

**AESTHETICISM,
EVIL,
HOMOSEXUALITY,
AND *HANNIBAL***

IF OSCAR WILDE
ATE PEOPLE

Geoff Klock

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Homosexuality, and
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This book is dedicated to Dr. Brady Berman, my own sensitive psychopath.

The bibliography, though, belongs to Maureen Matarese.

Epigraph

“(nothing but music from this point on)”

—Amazon Prime subtitles to *Hannibal*, Season 3, Episode 1

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Preface

I keep saying “Bryan Fuller’s *Hannibal*,” but *Hannibal*, like any TV show or movie, is a big production and a lot of the things you will see me attribute to Fuller out of linguistic convenience might be more accurately attributed to someone in the writers’ room, or the director, or the cinematographer, or the composer, or the set, or food designer, even though Fuller seems unusually involved: production designer Matthew Davies said “Bryan grooms every script, polishes every line of dialogue” and is exacting when it comes to things like furniture and flowers.

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Introduction

“Aperitif” is a small drink of liquor used to stimulate the appetite, but the word derives from the Latin “aperire,” meaning “to open.”¹ “Aperitif,” the first episode of *Hannibal*,² opens with a powerful statement of intent. In the first moments of the first episode we watch Will Graham at a crime scene and we see him move backward in time, taking on the role of the killer. He begins by slaying the patriarch of a family and narrates from the point of view of the killer: “He will die watching me take what is his away from him. This is my design” (1.1). This suburban home invasion murder, the husband dead and the woman shot but alive, recalls the start of Harris’s novel *Red Dragon*,³ which becomes Michael Mann’s *Manhunter*,⁴ which becomes Brett Ratner’s *Red Dragon*,⁵ all of which is sublimated into the final episodes of Bryan Fuller’s TV show *Hannibal*. Graham’s words, the opening words of the show, are Fuller’s statement of purpose, his calling his home run. Like Graham in this moment, Fuller will go back in time, get into the head of a killer, and imaginatively recreate something that already happened: he has recast one of the most iconic villains in film history, invented by someone else and expertly elaborated by many others. Patriarchs Harris, Mann, and Ratner, Anthony Hopkins and Brian Cox, and the lot of people who not only had their swing at this but invented the terms of the game—they will die watching Fuller take what is theirs away from them. This is his design. The word “design” derives from a Latin word meaning “sign” or “mark,”⁶ and this is Fuller’s aim, to make his mark. A design is a plan for a work of art, but it is also a word used for hostility and aggression—to have designs on someone else’s wife, for example, is to have intentions that are less than pure. In the word “design,” art and evil, the themes of the show, are immediately linked.

Alana Bloom says to Hannibal “For convenience [the psychiatric community] term you a monster” (3.8). In the fourteenth century “monsters” referred

to deformed animals, thought to be warnings from the gods,⁷ and so the word “monster” is related to “monitor”—something or someone that provides a warning. “Monster” is also, for the same reason, at the root of “demonstrate”—to teach a lesson. Will says, “Hannibal has a certain personality style we can all learn from. In moderation of course” (2.12). In its murder scenes *Hannibal* links art and evil, and this is a major part of the mark, the lesson, Fuller aims to make with his depiction of one of the great monsters of popular culture. Fuller’s *Hannibal* is a work of art about why art matters, and what evil has to do with it. This lesson may also be a warning.

“The devil is in the details” says Hannibal (1.1), and this book will be focusing on the details of Fuller’s show. Why that is a good idea is captured by a conversation between Hannibal and his therapist Bedelia about Will Graham:

Hannibal: He realized early on that he saw things differently than other people, felt things differently.

Bedelia: So did you.

Hannibal: I see myself in Will.

Bedelia: Do you see yourself in his madness?

Hannibal: Madness can be a medicine for the modern world. You take it in moderation, it’s beneficial.

Bedelia: You overdose and it can have unfortunate side effects.
Hannibal: Side effects can be temporary. They can be a boost to our psychological immune systems to help fight the existential crisis of normal life. (1.11)

“Madness in moderation” is what art does, and it is also what the study of art does, and this study will treat *Hannibal* as a work of art, one best understood by looking closely at the details. Lars Von Trier’s *Dogville*,⁸ a movie with no sets shot in an empty warehouse with tape on the floor to indicate where the buildings would be, rejects aestheticism; Baz Luhrmann’s *Moulin Rouge*,⁹ a lush production where every surface is bejeweled, celebrates aestheticism. Hannibal investigates aestheticism. As Mason Verger says, “I want to understand Hannibal Lecter to better understand myself” (3.4): Hannibal is a window into who we are. And like Mason Verger, we might be monsters.

**“ART IS NOT ABOUT SOMETHING—
IT IS THAT SOMETHING ITSELF”**

The Social Justice Activist movement has a lot of folks looking at works of art in terms of what values it promotes, its imagined effects on viewers,

and the world at large. Is *X-Men: First Class*¹⁰ bad news because it quickly kills off the only black guy and has the Latina girl suddenly go bad so that it can focus attention on a lot of white people, mostly men, in a story that takes place during the Civil Rights Movement, and that features characters that have traditionally been seen as metaphors for underprivileged minorities? Or is it good because it uses the blockbuster PG-13 action film, traditionally the preferred storytelling genre for young straight white guys, to present, in coded but not unsubtle terms, one of the most homoerotic male friendships in mainstream cinema? Is *The Dark Knight Rises*¹¹ good because it brings Occupy Wall Street and class issues, often hidden in American life and popular culture, to the fore? Or is it bad because it asks us to sympathize with a legacy billionaire punching homeless people in the face in its final act? To what extent is supporting art made by bad people—such as Roman Polanski, Woody Allen, R. Kelly, or Bill Cosby—supporting injustice?

A product of the late nineteenth century, the idea of art-for-art's sake, also known as aestheticism, is the idea that good art doesn't do anything, it simply is. It stands on its own, unconnected to the biography of its creator, or any petty "message." A painting by Mark Rothko or Jackson Pollock—a panel of color barely graded, or wild splashes of color—is a beautiful object, a sensuous and unique experience, and asking what it means, and especially thinking you will understand what it means by reading a biography of its creator, is kind of missing the point. As Samuel Beckett puts it about James Joyce, art "is not about something; *it is that something itself*."¹² Or as Andy Warhol puts it, in a more joking register, when a reporter asked him "what is the meaning of your art?": "it's decorative."¹³ Oscar Wilde would have dismissed attacking art for bad ideology with "Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming."¹⁴

On the subject of art, and this way of looking at art, we will have three main guides through Fuller's *Hannibal*. First, Oscar Wilde, the late nineteenth-century author of the gothic horror novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*,¹⁵ which as *Seinfeld*'s major precursor pioneered the idea of "a show about nothing;"¹⁶ Wilde was a major and underrated philosopher of art in his book *Intentions*, and one of the popularizers of aestheticism, because he spoke so eloquently on the subject—and in such good sound bites. Our second guide will be Wilde's more obscure teacher at Oxford, the art critic Walter Pater, the origin of our modern use of the word "aesthetic"; Pater was a quiet man, whose slim book about Renaissance art, which features the best prose in the English language, became a manifesto for the art-for-art's-sake movement and, in the words of the poet William Butler Yeats, "dominated a generation."¹⁷ A third guide through *Hannibal* will be contemporary art critic Camille Paglia, heir to Wilde and Pater and author

of *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*;¹⁸ she is the person best equipped to understand the dark side of aestheticism.

Wilde who Paglia calls “a master of mass media”¹⁹ distills aestheticism down to its essence in his maxims: “Art never expresses anything but itself”;²⁰ “all art is quite useless”;²¹ “the aim of art is not simple truth but complex beauty”;²² and “there is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all.”²³ Walter Pater’s major contribution to aestheticism is found in his famous five-paragraph conclusion to *The Renaissance*:

We have an interval, and then our place knows us no more. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest, at least among “the children of this world,” in art and song. For our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time The poetic passion, the desire for beauty, the love of art for its own sake, yields you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake.²⁴

One of the most important observations for aestheticism is Pater’s claim that “all art aspires to the condition of music,”²⁵ meaning that it longs to be divorced from mere content, as a symphony is. He elaborates,

For while in all other kinds of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form, and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it. That the mere matter of a poem, for instance, its subject, namely, its given incidents or situation—that the mere matter of a picture, the actual circumstances of an event, the actual topography of a landscape—should be nothing without the form, the spirit, of the handling, that this form, this mode of handling, should become an end in itself, should penetrate every part of the matter: this is what all art constantly strives after, and achieves in different degrees.²⁶

Content can be beautiful—*Harry Potter*²⁷ is not the best-written book on a sentence level, but its moral universe, in which every tiny gesture of goodwill comes back to reward the person that did it, has a tremendous power. But aestheticism places a higher premium on form than content.

It may seem faintly absurd to bring the idea of aestheticism to bear on pop culture, to be talking about X-Men movies in the same breath as Rothko paintings. But Camille Paglia sees the transition as natural: “high culture made itself obsolete Popular culture is the great heir of the western past.”²⁸ While pop culture is not often as beautiful and content-free as, say, an album by Flying Lotus, much of what makes pop culture great has very