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THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS, A PSYCHOLOGICAL REVIEW:

Psychologists are not trained to evaluate the artistic merits of a film, but we may try to analyze a film very much as we analyze other products of the human psyche such as dreams or myths. In fact, a film, in so far as it "grips" people, is a myth in action, and to comment on a film that fascinates its audience is to comment on a living myth, a snap-shot of the American psyche.

On the surface, The Silence of the Lambs is a murder mystery horror film with a sci-fi-monster-type villain. This evil villain has superhuman abilities that inspire awe and dread in the film's heroes as well as in the audience. This "monster" is reminiscent of King Kong in that he develops a protective relation with the heroine who alone understands him. But what distinguishes this movie from those where the enemy is a Fly or a Blob or a Creature from Outer Space or a Devil that possesses an innocent girl is that here the awesome enemy is none other than a man, and, in fact, a civilized, cultured man, a doctor, a psychiatrist portrayed in the film by Anthony Hopkins. Here the problem is man who is fearsome, awesome, fascinating, evil incarnate. Even Dr. Frankenstein

was not evil in this sense: It was his monster who performed the evil acts, and the doctor was only more or less conscious of what was going on. Dr. Hannibal Lecter, however, is the monster, performing evil acts, consciously. Evil is man.

Since Dr. Lecter is a psychiatrist, the evil is the mind of man. When Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster), a brave FBI agent trainee, stares at Dr. Lecter in his cage, drenched in surreal light, like from another planet or another dimension or another realm or another species, she is, after all, examining man: Man the otherworldly thinker who reads and listens to Bach and who is quiet, disciplined, self-contained, polite, and mannered, but also man the animal who uses his sublime intellect to kill other men and rip apart their flesh with his teeth and to eat it. The ability to look at man from this sur-real (yet still real) point of view and see him (as opposed to creatures from outer space) as the cause of the problem is the beginning of depth psychology whose goal is the increased responsibility that this shocking self-knowledge can inspire.

The film reflects an increased willingness to accept that there is evil within and an increased willingness to look at humankind in general and, hopefully, ourselves in particular. Doctor Lecter is not a foreigner: He is one of us, one whose profession is to help us look at ourselves (which he does in the movie).

We might now take our analysis one step further. We have already noted that this same Hannibal Lecter who is capable of killing with his mind alone (the man in the cell next to his) and who has committed superhuman atrocities, exhibits respect and tenderness towards Ms. Starling. Because of this feeling, Lecter's mind reveals its positive side and becomes a tool to help the heroine solve, not only her own personal problems, but also a chain of murders. It is this dual aspect of his mind (that is, the human mind), with its demonic and magical capacities, that enables Dr. Lecter to understand evil. Because the heroine is sympathetic (yet firm) and willing to interchange with this lunatic doctor (and even to become his student-patient), the doctor becomes a bridge to the world of pure evil that enables her to try to save another life. The viewer, in identifying with the attitude of Ms. Starling (and also becoming a student-patient of Dr. Lecter), leaves the theater learning more about the human mind, including, indirectly, his or her own.

It is true that the purest evil in the film is represented by the serial killer (nicknamed "Buffalo Bill") who is a transsexual and who is therefore like a non-human Alien for most Americans and capable of bearing our negative projections. This figure, however, is not an anonymous, off-screen murderer as we find in such films as Sea of Love, but a real person (whose given name is revealed as Jame Gumb). Mr. Gumb's immersion in ritualistic magic gives the director the opportunity of portraying him as a kind of demon. But the psychiatrist, in his dual aspect, is capable of helping us

understand even this miscreant and to see him in a human and understandable light. This transsexual is shrouded in symbols of butterflies and male-female dualities, and so he expresses a striving for transformation and for the uniting of the opposites (within us), even though the outcome of this search for self is hopelessly misguided. Yet in this seething depths of human degradation we may find the secret of evil--the search for self gone astray. This film somehow opens a window that allows us to look at the roots of the psyche somewhat dispassionately and objectively.

The ability to stomach the objective study of the human psyche and its connections to the evils of this world is an optimistic sign.

As a demonstration of the point of this review I invite the reader to perform an exercise in self-observation and examine his or her own reaction to the very last scene of the film.

- [< Prev](#)
- [Next >](#)