

# A Subversion of Power Through the Serial Killer-Agent Relationship in Thomas Harris' Novels and the TV Series Mindhunter

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**Petra Zrilić**

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Zadar, 2022.



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## 1. Introduction

Throughout the history of humankind, power has been one of the dominant concepts that systems, monarchs, and even individuals utilized to set their own rules and manipulate societies. Therefore, it is not unusual for power as such to be present in the collective awareness as a negative notion connected to force, violence, or submission (Novalić 240). Another, simpler definition depicts power in a more positive manner as something that can be used to create or produce rather than destroy if one's assumption would be kind-hearted human beings (Aron 99). A further point worth noting suggests that political structures are crucial for understanding the dynamics of power so scholars often explain one by using the other. However, politics is not the only field connected with power so economic, technological, or cultural aspects should not be neglected either. Many scholars, especially in the field of philosophy and sociology attempted to conceptualize this multidimensional phenomenon in order to provide a suitable definition that covers all aspects, sources, and methods power includes. But, as was already mentioned, power is not a flat concept and it cannot be described using solely one perspective. This resulted in creating opposed approaches; on one side there are classical, more traditional scholars whose theory of power includes a constant fight for domination and alteration of previously established forms. More recent approaches, such as structuralism, view people's role in this alteration as minimized or even non-existent since they have limited ability to impact and change already built structures (Kattakayam 449).

Another feature that makes power an intriguing phenomenon is its potential to be analyzed from the macro as well as micro perspective. When analyzing power relations, the center of attention could be the dynamics of relationships between individuals on a micro level bearing in mind structures and forms on a macro level that could impact them (Knorr-Cetina 15, 24). For example, the interaction of individuals that happens on a daily basis on a micro level

cannot be studied in a vacuum without the influence of norms, rules, and systems on a macro level. Even though the notion of power is generally considered to be a macro concept, its effect on smaller-scale social phenomena (like face-to-face interaction) should not be neglected.

Power is many times observed in the context of the resistance that appears as a response to it. This leads not only to connoting power with the resistance but refocusing the definition of power by explaining it only in terms of its subversion and fighting against it (Courpasson et al. 7). In an attempt to define what subversion is, there are not many alternatives, meaning, throughout history the concept was used predominantly to defend oppression of the king, state, or religious authorities. Any activity that directly posed a threat to the above-mentioned structures was marked as subversive (Spjut 255). This way, all religious or state issues were given legitimacy and the resistance or disapproval was easily eliminated by simply defining it as subversive. This key trait of power, its ability to be destabilized, overthrown, or subverted, is the essential feature that is often neglected among traditional scholars as their utmost aim is to understand and explain how power is to be retained rather than lost. Therefore, it is important to get insight into various sources that may cause a disruption of usual patterns of power relations.

The focus of this thesis paper is the subversion of power that occurs in a relationship between serial killers and the police in the process of gathering knowledge while catching psychopathic serial killers on the loose. The theoretical background of the paper will be based on Michel Foucault's critical theory and, in order to narrow the analysis, the dynamics of the relationship between characters of agents and killers from Thomas Harris' novels *Red Dragon*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, and *Hannibal* and the TV series *Mindhunter*. The core of the analysis will be the representation of the power play between agents Starling and Graham opposed to Hannibal Lecter and agents Holden and Tench opposed to Edmund Kemper.

The paper first discusses the Foucauldian concept of power in general with a special emphasis on exercising power in prisons. The focus then switches to the notion of psychopathy in popular culture from a critical point of view. The analysis of the relationship between the killer and the agents from the novels *Red Dragon*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, and *Hannibal* together with the analysis of the power play between them is the main part of the work. Finally, the portrayal of the real-life agents and the serial killer in the TV series *Mindhunter* will serve as an example for comparison with fictive counterparts.

## **2. The Foucauldian notion of power**

One of the scholars who warns about possible intricacies in explaining the notion of power is Michel Foucault, whose philosophy is based on undermining, interrogating, and delegitimizing all prevailing moral and political codes. His theory, which bridges the gap between modern and traditional, focuses on what power *is not* rather than on what *it is*. According to Foucault, power is neither something gathered around institutions or any other apparatus nor the submission of citizens in a state led by a monarch or government. It is not a formation and it is not a virtue of an individual; power is simply a name given to some structures in a certain time (*Power/Knowledge* 65). It is a relation that can determine one's behavior and a question of knowing the legal basis that can legitimize any kind of power exercise. In his explanation of the notion of power, Foucault is considered to be rather extreme. He offers some points to follow in order to understand the concept better. As Rutar states, Foucault does not observe power as something brutal or tyrannical but something rather beneficial and subjects not in any way oppressed by control but rather made out of it. Furthermore, power is, according to Foucault, not an object, organization, or uncommon asset but social relation. Power cannot be held against someone nor it can be occupied by them. The source of power is not in one location i.e. an institution or any kind of organization.



Power is not just a matter of politics – it affects the everyday life of ordinary people. Finally, one cannot say whether power is fair or moral, however, refusal to accept some forms of power is indeed favorable (158).

The main reason why this Foucauldian description of power is viewed as somewhat extreme is the presumption that power is omnipresent (Turkel 170). According to Foucault, there is no institution or structure in a society that is not, in some way, under the influence of power. However, this thought is far from being new or extreme; classical sociologists long before Foucault referred to power in a similar way. Even though there are numerous ways of understanding the concept, it is unavoidable to portray it as something as old as the first primitive society. But can this Foucauldian tendency of explaining power as something given in a specific time under specific circumstances encompass the true nature of power? In other words, can power be explained without conflict? It was already mentioned that power is often negatively presented in the collective awareness and the reason for that can be found in its exploitation by dominant social groups. In many cases, power is considered synonymous with violence and submission. Pursuing this further, the field of sociology provides a plethora of qualitative as well as quantitative arguments presenting the power in a pessimistic tone as the obstructive force of society.

One of the famous scholars in the field of sociology, Anthony Giddens, argues that power is at the core of each smaller or larger social relation (267). Put differently, power could be seen as the ability to influence other people's activities, hence, it is implicitly or explicitly displayed each time there is an interaction among individuals (Rutar 159). Foucault associates power with the opportunity to manipulate other person's or group's actions in a way that alters their primary decision. The moment this kind of control harms one or more people it is considered to be *supremacy*. Lastly, if there is some sort of exchange of goods included, mostly an unfair one, it means *exploitation* takes place (Rutar 171).

Many questions regarding power and its social role are yet to be answered. Therefore, it is hard to provide one specific definition that can be applied in all cases and situations. That is the reason the issue of power can only be hypothetically explained. To illustrate the idea of power, it is important to clarify what power incorporates, how power can most conveniently be explained, and what possible variants of power there exist.

### *2.1. Power-Knowledge and Prison Relationship*

When analyzing power, it is crucial to introduce another concept connected to the Foucauldian idea of power – *knowledge*. According to Foucault, power cannot be exercised without the help of knowledge (*Discipline and Punish* 32). Even though the two concepts are substantially different, they are intertwining and complement each other. The title of Foucault's book *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* confirms that power and knowledge are actually inseparable and one is to be best explained with the help of the other. That is the reason why Foucault emphasizes knowledge is neither one aspect of power nor it is a simple tool for its execution. The relation of these terms is much more complex than it appears to be at the first sight (Turler 178).

But how exactly does knowledge influence power? What can be seen from history, is that there is a simple relation between power and knowledge – the one who would possess a certain knowledge was given the power over certain objects or people. Among the most powerful people in the earliest civilizations like Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China were clergymen who knew in which season sowing should take place. This specific and, literally, a-matter-of-life-and-death knowledge gave the clergymen the most powerful position in society (Spierenburg 628). To pursue this idea further, Foucault argues knowledge and power are inseparably related in a way that one produces the other. In other words, certain knowledge is what allows exercising power in the first place. For example, gathering knowledge about the

categorization of criminal activities leads to the creation of the structures like prisons (*Discipline and Punish* 30). However, Foucault refuses to be categorical when elaborating on this issue so he never defines the difference between knowledge and power in much detail. The only declaration Foucault convincingly defends is that the institution of prison represents the most effective mechanism of total enforcement of rational power (*Discipline and Punish* 45).

From the sociological standpoint, a form of prison is especially interesting because it serves the purpose of eliminating crime from society as well as prisoners' resocialization. However, according to Foucault, none of the mentioned happens. The question that needs to be answered is why. Foucault proposes the reason for that is the fact prisons punish anyone who does something against the law instead of trying to discipline them. Only in this way, the full effectiveness of imprisoning could be achieved (Turek 186). It is crucial to point out that prisons are just one form of institutionalized discipline, surveillance, and the omnipresence of power. Various other structures within society function in this way.

In his 1975 book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault analyzes the formation of the so-called, *delinquency knowledge*, scientific evidence, appropriate legal formulas, and techniques of punishment that are a key part of our social space. According to Foucault, the structure of society is so weak that power is enabled to penetrate and occupy all levels of it (*Discipline and Punish* 78). This is the true nature of every form of power in contemporary society and proof that power does not only exist in abstract terminology like, "a state", "the law", or even "a social class". On the contrary, power is very real and rational, almost *palpable*. Therefore, the notion of *law* must be introduced as well. It is impossible to understand the principle of punishment in modern Western society without being aware of the concept of power and its execution. The above-mentioned knowledge, in combination with power, influences law in a way that allows the ones who have power over institutions,

persons, or domains to control and alter people's goals and decisions (Kalanj 77). To understand this idea better, Foucault provides an example of law enforcement in the past. Back in the day, punishment procedures had almost a theatrical character. They were used as sort of a rite, a public ritual, whose aim was to frighten the masses. This way, people were able to see and feel the reality of power and its personification that was utterly cruel and involved the torture of the convicts. In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this practice was changed. The spectacle of cruelty was not a part of the criminal system anymore and the power of a monarch was also abandoned. However, something else was created in order to keep social peace and order. It was a social contract that made people reprogram thoughts so they see a crime not as a direct attack on the monarch, but as an attack on the society itself. From that point on, society "had the right" to condemn a person to show how socially unacceptable the criminal act was and to make sure it will not be repeated. This was the only effective and useful way that replaced physical punishment with resocialization. The new concept of the evaluation of misdeeds helped people to achieve social regulation and control. In modern society the process of normalization took place. Prisons have become an example of the criminal justice system having both moral and economic functions. A prison is also a place of meticulous crime classification and gathering of knowledge that helps fight against crime. The most efficient punishment is the one that encourages obedience and the physical usefulness of the human body. In other words, Foucault argues the goal of the criminal justice system is to establish a system of knowledge and institutions in order to "train the body" (*Discipline and Punish* 71-93). The main purpose of power is to discipline the human body to create a disciplined society and the finest way to do that is to make people internalize social rules and norms. Here, the power of norm is great since it controls the slightest nuances of a person's life. The strict hierarchy creates spaces of surveillance so any kind of behavior that deviates from the "normal" is considered to be socially unacceptable and, therefore,

punishable. According to Foucault, punishment does not have to be formal. For instance, breaking rules connected to time (being late or not finishing a task), activities (laziness, distraction of any kind), behavior (disobedience, rudeness, arrogance), the body (untidy habits, sloppiness), or sexuality (inappropriate gestures or body language) that are considered to be against societal norms and “normal” behavior and are usually punished only informally, with disapproval and judgment (*Discipline and Punish* 180).

Normality in modern society is a norm and every institution, from school to the health care system is created to impose certain rules aim of which is to control and correct the above-mentioned aspects of human life. Knowledge and power cooperate to give legitimacy to the structures in charge creating the network of specific practices and discourses that are a part of the modern social apparatus. The power-knowledge relation, though, cannot be defined by causality neither Foucault tends to explain knowledge as an effect of power or vice versa – the connection between the terms is based on a pure correlativity. Power and knowledge are intertwined and directly imply each other (*Discipline and Punish* 32).

Lastly, there is another somewhat revolutionary Foucauldian concept that deserves to be mentioned in relation to knowledge and power – space. The idea of space is prominent in many of Foucault's publications and he himself states other scholars were often against it believing it was given too much emphasis. However, Foucault states the relationship between power and knowledge could not be explained without researching the notion of space (*Security, Territory, Population* 69). According to this approach, a prison (or any other total institution) could be observed as a space of discipline and behavior correction where individuals are incarcerated and classified in order to be trained. They will permanently and constantly be visible to the extent of internalization of rules and social norms (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 237). This essentially explains how, with the help of punishment and discipline, prisons as spaces are born. They could also be identified as utopian, ideal societies.

To put it another way, all mechanisms that are to be found in any form of utopian social structure or society could likewise be found in a prison as well (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 244). However, the prison differs from other total institutions (convents, barracks, asylums, or schools) in its total power over inmates – there is no outside space, it is not semi-closed and individuals cannot exit it if they have not served the sentence. The biggest irony of the system is in its constant reproduction of criminals in society. The reasons for that are multiple – from prisons’ failure to truly re-socialize inmates, to the rejection ex-inmates face after they go back to the outside life (West-Pavlov 156).

This paper will aim at deepening the understanding of the widely accepted course of the power-knowledge-control connection. Since the focus of the thesis is on the power subversion that occurs when agents turn to serial killers and their specific knowledge to catch other criminals on the loose, the area of the research will be narrowed only to the total institution of prison and power relations between fictional and actual agents and killers from Thomas Harris’ novels and the TV series *Mindhunter*. However, before that, the paper will discuss one aspect of killers’ character connected with both power and knowledge – their psychopathy.

### **3. A discourse on psychopathy in popular culture - a critical approach to it**

For the sake of this paper, there is another Foucauldian notion besides power-knowledge, space, or body that ought to be mentioned – madness. In contemporary popular culture, the term madness is often replaced with a more common notion – *psychopathy*. A popular belief about how the true psychopath should act will be confronted with the Foucauldian perspective of normality and power-knowledge relation. Hence it is necessary to define psychopathy more thoroughly.

The most prominent phenomenon of a psychotic character in mainstream culture is a psychopath serial killer. Art, especially literature and the film industry, based myriad plots on

the intrigue of twisted minds and body mutilations. The fear of what appears to be a normal individual and his true, abnormal psyche is a constituent part of many books and films in the horror genre. There is an archetypal portrayal of the psychopathic character; an individual presented as a perversion of nature, an evil mind without empathy, driven only by the urge to kill, and unable to feel remorse. When studying some of the scientific approaches to the problem of psychopathy, the simplest one would present it as a "moral sickness" (Smith 179). On the other hand, the Foucauldian approach would reject this demonized representation of a mad killer and put the blame on the constructs of power, knowledge, and normalization. However, the usual discourse created around psychopathic individuals is highly negative. This general representation of psychopathy made people believe the explanation for committing such hideous crimes lies in an individual's mental sickness. However, Foucault blames power for this. Foucault claims agents (for example, doctors) and institutions (for example, psychiatric institutions or hospitals) exercise power that is given to them via knowledge. This means their diagnoses are not to be questioned or discredited due to the power they possess through knowledge. By doing so, intuitions are led only by one rule: if an individual behaves different from what is considered to be *normal*, they are ill (Federman et al. 37). This, of course, leads to the question of what normal behavior is and which norms and rules should generally be accepted in society. To get the answer, the broader definition of psychopathy should be discussed. In popular culture, the term psychopath is sometimes used interchangeably with the term serial killer so a psychopath is represented as a cold-blooded murderer unable to feel emotions, for example, fear, guilt, or sadness. Furthermore, psychopaths are usually portrayed as male figures who objectify other people and are motivated only by personal satisfaction (Blair et al. 50). Even though psychopaths are considered to be abnormal and sick, they do remain responsible for their actions to some extent, legally if nothing. To better understand the issue, it is crucial also to define the

characteristics of a psychopath's counterpart, *the normal one*. The simplest way to do that is to negate all the above-described attributes. Consequently, people who are considered to be *normal* do show and feel emotions, they feel guilt and remorse and do not perceive others as objects in order to satisfy their needs. Nevertheless, researchers have found that psychopathy is more frequent among people than was commonly believed. Individuals who appear to be charismatic, self-centered, egoistic, manipulative, unable to develop serious and long-term relationships, immature, or even immoral to a certain extent, who tend to behave in a way that may seem to go against social rules and norms are considered to be psychopaths (Hare 118).

The issue of a psychopath could be presented differently from various points of view, for example, biological, psychological, or social. This paper will analyze psychopaths following the Foucauldian approach based on abolishing social norms and rules, even though his approach to these matters may sometimes be rigid. Foucault's interpretation of psychopathy would go against conventional explanations by defining a psychopath as a person who is declared to be one only because of the power-knowledge relationship.

When talking about the horror genre the character of a serial killer is frequently used to bridge the gap between the gothic and detective genres. The dark and mysterious gothic ambiance is taken to a modern-day society via a serial killer whose tendency is to murder not one time, as is the case in detective stories, but on multiple occasions. Moreover, a fictional serial killer carefully chooses their victims and usually has a certain *modus operandi*<sup>1</sup>. As Santaulària points out, the persona of a serial killer is rather complex and created in various manners. There are truly morally driven murderers who use their monstrosity to purge society ("The Great Good Place" 61). An example of this character would be Dexter Morgan from the TV series *Dexter*. He is forensic, working for a fictional police department, who is also a serial killer. He is determined to find and kill criminals, who somehow escaped the system, in

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<sup>1</sup> "a distinct pattern or method of operation that indicates or suggests the work of a single criminal in more than one crime" (Merriam-Webster).



order to punish them appropriately. The monstrous side of Dexter, committing gruesome crimes is, however, rather portrayed as an act of heroism even though traditionally accepted social norms and rules suggest there should be nothing moral or heroic in torture or murder. (Santaulària, "Dexter: Villain, Hero" 57). The character of a murderer and a psychopath is depicted as positive therefore blurring the line between good and evil. Examples like this as well testify there are monster-killer characters for whose degeneration social institutions are to be blamed; in the first place, the institution of the family. During childhood, the most important role of the family would be to socialize an individual as the family is the primary agent in their upbringing (Peña, et al. 131). When a family fails in an attempt to do that, it can mark a child for life so many fictional plots are based on the unhappy and violent childhood of the serial killer. Besides family, there are multiple social factors (war, poverty) as well as social structures that may fail to provide adequate support in the formation of an individual, for example, the school or legal system (Santaulària, "The Great Good Place" 61-62). A good example to support this statement would be the portrayal of Hannibal Lecter, the serial killer in Thomas Harris' novel *Hannibal* published in 1999. The war, as the main representation of destruction and violence in society, can be blamed for the later monstrous acts of the killer. In the novel, there is a brief insight into the traumatic experience that potentially could explain Dr. Lecter's cannibalistic murders that happens during World War II when he is only six years old. After their parents are murdered, Lecter and his sister are kept in a barn by a group of military deserters: "(...) in their long overcoats, their breaths stinking and steaming, the deserters came through the snow" (Hannibal 245). When they eat all that is left of animals killed in the firearm attack, deserters decide to eat children. Eventually, they choose Mischa, Lecter's sister, whose tragic death still haunts him in his dreams. This occurrence seems to be a very important factor in Lecter's later acts of murdering and cannibalizing people.

Another prominent figure in the genre is a detective, the antithesis of a murderer and the one who follows the clues in order to catch the “bad guy”. The everlasting fight between good and evil portrayed through the rivalry of the two characters is what the plot is based on. In this manner, there has to be a certain principle to be followed in order to satisfy the audience; a source of confusion and mess, the joy of detecting patterns, the thrill of expectation of the next murder in the series, reader's (or viewer's) feeling they can relate to a clever and intuitive detective, in other words, alteration of such an appalling act into entertainment (Baelo Allué 8). The difference between normal and abnormal behavior could correspond to the contrast between good and evil characters but that does not have to be the case. Every good story needs to have a positive and a negative character fighting to achieve their goal. As a matter of fact, a negative character does not necessarily presuppose negative characteristics. Said otherwise, if he/she is “a bad guy” it does not mean they are evil or ruthless. It is enough they constantly attempt to obstruct the positive character's actions (Davis 13). The importance of the complex portrayal of the “bad guy” is not needed, therefore it is left out more often than not. What is really necessary for the reader or viewer is the indulgence in the simplicity of the storyline and gripping atmosphere as well as following occasionally puzzling traces of finding the killer and resolving the problem. What is also preferable is the amusement. Taking all into account one easily tends to forget that murders are very realistic and often real-life cases serve as a model for their fictional counterparts (Baelo Allué 7).

Far from trying to justify the actions of serial killers (fictional or real ones), biological, psychological, or sociological theories aim to understand the factors that impact and guide individuals to commit acts of killing or cannibalism. To define such an individual's deeds as wicked would be too one-dimensional which would again lead to creating an umbrella term that marks all similar acts as purely evil. The aforementioned fictional characters Lecter and

Dexter are, unusual, to say the least since they do not necessarily possess purely evil characteristics which means their acts cannot be put under the category of “evil acts for the sake of it”. These individuals are a peculiar mix of good and bad, therefore making the audience baffled by forcing them to question their own sense of morality. Both characters are driven by a greater cause and, confusing as it might seem, in each of their murder there is some sort of moral purpose. Nonetheless, it does not make it easier to comprehend killing acts and it leaves the audience unable to fully understand and accept that murder, inherently an immoral act, can be morally justified. Arguably, it is due to the incompetence of the human mind to find a proper understanding for killing, succumbing to an easier solution: giving etiquette to an evil person. Scholars' opinions on this issue are divided. While some strongly support the idea of strict differentiation between moral and immoral acts, others blame the inability to fully grasp evil, or go even further trying to negate the existence of inherently evil actions when talking about crime and murders. An evil act aims at hurting and is wrong in its nature, often leaving people confused and unable to understand *why*. This latter component, the inability to understand why such an act happened, is considered to be the basis for a somewhat controversial theory that explains an evil act as something named as such only for the reason of scholars' inability of finding a better solution or a deeper insight into the issue (Feinberg 145). Foucauldian theory is also critical of accepting the ready-made mechanisms that people were born into. Foucault interrogates, undermines, and delegitimizes all prevailing moral and political codes. He calls into question categories of “insane” or “criminal” and proposes that these etiquettes were particularly social and linguistic constructions, meaning they do not refer to anything real. The popular diabolic representation of killers, such as Hannibal Lecter, is denied so other constructs have to be examined, for example, the power-knowledge relationship. The expertise in a certain field gives the ability to exercise power over evildoers labeling them as such without questioning the decision (Federman et al. 37).

#### 4. The persona of the monster and its antitype

##### 4.2. *Hannibal: a monster or a hero?*

"He's a monster. I think of him as one of those pitiful things that are born in hospitals from time to time. They feed it, and keep it warm, but they don't put it on the machines and it dies. Lecter is the same way in his head, only he looks normal and nobody could tell" (Red Dragon 56).

The existence of a monster figure appears to be present in various fields of society. From art (literature, painting, or music) to politics, there is a tendency to create a monstrous character that will be blamed for all human mistakes and immoral acts, or the acts that are on the verge of morality. According to Ingebretsen, as members of society, we also need disturbance in an arranged and controlled system in order to de-stress. The most convenient way to canalize rage and misdeeds is to create a scapegoat that will carry all the sins so humankind could be purified. In this way, society learns to solve chaotic situations and live in a well-balanced environment (26, 29). Taking everything into account, one could conclude that the persona of the monster was created by men. Moreover, when juxtaposed, monsters and men have much more in common than it appears to. To better understand the dynamics of the relationship between humane and monstrous in this master's thesis, the equivalent fictional characters will be portrayed. The traditional idea of complete opposition of good and bad characters will be challenged in a way to show that the characters of killers and the ones who are trying to catch them have much more in common than it appears to. In order to find some possible similarities between the characters, it is necessary to analyze a serial killer and agent separately as well as get a deeper insight into their relationship.

One of the most prominent serial killers is Hannibal Lecter, a fictional character in *Red Dragon* (1981), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988), and *Hannibal* (1999) written by Thomas

Harris. The character of Dr. Hannibal Lecter was presented in *Red Dragon* (1981) when an FBI agent, Will Graham, turns to doctor Lecter to catch “The Tooth Fairy” another serial killer who murders families in Atlanta and Birmingham. “- You know, when Lecter was first captured, we thought he might provide us with a singular opportunity to study him, - Chilton said. – It is so rare to get one alive. Lecter is so lucid, so perceptive; he’s trained in psychiatry...and he’s a mass murderer” (*Red Dragon* 77). After Lecter helps to find “The Tooth Fairy”, Lecter makes him attack Will Graham but Graham’s wife shoots “The Tooth Fairy”. In his second appearance, in Harris’ *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988), Hannibal is once again asked for help. This time, a young agent Clarice Starling was assigned to ask Lecter, who is willing to cooperate, a series of questions in order to catch another serial killer “Buffalo Bill” (Cenciarelli 109). Therefore, for the purpose of this work, the character of Dr. Lecter will be used to represent the monstrous figure of a psychotic serial killer and will be compared to its antipode, the detective.

If there was a brief description of Hannibal Lecter's character, it would be the most refined fictional serial killer. It would also be a shame not to investigate the complexity of his identity to learn why this figure is at the same time appealing and appalling. The traditional part of his portrayal represents him as a male Caucasian with great mental capacity as well as physical strength. On the other hand, the less traditional elements are the moral sense of his murders (as he kills bad individuals), the utterly disgusting and terrifying act of eating human flesh turned into an ordinary and polished act, and his love for socializing and women (Endah 5,6). When discussing those typical, traditional descriptions of the serial killer, the intellectual superiority of Dr. Lecter is one of the main characteristics that goes against the popular representation of a serial killer as a madman. Hannibal Lecter is far from being mad in that sense. He is not presented as a vulgar, aggressive murderer but as a mastermind who plays mind games with the police and uses his brains to deceive the authorities and escape from

prison: “But he is impenetrable, much too sophisticated for the standard tests” (The Silence of the Lambs 15). Moreover, when discussing the aforementioned Foucauldian notion of knowledge, Lecter is a true example of how being knowledgeable is equivalent to being powerful. Hence it is crucial to elaborate on the issue in more detail. The term knowledge is, however, too simplified to cover the complex portrayal of Dr. Lecter. In order to analyze his character more deeply, cultural capital should be taken into consideration as well. Lecter possesses more than knowledge itself; he is culturally aware and has general knowledge and fine taste for music, art, and food. According to Pierre Bourdieu, Lecter possesses all three aspects of what Bourdieu refers to as cultural capital (187). The first aspect is *embodied capital* or all values that are at the core of one's behavior, like vocabulary or mannerisms. The second part of cultural capital is the *objective* one. This is related to all material goods a person owns, for example, paintings, books, or musical instruments. Lastly, there is an *institutionalized* form of cultural capital, the most important form for the analysis of the Lecter's character. It refers to legitimately acquired academic qualifications that could give official and validate power to decide upon the important issue (Bourdieu, 187-191). To put it another way, Lecter possesses institutionalized knowledge; he is a doctor, a psychiatrist surgeon (later, a psychiatrist) who knows well how the human body and mind function. That helps him in his murders but also eventually puts him in a position where he can negotiate with the police and exchange this knowledge for something he wants (Endah 3). In all three books, *Red Dragon*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, and *Hannibal*, the team of specialized and educated doctors, agents, and forensics are trying to outsmart and catch him:

I want something Crawford can give me and I want to trade him for it (...) I only want something very simple, and he could get it (...) I've been in this room eight years, Clarice. I know that they will never, ever let me out while I'm alive. What I want is a view. I want a window where I can see a tree, or even water (...) I want to be in a

federal institution and I want my books back and a view. I'll give a good value for it.  
(The Silence of the Lambs 69)

The next important monstrous feature is his physical strength. When killing, Lecter does not only use intelligence but he performs an act of killing using great violence: “When the nurse bent over, he did this to her (...) The doctors managed to save one of her eyes. Lecter was hooked up to the monitors the entire time. He broke her jaw to get at her tongue. His pulse never got over eightyfive, even when he swallowed it” (The Silence of the Lambs 15). As Endah emphasizes, Hannibal prefers to cut and stab, which is more physically demanding, on no occasion does he use a firearm. Unlike a typical psychopath who is driven by the urge to satisfy his needs, Lecter’s murders are emotionless; he is not excited, lustful, or eager to kill just for the sake of it (4). He describes himself not as an evil or sadistic man but as someone who just “*happened*” to exist, one could say almost accidentally: “Nothing happened to me, Officer Starling. I happened. You can’t reduce me to a set of influences (...) nothing is ever anybody’s fault. Look at me, Officer Starling. Can you stand to say I’m evil? Am I evil, Officer Starling? – I think you’ve been destructive. For me it’s the same thing.” (The Silence of the Lambs 25).

However, the most important question is yet to be answered – what makes Dr. Hannibal Lecter so distinctive? To begin with, Hannibal Lecter is not purely evil as the typical representatives of the genre for the cause of his victims’ selection. He aims to kill not completely innocent people. It could be said he has some sort of “ethics” that he follows; the victims, according to Lecter, deserved to die for they may hurt someone he appreciates or may be rude or arrogant towards others. As a result, Lecter, although a ruthless murderer, could also be perceived as a hero. By this unconventional portrayal, he is given some sort of justification and purpose for his evil acts. In the book *The Silence of the Lambs* there is a

scene that describes how Lecter killed another inmate for his disrespectful behavior toward a female detective, officer Starling:

(...) Miggs flick his fingers and felt the warm spatter on her cheek and shoulder before she could turn away. She got away from him, registered that it was semen, not blood, and Lecter was calling to her, she could hear him (...) – I would not have had that happen to you. Discourtesy is unspeakably ugly to me (...) - Your friend Miggs is dead (...) – How? She felt numb and she had to handle it. – Swallowed his tongue sometime before daylight. The overnight orderly heard Lecter talking softly to Miggs. Lecter knew a lot about Miggs. He talked to him for a little while, but the overnight couldn't hear what Lecter said. Miggs was crying for a while, and then he stopped. (The Silence of the Lambs 29, 45)

As mentioned before, Lecter does not have any problems with female figures, as many serial killers do, and is generally rather social (Endah 5, 6). Taking all this into consideration, there is a fine line between the monstrous and humane side of the character of Hannibal Lecter. His nuanced personality makes it hard to distinguish between good and evil merging both aspects into one complex portrayal of the character. This shows his similarity to what is traditionally perceived as a positive character, a “good guy”, the detective, and at the same time, his similarity to merciless serial killers.

#### *4.3. The figure of an agent*

In Thomas Harris' novels, the characters opposed to the figure of the monster are agents who fight against them. However, very few scholars deal with the connection between these two oppositions and predominantly concentrate on the analysis of the consequences of killers' actions. To bridge the gap between the monstrous and humane and learn about the



power correlation between them, the dynamics of the relationship between the killer Hannibal Lecter and agents William Graham and Clarice Sterling from Harris' novels will be further analyzed. To begin with, the concrete difference between the previously-mentioned characters is somewhat vague. If one assumes there is a clear-cut distinction between a human being and a monster, it remains unclear why Dr. Lecter is presented as such an intelligent and sophisticated person and why Will Graham understands the mind of Dr. Lecter so well (Carroll 44). There are multiple occasions on which the border between humane and monstrous remains unclear leading the reader to the conclusion that characters are, actually, very similar: "It takes one to catch one," a high federal official told this reporter he was referring to Lecter, known as "Hannibal the Cannibal," who is both a psychiatrist and a mass murderer. OR WAS HE REFERRING TO GRAHAM???" (Red Dragon 112). To pursue this further, Carroll states that in a relationship between a human and a monster the latter is always more outstanding, specifically because of the juxtaposition with a human. In this way, a repellent monstrous character is used to create an image of how society should not look forgetting that a monster was produced by society itself (44).

The portrayal of agent Will Graham is quite complex, as is the case with the character of Dr. Lecter. He is a profiler who works for the FBI and who has helped to catch Lecter. Graham is truly empathetic, which can be considered both a gift and a curse. This is because Graham can make a connection with everyone in order to know what they think and how they feel. He is very sensitive about the world around him and the people in it. Consequently, he can do the same with the mind of a psychopath. Graham can vividly depict murder scenes and relive them in his head as well as understand the next step of the killer. His intuition helps him to get an insight into Lecter's psyche and catch him. Besides Graham being sensitive to nuances that might go unnoticed by other agents, according to Carroll, he possesses another quality; to be on the boundary of good and evil, humane and monstrous. His similarity to the

monster is the main reason why he is so precious and necessary in the FBI (46): “Do you know how you caught me? (...) The reason you caught me is that we’re just alike. – was the last thing Graham heard as the steel door closed behind him” (Red Dragon 85).

Another unavoidable, yet peculiar relationship between agents and murderers has to be analyzed. The untraditional representation of a female character (let alone a female agent), Clarice Starling, goes well with an unconventional portrayal of a cold-blooded serial killer, Hannibal Lecter. Female characters in horror fiction generally are depicted either as victims expecting to be killed by a monstrous madman or as the ones to be blamed if the child turned out to be that monster on his killing spree (Byers & Collins 13). On the other hand, the intricacy of agent Starling’s depiction and her preparedness to be one of the main instigators of the plot while fighting prejudice about women as "angels in the house" in the horror genre is what makes the character so unique and revolutionary in the genre. Overcoming many obstacles, Starling eventually becomes a true heroine (Stewart 44). However, it is difficult to neglect the fact that *she* is used primarily as a vehicle for a display of Dr. Lecter’s human side. Agent Starling has a rather different relationship with Dr. Lecter who can be regarded either as her mentor (Robbins 81) or, eventually, as her lover. This leads to the conclusion that the relationship between Lecter and Starling differs from the one he has with Graham. The relationship can as well be interpreted as an obsession, especially in the moments when Lecter fantasizes about replacing his long-dead sister with agent Starling (Repišti 226). The relationship between Lecter and Starling can be used to explain and understand the power subversion as well. However, what is important to keep in mind is Starling’s portrayal is in the spirit of inequality and usage of womanhood in the traditional, almost patriarchal manner; to unveil the monster's human side:

He held it at arm's length. Through the bars, his forefinger along the spine. She reached across the barrier and took it. For an instant, the tip of her forefinger touched

Dr. Lecter's. The touch crackled in his eyes. – Thank you, Clarice. – Thank you, Dr. Lecter. – and that is how he remained in Starling's mind. Caught in the instant when he did not mock. (The Silence of the Lambs 255)

Overall, it may be concluded that the two encounters with agents are rather different. To begin with, vis-à-vis with Lecter are two agents who differ in sex, age, and professional experience. Graham is a male, Starling is a female; Starling is in her twenties, while Graham is in his late thirties. Additionally, Starling's career has just begun, while Graham is much more experienced especially with minds like Lecter's; unlike Graham, Starling has never faced the monster in its utter ugliness and she is not prepared at all for facing the violence. But the common bond between agents is their conscious decision to give up the power they hold, even for a short period of time, and give it to the murderer, Dr. Lecter so they could obtain some important pieces of information and catch the killers on the loose. Regardless of the fact they arrived at the idea of consulting Lecter differently (Graham wants to meet Lecter on his own initiative, while Starling follows the order), both agents have the same goal: to catch another serial killer.

## **5. The power play between Lecter and agents**

As previously mentioned, the relationship established between serial killers and the ones who are trying to imprison them is crucial to learn about the subversion of power. The matter of this linkage can be put another way. Until now, the connection between the characters has been one-way; agents/the police/profilers try to defeat the monster and bring back order in the world of chaos. Characters were described straightforwardly as black or white and used to transmit the main message: a triumph of good over evil. There was no

deeper insight into a relationship between the two opposing sides that may occur in the process of solving a murder case. However, it is of paramount importance to analyze instances where the traditional course of action was altered. To illustrate the idea, examples of actual interactions between agents and murderers will further be analyzed.

Guillen offers interesting real-life cases of murders while weighing the positive and negative sides of communication between killers and the police. Even though rare, there are some examples of establishing a relationship through communication where serial killers decide to exchange information with the investigators directly or via media. Killers, especially serial ones, tend to be uncommunicative and secretive when it comes to their wrongdoing. However, every once in a while there was a murderer who would leave a certain message at the crime scene or would incognito communicate with the public (55). One of the most infamous examples would be the "Zodiac Killer" from California who wrote morbid puzzling letters asking to be published (Crooks 333). Another interesting case of communication between a killer and the police took place in Wichita, Kansas where, the so-called, "BTK killer" would write poems, and letters, make phone calls, and eventually even admit the crimes in an attempt to send his last message on a floppy disk drive (Hansen 45). The following question seeks to be answered: why this necessity to be heard is not so unusual among murderers as it may seem? One of the possible answers could be the feeling of utter control and dominance, hence power.

The concept of power is rather interesting when studied in relation to murderers. The first, obvious instance is the killer's desire to exercise power over their victims. However, for the sake of this paper, the focus will be on other less noticeable power relations. As Douglas & Olshaker argue, the killer's main desire is to be in control and more powerful than their victim, but they are also envious of the power the investigator has (17-18). That may be the reason why there were cases of serial killers presenting themselves as police officers or some

instances where they desperately tried to make a contact with the police. The theoretical background that this statement could be based on will be René Girard's mimetic theory. Namely, Girard argues that individuals are driven by desires emulated from other individuals. Eventually, it results in working towards the same goal and a solution to this problem has to be found somehow, otherwise, the conflict will turn into violence. It is also important to bear in mind that this representation of Girard's theory is very simplistic for the sake of better understanding. Here, the problem of aiming toward the same thing that cannot be shared with someone else should be emphasized (King 63). Pursuing this further, the theory of mimetics could be explained concerning the concept of power mentioned previously in Foucault's work. Let us assume that the main, as well as shared goal/desire, of the Harris' protagonists Dr. Lecter and detective Graham, is to be in a position of power. Power as a shared desire is of great importance for it would allow one to control the lives of other actors, be completely free "from", and live life according to their own rules. Consequently, only one scenario is possible and that is the connectedness of two sides in which one exercises power and the other receives it (Kunz 195). If there is no mutual agreement on who is going to achieve the desired goal, conflict is unavoidable, potentially leading to a violent situation. The imitation of the shared objective, on which the established relationship between agents and killers is based, could be explained from an additional point of view and that is the physical, mental, or emotional suffering from the past, or the so-called, trauma.

### *5.1. Trauma as a bond between Lecter and agents*

The key to understanding the relationship between agents and murderers could be in their shared experience of trauma. Through the reading of the series of novels *Red Dragon*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, and *Hannibal* it is noticeable how the interpretation of the characters revolves around hurtful past events that scarred characters for life and eventually influenced

their future actions. Namely, in *Red Dragon* agent Will Graham survives a brutal attack by Hannibal Lecter which leads the agent to retire from the police:

Dr. Hannibal Lecter did that with a linoleum knife. It happened a year before Molly met Graham, and it very nearly killed him. Dr. Lecter, known in the tabloids as "Hannibal the Cannibal," was the second psychopath Graham had caught. When he finally got out of the hospital, Graham, resigned from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, left Washington, and found a job as a diesel mechanic in the boatyard at Marathon in the Florida Keys. (Red Dragon 13)

Graham never fully recovers from the attack, more in terms of his psyche rather than his physique. The traumatic experience haunts him constantly and is re-lived once again when the agent is forced to meet Hannibal in order to catch another serial killer on the spree. He needs time and preparation to face Hannibal and afterward, Graham is left upset and in a great deal of distress: "Graham wanted to see Dr. Lecter asleep. He wanted time to brace himself. If he felt Lecter's madness in his head, he had to contain it quickly, like a spill" (Red Dragon 79). The persona of Dr. Lecter is so powerful and influential that Graham is completely overwhelmed by his presence. It causes a certain split in Graham's personality; his sanity resents the realization of the similarity between him and Hannibal: "He was numb except for dreading the loss of numbness. Walking with his head down, speaking to no one, he could hear his blood like a hollow drumming of wings (...) He had the absurd feeling that Lecter had walked out with him. He stopped outside the entrance and looked around him, assuring himself that he was alone." (Red Dragon 85).

This moment of similarity between humane and monstrous is of crucial importance for the interpretation of the relationship between agent Graham and Dr. Lecter. It is probable that the fusion of good and evil within each of the characters causes trauma for Graham. That is the point where the agent realizes he does not differ much from the monster itself and that

Lecter is so well-adapted to his social environment making it almost unthinkable for a person with his intellect and mannerisms to make such brutal acts. Consequently, Lecter is perceived as what appears to be more than a functional member of society, with his great intellect and refined taste in music, art, and food. Yet, he kills and cannibalizes his victims which is completely polar of the before-mentioned side of him. Graham, on the other hand, finds some traits of Hannibal within his persona; the intelligence accompanied by a photographic memory and ability to vividly recall past events, almost to the point where he can think as a killer, make him realize the similarity with Hannibal is greater than it appears:

– Do you know how you caught me, Will? – Goodbye, Dr. Lecter. You can leave messages for me at the number on the file. – Graham walked away. – Do you know how you caught me? – Graham was out of Lecter’s sight now, and he walked faster toward the far steel door. – The reason you caught me is that we’re just alike. – was the last thing Graham heard as the steel door closed behind him. (Red Dragon 85)

Another character, agent Starling, suffers a childhood trauma that appears to be hidden and irrelevant until it reveals itself during "a session" with Lecter: “What’s your worst memory of childhood?” (The Silence of the Lambs 163). After Starling's father dies she moves to her cousins' ranch where horses were kept only to be slaughtered. One night, after she is awakened by lambs screaming, she decides it is time to do something in order to avoid her favorite horse being killed. She runs away with the horse but the vivid memory of screaming lambs haunts her constantly. She was not aware of the trauma until she decides to do a favor to Dr. Lecter and trade some information about her personal life for valuable psychiatric insight into the mind of a killer that only Lecter can provide. As some scholars argue, the essence of trauma is exactly in its revelation that happens later in life under specific circumstances and not in its violent or hurtful nature (Caruth 5). For agent Starling, this means

bringing to light the forgotten memory of the innocent lambs that are to be slaughtered and her helplessness to alter their faith:

– I woke up and heard the lambs screaming. I woke up in the dark and the lambs were screaming. – They were slaughtering the spring lambs? – Yes (...) – You still wake up sometimes, don't you? Wake up in the iron dark with the lambs screaming? – Sometimes. – Do you think if you caught Buffalo Bill yourself and if you made Catherine all right, you could make the lambs stop screaming, do you think they'd be all right too and you wouldn't wake up again in the dark and hear the lambs screaming? Clarice? – I don't know. Maybe. (The Silence of the Lambs 253)

This, what appears to be an irrelevant occurrence, made a tremendous impact on agent Starling's life and it also strengthens the bond between her and Lecter in a way that they now share a similar traumatic experience. Namely, as it was already stated, Lecter lost his sister during World War II in a rather brutal manner; she was killed and eaten. Consequently, it influenced Lecter's future cannibalistic inclinations as well as continued to graphically live in his memory:

Hannibal Lecter, six, watched through a crack in the barn (...) they chose his sister, Mischa, and led her away. To play, they said. No one who was led away to play ever returned (...) he prayed so hard that he would see Mischa again (...). His prayer to see her again did not go entirely unanswered - he did see a few of Mischa's milk teeth in the reeking stool pit his captors used (...) His eyes open and he is suddenly, completely awake, his dream of his sister Mischa, long dead and digested, running seamlessly into this present waking: danger then, danger now. (Hannibal 180, 245, 246)

On a final note, it can be said that the characters of agents and murderers were conventionally considered different in nature. Based on the traditional approach, their



relationship was straightforward; agents are positive, killers are negative, and the first aim at imprisoning the latter. However, untraditional critical explanations, out of which Foucauldian is just one, tend to make a boundary between good and bad vaguer and approach it from the perspective of power struggle or shared past trauma. This provides new insight into the dynamics of the relationship between the aforementioned characters making the portrayal more complex. The two theoretical standpoints that were used, mimetic theory and shared experience of trauma show how characters have much more in common, if nothing, the same aspirations for power and painful trauma from the past. Conveniently, up until this point, fictional characters of serial killers and agents from Thomas Harris' novels were analyzed. In the next part of the paper, the characters from the TV series *Mindhunter* will be presented. The series is specific for it depicts real-life occurrences, therefore provides much livelier insight into power relations as well as power subversion between killers and agents.

## **6. In the mind of *Mindhunter***

The decision to take a step further and initiate the conversation with the real serial killers was brought by the U. S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) at the end of the 70s. During that period, a series of vicious, incomprehensible murders occurred that made the National Institute of Justice consider possible alternatives in order to find and arrest some of the most notorious killers in U. S. history (Douglas & Olshaker 15). The word “conversation”, however, may not be appropriate to use for various complex approaches that were used. Although, the actual talk with serial killers, who have already been in prison, makes the basis of something that will later be named criminal profiling. The cooperation between the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the National Institute of Justice resulted in the creation of a database of serial killer features that accompany various evidence found at the murder

location (Haskins 6). This step will be of significant importance in future investigations that resulted in catching some of the most prolific serial killers out there.

In order to understand the importance of police work in general and especially in the TV series *Mindhunter*, it is necessary to elaborate on the topic of criminal profiling. The aim of profilers is to prevent future crimes from happening by collecting extensive data on motives, actions, or specific characteristics behind some of the most gruesome acts ever committed. Many experts from various fields are also included in the process of collecting information so psychology, forensic psychiatry, medicine, and sociology play an important role in creating a profile of sex offenders, arsonists, serial killers, or even terrorists to predict and prevent their crimes (Popescu & Scripcaru 67). But the very first idea of establishing a unit appeared in the '70s after the significant increase in the number of killings and assaults across the USA. John Edward Douglas came up with the idea of interviewing some of the most notorious killers while he was traveling the country teaching the police to negotiate in hostage crises. With the help of his colleague, Mark Olshaker, he found the Behavioral Science Unit and, for the first time, used the word "serial killer". This inspired the making of the docudrama *Mindhunter*, the TV series based on real events, created by Joe Penhall and streamed on Netflix (Byers & Collins 2). The plot revolves around real-live events from agent Douglas and Olshaker's FBI career that resulted in establishing a separate FBI unit dealing with killers and it involves interviews with Edmund Kemper, David Berkowitz, Charles Manson, etc. In the series, some actual pieces of dialogues were taken and used on screen, so scenes of, for example, conversations with notorious murderer Edmund Kemper, were re-enacted (Davis, 2019). This particular feature of the series is crucial in order to get a deeper insight into the power relations between agents and serial killers. As was already mentioned, a significant portion of the horror genre is based on the character of a psychopathic individual whose portrayal aims to merge gothic and detective elements (Santaulària, "The Great Good

Place” 61). But more often than not, fictional characters are inspired by their counterparts in real life, especially due to the audience’s fascination with serial killers and true crime. Movies like *My Friend Dahmer*, *Zodiac*, and *The Night Stalker* were inspired by serial killers that terrorized the population across the USA in the late ‘60s, as well as in the ‘80s and ‘90s (26 Serial Killer Movies 2019). It is also important to take into consideration the social context associated with serial killers and that is in most cases the United States of America. The reason for that is that 74% of all serial killers in the world operate there while only 19% are reported to live in Europe (Caputi 110). What makes the American culture specific in relation to serial killers is another, broader notion; violence. As the American sociologist Randal Collins argues, violence can serve as a sort of entertainment. In that sense, it is purposely constructed as an amusing routine which makes it acceptable and therefore justified (242). The interesting part of this theory is the perception of violence as something that does not happen on a daily basis even though we, as a society, are surrounded by violent content in various forms. Violence is rare because people connote it with negative feelings such as anger or fear, leading them to avoid violent situations which is precisely what makes it sensational (Collins 242). This simple explanation may highlight why violent occurrences, particularly murders are so highly represented in the media; they are rare, sensational, and therefore well-accepted among the audience. Especially the latter one, the audience, in a society of consumerism and spectacle plays a salient role; it is drawn by mutilated bodies, injuries, traumas, and terror (Seltzer 3). Consequently, this is what makes serial killers (real and fictional) so intriguing to the public which, more often than not, praises them as some sort of perverted and unconventional role models. The TV series *Mindhunter* is one among many popular references to the phenomenon of the serial killer, particularly interesting because it showed the very beginning of criminal profiling in the FBI. Another novelty is that the story revolves around real-life characters of agents and killers who somewhat cooperate in

gathering the knowledge necessary to catch future criminals. The focal point of this cooperation is the interviews which will further be analyzed to show how power is exercised in an unexpected way.

### **7. The power play between Kemper and agents**

As it has already been stated, power relations in the analyzed novels and TV series are reversed for one reason; to collect precious knowledge necessary to foresee and prevent future crimes. In order to gather the knowledge, some sort of concession has to be made. More specific examples of that “trade” will be presented later. For now, the focus is on general knowledge obtained in interviews between killers and agents that happened in real life and are shown in the TV series *Mindhunter*. In the scene from season one, agents Holden, Tench (real-life Douglas and Olshaker), Smith, and a psychiatrist Dr. Wendy Carr discuss the data collected after the interviews with some of the killers. To emphasize the importance of the given opportunity for the killers to speak and for agents to gather information, the director of the TV series decides to put in a scene where agents and a psychiatrist coin the expression “serial killer”: “It should feel like a long story. Continually updated.” – “A series of killings.” – “Serial?” – “Serial murderer?” – “Serial killer?” – “That’s better. Let’s see if it sticks.” (*Mindhunter* S1 E9 27:44-27:31). But before the agents have the chance to deduce from what they have heard in interviews with killers, they have to give up some of the power that is socially ascribed to them and hand it over to the killers. Now, the following issue has to be examined: What kind of power could possibly an imprisoned criminal exercise over the agents? The first and the most obvious answer could be in the psychological nature of the mentally ill individual. By letting them speak in detail about the heinous acts they did, the opportunity to relive such moments and feel powerful again is given. The nature of the murderous instinct is such that craves any possible form of power regardless of the usually

immoral means used to achieve it (Ürmösné & Simon 33). In season two of the series *Mindhunter*, one particular scene depicts how this theoretical explanation is (executed in real-life) put into practice. In one of many instances of interviewing Edmund Kemper, agents try to examine the real reason behind the killer's returning to the crime site: "You need to ask Kemper about returning to the scene of the crime, for BTK." – "We know he did that. He told us." – "But we need to know why." (*Mindhunter* S2 E5 43:38-43:46). Following this, Kemper offers a simple and straightforward answer: "The feeling of complete dominance (...)" (*Mindhunter* S2 E5 41:16-41:19). So, this is the very first instance of power that a psychopathic criminal holds in their hands: power over life and death. It is straightforward and the most obvious kind of power they possess. The second instance of power is yet to be formed after a criminal is captured and has no more opportunity to exercise the first instance. The only occasion when killers get to indulge in the feeling of power is when the usual and socially accepted trait of power is reversed, in other words when agents purposefully ask criminals for help in solving cases. Here, the aforementioned character from the TV series and actual serial killer Edmund Kemper stood out prominently. His intriguing and complicated persona will be analyzed in comparison with the fictional character Dr. Hannibal Lecter in order to find similar traits of power relations between agents and killers.

In a myriad of dynamic relationships between characters from *Mindhunter* and Thomas Harris' novels, two characters stand out; the fictional character Hannibal Lecter and the real-life killer Edmund Kemper portrayed in the TV series. It is not a coincidence they are the main protagonists the plot revolves around. Lecter and Kemper have a lot of shared characteristics that can serve as a good starting point in the comprehension of power relations from a Foucauldian point of view. The first evident connection between Lecter and Kemper is that agents asked for help. In need of information necessary to catch criminals, agents from both books and TV series voluntarily go to imprisoned killers and ask for their insight.

Interestingly, Lecter and Kemper are not coincidentally chosen as representatives of the psychopathic killers necessary to satisfy the form. The common trait that makes them powerful in a given moment is the specific knowledge they possess. Lecter has an academic degree with a refined taste for art and music (Cenclarelli 108). Kemper himself is an extremely intelligent and articulated individual (Edmund Kemper Biography 2017). They both possess general and, more importantly, specific knowledge. This particular feature is crucial to understand how and why power distributes. Both characters developed an astonishing set of social skills helping them to accommodate very well in their separate yet same environments. Namely, Lecter and Kemper, before they were arrested, had another similar trait: they were in continuous touch with authorities, either for the sake of pleasure (Kemper) or to provide professional help (Lecter). But why exactly were these two characters chosen to play the most important role in both novels and TV series? This may have to do not only with their strong and dominating personality but also with the power they hold on the account of it. Lecter and Kemper possess certain traits that make them human more than other serial killers mentioned in the book as well as in the series. This humane aspect of their persona might explain why power subversion takes place when Lecter and Kemper are faced with the agents.

As the character of Hannibal Lecter was already given enough space, the focus hereafter will be shifted to Edmund Kemper and his relationship with the agents. Up until this point, similarities between two the two characters were emphasized. However, there is one great difference that seeks attention: Kemper was an actual, real-life killer. For the sake of this paper, only his portrayal in the TV series will be considered as delving into Kemper's real-life biography would be too complex and rather irrelevant. Here, the connectedness between him and agents established in the moment of knowledge trade and power subversion will be examined in more detail. First of all, it was an unbelievably challenging task to find some

research on the portrayal of Edmund Kemper in the TV series *Mindhunter*, let alone the power display between him and agents. The scholars predominately focus on the research in the field of psychology, forensics, or psychiatry regarding killer's real-life characteristics, so the importance of the sociological explanations in terms of the Foucauldian notion of power, as presented in the TV series, is usually left out. Another point worth noting is his portrayal in the series. In popular culture the phenomenon of the serial killer is omnipresent. It is a sensation that frightens and, at the same time, fascinates the public. Thus, many categories of popular culture, especially literature and the film industry, aim to benefit from real-life and spine-chilling serial murderer minds (White 160). Kemper's portrayal in the series is made out of actual parts of the interview between him and agents that were re-enacted on screen (Davis 2019). This was of crucial importance for the audience to take a deeper insight into a perverted mind so they can enjoy the complexity of understanding it from their own comfort and safe distance, often forgetting it was not about a fictional character (Baelo Allué 7). This purposeful mix of fictive and real could be compared to the proximity of humane and monstrous. Similarly to the character of Hannibal Lecter, the boundary between good and evil, moral and immoral is rather blurred. In the same spirit, the representation of Edmund Kemper could be understood. He is depicted as intelligent, sociable, and very articulated, as he was in real life. These traits were the weapon he overpowered the agents with for one simple reason: they were not expected to be present within the monstrous serial killer persona. There are quite a few examples of minute displays of power that can easily go unnoticed. In the very first scene when the audience gets to know the notorious killer, after the polite greeting, Kemper states: "So how can I help? (...) Have you had breakfast? Can I get you something? You want a sandwich? I'll get us an egg salad sandwich. I can get almost anything you want from the canteen" (*Mindhunter* S1 E2 43:23-43:39). This simple and polite display is not expected and most certainly does not correspond to the character of a sadistic

serial killer and a rapist. Precisely in this instance of inability to separate good from evil or humane from monstrous lies Kemper's power. He baffles and intrigues the agents who are aware of the brutality and realness of his acts, but who at the same time allow themselves to forget about it and engage in a friendly conversation with Kemper. What also gives him an opportunity to hold power for a brief moment is his possession of knowledge connected to the motives and reasons behind the murderous acts. It is important to remember Kemper was the pioneer when it comes to establishing the behavioral FBI unit. He was an inexhaustible source of precious information that helped in the formation of a database of various serial killer features and characteristics that helped and are still helping in catching criminals (Haskins 6). However, without one crucial feature in the portrayal of Kemper (as well as Lecter), the exchange of knowledge could not take place. This feature is intelligence that may be used synonymously with eloquence, cleverness, or erudition. This particular, yet apparently irrelevant, characteristic is what makes Kemper powerful, even for a brief moment, during sessions with agents. His aim is not to disrespect or belittle agents. On the contrary, his goal is to be equal to them, even though his knowledge is not acquired legitimately, through institutions (Bourdieu 187). By letting them get to know his human side and forgetting he is still a vicious serial killer, the agents are (like the audience) trapped in another realm, in a mix of fiction and reality deprived of the power they initially had. For the first time, agents do not have a subordinated inmate across the table, but almost a colleague with whom they deductively come to the conclusion in a fair exchange of knowledge. The agents' realization a monstrous figure of a serial killer possesses a remarkable set of skills that makes him similar to them is what caused the subversion of power. These skills are not expected or associated with the traditionally accepted figure of a violent and psychotic serial killer. That is why this particular character, Edmund Kemper, was given the opportunity to reverse socially accepted power relations. In his portrayal, macro and micro explanations of power are conjoined. On



one side, there is understanding power is a concept constructed by social structures and institutions on a macro level that cannot be changed or influenced by individuals. Yet, Kemper, as an individual, is engaged in the process of power subversion on a micro level by negotiating meanings and rules (Knorr-Cetina 15, 24). Here, the Foucauldian approach in the spirit of structuralism is taken to a smaller, micro level. If institutionally gathered and legitimized knowledge is used to establish dominance and power on a macro level, the same mechanism could be applied on a micro level, through face-to-face interactions. This is how, with the help of almost unnoticeable signals, power subversion takes place on a micro level. Some of the examples of that subversion could be seen in the interaction between Kemper and agents. Firstly, Kemper clearly indicates he does not have anything with institutions, structures, or authorities, i.e. with large structures in general: "Well, Holden, I'm not an expert. I'm not an authority. I'm just an extremely accomplished murderer who spent my adult life successfully evading capture until I gave myself up because I despaired of ever being caught" (*Mindhunter* S1 E2 35:00-35:18). Kemper aims at separating himself from institutionalized forms in any sense and emphasizes he was just an individual. Moreover, as an individual without any sort of official and legitimized background, he possesses mechanisms to hold power even in brief moments of interaction with the agents. His most powerful mechanism is his knowledge and intelligence: "You can spell oeuvre, can't you Holden?" (...) "Well, they were both very controlling, aggressive, matriarchal women." – "Matriarchal?" – "Female-centric. Get that down. That's a big antecedent." (*Mindhunter* S1 E2 14:13-14:19, 36:01-36:03). Without any wish to humiliate the agents or diminish their work Kemper displays these small yet powerful cues aiming at truly helping and mentoring the agents so they could imprison killers on the loose. Due to this shared goal, according to Girard's mimetic theory, actors fight for power and dominance constantly since only one outcome is possible and that is the power of one over the other (Kunz 195). Even though the

agents are more powerful at last, they cannot exist without serial killers and their unique insight. Their perspective and knowledge cannot be obtained unless they are given space and opportunity to become powerful, even for a brief moment.

## **8. Conclusion**

“Power, then, is something like this: A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (Dahl 202, 203).

In order to summarize the main ideas of the Foucauldian theory when it comes to the notions of power, knowledge, and normality, one could state this: science and knowledge, in general, are formed in a way to exclude and restrict so through power, dominance could be established. In other words, knowledge is formally located in institutions and social structures, especially in total institutions like prisons or asylums and social structures connected to the military, medicine, school, or work. These areas of social activities are the very core of establishing the category of normal, hence they hold the power to categorize and standardize something as crime, pathology, or deviancy. As a consequence, an unquestionable and widely accepted narrative of normal is constructed and justified with the help of the state and law building the inseparable linkage between power and knowledge (Turkel 172).

The mentioned relation between Foucauldian notions is rather straightforward; the one who possesses knowledge holds power and exercises it on the one labeled as subordinated with the help of that same knowledge. But the idea of power-knowledge relation could be challenged in a way to examine the situation vice-versa. In that case, the following question can be asked: What happens when power is subverted in a way that the ones who, according to Foucault, have power compromise and give it to the ones with the etiquette of a criminal or an insane one? Since the focus of this thesis is on the power subversion that occurs when agents turn to serial killers and their specific knowledge to catch criminals on the loose, the

area of the research was narrowed down only to the total institution of prison and power relations between fictional and actual agents and killers from Thomas Harris' novels and the TV series *Mindhunter*. Moreover, it was important to define the notion of power subversion in general. Throughout history, the concept was used to defend the oppression of the king, state, or religious authorities. Any activity that posed a threat to these structures was marked subversive (Spjut 255). This way, all religious or state issues were given legitimacy so any kind of resistance was eliminated by being defined as subversive. This is attuned to the Foucauldian explanation of power relations in total institutions. Any action that is not in accordance with categories established by the ones who possess a piece of specific knowledge, therefore power, is labeled as abnormal or subversive (*Power/Knowledge* 58, 60).

The usual and socially acceptable pattern of power relations between characters of agents and criminals in novels *Red Dragon*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, and *Hannibal*, as well as the TV series *Mindhunter*, would be this: agents have power based on knowledge, law, and structures like a prison to control and decide upon various aspects of inmates' life that begins from the moment they are captured. This is a generally accepted idea that will be challenged by the Foucauldian approach. According to it, power is as real concept as it is approved by social categories, in other words, it is a socially accepted construct. It has its base in institutional knowledge that legitimizes power relations in a way that gives the ability to someone to label someone else as deviant (*Power/Knowledge* 65). In short, criminals, or psychopaths are only given an etiquette of a criminal or a psychopath due to the power of the "knowledgeable" in charge, in this case, the police and psychiatrists. Even though Foucault is considered to be rather extreme in his understanding of power-knowledge connectedness, his theory could serve as a good starting point to challenge the traditional idea of one-way power relations. For this reason, subversion is extremely important; it goes directly against all socially established categories and structures and it leads to the questioning of the

conventional traits of power. Thereby, the objective of this paper was to represent a relationship between serial killers and agents through the prism of subverted power relations in the portrayal of the fictional characters in a few selected scenes from Thomas Harris' novels as well as the TV series *Mindhunter*. Based on the traditional approach, the characters of agents and murderers were conventionally portrayed differently in nature, with agents as positive and killers as negative. However, according to the untraditional critical explanations, there is a tendency to make a boundary between good and evil vaguer and approach it from the perspective of mimetic theory or shared past trauma. These approaches equalize *the monster* and *the good guy* and even go a step further in giving a justification and moral component to the acts of killing. This humane and almost heroic aspect of killers' personae explains why power subversion takes place in the relationship between Lecter, Kemper, and the agents. Finally, traditionally negative characters are overpowered by positive characters since they can walk out of the prison freely. However, the need to turn to *the bad guy* existed and still exists in order to gather precious knowledge firsthand. This opportunity to briefly become powerful on a micro level in face-to-face interaction is exactly the premise for the subversion of power that takes place.

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**A Subversion of Power Through the Serial Killer-Agent Relationship in Thomas Harris' Novels and the TV Series *Mindhunter*: Summary and key words**

Power has been an interesting concept for many scholars, especially in the field of sociology and philosophy. It was usually considered negative and destructive, used to alter people's decisions and goals. More traditional explanations viewed power as something to be held and fought for whereas modern approaches accept the idea of limited human ability to change already built structures. The Foucauldian notion of power explains it in relation to knowledge and total institutions as places where power with the help of knowledge is best practiced. The main role of prison as a total institution is to accept and internalize the socially accepted behavior so that normalization could take place. In popular culture, psychotic individuals are considered abnormal and the phenomenon of a psychopath serial killer is prominent in literature, movies, and TV series. The aim of this thesis paper is to examine the subversion of power that occurs in a relationship between serial killers and the police in the process of gathering knowledge. The theoretical background of the paper is Michel Foucault's critical theory. The focus is on the dynamics of the relationship between characters of agents and killers from Thomas Harris' novels *Red Dragon*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, and *Hannibal* and the TV series *Mindhunter*. The core of the analysis will be the representation of the power play between agents Starling, Graham, Holden, and Tench and serial killers Hannibal Lecter and Edmund Kemper.

Key words: power, Foucault, serial killers, Hannibal Lecter, *Mindhunter*

## **Subverzija moći kroz odnos serijskog ubojice i agenta na primjeru romana Thomasa Harrisa i serije *Mindhunter*: Sažetak i ključne riječi**

Pojam moći je zanimljiv za mnoge znanstvenike, napose u poljima poput sociologije ili filozofije. Uobičajeno se smatra negativnim i destruktivnim te se koristi kako bi se mijenjale ljudske odluke i ciljevi. Tradicionalna objašnjenja moć promatraju kao nešto što se posjeduje i za što se bori, dok ona moderna prihvaćaju ideju ograničene ljudske mogućnosti da se mijenjaju prethodno utvrđene strukture. Foucaultov pojam moći dovodi u vezu znanje i moć te totalne institucije kao mjesta gdje se moć uz pomoć znanja najbolje provodi u praksi. Glavna uloga zatvora kao totalne institucije jest prihvatiti i internalizirati društveno prihvatljivo ponašanje kako bi došlo do normalizacije. U popularnoj kulturi psihotični pojedinci su smatrani abnormalnima te je fenomen serijskog ubojice psihopata postao čest u književnosti, filmu i televizijskim serijama. Cilj ovog rada jest ispitati subverziju moći do koje dolazi u odnosu između serijskih ubojica i agenata u postupku prikupljanja znanja. Teorijska podloga rada jest Foucaultova kritička teorija. Fokus rada jest dinamika veze između likova agenata i ubojica iz romana Thomasa Harrisa *Crveni zmaj*, *Kad jaganjci utihnu* i *Hannibal* te serije *Mindhunter*. Srž rada jest prikaz odnosa moći između agenata Starling, Grahama, Holdena i Tencha te serijskih ubojica Hannibala Lectera i Edmunda Kempera.

Ključne riječi: moć, Foucault, serijski ubojice, Hannibal Lecter, *Mindhunter*