

WILL THE LAMBS STILL SCREAM? ON THE SILENCE OF ANIMALS

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The Silence of the Lambs, the 1991 Jonathan Demme masterpiece, was translated into Italian with the suggestive title of ‘The Silence of the Innocents’.¹ However, this translation misses something about the personal events of the main character, the young FBI Academy student Clarice Starling (played by Jodie Foster, whose performance won her the Academy Award for Best Actress). More specifically with regard to her traumatic real, revealed during her wild unforgettable encounters with the other central character (more specifically in their last), the legendary cannibal psychiatrist Hannibal Lecter (played by the other Academy Award-winner for his role in the film, Anthony Hopkins)², is summed up in a single scene: as a girl, Clarice, who has lost both her parents, (her father was a police officer killed during a shootout and whose legacy Clarice collects) is compassionately put up by her cousin in a ranch. One morning ‘a strange noise... some kind of screaming, like a child’s voice’ wakes her. Clarice realises that the *strange noise* is the screaming of the lambs being taken to the slaughter: ‘The lambs were screaming... I opened the gate to their pen, but they wouldn’t run. They just stood there, confused. They wouldn’t run.’³ Urged on by Lecter, Starling retraces the scene and reluctantly admits that she tried to take one between her arms, that she thought ‘she could save at least one, but ... he was so heavy,’ and so she had to drop even that one lamb, who was then slaughtered just like all the others. Lecter doesn’t give up, he wants to reach Clarice’s murkiest depths; hit there where it hurts. Having now entered her mind, something our cannibal is a specialist in, like every psychopath worthy of that name, at once ruthless and merciful, he formulates the subjective truth of his extemporaneous patient: ‘...You still wake up sometimes, don’t you? You wake up in the dark and hear the screaming of the lambs.... And you think if you save poor Catherine, you could make them stop, don’t you? You think if Catherine lives, you won’t wake up in the dark ever again to that awful screaming of the lambs.’ Catherine is the victim to save from the clutches of Buffalo Bill, the killer of

¹In the title, ‘lambs’ was replaced with ‘innocent’ only in Italy and South America.

² *The Silence of the Lambs*, after *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1976), was the only film in cinema history to garner a total of five Academy Awards.

³ From the scene of the last dialogue between Starling and Lecter.

women around whom the film rotates. This memorable scene ends with a suggestion by Lecter to Starling, a lamb among lambs; a suggestion that turns out decisive to capturing her serial killer and for her promotion to special FBI agent: *quid pro quo*, as Lecter states. A small piece of soul for a fraction of the path towards being saved or healed, call it what you will. After all, is this not the way psychoanalysis works?

The wording Silence of the Lambs/of the Innocent may be read at least on two levels: the first is the literal one of Demme's movie, according to which lambs *are not* silent, on the contrary, they scream in terror; if anything, the problem is to silence them. Identification and redemption: something of the subject and/or the Other must be soothed to prevent it from screaming any longer. The other level refers to the fact that lambs/animals-in-general have no speech, no language. Animals are silent because they do not speak, because they do not *reply*. An entire philosophical tradition, starting from Aristotle, via Descartes and through to Heidegger and Lacan himself, has questioned itself on the animal from this point of view: the animal does not speak, it has no language, which makes it *poor in world*, only capable of *reactions*. It presents itself, therefore, with a primal minus compared to the human. Language introduces the lack typical of human beings; but in animals' language itself is lacking. Hence all the questions rotating around their being or not being able to reason, respond-react, in other words, having *logos*. A question posed by Bentham shifts the focus considerably: 'Can they suffer?' Because here 'the question becomes tainted with a certain passivity.' (Derrida 2005) Bentham's question commits him to considering a casting off, or at least a wavering, of the mastery inherent to the practice of the logos as a phallic exercise (in Derrida's terminology: a *phallogocentric* one). No longer is it a question of being able, knowing how, having the skills; suffering does not take these into account, it takes into account instead a certain degree of submission to one's own impotence, to a possibility without power (Derrida 2006). In Freudian terms, of finding the courage to adhere, at least partially, to one's *Hilflosigkeit*, that condition of *forsaking* that marks humans from the beginning as living beings different from other living beings, premature and hence dependent on the care of the Other for a long period of time, desperately un-adapted. It is on this condition, as the original Real, that subjects form themselves, to then let it fall into oblivion through all the means offered by language. Language separates us from the Real. As analysts and all those who have experienced analysis know, the Real resists against the grip of language, the word makes an effort to say the unsayable and only grabs a few shreds of it. One can (more or less) live with the Real, one can dribble it away, if all goes well, and one can even put it to use (Lacan 2005), but in regard to translating it into words, symbolizing it, as the structuralist Lacan thought he could, that is a very limited

option that poets and artists in general are better at, as we can see in Demme's film. Lacan would then change his mind and devote his last teachings entirely to the Real, which on the whole becomes synonymous with the unconscious. The Real is our *extimité*, that which is most intimate and foreign, ultimately unknowable, mute. And that, as in Starling's experience, carries on screaming. It is the opaque core from which repetition moves, with its experiences of pleasure, but it is also the margin of opening to the *new* (Cimino 2015). To it, even to gain some advantage, we can only give in (Pagliardini 2017), abandoning the pretension of making it give into us, hence to the logos. It is a question of going beyond the coordinates that codify the structure, of abandoning the thorny forest of the defences (Fachinelli 1989) that delusively protect humans from the impossible to write (and utter) inherent to the Real and to its unknown variables. Going *towards* the Real requires an active exercise in passivity, a radical *feminization* capable of sustaining the abandonment of the *maîtrise* to look towards what is disorienting and unknown, without the pretentiousness of taming it. Knowing that animals suffer does not really mean knowing what they really feel and how. It is something we will probably never know, because the abyss separating us from them is huge and everything we think we might know about them has the defect of being *human*, of having been adjusted to our coordinates. It means, instead, looking towards a horizon in which the forsaking and foreignness of the Other (and our own) become constitutive ontological elements. Starling's lambs (and Starling herself) are on this horizon because someone has made it their own. It is the lamb/animal as such that counts, an Other that doesn't speak, but is capable of screaming, that is foreign and yet familiar, *extime*. What counts is that it has something of the order of the Real (and hence of the absolute) that talks about life with no mediations, in this case of dying life, but, as Derrida reminds us, is life not always dying? This assumption clashes somewhat with the practice of *phallogocentrism*. The young girl Clarice thinks nothing (in this being a child probably helps), she too in this sense with no mediations, and simply responds to the screaming of the lambs (therefore to her *extime*). She takes one between her arms and runs away, as if that single lamb were something that *intimately* concerned her; which is actually true.

Starling has to somehow prevent the lambs from screaming, as Lecter reveals, and here we reach the first of the two levels by which we can read the title of this remarkable film, the literal level. Freud spoke of ambivalence to indicate the double affective love/hate current every object investment is imbued in and that emerges with all its power in mourning (Freud 1917 SE XXIV). Hate is older than love (Freud 1915 SE XIV), it can be traced back to the primal introduction of the foreign element and is hated (spat out) for this reason, an operation that ushers in the

construction of the subject (Freud 1925 SE XIX) and, paradoxically, its ability to recognise otherness. At the base of this recognition there is therefore a *refusal* (the Freudian no), which corresponds to the subjective drive quota, which cannot be assimilated and is therefore placed externally: no! Even in love the relationship towards the object preserves this primal irreducible core of refusal. Hate against the foreigner is the attempt to expel something of one's own, specifically the excess of the drive; an operation by definition destined to fail and hence to be repeated over and over again. This is the mechanism that underlies the various forms of racism, of fundamentalism, and of any form, macroscopic or not, of hatred against the Other and its diversity. The more difficult it is for the subject to recognise that the foreigner is (in) himself, the more powerful the tendency to reject any form of diversity, to the point of declared paranoia, in which the idea of an uncontaminated unstained ego is the counterpart to the idea of an Other bearer of all evils and impurities. If, instead, the subject presents a certain degree of adoption of that *surplus* we cannot dispose of, then guilt emerges, also as the only signal of the drive force at work, in the form, in short, of a soiled conscience. We can imagine that this needs to silence the lambs/animals that moves Starling, as well as the devotion/doggedness for a job that involves catching the evil and saving the good (the innocent), arises from a subjective division, namely from a certain degree of assumption of the raunchy core that inhabits her, the same that inhabits us all. The death of her father, with which she identifies, reinforces this hypothesis: the hatred for those who abandon us, even by dying, can be very powerful. Here the plot is constructed in a very remarkable way. Also, because the film, and the novel it is based on, features *prequels* and *sequels* of the Hannibal saga, with an authentic cult following. A prequel movie, Peter Webber's *Hannibal Rising*, based on the book of the same name by Thomas Harris is from 2007. Lithuania, winter of 1944: the child Hannibal, the son of an aristocratic family impoverished by the revolution, has been left alone in the family castle with his younger sister aged 3 or 4, of whom he is tenderly fond and has tried to protect since their parents were killed during a Nazi bombing. When a gang of pro-Nazi looting killers breaks into their mansion, the two children try to hide and then to survive the brutality of their captors, until they decide to kill Mischa to satisfy their hunger. Hannibal too eats his sister's flesh (the root of his enjoyment in being a cannibal), though unwittingly. This fact will be revealed to him many years later by the last survivor of the group of torturers just before also being killed by the young Hannibal, who in the meantime has cultivated his vengeful/ bloodthirsty vocation by dedicating himself to the study of medicine and martial arts (and more precisely of samurai discipline, certainly no trifle). At this point Hannibal identifies entirely with his cannibalism (and from his point of view is perfectly justified in doing so). He too has someone to silence: Mischa/the innocent/the lamb, who

screams as the torturers drag her to her death (to literally slaughter her) and who Hannibal will continue to hear at night in his nightmares, just like Clarice and her lambs. A detail that appears in the novel and not the movie is worthy of note: the child Hannibal watches in horror, and moved by infinite pity, the capture and killing of a little deer which takes place not long before that of Mischa and has the same aim: eating. It comes across quite clearly how the identificational cores of Lecter and Starling, both the identification with the innocent/non-human living being and that to its opposite, the avenger of the innocent, are very similar. Both are moved by the need for the lambs to keep silent, not only for a question of identification, but also because the residual drive-based hate that in Starling, as we've seen, results in a subjective division and hence in a feeling of guilt. All this causes her to move within the domain of the law, though with some exceptions, as those who've read the saga know. Whilst Lecter belongs entirely to the side of identification with the avenger (after some partial yielding at the beginning of the affair, like when he discovers that he too fed on his sister's flesh or watches the killing of the deer) and can give free rein to his drive-related instances (and his relative *jouissance*, because, being a 'pure' psychopath, he knows no guilt or subjective division. He is not, therefore, subjected to the limits the law imposes on subjects as members of a community. Perhaps this is what makes him so likable, not only because ultimately he achieves justice in his own way, but also because he does quite freely what we neurotics, who are always dealing with the dilemmas of civilization and its *discontents*, cannot indulge in.

'Well, Clarice, have the lambs stopped screaming?' This is what Lecter (who has managed to escape from prison, just for a change, and can indulge in new 'meals') asks Starling during a memorable phone call just when she is receiving her special agent diploma after capturing Buffalo Bill and freeing Catherine. She neglects to answer; how can you answer a question like that? Is it possible for the lambs to stay silent? If what screams with them (even if it does not *speak*) is our intimate and foreign core, one would have to say no, if it is our de-relict Real as the horizon on which to place ourselves and 'all the cubs of the earth' (Ortese 1996), it would be better for the lambs not to be silent, for them to carry on screaming and keep reminding us. With regard to the first question, on the other hand, if the screams of the lambs gather our excess drives, to whatever degree they are correlated to guilt (in the case of Lecter, a happy cannibal, not at all), it is something we will have to deal with forever, as Freud (1930: SE XXI) knew full well, each in their own way and according to their own ethical measure.

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