediate between two apparently irreconcilable statements: that the remake is just like its model, and that the remake is better" (2002, p. 44).

Thus, the multitude of texts that surround *Hannibal*—the novels of Thomas Harris and their film adaptations—add a complementary enjoyment for the most in-the-know viewers. Such viewers aspire to identify all the references in the "*Hannibal*verse," to rearrange them narratively and aesthetically, and to observe their interactions with the original. As Quaresima puts it, the remake ideally "assumes that its viewer is an intertextual viewer [who finds pleasure] in juxtaposing and comparing" (quoted in Kelleter & Loock, 2017, p. 136). Hence the various intertextual levels and self-quotations present in the series: the diehard "Fannibals" will be able to track the concomitance between Will Graham's escape to

Lithuania (season three) and the last two works of the Lecterian canon: the novel *Hannibal Rising* and its subsequent film adaptation. Only viewers who have seen the movie *Hannibal* (Ridley Scott, 2001) (or read Harris' first novel) will notice the visual correlation between the Lecter played by Anthony Hopkins carrying an unconscious Clarice Sterling and Mads Mikkelsen's Lecter doing the same with Will Graham in "Digestive" (3.7.).

The series also allows viewers moderately acquainted with the character's narrative universe to enjoy the appeal of self-referentiality. Beyond the expected narrative arc (involving characters, dramatic conflicts, and settings), *Hannibal* is prodigal in "explicit visual citations, narrative winks, ironic allusions or re-readings that comically or critically subvert narrative elements from previous installments" (García Martínez, 2018b, p. 63).

Consequently, the viewer who finds aesthetic pleasure in verifying changes in gender (Freddie Lounds, Alana Bloom) or race (Jack Crawford, Reba McClane) can also be surprised by the reversed echo of the last scene of the first season: Lecter visits a jailed Graham, who wears the same blue jumpsuit as the Lecter from *The Silence of the Lambs*. The viewer laughs when hearing Mads Mikkelsen repeat a famous phrase from Anthony Hopkins' Lecter ("It's nice to have an old friend for dinner") while tasting, along with Frederick Chilton and Alana Bloom, an exquisite dish featuring meat consisting of the friend ironically invoked in the "Entrée" episode (Yu Wu, Fuller, & Rymer, 2013). As Fuchs and Phillips accurately note, *Hannibal* "is riddled with cannibalism-based inside jokes between the serial-killing main character and the audience" (2017, p. 210). The series is filled with these sorts of Easter eggs, tributes, and inside jokes that the most knowledgeable viewers strive to detect, turning Bryan Fuller's work into a kind of narrative palimpsest (Abbott, 2018).[4]

AESTHETIC ENJOYMENT AND THE BEAUTY OF THE TERRIBLE

As we see, suspense softens the repugnance precisely because, due to the various ways in which it unfolds in *Hannibal* (narrative mystery, structural repetition, intra-textual references), it allows the addition of more layers of narrative and aesthetic attention. Consequently, the hardly bearable impact that the repulsive scenes would have if they lacked context is ameliorated—or, at least, their capacity to shock is softened—among the layers that make up the cognitive flow of each episode.

However, it is unquestionably true that *Hannibal*'s repugnant images are elaborated in a meticulous way to not only shock and discomfort the viewer, but also to fascinate him/her visually, enveloping him/her with the perfection of the form and the allure of its beauty. This incongruity between aversion and seduction forms the so-called paradox of disgust (Levinson, 2013; Korsmeyer, 2011), a variant of the paradox of tragedy (a puzzle widely debated by philosophers of art).

Like dramatic engagement and suspense, the beautiful mise-en-scène orchestrated by Bryan Fuller is vital so that the viewer not only does not dodge or abandon the story but instead becomes profoundly and actively involved in it.[5] To support our argument, it may be illustrative to analyze in detail one of *Hannibal*'s many repellant images: the human mural of "Sakizuke" (2.2.). Thus, we can delve into the mechanisms of the complex aesthetic operation that *Hannibal*, in general, claims from the viewer.

The beginning of the episode presents one of the most physically brutal moments of the series: a man awakens, naked, in the middle of a cluster of dead people. The bodies are arranged in a hyper-stylized, harmonic way, following a pattern of concentric circles; the bodies in the inner ring are curled around one another while those in the outer ring are stretched out, fanned out around the center group. When the victim tries to move, he discovers, with horror, that his skin is sewn to other bodies. The explicitness of the peeling flesh, in a close-up, multiplies its disturbing effect thanks to the sound of the sliced skin and the screams of the tortured. The scene is horrifying (as is its description). And yet, it contains the keys that usually allow *Hannibal* to go beyond gore: sophistication in its mise-en-scène, plastic beauty, and conceptual symbolism.

The complexity of Bryan Fuller's staging, studied in detail by Ndalianis (2015), Abbott (2017), and Medina Contreras (2018), is one of *Hannibal*'s hallmarks. To the baroque visual style that characterizes the series—the mood-variant color palette, Reitzell's disturbing and dissonant music, the weird camera angles—we must add the specificity of the mise-en-scène. The "human mural" makes various appearances throughout the episode: the use of a zenithal long shot at one point makes the collage of bodies resemble the physiognomy and color of a human eye, from the central darkness of the pupil to the irregularity of the grooves that radially populate the iris. Audiovisual sophistication reaches its peak when, in a virtuous filmic *tour de force*, Tim Hunter, the episode's director, achieves a

hypnotic shot reverse shot. Hannibal Lecter climbs up to the top of the water tank in which the killer hides his victims. He looks down toward the interior from the oculus on the ceiling and discovers the mural. The reverse shot shows us a mesmerizing visual combination: the human eye-shaped mural is reflected in Hannibal Lecter's own pupil. Thus, the image merges the three elements into a layered visual metaphor: the literalness of both Hannibal's eye and the crime scene (the 'tenor', following the rhetorical structure of the metaphor[6]), create a figuration of God's eye, the zenith oculus from which a superior being stares (the 'vehicle', again in rhetorical terms); these elements together (the 'foundation') suggest the rose window, an architectural feature characteristic of Gothic cathedrals. As we can see, the semantic density of the mise-en-scène is exceptional.

The image of the rose window leads us to the second aspect of the show that allows *Hannibal* to transcend the gore genre: the symbolism of the macabre homicide, which reaches metaphysical levels. James Gray, the murderous muralist, has baptized his creation "The Eye of God." It is no accident that the collage, in the form of an eye, is related to rose windows. These rose windows, as Helen J. Dow explains, were the embodiment of a very complex symbology, which tried to represent the background of Catholic teachings by way of form, to the point of representing "the material consummation of the outlook which produced it" (Dow, 1957, p. 295). Taking up one of the essential features that the medievalist Emile Mâle attributed to Gothic art— symbolism—the rose window operates by showing "men one thing and inviting them to see in it the figure of another" (2018, p. 34). Accordingly, the rose window implies the staging of a subsidiary or displaced vision (one thing for another). By superimposing the scene of a crime pompously named "The Eye of God" and Dr. Lecter's own gaze, *Hannibal* is proposing semantic contiguity between the bloodthirsty psychiatrist and a divine figure. Beyond the religious discussions scattered throughout the series—from Lecter blurting out at Will in the second episode of the series, "Killing must feel good to God too. He does it all the time" (Gray & Rymer, 2013) to the ecclesiastical iconography of the Red Dragon plot arc in the third season—the character himself inserts in the diegesis the metaphysical allusion. To demonstrate his superiority over other serial killers, Lecter seizes the "artist" and makes him a part of his mortuary mural, sewing him to the rest of the inert bodies. At that time, the show plays again with the eye symbol, but reversing it: this time, it is the pupil of a bound James Gray that reflects, in the center, the face of the diabolical Dr. Lecter, the "God" who has decided to give him a taste of his own medicine. Even with irony, the character played by Mads Mikkelsen tells him: "God gave you purpose—not only to create art, but to become it. (...) Your eye will now see God reflected back. (...) If God is looking down at you, don't you want to be looking back at Him?" (Vlaming, Fuller, & Hunter, 2014). However, as we have said, what Gray is seeing is precisely Hannibal Lecter's face.

Finally, although the concept of beauty is as ubiquitous in as it is difficult to distill from the collective efforts of philosophy of art (Sartwell, 2017[7]; De Clerq, 2012), here we refer to it in a way that is both formal and quotidian, following the teachings of Greek philosophers and medieval scholastics. These described beauty as exemplifying order, symmetry, precision, proportion, and balance between the sum and its parts. The classic definition provided by Saint Thomas Aquinas explains beauty as a sum of *integritas* (unity, completion), *consonantia* (proportion, harmony) and *claritas* (clarity, radiance).

Of Thomistic roots, the iconography of the Middle Ages (so present in the scenes of *Hannibal*'s sinister human mural) is characterized by aspiring to be "the expression of a mysterious inner harmony" (Mâle, 2018, p. 29). In this regard, symmetry follows "obedience to the rules of a kind of sacred mathematics" (Mâle, 2018, p. 26). Thus, the example of the human mural also recalls the classical and neoclassical importance of the perfection of the human body as representing the peak of beauty: the torsos of the bodies in the mural are young, muscular, shiny, not yet touched by decomposition; on the contrary, the corpses' skin exhibits an oily glow. In addition, the discovery of the crime by Dr. Lecter is enhanced (a common trope in the series) by classical music, in this case by Bach's *Mass in B Minor*, a Baroque masterpiece that adds a further layer of Catholic and metaphysical significance.[8]

The keys to making such risky scenes enjoyable are in the notions of context and fascination. Regarding the first, finding beauty in something grotesque and repulsive is possible according to the circumstances or facts related to a specific situation:

> Thus what is normally repellent and harsh to look upon may, given a certain context and relation to other features, become beautiful and pleasing. So, following Sible, it may be claimed that the aesthetic value of features such as ugliness and incoherence may

be, properly speaking, relational and wholly context dependent rather than being, as is the case with beauty, of autonomous aesthetic value (Kieran, 1997, p. 392).

Consequently, from the first sequence of the pilot episode, *Hannibal*'s stunning mise-en-scène puts the viewer on notice, conveying the expectation that viewers will need to decode the story: oneiric insertions, a dislocated temporality, a chromatic pattern that differentiates Will's re-creation of reality, or an unsettling soundtrack that aspires to generate a "constant heightened state of reality" (Dionne, 2014). *Hannibal* is an aesthetically daring series, where the elegance in the dress and the manner of Dr. Lecter is mirrored in the fineness of the food cooked and presented, and where the cultured and intellectually refined character played by Mads Mikkelsen translates into a myriad of allusions to painting, sculpture, music, and cinema (see Crisóstomo, 2018). The series is a formal delight for the senses; its aesthetic qualities encourage the viewer to explore and accommodate that beauty, despite the moral and emotional responses that might be triggered due to its repugnance.

The repulsive scenes are not only fully embedded in the narrative context, but they also elicit fascination in the viewer, so that the viewer not only tolerates but aesthetically engages with the scenes. Fascination is in part a result of the confusion and perplexity of our moral and aesthetic judgments: the aesthetic experience becomes more intense when the viewer must try to make sense of such an enigma. This fascination multiplies the viewer's enjoyment of *Hannibal* since, as Baumbach explains, "the more we are attracted and captured by a particular image or text, the stronger our engagement in that particular image and text will be" (2010, p. 230). Again, fascination is achieved not by the mere shock produced by these images—a *mondo*[9] shock—but by the expressionistic staging. Both bloody and beautiful, it immerses the audience in a universe of insanity, where the limits between witness and accomplice are diluted. Thus, *Hannibal*'s mise-en-scène becomes the practical incarnation of the paradox of disgust.

CONCLUSIONS

Even with the sweeping and delicate melody of Siouxsie Sioux playing ("Love Crime"), the last scene of the series delivers macabre delight for the last time. Bedelia du Maurier, Hannibal Lecter's accomplice, sits at an elegant table, where a tasty leg of meat steams. The camera movement reveals that it is Bedelia's own limb.

As on so many occasions throughout the 39 episodes of *Hannibal*, aesthetic pleasure and repugnance collide in the scene. Precisely that aporia—moral, dramatic, aesthetic, and even culinary—between delight and disgust is what *Hannibal* offers consistently and in depth.

As we have argued, *Hannibal* uses three strategies that enable and increase the aesthetic enjoyment of the viewer, thus subverting the repugnance of the explicit scenes. First, the series establishes a perverse and at times paradoxical moral scheme, where the foreseeable rejection of the criminal and detestable behavior of a serial killer such as Dr. Lecter is consistently refuted or, at least, blurred. The structure of sympathy that Bryan Fuller raises around Dr. Lecter is constructed from Lecter's professional mission (e.g. helping the FBI, healing Will Graham), his ironic humor around cannibalism, the visual concealment of his monstrous aspect until later in the series, the presence of villains more detestable than him, and his victimization (especially, in the third season, at the hands of Mason Verger).

Second, "temporal prolongation" minimizes disgust through the deployment of suspense, the structural repetition of ingenious murders, and the abundance of intra-textual references characteristic of a *preboot*. This allows us to add more layers of narrative attention, so that the impact of the repugnant scenes is just one part of each episode's appeal. *Hannibal* is an example of how the length and dramatic density of the television narrative enables a storytelling apparatus capable of conjuring (and holding viewers throughout) the accumulation of Dantesque scenes.

Third, it is precisely the visual fascination that *Hannibal* elicits which, along with the context, ensures that violence is not banalized or seen as unnecessary. As with Bedelia's cooked leg, the whole of *Hannibal* proposes a contradictory aesthetic that exhibits the beauty of what is macabre and the attraction of the repugnant. The nightmare is always wrapped with the cellophane of operatic refinement, placid sleep, and succulent delicacy. The example discussed at length in our analysis (the human mural that mimics the eye of God in "Sakizuke") demonstrates *Hannibal*'s overwhelming semantic compactness and its conscious symbiosis between form and substance. The major limitation of this paper lies in its inability to more than point to the ways in which the show exemplifies the paradox of disgust, which demands an exclusive study. Because *Hannibal*, hovering at the nexus of aesthetic pleasure and disgust, subverts the repugnant to make itself a beautiful object.

Notes

1. For example, season two of *Hannibal* is ranked among the ten best of 2014, according to Metacritic. In addition, respected critics such as Matt Fowler (*IGN*) and Matt Zoller Seitz (*Vulture*) placed *Hannibal*'s second and third seasons, respectively, at the top of their lists of best television series in 2014 and 2015.

2. As Mikita Brottman argues, the relationship between cinema and "offensive" content—what she has named *cinéma vomitif* (1997)—is not a new phenomenon and can be traced in classics such as *Freaks* (Tod Browning, 1932), *The Tingler* (William Castle, 1959), and *Blood Feast* (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1963). Without pretending to be exhaustive, to the films studied by Brottman we can add countercultural or independent film directors such as John Waters, David Cronenberg, and the Pasolini's *Salò or le 120 giornate di Sodom*a (1975), where one of the most famous scenes shows a coprophagic feast. Likewise, the inventory of *cinéma vomitif* could be completed with comedy subgenres, such as the so-called "gross-out comedy," which had some success in the eighties and was subsequently revitalized by directors such as the Farrelly brothers or the *American Pie* saga in the United States, and *Torrente*, in Spain. However, it is obviously in the horror genre where aversion and celluloid have always been more intertwined, to the point that several subgenres have turned repulsive images into a brand identity: *mondo*, gore, slasher, zombie cinema, and torture porn, among others.

3. As pointed out by one of the peer evaluators of this article, the consciously unreal exaggeration of the horrifying images also exerts a counterweight to the effect *Hannibal* can cause in the viewer.

4. As Abbott puts it, "*Hannibal*'s palimpsestuous narrative provides a useful model that abandons the focus on fidelity and even the notion of an 'original' text, in favor of positioning the serialised televisual text as a central prism through which an audience can engage with and reflect upon the interactions between the multitude of texts that comprise the story" (2018, p. 564).

5. It is pertinent to draw parallels with *The Following*, a series whose premise shares characteristics with *Hannibal*: a serial killer who, from prison, orchestrates a network of psychopaths to commit crimes as spectacular as they are horrifying and explicit. While *Hannibal*'s artistic significance is appreciable in the affection by the critics and the enormous amount of academic analysis it has generated, many of *The Following*'s critics dealt precisely with the show's failure to generate the paradox of disgust. *The Guardian* called *The Following* a "brainless, gratuitous bloodbath" (Dempster, 2013), the *Hollywood Reporter* accused it of pretending "to shock people with gratuitous, relentless carnage" (Goodman, 2013). In *New York Magazine*, one of the most prominent TV critics in the United States compared *The Following* with *Hannibal*, calling the former "much dumber and clumsier" (Zoller Seitz, 2014).

6. Since rhetorician I. A. Richards established that triple scheme of metaphor in 1936, studies on metaphor have advanced in Linguistics, Communication and Philosophy (e.g., Fludernik, Freeman, & Freeman, 1999). However, the essence with which Richards described the metaphor as a rhetorical figure remains valid for non-specialized analysis, like this one, since even Wikipedia has canonized Richards' ideas to define the metaphor in a general way.

7. "The nature of beauty is one of the most enduring and controversial themes in Western philosophy, and is—with the nature of art—one of the two fundamental issues in philosophical aesthetics" (Sartwell, 2017).

8. According to musicologist George B. Stauffer, "no other work displays Bach's powers of compositional refinement and stylistic synthesis so clearly and on such a grand scale" (2003, p. ix).

9. For an insight into the aesthetic characteristics of this subgenre of insatiably explicit terror, see Brottman (2004).

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