

## Research Article

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# “See My Heart”: Art and Alchemical Reasoning, or Character Transformation in Bryan Fuller’s *Hannibal*

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2017-0027>

Received August 30, 2017; accepted November 10, 2017

**Abstract:** Works of art seem to be used more and more frequently in scripted TV shows nowadays. Most often, they constitute a symbolic point of reference, an intertextual “interlude,” or merely a convenient plot device. However, Bryan Fuller’s 2013 TV series *Hannibal* goes beyond the stereotypical functions of art, using it as a sort of intermediary between literary and televisual fantasies and elevating its narrative status. It can even be argued that works of art in *Hannibal* constitute the key element to understanding character development and transmutation in the three seasons of the show. This article focuses on the ramifications of making Sandro Botticelli’s ever-elusive *Primavera* a striking aspect of *Hannibal*’s third season. Fuller foregrounds the painting’s motif of becoming in order to repurpose the literary franchise and its cinematic offshoots. As a result, a more in-depth portrayal of its principal characters is offered, together with their unending, but ultimately incomplete alchemical cycle of purification, “fiery love,” rebirth and death: stages representing the “enlightenment and perfection” (Gillies, *Botticelli’s Primavera* 133) of human souls. Alongside other masterpieces displayed in the series, *Primavera* helps destabilise the confines of the televisual medium and of the horror genre, while at the same time demonstrating the complexity of transmedial connections and influences.

**Keywords:** alchemy, art, cycle, interpretation, transmedialization, transmutation, TV

## Introduction

Bryan Fuller’s *Hannibal*, a three-season TV series launched on NBC in the years 2013–2015,<sup>1</sup> is an adaptation and a “preboot” (Brinker 318), or a quasi-prequel to Thomas Harris’s quadrilogy devoted to doctor Hannibal Lecter, a forensic psychiatrist who also happens to be a serial killer/cannibal. In many ways, the newly conceived *Hannibal* follows the original character’s footsteps; as Richard Logsdon observes, he “has about him an Old World European charm that he expresses through his love of classical music, classical art, and classical cuisine and that expertly conceals his cannibalistic cravings and makes him seem civilized” (53) and, at least from Will Graham’s point of view, “must come across as a man of remarkable erudition” (53). As was the case with his literary predecessor, his cannibalism “is never just about eating”—it offers “a means of exerting absolute domination over another person” (Magistrale 138). All in all, Fuller’s approach to the iconic franchise resembles that of a DJ with refined tastes. By sampling, reworking, repurposing and remixing the “choice” bits from the four novels, the creator was able to focus on the evolving relationship between the eponymous character and the already mentioned Will, a brilliant, if vehemently antisocial, FBI profiler.

<sup>1</sup> According to the news posted by several trade magazines and Fuller himself in August 2017, negotiations started to revive the series within the next few years: a factor which would greatly complicate the possibility of coming up with a conclusive interpretation of the already existing seasons; see Sharf.

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Each of the three seasons of the show had a distinct narrative arc which led to a radical change as regards Hannibal and Will. While Hannibal's manipulations made it possible to frame and incarcerate Will as an alleged murderer by the end of season one, in the following series of episodes the hyper-empathetic profiler tried to shake off Hannibal's dominance and give him a taste of his own medicine, but the season ended on a brutal note, with the not-so-gentlemanly doctor punishing Will for not succumbing to his "gift" of friendship. The third season of the beautifully shot, at times horrifically gruesome show, in which Will eventually acknowledges his darker instincts and admits to himself and others that he is fascinated by Hannibal and craves his love, was divided into two major arcs. The first part of that season took place in Florence, where Hannibal was able to live under a stolen identity, like his temporary partner in crime, personal psychiatrist Bedelia Du Maurier, while the remaining episodes constituted the so-called Red Dragon cycle, which culminated in the two male protagonists slaying Francis Dolarhyde and falling/jumping off a cliff into the sea, in a bloody embrace: "two damaged hearts beating together, two brains working in sync to become something so undeniably human that was both demonic and divine at the same time."<sup>2</sup>

In the present article, references will be made almost exclusively to the first seven episodes of season 3, in which the male protagonists undergo fundamental changes and their bond is brought from the subtext to the forefront. Intriguingly enough, the new stage of Hannibal and Will's relationship is underscored by the peculiar uses of Sandro Botticelli's *Primavera*. However, it will be argued that, rather than merely catalysing the characters' emotions, the microcosm featured in the mysterious painting makes it possible to reflect on *Hannibal*'s macrocosm, both in terms of how the story progresses and the aesthetic choices made by the filmmakers.

Of key relevance here is the idea of alchemical process, understood as a cycle of spiritual transformations aimed at elevating the soul and coded in works of art using specific colour palettes, spatial patterns, body arrangements and arrays of symbols. When inquiring into the importance of Botticelli's masterpiece in *Hannibal*, one should bear in mind that the use of *Primavera* is not limited to an intertextual reference, a mental shortcut, or a glib wink at those viewers who like to think of themselves as art connoisseurs, nor is it an empty decorative embellishment meant to confirm the uniqueness of the creators' ambitious design. Apart from being a significant structural device and a means of enriching the character development in the third season of the series, the painting encourages a very specific, alchemy-oriented interpretation of *Hannibal*'s protagonists and their life trajectories. Accordingly, Fuller's adaptation offers ways of visualizing character development which are organically interwoven with the themes of the story. Similarly to "the alchemical projections," which "sketch a picture of certain fundamental psychological facts and, as it were, reflect them in matter" (Jung 106), the oftentimes surrealist and Gothicized *mise-en-scène* in *Hannibal* helps to externalize human obsessions and motivations. Additionally, James Hawkinson's cinematography in the third season literally brings to the surface that which is ineffable, impossible to render in words: the mysterious and indescribable *unio mystica*, what famous Jungian disciple Marie-Louise von Franz referred to as "the condition of 'togetherness', which comes from participating in the same experience, cannot be explained not because one *wants* to make a secret of it, but because it is inexplicable and irrational and very complex" (69, 68).

An analysis of this kind, based on seemingly trifling details and yet striving to identify a general pattern, could certainly raise doubts as to the filmmakers' (expressed or not expressed) intentions and influences: as Angela Dalle Vacche warns, these two categories have always been problematic since, "like architecture, filmmaking is an industrial art characterized by collaborative authorship" (4). Issues connected with genre are of paramount importance, too. *Hannibal* the TV series owes a great deal to horror, a genre which "has always revolved around concepts and images of transformation and shape changing" (Magistrale 133) and, after all, it adapts novels which "highlight characters undergoing identity transitions and transmogrifications" (Magistrale 134). Nevertheless, focusing on a relatively brief presence of a work of art in a 39-episode TV show is an appealing idea: paradoxically, some of the characters portrayed in *Primavera* may be said to function almost as a foil to *Hannibal*'s protagonists and there are intriguing parallels and divergences between their identities/stories and ways of depicting them. Parenthetically, numerous, often mutually exclusive interpretations of Botticelli's enigmatic masterpiece bring about yet another similarity

<sup>2</sup> An excerpt from the comment by a poster nicknamed "joaquist0" made on 30 August 2015 and accompanying Michael Slezak's "post-mortem" article on the final episode of the series.

with Fuller's *Hannibal*, which, to quote Alison Willmore, was never "a procedural about finding killers," but rather "a drama about the battle for Will's soul."

## Transmedialization as Televisual Ekphrasis

The use of works of art in literature, either by showing them or discussing/describing them, has traditionally been referred to as ekphrasis, a term which emphasises how the verbal tries to subsume the visual. Naturally, the ekphrastic process also takes place in visual media. Therefore, as Laura M. Sager Eidt contends, the instances of using paintings in feature films and episodes of scripted TV make it necessary to expand and update the already existing definitions of ekphrasis. However, while Sager Eidt is interested primarily in how "the relationship between film and painting, or the triad of painting, novel and film" might "reshape the reader or viewer perceptions of the artworks depicted" (10), the present investigation will take the opposite route; namely, it will attempt to establish how the inclusion of the painting contributes to the perception and interpretation of the principal characters' arcs and motivations.

Siglind Bruhn contrasts ekphrasis with transmedialization and argued that these two notions complement each other, except the latter denotes "not the result but the process of the interartistic transfer" and is "an artificial term, combining the prefix 'trans-' for 'crossing a border' with an emphasis on the different media represented by the artwork responded to and the one responding to it" (8, note 5). Following Bruhn's approach to musical ekphrasis, Sager Eidt in her 2008 study, *Writing and Filming the Painting: Ekphrasis in Literature and Film*, focuses on "the ability of film to transmedialize a work of art by adapting the pictorial into the cinematographic language" (20). When characterising the filmic counterpart of literary ekphrasis, she makes the following comment:

Unlike the purely verbal nature of most literary ekphrases, however, film has at its disposal verbal, visual and auditory (e.g. background noises, music) means with which to transmedialize a painting. Thus, the discourse of filmic ekphrasis can be constituted by both of the sign systems (the verbal and the visual) that are separate and often in competition in a literary ekphrasis. In other words, filmic ekphrasis reenacts in the cinematographic medium itself the antagonism between word and image that is central to the tradition of ekphrasis. In literary ekphrasis, as in films, it is often the visual elements that revalue or subvert the written/spoken word. Likewise, just as literary ekphrasis often uses the discourse about the image as a self-reflective statement on its own status in comparison to the visual image, so can the insertion of works of art into a film function as a self-referential comment on the film as a "moving image" and its relationship to the silent, static image. (Sager Eidt 23)

A lot of the above observations could be applied to the televisual medium. However, with its use of Botticelli's *Primavera*, *Hannibal* inevitably broadens the scope of analysis or at least helps to refocus the discussion from the competitive aspect of the ekphrastic process to the cooperation of the verbal, the visual and the auditory in order to push forward the given narrative. In other words, the discourse of filmic ekphrasis does not have to be antagonistic (cf. Sager Eidt 23, particularly the idea that visual elements can "revalue or subvert the written/spoken word"), even if "a filmic quotation still transmedializes and appropriates the image" (Sager Eidt 42) and even if the given show becomes "self-aware" or self-referential as a result of employing works of art. On the contrary, filmic ekphrasis is capable of obliterating the traditional boundaries between content and form, which is particularly relevant in light of the fact that the first half of *Hannibal*'s third season has frequently been accused of being over-aestheticized at the expense of proper storytelling.

## Breaking down Spring

Our Work is the conversion and change of one being  
into another being, one thing into another thing,  
weakness into strength, bodily into spiritual nature.  
Julius Evola (qtd in Cirlot 8)

Sandro Botticelli's *Primavera* is routinely mentioned among the most mysterious paintings in the history of visual arts. Accordingly, it inspired numerous, often conflicting interpretations and there is still no universal

agreement as to the characters depicted by the artist, the nature of the connections between them and the significance of the particular moment in which they are captured. In a comment that seems representative of art critics and historians' bafflement and frustration, Émile Gebhart and Victoria Charles admit that "[w]hen trying to explain the enigma of the scene, the interpretations become astoundingly foggy," but conclude that "this very confusion leaves us at complete liberty to interpret it ourselves, if very vaguely" (115). Their description of *Primavera* occasionally does sound vague and uncertain as to the significance and emotional dynamic of the scene portrayed:

Eight figures rise at the forest's edge, on a multicoloured flowery meadow. They seem more like fleeting visions of a dream than actual people; they are the visible expression of one single idea. These eight figures are set up in five different scenes and it takes some discernment to detect a link between them. To the right of the viewer, a young girl is winding out of the arms of an aerial demon, a rather evil-looking greenish spectre with large wings that are stuck between the trees. She is naked under a transparent drapery, the blonde hair is ruffled, her arm held out in front of her. She is turning towards the demon and seems to beseech him. A branch of flowers is coming out of her mouth. She is about to run in front of the Primavera, but the woman personifying spring is in no way disturbed by the girl's distress. . . .

This entire scene is rather enigmatic. The evil demon and the nymph, who is desperately trying to escape, depict an alarming scene of violence. (Gebhart and Charles 118)

Federico Zeri, one of the many art historians supporting an allegorical reading of the painting, highlighted the motif of transmutation (5), whereby wood nymph Chloris gets impregnated by Zephyrus and becomes goddess Flora: an interpretation stemming from the conviction that Botticelli drew inspiration from a poem by Ovid describing this particular metamorphosis. The artist's intertextual gesture (effectively, the opposite of transmedialization) imitates Ovid's decision to transform one myth into another and likens Botticelli's status to that of a poet: "an Ovid among painters" (Barolsky 23). Zeri also stressed the cyclical nature of the scene depicted by the artist. For example, Botticelli's Mercury "in some ways creates circular continuity with the first figure on the right": he protects the garden against strong winds, but needs Zephyrus "to increase the speed of his wings" (Zeri 8).

Against the prevailing claims that the central figure of the painting is Venus, Jean Gillies argued that Botticelli's real intention was to represent Isis, Egyptian moon goddess who tricked angels into sharing the secrets of obtaining gold and silver and thanks to whose resistance and "delay in order to attain knowledge" (von Franz 57) alchemy was born. Gillies analysed the woman's rather stiff stance, the position of her hands and details of clothing, but especially the medallion between her breasts, consisting of "a lunar crescent surrounding an earth-red stone with a rough, undefined surface" ("The Central Figure" 14). In her effort to account for the rather striking choice of colours for the piece of jewellery symbolizing the goddess, Gillies explained that the crescent is gold, rather than silver, because the medallion reflects the light of sun, which "iconographically is outside the painting: the feminine moon reflects or incorporates the sun's masculine light" ("The Central Figure" 14). In a more recently published study of the masterpiece, the scholar confirmed the necessity of emphasizing "an alchemical correspondence to the astrological reading of *Primavera*" (Gillies 125). A similar approach was offered by, among other scholars, Ernesto Frers. He paid special attention to the three Graces in the painting, shown in an orphic circle consisting of *emanatio*, *raptio* and *remeatio* (giving, accepting and returning) and symbolising both an initiation and life cycle (30). Additionally, Frers drew attention to the influence of Renaissance paganism and occultism on the painting (25) and treated it as a hermetic description of a spiritual entity transforming into a material reality, with each person embodying one of the consecutive stages of the process (26-27).

Indeed, the colour palette in *Primavera* follows the colours and their sequence in the alchemical processing of metals. Using Carl Gustav Jung's methodology (which is ekphrastic insofar as it subsumes and verbalises the visual) Juan Eduardo Cirlot briefly described the main phases of the Great Work (i.e. spiritual evolution, rather than the effort associated literally with metallurgy and chemistry) desired by alchemists, enumerating:

(1) prime matter (corresponding to black), (2) mercury (white) and (3) sulphur (red), culminating in the production of the 'stone' (gold). Black pertains to the state of fermentation, putrefaction, occultation and penitence; white to that of illumination, ascension, revelation and pardon; red to that of suffering, sublimation and love. And gold is the state of

glory. So that the series black—white—red—gold, denotes the path of spiritual ascension. The opposite or descending series can be seen in the scale beginning with yellow (that is, gold in the negative sense of the point of departure or emanation rather than the point of arrival), blue (or heaven), green (nature, or immediate natural life), black (that is, in the sense of the neoplatonic ‘fall’). (56)

To be fair, Jung’s neat division of the alchemical process (more precisely, its spiritual variety) into four stages was criticized by James Elkins, who stressed the fact that “[m]any alchemical texts do not keep to the four-step sequence, and it is also common to find black, white, red, or black, white, green (*viriditas*), red, or an indefinite number of cycles, or no [colour] identifications at all” (65). However, from the point of view of this article, of greatest relevance is the plausibility of interpreting *Primavera* as a work of art whose very structure and subject matter depend on the alchemical cycle of transformations. Botticelli refuses to observe the epoch-specific conventions of perspective, temporal duration and succession, while “[t]he planetary colours of blue, green and gold are much in evidence” in his painting (Dee 22). As Frers observed, those aesthetic choices encourage the viewer to look beyond the dazzling beauty of the masterpiece and find complexity and transcendence underneath the ornamental. It is precisely this duality and the overall ambiguity of representation that connects *Primavera* with Fuller’s work, both as regards their formal properties and thematic preoccupations.

## The Half-baked Alchemist

“You no longer have ethical problems, Hannibal. You have aesthetical ones.”

Bedelia Du Maurier (*Hannibal*, season 3, ep. 1, “Antipasto”)

“The heart—it is a physical organ, we all know. But how much more an emotional organ—this we also know. Love, like blood, flows from the heart. Are blood and love related?

Does a heart pump blood as it pumps love? Is love the blood of the universe?”

The Log Lady (*Twin Peaks*, season 2, ep. 14, “Double Play”)

*Hannibal* makes numerous references to spiritual alchemy or, to be exact, to its degenerate form, imagined and practiced by the show’s eponymous protagonist. Ironically, throughout its three seasons Doctor Lecter seems to be extolling the value of spiritual integration, what Zora Burden refers to as “mental clarity to a perception of how things really are,” the taoist wholeness: “see[ing] realities with new eyes, . . . be[ing] resurrected.” But is he able to go beyond the visceral pleasures of psychological and physiological abuse, to really see the heart?

Like the descriptions of the alchemical process, the language spoken by the characters (re)imagined by Fuller at times verges on the pretentious and is often esoteric, full of bizarre metaphors, euphemisms, riddles and half-truths reflecting the dualities of human nature. The series is surrealist in its look; Jungian in its archetypal leanings (whereby Hannibal is firmly associated with fire and Will represents the element of water) and insistence on the need to return to instincts; alchemical insofar as it consistently references the idea of spiritual development through transmutation and unification/merging/blurring of selves. Situational archetypes (death, rebirth, good vs evil, wisdom vs ignorance) abound as well as setting archetypes (Will drenched in sweat, standing in the middle of a river—his immersion in the unconscious symbolized by dreams, voices, visions; cf. Hauck) and character archetypes (evil genius, the magician, star-crossed lovers, the creature of nightmares, trickster, devil, etc.).

*Primavera* is mentioned and shown for the first time in the eponymously titled second episode of season 3, as an inspiration for the infamous Monster of Florence, a murderer who had the habit of arranging his victims as a beautiful painting, clearly aspiring to be an image creator. Detective Rinaldo Pazzi recalls seeing young Hannibal in Uffizi when he made sketches imitating fragments of Botticelli’s work. Pazzi shows Will a photo of a couple slain (allegedly by Hannibal) and posed in exactly the same manner Zephyrus and Chloris are represented. Will knows Hannibal is in Florence and while travelling to the city in “Contorno” (the fifth episode of the season), he hands Hannibal’s old acquaintance a small reproduction of the painting on a Uffizi-sold postcard. In the middle of the episode shots of Hannibal playing the harpsichord are interspersed with close-ups of his hand sketching the faces of Botticelli’s garlanded nymph and the god of winds, just like he recreated them two decades earlier.

It is only in the following episode, “Dolce,” that the viewer sees the painting in its natural locale. Curiously enough, while sketching the above mentioned Chloris and Zephyrus, Hannibal gives them the faces of Bedelia and Will, respectively. The obvious question is whether Hannibal identifies with any of the characters portrayed by Botticelli and whether he perceives himself as an agent of transmutation, a modern-day incarnation of Hermes (cf. Battistini 279) or simply as a modern-day version of an almighty devil:

Will Graham, the fragile ego of the show's psyche, is the one initially trapped in matter, and his release from it—the alchemical spiritualization of matter, if you will—heralds Hannibal's entrapment within it. Bored and motivated by his own ends, Hannibal then becomes the ultimate Mercurial Spirit trapped by the alchemist, caught in a bottle or trapped in a tree to be freed by a Magician. But what are the ends of the Devil, and, truly, God? (Sullivan)

Hannibal may have demonstrated a reductive interpretation of the painting, but his shallowness is interesting insofar as it reveals something about his understanding of people and relationships. Firstly, it seems that he considers genuine transformation to be possible solely through domination and violence. Perhaps that is why the idea of equating Chloris with Bedelia appeals to him so much. The psychiatrist is reluctant to participate in Hannibal's transgressions, would rather content herself with merely observing. Hers is a learning experience—she is “in it” largely for research purposes—but on the other hand, it is highly doubtful she is on a path to spiritual perfection (cf. Frers 27) or even aspires to it. Like Chloris, she needs to be pushed, forced onto the scene and into action by fear tactics. Secondly, and ironically, by imagining the sensitive, withdrawn Will as Zephyrus, Hannibal has tapped into his would-be lover's darker side with an impressive prescience, and maybe even prefigured his readiness to accept his shadow, to become a willing and reliable partner in (serial) crime and manifest pettiness in place of logic and moral judgment.

Sitting on a bench before the masterpiece in the pivotal episode of the series, titled “Dolce,” Hannibal asks his insecure companion about the difference between the past and the future. Will waxes poetic about destiny and astrology, wonders if their stars “are the same,” expresses the desire to understand clearly what he is seeing and admits that meeting Hannibal was a turning point in his life, but now everything is starting to blur: “[y]ou and I have begun to blur” (a response reminiscent of the alchemical notion of merging, modelled on the phrase attributed to Isis: “I am you and you are me”; cf. von Franz 69).

The concept of blurring is then visualised in an oneiric, kaleidoscopic love scene between Will's former confidante, Alana Bloom and her girlfriend, Margot Verger. In one of the next sequences, Will and Hannibal's imaginary dinner (all in Will's head since he has just been drugged by his companion) is featured and presented as an ink-blot moving image. The audio-description of the merge scene defines the accompanying sound as “scraping on metal, something sizzling,” a reference to frying and, more obliquely, to drug fumes. Out of a sickly yellowish background, Will's face emerges first, surrounded by dark and blood-red wisps. The butter sizzling on the pan looks exactly like a bar of gold. The negative space amid the sizzling fat transforms into Hannibal's and Will's black silhouettes at the table and the colour palette slowly progresses towards greenish hues. Seen from Will's subjective point of view, Hannibal dominates and suddenly becomes a wendigo, on whose branch-like horns the smoky wisps arrange themselves into an image of two men facing each other, only to become ever blackening striped vortices.

The scene lasts one minute, during which a grotesque alchemical cycle takes place, whose misguided intent and incompleteness seem all the more brutal once Will wakes up from his hallucination and is, again, injured and traumatised by Hannibal. (Their newly confirmed psychological closeness is summed up accurately by Jack Crawford in the next episode of the series, titled “Digestivo”: “I know them. They are identically different, Hannibal and Will.”<sup>3</sup>) The drops of blood squirting from Will's head like a gravity-defying shower and vanishing into a cloudy sky in the final moments of “Dolce” bring an immediate association with the scene in the middle of “Aperitivo,” the fourth episode of the series, in which Jack reminisces about being attacked by the not so good doctor. Drops of his blood also rise towards the sky and gradually become white like stars during the ascension (the flashback functions as an extension of the preceding scene, in which Mason Verger assures Alana: “I'm right with the Risen Jesus” and discusses the

<sup>3</sup> Quoted after the episode recap at <https://tv.avclub.com/hannibal-digestivo-1798184383>.

idea of revenge; even more relevantly, it transitions into Jack's scenes with his dying wife). Once again, we are firmly in the occult territory, with images known from the tarot, where the moon (Will's planet) is:

traditionally portrayed in the vicinity of water, guarded by dogs. . . . [which are] are a warning to the moon to stay away from the realm of the sun (the logos) . . . . Long, yellow rays stream out from this disk, intermixed with other shorter, reddish rays. *Inverted drops of water* [emphasis mine] are floating in the air, as if attracted by the moon. It is a scene which illustrates the strength and the dangers of the world of appearances and the imagination. (Cirilot 217)

Apart from the repeated use of drops of blood in slow-motion, particularly striking is the motif of intersecting red, yellow and white circles and dots (colours of the alchemical process), established as a visual theme in the first minutes of season 3 premiere and exploited rather obsessively throughout the first half of the final season. The circles and dots "accompany" Will's recovery (the LEDs of the equipment sustaining his life) and talks with imaginary Abigail. They also appear in the Norman chapel scenes, in which he is looking at a beating heart unfolding into a preposterously repulsive stumbling carcass, with hooves and horns (Hannibal's "valentine written on a broken man"). These almost abstract circular forms are mostly votive candles, blurred in the background, their colours fluctuating depending on the emotional make-up and the point of view assumed in the given sequence, e.g., when Will and Hannibal meet for the first time at the end of episode 1: the former—still confused and traumatised—sees only dark yellow lights, while the latter notices blurry reddish circles (albedo and citrinitas vs. rubedo: the love prospects must seem quite realistic to Hannibal at this point because of Will's declaration of forgiveness). The circles and dots are also part of the *mise-en-scène* in the scenes involving Jack Crawford, who is mourning the death of his wife and receives Hannibal's letter of condolences.

Hannibal draws pleasure and satisfaction from being able to orchestrate events and manipulate people, even if one of those "pet projects" is Will—a man with whom Lecter falls in love (however he understands the concept of love). Most of all, Hannibal wants to be treated as a true artist and therein lies the problem. Ultimately, he turns out to be only an amoral imitator, and a somewhat clueless copyist, at that. Hannibal is no devil and no alchemist. He is merely capable of a nightmarish perversion of the alchemical ritual denoting love and spiritual elevation. The relationship between the two men is abusive even if Will chooses to follow Hannibal and accept his love ("It's beautiful," he comments on the blackness of blood in the moonlight, which symbolises his and Hannibal's successful hunt for Dolarhyde in the series finale). Coercion should not be a prerequisite to self-recognition, to seeing anyone's heart. A juxtaposition of *Primavera* and the series makes it possible to appreciate the relevance of the masterpiece in highlighting Hannibal's delusions of grandeur and his similarly misguided notion that forcing Will to embrace his darkness is an act of true love. Similarly, Will may be on track to self-recognition, but even when he hugs his tormentor in the cliff scene, his final gesture (pushing himself and Hannibal off the cliff) could be interpreted not only in romantic terms; it seems perfectly legitimate to suggest that he may have seen it as the only way to remove Hannibal or that he could not live with the newly gathered awareness of who he is and what he is capable of. Apparently, true individuation does not afford the privilege of having only aesthetical concerns.

## Seeing is Believing

"I see my end in my beginning."

Hannibal Lecter (*Hannibal*, season 3, ep. 6, "Dolce")

In this section, selected screencaps from Bryan Fuller's *Hannibal* are juxtaposed with Botticelli's *Primavera* characters in order to demonstrate the ways in which the show's cinematography helps to visualize the idea of alchemical cycles and transformations.





**Figure 1.** The photographic reproduction of Sandro Botticelli's *Primavera* available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primavera\\_\(painting\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primavera_(painting)), dated to 1482 and linked to the following source/photographer: <http://www.googleartproject.com/collection/uffizi-gallery/artwork/la-primavera-spring-botticelli-filipepi/331460/>. Read from right to left, *Primavera* celebrates the desired progression in the “healthy” alchemical cycle, from darkness to whiteness to redness.



**Figure 2.** Sandro Botticelli, details of *Primavera*; Allegory of Spring, c. 1478, Galleria degli Uffizi. Image and original data provided by SCALA, Florence/ART RESOURCE, N.Y.; [artres.com](http://artres.com); [scalarchives.com](http://scalarchives.com) | (c) 2006. The detail above shows Venus, or rather Isis, with her characteristic pendant, and the idea of passionate, blind love embodied by the Cupid's arrow. [https://artstor.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/venus\\_detail.gif?w=314](https://artstor.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/venus_detail.gif?w=314).

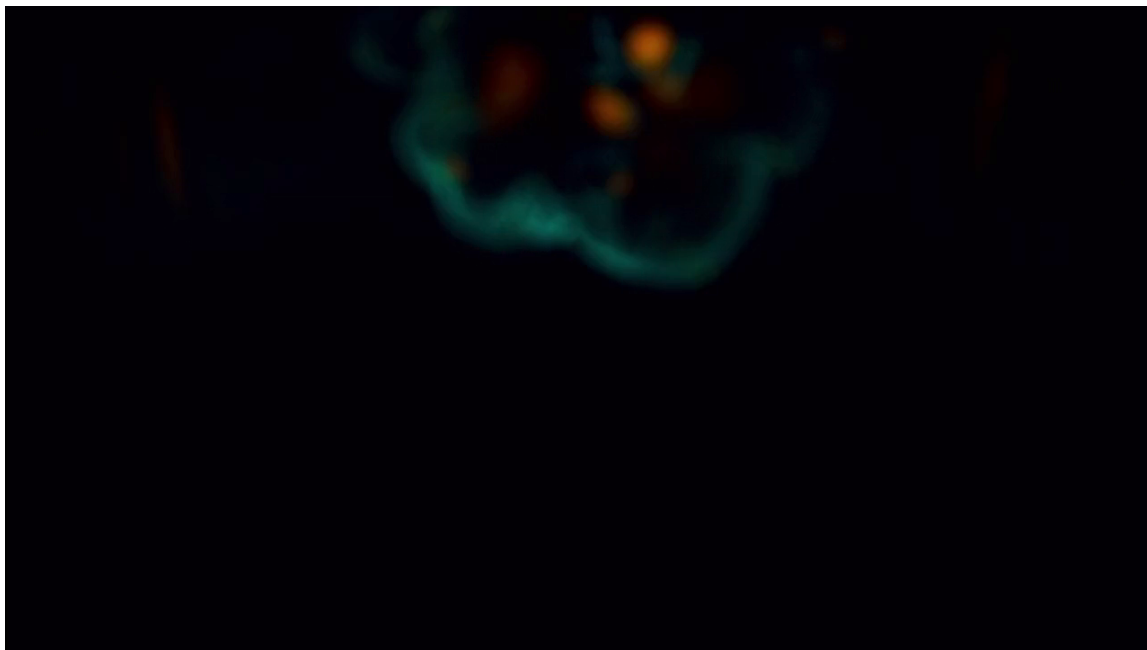




**Figure 3.** The detail focuses on the aggressive Zephyrus (whose wings are stuck in the branches of the tree) and fearful Chloris, who is literally pushed by him onto the scene. <https://artstor.wordpress.com/2013/03/20/spring-mysteries-botticellis-primavera/>.



**Figure 4.** The symbolic beginning of the “nigredo” stage rendered by dark green colour palette at the beginning of the third season of the series, right after the flashback from season 2. Symbolically, the visual is also a reminder that the first half of season 3 is “really about the afterlife,” mostly “in the sense of life after trauma,” which irrevocably changes the characters, including Hannibal (MM). The key of Hannibal’s motorbike is put into ignition. The fumes are reminiscent of Zephyrus’s angry/furious breath. Screenshot from *Hannibal*, season 3, episode 1, “Antipasto,” directed by Vincenzo Natali.



**Figure 5.** The fuel-air mixture ignited by the spark explodes into brown and orange. Screenshot from *Hannibal*, season 3, episode 1, “Antipasto.”



**Figure 6.** The rear light of Hannibal's bike is match-cut with a full moon. This visual codes the pairing of opposites, or, to use Jung's description, the “marriage” of consciousness and unconsciousness, symbolized by the closeness of Sol and Luna (106); it also foreshadows/foregrounds the theme of love between Hannibal and Will and, alchemically speaking, announces the possibility of transitioning from the albedo to rubedo stage. Worth recalling is Zeri's comment about Venus's (more likely, Isis's) medallion in *Primavera*, in which “the flame of the fire of love” is “captured by the ruby set into the pendant” (Zeri 12). Screenshot from *Hannibal*, season 3, episode 1, “Antipasto.”



**Figure 7.** The motif of Jungian *Mysterium Coniunctionis* returns in Season 3, ep. 2, “Primavera,” directed by Vincenzo Natali. The screencap shows Will waking up in hospital, after the ordeal inflicted by Hannibal which took place at the end of season 2 and is brought back, almost in its entirety and maybe in Will’s nightmarish dream, at the beginning of the episode. Medical equipment is the source of intersecting circles of light which, however, could also be a projection of Will’s subconscious and appear only in the brief moment of lucidity between Will’s coma and his subsequent hallucination involving dead Abigail’s visit to the hospital ward.



**Figure 8.** Injured and bedridden, Jack Crawford has a dream in which he relives Hannibal’s attack. Drops of his blood defy gravity and ascend to the sky, becoming white like stars (the reversal of the proper alchemical cycle from albedo to rubedo)—the camera pan first assumes Jack’s point of view and then tracks away from his body in an almost rotating fashion, as if the dead wife were “looking” at him from above. Screencap from *Hannibal*, season 3, episode 4, “Aperitivo,” directed by Marc Jobst.





**Figure 9.** “See. This is all I ever wanted for you, Will. For both of us,” Hannibal assures Will. Screenshot from the thirteenth (and final) episode of season 3, “The Wrath of the Lamb,” directed by Michael Rymer.



**Figure 10.** Will embraces his true nature by embracing Hannibal. Screenshot from the thirteenth (and final) episode of season 3, “The Wrath of the Lamb.”



**Figure 11.** The split second before Will pushes Hannibal off the cliff. The yellowish light on the right (corresponding to the alchemical stage of *citrinitas*) is dominated by greenish hues. This is not the beginning of a new cycle, but rather a devolution into its initial phases. Screenshot from the thirteenth (and final) episode of season 3, “The Wrath of the Lamb.”



**Figure 12.** Return to *nigredo*? The tracking shot moves from over the cliff towards the murky waters below. Darkness prevails. We are back to square one (and to Will’s natural element); the descent to hell is happening again. Screenshot from the thirteenth (and final) episode of season 3, “The Wrath of the Lamb.”

## The Search for Televisual Gold

As an adaptation and a piece of filmmaking which is so obviously indebted to the conventions employed by horror literature and film, *Hannibal* embodies the spirit of Gothic, whose “components can be reordered in infinite combinations, because they provide a lexicon that can be plundered for a hundred different

purposes, a crypt of body parts that can be stitched together in myriad different permutations" (Spooner 156). Furthermore, its subject matter and idiosyncratic style bring to mind Fred Botting's argument that Gothic is the writing of excess and "remains fascinated by objects and practices that are constructed as negative, irrational, immoral and fantastic" (1), opting for "an aesthetics based on feeling and emotion" (2). *Hannibal* is, then, in some ways a perfect platform for dwelling on the actions and motivations of dark, irrational, morally unacceptable characters, and, additionally, a cultural artefact which uses the potential of transmedialization to the fullest.

Over a century ago, famous art historian Adolf Paul Oppé warned that "Botticelli's work is lively, but the life it embodies is not high and desirable. . . . His lack of universality leads him to exaggeration, a lack of measure. If one has too much to do with him, one loses the true sense of life" (qtd. in Mandel 11). The parallels with *Hannibal* are almost exhilarating: it is, after all, a show which excels in focusing on an evil genius and his "disciple"; it thrives on crazy aesthetic; it demands attentive viewing and garners enthusiastic reviews from critics as well as exuberant fans. But there is an even more general level of comparisons to consider: how, perhaps inadvertently, the alchemical approach to the painting might be helpful in emphasizing the specific properties of the scripted TV medium and the consequences of playing with its conventions or challenging them.

The motif of becoming which fuels the alchemical process is crucial also in the case of narrative arcs spanning several episodes or entire seasons, and never-ending sagas and interactions between characters who love, hate, destroy and transform one another; who seem to be constantly evolving and yet cannot change their essence; who soap-operatically die only to be revived by the ever-hungry audiences, greedy executives and TV "magic." In the context of televisual flow genres and productions tend to blur, its rhythm—punctuated by reboots and cancellations, the recycling of characters and (arche)types, popular tropes and story clichés. Subjected to rigid rules aimed at engaging the viewership and extract as much "gold" as possible, episodes and seasons are constructed in such a way as to ensure the deferral of pleasure resulting from learning important things about characters and storylines (which resembles the delay of revelations in alchemy—and, metatextually speaking, the process of analysing scripted TV can be time-consuming and frustrating, too). Narrative closure is difficult to achieve and fully accept (*Hannibal* being a representative example of the said tendency).

Rowena Clarke's idea that "*Hannibal*'s presentation of the aestheticization of murder [can] be understood as a comment on the ethics of television violence and the viewers it shapes, as well as the alchemy of television's so called 'golden age' in which pulp sensibilities have transmogrified into 'quality TV,'" is remarkable for capturing the specific sociocultural and economic moment in which television shows are pitched, developed, produced, marketed and distributed. Taking into account the importance of, literally, *chemistry* between characters and endless demand for their transformations, it is easy to appreciate the validity of alchemical metaphors and comparisons. Making TV is, in essence, an endless cycle, aimed at financial success, propelled by an ambition to create a sizzling hot product and to make a difference despite growing expectations and oversaturated markets. The term "golden age" is hardly an exaggeration in the era of peak TV, when showrunners and creators are constantly searching for the next Great Work, for the opportunity to find love among the viewers and strike gold.

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