

Outrageous Sirk-umstances: Hannibal and the Aesthetics of Excess

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Hannibal's cinematic citations are common knowledge amongst viewers of the show, aided by Bryan Fuller's own excited tweets about its visual indebtedness to such filmmakers as Stanley Kubrick [slide] and Brian DePalma [slide]. When I first began watching the show back in 2013, my first inclination was to see such homage as just that – stylistic flourishes that might delight cinephilic fans, but contributed little else. Yet, at least some of these flourishes, such as the show's penchant for rigidly symmetrical composition a la Kubrick [slide], in fact set the stage for meaningful disruption [slide] in ways that augment our understanding of the characters' inner worlds.

Such overt – even fannish – homage is part and parcel of *Hannibal*'s visual language; but there are other ways of understanding both *Hannibal*'s cinematic provenance and its significance. As I've been thinking about visual excess in *Hannibal* over the past half-year or so, the German émigré director, Douglas Sirk [slide] has repeatedly come to mind. Sirk is not to *Hannibal* what Kubrick, Cronenberg, DePalma and other filmmakers are; rather, based on certain similarities – both aesthetic and discursive – between the show and Sirk's films, he functions here as a heuristic device for better understanding *Hannibal*'s visual language, and particularly how it challenges the aesthetic and narrative norms of so-called 'quality TV' in the United States.

Given that this is an interdisciplinary conference, I'd like to begin with a brief introduction to Sirk and the critical reception of his films by both reviewers and scholars. Sirk began his career as [slide] a stage director in Germany, which would ultimately pave

the way for his scholarly acclaim in the United States. He immigrated to the United States just prior to World War II, eventually settling in Hollywood and directing a series of largely forgettable films for Columbia Pictures [slide]. It wasn't until he contracted with Universal-International Pictures that Sirk produced the melodramas that would establish him as an auteur. Yet critical recognition was long in coming: as 'women's films' centered on romance and domestic life, told in an almost lurid Technicolor, anti-realist style, Sirk's films [slide] *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), *Written on the Wind* (1956), *The Tarnished Angels* (1957), *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* (1958), and *Imitation of Life* (1959) were all but forgotten until he was featured in the April 1967 issue of the French film journal, *Cahiers du cinéma*.

From here, scholarship of Sirk's melodramas began to flourish within the nascent film studies programs of 1970s America, in work that centered on what was perceived as the films' ironic stance towards their feminine, domestic themes. Citing Sirk's stage directing career and demonstrated familiarity with the works of Bertolt Brecht [slide] scholars honed in on the ways his films enacted distanciation, described by Brecht as [slide] "stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity." A particularly popular form of Marxist critique in the late 1960s, distanciation involved invoking such reminders of narrative constructedness as direct address as a means of producing a viewing subject in whom political will remained intact and immune to the apolitical temptations of closed narrative.

Sirk scholars discerned this kind of distanciation in moments in his films where style overwhelmed the narrative, snapping the viewer out of narrative complacency and

into an ironic critique of American social mores and consumer culture – a perspective affirmed by Sirk himself. Among the most representative of such scenes comes in the 1955 film *All That Heaven Allows*, which I'd like to take a moment to show here. In it, widow Cary Scott, played by Jane Wyman, has been encouraged by her adult children to abandon a love affair with a younger man, with predictably devastating results [clip]. If it's unclear through the dialogue how Cary feels at the hands of her callous children, Sirk's visuals unequivocally drive the message home, showing Cary [slide] boxed in first by her daughter, who is resplendent in the vivid red of a sexual awakening denied to Cary, and then [slide] by the ersatz world of the television set.

So, what does this all have to do with *Hannibal*? Particularly from season two onward, *Hannibal* is rife with such instances of overdetermination, in which visuals almost hyperbolically reflect narrative, drawing attention to themselves in ways that echo, however unintentionally, Sirk. We see this in costume – [slide] Freddie Lounds's *His Girl Friday* ensemble [slide] and leopard skin print; Abigail Hobbes's deceptively innocent pastel pink and blue hospital wear; [slide] Alana Bloom's Joan Crawford pantsuit; [slide] and Bedelia DuMaurier's femme-fatale, not to mention all of Hannibal's own unconventional and sometimes off-putting suits; we see it in *mise en scene* – [slide] Hannibal's lecture at Lo Studiolo, and [slide] while he's enjoying Beverly's kidney; and we see it particularly in scenes such as this [clip]. As much as Cary is boxed in in *All That Heaven Allows*, Will here is quite literally divided [slide] between his twin desires to kill and flee with Hannibal, [slide] effectively trapped and unable to act on either.

If we might, then, see *Hannibal* as reflecting something of a Sirkian aesthetic, does it thus follow that *Hannibal*, too, is engaged in a kind of Brechtian distancing?

Does the show attempt to pull us from our complacency and make us question what we might otherwise unconditionally accept? There's certainly evidence that, at the very least, the unavoidable knowledge of what *exactly* is being so meticulously presented on Hannibal's dinner table acts as its own kind of distancing. Particularly when the [slide] beauty of the meal is one part of an emotionally meaningful tableau, we might consider our very morality as called into question [clip]. The same is true of other tableaux throughout the show – [slide] grotesque, even horrifying, but for their emotional resonance. What does it say of us, then, if we luxuriate in both their beauty and affective impact?

At the same time, I want to suggest that *Hannibal* equally enacts a critique of a different kind, one that is reflected in the turning of the critical tide that affected Sirkian scholarship of the 1980s and beyond. Original reviews of Sirk's films were almost wholly and vehemently negative, largely on the basis of their "failed realism" (Klinger 76) and "frankly feminine" (Ibid. 77) style. They were condemned as "high-class pulp fiction," riddled with "phony glamour" and "novelistic emotional entanglements," and dismissed as little more than cinematic soap opera. As Barbara Klinger writes, for reviewers, Sirk's films [slide] "signified the debasement of art into sentimentality and cliché" (78-79) – a critique that rested on [slide] "antipathy to the feminine" in which [slide] "the best one could hope for... is that someone would 'manfully impose sense where possible'" (Ibid. 79). Similarly, early scholarly reconsideration of Sirk's melodramas was also predicated on [slide] "maintain[ing] as great a distance as possible from the... imagined responses of women spectators constituting the demographic for these films" (Feil 31). In his 1990s critique of this earlier scholarship, Ken Feil extends antipathy of the feminine to include

gay men, noting that [slide], “insofar as both women and gay male audiences pose the threats of erotic attachment and complex identification with the characters and events of Sirk’s melodramas, film studies auteur critics deploy the abject images and connotations of sobbing women and campy queers in order to distinguish the authenticity and mastery of their Eisenhower-era auteur” (Ibid).

In other words, early scholarly reconsideration of Sirk’s soap operatic melodramas was dependent on distancing them from their female (and, Feil argues, gay male) audiences by means of focusing on their obvious and intended irony. Interesting, then, that such approbation uncannily reflects present-day distinctions between critically acclaimed ‘quality TV’ and [slide] “feminine genres like the romance, melodrama, and fairy tale” (Kustritz 1). Michael Newman and Elana Levine have observed [slide] that “much of what we identify as Quality, complex, and sophisticated in American television since at least the 1980s achieves that status in part through its ability to mark itself off from soap opera” (99). This, they argue, is accomplished primarily through a cinematic aesthetic that features complex lighting, composition, focal distance, and so on – all of which *Hannibal* exhibits in abundance; and it is in this sense, above all, that *Hannibal* fits within the broad framework of quality TV.

Yet differences between how a cinematic aesthetic is realized in *Hannibal* and in shows such as *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, or *Mad Men* begin to foreground the critical work enacted in *Hannibal*. The cinematography of quality TV often reflects its protagonists and their circumstances – alienated [slide], alone [slide], distant [slide]. They are the complex anti-heroes of their own realist stories, beleaguered by responsibilities no one understands and burdened by women whose only purpose seems

to be to make life even more difficult for them – white everymen whose sense of self and social standing is crumbling under the weight of a world out to get them.

Cinematography in *Hannibal* similarly reflects the centrality of its two protagonists' lives and, particularly in the first season, this is accomplished largely through [slide] visually and [slide] emotionally distanced images. But as Hannibal and Will's relationship begins to evolve through Will's deliberate and deceitful appeal to Hannibal's desire for his friendship, so too does the show's cinematography transition to a visual intimacy characterized by shallow focal length and extreme close-ups [slide], warm palette [slide], and tight composition [slide], heralding its slide into the murky, messy world of feelings.

As a show that is less a procedural about a cannibal-serial killer-psychiatrist, than an anti-realist melodrama centered the evolving and ever-intensifying interpersonal relationship between its *two* protagonists, *Hannibal* embraces emotion with devastating seriousness [clip]; and it does this even while the show is demonstrably aware of the often inherent ridiculousness of succumbing to hyperbolic emotional displays [slide]. Indeed, *Hannibal* demonstrates throughout a certain camp sensibility that rivals Sirk's own "us[es] of cliché as a means of undercutting romance and assaulting melodrama's typical emotional affect" (Klinger 154), as happy to "de-romanticize" its characters as romanticize them [clip]. It is this peaceful coexistence of sentiment and irony that sets *Hannibal* apart from typical quality TV; as Feil writes of Sirk, *Hannibal* [slide] "blurs [the] modernist distinctions between unselfconscious emotionality and social critique" (41) on which the legitimacy of quality TV rests, enacting a critique of equally modernist quality TV from within. Indeed, [slide] "in contrast to the modernist contract of cultural

contempt, distancing, and a centered critical subjectivity,” in *Hannibal* [slide] “love and contempt, empathy and distancing, critical identity and fan identity fluctuate” (Ibid.) reflecting and embodying our contemporary media moment, in which the lines that heretofore have defined and bounded both media and its consumption [slide] have begun to blur.

Works Cited

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