

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN



JOURNAL OF POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH VOLUME XIV 2015

Published by the Graduate Students' Union
of the University of Dublin, Trinity College.

This issue represents submissions
from the 2014-2015 academic year.

Printed in Ireland by Westside Print
Front cover illustration by Shane Finan

Typeset in Palatino and CG Omega using Adobe InDesign

ISSN: 2009-4787

This issue of the TCD Journal of Postgraduate Research may be cited as: (2015)
Journal of Postgraduate Research, Volume XIV

© The contributors and the TCD Journal of Postgraduate Research. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the permission of the author. All rights reserved. All views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the editorial team or those of the TCD Graduate Students' Union.

“It’s Always the Same, and It’s Always Different” Mythologisation and the Serial Killer in *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*.

by
David A. Smyth

Abstract

Serial killers are important in American horror because of their ability to exist between ‘myth’ and ‘reality’. The serial killer is one of the most important American myths, but it is one firmly rooted in real life: unlike Paul Bunyan or Superman, serial killers *do* exist. This essay examines the relationship between the ‘myth’ and the ‘reality’ of serial killers, and the complex relationship between the American public and the serial killer, using *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* as a guide.

Firstly, the essay will discuss the creation and importance of American myths, before moving on to examine how the serial killer fits into the American myth mould. It will demonstrate that the serial killer is a mythologised figure in American culture, and that, as a result of this mythologisation, the serial killer as a figure in ‘reality’ is destabilised and made ‘safe’.

Following this, the essay assesses John McNaughton’s *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* as a reaction against the mythologisation of the serial killer in popular culture. By utilising McNaughton’s film, the essay will deconstruct the ‘myth’ of the serial killer as presented in American popular culture. The essay also focuses on how McNaughton’s film reiterates the myth of the serial killer in its final moments, and how this reflects on the place of the serial killer in American myth.

Keywords

serial killers, myth, reality, America, popular culture

The story of the hook-handed man (an escaped killer, with a hook for a hand, attacks a teenaged couple in their car one night as they listen to the news of his escape on their radio) is “the most basic horror story I know [...] it offers no characterisation, no theme, no particular artifice; it does not aspire to symbolic beauty or try to summarise the times, the mind, or the human spirit [...] the story of The Hook exists for one reason and one

reason alone: to scare the shit out of little kids after the sun goes down”.¹ The hook-handed man story is serial killer as classic myth: it is basic, formative, and primal. “Myth [...] formulates answers to fundamental human hopes and fears”.² American myth, because of its constructed nature, always has a footing in ‘reality’. Created by lumberjacks in the late nineteenth century, Paul Bunyan is one of America’s defining myths. “The original Paul Bunyan could only have been satirical”³ before transforming into a myth that resonates into the present day. Bunyan is just one example of the constructed, performative nature of American myth. America defines itself as the ‘land of opportunity’ built around the ideals of the ‘American way’, a construct that promotes the idea that dreams *can* become reality: “America is neither dream nor reality”,⁴ it is a combination of both. The serial killer myth flourishes in America because it highlights and exploits the blurred line between ‘myth’ and ‘reality’. The serial killer is one of the most important modern American myths, but it is one firmly rooted in ‘real’ life: unlike Paul Bunyan or Pecos Bill, serial killers *do* exist. The serial killer is popular in American horror because, despite its frightening realism and the fact that it is not a monster exclusive to the movies or myth, it is still a figure largely defined in the public consciousness by those same movies and myths. The serial killer exists between myth and reality, and it is this tension that the present essay will address, using John McNaughton’s *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* as a guide.

Firstly, the serial killer must be understood as a mythical figure. Jack the Ripper is perhaps the world’s most mythologised serial killer, appearing in dozens of films, television programmes, and novels since he first came to prominence in 1888: “most of us have grown up in the shadow of Jack the Ripper [...] Over the past hundred years, the Ripper murders have achieved the status of a modern myth.”⁵ Jack the Ripper is a figure that has become so mythologised as to appear ‘unreal’. In fact, the Ripper murders were almost immediately reappropriated from ‘reality’ into ‘myth’, as the

1 Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (London: Warner Books, 1991), 33- 5.

2 Deborah Madsen, *Allegory in American: From Puritanism to Postmodernism* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 128.

3 Max Gartenberg, “Paul Bunyan and Little John,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 62.426 (1949), 418.

4 Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso, 1989), 28.

5 Judith R. Walkowitz, “Jack the Ripper and the Myth of Male Violence,” *Feminist Studies* 8.3 (1982), 541- 4.

public turned to popular culture in an effort to understand the seemingly unsolvable case. David Schmid's study of the period outlines that "[i]n the Ripper case, the public was denied the catharsis represented by the trial and sentence, and so they had all the more reason to seek that catharsis by turning to popular culture."⁶ From the beginning of the modern era the public has constantly attempted to familiarise and deconstruct the actions of the serial killer by turning to popular culture in an effort to mythologise their gruesome reality. As the Ripper case grew in popularity and notoriety, entrepreneurial types took to "[c]harging people to view murder scenes."⁷ Popular culture becomes a lens through which the horrors of the serial killer are made 'safe': "The presence of women at these [Jack the Ripper] shows suggest they may have used these exhibits to distance themselves from the Ripper's victims".⁸ By embracing the Ripper murders as myth, they become less dangerous, and take on the moralistic message that the city is unsafe for women alone at night. The actual fact of serial murder is blurred, and familiarised, as the Ripper murders are turned into a myth. Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell deal with the phenomenon in *From Hell*, their graphic novel about the mythical nature of the Ripper murders, highlighting the power of myth in the shaping of the Ripper 'story': "Our story's written [...] inked in blood long dry [...] engraved in stone."⁹ These words, spoken by William Gull (Moore and Campbell's Ripper), directly reference the legacy of the Ripper murders, as the violent acts perpetrated by the killer ensure his survival in popular culture. As the graphic novel continues, Gull finds himself floating through history, encountering various serial killers and events that reiterate the Ripper's ever-lasting 'popularity'.

With the Ripper case, the serial killer is reduced to a piece of popular culture that can be readily deconstructed and understood. In attempts to 'understand' the serial killer, the killer usually becomes further mythologised. In 1988 (the centenary of the Ripper murders) the FBI released a profile of the killer, revealing him to be "an asocial white male [...] a quiet, shy loner [...] probably with a heavy-drinking promiscuous mother."¹⁰ This information is irrelevant: the crimes happened a century

6 David Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 34.

7 *Ibid.*, 34.

8 Schmid, *Celebrities*, 35.

9 Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell, *From Hell* (London: Knockabout Comics, 1989), 4.37- 8.

10 Schmid, *Celebrities*, 66.

ago, and the psychological profile (compiled by John Douglas, head of the FBI Investigative Support unit) is merely another 'twist in the tale' being sold to the general public. "The 'profile' is meant to underscore the radical otherness of the killer"¹¹: the actions of the serial killer are only further mythologised by attempting to place an 'understanding' on them. The accuracy of Douglas's findings do not matter. What matters is entertainment, and a furthering of the Jack the Ripper mythology.

The longevity of the Ripper mythology and the instantly mythological nature of the entire case both lead to a mythologisation of the serial killer in popular culture. Popular culture "makes, or attempts to make, meanings that serve the dominant interest in society,"¹² acting, like myth, to reinforce societal ideals. For example, in "Material Girl: The Effacements of Postmodern Culture", Susan Bordo writes on the idea of a 'cultural plastic' that society controls, and can mould to whatever means necessary: "In place of God the watchmaker, we now have ourselves, the master sculptors of the plastic."¹³ Society uses popular culture to reflect and distort reality. Despite the Ripper's British origins, he is instantly re-established as having connections to America: "there is a long tradition, beginning during the murders themselves, of associating Americans with Jack the Ripper [...] few commentators in the United States rejected such theories."¹⁴ There is an immediate understanding that the serial killer is a decidedly American figure, as evidenced in Linnie Blake's work on 'wound culture': "[T]he violent murderer has been a recurrent figure in the mass cultural imagination of the United States since the earliest days of the republic."¹⁵ The serial killer represents "the enemy of social cohesiveness,"¹⁶ a figure who questions the ideals of America. They operate outside the law and do not appear to value the lives or liberties of other citizens. As a result, they effectively subvert the promise of the American constitution, which offers the 'unalienable rights' of 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' Alongside the broader ideological disruptions, the serial killer would become associated with violent crime in the imagination of the

11 Deborah Cameron, "St-i-i-ll Going... The Quest for Jack the Ripper", *Social Text* 40 (1994), 152.

12 John Fiske, "Television Culture" in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 1087.

13 Susan Bordo, "Material Girl: The Effacements of Postmodern Culture" in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 1099.

14 Schmid, *Celebrities*, 32.

15 Linnie Blake, *The Wounds of Nations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 102.

16 *Ibid.*, 108.

public due to the fact that it “dovetailed neatly with broader patterns of thinking about crime and violence”¹⁷ in the United States. As the serial killer becomes utilised as a representative system, “we can speak of serial murder as a whole mythological system.”¹⁸

Despite the position of the serial killer as a destabilising figure in American society, the myth surrounding the figure gradually overtakes ‘reality’. John Wayne Gacy and Ted Bundy are two serial killers who contribute to the mythical nature of the ‘real’ killer: “The lethal clown face came to symbolise the multiple murder threat just as effectively as the handsome talking head of Ted Bundy.”¹⁹ Gacy and Bundy become mythical figures, because of their recognisable traits: Gacy’s charitable activities as Pogo the Clown formed his persona as the ‘killer clown’, while Bundy’s good looks create the handsome and charismatic killer (“Nobody would have known that the handsome young man behind the wheel was actually transporting a helpless victim who would soon die”²⁰). Serial killers begin to exist outside ‘reality’, as they become celebrity figures:

the serial killer makes a particularly appropriate (even emblematic) celebrity because both figures inspire feelings of attraction and repulsion, admiration and condemnation. Even though the ‘normal’ celebrity (for example, the film star) seems to be a wholly loved and admired figure, in fact the public’s relation to the celebrity is also characterised by resentment, even violent hatred.²¹

Schmid’s casting of the serial killer as celebrity furthers the idea that the serial killer operates outside ‘reality’.

In *The Wounds of Nations*, Blake states that “the figure of the serial killer has come to occupy an increasingly prominent and problematic position at the heart of popular culture”.²² Films like *Halloween*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, and *Friday the 13th* all feature serial killer figures that exist outside ‘reality’. They are the monstrous Other, sharing traits with the figure of the hook-handed man. While these films are often referred to as slasher / spree killer films, Michael, Freddy, and Jason all fit the template of a serial killer: the

17 Schmid, *Celebrities*, 83.

18 Jenkins, *Nightmares*, 143.

19 *Ibid.*, 146.

20 Robert Keppel, *The Riverman: Ted Bundy and I Hunt for the Green River Killer* (New York: Pocket Books, 1995), 20.

21 Schmid, *Celebrities*, 6.

22 Blake, *Wounds*, 105.

sequels that follow the initial films make this clear, as the murderers return after a period of time to kill a new set of victims. In this way, the killers in these films become serial mass murderers. Sequels are relevant to the desensitisation of the serial killer figure. The more times a figure appears on screen, the less impactful it becomes, the easier to accept as 'unreal'. While Michael and Freddy (not so much Jason, who began his career as a jump-scare, and seems to only ever have existed in that realm) begin their filmic lives as characters imbued with meaning (Michael as 'pure evil', Freddy as fears surrounding child murder), they quickly become the stars of their own franchises: serial killers as protagonists. As their "quasi-comic crimes dominated multiplexes across the 1980s,"²³ they become bloated parodies of themselves — Michael is revealed to be controlled by druids in *Halloween: The Curse of Michael Meyers*, Freddy collaborated with The Fat Boys on a rap song for the fourth instalment of his franchise, *Jason X* is set in space — reflecting the over-simplification of the serial killer they promote. The serial killer is a victim of sequelisation: the more the character is exposed and explained, the less 'real' it becomes. "The almost inescapable failure of sequels results from the fact that, at the same time a sequel calls to mind the charismatic original, it also recalls its absence".²⁴ The sequelisation of the serial killer results in a hollowing out of the figure, as it becomes an empty referent of its past self, "a lavish display of the mere surface of the prior work".²⁵ In this way, the sequelisation of the horror movie serial killer reflects and enhances the initial simplification of the figure as 'myth', as it strengthens the audience's perception that the serial killer adheres to consistent tropes and regular patterns.

The serial killer is "validated by the American culture industry"²⁶ as a mythical figure that can be appropriated for entertainment purposes: the audience can "derive a certain scopophilic delight"²⁷ from watching these figures. Each character is attributed a simple explanation for their murders: "They are studies of pure evil, not psychiatric disorder".²⁸ This soft focus on the motives of the killer, the 'easy' explanation, is just one example of the transformation of the serial killer myth into an easily exploited trope,

23 Blake, *Wounds*, 102.

24 Todd Berliner, "The Pleasures of Disappointment: Sequels and *The Godfather, Part II*," *Journal of Film and Video* 53.2/3 (2001), 109.

25 *Ibid.*, 110.

26 Blake, *Wounds*, 112.

27 *Ibid.*, 112.

28 Jenkins, *Nightmares*, 147.

an entity that the audience expects, accepts and understands as part of the horror movie landscape. The slasher set-up is easily recognisable and rarely diverted from: a deranged killer murders a multitude of teens over a brief period of time. As a result, it breeds familiarity. John Fiske states that “[a] code is a rule-governed system of signs, whose rules and conventions are shared amongst members of a culture, and which is used to generate and circulate meanings in and for that culture.”²⁹ If a narrative adheres to previously established ‘rules and conventions’ then the audience accepts that narrative. As a result of this acceptance of tropes, the tropes become ways by which the culture is defined, and a ‘cultural shorthand’ is agreed upon. The serial killer of ‘reality’ becomes encoded with the same tropes as the serial killer of ‘myth’, until there is very little distinction left between the two. The serial killer as presented in myth and film becomes the “dominant ideology”,³⁰ one in which the audience willingly partakes. “In the serial killer ... action and identity are fused”³¹: this connection between the actions of the serial killer and their self is furthered by the depictions of the figure in popular culture, as the figure becomes defined by the myth performed by the movies. The existence of the serial killer as a trope and a myth abstracts the serial killer as a figure in reality, as the audience begins to exclusively perceive the serial killer of ‘reality’ as the serial killer of ‘myth’.

The mythologisation of the serial killer is what director John McNaughton attempts to tackle in *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*. McNaughton redirects the serial killer narrative away from myth and into reality. McNaughton’s film is a reaction to the filmic mythologisation of and desensitisation to the serial killer that occurred as a result of the popularity of the figure.

The true myth of the serial killer is that there is an easily identified reason behind what they do: myths are designed to offer fundamental answers to unquantifiable ideas. The public wishes to understand *who* Jack the Ripper was because that will offer closure, and supposedly give reason to his actions:

Perhaps there is a reason here for the endless quest of the Ripperologists

29 Fiske, “Television Culture,” 1088.

30 Ibid., 1094.

31 Schmid, *Celebrities*, 15.

to give Jack an identity, a history, and a name. Individualised, he can be sorted into the usual boxes: the 'abused child' box, the 'weak mother' box, the 'cheating wife' box, the 'too much testosterone' box, the 'congenital psychopath' box, the 'addiction' box. Lacking individuality, Jack has been able to speak to us *only* about his culture, and about ours.³²

By 'understanding' Jack the Ripper, or any serial killer, the criminal can be bested: "Once a monster has been identified, he can be defeated and captured."³³ In response to this, Henry (Michael Rooker), based on real-life serial killer and compulsive confessor Henry Lee Lucas, is presented to the audience as an uncomfortably real, motiveless character, who understands and plays with the tropes of the serial killer.

The first trope is the trope of the motive. Becky (Tracy Arnold) attempts to furnish Henry with a reason for his mother's murder: "She must have treated you real bad."³⁴ As a result of this, she highlights the complex relationship between the serial killer and his 'audience'; she points out the need for the audience to understand Henry's motives, in an effort to excuse his behaviour on some level. If Henry gives an answer that plays into established serial killer tropes, then the audience will be satisfied, and can continue on. Despite Becky's efforts, Henry's answer feels overly fabricated:

She was a whore. My mama was a whore. But I don't fault her for that. It ain't what she done, but how she done it. Long as I can remember, she'd be bringin' men up to the house ... She'd make me watch ... She'd beat me too. A lot. ... And sometimes she'd beat me, and make me wear a dress, and watch her doin' it. Then they'd laugh at me.³⁵

Henry's answer(s) combine to form a jumbled myriad of serial killer tropes (a promiscuous mother, child abuse, cross-dressing, bullying) that create the impression that Henry is lying. The real Henry Lee Lucas is so associated with lies that his "death sentence was commuted to a life sentence due to concerns over the veracity of his confessions."³⁶ Lucas's 'confessions' lead to an "ambiguous relationship among truth, memory,

32 Cameron, "St-i-i-i-ll Going", 153.

33 Jenkins, *Nightmares*, 148.

34 *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, directed by John McNaughton (1986; Orland Park, IL: Dark Sky Films, 2009), Blu-Ray.

35 *Ibid.*

36 Shaun Kimber, "Merging Fact and Fiction: Cult Celebrity, Film Narrative, and the Henry Lee Lucas Story," in *Real Lives, Celebrity Stories: Narratives of Ordinary and Extraordinary People Across Media*, ed. Bronwen Thomas and Julia Round (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 151.

and lies"³⁷ in his story that is reflected in the fictive Henry's 'confession'. He does not have *any* true motive, and, as a result, is unquantifiable. This scene further highlights Henry's lack of motive by revealing that he cannot remember how he killed his mother:

HENRY: Yeah, I killed my mama. One night ... I shot her. I shot her dead.

BECKY: I thought you said you stabbed her?

HENRY: Oh yeah, that's right. I stabbed her.³⁸

Henry is unable to correctly recall the details of his mother's murder, as evidenced in Becky's assertion that "Otis said you hit her with a baseball bat."³⁹ This reiterates the idea that Henry is 'real': none of the murders he commits are pivotal to his nature. He is an unknowable force, not easily explained away by the tropes of standard serial killer narratives.

Henry further demonstrates his awareness of the tropes of the serial killer by offering Otis (Tom Towles) the following advice: "If you shoot someone in the head with a .45 every time you kill somebody, it becomes like your fingerprint, see? But if you strangle one, stab another, and one you cut up, and one you don't, then the police don't know what to do."⁴⁰ In a direct reaction to the overly familiar serial killers of the screen and myth, Henry's mode of serial killing is devoid of specific characteristics, allowing McNaughton to deconstruct his second trope. Henry destabilises the idea that serial killers are in any way recognisable, or knowable, by refusing to brandish a signature weapon, or adhere to a previously established template. He defies simple categorization. Henry is completely self-aware, seemingly understanding of the performative nature of serial killing, and how that relates to the level of notoriety a serial killer will acquire.

Henry further debunks the serial killer narrative by ignoring the trope of victim as sympathetic audience surrogate: "[Horror] is notorious for confronting its target audience [...] with cinematic images of themselves in various states of danger."⁴¹ Becky and Otis aside, Henry's victims rarely speak, and get more screen time as corpses. At the beginning of the film,

37 *Ibid.*, 152.

38 McNaughton, *Henry*.

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*

41 Aviva Briefel, "Monster Pains: Masochism, Menustration, and Identification in the Horror Film," *Film Quarterly* 58.3 (2005), 19.

McNaughton provides a series of highly stylised establishing shots of victims in tableau, coupled with the sounds of their murder playing over the images. This creates a distancing effect between the audience and the victim. Becky is the closest the film has to a sympathetic, identifiable character, and she essentially co-operates with the one murder she witnesses Henry commit. Henry is the focus of the film, not the victims. This awareness of serial killer tropes — specifically in relation to establishing a clear motive and following a ‘personal style’ of killing — furthers the idea that this story takes place in ‘reality’, distanced from movie-style serial killers. Henry demonstrates “the inhabiting of the popular understanding of the serial killer as a self-understanding”⁴²: his knowledge of the serial killer myth propagated by the media and film allows him to remain mysterious to Becky, while encouraging her to believe that she ‘understands’ him. *Henry* plays with the tropes of the serial killer, highlighting the constructed, fabricated nature of those tropes.

McNaughton further distances Henry from his mythical counterparts by establishing Henry’s world as analogous with the audience’s ‘reality’. It is a story “told in [...] flat, unforgiving realism [...] a docudrama of chilling horror.”⁴³ McNaughton “views all the happenings with a level of clinical detachment”⁴⁴ that highlights the horrifying acts contained within the film. The realism of McNaughton’s film may be seen to continue the reaction against the unrealistic myth of the slasher-film serial killer. *Henry*’s realism is rooted in its depiction of violence. “Strong violence [...] acts on the mind by refusing it glib comfort and immediate resolutions.”⁴⁵ *Henry* features acts of violence less elaborate than the violence the serial killer myth in popular culture usually promotes. “This does not square with the conventions of movie violence, where the cataclysm of death constitutes no more than a momentary lull ending with a cutaway to the next scene.”⁴⁶ Instead, the violence appears real and Henry’s and, more importantly, Otis’s desensitisation becomes all the more problematic.

Throughout the film, McNaughton plays with the disassociation between

42 Mark Seltzer, “The Serial Killer as a Type of Person,” in *The Horror Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder (London: Routledge, 2000), 105.

43 Roger Ebert, review of *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, dir. John McNaughton, Sept. 14 1990, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/henry-portrait-of-a-serial-killer-1990>

44 John Kenneth Muir, *Horror Films of the 1980s* (Jefferson: McFarland Publishing, 2007), 740.

45 Devin McKinney, “Violence: The Strong and the Weak,” *Film Quarterly* 46.4 (1993), 17.

46 *Ibid.*, 17.

violence and the viewer once it has been filtered through a camera lens, and made 'safe'. Freddy Krueger murders thirty-three people over the course of the original seven films (a total oddly shared by John Wayne Gacy), and each kill becomes less consequential than the last, as the audience expects and accepts Freddy's actions. *Henry* reflects this, as Henry calmly eats a burger while Otis films a fight between two homeless men, and both men happily re-watch the footage of their home invasion back on their television. Television and movies (represented here by Otis and Henry's stolen camera), with their constant true-crime shows and serial killer flicks, reinforce the myth of the serial killer as safe, and of violence as inconsequential and ridiculous. As McNaughton says in an interview with Clark Collis of *Empire Magazine*:

That's the scene where the whole picture turns inside out. You think you're seeing the murders as they happen. But then the camera pulls back and you realise you're watching it with them on the couch later. If you use your mind at all you're forced to ask: 'What am I doing here?'⁴⁷

Henry shows the effect of the watering-down associated with mythologisation, as incredibly realistic violence becomes 'watchable'. Otis is so immediately swayed by Henry's ways that he becomes representative of the power of the myth of the serial killer: he becomes the audience, re-watching his own violent acts to the point of desensitization. The T.V. shop/warehouse scene, in which Otis and Henry murder an unpleasant salesman and steal a camera and television set, is most important in this reading. It reveals McNaughton's feelings on the attitude towards violence that Otis represents. The insistence that "We want colour"⁴⁸ reflects the human insistence on 'understanding' the serial killer in its most technicolor format. This is why the only repulsive victim of Henry and Otis is the man selling television sets, because he facilitates Otis's idea of Henry and himself as killers from the screen: "You can make your own movies with that?"⁴⁹ The character receives the most theatrical death, as Henry and Otis crush his head with one of his own television sets. The murder is coupled with a 'zinger', as Henry says "Otis: plug it in."⁵⁰ It is in this moment that

47 John McNaughton in Clark Collis, "Empire Essay: *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*," review of *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, dir. John McNaughton, <http://www.empireonline.com/reviews/reviewcomplete.asp?FID=132662>

48 McNaughton, *Henry*.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

Henry and Otis come closest to the serial killer as represented in film.

The most horrifying act in the film is shown entirely via the medium of a videotape playing on Otis and Henry's television set. In the scene, Henry and Otis invade the home of a suburban family, murdering them all. McNaughton highlights the desensitising nature of the televisual/filmic lens as Otis re-watches the attack, frame-by-frame: "I wanna see it again."⁵¹ By portraying these acts of violence through a televisual lens, McNaughton is questioning the "coherent, unified sense"⁵² of the serial killer as myth figure, pointing out the ideological practice the audience is engaging in, as he attempts to deconstruct the dominant ideology of the slasher film.

However, there is a sense in McNaughton's film that the mythologisation of the serial killer is inescapable, and that the dominant ideology he is attempting to deconstruct is impossible to take down. The serial killer narrative is constantly reaffirmed in *Henry*, something that McNaughton seems to understand and struggle with.

Becky's relationship with Henry reflects the relationship the audience has with serial killers. She strives to understand Henry, and, following a brief conversation, declares that "I feel like I know you. Like I've known you a long time. I feel like I've known you forever and ever."⁵³ This can be viewed as both an indictment of the myth of the serial killer, and as a testament to its power. Becky is a figure that needs myth, in much the same way that society does. Having been abused by her father and husband (and eventually her brother), Becky reaches for a narrative straight from popular culture to reassemble her life, as she travels to the city to "get a job, make some money,"⁵⁴ reflecting the American Dream of upward mobility. While there, she meets Henry, a thoroughly American figure: he drives an American muscle car, dresses in white t-shirts like Marlon Brando, smokes cigarettes, eats at diners and listens to American pop music on the radio. He even carries a guitar (taken from a victim), evoking Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash, when they first meet. He is polite, offering Becky his room, and then has to "get going. I have some work to do today."⁵⁵ Henry embodies seemingly positive aspects of the American myth that Becky

51 Ibid.

52 Fiske, "Television Culture," 1094.

53 McNaughton, *Henry*.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

recognises as lacking in her life with Leroy, and in her brother. Ironically, he becomes her saviour figure.

In one of the film's pivotal scenes, Becky and Henry discuss (and bond over) Henry's murder of his mother. Becky instigates the whole conversation by proving incapable of adhering to Otis's request that she not mention Henry's killer tendencies (obviously, Otis is also implicated in this, by telling her in the first place):

BECKY: What was he in for?

OTIS: You don't wanna know.

BECKY: What'd he do, kill his mama?

OTIS: You don't wanna know.⁵⁶

Becky has a fundamental *need* to ask Henry, to understand his motives and reasoning. He is her American myth figure, even before she realises he is also a murderer. As soon as this is revealed she attempts to reassess him in the mythic mould, unwilling to let him go. As Henry reveals his varied reasons for murdering his mother, Becky's responses are bland, bordering on inappropriate: upon learning that Henry was forced to watch his mother have sex, she responds by telling him that "That's creepy."⁵⁷ She only picks up on the more sensationalist parts of Henry's story: "She made you wear a dress?"⁵⁸ She is pacified once she 'understands'. The fact that Henry is possibly lying, or manipulating tropes of the serial killer, does not register with Becky: the myth is created the moment she accepts Henry's story. Following the kitchen table conversation about Henry's mother, Otis arrives and asks "Hey. Anything good on T.V?"⁵⁹: there is no response, because Becky does not need 'T.V', she has all the entertainment she requires in Henry. With this scene, McNaughton and Becky cede power to the myth of the serial killer, a power that returns in the final moments of the film. As Becky and Henry drive away from the city, having murdered Otis, they have the following exchange:

BECKY: I love you, Henry.

HENRY: I guess I love you too.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

BECKY: Where're we gonna go now?

HENRY: We'll find a place. (*pause*) You wanna listen to the radio?

BECKY: Okay.⁶⁰

As Henry turns on the radio, a song — attributed to Lynn and the Lizards — containing the lyrics “loving you was my mistake, my mistake was loving you” plays the scene to a close. Thanks to popular culture, the audience understands that Becky is doomed. In the same way that Becky reduced Henry to a non-threat, to a myth, as soon as she ‘understood’ him, the radio reduces Becky’s fate to a lyric in a pop song. She believed in the myth of Henry, as all-American man, and in the myth of the serial killer. Becky’s dependency on myth results in her eventual demise.

The film finally dips into true mythologisation in its final moments. Instead of offering some sort of closure to the story, the film instead ends with Henry dumping Becky’s body (in a suitcase) and driving away from the crime. While the resistance of closure could be argued as an attempt at furthering the realism of the film, the fact that the film becomes a circular narrative debunks that theory. As Henry pulls off from the side of the road, the scene is directly reminiscent of the opening shots of Henry driving between murders, and most specifically to the very first shot of a female body discarded in what appears to be a grassy lay-by. There is no world-shattering climax, no justice wrought on Henry, as he just moves on to the next town. In the final shots, “reality and fantasy have changed places,”⁶¹ as the film concludes with Henry becoming the mythical figure the film is resisting. He becomes eternal, his reign of violence never coming to an end: “It’s always the same. And it’s always different.”⁶² The fact that the real Henry Lee Lucas was captured and incarcerated, and that this iteration of Henry does not face that same fate, ties directly into the mythologisation of the serial killer. The fictionalised, mythologised version of Henry becomes more powerful than the ‘real’ killer.

With these final scenes, McNaughton accepts the inescapable nature of the serial killer myth. He understands that the figure is important because of

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Seltzer, “Type of Person,” 104.

⁶² McNaughton, *Henry*.

its position as a myth. Presenting the serial killer as ‘myth’ is a popular idea due to its ability to reduce the serial killer to a figure from the movies. By accepting the serial killer as a mythical figure, the reality of the killer is reduced dramatically. This is most evident in *Henry*, in the figures of Becky and Otis. As these characters reduce Henry’s actions in their minds, they become more relaxed, more willing to accept his murderous traits. As he becomes more mythical, he becomes less frightening. What *Henry*’s ‘unflinchingly real’ portrayal of the serial killer does is interrogate that mythologisation. The serial killer is important because it reveals American attitudes towards violent crime: it pushes back against accepting the reality of the situation, instead offering up an ‘understandable’ bogeyman. By destabilising the mythical narrative associated with the serial killer, McNaughton reveals the dangers associated with the American public’s ability to desensitise itself to serial violence. In the final scene, as McNaughton allows the ‘myth’ to emerge victorious, he again reiterates his point: if the myth of violence — particularly serial violence — is continually perpetrated in the media, and in society, then Henry will continue forever. He will remain undefeated and eternal.

References

- Baudrillard, Jean. *America*. London: Verso, 1989.
- Berliner, Todd. “The Pleasures of Disappointment: Sequels and *The Godfather, Part II*.” *Journal of Film and Video* 53.2/3 (2001): 107- 123.
- Blake, Linnie. *The Wounds of Nations*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008.
- Bordo, Susan. “‘Material Girl’: The Effacements of Postmodern Culture”. In *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 1099- 1114. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.
- Briefel, Aviva. “Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film.” *Film Quarterly* 58.3 (2005): 16- 27.
- Cameron, Deborah. “St-i-i-i-ll Going... The Quest for Jack the Ripper.” *Social Text* 40 (1994): 147- 154.
- Collis, Clark. “Empire Essay: *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*,” review of *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, dir. John McNaughton, <http://www.empireonline.com/reviews/reviewcomplete.asp?FID=132662>
- Fiske, John. “Television Culture.” In *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 1087- 1098. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.
- Gartenberg, Max. “Paul Bunyan and Little John.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 62.246 (1949): 416- 422.
- Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*. Dir. John McNaughton. Writ. McNaughton and Richard

Fire. Perf. Michael Rooker, Tracy Arnold, Tom Towles. Greycat Films, 1989.

Ebert, Roger. Review of *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, dir. John McNaughton, Sept. 14 1990, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/henry-portrait-of-a-serial-killer-1990>.

Jenkins, Phillip. *Decade of Nightmares*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Keppel, Robert. *The Riverman: Ted Bundy and I Hunt for the Green River Killer*. New York: Pocket Books, 1995.

Kimber, Shaun. "Merging Fact and Fiction: Cult Celebrity, Film Narrative, and the

Henry Lee Lucas Story." In *Real Lives, Celebrity Stories: Narratives of Ordinary and Extraordinary People Across the Media*, edited by Brownwen Thomas and Julia Round, 151- 67. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.

King, Stephen. *Danse Macabre*. London: Warner Books, 1991.

Madsen, Deborah. *Allegory in America: From Puritanism to Postmodernism*. London: Macmillan, 1996.

McKinney, Devin. "Violence: The Strong and the Weak." *Film Quarterly* 46.4 (1993): 16- 22.

Moore, Alan and Eddie Campbell. *From Hell*. 1989. London: Knockabout Comics, 1999.

Muir, John Kenneth. *Horror Films of the 1980s*. Jefferson: McFarland Publishing, 2007.

Schmid, David. *Natural Born Celebrities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Seltzer, Mark. "The Serial Killer as a Type of Person." *The Horror Reader*. Ed. Ken Gelder. London: Routledge, 2000.

Walkowitz, Judith R. "Jack the Ripper and the Myth of Male Violence." *Feminist Studies* 8.3 (1982): 542- 574.