Carnal Metamorphosis in *Hannibal* (2013-2015)

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Abstract: This paper explores the integration of German surrealist motifs within the visual and thematic design of the TV series *Hannibal* (2013–2015). Through detailed visual analysis, it examines how animal figures such as the raven-stag and Wendigo serve as metaphors for identity and transformation, aligning with the works of Max Ernst, Hans Bellmer, and Meret Oppenheim. The paper contends that *Hannibal* not only inherits surrealism's fascination with the unconscious but also reinvents it within contemporary media, embodying Freud's psychoanalytic principles and André Breton's ideology. Employing German surrealist aesthetics, *Hannibal* crafts a narrative of psychological metamorphosis and human-animal hybridity. This synthesis invites viewers to experience a visceral reimagining of surrealism's painterly concerns in a cinematic format. By reinterpreting surrealist themes for contemporary media, Hannibal invites a reevaluation of surrealism's role in shaping modern narratives of identity, morality, and metamorphosis.

Keywords: German surrealism; *Hannibal*; animals; art history; psychoanalysis; visual analysis.

Figure 1: Hal Renaugh, Will and Wendigo, 2024.

The TV series *Hannibal* (2013-2015) is a psychological thriller developed by Bryan Fuller, starring Mads Mikkelsen as Dr. Hannibal Lecter and Hugh Dancy as Will Graham. The show serves as an adaptation of and prequel to Thomas Harris's novel *Red Dragon* (1981) and explores the complex relationship between FBI profiler Will Graham and psychiatrist Dr. Hannibal Lecter, who is secretly a cannibalistic serial killer.

The series is known for its stunning visual style, complex psychological themes, and the intense performances of its lead actors. *Hannibal* is particularly notable for its artistic approach to violence and gore, often presenting disturbing scenes in a painterly, aesthetically striking manner that deliberately challenges viewers to question and respond to what is objectively seen versus what is intuited or imagined.

Animals in *Hannibal* and Their Symbolism

In *Hannibal*, animals act as psychological extensions of the characters, embodying themes of identity, power, and transformation. Will Graham's dogs, the raven-stag who becomes the Wendigo, and other animal representations serve as visual metaphors and integral components of the exploration of human-animal boundaries[1]. Will's dogs symbolize his empathy and connection to innocence, providing a counterpoint to Hannibal's predatory influence. Meanwhile, the recurring raven-stag symbolizes

[1] Gernot Böhme, *Der Stag als Urbild: Zur Symbolik des Tieres in Mythos und Moderne* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2021).

Hannibal's looming presence in Will's subconscious, blurring the lines between predator and prey. These animals, both real and hallucinatory, deepen the show's psychological landscape, turning it into a visual narrative of fragmentation and metamorphosis[2] **[Fig. 1]**.

Hannibal's animals extend beyond symbolism into culinary transformation. The animals served in his meticulously prepared meals—lamb, bird, rabbit, and even human flesh—carry symbolic weight. Their consumption becomes a ritualistic act of dominance and transgression, aligning the series with German surrealism's visual and symbolic traditions.

Max Ernst: Avian Metamorphosis and Psyche

Max Ernst (1891–1976) remains one of surrealism's most prominent figures, a self-styled shamanistic purveyor of dreams and a master of the uncanny, where birds—his favored avatars—become symbols of psychological flight, transformation, and rupture[3]. In *La Toilette de la mariée* (1940), Ernst gives us an unholy creature—half-woman, half-bird—trapped in a state of perpetual becoming, hovering between the human and the avian, the domestic and the wild[4]. This ambivalence is mirrored with

[2] Matthias Vogt, *Unbewusste Kräfte: Psychoanalyse, Kunst und das Tier in der Moderne* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017).
[3] Werner Spies, ed., *Max Ernst: Retrospektive* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 1996).
[4] Max Ernst, *La Toilette de la mariée*, 1940, oil on canvas, 129.6 × 96.3 cm, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, 76.2553 PG

haunting clarity in *Hannibal*'s raven-stag, a creature that stalks Will Graham's subconscious with the same disquieting ambiguity.

In *Hannibal*, the raven-stag does more than lurk ominously—it acts as a psychopomp, a dark guide leading Will deeper into the labyrinthine spaces of his psyche, where the boundary between self and other dissolves with disturbing ease. Ernst's birds are not merely flighted creatures but are hybrid monstrosities, their wings heavy with the weight of unconscious desires. So too is the raven-stag, a spectral figure that is, in essence, Hannibal Lecter wearing a feathered, antlered cloak of primality.

In Episode "Savoureux" (1x13), the raven-stag materializes in a forest—a space traditionally associated with freedom and the untamed. Yet here, the forest is a visual prison, a place where Will's guilt, fear, and increasingly porous identity are ensnared. The raven-stag, black as night and towering, evokes the hybrid imagery in Ernst's *La Toilette de la mariée*, where the conflation of human and animal forms unsettles our most basic expectations of corporeal integrity. The creature's imposing presence in the frame mirrors the emotional claustrophobia of the scene, a reflection of Will's own entrapment in his deepening identification with Hannibal. This hybrid symbolism suggests a deeper transformation, one that is psychological as much as it is visual.

The raven-stag's evolution over the series mirrors the shifting dynamics of Will's relationship

78. Accessed 12 November 2024. https://www.guggenheim-venice.it/en/art/works/attirement-of-the-bride/

with Hannibal. By the time we reach Episode "Sakizuki" (2x02), the bird imagery becomes more overt, as ravens circle overhead, foreshadowing a gruesome mural of human corpses below. Ernst's birds operate as avatars of liminality—creatures caught in transition, much like Will himself, who is no longer a mere investigator but something altogether darker, more primal. The raven-stag, with its increasingly menacing appearance, signals Will's growing complicity, much like Ernst's birds hover ominously between flight and fall, between liberation and constraint.

The metamorphosis from raven-stag to Wendigo represents one of *Hannibal*'s most visually articulate statements on identity. Where Ernst's creatures remain in limbo, suspended between one form and another, the Wendigo emerges as the final product of Will's psychic collapse. This hulking, blackened figure with antlers—equal parts man, beast, and shadow—serves as the ultimate articulation of Hannibal's predatory influence on Will. It is as if Ernst's surrealist vision, which so often teeters between the beautiful and the grotesque, finds its most potent cinematic expression in the slow, inevitable descent of Will into the role of Hannibal's *Doppelgänger*.

To compare the two in more explicit terms: Ernst's *La Toilette de la mariée* and *Hannibal*'s raven-stag do not merely serve as visual motifs but as active participants in the narrative of transformation. Ernst's bird-woman is on the cusp of flight, though forever grounded by her human body; the raven-stag, too, is a creature of flight, but one that draws Will ever deeper into the darkness.

These are not just creatures of metamorphosis but emblems of it, articulating a rupture that speaks to the dissolution of the self in the face of the other.

Hans Bellmer: Disarticulation and the Abject

Hans Bellmer (1902–1975), most known for his *Poupée* series, presents the human body as a grotesque object of desire, disassembled and reconstituted to provoke discomfort and fascination in equal measure[5]. His dolls, those twisted effigies of femininity, engage in a ballet of mutilation, their distorted forms evoking both vulnerability and menace[6]. In *Hannibal*, Bellmer's shadow looms large in the series' aesthetic of bodily fragmentation, where human figures are deconstructed not only to shock but to underscore the fluidity of identity, the self as an assemblage of parts.

Take, for instance, the visceral tableau in "Sakizuki" (2x02), where a man's body is arranged into a horrific mural, his skin stretched taut, limbs severed and repositioned with macabre precision. This scene is not simply a display of violence; it is a visual echo of Bellmer's doll imagery, where the

[5] Hans Bellmer, *La Poupée*, 1936, hand-colored gelatin silver print, image: 22.7 × 16.6 cm, mount: 32.8 × 24.7 cm, Art Institute of Chicago, Number 1995.26, Gift of the Irving Penn Foundation Accessed 9 November 2024. https://www.artic.edu/artworks/223367/the-doll-la-poupee

[6] Therese Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors: The Art of Hans Bellmer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

female body is rearranged in ways that pervert anatomy and agency[7]. The body in *Hannibal*, like Bellmer's *Poupée*, is not merely an object—though it is, of course, objectified—but an articulation of inner torment. Each dislocated limb speaks to the fragmentation of identity, much as Bellmer's dolls, with their disjointed appendages and blank, accusatory stares, represent the fractured psyche.

In Bellmer's *La Poupée*, the doll's limbs are twisted into impossible postures, a fetishistic rendering of corporeal disarray that evokes both the uncanny and the abject. This is mirrored in *Hannibal*'s infamous bear-suit scene from "Takiawase" (2x04), where a man's body is grotesquely melded with that of a bear, the animal's feral strength juxtaposed against the human fragility beneath. Bellmer's dolls, bound and gagged by their very construction, exist in a similar space of tension—they are at once powerful in their deformity and powerless in their mutilation. The bear-suit scene is a literal manifestation of this tension, where the victim's body, now monstrous, teeters between human and animal, subject and object. The grotesque becomes sublime in this fusion, much as Bellmer's dolls evoke both the erotic and the horrific.

[7] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/book.20656.

Figure 2: A from "Sorbet" Brooke Palmer/NBC | 2013 NBCUniversal Media, LLC.

Bellmer's photographic studies, wherein he manipulates his dolls into positions that evoke both sexualized desire and violent disarticulation, find their most chilling analogue in *Hannibal*'s culinary displays. In "Sorbet" (1x07), Hannibal meticulously prepares human organs as if they were *objets d'art* **[Fig. 2, above]**, arranging them with the same fetishistic obsession that Bellmer displayed in his doll imagery. The organs, gleaming with a perverse beauty, serve not merely as symbols of death but as symbols of control—over the body, over the self.

But where Bellmer's dolls are mute, forever suspended in their disarticulated state, *Hannibal*'s victims remain disturbingly alive, their bodies contorted yet still imbued with the potential for movement, for rebellion. The bear-suit, for instance, though encasing its victim in a grotesque amalgamation of flesh and fur, retains the uncanny possibility of animation—a suggestion that the boundary between man and beast, life and death, is perilously thin[8]. This speaks directly to Bellmer's exploration of the uncanny, where the familiar body is rendered strange through dismemberment and reassembly, yet never entirely alien. In Bellmer, the body is an arena of conflict, where desire and violence collide, where the erotic and the abject exist in a state of constant tension. Hannibal takes this tension to its logical extreme, using the body as both canvas and weapon.

Meret Oppenheim: Tactility and Camouflage

The fur-lined teacup of "Breakfast in Fur" presents an open challenge to our expectations of the domestic and the familiar[9]. The object itself—

[8] Alberto N. García, "'Tell Me, What Are You Becoming?' Hannibal and the Inescapable Presence of the Grotesque," *Horror Studies* 11, no. 1 (2020): 55–71, https://doi.org/10.1386/host_00012_1.

[9] Meret Oppenheim, *Le Déjeuner en fourrure*, 1936, fur-covered cup, saucer, and spoon, cup: 10.9 cm in diameter, saucer: 23.7 cm in diameter, spoon: 20.2 cm long, overall height: 7.3 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Number 130.1946.a-c. Accessed 16 November 2024. https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80997.

ostensibly a cup and saucer for drinking tea—is no optical illusion. We see clearly what it is, but the shock emerges from its tactile contradiction: the soft, animal fur, where we expect cool porcelain, disrupts our assumptions of texture and purpose. This confrontation of materiality disturbs without deception. In contrast, *Hannibal* (2013–2015) achieves its surrealism not through overt confrontation but through concealment and subtlety, particularly in its culinary sequences, where Hannibal Lecter presents dishes that look exquisite yet are laced with human flesh, hidden in plain sight.

In "Sorbet" (1x07), Hannibal's guests dine without knowing the true nature of the food on their plates—human organs disguised as haute cuisine. Here, the overlap between food and flesh is concealed, a deception at the heart of the series' visual language. Unlike Oppenheim's fur-covered teacup, where the shock lies in the transparency of the material mismatch, Hannibal's meals exploit the surface allure of their presentation, drawing the viewer and characters alike into a sinister game of revelation and concealment.

Oppenheim's work, in its rawness, confronts the viewer directly[10]. The fur on the teacup does not hide what it is; it presents itself with a jarring frankness, inviting us to touch what we should only sip from. *Hannibal*, however, is steeped in

[10] Daniel Baumann, ed., *Meret Oppenheim: Worte nicht in giftige Buchstaben eingewickelt* [Words Not Wrapped in Poisonous Letters] (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2014)

camouflage, each meal meticulously crafted to hide its horrors. In "Futamono" (2x06) **[Fig. 3]**, this deception reaches its apex: a flower-adorned feast appears as a celebration of nature's bounty, yet its centerpiece—much like the dishes around it—contains human remains. Where Oppenheim's cup is a tactile provocation, Hannibal's meals are an exercise in visual misdirection. His guests, unaware of the true nature of their consumption, partake in what is essentially a grotesque masquerade.

Figure 3: Shot from„Futamono" Brooke Palmer/NBC | 2013 NBCUniversal Media, LLC.

Both works, however, force us to reckon with the act of consumption, though from surrealistically appropriate angles: Oppenheim presents the rawness of the animal in domestic form, while Hannibal conceals the human in the trappings of the culinary sublime. The viewer is left to question not

only what they consume but how they engage with the materials before them.

Freud, Surrealism, and the Unconscious

Surrealism's obsession with the unconscious, as championed by André Breton and Georges Bataille, delves into the murky terrains where reason dissolves and the primal, irrational forces of the psyche reign. In *Hannibal*, these forces manifest not just through the characters' actions but through the visual architecture of the series itself. Freud's psychoanalytic theories provide the foundational structure, but it is surrealism's fascination with the dream world and the latent impulses that animates *Hannibal*'s grotesque beauty[11].

Breton, in his *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), celebrated the "pure psychic automatism" of dreams—the place where the unconscious asserts its dominance over the waking mind[12]. In *Hannibal*, dreams and waking life intermingle, producing a seamless fluidity between conscious repression and the vivid landscapes of the unconscious. Will Graham's dream sequences are not just hallucinations; they are visual journeys into the undercurrents of his mind, where the raven-stag who becomes the Wendigo and shifting forests of enchantment give form to his unspoken desires and

[11] Sigmund Freud, *Totem und Tabu* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1913).
[12] André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972),

fears. These sequences operate in much the same way as surrealist automatism, where the illogical becomes the key to revealing the hidden depths of human identity.

Surrealism's alignment with both Novalis and Freud, particularly through Breton, saw dreams not as mere escape but as the site where the self's most authentic impulses could emerge. This dynamic plays out repeatedly in *Hannibal*, where the show's visual language borrows heavily from the surrealist tradition of revealing the unconscious through jarring and unexpected imagery[13]. The raven-stag, for example, moves not through the rational spaces of plot but through Will's subconscious—a figure whose significance unfolds through dream logic rather than narrative causality. Its presence evokes the kind of surreal landscapes that Ernst explored, where creatures and forms exist in an eternal state of metamorphosis, as unstable as the mind that imagines them.

Georges Bataille, in his trenchant critique of Breton's surrealism, sought to explore the boundaries of the erotic and the grotesque as expressions of the unconscious[14]. In *Hannibal*, these boundaries are continually tested. Hannibal Lecter's elaborate feasts, presented with a near-religious reverence, evoke Bataille's obsession with the

[13] Peter Fischer, *Surrealismus in Deutschland 1925–1950: Verborgene Bilder, Ungehörte Töne, Entdeckte Räume* (Berlin: Reimer Verlag, 2017).

[14] George Bataille, *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, ed. and trans. Michael Richardson (New York: Verso, 2006).

formlessness of excess[15]. For Bataille, the act of transgressing the boundaries of the civilized is not simply an intellectual exercise but a return to the primal, where the unconscious exposes the underbelly of human desire. Hannibal's meals, crafted from the flesh of his victims, become grotesque rituals that draw directly on this surrealist fascination with the abject—the point at which the human body and its desires are most laid bare.

Yet *Hannibal* is more than a visual echo of surrealist motifs; it is an exploration of the unconscious itself, rendered through a dreamlike lens that mirrors the ambitions of Breton's *exquisite corpse* technique. Just as the surrealists delighted in disrupting rational thought with bizarre juxtapositions and illogical pairings, *Hannibal*'s narrative similarly refuses to adhere to the rules of coherence. Dream sequences bleed into reality, much like in the works of Max Ernst and Hans Bellmer, where the body and the psyche are constantly reimagined in disturbing and uncanny forms.

In *Hannibal*, the visual field is saturated with this surrealist impulse, where dreams, hallucinations, and the grotesque coexist in a space that deliberately evades rationality. Freud's theories may serve as the scaffolding, but it is the surrealist fascination with disrupting the boundaries between the conscious and unconscious that animates the series. This is not a mere borrowing of imagery but an ongoing dialogue with the tradition of surrealism

[15] Leslie S. Klinger, "The Psychological Complexity of Hannibal Lecter," Journal of Film and Television 29, no. 3 (2021): 112-127.

itself—an exploration of the psyche, where animal avatars, fragmented bodies, and unsettling table settings evoke a world where nothing is as it seems, and everything is in flux.

Conclusion

In *Hannibal*, the legacy of German surrealism finds renewed expression, not only through its grotesque and sublime visual language but through its deep engagement with the psychological and philosophical concerns that animated the movement. The show's exploration of identity, morality, and metamorphosis—embodied in the raven-stag, Will Graham's psychic fragmentation, and Hannibal's elaborate feasts—evokes the same preoccupations that defined artists like Max Ernst, Hans Bellmer, and Meret Oppenheim.

Crucially, *Hannibal* also inherits the surrealist fascination with the unconscious, particularly as articulated by André Breton vis á vis Novalis[16]. The dream sequences, animal avatars, and uncanny transformations within the show mirror surrealism's obsession with revealing the primal, irrational forces lurking beneath the surface of consciousness.

This thematic echo aligns with Hal Foster's analysis of the neo-avant-garde, where he notes that contemporary media can continue the inquiries of early 20th-century movements, extending their

[16] See: Novalis, *The Disciples at Sais and Other Fragments*, trans. F. V. M. Harper (London: Forgotten Books, 1920).

critiques of identity and power into new forms[17]. In *Hannibal*, these explorations are not merely visual but visceral, as the series confronts viewers with the collapse of distinctions between human and animal, self and other, proclaiming itself an inheritor of the concerns of (German) surrealism.

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