

The Transvestite, the Transsexual and the Trans Woman
The Transmisogynist Representation of Transgender Killers in *Psycho*,
The Silence of the Lambs and *The Mantis*

by

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Summary

This thesis examines three stories revolving around the transmisogynist trope of transgender female serial killers: the 1959 novel *Psycho* by Robert Bloch and its film adaptations by Alfred Hitchcock and Gus van Sant, the 1989 novel *The Silence of the Lambs* by Thomas Harris and its film adaptation by Jonathan Demme, and the Netflix Original series *The Mantis*. By historically contextualizing these texts and critiquing contemporaneous conceptualizations of transgender individuals through a modern-day trans activist lens, the way in which past societal beliefs contributed to the transmisogyny in the texts is explored. Norman Bates in *Psycho* is portrayed as a crossdressing man, which is presented as a symptom of being dangerously disturbed, linking gender nonconformity and mental illness to extreme violence. Jame Gumb in *The Silence of the Lambs* is portrayed as a transgender woman who is denied access to health care services needed to medically transition, enforcing the idea of a “false transsexual” which encourages disbelief of trans people’s self-identification. Virginie Delorme in *The Mantis* is portrayed as a trans woman who was similarly refused sex reassignment surgery and is rejected by men because of her poorly performed clandestine vaginoplasty, supporting the transphobic notion that post-operative trans women are merely mutilated men. The uncovered flaws in representing transgender women fairly and accurately point in a direction for future views on trans women that are not conducive to the production of such harmful fictional media.

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Introduction

Transgender people have been misrepresented in literature and media for decades. However, the more recent progress brought about by social justice efforts has led some to believe “trans people have, to a certain degree, assumed center stage in popular culture” (Fellner). This supposed prevalence of fictional characters that are no longer just cisgender straight white men is a common complaint among those who oppose inclusivity: Black and female characters have led to backlash against Marvel comics (Proctor & Kies 127-28) and the third *Star Wars* trilogy (Hassler-Forest). When proponents begin to concede the point that oppressed groups are taking over mass media, they underestimate the work still left to be done. Representation of minorities growing more important in fiction should have meant that all sorts of characters are now being written as, in this instance, transgender. However, trans characters are usually treated like walking gender identities by focusing on their suicidal tendencies or sex reassignment surgery: It turns out they are still limited to a set of pre-existent tropes. Particularly for trans women, American television reproduces these very plots, whether tragic or comedic: “[T]hey die or are dying, they kill other people or are killed, they are your old pal from college who presents as female now, they are in the hospital, they’ve come down to the station for questioning” (Bernard). While most of these tropes are problematic in their own right – from marginalizing sex work to reiterating victimhood by showcasing abuse or assault – this thesis focuses in particular on those instances where trans women are portrayed as frightening. For when they are not in danger themselves, it is a common occurrence within the thriller genre especially that trans women are portrayed as the murderous madwomen behind serial killings.

As is the case with the many feminine or queer-coded villains in media which aim to reinforce traditional gender roles and equate deviancy with malevolence (Kim 164), the trope of trans female killers plays on the societal fears of and disgust for non-normative gendered

behavior, which is often also seen as sexual in nature. By reaffirming these fears, the trope risks audiences will carry over the disgust they have for the killers to real-life trans people, as people who watch negative film depictions of trans women quickly become more negative in their attitude towards trans women afterwards (Solomon & Kurtz-Costes 34). While positive media interventions lasting ten minutes or less were found to have no positive effect on the attitudes towards this outgroup, exposure to the same amount of negative representations led to a more negative perception of trans women (44-45). Solomon & Kurtz-Costes speculate that this may be explained by Dolf Zillmann's exemplification theory, which states that audiences are more likely to generalize "evocative" representations to the entire minority group than they are to generalize more nuanced ones (45). This means that a thrilling, stereotype-enforcing portrayal of a trans woman would be more harmful than a well-meaning, positive portrayal could help dismantle stereotypes. As such, the acceptance of transgender women in society is hindered by their characterization as deranged killers in murder fiction: The use of gender identity as a plot device creates fear of gender nonconformity and dehumanizes trans women specifically. This makes these texts essentially transmisogynist, a concept describing the combination of transphobia and misogyny, which is further explored in the first chapter. As rights and medical treatment have evolved over the decades, the trope of the murderous transgender woman has adapted to incorporate these possibilities of transitioning. The horror is derived from gender nonconformity and crossdressing at first. Then, as hormone replacement therapy and sex reassignment surgery become more widely available, the need to physically transform oneself is used to frighten. Eventually, framing this process of transitioning as mutilation transforms the woman into a disfigured monster. The three stories that are focused on in this thesis progress from a lone recluse without any means of professional help around 1960 in *Psycho*, to someone seeking help but being rejected for treatment during the late eighties in *The Silence of the Lambs*, to a

modern-day trans woman who has transitioned but whose sex reassignment surgery has been performed poorly in *The Mantis*.

This thesis first examines the two foremost examples from the past sixty years that use the longstanding trope of transgender killers: Robert Bloch's *Psycho* and Thomas Harris' *The Silence of the Lambs*, of which the adaptations by Alfred Hitchcock and Jonathan Demme respectively have had tremendous cultural impact. As a result, cultural and literary critics have of course analyzed both works numerous times before. After having examined these classics within the genre, this thesis turns to a more recent example of the same trope in the 2017 Netflix Original series *The Mantis* (original title *La Mante*). This French-language television show was released only recently and has not yet been academically discussed at any length. However, it is far from a niche audience that has been exposed to the series: Netflix's platform assures that it reached a significant number of viewers worldwide, even if no exact ratings are ever released. Joelle Ruby Ryan mentions *Psycho* and *The Silence of the Lambs* but opts to review lesser-known works from mainstream cinema in her chapter on the Transgender Monster archetype (179). Critics analyzing either of the two films without regard for the representation of trans people, however, consistently overlook the problematic underlying gender ideologies. They often adopt the perspective that the serial killers should be regarded as ultimately male themselves, without critically questioning this narrative. Steven Schneider, despite noting the "variously 'feminized'" depiction of killers in the slasher subgenre, cites Carol Clover's observation of a killer's "phallic purpose" in penetrating a female body with a knife (239). He specifically contrasts "the transvestite or transsexual" with female psycho-killers, referring to a "sexual 'truth' ... serv[ing] to confirm the killer's biological *maleness*" (239-40; emphasis in original). In this way, the literature adopts the viewpoint that trans women are merely men whose masculinity has been compromised by their gender nonconformity. A supposedly feminist reading of *The Silence*

of the Lambs may focus on Clarice Starling as transgressing notions of femininity and gender roles, while positioning Jame Gumb (consistently referred to by her¹ more masculine nickname Buffalo Bill) as a “threat to traditional categories of sexual difference” (Elsaesser and Buckland 255). Julie Tharp similarly opposes the two characters as “the ‘masculine’ woman ... and the ‘feminine’ man” (112). Elsaesser and Buckland notably pay attention to Jame’s sexual identity and “stereotypically homosexual behaviour”, mentioning that gay men recognized “homophobic and criminalizing portrayals of sexual ‘deviance’” in the film, which conflates gender identity with sexuality (258-59).

This thesis explores the implied stances of the primary texts on transgender women, as well as the films’ choices in representing the transgression of gender norms by the novels’ serial killers, by re-examining them from a transgender perspective. As this thesis examines the historical conceptualization of transgender individuals through a modern-day trans activist lens, the way in which these views contributed to the transmisogyny in the texts becomes visible, while simultaneously pointing in a direction for future ideas about trans women that should not support stereotypes of this kind. Using theoretical concepts such as Butler’s performativity and Crenshaw’s intersectionality in tandem, the analysis of the transgender killer trope aims to further the sophistication of queer theory in a time of trans-inclusive modern feminism. The analysis of the works and their adaptations focuses on the passages and scenes most relevant to their gender identity, such as the similar instances where a psychiatrist denies that the killer is actually trans. By explicitly conceding that violence does not fit the profile of an actual transgender woman, the authors can claim deniability despite continuing the gender horror technique. Differences between the two media raise the question if and how the big screen adaptations have reshaped the novels’

¹ Whether the killer has received sex reassignment surgery, as is the case in *The Mantis*, or explicitly self-identifies as transgender but has not received any sort of official treatment, like Jame Gumb, this thesis does not refer to them as male, as it is this very assumption that is under examination.

stances on gender, for better or worse. How do the scenes that filmmakers add or remove impact the representation of trans women? Even if the character in question is only represented as a crossdresser and for all intents and purposes is framed as a man, as is the case with Norman Bates, audiences are more likely to conflate this gender nonconformity with a trans female identity than they are to generalize his portrayal to all men. This thesis deals with analyzing in what ways the representation has evolved despite still utilizing a plot centered around a murderous transgender woman, and whether or not this progression of the cliché is at all more positive in its portrayal of trans women.

Chapter 1

A History of Violence, Terminology and Pathologization

The terminology within the transgender community can seem daunting to outsiders, so a discussion of terms used throughout this thesis is in order. As of writing, the consensus amongst trans activists is that the community should “work to honor and respect everyone’s self-identification” (Simmons and White 3). That being said, many terms that were previously acceptable have since been reassessed and discarded. They may have implied falsehoods, e.g., *male-to-female* and *female-to-male* denounce a transgender woman was ever male to begin with or a trans man used to be female, a sentiment many trans people would not agree with these days. Other terms may have unnecessarily complicated things despite good intentions: *Trans** supposedly “signals greater inclusivity of new gender identities and expressions and better represents a broader community of individuals” (Tompkins 27), yet it would then follow that without the asterisk these non-binary gender nonconforming people are not included in the trans community. However, if they do not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth either, they are very much considered part of the trans community.

To say that “we [trans people] find ourselves frequently creating and changing the terminology that best fits or describes who we are” (Simmons and White 3), feels like an understatement. It is not uncommon for cisgender people to interpret these ongoing discussions within the community as contradictory opinions, giving themselves an excuse to use whatever cis-centric terms they prefer when referring to transgender people. But language has impact, so being conscious of what terms trans people disapprove of matters. Due to the transmisogynist nature of the works discussed, which often contain contemporaneous terminology, older and less favorable medical language is also cited in this thesis. Whenever speaking about one’s identity in general though, the adjective *transgender* is used as an

umbrella term in this thesis; it usually refers to (binary) trans women in particular, as those characters are at the core of this thesis' subject.

As the texts this thesis concerns itself with span a good sixty years, a historical look at the development of the conceptualization of transgender people is in order. Interest in gender nonconforming femininity was not invented by the authors of the works under examination: Jemma Tosh notes that “[p]sychiatry and psychology have maintained a predominant interest in effeminacy, with gender nonconforming masculinity attracting little academic attention by comparison” (57). As she notes, it must be emphasized that the descriptions and terms employed by psychiatry, especially in the early twentieth century, can be “offensive, pathologizing, and oppressive” and should not be taken to refer to any person’s experience (58). It took the medical field a long time to distinguish between homosexual, crossdressing, and transgender individuals, as all gender nonconforming people assigned male at birth were conflated into the same category: All “effeminate boys” were conceptualized as varying degrees of homosexuality in Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s late-nineteenth-century work *Psychopathia Sexualis*. These degrees were, in order of “severity”:

- An attraction to the same-sex (degree 1);
- “Eviration”, the development of a feminine personality (degree 2);
- “Metamorphosis sexualis paranoica”, described as when a man would feel as if they were a woman (degree 3), or they believed that they were a woman (degree 4; Tosh 62)

While activists campaigned for the removal of homosexuality as a mental illness from the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* during the sixties, the inability to differentiate between sexual and gender “deviance” continued: The research into “feminine boys” still combined intersex, transgender and homosexual children into a single category (Tosh 70). The distinct category of “transsexualism” was used by David Cauldwell

from 1949 onwards and would be developed into a clinical category by Harry Benjamin, though it was first coined by Magnus Hirschfeld in 1923 as “*seelischer Transsexualismus*” (Ekins and King). He had previously coined the term “transvestism” in 1910, referred people for the first sex reassignment surgeries in Berlin, and founded the *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft* in 1919. The archives of the institute – some 20,000 books and journals, as well as 5,000 images – were publicly burned by the Nazi *Deutsche Studentenschaft* in May 1933, destroying most of the “Jewish sexology” of the era (Pfäfflin).

Any attempts at advancements in transgender studies since then had been similarly met with resistance, so the knowledge of the medical field on the topic still had a long way to go when Robert Bloch started writing what would become the 1959 novel *Psycho* (and still, though in different ways, when Thomas Harris published *The Silence of the Lambs* in 1989). Before delving into the story of Norman Bates, it is therefore worth taking a look at the one real-life case that is known to have inspired Bloch, as he explicitly writes that the press compared Bates to “the Gein affair up north” (Bloch 165). Edward Theodore Gein was arrested in November 1957 for the murder of Mary Hogan, whose sliced-off face law enforcement found in a bag in Gein’s kitchen, and the murder of Bernice Worden, who was found in the woodshed, decapitated and hanging from a meat hook with her internal organs missing (Castleden; Sullivan). A more contemporaneous source from 1959 relays that “[p]ortions of viscera, sections of human skin, a box of noses and remains of extremities were found ... Ten human skulls neatly arranged in a row, books on anatomy, embalming equipment, pulp magazines, furniture upholstered with skin” (Arndt 106). Where Chloe Castleden mentions “a full suit made from human flesh,” George Arndt insists that “[t]he largest piece of skin found, neatly rolled, was from an anterior chest, including the mammaries” (106). Castleden justly asserts that “[t]here are actually more fictional versions of Ed Gein’s life than there are genuine biographical writings about the man”, and her

account is no less guilty of mixing police files, reports and rumors to form a cohesive true-crime narrative. Much like the people of the era did, Castleden attempts to explain Gein's horrific violence with an overbearing mother imposing her strict "religious morality" on him during childhood, keeping him away from any potential friends and instilling a thorough sense of misogyny in him.

The mythology surrounding Gein's person aligns with Freudian theories centered around emasculating mothers, whose behavior Ronald Bayer characterizes as: "[R]esponding to their heterosexual drives with hostility ... favouring their sons over their husbands; inhibiting the development of normal peer relationships with other boys" (qtd. in Tosh 66). Unsurprisingly, according to these lines of thinking, this upbringing should also result in a gender nonconforming child. However, as Graham Robb notes: "Far from identifying a cause, this appears to describe a common parental reaction to sons who were either homosexual or effeminate: mothers tended to sympathize, fathers tended to sever all ties" (qtd. in Tosh 66). Even if we accept that Gein was "effeminate," the horrors he committed are often indicative of a decidedly heterosexual obsession with the female form: K.E. Sullivan mentions "a belt decorated with nipples [and] a box of nine vaginas." Reading Gein's actual confession of covering his penis with a cut-off vagina and wearing it in panties is hard to take seriously: He "cheerfully" admits to every increasingly specific act the polygraph specialist suggests to him (Sullivan). He may have told police that he would wear the vest with breasts to pretend to be his mother, but Castleden characterizing this as enjoyment in putting on women's skin and "some sort of repellant transvestite performance" reveals more about her own transmisogyny, since "none of the reports [from his psychiatric evaluations] profiled him as a transvestite" (Sullivan). Castleden's use of the word "repellant" is far from innocent, as it does not solely rely on the horror of wearing cut-off body parts but implicates the gender nonconformity in its abhorrent nature. Gein was also rumored to be obsessed with the

transgender woman Christine Jorgensen, who underwent one of the first widely-publicized sex reassignment surgeries in the United States (Sullivan). In actuality, Jorgensen's autobiography was not published until 1967, and even if Gein had read about her in the news, this would have been four years after he had started grave-robbing (Sullivan). Sullivan insists "the accounts cannot offer much information to support the conclusion that Gein was a transgendered individual ... [y]et the cultural association persists – to the detriment of differently-gendered people everywhere". Harold Schechter indicates in his book *Deviant: The Shocking True Story of Ed Gein, the Original Psycho* that "much of the media coverage ... was erroneous and sensationalized" but does not specifically address the assertions that Gein "wished he were a woman" (Sullivan).

The rumors of the time that have informed all subsequent stories of Ed Gein's life and crimes were a prime example of the tendency to blame femininity for sexual violence:

[P]sychiatry and psychology's long lasting [sic] interest in diagnoses related to rape do not pathologize the sexual violence, nor do they portray masculine aggression as a problem. Instead, for psychiatry and psychology, the problem lies with the gender nonconformity that the diagnoses represent: a brutal form of masculine sexuality combined with the hysterical and uncontrollable emotions of femininity. (Tosh 114-15)

The thought of cisgender heterosexual masculinity taking toxic, violent forms was not one which society was ready to confront, while gender nonconformity was already considered a "perversion". An indication of gender nonconformity being seen as "perverted", is how crossdressing has for a long time been regarded as sexually deviant behavior, despite far from always being a sexual act and the view having "been vehemently contested" (Tosh 81). The *DSM-III* of 1980 named crossdressing "transvestic fetishism" while the 2013 *DSM-V*'s "transvestic disorder" included the term "autogynephilia" in its diagnostic criteria, which was

defined by the *DSM-V* Paraphilias Chair as “males [who are] erotically aroused by the thought or image of themselves as women” (qtd. in Tosh 81). The diagnostic criterium is not only criticized for unnecessarily eroticizing gender nonconformity, but also because the criteria apply to many cisgender women who are never diagnosed (Tosh 82). Meanwhile, the opposite diagnosis, “autoandrophilia”, arousal at the thought or image of yourself as a man, is not included (Tosh 82).

This urge to sexualize nonconforming gender expression of anyone assigned male at birth specifically is a prime example of transmisogyny. In line with how Kimberlé Crenshaw subverted the framework that insisted oppression takes place “along a single categorical axis” and coined the term “intersectionality” in the context of the disadvantages specific to women of color (140), transmisogyny lies on the intersection of misogyny and transphobia. Simply stated, transphobia entails “any negative attitudes (hate, contempt, disapproval) directed toward trans people because of their being trans” (Bettcher 249). As a trans woman, the sexism one experiences is a distinct brand of misogyny, different from the marginalization which otherwise privileged cisgender women would experience. The hatred of femininity is in a sense combined with the disgust for a perceived transgression of gender norms to form a justification for various forms of violence against trans women. The attack on the public perception of trans women is but one of these forms, but one that spreads its justification of transmisogynist violence to other people like a pandemic. Thus, it further molds society into the “broader social context that systematically disadvantages trans people and promotes and rewards antitrans sentiment” (Bettcher 249), a sentiment which becomes visible in the texts critically explored in this thesis.

Chapter 2: The Transvestite

Psycho and the Original Gender Horror Template

Robert Bloch's *Psycho* leans into the part of Ed Gein's story concerning where his deeds originated and therefore what his pathology was popularly attributed to: his mother. Norman Bates, much like Gein, is portrayed as being emasculated by an unhealthy mother-son relationship. It is no wonder this was the angle of interest to Bloch during "an era obsessed with proper forms of masculinity" (Sullivan), in which parents were warned that comics about Batman and his underage ward Robin "fixate homoerotic tendencies by suggesting the form of an adolescent-with-adult or Ganymede-Zeus type of love-relationship" (Wertham 190). Freud's theory prevailed, stating that overprotective mothers inhibited a "healthy" heterosexual (and cisgender) development and caused effeminacy. The misogyny in always blaming the mother should not be ignored. In Gein's case, it is largely overlooked that he indicated "George Gein [his father] was an alcoholic who drank excessively and abused both Ed and his brother" (Sullivan); when it is mentioned by Castleden, she speculates whether this was "a response to his overbearing wife". Ironically, Bloch's portrayal of a man obsessed with his deceased mother is a more accurate representation of Ed Gein than most of the contemporaneous press coverage: one of the doctors involved in his psychiatric evaluations "maintained that Gein's desire for female body parts was a manifestation of his attempts not to be his mother but to find a 'substitute for [her] in the form of a replica or body that could be kept indefinitely'" (Sullivan). The mythologies of Gein and Bates have become entangled to such an extent that elements of Bloch's novel are now baseless claims about Gein, such as being a taxidermist and keeping his mother's corpse in his basement (Sullivan).

The allusions foreshadowing what would become perhaps the most famous plot twist in film history begin in the first chapter of *Psycho*. Norman compares Mother's voice to the

“drum of the dead” made from a corpse, which he² was reading about in a book on Incas, describing her words as “reverberating from the mangled mouth” and coming “out of the jaws of death” (Bloch 14). When Mother first arrives on the scene, Norman “didn’t even have to look up to know she was there” (11) and indeed does not look up throughout the exchange, presumably since there is no one there. Mother says: “I don’t make you sick. You make *yourself* sick” (emphasis in original), while Norman admits that what she is saying is what “he had told himself, over and over again, all through the years” and he is a child that has allowed himself to be “possessed” (12-13). At one point, Mother interrupts his thoughts by replying to something she couldn’t possibly have heard, prompting Norman to think: “God, could she read his *mind*?” (15; emphasis in original). The implication of their intertwined identity is clear from the start. This, however, also begins to imply Norman’s effeminacy.

The concept of the emasculating female authority is clear: Mother even states that she is “the one who has the strength” (Bloch 16). However, Norman is also portrayed as lesser than the masculine ideal by decidedly fatphobic descriptions of his appearance. “[H]is plump face” (10) immediately indicates his lack of masculinity, on top of Mother calling him a “big, fat, overgrown Mamma’s Boy” (15). He refers to his own body with “the blubbery fat, the short hairless arms, the big belly” (91), adding a lack of body hair as indicator of a lack of manhood. He envies the “tall and lean and handsome” look of Joe Considine, who his mother fell in love with, creating an Oedipal tension. Norman also “shaved only once a week” (91), and since he is not described as having any noticeable facial hair, this implies it just does not grow that quickly, again emasculating him. When Mary Crane arrives at the motel, she too refers to him as “[t]he fat man” (30) and “the pudgy man” (36), further undermining his

² The novel uses the pronouns he and him from its first sentence (Bloch 9). While this choice to represent the murderer as a man is scrutinized in the following chapter, I follow Bloch’s lead in this case, since Norman Bates is only implied to have internalized his mother’s personality – and even then, as a separate entity from himself – rather than explicitly identifying as a woman himself.

masculinity despite calling him a man. With the introduction of a young woman as the focalizer in certain chapters, so comes the implication of Norman's incompetence as a heterosexual male: "The poor guy was actually afraid to get near a woman!" (37). Mary calls him "pathetic" and speculates that if she were to kiss him, "[t]he poor old geezer would probably faint!" (40). These exclamations serve as humorous remarks at the expense of someone who is too effeminate to be fully seen as a man, in the conservative red-blooded heterosexual sense. Ironically, the feminine qualities that traditionally disqualify him from being considered a "real" man, can only be mocked as long as he continues to be classified as a man, rather than seen as actually transcending the binary.

When the emasculation reaches its climax in the reveal that the murders committed by "a crazy old woman" (Bloch 41) were committed by Norman, the horror comes from the contrast between his assigned sex and his appearance rather than the knife he is holding: he is a "fat, shapeless figure, half-concealed by the tight dress which had been pulled down incongruously to cover the garments beneath" (163). "The white, painted, simpering face" and "garishly reddened lips" further the image of a man who is far from adept at copying the look of a binary cis woman. This correlates with the oft-perpetuated myth that cis people can always tell when someone presenting as female was assigned male at birth, which creates the passability paradox: if a trans woman can "pass" as a binary cis woman, she experiences a certain amount of privilege in that she is subjected to fewer instances of transmisogyny, despite being under "constant threat of not passing or being 'clocked' or 'spooked'" (Arayasirikul & Wilson 11). Norman cannot pass and is therefore a monstrosity of gender nonconformity. The sentence that finally contains the plot twist leads the reader to associate crossdressing with psychosis: "It was the scream of an hysterical woman, and it came from the throat of Norman Bates" (Bloch 163). The psychiatric terms are thrown around relatively carelessly, as Norman earlier diagnosed himself with "a mild form of schizophrenia, most

likely some form of borderline neurosis” (93) and ends up being deemed “psychotic” by Dr. Steiner (172). These terms have since evolved into different modern categories of mental disorder. Regardless of what label would best fit the fictional murderer, the link between mental illness and crossdressing results in a dual stigmatization. The events both imply that to be mentally ill is to be a danger to the lives of others, as well as that that one would have to be mentally ill to be gender nonconforming. The stigma on mental illness is thus utilized to double the stigma on gender nonconformity. To escape this stigma, there has long been a call for “the depathologizing of gender dysphoria and for the open availability of medical sex-change procedures” amongst transgender activists, similar to the protests that eventually succeeded in removing homosexuality as a diagnosis from the *DSM* in 1973 (Hausman 470).

The novel also speculates on the possibility of Norman Bates’ pathology having been caused by incestuous sexual abuse, despite the widespread belief in a “cycle of abuse” only applying to a minority of male perpetrators of child sexual abuse and not at all to women (Glasser et al.). In this way, the cliché of childhood trauma – and the suggestion that abused children turn into dangerously disturbed people – functions as another stigmatization of mental illness, right before the character of Sam inevitably introduces the word transvestite:

“He and his mother were very close, of course, and apparently she dominated him. *Whether there was ever anything more to their relationship*, Dr. Steiner doesn’t know. But he does suspect that Norman was a secret transvestite long before Mrs. Bates died. You know what a transvestite is, don’t you?”

Lila nodded. “A person who dresses in the clothing of the opposite sex, isn’t that it?”

“Well, the way Steiner explained it, there’s a lot more to it than that. Transvestites aren’t necessarily homosexual, but they identify themselves

strongly with members of the other sex. In a way, Norman wanted to be like his mother, and in a way he wanted his mother to become a part of himself.”

(Bloch 167-68; emphasis added)

The term only seems to be used for describing crossdressing as behavior regardless of the reason; Norman is never explicitly said to identify as a woman, only to want to be “like” his mother in the sense that her personality was stronger than his own. In the final chapter, the pronouns “she” and “her” are suddenly used (173), as Mother has now taken over as the sole personality inside Norman Bates’ mind, implying that only now that he has fully gone mad, he truly thinks himself female. This further suggests identifying as another gender than assigned at birth is a sign of a mental disorder: crossdressing is just a side effect of being schizophrenic, and therefore should not be taken as a serious form of gender expression. Crossdressing is often regarded in the same way as drag: drag queens present as female for comedic or entertainment purposes while retaining their male gender identity, even if they are not necessarily the masculine type and are often homosexual men. This perception is then transplanted onto trans women presenting as female, while they would not describe themselves as crossdressing individuals, since their appearance matches their gender. Norman being a “transvestite” similarly suggests that people who were assigned male at birth and dress feminine are merely performing a gender, rather than embodying their lived experience. Gender, however, might be a social construct, but that does not make it any less real; it is performative rather than a performance. This concept of gender as a performative applies J.L. Austin’s theory on speech acts to “a single instance of a gendered practice”, connecting it to “the historical chain of repetitions that makes each instance possible” and provides the positing power to give meaning to such a gender performative (Gerdes 148-49): “[T]he essence or identity that [these acts and gestures] purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (Butler

2548; emphasis in original). It was conceived of by Judith Butler and has been misinterpreted numerous times, in part due to the ciscentric perspective she had while writing her seminal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*: “[A]t that time I did not think well enough about trans issues. Some trans people thought that in claiming that gender is performative that I was saying that it is all a fiction, and that a person’s felt sense of gender was therefore ‘unreal.’ That was never my intention” (Williams). Norman Bates plays into these later misinterpretations of Butler by demonstrating to a mainstream audience that not conforming to your assigned sex is a sort of playing dress-up – and therefore a farce.



(*Psycho* [Hitchcock] 1:41:27)



(*Psycho* [Van Sant] 1:33:49)



(*Psycho* [Hitchcock] 1:41:38)



(*Psycho* [Van Sant] 1:34:11)

In Alfred Hitchcock’s adaptation of the same name, the reveal of Norman dressed as his mother is the cue for its famous, frightening score to kick in (*Psycho* [Hitchcock] 1:41:25). The moment is clearly played to horrify: “Norman enters in a medium long shot wearing a wig and a long striped dress which accentuates his height. He is depicted as wholly demonic” (Fielding 5-6). In the screenplay, his “wild wig” is explicitly described as “a mockery of a woman’s hair” (Stefano 121), indicating that Norman was supposed to be seen as imitating womanhood – badly. The horrific juxtaposition of the phallic knife and feminine

dress is contrasted with Sam Loomis' unquestionable masculinity: "[A] *man*'s hand ... grabs Norman's wrist" (121; emphasis added). In the struggle, Norman loses his wig and along with it his femininity, which is emphasized with a close-up of the wig falling to the floor (*Psycho* [Hitchcock] 1:41:44). After his unmasking as a transvestite, his motives are



(*Psycho* [Hitchcock] 1:41:44) (*Psycho* [Van Sant] 1:34:16)

explained in a long monologue by one Dr. Fred Richman, named Dr. Simon in the screenplay. This exposition expands on Norman's Oedipal complex, by stating his mother would become as jealous of other women as he had become of Joe Consideine, implying his targets were all "[y]oung girls" (Stefano 125). Anthony Perkins, who portrays Bates, is decidedly younger and thinner than his counterpart in Bloch's novel, now embodying femininity with a smaller build than the other male characters. Where the novel admits Norman is a transvestite, the adaptation tries to get away with denying this: while he "was never all Norman, but ... often only mother", he was "[n]ot exactly" a transvestite for he did not do so "in order to achieve a sexual change or satisfaction" (126). It is clearly established that "[w]henver reality came too close ... he'd dress up, ... and he'd walk about the house, sit in her chair, speak in her voice" (126), but "essentially living as a woman for a lot of the time" (Fielding 6) does not seem to fit the psychiatrist's criteria. In the 1998 remake, these last lines were the only ones included in the monologue by the psychiatrist, now named Dr. Simon in the credits, that referenced Norman being a crossdresser (*Psycho* [Van Sant] 1:37:05-25). Sam does not ask why he was dressed "like that" and the district attorney does not call him a "transvestite" (Stefano 126). The Oedipal aspect to Mother's jealousy is also

left out. Whether this was done to get rid of the dated terminology of 1960 or to simplify Norman's motives and speed up the scene is up for debate. During Mother's final monologue, Norman's voice can also be heard echoing her lines, emphasizing his presumed schizophrenia (*Psycho* [Van Sant] 1:38:50-39:15). The films are not innocent of harmful representation either way, as the depiction of Norman certainly qualifies as transvestism, especially in the minds of a 1960 mainstream audience: In its attempt to purely link Norman's crossdressing to his already "dangerously disturbed" pathology (Stefano 125), it only imparts a stronger connection between gender nonconformity and monstrosity on the audience, doing far more harm than good.

Chapter 3: The Transsexual

The Silence of the Lambs and Medical Gatekeeping

If *Psycho* explored the supposed childhood origins of Ed Gein's horrific crimes and birthed the genre of gender horror in the process, *The Silence of the Lambs* focuses its full attention on the rumors surrounding Gein's obsession with Christine Jorgensen's sex reassignment surgery. The pathologization of gender nonconformity had evolved since 1960: two decades after *Psycho*, the *DSM-III* introduced the diagnoses "transsexualism" and "gender identity disorder in childhood."³ The APA also made the distinction between "transsexualism" and "transvestic fetishism" – essential to the former was the desire to "become or live as the opposite sex"⁴ while the latter was characterized by a sexual pleasure not present in "transsexualism" (Tosh 82). This distinction raised the question what a "true transsexual" essentially is and the answer was inevitably provided by cisgender medical professionals like Harry Benjamin. For instance, central to the *Benjamin Criteria* for "transsexualism" was the notion that a "true transsexual" could not be homosexual, resulting in individuals being turned down for treatment "up until the late 1980s" if they indicated their sexual orientation after transitioning would be lesbian or gay (Johnson 446). The APA's decision that gender identity was not sexual did not mean that gender and sexuality were seen as separate: "transsexualism" was still seen as an extension of homosexuality and thus presupposed trans women to be attracted to men. Jos Truitt draws on historical knowledge of the transgender community when she asserts that doctors also only allowed those trans women to transition

³ "Gender identity disorder in childhood" to this day remains treated by psychiatrists with the main objective of preventing "transsexualism" in adulthood (Tosh 82).

⁴ The term "opposite sex" obviously upholds the gender binary which many people do not identify as a part of and ignores the existence of intersex people. The medical establishment has long regulated a binary gender system with "the clinically established notion of 'changing sex'" (Johnson 457). In 1993, biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling proposed "the two-sex system ... be replaced by a five-sex system", using intersex cases to demonstrate that genitals vary greatly at birth; the medical practice up until then had been to "operate on these 'biological anomalies' and reinstate the truth of a two-sex system" (Johnson 457). Her work began to highlight that sex, like gender, is a social construct, and neither genitals nor chromosomes exist in merely two configurations.

who they deemed “could ‘pass’ and achieve some level of normative attractiveness”. All regulation of these diagnostic criteria (asexual desire to transition, heterosexuality, passability) backfired, as reputable clinics only treating “textbook cases” inevitably resulted in the applicants knowing the literature well and all presenting very similar life histories, since “candidates had little choice but to present as a ‘textbook’ case” (Johnson 449). Psychiatrists, however, were more afraid to be “deceived,” i.e., letting a hypothetical cisgender person transition who was “inappropriately” looking to get SRS (450), than not letting a transgender person transition and subjecting them to extreme psychological distress, given the suicide rates among trans people. If, as Benjamin wrote, a transgender individual “puts all his faith and future into the hands of the doctor, particularly the surgeon” (qtd. in Johnson 447), then certainly this applies to the cisgender psychiatrist who “remain[s] in the position of ‘gate-keeper,’ regulating their passage to [a] new gender identit[y]” (458). Bernice Hausman declared in 2001 that she opposes demedicalization, “the removal of transsexualism from medicine’s purview” (470),⁵ regardless, as she questions the legitimacy of the similarity between “medicine’s historical regulation of and attempts to eradicate homosexuality” and “physicians’ and gender clinics’ role in gatekeeping” who gets to transition (489). Holly Devor on the other hand insists that “the success of [the current one-year real-life test during transition should] be determined by the persons who have lived them rather than by helping professionals unless pathological psychological or medical conditions contraindicate” (qtd. in Hausman 471), for if being transgender is not a disease, why should it be diagnosed instead of proclaimed by the person experiencing their gender identity? These matters will prove relevant to the story of *The Silence of the Lambs* analyzed in this chapter.

⁵ However, Hausman supports depathologization, the idea that trans people should be able to get the help they need without “the stigma of mental illness that the treatment’s diagnosis implies (or socially produces)” (489).

Along with the increased prevalence of trans people and information on transitioning becoming more wide-spread, came reactionary critics of SRS and of “transsexuals” being recognized as “real” men or, particularly, women. Judith Lorber states that transgender individuals are not feminist allies, since “transvestites and transsexualism do nothing to challenge the social construction of gender. Their goal is to be masculine men and feminine women” (qtd. in Johnson 457). This belief originated due to the clinics’ own binary view of gender, their doctors only being willing to treat those trans women who conformed to heterosexist norms of femininity. While “feminism had led to generations of women who actively rejected regressive gender norms,” trans women were expected to be passive and adhere to “50s housewife stereotypes” (Truitt). Janice Raymond denied trans women womanhood, instead referring to them as “misguided and mistaken ... deviant males” (qtd. in Johnson 454). She also wrote in her work *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, which was published in 1980 and “written under the supervision of influential feminist Mary Daly” (Truitt): “All transsexuals rape women’s bodies by reducing the female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves... Rape, although it is usually done by force, can also be accomplished by deception” (qtd. in Stone 223). The existence of transgender men is conveniently ignored. The prejudice that trans women are deceptive can actually be traced back to doctors insisting you leave your past behind post-transition and even “fabricat[e] a new history for [your]sel[f]” (Truitt). The idea that transgender women are merely men wishing to invade women’s spaces is about as blatant in its transmisogyny as Raymond misgendering Sandy Stone and accusing her of having “male privilege” (qtd. in Stone 224). Judith Butler, pioneer of the field of queer theory, distances herself from other feminist⁶ theorists who propose a “kind of prescriptivism, which seems to [her] to aspire to a

⁶ These “feminists” clearly predate notions of intersectional solidarity within third-wave feminism and the label should be taken as self-described. Many modern feminists, who support inclusivity, would describe them as “trans-exclusionary radical feminists” (TERFs), although many TERFs call the term a slur and would prefer to

kind of feminist tyranny” (Williams), while accepting “criticisms [of queer theory by the trans community] as necessary” and “revising [her] views in response” (Ahmed 490). The transphobic voices in the feminist community Butler specifically names are Raymond, and Sheila Jeffreys, who calls sex reassignment surgery a “medical abuse of human rights” and “[t]he mutilation of healthy bodies” (qtd. in Williams).

As feminist activists were divided between those who believed trans people should be supported like lesbian, bi and gay people and those who thought trans women were an affront to feminism and womanhood, activists were also divided during the reception of the 1991 adaptation of *The Silence of the Lambs*: cisgender feminists found the protagonist Clarice Starling to be an empowering image of a working woman in a man’s world, while gay men noted the effeminacy of the serial killer Jame Gumb as homophobia (Staiger 282). It may be self-evident that this thesis regards these allegations as actually referring to the transmisogyny inherent in the text. The recurring conflation between transphobia and homophobia, also very much present in the literature on the film, which insists on reading Jame Gumb as “a male killer [who] strikes against women again and again” (Young 5), “suggests that any non-heteronormative gender identity or sexuality is read as homosexuality, that as a culture we cannot distinguish between the two” (Sullivan). In actuality, Jame Gumb is explicitly portrayed as a self-identifying woman – it is simply that no one else validates her gender. In Harris’ novel, the sequel to *Red Dragon*, in which Hannibal Lecter is first introduced, Jame is described as experiencing genital dysphoria in the shower, “using a dishmop on the parts he did not like to touch,” as well as having self-medicated with hormones, “Premarin for a while and then diethylstilbestrol, orally” and removed her beard with “[a] lot of electrolysis” (155). It should be noted that throughout she is consistently

be called “gender critical.” Other feminists who criticize the term argue that “TERF” is too sympathetic towards their appropriation of feminism for their transphobic agenda and have come up with the alternative “feminism-appropriating reactionary transphobes” (FARTs).

referred to as a “white *male*” and by masculine pronouns (154). As she is clearly established to identify as female, and since respecting anyone’s gender identity and preferred pronouns is a cornerstone of trans activism (Simmons and White 3), this thesis instead refers to her with feminine pronouns. If using “she” and “her” seems confusing, this only demonstrates society’s persistent inclination to view transgender women as men, which is clearly present in the text. Harris seems to go out of his way to emphasize Jame Gumb as a gender monstrosity because she is unable to conform to normative notions of attractive femininity: she is “six foot one inch, 205 pounds”, has a “naturally deep voice”, her chest hair has only been “thinned ... a little” by the hormone therapy, and despite her reshaped hairline and lack of a beard, she does “not look like a woman” (154-55). The narrator explicitly notes that her transition might be taken as offensive: “Whether his behavior was an earnest, inept attempt to swish or a hateful mocking would be hard to say on short acquaintance” (155). Rather than an affront to women, however, the verb swish is actually derived from the US slang for “[a] homosexual man; an effeminate man” (*OED*) and thus humiliatingly refers to Jame coming across as a gay male.

As Jame does not “pass”, it becomes evident she has “applied for sex reassignment at one or all of [the three major centers for SRS]” but has “been denied” (Harris 189). Fellow serial killer Hannibal “the Cannibal” Lecter is the character used to convey this conclusion, as he is also portrayed as a brilliant psychiatrist. In his conversation with FBI trainee Clarice, he upholds the historical division between “real transsexual[s]” (187) and those like Jame, who “thinks he is, he tries to be [a transsexual]” (189). He also relates trans women to autogynephilic sexual urges when he implies Jame has an “anger expressed as lust” (189). Throughout, he refers to her as Billy, an infantilized version of the nickname Buffalo Bill that was given to her by the newspapers. The way Clarice is “going to catch him” (187) is based on finding “a male who will test differently from the way a true transsexual would test”: her

House-Tree-Person drawings are suggested to differ substantially from what trans women would “almost always” draw (192). They are looking for someone “with mental disturbances”, yet no other diagnosis is provided by the novel beyond her being trans, suggesting to the reader that a gender identity other than cisgender is a logical motive for the horrific crimes necessary to “mak[e] himself a girl suit out of real girls” (187). While suggesting another specific condition would have been equally stigmatizing for such a mental illness, as it is the representation of Jame only suggests the problem lies with her “want[ing] to change” like the moth’s chrysalis she places in each victim’s throat (187). No attention is drawn to how the institutions in charge of medical treatment for trans women have left her very few options besides growing desperate. Yet the actions she takes out of desperation, and therefore the character that the narrative creates, are unrealistic in every way. As the novel itself states, trans women are unlikely to grow violent, instead being described by Clarice as “passive types, usually” (187), which was one of the contemporaneous “sexist requirements to access a diagnosis” (Truitt). The novel doubles down on trying to get away with portraying a trans character without being a representation of trans people by introducing a Dr. Danielson, “head of the Gender Identity Clinic at Johns Hopkins”, who fights the FBI’s attempts to get access to his patients’ files:

“To even mention Buffalo Bill in the same breath with the problems we treat here is ignorant and unfair and dangerous ... It’s taken years – we’re not through yet – showing the public that transsexuals aren’t crazy, they aren’t perverts, they aren’t *queers*, whatever that is—”

“I agree with you—”

“Hold on. The incidence of violence among transsexuals is a lot lower than in the general population. These are decent people with a real problem – a

famously intransigent problem. They deserve help and we can give it. I'm not having a witch hunt here." (Harris 206; emphasis in original)

Demonstrating the fragility of the institutional help offered to trans people, flawed as it is, the FBI director responds by threatening Danielson with losing his federal assistance if the Senator, whose daughter has been kidnapped, decides SRS should be considered cosmetic surgery. Lecter and the FBI turn out to be right and Jame is an applicant Danielson's institution refused to treat. She is compared to "surgical addicts" and presumed to have hidden her identity from them because of a criminal record (207). The irony of this short sequence is evident: the novel constantly juxtaposes murdering women to skin them with being a trans woman, as a result acting, in its own words, ignorantly, unfairly and dangerously.

In the 1991 adaptation for the big screen, this scene is absent. This is likely because a psychologist's denial of trans women being violent distracts from the main plot centered around catching a violent trans woman. Instead, in Ted Tally's screenplay, all diagnoses of Jame come from Hannibal Lecter, who might be a psychopathic serial killer and cannibal, but whose psychiatric expertise is never once questioned. When trading information with Clarice in the famous *quid pro quo* sequence, Lecter states: "Billy hates his own identity, he always has – and he thinks that makes him a transsexual. But his pathology is a thousand times more savage..." (Tally 67). In the eventual product, Anthony Hopkins has added "and more terrifying" to the end of this line (*Silence* 57:57-59). The implication is that being trans is as much a pathology as whatever drives one to skin women, albeit a less savage and terrifying pathology. In addition to Lecter's correct hypotheses about Jame being a trans woman, director Jonathan Demme adapts the scenes in the novel written from Jame's perspective with possibly the most infamous shot from the film, one that fully encapsulates the attempt to shock audiences with gender horror. In Harris' version, Jame is obsessively rewatching VHS-

tapes of her mother's swimsuit competition from the Miss Sacramento pageant (322), reiterating the concept of unhealthy relationships between mother and "son" also present in the character of Norman Bates. This is cut from the film, yet the scene that most prominently features Jame's struggle with gender is not in Tally's screenplay either. The scene is often referred to as the Buffalo Bill dance scene, as it features cis male actor Ted Levine, clearly flat-chested, dancing to Q. Lazzarus' song "Goodbye Horses". He is not wearing a regular wig, but the scalp of one of his victims, the visual suggesting that the transition to another gender than the one assigned to you at birth is an act of violence, so that the film aligns itself with the TERF ideology that trans women "infiltrate" female-only spaces. Gumb is applying lipstick and saying in a deep masculine voice: "Would you fuck me? I'd fuck me. I'd fuck me hard. I'd fuck me so hard" (Demme 1:35:30-52). The emphasis is put on her wish to be sexually attractive when she is filming herself dancing in only a kimono, until the scene culminates in her awkwardly tucking her genitals between her legs and walking backwards to reveal her naked body. The public perception of this scene can only be speculated on, but fact is that the imagery has had a cultural impact, sparking multiple parodies. Kevin Smith included what he calls "The Tuck" in the sequel to his debut *Clerks* because his friend used to



(*Silence* 1:36:40)



"That's my surprise?"
(*Clerks II* 34:53)



("Stew-Roids" 20:13)

jokingly “danc[e] subtly with his man-pussy on display” (Smith; *Clerks II* 34:50-59). The animated FOX show *Family Guy* had the character of Chris Griffin recreate the scene on camera, resulting in a video which ends his streak of popularity in school. The fragment ends with his father Peter walking in, seeing his genitals from behind, and making a series of shocked noises (“Stew-Roids” 19:45-20:20).

If the later references to this particular scene are not enough indication of how it portrays trans people to a wider audience, even at the time of release Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs* was controversial. The clearest sign of contemporaneous dissatisfaction with “Mr. Gumb”, as he is called in the screenplay (Tally), were the protests of activist group Queer Nation at the Academy Awards event of 1992 (Broverman), where the film won Oscars for Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Director, and Best Picture. The protests focused around the stereotypical portrayal of gay characters, again conflating gay men with trans women – unsurprisingly, as the film goes out of its way to deny Jame’s gender. According to one critic who sees the adaptation as a “flaying of feminist theory”, the film attempts to offer “one [revisionary approach to gender] that reifies sexual difference as the basis for a critique of power, and another that works to transcend a sexual binary by suggesting the affinity of gender with costume” (Young 7). Both of these approaches are transphobic: the former denies the importance of gender, instead clinging to biological sex as determining one’s power in society, while the latter suggests gender is merely a costume, rather than a valid identity that is inherent regardless of gender expression. Demme has been asked about the film being “criticized for being anti-gay and transphobic at the time of its release, and even more so since” (Stern). His response admits it was his “directorial failing” that he “didn’t find ways to emphasize the fact that Gumb *wasn’t* gay”, although he reads the character as having “*extreme* self-loathing” due to childhood abuse and attempting to “escape himself” by “turning himself into a female”, which surely is not any less stereotypical yet

simply denies Jame her female gender (Stern; emphasis in original). Demme states a gay friend made him aware of the hardships of “growing up gay and being exposed to all these stereotypes” but was happy his film has “now become a part of the dialogue on stereotypical portrayals of gays in movies” (Stern). Even as he was at the time of the interview “doing a documentary on a friend of mine over time who’s a pre-op transsexual” (Stern) – a phrasing which hardly affirms his friend’s gender, whatever it may be, in any meaningful way – any understanding of the actual impact of his presentation of a transgender character seems absent.

The Silence of the Lambs tries its hardest to construct a fictional being: someone that has both been extremely violent since she was abused in childhood and has come to the realization that she is not the gender that was assigned to her at birth. By explicitly mentioning that this combination is, to put it mildly, very unlikely to ever occur in reality, the novel and film adaptation try to pass themselves off as not depicting an actual trans woman. In this way, the authors of both novel and film normalize gatekeeping and uphold the distinction between “real” trans people and those who were not allowed to decide their own identity. Again, this separation, when it was more institutional than today, often relied on whether or not a trans woman could conform to normative beauty standards of cisgender men (Truitt). To this day, fears exist that transgender youth may later turn out not to be trans and de-transition, a phenomenon called desistance. While the effects of puberty-blocking treatment are entirely reversible (Turban & Keuroghlian 453), desistance rates as high as 80% are still reported “in the media, among the lay public, and in medical and scientific journals” despite many concerns about the methodology in acquiring these numbers (Temple Newhook et al. 212). Many of the children classified as having “gender identity disorder”, as it was named before 2013, were subthreshold for a diagnosis and would likely not get a “gender dysphoria in children” diagnosis according to the current *DSM-V* standards; they

may just have been brought to gender clinics for having gender-nonconforming interests (Temple Newhook et al. 215). More commonly, de-transitioning occurs when trans people are forced to by unsupportive assisted living systems (Ducheny et al.) or when faced with “continual gender-based harassment” and a general lack of support from their environment, which may then result in increased depression and suicidal tendencies, until some re-transition at a later point in life (Turban & Keuroghlian 451). The mythical group of trans people who actually turn out to be cis is infinitesimal compared to the group of trans people hurt by the resulting amount of gatekeeping in medical facilities, or as Turban & Keuroghlian put it: “With a 40% lifetime suicide attempt prevalence among transgender people, the risk of preventing social and/or medical transition for those with significant gender-related distress almost always outweighs the risk of regret in a small minority of patients who receive gender-affirming medical care” (453). While strong arguments for the universal right to transition exist, as denying a trans person the established standard of care causes great psychological and physical harm (Priest), children cannot access transgender healthcare without parental approval – and parents are likely to deny them help out of fear that they might regret it at a later age. This notion that one could be mistaken in their self-identification as soon as they declare to be another gender than whichever was assigned at birth, is precisely what *The Silence of the Lambs* suggests to audiences. The novel and adaptation not only portray trans women as monstrosities opposing “actual” femininity, but their rhetoric of a “false transsexual” harms young and vulnerable transgender people by encouraging their support systems to not believe them.

Chapter 4: The Trans Woman

The Mantis and Transitioning as Mutilation

To fully understand the final text under examination, we must consider another frequently used aspect of horror: the trope of deformity as shorthand for malevolence. Jamie McDaniel asserts that deformity is so often used in literary and cinematic texts because the audience immediately demands a narrative: they want to know why a body does not conform to normative notions of abledness (423). This curiosity about the private reasons for a character's disfigurement then leads into this backstory being revealed for the reader or viewer's enjoyment. If not to elicit pity, deformity is often used as a shocking origin for the villain and their motives related to this trauma: the common horror trope relevant to this chapter "is that of the physically mutilated monster ... [which] forces the audience to associate [its] deformity with dangerous and deviant behavior" (McDaniel 424). Knowing that the horror genre tends to "represent those who embody the grotesque as monster-villains[,] articulat[ing] a forceful distaste for non-normative manifestations of the self" (Gruson-Wood 84), it becomes clear how one could use the "abnormality" of the transgender body as basis for a disfigured monster. The motives for transphobes especially to conflate the trans body with the disfigured body are obvious if you consider that ableism is so pervasive in society that it is hardly ever noticed, as it seems natural and necessary for civilization to function – and what is natural is all too often also deemed inherently moral (Cherney). The predominant societal belief that *normal is natural* then also implies that *deviance is evil*, which is the basis for many forms of discrimination, of which transmisogyny is but one. What is in fact an "ideological preference" – the preference for what is normative – is obscured as a fact of nature, a biological law (Cherney). As a result, "valuing normal bodies and devaluing 'abnormal' bodies" is no longer an ideologically questionable or even reprehensible practice, but merely proves one's understanding of the way the world works

naturally (Cherney). If transitioning, then, is not only seen as abnormal and unnatural, but the surgical procedures for trans people are also regarded as mutilation and deformity, it becomes easier to perceive wanting to transition as a symptom of severe mental illness. In transphobic terms: desiring the mutilation of an otherwise abled, normative body begs for conservatives to intervene rather than respect trans people's bodily autonomy. If they are willingly "disfigured", it is suddenly difficult to defend trans people as equals who deserve human rights instead of as lesser beings, because it is so ingrained in our culture that physical deviations from the normative, "healthy" body are inferior. Although ableism and transphobia are intertwined in the text under examination in accordance with transphobic views of trans bodies as disfigured, the two are distinct forms of oppression and these observations should not be taken to reduce ableism to an aspect of transphobia or diminish the marginalization of disabled people in any way.

The 2017 Netflix Original *The Mantis* is a French detective mini-series consisting of six episodes of just under an hour long. The plot revolves around a copycat killer who has begun a streak of murders using the modus operandi of Jeanne Deber, nicknamed "the mantis" after the habit among most predatory species of praying mantis in captivity to engage in female-on-male sexual cannibalism (Lawrence 569). Jeanne is then enlisted by the police to help catch the new serial killer, but she will only work with her son, Damien Carrot, who, after her arrest, has grown up to become a detective. At first, the investigation focuses on male suspects for the murders: "All we have on him is a silhouette. Seems it's a man" ("Épisode 1" 41:14-19).⁷ For the next two episodes, this remains the assumption in their search, as apparently the shape of the serial killer's body is easily interpreted as male. It is not until the fourth episode that the team of detectives finds an online profile of a woman by the

⁷ Original French closed captions: "Tout ce qu'on sur lui pour le moment, c'est une silhouette. A priori, c'est un homme."

name of Ruby, who had been flirting with the male victims online before meeting them. This establishes a connection between the victims for the detectives: “And the copycat may be a woman.” “Who seduces her victims before killing them” (“Épisode 4” 15:36-40).⁸ This deliberate misdirection in terms of the killer’s gender foreshadows the reveal that the killer is a trans woman. The show suggests in this way that her being trans means she is hard to categorize as either male or female, denying her womanhood from the very beginning. The positioning of a trans woman as being outside the definitions of the gender binary is a recurring motif throughout the series: the killer is strange and frightening for she is neither a man nor a woman, even though she asserts she is female.

When the killer copies parts of Jeanne’s modus operandi that were never publicized, it turns out there was only one other person present who would know about the precise actions of The Mantis. Jeanne recalls a relative of one of her victims: “A daughter who was around 10. Camille. She was a little blonde girl. ... I noticed bruises on her wrists. ... That’s how I found out her father maltreated her” (“Épisode 5” 21:30-22:14).⁹ In the simultaneous flashback, Camille also has bruising in her neck, as stated in the original French text. At this point, neither the detectives nor the audience know that she is trans – and beaten because of that. As such, the only implication is that abuse leads to vengeful killing sprees, again spreading the previously discussed idea of a “cycle of abuse,” which does not hold up to scrutiny, especially in women (Glasser et al.). That Camille is not to be seen as a woman quickly becomes clear though, as the police visit her mother, who is in a nursing home and suffers from advanced Alzheimer’s. She tells the detectives that Camille is “quite peculiar”¹⁰

⁸ Original French closed captions: “Le copycat serait une femme.” “Qui séduirait toutes ses victimes avant de les tuer.”

⁹ Original French closed captions: “Oui, une fille d’environ 10 ans. Camille. C’était une petite fille blonde. ... Elle avait des hématomes sur les poignets et dans le cou. ... C’est comme ça que j’ai découvert que son père la maltraitait.”

¹⁰ Original French closed captions: “Camille, c’est quelqu’un de spécial.”

and people don't accept that, especially her father, who turned violent ("Épisode 5" 25:07-19). She subsequently states "it's his nature, that's how he is"¹¹ and the use of pronouns does not go unnoticed by the protagonist (25:27-31). Camille's mother explains: "Yes, in his head, he's a girl. And Camille says in his body as well" (25:41-48). This is related to an ongoing discussion between trans people and transphobes on the importance of biological sex to distinguish between people. Activists point to the sex binary being a social construct as much as the gender binary: "[P]eople all have different forms of genitalia, hormones, body types, etc [sic] that exist along spectrums" (Erlick). According to Anne Fausto-Sterling, who did not limit her research to just ambiguous genitalia, having a Disorder of Sex Development is about as common as having red hair (Hida). Most people never get their chromosomes tested, so transphobes calling trans women "biologically male" is an assumption at best and a meaningless term intended to demean at worst. The way Camille's mother frames the argument that trans women are female in their bodies as well, only emphasizes that Camille is not quite right in the head, while any sympathy for her is also undercut by her mother continuing to use male pronouns for her.

The detectives leave the nursing home, the protagonist's female colleague exclaiming: "A transgender kid! Go figure his or her appearance. Male, female? Even her mother can't tell"¹² ("Épisode 5" 26:16-22). The original text is less ambiguous, roughly translating to: "Go figure what *he* looks like today" (emphasis added). The translation of the last sentence is more misleading, however, as it states that Camille's own mother cannot even classify her within the gender binary. The French text simply said she could not tell *them* what Camille looked like, which is not surprising for a woman with dementia who has not seen her daughter in years. The next day, the female detective gets to interview the only victim who

¹¹ Original French closed captions: "Après tout, c'est sa nature. Il est comme ça."

¹² Original French closed captions: "Un enfant transgenre. Va savoir à quoi il ressemble aujourd'hui. Homme, femme. Même sa mère est incapable de nous le dire."

survived in the hospital. He confirms he had met his attacker before and recounts his first encounter with the woman he knew as Ruby:

A month ago, we went on a date. When I got there, all the lights were out. The curtains drawn. She wanted to be in darkness. I thought it was a game... But it didn't add up. She was really uncomfortable when we started... I started caressing her and... I saw there was something wrong."

"Right, she was a man. [He shakes his head.] I mean, a transvestite."

"I don't know what you call that, but it wasn't nice. She must've been operated on or something. I got dressed and left straight away. ("Épisode 5" 33:51-34:52)¹³

The transmisogyny that permeates the show from here on out becomes increasingly visible in this character of female detective Szofia Kovacs. She has been suspicious of Damien throughout the series until she eventually found out he was Jeanne Deber's son. Now that the killer has been discovered to be transgender, she has become the main voice for the transphobic notion that Camille is just a man playing dress-up. In French, she did not even use a female pronoun for "*she* was a man," rather saying something closer to "*it* was a man" (emphasis added). While the victim is unwilling to call his attacker a man and continues to use female pronouns, he supports the transmisogyny by introducing the motivation for Camille's murders. In the French text, he specifically states: "[I]t wasn't nice to *see*," referring to her genitalia:

¹³ Original French closed captions: "Et puis, il y a un mois, elle m'a donné rendez-vous. Quand je suis arrivé, toutes les lumières étaient éteintes, les rideaux, tirés. Elle voulait qu'on se voie dans le noir. Au début, j'ai pensé à un jeu, mais... Ça collait pas. Elle était mal à l'aise, quand on a commencé à... J'ai commencé à la caresser... J'ai vu qu'il y avait un truc qui collait pas." "Oui, c'était un homme. Enfin, un travesti." "Je sais pas comment appeler ça. C'était pas beau à voir. Elle avait dû se faire opérer. Je sais pas. Je me suis rhabillé. Et je suis parti tout de suite."

Camille Fontaine had a vaginoplasty. A sex change surgery. Apparently, it didn't turn out well."

"Several requests for the surgery were made some 15 years ago. Fontaine saw specialists and psychiatrists. They all refused it. He was too unstable."

"Hence, the clandestine surgery."

"It must've been done by a charlatan. Camille's last record is at an emergency ward in 2003. For internal bleeding." ...

"Doesn't solve his sexuality. He wants to be desired as a woman."

"Once in bed, he has a hard time."

"Camille Fontaine is rejected by men. And he can't stand that, that's what leads him to murder."

"The Mantis killed her idiot father, who used to beat him up."

"She became her role model. ("Épisode 5" 34:57-35:58)¹⁴

Apparently, she is consistently rejected and left by prospective sexual partners because of her disfigured vagina, one so monstrous any man immediately recognizes something is wrong with it. As this is left to the viewers' imagination, they are encouraged to imagine trans women as mutilated men, the way TERFs such as Sheila Jeffreys insist you should regard SRS.

The French text is even more explicit about the reason why Camille is rejected, adding: "Camille Fontaine sees herself as a real woman, but men are repulsed by it." Again,

¹⁴ Original French closed captions: "Camille Fontaine a subi une vaginoplastie. Une opération pour changer de sexe. Apparemment, l'opération aurait mal tourné." "J'ai retrouvé plusieurs demandes officielles à la Sécu. Fontaine a vu des psychiatres. Ils ont tous refusé l'opération, le trouvant trop instable." "D'où l'opération clandestine." "Sauf que ça a dû être fait par un charlot. Sa dernière trace, c'est aux urgences de Cochin en 2003, pour une hémorragie interne." ... "mais ça règle pas son problème. Il veut être désiré en tant que femme." "Mais une fois au lit, il galère." "Camille Fontaine se voit comme une vraie femme. Mais les hommes la repoussent. Et c'est ce rejet qui le fait basculer dans le meurtre." "La Mante a tué son père, qui l'a battue toute son enfance." "La Mante est devenue son modèle."

the killer herself seems to be the only one to recognize her womanhood. Psychologists did not allow her to transition on grounds of mental instability, a likely result of witnessing the murder of your abusive father in childhood. At the same time, the characters begin misgendering her consistently now. Misgendering is a form of oppression that can be defined as using gendered terms in ways that harm transgender people's capacity for self-identification and undermine their self-respect (Kapusta 502), such as using male pronouns for trans women or otherwise excluding them from the category of women. Even the subtitler got confused by the use of pronouns for Camille, resulting in the text: "The Mantis killed *her* idiot father, who used to beat *him* up". In French, the possessive pronoun "son" is masculine because of the possessed, not the possessor, but "him" and "his" are also used consistently in the Dutch and German subtitles on Netflix, languages in which the grammatical gender of the possessive pronoun does refer to Camille. As it stands, the show goes out of its way to deny the transgender serial killer her womanhood, as if to punish her for crimes she is said to commit precisely because of the rejection of her gender. While *The Mantis* could have been a story about how abusing trans children damages them permanently – which in itself would have been unrealistic and problematic when opting for murderous instead of suicidal tendencies as a result of a lack of acceptance – the series piles onto the abuse suffered in childhood, implying any and all mistreatment of trans women is warranted.

Since Camille is established to know Jeanne Deber's identity, she is also aware of Damien's: as it turns out, his girlfriend's best friend Virginie Delorme, who's been a supporting character in every episode, is actually Camille Fontaine. The name Virginie is quite on the nose as far as speaking names go, clearly referring to her character remaining virginal, if not exactly by choice. She is portrayed by the cisgender actress Frédérique Bel, but while this is certainly preferable to a cis man portraying a trans woman, it is far from progress. Even disregarding how trans roles should ideally be played by trans actors, as it is

rare for them to obtain cis roles while cis actors are even picked over them for the few available trans roles – though no self-respecting trans actress would have read this script and still wanted the role – the choice for a cisgender female merely serves to be able to hide her character in plain sight. A portrayal as visually stereotypical as Jame Gumb’s in *The Silence of the Lambs* would have stood out like a sore thumb, immediately pointing the viewer in the direction of the one trans character they have seen before as their main suspect and ruining the suspense leading up to the reveal. In this way, the series also encourages the fear of trans people who are not visibly trans, or “stealth”: cisgender people often feel entitled to know if you are trans, as within the normative binary system, they are used to knowing what everyone’s genitals looked like at birth. Withholding this personal information, especially in the context of a sexual encounter, makes the trans person in question “deceptive” and therefore untrustworthy. As stated before, this trope likely stems from the practice of having trans people in transition build a second life by inventing a new past for themselves (Truitt). Virginie, who has assumed another identity even after this system was dismantled, is a clear example of such a deceptive transgender woman.

Damien figures out Virginie is the killer right after she promises Jeanne to undo the happiness she created for their family: she introduced Damien to his girlfriend Lucie, who she knows to be pregnant with his child. Damien warns Lucie to get out of Virginie’s house, but is locked in. From here on out, Virginie suddenly acts like the scary monster she has been set up to be, yelling in jealousy about how Lucie never knew what it was like to be rejected.



Virginie with Lucie (“Épisode 3” 31:57) Virginie with a knife (“Épisode 6” 11:31)

The actress playing Lucie, Manon Azem, has indeed been cast as a far more conventionally attractive cis woman, while Frédérique Bel is framed as the love interest's less impressive friend. Virginie kidnaps Lucie, creepily lays out tools, saws and knives on a table and even makes a handheld video for the police, holding a knife to Lucie's throat and smiling, as if she is pretending to be the Joker in *The Dark Knight*. The enjoyment in what she is doing belongs to a far more caricatural villain than the killer in most detective shows ever becomes, but Virginie is far from the type of mastermind that plays games with the police. She makes a sharp turn for the theatrical as soon as she is found out, indicating she is not in control but rather going "psychotic." Beyond enforcing the stigma on mental illness, her previously mentioned instability sets her apart from the calm and collected original Mantis, Jeanne. Much like Hannibal Lecter serves as a civilized, sophisticated foil to the character of Jame Gumb, *The Mantis* has one serial killer the viewer is supposed to root for in the end, and one serial killer the viewer is supposed to root against. In both cases, the transgender woman is not the likeable murderer, but whereas *The Silence of the Lambs* opposes two forms of – in its eyes – masculinity, *The Mantis* uses a female foil to the trans character. Virginie trades Lucie for Jeanne and yells at her while she sits in silence, bound to a chair. If Jeanne's cold and calculated character is preferable, Virginie's angry and joyous cruelty disqualifies her from such femininity, aligning her with the abusive men featured as victims of an actually just killer throughout the plot.

The sympathetic, original Mantis turns out to have been the victim of her father's abuse, just like Virginie. Jeanne's father was previously presented as Damien's sweet old grandfather, before she confronts him: "You created the monster I became by raping me all those years, and by killing my mother before my eyes" ("Épisode 6" 47:50-59).¹⁵ While

¹⁵ Original French closed captions: "Tu as fait de moi le monstre que je suis devenue en me violant pendant toutes ces années et en tuant ma mère sous mes yeux."

Jeanne is presented as a thoroughly civilized killer, motivated by her own suffering at the hands of a man to do society a favor by getting rid of these abusers, Virginie is not at all presented in the same noble light for killing transphobic men. Declining to have sex with her is hardly abuse, of course, even if it is purely because she is trans, but instead of discussing this form of transphobia reasonably, the series is preoccupied with framing her as deserving of rejection and abuse. Jeanne even tells Virginie: “I killed sick specimen. Like your father. You only kill life and love. Things you’ve never had and don’t deserve” (“Épisode 5” 47:33-44).¹⁶ If she does not kill horrible men, she must kill innocent men, which means the show is convinced their transphobia is as harmless as the transphobia of the main characters, with whom the viewer is supposed to sympathize. Virginie does not deserve to love or live, as she is a stereotypical, predatory transgender woman intent on tricking men into having sex with her – only in reality, such encounters result in the trans woman being murdered, not the man (Lee & Kwan).

¹⁶ Original French closed captions: “Moi, je tuais des spécimens malades, comme ton père. Toi, tu n'as fait que tuer la vie et l'amour. Deux choses qui te sont étrangères et que tu ne mérites pas.”

Conclusions

Repercussions Risked by Transmisogynist Representation

The only argument that might convince anyone with a modicum of empathy to excuse dismantling the very means of continued existence for a group of people is probably that this group is a structural danger to society. However, anyone wanting to dismantle any group's means of continued existence should be wary of giving off the impression that their concerns are in fact discriminatory, like Muslims being an inherent terrorist threat or asylum seekers raping white women. As a result, such an endeavor better be supported by deliberately slanted misinterpretations of scientific studies – and TERFs are very adept at this skill when it comes to normalizing the idea that trans women are violent towards them. One oft-cited cohort study was conducted in Sweden and found that trans women “retained a male pattern regarding criminality” (Dhejne et al. 6). This quotation out of context must mean that allowing trans women into female-only spaces and bathrooms exposes cis women to the risk of being assaulted, right? Of course, you would have to ignore that the author was interviewed by *The TransAdvocate* and clarified: “[W]e were certainly not saying that we found that trans women were a rape risk. What we were saying was that for the 1973 to 1988 cohort group and the cisgender male group, both experienced similar *rates* of convictions” (qtd. in Cursed E). Besides the crime rate of trans women consisting largely of poverty-related convictions, these differences between trans people and control groups disappeared in the 1989 to 2003 cohort (Cursed E). But when the data fail to support your arguments, it is good to have media that spread your irrational transphobic fears.

These examples of transmisogynist representation within the trope of the transgender serial killer did not deserve to be scrutinized because they were inaccurate or willfully deceptive, though they certainly were. It was not because they were insensitive or offensive, though they certainly were. It was not because I am a trans activist, though I certainly am.

These texts begged to be criticized because they excuse aggression against trans women, whether that be blatant misgendering, gatekeeping bathrooms, or beating them, and because society still seems to ignore this form of oppression. According to the Trans Murder Monitoring Project, at this point over 300 transgender people are killed annually, the number steadily increasing year over year, adding up to 2982 victims in the ten years that the project has been running. These are just the registered murders TMM could find online and they believe the actual number of deaths to be significantly higher, which only leaves the amount of non-lethal physical and sexual violence inflicted on trans people, and trans women of color and trans sex workers in particular, to the imagination (“Trans Day”). Enter a beloved masterpiece by the most heralded Classic Hollywood director of all time, an Oscar-sweeping “feminist” classic whose imagery permeates cultural awareness, a high-art detective series full of big-name French actors distributed on the world’s biggest streaming service, and many more examples not discussed in this thesis.

The historical contextualization of the analyses in this thesis has shown the representations of trans women to go hand in hand with contemporaneous transmisogyny. Robert Bloch’s and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* established the gender horror template that would be followed again and again: portray crossdressing as a symptom of mental “disturbances,” synonymous with murderous inclinations. In the process, they enforced the stigma on mental illness and legitimized the societal disgust of gender nonconformity, which caused the unfounded rumors about Ed Gein in the first place. When it was no longer unheard of that someone would actually be unhappy with their assigned sex, the interest in crossdressing expanded to include transitioning and especially SRS. While focusing on actual issues trans people were facing within the medical system, their complaints were represented as irrational and grounds for violent behavior. Thomas Harris’ and Jonathan Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs* attempt to convince their audience that no “real” trans person is being

portrayed, undermining the concept of self-identification central to queer theory and essential for the advancement of trans rights. Representing a trans woman trying to have her body match her gender identity as a delusional “man” butchering cis women frames transition as violence and excuses medical gatekeeping. Even today, as healthcare has largely been improved and transphobia is vehemently contested by most feminists, the trope persists. French Netflix Original *The Mantis* depicts its transgender killer as a mutilated monstrosity who is unlovable, in no way challenging the existing stigma surrounding sex between trans and cis people, rather encouraging the idea that trans women are merely trying to trick you into sex with a “man”. The trans woman is presented as utterly untrustworthy for hiding her past from her friend and therefore inherently deceptive. In addition to further stigmatizing trans people, mental illness, and deformity, all of the above texts feature serial killers who were also abused in childhood, explaining their violence by exploiting their victimization. When a plot suggests that abuse creates trans children, which should not be used as one’s deterrent for abusing children to begin with, it undercuts the reality that many children are abused because they are trans and not the other way around.

Most importantly, all fictional serial killers discussed in this thesis – and they are not the only ones – are trans *women*. This is no coincidence, as psychologists, media and society at large have been focused mostly on what would drive someone to voluntarily identify as female rather than male; the opposite seems understandable enough from a patriarchal perspective. This has spawned many tropes portraying trans people as merely the victims of their identity, miserable and mistreated, but the specific trope of trans women as serial killers is a clear expression of transmisogyny. Continuing to link femininity and violence is a willfully dishonest scare tactic that simultaneously insists trans women are men. As long as writers think themselves clever for using trans identity as a plot device to mislead their audience, it will be harder to convince their audience that in reality trans identities are valid

instead of deceptive and confusing. As long as fiction portrays trans women as simply men in disguises, varying from pathetic to scarily convincing, it will be easier for transphobic conservatives to misgender them consistently, exclude them from female-only spaces, deny them public platforms, and take away their access to the health care they desperately need.

Until this portrayal in fiction changes, future research has no shortage of material featuring trans people to examine, as well as no shortage of various other tropes involving their identity to scrutinize. A triptych on the perception of trans people in different times has its shortcomings, as *DSM* editions alone outnumber these stories and eras, but a template can be derived from these analyses. Firstly, an interdisciplinary approach will prove fruitful, as this thesis could have benefited from a more sophisticated foundation in media studies. As it stands, the analyses are decidedly from a perspective of literary criticism, undoubtedly overlooking more systematically cinematographic choices while interpreting the adaptations and television series. Secondly, a broad understanding of the historical context of pathologization of transgender people proved necessary to properly examine the texts. It is hard to pinpoint time-dependent views that influenced writers researching the subject, and even harder to establish the role of fiction in upholding these views, if one is not aware of them. Equally important was a recognition of modern-day feminism and trans activism, so as not to produce academic writing that is years out of touch simply because academia tends to be slow in adopting these theories. This thesis intended to further both fiction and academic theory in a direction that is more conscious of its impact on trans lives, through demonstrating their past flawed convictions and combining older, ciscentric concepts with current trans theory. Most importantly, it is therefore essential this type of research be done with a transgender individual involved to a degree that they can prevent bigotry from seeping into the study under the guise of a philosophical discussion on the concept of trans people:

No matter how much academics enjoy theorizing and conceptualizing, our existence and identity should not be up for debate.

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