

‘the silence of the
lambs’



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The making and starring of feature films is renowned for being a male dominated career. Many lead roles in big budget Hollywood films have been acted by many male icons such as Robin Williams, John Wayne, Morgan Freeman and Sylvester Stallone. It seems that for the beginning of the 20th Century, the majority of lead characters have been male. It would be a mistake to assume that the mainstream media have never provided space for representations of strong and independent women. The British social realist soap opera, from 'Coronation Street' in the 1960s and 1970s, through to 'Eastenders' And 'Brookside' in the 1980s and 1990s, have consistently featured heroic female characters surviving against all the odds, in contrast to the relatively weak and unsympathetic male characters.

Yet, even in predominantly 'masculine' genres, such as science fiction, horror and action adventure films, there has been the emergence of a range of action heroines, as shown in such films as 'Alien' (1986) and 'Thelma and Louise' (1991). Although such films range from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, it is only in the last 20 years of the century that such films have risen. Despite the arrival in the late 1990s and the beginning of the 21st Century of films such as 'G. I. Jane' (1997) and 'Erin Brockovich' (2000) these are still very much isolated cases.

Although evidence of a widening range of masculine representations exists, including more sensitive, emotional images of fatherhood and male insecurity, there is still a presence of traditional forms of masculinity, be it the violent aggression of 'Reservoir Dogs' (1992) or the laddish sexism of 'Loaded' (1994). The hero in thrillers is generally male. For example, in 'Lethal Weapon' (1987) the lead character is Detective Sergeant Martin Riggs

(Mel Gibson). Riggs is a stereotypical male policeman; he shoots before he thinks and would rather be out in the line of fire than sat in the office doing the paper work. Riggs has suicidal tendencies following the death of his wife in an accident. This affects his work by making him unscathed by death, which has a positive effect on the outcome.

It is not unusual for a male policeman to have a partner or sidekick. In ‘Lethal Weapon’ Riggs has a partner Detective Sergeant Roger Murtaugh (Danny Glover). In this investigative essay, I intend to show how females are represented in psychological thrillers. Psychological thrillers are also male dominant. It was only with the release of ‘The Silence of the Lambs’ in 1991 that female heroines got the lead character.

‘The Silence of the Lambs’ is the kind of film that is both psychological and frightening at the same time. The 1991 film opens during the title sequence in the woods near Quantico, Virginia, where a young Federal Bureau of Investigation Academy trainee Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) is climbing up a rope on an incline, hauling herself up hand over hand. This sets the scene and is a perfect metaphor for the personal journey and ordeal she will soon experience in the film.

In ‘The Silence of the Lambs’, the lead character is Clarice Starling. Although the role is portrayed as a strong, individualistic woman in a male dominated career, her name symbolically signifies a feminine bird, trembling and quaint. From the very beginning of the film, it is clear that Clarice is one of the few female trainees at Quantico, because when called to see her supervisor, she enters a lift and is surrounded by red shirted males. The film

is probably most memorable for her introduction scene to the notorious, cannibal-psychiatrist Dr Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins). As she takes a slow tense walk along a dank row of medieval, high-security prison cells on her left to meet him.

This slow walk down the corridor shows her authority and determinedness not to let Dr Lecter get inside her head. After the long tense walk, she finds Hannibal Lecter, the brilliant, but insane criminal monster, imprisoned in a windowless, glassed in, dungeon-like cell, decorated with his own charcoal or crayon drawings of European cityscapes. His name is also symbolic, recalling the legendary, elephant-leading military leader Hannibal and Lecter or lecteur; a French word for reader becomes the intellectual, cultured component of his character. Filmed from Clarice’s point of view, the notorious psychiatrist makes a dramatic film entrance. He first appears standing, ironically still and at attention in his cell, watching her with twinkling, chillingly dead, blue eyes.

His hair is closely cropped and his head is tilted slightly in her direction. The menacing, fiendish, but polite, suave and gracious Hannibal takes the initiative and urges the clever, intelligent, but inexperienced Clarice to step closer to his cell to show her ID credentials. She complies trying to hide her fear from the lethal predator. Although Clarice is trying to dominate this scene by her outward appearance; for example, both her clothes and her posture connote that she is a strong woman, mentally more than physically, and that she knows what she wants and exactly how to get it. During their introduction, Clarice struggles to maintain her separate identity from him to avoid being overwhelmed – she never flinches away or averts her gaze, and

he begins to take an analytical and personal interest in Clarice. Perhaps the fact that she is un-nerved by his questioning suggests that she does not see him for what he really is.

This could be because she is too naive. “ You’re so-o ambitious, aren’t you? You know what You look like to me, with your good bag and your cheap shoes? You look like a rube. A well scrubbed, hustling rube, with a little taste. Good nutrition’s given you some length of bone, but you’re not more than one generation from poor white trash, are you, Agent Starling? And that accent you’ve tried so desperately to shed – pure West Virginia. What does your father do? Is he a coal miner? Does he stink of the lamp? You know how quickly the boys found you. All those tedious fumbling in the back seats of cars, while you could only dream of getting out.

Getting anywhere, getting all the way to the F... B.

.. I. ” These words strike deep into Clarice’s heart because she knows she has not lived up to her own expectations.

Her self-confidence has worn thin, and she is visibly shaken and ashamed. Yet, she composes herself and manages to swing back with concentrated anger, retorting that he should fill out the questionnaire: “ You see a lot, Doctor. But are you strong enough to point that high-powered perception at yourself? What about it? – why don’t you, why don’t you look at yourself and write down what you see? Or maybe you’re afraid to..

. ” This passage of speech clearly shows Clarice reverting to her emotionally strong self and dominating the scene once more. Outside the hospital after

being sent away, she is visibly upset and disturbed by her encounter with Lecter. When she looks at her old Pinto in the parking lot, she experiences a short flashback which takes her back to when she was ten years old, the daughter of a small-town West Virginia policeman/marshal. From the porch of the Starling house, she rushes into her biological father’s arms and embrace – and twirls her around. The young agent slumps next to her car in the parking lot, sobbing.

This suggests that although Clarice is brave and emotionally strong when face-to-face with Lecter, she is actually very vulnerable. Their fourth and final encounter plays out like a profound, perverted parody of a ‘love scene’. In the remarkable scene in the tight guarded room, both trade information and confide in each other – learning vital secrets, that each covets. The camera moves to closer angles (close up shots) on their faces as the scene progresses and the intimacy level intensifies.

As a teacher and fatherly guide, and as a vigilant but learning pupil, they fulfil roles that bring revealing awareness. Dr Lecter gives Clarice hints and clues that lead to the serial killer, suggesting the madman’s motivation and how the murderer might have begun his string of attacks. Clarice yields her ultimate emotional secret of a traumatic childhood event (with reference to the film’s poetic title). Simultaneously, he psychologically analyses her motives for being a rescuing hero and how she is attracted to vulnerability. As a frightened child, she tried to save a lamb from slaughter, and she still suffers dreams of lambs screaming: “Lecter: People will say we’re in love.

He clucks at her with his tongue) Anthrax Island. That was an especially nice touch, Clarice. Yours? Clarice: Yes Lecter: Yeah. That was good.

Pity about poor Catherine, though. Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock. Clarice: Your anagrams are showing, doctor. (She circles the cage, still keeping him in view) ' Louis Friend' ' Iron Sulphide.' Also known as fool's gold. Lecter: Oh Clarice, your problem is, you need to get more fun out of life.

Clarice: You were telling me the truth back in Baltimore, sir. Please continue now. In a domineering close-up which fills the screen with his forehead, the intimidating Lecter compares everything to her failed attempt to rescue a frantic, bleating lamb from the slaughter when she was a child to the present day motives regarding the rescue of another innocent victim, Catherine:

Lecter: You still wake up sometimes, don't you, wake up in the dark, and hear the screaming of the lambs? Clarice: Yes Lecter: And you think that 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. Clarice: I don't know. I don't know Lecter: Thank you, Clarice.

Thank you. Clarice: Tell me his name, doctor. (The sound of a door opening) Lecter: Dr. Chilton, I presume. I think you know each other. " Chilton appears with police, poised to take Clarice from Lecter's presence.

Although it is Lecter's ' turn' to reveal the serial killer's name, time has run out. As they pull her away, Lecter rises: " Brave Clarice. You will let me know when those lambs stop screaming, won't you? " As she reaches between the bars to take the file on Buffalo Bill from Lecter's extended hand, he strokes

her finger, which is a brief but shocking moment in the film. Clarice not only sees Lecter as the source for all her information about Buffalo Bill, but as a fatherly guide and a powerful mind. Maybe it is her naivety, or her inability to see Lecter’s true self, but it is not his psychopathic thoughts that affect her, it is his mind power.

Clarice sees Lecter as a substitute for her biological father, who was shot on duty when Clarice was young, because Lecter is the only person in her life to give her guidance and support when she has asked for it. Lecter also shows concern for her by asking: “ You will let me know when the lambs stop screaming won’t you? While the SWAT team and Crawford are mistakenly breaking into the wrong house in Illinois, Clarice is face to face with the uptight serial killer. In the climatic, terrifying chase sequence in the dungeon-like hideaway, she cautiously follows the madman down the stairway into the cellar with her gun drawn. She locates the kidnapped, hysterical girl who can only cry: “ Get me out of here! ” This shows the similarities between Catherine and Clarice.

Both Catherine and Clarice only want to be free. Catherine free from the capture of James Gumb and Clarice from the screaming of the lambs. Gasping for breath and crouching as she weaves back and forth in passageways lit by naked light bulbs, she finds herself in Gumb’s laboratory and skinning room, where big moths fly overhead. In a bathroom off the workroom, a female hand and wrist extend up out of a murky mixture in a bathtub.

As Clarice reacts in horror to this sight, the lights go out and she finds herself in total darkness. Gumb has fitted himself with night-vision goggles. From his perspective, everything appears in a greenish tint, and he watches her as she flattens herself against a wall and tries to get her bearings. As the serial killer reaches out with one hand to stroke her hair and the skin of her face, his fingers float through the air just inches in front of her. Then he pauses, raises his gun in the air, and cocks the hammer.

Its loud metallic click tips Clarice to his location. She spins around and fires flaming shots from her gun muzzle at him, at point blank range. She hits the floor and struggles to reload her gun cylinder, but there is no need. Gumb gurgles blood from his throat and dies a few feet away.

The front porch of the Gumb house is surrounded with an ambulance, TV crews and police cars. Still hugging Precious, Catherine is led to the awaiting ambulance. Crawford protectively cradles Clarice with his arm, asking if she is ok. In an abrupt cut to applause and the FBI's Academy's graduation, Clarice's name is read and she receives her diploma and congratulations. At the celebration party following the ceremony, Crawford, who used her intelligence and ambition to help him solve the serial killers case will be ultimately rewarded for the criminal's demise, is unable to find any words. He offers only brief congratulations, linking his pride in her to her respect for her father: " Your father would have been proud today.

After leaving Crawford, Clarice receives a long distant phone call from Lecter, disguised and calling from a phone at an open-air cafe at a tropical airport terminal. Her heroic, determined rescue of Catherine, the latest

female victim of a serial killer, has presumably silenced the lambs once and for all. In my analysis, I have tried to examine the character of Clarice Starling. Is she simply a representation of a stereotypical heroine, symbolic of modern womanhood, or is she a more complex character? There are many examples in modern cinema of strong successful heroines who come out on top for instance: 'Halloween H20' (1998), and 'Dangerous Minds' (1995). But is this all the character of Clarice made for? As Jodie Foster was quoted at the premier of 'Silence of the Lambs' in 1991 "What's great about this character is that her lot in life, as the hero/heroine, is to save the underdog, because she's lucky enough not to be the underdog anymore. I feel like there's never been a female hero who uses femininity as a warrior thing, and not like Rambo – Rambette – in underwear.

This is not some male version of a female hero. " I would now like to suggest as my conclusion that in Clarice Starling we have a multidimensional representation of a modern woman with all its complexity. She is certainly strong, successful, ambitious and courageous. Although in this film Clarice is represented as being emotionally weak, vulnerable and easily undermined. 'Silence of the Lambs' is certainly a groundbreaking film, in terms of being the first Hollywood blockbuster in history to portray women as being the stronger sex.