

The Monster Without: *Red Dragon*, the Cleft-Lip, and the Politics of Recognition

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Rarely represented in popular film, the cleft lip and palate is more often than not used as the locus of some kind of monstrosity. Of films featuring characters affected by cleft lip and palate, for example, at least five figure them as agents of violence or death. From the school bully,¹ to a hired killer,² to a serial killer,³ to a zombie,⁴ it is common to use the cleft lip as a cue for menace, or as a thing to be feared. On the other side of violence, the recent film *Psycho Beach Party*⁵ features a young girl with a cleft lip as the first to be killed by a serial killer targeting youth with disabilities. Even the Swedish film *Den Enfoldige Mördaren*,⁶ or "The Simple-minded Murderer," acclaimed for the sympathetic portrayal of its protagonist, features a killer with a cleft lip.

Following in this tradition, the recent film *Red Dragon*⁷ features a serial killer whose cleft lip is the primary factor motivating his murderous behaviour. Although the film initially capitalizes upon the tradition of linking cleft lip and palate with homicidal psychopathy, however, it does so through a keen awareness of the politics of identity formation, and so has the effect of ultimately shifting the locus of monstrosity away from the cleft lip, and toward those social systems of

¹ Frank Whaley, *Joe the King* (USA: Lions Gate, 1999), videorecording.

² Frank Tuttle, *This Gun for Hire* (USA: Universal Studios, 1942), videorecording.

³ Michael Mann, *Manhunter* (USA: MGM, 1986), videorecording

⁴ David Cronenberg, *The Brood* (USA: MGM, 1979), videorecording

⁵ Robert Lee King, *Psycho Beach Party* (USA: Strand Releasing Home Video, 2001), videorecording.

⁶ Hans Alfredson, *Den Enfoldige Mördaren* (Sweden: Kommunenes Filmcentral), videorecording.

⁷ Brett Ratner, *Red Dragon* (USA: Universal Studios, 2003), videorecording.

representation that would constitute the cleft lip and palate as such. With particular attention to the image of the mirror, this paper is concerned with offering a psychoanalytic reading of the film, through the Lacanian concept of the mirror stage, in order to demonstrate certain ways in which *Red Dragon* subtly deconstructs the filmic tradition that has, thus far, failed to do justice to the cleft lip and palate as a social issue.

Red Dragon

Based on the book by Thomas Harris,⁸ *Red Dragon* is the third installment of what Universal Pictures calls its “Hannibal Lecter Trilogy,” and the prequel to the Academy Award Winning *The Silence of the Lambs*.⁹ The film follows FBI investigator Will Graham (Edward Norton) in his efforts to track a serial killer who, by the start of the film, has already killed twice. This unknown killer, at first referred to as the ‘tooth fairy,’ focuses his attention on families, which he slaughters by shooting the children silently in their beds before proceeding to the master bedroom where he shoots the husband/father and, finally, rapes and murders the wife/mother. Aside from his brutality, what makes the killer especially distinctive, however, is a peculiar practice involving mirrors. Surveying the scene of the second of the two murders, Graham makes a realization that marks an important turning point in the case, which he speaks into a tape recorder:

He dragged the bodies into the master bedroom, but why bother? They were already dead, and none of them got the same [pause] extra attention as Mrs. Leeds....Small pieces of mirror were inserted into the orbital sockets of the victims. This occurred post-mortem. Why did you put mirrors in their eyes?...The pieces of mirror make their eyes look alive! He wanted an audience! He wanted them all line up, watching him when he touched her!

The smashed mirrors and deliberate placement are crucial in developing a preliminary profile of the killer. When Graham visits the infamous Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) for advice on the case, Lecter makes

⁸ Thomas Harris, *Red Dragon* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 2002).

⁹ Jonathan Demme, *The Silence of the Lambs* (USA: MGM, 1991), videorecording.

the observation that “This is a very shy boy, Will. I’d love to meet him. Have you considered the possibility that he is disfigured, or that he may believe he is disfigured?”

There is a degree of ambiguity in Lecter’s statement. Does Lecter mean to suggest simply that the killer is facially disfigured? Or is he also making some kind of moral judgment, a kind of disfigurement of the soul? Although the preferred meaning is clearly the former, without qualification, Lecter’s suggestion easily plays into certain taken-for-granted physiognomic assumptions on the part of the audience. Much research has been done into the effect of appearance on moral perception, with findings that, following Johann Lavater, the father of modern physiognomy, beauty functions as a heuristic for goodness. As Lavater famously suggested, “beauty and deformity of the countenance is in a just and determinate proportion to the moral beauty and deformity of the man.”¹⁰ The notion of disfigurement, then, functions simultaneously as a moral and aesthetic judgment, or rather as if the moral and the aesthetic were identical. Hence, prior to seeing the killer’s face, the film has already established certain aesthetic expectancies on the part of the audience.

By the time we *see* the killer, Francis Dolarhyde (Brilliantly played by Ralph Fiennes), therefore, we already know him as a monster; having been given a set of monstrous signifieds, the audience must only await a kind of condensation into the signifier of the face, a movement from awareness to identification, from the fact that there is a killer to the knowledge of who the killer is. For the first third of the film, then, the audience’s position is echoed by Will Graham in conversation with Jack Crawford, head of the Behavioral Science Unit of the FBI in Quantico, Virginia: “He’s got no face to me.”

When Dolarhyde’s face is finally revealed, it is in no way disappointing to what we would expect from the serial killer to whom we have already been introduced. As the voyeuristic camera ascends the staircase to the attic of a picturesque mansion, it comes upon the figure of Francis Dolarhyde at his workout bench, lifting a massive amount of weight while yelling into the air, tormented by the voice of his grandmother, angry and threatening to cut off his genitals:

Oh Francis, I’ve never seen a child as dirty or disgusting as you. Look at you! You’re soaking wet! Get out of my bed, go up to your room. Shut up you dirty little

¹⁰ Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, Ed. And Trans. Thomas Holcroft (New York, NY: R. Worthington, 1880), 99.

beast! I should have put you in an orphanage, grandson or not. Into the bathroom. Take off your nightshirt, and wipe yourself off. Hurry up! Now give me my scissors from the medicine chest. Take that filthy thing in your hand and stretch it out. Now, look down.. Do you want me to cut it off?! Do you?! I pledge you my word Francis: if you ever make you're bed dirty again I'll cut it off. Understand?!

Dolarhyde racks the weight and sits up, but we do not yet see his entire face. A stocking covers his eyes and nose, revealing only a toothless mouth into which he inserts a dirty set of crooked dentures modeled after his grandmother's. Making gruesome faces into a broken mirror, Dolarhyde's face is revealed through a single distinguishing feature. Given the physiognomic expectancies established during the first part of the film, comes as no surprise to find that the face of evil has a cleft lip.

The structure of our introduction to Francis Dolarhyde, therefore, is such that the monstrosity of his actions are condensed, not in the person, but rather in the disfigurement. To this extent that Dolarhyde is obscured in the film by the salience of his facial deformity, his cleft lip functions as a synecdoche, as a part that not only stands in for the whole, but also into which the entirety of his personhood is reduced. By alienating Dolarhyde from the totality of his personhood, and reducing him to his cleft lip, he is no longer represented as a person committing monstrous acts, but rather as a monster from whom such acts would certainly be expected. The cleft lip, in this case, serves as an explanatory principle for the commission of monstrous acts and, to this extent, *Red Dragon* successfully constructs Dolarhyde as a monster by mobilizing latent social anxieties located within a long physiognomic tradition that would conflate aesthetic and the moral.

Red Dragon, however, does not stop at the mere use of the cleft lip as a symbol of Dolarhyde's monstrosity, but ultimately deconstructs the reductionism so typical of other representations of persons affected by cleft lip and palate. The film accomplishes this through a subtle performance of identity politics, and an awareness of the processes by which subjectivities are formed and violated in relation to the gaze of others.

The Lacanian Mirror Stage

For Lacan, the mirror stage marks the moment at which a child first contracts their social identity. Citing an experiment conducted by Baldwin, Lacan's 1949 lecture on the mirror stage points to the moment in

a child's development when, in contrast to a chimpanzee, which will realize its mirror image as illusory and quickly lose interest, they will, with jubilation, assume the image as coincident with itself.

Unable as yet to walk, or even to stand up, and held tightly as he is by some support, human or artificial (what in France we call a '*trotte-bébé*'), he nevertheless overcomes, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the obstructions of his support and, fixing his attitude in a slightly leaning-forward position, in order to hold it in its gaze, brings back an instantaneous aspect of the image.¹¹

For Lacan, the subject first comes to assume its identity—or ego—through an identification with its specular image, or with itself as for another: “We have only to understand the mirror stage as *an identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the name: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image.”¹²

More than simply affording the infant an image with which to identify, however, the mirror, in allowing the infant to see itself as if it were an other, positions it within its field of vision as a whole (as *gestalt*) rather than as a fragmented body.¹³

The fact is that the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power is given to him only as *gestalt*, that is to say, in an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent than constituted, but in which appears to him above all in contrasting size (*un relief de stature*) that fixes it and in a symmetry that inverts it, in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him.¹⁴

¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), 1-2.

¹² Lacan, p. 2.

¹³ Lacan, p. 4-5

¹⁴ Lacan, p. 2.

The specular image *gives* the child their face, a face that they could not otherwise know or experience (for one cannot see their own face save for as reflected by some external, and always already imperfect, medium). Paradoxically, then, the subject cannot contract their identity as an ego until they identify with a face that is not theirs, but, instead, with a face that is *for others*. As Evans explains,

In the mirror stage the infant sees its reflection in the mirror as a whole/synthesis, and this perception causes, by contrast, the perception of its own body (which lacks motor coordination at this stage) as divided and fragmented. The anxiety provoked by this feeling of fragmentation fuels the identification with the specular image by which the ego is formed.¹⁵

The subject, then, is formed through identification with an illusory wholeness, of themselves as they *appear* under the gaze of others.

Identity Politics and the Locus of Monstrosity

In *Red Dragon*, then, we can read Francis Dolarhyde's insistence upon breaking mirrors—both in his own home and in the homes of his victims—as symptomatic of a kind of failed identification during the mirror stage of his development. The shattered or fragmented mirror in *Red Dragon* is representative of the fragmentary gaze with which Dolarhyde was compelled to identify. Under the gaze of others and, in particular, under the gaze of his grandmother, Dolarhyde is refused an image of himself in the unified gestalt of his body and given, instead, a fragmented image that reduced him to his cleft lip.

As mentioned, our first exposure to Dolarhyde's face is, not as a whole, but rather obscured except for the alienated feature of his cleft lip. Gesturing into the broken mirror, and silently growling through a set of crooked dentures, we observe that specular image with which Dolarhyde identifies is fragmented and monstrous. Facing the mirror, Dolarhyde is dually positioned, as both subject and object, audience and performer. The image that he confronts is the image with which he identifies on account of the fact that it is the image that he believes others identify as himself.

¹⁵ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York, NY: Brunner-Routledge, 2003), 67.

The accounts of Dolarhyde's childhood experiences (which are quite extensive in Harris's novel) are for the most part absent from the film, which structures the narrative of Dolarhyde's childhood abuses around his grandmother. In the film, Mrs. Dolarhyde is used metonymically, standing in for the gaze of the generalized other, and the kinds of monstrous positioning. The film's use of metonymy in this respect resonates strongly with what Lacan has to say about the symbolic mother. In his Lacanian perspective on art, Darian Leader remarks that, "if an infant is captivated by its image in a mirror, it will often turn to a parent to receive an acknowledgement, some gesture that would secure the image as its own."¹⁶ During the moment of his specular identification, therefore, the infant will seek out another as guarantee: the mother. For Lacan, the mother stands in for the symbolic order on account of the fact that she is the one who "introduces the child into language by interpreting the child's screams and thereby retroactively determine[s] their meaning."¹⁷

In *Red Dragon*, therefore, the grandmother represents the gaze of others that established the limits of Dolarhyde's identity. Recognized as a 'dirty little beast,' Dolarhyde's experience is similar to that of Franz Fanon who, despite longing only to be "a man among other men,"¹⁸ and consciously presenting himself in order to be recognized as such, nevertheless felt himself confronted by an image of himself that was not his own: "An unfamiliar weight burdened me. The real world challenged my claims....I wanted to be a man, nothing but a man. Some identified me with ancestors of mine who had been enslaved or lynched: I decided to accept this."¹⁹ With the limits of his identity set from outside of himself, Dolarhyde sees in the mirror an image of himself as it is projected from and guaranteed by others. Recognized as a beast, Dolarhyde now sees a beast in the mirror, a beast with which the misrecognitions of his childhood forced him to identify.

¹⁶ Darian Leader, *Stealing the Mona Lisa: What Art Stops us from Seeing* (New York, NY: Counterpoint, 2002), 26.

¹⁷ Evans, p. 119.

¹⁸ Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans, Charles Lam Markmann (New York, NY: Grove, 1967), 112.

¹⁹ Fanon, pp. 110; 113.

During Dolarhyde's murders, then, the placement of fragments of mirror into the eyes of his victims functions as a kind of reappropriation of the Other's gaze. By replacing the eyes of his victims with pieces of mirror—the mirror, itself, representing the gaze of others—Dolarhyde is able to master *their* gaze, the gaze of families chosen for their ability to stand in for the normative gaze in general.

Dolarhyde thus also becomes a monstrous version of the cinematic apparatus, the agent that (according to some feminist theory) objectifies the female figure who is gazed upon, rendering her an object for the viewing subject's pleasure. However, the scenario in *Red Dragon* posits an audience that must be rendered—and must remain—passive, an audience that inhabits a single subject position, if it inhabits one at all.²⁰

What distinguishes Dolarhyde's attempts at mastery is that they are not meant as acts of revenge (as in disability narratives like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, or Tod Bowring's *Freaks*), or as efforts to *correct* a deep sense of *mis*-recognition. Instead, Dolarhyde's acts are acts in an existential sense, as necessary to bringing himself into being, to achieving a kind of absolute identification with the monstrous images to which he has been subjected. Speaking to a captured Freddy Lounds, who sits undressed and glued to an old wooden wheelchair, Dolarhyde explains his project, and his relationship to the Red Dragon:

I am not a man. I began as one, but each being that I change makes me more than a man, as you will witness...do you want to know what I am?...I *am* the dragon, and you call be insane. You are privy to a great becoming, but you recognize nothing. You are an ant in the afterbirth. It is in your nature to do one thing correctly. Before me you rightly tremble, but fear is not what you own me Mr. Lounds. You owe me awe!

In becoming the image to which he has been subjected, Dolarhyde demonstrates an awareness of the gaze of others, and an awareness of the fact that the exclusion through which he has felt disempowered may also

²⁰ Andrew Schopp, "The Practice and Politics of 'Freeing the Look': Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*," *Camera Obscura* 18 (2003): 126.

be used as a source of power. As has been observed among feminist, black, and queer communities, defiled identities and subject positions can be reappropriated and utilized as part of more positive processes of identity formation. Appiah describes this process as a possible source of healing:

One form of healing the self that those who have these identities participate in is learning to see these collective identities not as sources of limitation and insult but as a valuable part of what they centrally are. [...] In order to construct a life with dignity, it seems natural to take the collective identity and construct positive life-scripts instead.²¹

Adopting a more Sadean perspective, on the other hand, and one that seems more resonant with Dolarhyde's experience, Enzensberger (1972) succinctly explains that "the one who can defile others, whether clean himself or not, is the boss."²² In his desire to become the Red Dragon, we see Dolarhyde's desire to overcome the fragmentation of his body, by identifying fully and completely with his fragmentation, by transforming his fragmentation into *gestalt*. Recognized as a 'dirty little beast,' Dolarhyde is unable to constitute himself as anything other. What he can do, however, is use his 'dirty' status as a source of power, taking his becoming into his own hands in order to alter the nature of the Other's gaze, from disrespect to awe.

Read in this way, through the Lacanian concept of the mirror stage, *Red Dragon* is, therefore, distinguished from the cinematic tradition of using the cleft lip to represent monstrosity. Dolarhyde, it is true, is guilty of committing the most heinous of acts, and the most gruesome of violations. The figure of Mrs. Dolarhyde, however, serves to challenge the locus of his monstrosity. In contrast to other films that would play upon the physiognomic conflation between the good and the beautiful, *Red Dragon* finds the source of Dolarhyde's monstrosity, not in his cleft lip, but rather in that system of misrecognitions (a system in which the cinematic tradition is implicated) that would reduce him to his facial

²¹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Identity, authenticity, survival: multicultural societies and social reproduction," in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 161.

²² Christian Enzensberger, *Smut: An anatomy of dirt*, trans. Sandra Morris (New York, NY: Seabury, 1972), 47.

deformity, instead of as a unified whole. In contrast to the propensity of films to represent disability as a personal trouble,²³ however, *Red Dragon* makes a positive contribution through its awareness of the centrality of the social to the construction of disability as such.

Postscript: Shifting the Gaze

Red Dragon, it must be said, is in no way a realistic portrayal of the experience of persons affected with cleft lip and palate. Nor is it a film that should be promoted as actively deconstructing misperceptions about the common disfigurement. Nevertheless, this kind of reading is revealing of the film's awareness of identity politics and subtle critique of the physiognomic tradition. Further discussion of the many other ways in which the film demonstrates its keen awareness of the politics of recognition is, unfortunately, not possible given the limits of this paper. In concluding, however, it is worth briefly mentioning that, in contrast to the other two films in the Hannibal Lector Trilogy (*Silence of the Lambs*, and *Hannibal*), *Red Dragon* is unique in so far as it is far more interested in narrating the story of its antagonist and is, in fact, the only one to present its villain in a sympathetic light.²⁴ This is achieved, in particular, through the inclusion of an extensive subplot which momentarily erases Will Graham and re-positions Francis Dolarhyde as protagonist. This subplot, which occupies a sizeable portion of the film, is a love story between Dolarhyde and a blind woman by the name of Reba McLean. In this narrative, Reba serves to positively underscore importance of recognition to the constitution of the subject. Blind, Reba is nonetheless able to identify Dolarhyde's cleft lip and, more than this, identify it as a source of great anxiety. At Reba's house, and over pie and coffee, Reba poignantly remarks:

Let's talk about something for a minute and get it out of the way, okay? I can hear that you've had some kind of soft palate repair, but I understand you fine 'cause you speak very well. If you don't want to talk to me, that's

²³ Laurie E. Klobas, *Disability Drama in Television and Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1988), xiii.

²⁴ Stephen M. Fuller, "Deposing an American Cultural Totem: Clarice Starling and Postmodern Heroism in Thomas Harris's *Red Dragon*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, and *Hannibal*" *The Journal of Popular Culture* 38 (2005): 824.

cool. But, I hope that you will because I know what its like having people always thinking that you're different.

Reba also volunteers information about what *others* think of him, commenting that "I don't think anybody knows you at all D. Everybody wonders about you though. Especially the women." His interest peaked, Dolarhyde inquires as to what they think of him, to which she responds that they find him "very mysterious and interesting." Touched and self-conscious, Dolarhyde then asks what others think of his appearance: "They said that you have a remarkable body. That you're very sensitive about your face, but you shouldn't be. Oh, and, uh, they asked me if you are as strong as you look."

Reba, then, serves as a point of positive recognition who, though blind, is able to project an alternative, and non-monstrous, mirror image with which Dolarhyde longs to identify—as one who loves and is loved. Confronted with this alternative image, Dolarhyde's identification with the *Red Dragon* is disrupted. No longer is he the Red Dragon but, instead, the Red Dragon begins to torment him from outside; a competing gaze literally demanding the other's destruction.

Reba, then, in contrast with the monstrosity of Mrs. Dolarhyde, represents the power of the *humanizing* gaze, the gaze that would recognize others in their wholeness while refusing the fragmentary reductionism so typical of views of persons with disabilities in general, and of those affected by cleft lip and palate in particular.

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