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Yvonne Tasker: The Silence of the Lambs

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Yvonne Tasker: *The Silence of the Lambs*

London: British Film Institute 2002, 95 p., ISBN 0-85170-871-2. € 14,11

Begun ten years after release of the 1990 film version of Thomas Harris's 1988 thriller, *Silence of the Lambs*, Yvonne Tasker's short critical study benefits not only from the author's broad knowledge of film and television (both British and American) but also from the objectivity a decade can give over the various competing views that formed the film's critical reception. Though the author notes that „[g]enres as well as characters connect complexly in this film” (p.22), she deftly examines director Jonathan Demme's „hybrid creation” as „horror [film], woman's film, and the police procedural” (p.22), with chapters dedicated to Gothic and psychological elements running through the work. She recognizes the similarities between novel and film versions of *Silence* while throughout arguing the latter's more „compassionate” (p.19) depiction of the victims and of Starling, the FBI agent/trainee sent out to find their killer.

Tasker begins her analysis by tracing Buffalo Bill's genealogy from Norman Bates through Leatherface and Jason. She astutely observes that avian names such as Starling and Martin in *Silence*, as well as visuals of live and stuffed birds, may be references to *Psycho*'s own infamous taxidermic specimens. As a woman's film, which the author defines as one „with a female protagonist, dealing with issues related to women and women's lives, and ultimately privileging a woman's point of view” (p.24), *Silence* participates in feminist discourse both textually and visually. Shots frequently give Starling's point of view as she winds labyrinthine paths not only through crime scenes but also past the stares and comments of assorted male colleagues, superiors, and psychopaths. Nevertheless, Tasker declines to describe *Silence* as being „in any straightforward way a feminist film” because of the ambiguous portrayal of feminine ambition in the character of Buffalo Bill (p.25). But another observation, unstated in this study, further undercuts any ascription of „feminist film” to *Silence*. Tasker contends that the film „fully mobilises” the „compelling figure of the female investigator” (p.24). Starling, however, despite her ambition and intelligence merely follows paths laid obscurely by the male Lecter. The same, too, may be said of the character played by Angelina Jolie in *The Bone Collector* (a film Tasker also cites), who carries out the instructions of Denzel Washington's quadriplegic detective. In each of these films, a man – one confined to a cell, the other to a bed – performs the intellectual work while the woman sullies her hands in the field.

As police procedural, Tasker places *Silence* in a line that extends from the low-tech television series *Quincy* through others more technologically-savvy, such as *The X-Files* (piloted 1993) and *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (CBS, 2000-), *Silent Witness* (BBC, 1996-), Patricia Cornwall's successful series of Kay Scarpetta crime novels, and the films *Copycat* (US, Jon Amiel, 1995) and *The Bone Collector* (US, Phillip Noyce, 1999). In this genre, viewer or reader is invited

into the autopsy room where „[b]odies are picked over for minute traces of the crime, the analytic processes employed intricately described at every stage” (p.45). Tasker sees a parallel in scenes depicting the FBI’s meticulous „investigation of the dead body and Gumb’s precision in flaying his victims” (p.41). That is, both killers and detectives are „skilled at their work, although they have different ways of getting under the skin” (p.41). The author might also have observed that this idea had been stunningly visualized in Fritz Lang’s 1931 *M*, wherein certain cross-cut scenes depict a band of thieves and a group of police detectives sitting around separate tables, unwittingly responding to each other in their quests for a serial killer.

Tasker makes her most compelling arguments in the chapter entitled „The Female Gothic.” Here she closely examines the film’s use of space to create mood, to visualize the psychological workings of Lecter and Buffalo Bill, and to place Starling within the tradition of the female gothic, which includes Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* (1940) and *Suspicion* (1941), as well as Fritz Lang’s *Secret Beyond the Door* (1948) [p.63]. She notes the preponderance of complex environments that Starling must negotiate, whether they be the Baltimore asylum which houses Lecter, Buffalo Bill’s basement, or even the dark, disorienting disarray of the storage facility in which she finds Raspeil’s head. Tasker goes on to contrast images of „Quantico’s sternly modern space” and „the Gothic space of the Baltimore asylum” (p.62). Yet, the FBI headquarters also possesses a Gothic quality, for to reach Crawford, Starling must wind a complex path through various floors and hallways. The iron barred-doors in the Baltimore asylum echo the metallic clang of the elevator doors in Quantico, both slamming shut with an „abandon all hope, ye who enter”-finality.

Indeed, the book’s only weakness is that Tasker does not delve as deeply nor as broadly as one might wish into certain aspects of the film. For example, she notes that „*Silence* exploits a tradition of dark, religious iconography that extends from Hieronymous Bosch through William Blake (a key figure for Harris)” (p.32), reproducing Blake’s *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed in Sun* in one of the book’s larger illustrations. Unfortunately, she does not elaborate on this iconographic tradition, nor why Harris finds it important. Besides citing the visual connection between Lecter’s evisceration and hanging of Lieutenant Boyle and Blake’s 19th century watercolor, she might also have pointed out that in *Manhunter* (1986), serial killer Francis Dolarhyde projects a slide-image of the same work on a wall in his house, urging a reckless and arrogant tabloid reporter to „See, see,” before dispatching him. Indeed, a detail of the print appears tattooed on Dolarhyde’s back in *Red Dragon*, the 2002 remake of *Manhunter*: What, then, is the viewer to make of this recurring image, apparently familiar to killers of as widely disparate styles as the proletariat Dolarhyde and the urbane Lecter?

In the final chapter, entitled „Under the Skin,” Tasker examines the depiction of insanity and psychoanalytic methods in *Silence*. She also undertakes, less successfully, an analysis of audience fascination with Lecter’s character. The author sees him as a conflation of the „twin figures of reason and unreason,” as both „perverse profiler and psychopath” (p.76). Furthermore, compared to the other serial killer, Buffalo Bill (or to anyone else in the film, for that matter), Lecter is „defiantly high-culture” (p.83). Tasker intrepidly concludes that „Lecter’s appeal lies in his elaborate courtesy towards Starling and his contemptuous rejection of the very authority that, as a supposedly learned man, he represents” (p.85). This assessment is undeniably true in part, but cannot be the entire reason for Lecter’s growing popularity. The third installment in the novel-based film series is not, after all, entitled *Clarice*. Earlier Tasker argues that „[o]ther than the obvious – he escapes capture – transformation is not at issue with Hannibal Lecter. He remains seemingly fixed throughout” (p.13). By standing back from *Silence*, however, one can see an enviable (from a working actor’s point of view, anyway) extension and development of the doctor’s character over the years. Lecter’s film presence has progressively expanded, from captivating and captive adviser in *Manhunter*, to resourceful manipulator and escapee in *Silence of the Lambs*, to cultured fugitive enjoying star-billing in *Hannibal* (2001).

Tasker cites a studio executive who objected strongly to producing a film with a story line about skinning woman (p.29). Yet, every work of art addresses some contemporaneous question. Just such a gruesome premise had already enjoyed international success through Patrick Suskind’s 1985 crime thriller, *Das Parfum*, in which an 18th-century French olfactory prodigy with no corporal fragrance of his own sets out to manufacture one from the distilled fat of Parisian women. Brett Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, a novel about a yuppie who tortures and dismembers women, strewing his apartment with the body parts, appeared the same year as the film version of *Silence*. The time was somehow right for these works. Why? What one misses in Tasker’s book is a wider examination of social and cultural context, of what fed the international appetite for such misogynistic fare. Then again, this problem may be too large for a single book about a single film.

An analysis of the soundtrack might also have proven worthwhile. The music in this, as in any good thriller, propels the story and articulates the characters at least as much as the visuals. As Catherine Martin drives home, for example, she sings along with her radio to Tom Petty’s „American Girl.” The song, ostensibly about a young woman who leaves home to pursue dreams of a larger world than the one in which she grew up, describes the life not only of Buffalo Bill’s West Virginia victim, but also of Fredericka Bimmel’s friend, even of Starling herself, one step removed from white trash, as Lecter describes her. Further, few pieces of music so appropriately evoke Lecter’s *modus operandi* as the doctor’s favorite *Goldberg Variations*. Tasker notes that Lecter’s bouts of sudden violence are

punctuated by a return to calm (p.79). Bach's variations themselves often undertake rapid tempo shifts, as from the *Aria* to the first variation or from the fifth variation to the sixth, ultimately reprising the opening with the peaceful *Aria da capo*. The baroque piece thus underscores Lecter's killing style.

But these shortcomings aside, Tasker has produced an admirable work, one that displays rigor of argument without the bane of cumbersome jargon. She has copiously illustrated the pages with a judicious selection of stills from *Silence* and other films. Both professional film analyst as well as amateur aficionado may profit from taking this book in hand.

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