Feature Articles

1 Exotic Dancers: Gender Differences in Societal Reaction, Subcultural Ties, and Conventional Support
   by Constance Bernard, Christen DeGabrielle, Lynette Cartier, Elizabeth Monk-Turner, Celestine Phill,
   Jennifer Sherwood, Thomasena Tyree

12 Prime-time Murder: Presentations of Murder on Popular Television Justice Programs
   by Danielle M. Soulliere

39 The Compulsion of Real/Reel Serial Killers and Vampires: Toward a Gothic Criminology
   by Caroline Joan Picart & Cecil Greek

69 The Mouse Who Would Rule the World! How American Criminal Justice Reflects the Themes of Disneyization
   by Matthew B. Robinson

Review Essays

87 Review of Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster from Little Caesar to Touch of Evil
   by Tony Hilfer

93 Review of The Perreaus and Mrs. Rudd: Forgery and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century London
   by Jessica Warner
EXOTIC DANCERS: GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SOCIETAL REACTION, SUBCULTURAL TIES, AND CONVENTIONAL SUPPORT*

by

Constance Bernard
Christen DeGabrielle
Lynette Cartier
Elizabeth Monk-Turner
Celestine Phill
Jennifer Sherwood
Thomasena Tyree

Old Dominion University
Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice

ABSTRACT

We explore the world of female and male exotic dancers. Utilizing Hirschi’s Bonding theory, we look at gender differences in societal reaction, subcultural ties, and conventional support among dancers in a large metropolitan area. We surveyed 56 respondents from 18 exotic dancing establishments. Female dancers are less likely than male dancers to receive community support for dancing as a way to earn a living. Female dancers are also less likely than male dancers to recommend this work to a friend. The majority of female respondents dance for a living. Few of our male respondents relied on dancing as their primary source of income. While strong bonds are established within the subculture of exotic dancing, dancers also maintain bonds within mainstream society. In other words, a majority of the dancers had strong conventional ties (Hirschi’s attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief) as measured by education, religion, and supportive family, friends, and significant others.

ON EXOTIC DANCERS

Little research has been done on the topic of exotic dancing. Popular research on exotic dancing is interesting and informative; however, most of it lacks empirical data. Research to date focuses on how one becomes an exotic dancer and the adaptations one must endure within this profession (Calhoun, Fisher, and Cannon, 1998; Calhoun, Cannon, and Fisher, 1998; Cannon, Calhoun, and Fisher, 1998; Lewis, 1998; McCaghy and Skipper, 1969; Carey, Peterson, and Sharpe, 1974; Forsyth, 1992; Forsyth and Deshotels, 1997); the relationships and interactions between dancers and customers (Wood, 2000; Boles and Garbin, 1974; Petersen and Dressel, 1982; Enck and Preston, 1988; Ronae and Ellis, 1989); and the use of neutralization techniques by the dancers in order to justify their occupation and accept the stigmatizing components attached to the role of an exotic dancer (Peretti and O’Connor, 1989; Thompson and Harred, 1992; Reid, Epstein and Benson, 1994; Maticka-Tyndale et al., 2000). Past researchers assume that exotic dancing is a deviant subculture. More recent research examines the roles of...
male exotic dancers and how those roles compare and contrast to female exotic dancers (Tewksbury, 1993; Calhoun, Cannon, and Fisher, 1996).

An “exotic dancer” is defined as one who removes all or most of her clothing in a sexually suggestive fashion to a paying audience in a performance environment (Skipper and McCaghy, 1970). This definition purposely excludes males because of the identity and role differences between male and female dancers. In this paper, we will use the terms interchangeably between female and male dancers. Exotic dancers are also known as “strippers,” “stripteasers,” “table dancers,” “go-go dancers,” and “adult entertainers” (Skipper and McCaghy, 1970).

Many reasons have been cited as to why women become exotic dancers; however, the overriding motivation is to make money. The more attractive the dancer, the more business she generates. Therefore, beauty and sexuality act as the currency in this profession (Forsyth and Deshotels, 1997). There are no job prerequisites to become an exotic dancer. Formal training is minimal. Dancers learn a set of rules, such as: never leave money unattended (Enck and Preston, 1988); never leave the club with a customer; and never refuse a table dance (Forsyth and Deshotels, 1997). As long as she can “sell” herself, she is capable of becoming an exotic dancer.

The setting of a dance club is prone to deviant activity, such as prostitution and illegal drug use; therefore, the profession of exotic dancing is generally considered deviant (Boles and Garbin, 1974, 1977). Further, other conservative forms of “deviance,” such as lesbianism, may arise. Boles and Garbin (1974, 1977) argue that exotic dancers become lesbians because of their isolation from effective social relationships and their overall dissatisfaction with males. McCaghy and Skipper (1969) argue that women enhance and broaden their sexual activities through lesbian relationships. They then carry those attributes into their profession. Finally, Peretti and O’Connor (1989) suggest that because female exotic dancers are continually exploited, they may develop hostile and frigid attitudes towards men. Thus, lesbian relationships provide greater sexual fulfillment (see Skipper and McCaghy, 1970).

In their work, Schwartz and Rutter (1998) examine sexual behavior and gender (see also Weitz, 1998; Lindsey, 1997). Given that dancing is a type of sex work, it is important to better understand, within a larger sociocultural context, gender, sex roles, and perceived appropriate behavior. Schwartz and Rutter (1998) argue that both men and women prefer sex and intimacy in a relationship; however, if that is not an option, men are more accepting of casual sex than are women. Women’s sexual desires tend to be more relational compared to men’s (see Ellis and Symons, 1990; Hatfield and Rapson, 1996). Thus, men’s sexual desire “is more likely to allow for sex just for fun” (Schwartz and Rutter, 1998: 45). Thus, the intimacy and fantasy exotic dancers sell plays better to a male than female audience. Symons (1979) argues that, for men, sex is lust and physical gratification. The fantasy of casual sex with no plotlines fires the erotic imagination. Women, on the other hand, tend to fantasize about a partner and the relationship. It is not surprising that most exotic dancers work at clubs that cater to men and the male sexual fantasy. Female and male dancers are playing to vastly different audiences. Female dancers offer fantasy sex; the few clubs that cater to women, with a largely “virgin” clientele, sell fun and entertainment – not the fantasy of sexual pleasure (see Montemurro, 2001).
Ronai and Ellis (1989) suggest that exotic dancing “pays well, but cost(s) dearly.” The reason for this is because of the negative stigma associated with exotic dancing. When revealing one’s occupation, a person may be seeking immediate social acceptance from others. However, when an occupation is considered illegal, immoral, or improper, social acceptance is not granted (Ritzer, 1977). Thompson and Harred’s (1992) work focuses on how dancers manage this stigma. They posit that most dancers “divide the social world” by only revealing part of their identity. In other words, dancers reveal only a part of their identity in order to avoid being characterized by the stigmatizing attributes associated with exotic dancing. Also, dancers employ some of Matza and Sykes’s (1957) “techniques of neutralization” in order to rationalize and justify their profession. These techniques include: denial of injury (the dancer assumes that his or her performance is not hurting another person); condemnation of the condemner (exotic dancing is not illegal; “other people are doing it, so I can do it too”); and appeal to higher loyalties (some dancers use their profession for attention and to gain acceptance from others).

Most research indicates that at some point a dancer has felt exploited by customers, management, or other dancers. The most common complaint from dancers is being portrayed as an object or instrument rather than a person (McCaghy and Skipper, 1969; Boles and Garbin, 1974). While dancers feel this exploitation, they also admit to exploiting their customers (Bell, Sloan, and Stickling, 1998). The dancers are using the customers for money. They sell the fantasy of sex but do not follow through with the act. One dancer commented that the customers are “suckers” for giving the dancers money just for their physical attraction (Bell, Sloan, and Stickling, 1998). Pasko (1999), though, maintains that dancers, in an attempt to acquire a tip or monetary reward, sell more than attractiveness and fantasy; they feign feelings of intimacy and emotional connectedness for their customers.

Because of the social stigma and the continual exploitation, some research has been done to explore a dancer’s perceived self versus her ideal self. Peretti and O’Connor’s (1989) work aims to better understand how an exotic dancer’s perceived and ideal self effect her emotional stability. They posit that the greater the discrepancy between a dancer’s perceived and ideal self, the greater the effect on a dancer’s emotional stability. Reid, Epstein, and Benson (1994) suggest that many dancers are adjusted to their role, but they may not feel that their role as an exotic dancer (perceived self) is an accurate reflection of who they really are (ideal self). In other words, dancers do not consider this occupation to be a defining measure of their ideal self. Dancing does not display one’s core values and ideologies. Rather, dancing is a means to earn money and is not perceived by most dancers as defining their identity.

A more recent area of study centers on male exotic dancers. Research shows that the roles of male exotic dancers differ from those of female dancers (Tewksbury, 1993; Ronai and Cross, 1998; Montemurro, 2001). The male exotic dancer is not as apt as the female dancer to be seen as deviant. Dressel and Petersen (1982) found that men voluntarily pursue the profession of dancing in order to show off their bodies. Further, Ronai and Ellis (1989) argue that male dancers rarely engage in prostitution, while this deviant act is a “component” of female exotic dancing.

Male strippers often feel the same level of exploitation by the customers as female dancers; however, men are more in control of the audience than are women (Tewksbury, 1993).
In other words, male dancers are able to maintain a sense of power even when being portrayed as sex objects, while females seem to lose this sense of power as soon as they come on the stage (Tewksbury, 1993). Thus, male dancers may not experience the same amount of humiliation and degradation as female dancers (Calhoun, Cannon, and Fischer, 1996).

HIRSCHI’S SOCIAL BOND THEORY AND GENDER IN THE WORLD OF THE EXOTIC DANCER

We utilize Hirschi’s social bond theory to better understand gender differences and similarities in the world of the exotic dancer. Social bond theory contends that people have rational choice and are free to engage in any kind of behavior; however, one’s behavior is a reflection of their degree of morality (Hirschi, 1969). Hirschi assumes that conventional society governs the perspective from which behavior is viewed. The social bond has four dimensions: attachment, involvement, commitment, and belief. We believe female exotic dancers will have greater subcultural ties than male exotic dancers because of gender differences in how societal reactions to the profession are experienced. We assume that society’s negative reactions toward female exotic dancers, in particular, will result in stronger subcultural ties for female than male dancers. Finally, we explore conventional support systems available to the dancers. We expect female exotic dancers to have less conventional support than male exotic dancers. Again, we expect it will be more difficult for women than men to integrate their professional and personal lives because of differences in perceived societal reaction to dancing.

METHOD

Our survey consisted of demographic variables and questions to capture perceived societal reactions to exotic dancing, subcultural ties to the dancing profession, and conventional support systems available to dancers. Societal reaction includes questions asking how respondents believe their family, friends, and significant others view their choice of occupation. We also asked respondents if they would recommend their line of work to a friend or sibling. Subcultural ties assess one’s formal and informal ties to the subculture of exotic dancing. We asked questions pertaining to both physical barriers and perceived restraints related to the exotic dancing profession. Issues addressed include whether dancing serves as one’s primary source of income, feelings of entrapment, the time spent preparing for a performance, and relationships that exist within the subculture of exotic dancing. To measure conventional support, we look at one’s formal and informal ties to the conventional society. Issues addressed in these survey questions include: marital status, education level, religion, and childhood environment. Again, we are especially interested in how societal reactions, subcultural ties, and conventional support differ between male and female dancers.

Sampling and Data Collection

Our sampling frame, consisting of 33 clubs, was compiled from all the exotic dancing organizations in a large suburban area of Virginia (Appendix A). We included all clubs advertised via the newspaper and the phone book, including male and female exotic dancing clubs, Go-Go clubs, Strip-o-Grams, male reviews, and private affairs. The managers of each of these organizations was then contacted by phone and asked if we had their permission to enter
their premises for the purpose of speaking with workers about their experiences. Twelve of the clubs refused to voluntarily participate in this research, while 18 willingly agreed. The remaining three organizations granted our request to enter their premises; however, we were unable to get any of the dancers to voluntarily complete a survey. Data for this project were obtained through a survey consisting of 91 questions. Roughly one-fourth of the questions were open-ended, and completion of the survey took an average of 25 minutes.3

Two researchers visited each of the participating clubs. We informed the club manager about the purpose of our research and asked how they wished us to proceed with the distribution of surveys to the dancers. We were instructed to sit either in the dressing room or in the lobby. At this point, we had only received permission from the club management to enter the club; however, it was not guaranteed that the dancers would participate in the study. The management left it to the discretion of each individual dancer whether or not he or she completed a questionnaire. The researchers approached each and every dancer that they observed on the premises. Therefore, the sample for this research is comprised of a convenience selection of willing dancers from those clubs that willfully admitted the researchers. On the average, five dancers were on hand at each club. After completing the survey, some dancers identified others they felt would voluntarily participate in this study. All participation was anonymous and voluntary. Given that our variables are measured at the nominal level, we examine chi-square statistics to see if significant gender differences exist among exotic dancers.

Sample Description

A total of 56 respondents completed the survey, 16 males and 40 females. This gender distribution is in line with the exotic dancing population nationally (see Forsyth, 1992). Most (69 percent) of the respondents are white (63 percent of the males and 72 percent of the females); 22 percent are black (25 percent of the males and 20 percent of the females). The dancers range in age from 19 to 40, with a median age of 24. Dancers are most likely to be single (30 of 56) or divorced (12 of 56). Among the other dancers, nine of the respondents are married, three cohabitate, and two are separated. A majority (58.9%) of the respondents have children. The range of highest level of education is from 11 years to 20 years, with the mean at 13 years. Most (89 percent) of the respondents self reported as heterosexuals. Only four percent self reported as homosexual or bisexual (seven percent). The vast majority (89 percent) were raised in a religious home. Few (five percent) were raised in a home where a family member was an exotic dancer. Almost half (48.2 percent) of the dancers are self-managed, 34 percent are club managed, and 14 percent are private service managed (in other words a service outside the club books their appointments). The majority of women (57 percent) are self-managed or club managed (40 percent). Among men, half are private service managed ($\chi^2 = 24.47; p = .001$).

Societal Reaction

Investigating societal reactions to exotic dancers, we found that the vast majority of respondents felt that their friends (75 percent) and significant others (65.4 percent) accepted their work. Respondents’ families were less enthusiastic about their job choice. Only 46 percent of them, the dancers perceived, accepted this as a way to earn money; nine percent of family members were intolerant or repulsed by this line of work. Most respondents (86.3 percent)
considered exotic dancing a legitimate line of work; eight percent think dancing is prostitution as well. Most dancers (89 percent) would recommend dancing to a friend. Notably, all the male respondents would recommend dancing to a friend; whereas, 15 percent of female dancers would not ($X^2 = 2.69; p = .10$). In fact, one male dancer volunteered that he “would do it [dance] for free!”

We asked respondents how community knowledge about their profession affected them. The majority (73 percent) felt the community responded positively to exotic dancing as a way to earn money. Again, though, a gender difference appeared. All male respondents said they felt community knowledge about their profession positively affected them; whereas, only 62 percent of female dancers felt this positive community support ($X^2 = 8.19; p = .001$).

**SUBCULTURAL TIES**

While the vast majority (88 percent) of dancers have friends who also dance, few (10 percent) have other family members who are exotic dancers. Many dancers (49 percent) were comfortable or very comfortable in revealing their occupation to others. Interestingly, most (52 percent) respondents viewed exotic dancing as a promiscuous activity. Most (63 percent) dancers have never dated a customer. Of those who dated customers, male dancers are more likely to date (75 percent) a customer versus comparable females (21 percent) ($X^2 = 14.05; p = .001$).

For dancers generally, this is not their sole source of income. However, more women than men rely on dancing for primary support. The majority (56 percent) of female respondents versus 12 percent of males dance for a living ($X^2 = 8.89; p = .003$). Besides the money, dancers noted the thrill, attention, and atmosphere of the dancing environment. Both male and female dancers, though, believe they could change to another type of work. Some dancers, however, have experienced problems. One dancer commented, “I have lost jobs in the past because employers found out [that she danced].”

**CONVENTIONAL SUPPORT**

The majority of dancers (66 percent) were raised by both their mother and father. If a mother and father were not present, gender differences in care emerged. Almost one-fifth (19 percent) of male dancers were raised by their father only. None of the female dancers were raised in a lone father household ($X^2 = 9.63; p = .02$) (only two percent of the sample as a whole was raised by a guardian). The vast majority (91 percent) of respondents feel close to their parent(s).

We asked respondents if they were exposed to pornography or sexual nudity during their childhood. Most (78 percent) were not exposed. If they were exposed, males were more likely to experience this material (44 percent) than comparable female dancers (12 percent) ($X^2 = 6.36; p = .01$).
CONCLUSION

As expected, female exotic dancers experience less community support for dancing as a way to earn money than do comparable males. We argue that this relates to what male and female exotic dancers are selling. Female dancers offer a sexual fantasy to their clientele, whereas male dancers sell fun and entertainment. Perhaps this explains why female dancers are much less likely than male dancers to recommend dancing to a friend. While strong bonds are established within the subculture of exotic dancing, dancers do maintain bonds with mainstream society. In other words, a majority of dancers had strong, conventional ties (Hirschi’s attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief) such as education, religion, and supportive family, friends, and significant others.

We expected that the more one is involved in the subculture, the greater the chance that a dancer will be labeled negatively. We assumed that females would be more involved in the exotic dancing subculture because they experience more negative societal reactions to their work compared to male dancers. We found that female dancers are more likely to rely on dancing as a way to earn a living versus comparable males. Perhaps this is why female dancers do not feel the same positive community support as do males. Whether or not dancing displays the female dancer's real self, this is how she spends much of her time. Given this time investment, she is identified, more so than male dancers, by this occupation. This means the negative connotations associated with exotic dancing are more likely to be applied to her, and she recognizes this. This may well shape the gender difference we find in recommending dancing to others. Female dancers have more reservations about recommending dancing than do male dancers. This supports the work of Egan (2000) who argues that it is difficult for female exotic dancers to keep work and personal “selves” or roles separate and distinct.

Male dancers, on the other hand, enter the occupation for economic as well as other reasons (to show off the body). They feel more positive about dancing and, in fact, perceive community support for this work. This, too, helps shape the gender difference observed in regard to dating customers. Among those who dated customers, we found that male dancers were more apt to engage in this behavior than were female dancers. For males, dancing may well enhance their social opportunities. Female dancers, on the other hand, may be more apt to see dancing as prostitution, which leads them to divide work from pleasure.

ENDNOTES

* Direct correspondence to Dr. Elizabeth Monk-Turner, Old Dominion University, Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice, Norfolk, VA, 23529 (E-mail: eturner@odu.edu).

1. A stigma is any attribute that sets people apart and disqualifies or discredits them for social acceptance (Goffman, 1963).

2. This project was reviewed and approved by Old Dominion University’s human subjects institutional review panel. Respondents who provided information for this study did so voluntarily.
3. Initially, five informal surveys and interviews were voluntarily completed by male and female exotic dancers in order for the researchers to pretest the dancers’ willingness to participate in the project and the quality of the questions being asked. As a result, some of the wording of the questions was changed for the purpose of clarity.

4. All the researchers were female. The researchers went into clubs as a pair but conducted the interviews one-on-one.

5. The overwhelming majority of dancers approached were eager to participate in this study. In the few cases when a dancer declined to participate, there was a problem with regard to time commitments. We interviewed dancers at 18 of the 33 clubs in our sampling frame. We believe the 56 dancers interviewed are representative of dancers as a whole. There was no bias in club selection (all clubs in the area were in our sampling frame). We believe that those clubs that did not let us enter do not pose a problem of systematic sampling bias (we make the assumption that clubs who declined to participate are missing at random).

6. Respondents were asked about the perceived reaction of their friends in general.

APPENDIX A
A LIST OF ALL EXOTIC DANCING ORGANIZATIONS IN THE TIDEWATER AREA OF VIRGINIA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Club Name</th>
<th>Response to Request</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. About Face Enterprises</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. A Class Act</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ambush</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. American Male Dancers Company</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Apollo Productions</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Chevy’s</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Clancy’s</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Dancers Unlimited</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Discreet Enterprises</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Eloquent Beauties</td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Flight Deck</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Foxy Ladies</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Fantasies</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Fantasy Lounge</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Garry’s</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Gold Club</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Grinders</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Guy’s Fantasy</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Heart Break Café</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Intimate Dreams</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. JB’s Gallery of Girls</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Knickerbocker’s</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
23. Lovely Ladies       *
24. Paradise Enterprises ***
25. Picassos            *
26. Pretty Lady’s       ***
27. RC’s Inn            ***
28. Sorority Sisters    ***
29. Sugar and Spice     ***
30. Super Sexy Strippers ***
31. Sweet Dreams        ***
32. Shadows             *
33. Tailgators

KEY:  * Club said “NO” to our request in conducting the survey on their premises
       ** Club admitted the researchers, however, the dancers did not agree to participate
       *** Club admitted the researchers and the dancers complied (i.e., filled out surveys)

REFERENCES


PRIME-TIME MURDER:
PRESENTATIONS OF MURDER ON
POPULAR TELEVISION JUSTICE PROGRAMS*

by

Danielle M. Souliere
University of Windsor

ABSTRACT

Entertainment television has long been fascinated with violence and murder. This paper examines presentations and explanations of murder in three popular prime-time television justice programs – NYPD Blue, Law and Order, and The Practice – and compares these mediated presentations with images presented by official statistics and established research findings. The potential implications of these television presentations on viewer knowledge and understanding are discussed. The findings suggest that murder is presented fairly accurately such that viewers should come away with a basic understanding of the nature and circumstances surrounding murder, although they are likely to be somewhat misled that violence is common. In addition, the explanations offered for the commission of murder are heavily individualistic, precluding an adequate sociological understanding of murder by ignoring important social factors.

INTRODUCTION

Television has long been fascinated with crime. Indeed, both news and entertainment television have included crime as a prominent feature over the past several decades (Dominick 1978; Graber 1980; Garofalo 1981; Estep and MacDonald 1984; Schlesinger, Tumber and Murdock 1991; Lichter, Lichter and Rothman 1994). Estep and MacDonald (1984) note, for example, that historically prime-time television has devoted at least one-third of its time to crime. Crime and law enforcement programs have virtually littered television programming for the past four decades and have included such diverse programs as The Avengers, Mod Squad, Kojak, Baretta, Hawaii Five-O, The Rockford Files, Dragnet, Starsky and Hutch, Colombo, Hill Street Blues, Magnum, P.I., Cagney and Lacy, Simon and Simon, Miami Vice, T.J. Hooker, In the Heat of the Night, Murder She Wrote, L.A. Law, The Commish, NYPD Blue, Walker: Texas Ranger, The X-Files, Homicide, Law and Order, The Practice, Nash Bridges, JAG, and Judging Amy. Furthermore, with the addition of several new criminal justice-type dramas to the current broadcast season such as The Fugitive, The District, Level-9, The Job and C.S.I: Crime Scene Investigation, this fascination with crime does not appear to be waning.

Television’s persistent fascination with crime makes a study of contemporary justice shows imperative. The fact that both news and entertainment television have focused on crime and criminal justice means that, for the vast majority of us, our exposure to crime, violence and the criminal justice system may be obtained largely through the media rather than through personal experience or formal education (Dominick 1978). Television clearly stands as the most popular and most widely used communication medium (Althiede and Snow 1979; Gerbner and Gross 1980; Firestone 1993; Livingstone 1996) and there is little debate that television exerts a
powerful influence as a source of information about contemporary culture in today’s society (Henningan et al. 1982; Murdock 1982; Firestone 1993). This, of course, extends to information about crime as well as other social and cultural aspects. If our exposure to crime occurs mostly through mediated communication such as television, then television content, in the form of images and messages, may be a primary force in shaping viewer understanding of crime.

Past analyses of entertainment-based television suggest that crimes of violence such as murder tend to be overrepresented in television programming (Dominick 1973; Estep and MacDonald 1984; Maguire 1988; Oliver 1994; Shrum 1996; Fabianic 1997). Violence also appears to be a common theme in many reality-based television shows (Cavender and Bond-Maupin 1993; Oliver 1994; Carmody 1998; Kooistra, Mahoney and Westervelt 1998). The images and messages conveyed by these television programs about violent crime, in particular murder, may ultimately influence what viewers come to think about violent crime in terms of its prevalence and nature as well as possible explanations for its occurrence.

There is some evidence that images of crime presented through television programming are frequently inaccurate and grossly distorted (see Pandiani 1978; Lichter and Lichter 1983; Carlson 1985; Maguire 1988; Lichter et al. 1994) which may contribute to false beliefs or distorted views about crime. Thus, television portrayals, rather than enlightening viewers about crime, may in fact preclude adequate understanding. As Surette (1992: 296) contends:

\begin{quote}
If most of us get our knowledge of crime and criminal justice from the news media and TV programs, which tend to cover or portray only the most sensational kinds of crime and criminal justice activities, it’s no surprise that many of us develop perceptions that may not reflect what is really happening in the world of crime and in the various stages of the criminal justice system.
\end{quote}

With the possibility that television provides viewers with a certain conception of crime, especially violent crime, which may be distorted, it is necessary to systematically analyze the content of contemporary entertainment television programs in order to assess the potential implications they may have on our epistemological frameworks concerning crime. Moreover, it is prudent to compare these television portrayals with official portrayals in order to reveal any distortions in TV images which may potentially affect viewer understanding of crime. Furthermore, although several past studies have examined television portrayals of crime in general, few have gone beyond simply recording and counting the number and types of crimes depicted. Since murder has tended to be the crime of focus on entertainment television, it is important to examine portrayals of murder in more depth and to assess what TV shows tell us about the nature of murder and its explanation. As such, an extensive examination of murder, as it is depicted in contemporary prime-time entertainment television justice programs, was undertaken in this study to uncover the way in which murder is presented to viewers and how it is typically explained. These television portrayals were compared to what is known about murder through official statistics and the relevant research literature to assess the degree of distortion by the entertainment television programs analyzed. These research objectives were pursued with the aim of discussing the potential implications of television presentations of violent crime such as murder on viewer knowledge and understanding.
TELEVISION PORTRAYALS OF CRIME

Systematic content analyses of television have revealed that violent crime is a common feature of entertainment programming (Dominick 1973; Estep and MacDonald 1984; Maguire 1988; Shrum 1996; Fabianic 1997). For example, after examining one week of prime-time television, Dominick (1973) found that 22 percent of all prime-time crimes depicted murder while 8 percent depicted robbery. Eleven years later, Estep and MacDonald (1984) found similar results in their analysis of prime-time crime shows: murder comprised 26 percent of prime-time crimes, robbery 19 percent and assault 11 percent. As well, in analyzing forty-six hours of prime-time television crime and police programs, Maguire (1988) found that nearly two-thirds of the criminal offenses depicted were killings or attempted killings. Similarly, Shrum (1996) found that violent crime, especially rape, was a common major theme of daytime dramas. Violence also appears to be common in many reality-based programs. For example, Cavender and Bond-Maupin (1993) report that reality crime shows such as America’s Most Wanted and Unsolved Mysteries tend to focus on serious violent crime such as murder. Likewise, Oliver (1994), in analyzing five reality-based television shows including COPS and America’s Most Wanted, concludes that violent crime is significantly overrepresented. Furthermore, content analyses carried out by Kooistra and colleagues (1998) as well as Carmody (1998) confirm the commonality of violent crime portrayals by many reality-based police shows.

There is some suggestion that crime, as presented by entertainment television, however, differs dramatically from crime as described in official statistics and research reports. Comparisons reveal that the media tend to depict the crimes that occur the least in American society (violent crimes), while neglecting the crimes that occur the most (property crimes) (Maguire 19988; Liska and Baccaglini 1990; Warr 1995). Of course, it is important to keep in mind that producers of television crime dramas, including reality-based crime shows, have a very different goal than scientific researchers and government agencies which produce crime statistics for scientific and public consumption. Above all, the primary purpose of the crime drama is to entertain. In order to appeal to the entertainment senses of its consumers, crime drama content is likely to focus on unusual and/or exaggerated images and events. After all, the routine and mundane are the stuff of everyday life not drama. It is not surprising, then, that crime drama presentations will be more sensational and hence different from the images of crime presented through government statistics and research reports. Thus, it is expected that analyses of popular entertainment television programs will reveal a certain amount of distortion in presenting crime in general and in presenting murder.

Distorted presentations may contribute to inaccurate or false beliefs about crime among viewers. Indeed, several authors have contended that the media may be an important source of crime myths or false beliefs about crime (Pepinsky and Jesilow 1984; Wright 1985; Kappeler, Blumberg and Potter 1993; Fabianic 1997) and evidence suggests that media consumers may be influenced by these media myths. Lewis (1981), for example, reports that those who watch television the most have the most distorted views of crime. Likewise, Carlson (1985) found that adolescents who are heavy viewers of crime shows measure lower on knowledge of criminal justice processes. These results and others suggest that crime myths projected by television and other media may become encapsulated in the knowledge-base of consumers such that if we rely
heavily on the media for information about crime, without the influence of other sources, we are likely to acquire erroneous beliefs. It is important, therefore, to discuss the potential implications of mediated murder presentations on overall viewer understanding should such crime myths abound in the television programs analyzed.

TELEVISION EXPLANATIONS FOR CRIME

Explanations for crime and criminality offered by both news and entertainment media have tended to be overwhelmingly individualistic. That is, media characters are thought to commit crimes because of greed, jealousy, emotional instability, mental pathology, and other individual defects or weaknesses (Barrile 1984; Estep and MacDonald 1984; Maguire 1988; Cavender and Bond-Maupin 1993; Fabianic 1997). Cavender and Bond-Maupin (1993), for example, report that criminals, as presented in the media, are dangerous people with ambiguous psychological capacities – in essence, “crazed killers” and “psychopaths”. In this way, criminality is viewed as the failure of an individual who is morally weak or mentally deficient. Indeed, Maguire (1988) reports that social explanations are almost entirely absent from crime and police dramas, with a heavy emphasis on conservative and individualistic explanations that center around individual pathology. Similarly, Fabianic (1997), in analyzing homicide causation in TV crime dramas, notes not only the lack of explanations for crime in television crime dramas, but points to a heavy reliance on individualistic explanations that frequently do not go beyond superficial plot motives. Fabianic concludes that homicide is typically portrayed as the result of an individual weakness or defect such as mental illness, greed or jealousy, and little or no effort is made in these crime dramas to relate homicide to social-structural or institutional forces. It is important, then, to examine the way in which murders are explained in entertainment television programs in order to gain insight into the potential implications on viewer understanding of murder as a whole.

METHODOLOGY

Research Objective

The primary objective of the study was to obtain a detailed accurate picture of the presentation and explanation of crime, in particular murder, in three purposively selected entertainment-based television justice programs by using quantitative and qualitative content analysis techniques. In this respect, the purpose of the study was primarily descriptive, although an attempt was made to shed light on the potential implications of these television presentations on viewer knowledge and understanding.

Sample

The sample was selected from the population of prime-time entertainment-based “justice programs” broadcast on one of the major networks as part of the 1999/2000 television season. The major networks included: ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX and UPN. Prime-time encompassed the evening hours, specifically the time period between 8:00 and 11:00 pm Eastern Time. Considered a particular “genre”, or general category of TV entertainment (Gitlin 1979), “justice” programs (sometimes called police dramas, crime dramas, legal shows or lawyer shows) were
defined as half-hour or one-hour television programs that focus on some aspect of the criminal justice system such as law enforcement, criminal prosecution, courts or corrections. Furthermore, entertainment-based justice programs were defined as fictional; that is, characters and events are fictional, they do not portray real-life characters or actual events. Using these carefully constructed definitions, the researcher discovered thirteen entertainment-based justice programs being broadcast on the various networks during the 1999/2000 television season which included: *NYPD Blue* (ABC), *The Practice* (ABC), *Snoops* (ABC), *Law and Order* (NBC), *Law and Order: SVU* (NBC), *The Profiler* (NBC), *Judging Amy* (CBS), *JAG* (CBS), *Martial Law* (CBS), *Nash Bridges* (CBS), *Walker: Texas Ranger* (CBS), *The X-Files* (FOX), and *Ally McBeal* (FOX). Time and budget constraints restricted the analyses to a one-year season only. The researcher chose the 1999/2000 television season as representing the broadcast year that corresponded to the start of the research project.

The sample chosen was not random but was purposively selected. In particular, three entertainment-based justice programs were selected for analysis: *NYPD Blue, Law and Order*, and *The Practice*. This purposively selected sample was chosen for several reasons. First, *NYPD Blue, Law and Order* and *The Practice* were considered the most popular, all three falling within the top twenty prime-time programs for the season, as ranked by Nielsen Media Research (USA Today 2000). Thus, it could be reasonably asserted that most people who were watching justice programs during the 1999/2000 television season were most likely watching one or all of these three programs. The popularity of these shows was further reinforced through critical acclimation, with each of these programs being recipients of multiple awards, including Emmy awards for Outstanding Drama Series. As television standards go, then, what this suggests is that these three justice programs are viewed as “good TV”. Since the researcher was interested in uncovering and understanding the images and messages presented to the public via prime-time television, it made sense to evaluate the most popular shows, which have a relatively large viewing audience.

These programs were also selected because they represented various aspects of the criminal justice system. With a wide range of criminal justice activities portrayed in *NYPD Blue, Law and Order*, and *The Practice*, it was thought that these programs would provide valuable content from different perspectives which might shed light on the way in which murder is presented as well as various explanations offered for its occurrence.

Furthermore, these programs were selected because they were readily accessible and easily recorded given their varying time slots. *NYPD Blue* (ABC) aired Tuesdays from 10:00 – 11:00 pm ET; *Law and Order* (NBC) aired Wednesdays from 10:00 – 11:00 pm ET; and *The Practice* (ABC) aired on Sundays from 10:00 – 11:00 pm ET. Not only did this allow for different nights of the weeks and for different networks to be represented, but the researcher was able to record almost the entire season of episodes for each program with limited programming conflict. Moreover, purposively limiting the sample not only rendered data collection more conveniently possible, but also rendered data analysis more manageable. Since a comprehensive content analysis was to be undertaken, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative analysis techniques, a relatively small sample was necessary to keep the analysis reasonably manageable within the restricted time and resource allocations.
Altogether, 24 episodes of *Law and Order* were aired on NBC during the 1999/2000 television season, comprising episodes #206 to #229. Twenty-three of these episodes were analyzed for the current study; one episode (#225) was missed due to VCR equipment failure. A total of 22 episodes of *The Practice* were aired on ABC, comprising episodes #58 to #79, with 20 of these episodes subsequently analyzed; episodes #67 and #74 could not be analyzed because of a faulty section of videotape. ABC aired 22 episodes of *NYPD Blue*, comprising episodes #133 to #154. Of these, 20 episodes were analyzed; episodes #140 and #151 were missed due to unexpected changes in airing date. Thus, a total of 63 episodes of the three entertainment-based justice programs were analyzed with data collected on a total of 113 criminal incidents.

**Data Collection**

Primary data consisted of videotaped episodes of the three entertainment-based justice programs, which provided both visual images and verbal text. Full and partial transcripts were also created from these episodes and housed in case files for reference. The case files were numbered according to the episode in which a particular event occurred.

**Data Analysis**

The videotaped episodes and transcripts were used to make sense of the episode content and to develop general content categories for which further data were collected. To be sure, an important part of any content analysis is the development of general content categories (Berg 1995; Riffe, Lacy and Fico 1998) using both inductive and deductive processes (Strauss 1987). On the basis of previous content analysis of justice programs, initial content categories were developed (deductive) and then modified according to the episode transcripts and images (inductive).

The resulting content categories for which data were collected for this part of the study included: type of crime, type of murder, and the gender and race/ethnicity of offender and victim characters. As one type of crime, *murder* was specifically defined as an intentional act or omission that results in the death of another human being. Included also was *attempted murder*, defined as an act with the intention to kill but where death did not ultimately result. Murders were further classified into specialized types such as: spouse murder, murder-for-hire, mass or serial murder, and drug-related murder. Once the crime was identified as a murder, further content categories were developed and explored including the circumstances surrounding the murder which encompassed weapon use, victim-offender relationship, alcohol/drug use, location, number of offenders and victims, and context factors (such as whether the murder was planned or spontaneous and whether a murder occurred in the context of another crime such as rape or robbery). The creation of content categories for murder explanations centered around the motives ascribed to the offender by various characters in the episodes. Motives were classified as either expressive, instrumental or the result of some mental illness. As well, any mention of social factors as a possible reason for committing murder were noted and explored as a separate content category.

Once the major content categories were developed to some degree of satisfaction, the researcher then developed a set of coding guidelines to assist in the coding of the content data for
each of the major content categories. These guidelines consisted of definitions used to identify particular content, attribute categories composing the particular content variables, as well as clues or indicators that assisted the researcher in assigning content to appropriate attribute categories. These coding guidelines not only facilitated the data collection process, but ensured that content was coded consistently across episodes and across justice programs.

Having carefully constructed coding guidelines was especially important to overcome the limitations of having a single coder in order to maintain validity and reliability. The videotaped episodes allowed the researcher to go back to the original data whenever coding problems or issues arose. As well, attempts were made to triangulate data and methods with the researcher relying on multiple clues for coding content. For example, both visual and text clues were often used to assign content to appropriate categories. It was felt that such triangulation would contribute to both reliability and validity of the research data and findings.

Appropriate descriptive statistics were generated for the quantitative data and, where appropriate, this quantitative summary was supplemented with qualitative verbal descriptions to illustrate or provide examples of key quantitative categories.

In addition, comparative analysis was undertaken using existing statistics and previous research findings. Specifically, content images of the murder presentations in the three television justice programs were compared with the portrayals of murder revealed by official statistics and appropriate research literature. The primary sources from which official statistics were derived for comparison were the preliminary 1999 Uniform Crime Reports (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2000) and the 1998 UCR Supplemental Homicide Reports (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1999). Recognizing the limitations of official statistics, the researcher also made use of the findings from a variety of research reports that focused on murder.

RESULTS

**Overrepresentation of Violent Crime**

As expected, violent crime was overrepresented in the prime-time television justice programs analyzed, especially murder (see Table 1 below).

In sum, the three justice programs depicted violent crimes at a consistently high rate, comprising more than three-quarters of the crimes presented across the episodes overall. Murder/attempted murder emerged as the most common violent crime; there were 75 murders or attempted murders presented across the three programs, comprising 66 percent of the total criminal incidents depicted and 82 percent of the total violent crimes depicted.

This overrepresentation of violent crime does not coincide with official reports of crime in the United States, which conclude that violent crimes are less common than property crimes with murder/attempted murder being relatively rare. According to the Preliminary 1999 Uniform Crime Reports (FBI 2000), there were 299,523 total index crimes reported in 1999 in New York City (the setting for both Law and Order and NYPD Blue). Violent crimes comprised only 26.4 percent of these total index crimes with aggravated assault the most common violent crime.
TABLE 1: Criminal Incidents Presented on Law and Order, The Practice, and NYPD Blue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Law and Order</th>
<th>The Practice</th>
<th>NYPD Blue</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>27 (62.5%)</td>
<td>19 (63%)</td>
<td>25 (62.5%)</td>
<td>71 (62.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempted Murder</td>
<td>2 (4.5%)</td>
<td>2 (7%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>4 (3.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape/Sexual Assault</td>
<td>3 (7%)</td>
<td>4 (13.5%)</td>
<td>4 (10%)</td>
<td>11 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>2 (5%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>3 (7.5%)</td>
<td>6 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (2.5%)</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft/Larceny</td>
<td>2 (5%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>4 (10%)</td>
<td>6 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Securities Violation/Fraud</td>
<td>2 (5%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (2.5%)</td>
<td>3 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug Violation</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (2.5%)</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4 (9%)</td>
<td>4 (13.5%)</td>
<td>1 (2.5%)</td>
<td>9 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>43 (100%)</td>
<td>30 (100%)</td>
<td>40 (100%)</td>
<td>113 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentage totals may not always add up to exactly 100 due to rounding.

(51.3%), followed by robbery (46.7%) and rape (2%); murder comprised less than 1 percent of the violent crimes. Violent crimes was also less common than property crime in Boston (the setting for The Practice), accounting for 21 percent of the total 35,078 index crimes reported in Boston in 1999. Again, the most common violent crime was aggravated assault (61%), followed by robbery (34%), and murder (0.4%).

Comparing this study’s results to official statistics, then, it would seem that the prime-time justice programs analyzed tend to over-represent the crimes that occur the least (violent crimes) and under-represent the crimes that occur the most (property crimes) in American society. Within violent crime itself, the pattern that emerges from the justice programs is opposite the pattern that emerges from official statistics. For all three of the entertainment justice programs, murder was the most common violent crime, followed by rape and then robbery. Officially, aggravated assault is the most common (a crime, interestingly enough, that was not depicted in any of the justice program episodes), followed by robbery, rape and then murder.

Circumstances Surrounding Murder

Since the bulk (66%) of criminal incidents across the three justice programs were murder or attempted murder incidents, it is instructive to focus attention on the circumstances surrounding murder when making comparisons to official portrayals and discussing implications of television murder presentations on viewer knowledge and understanding. As such, data for the circumstances surrounding murder such as weapon use, victim-offender relationship, alcohol/drug use, location, number of offenders and victims, and context factors were collected and analyzed according to each of the 75 murder/attempted murder incidents presented. Since, for the most part, attempted murder incidents took on the same general characteristics as murder incidents with the exception that death did not ultimately result, attempted murder was treated as murder in the analysis of the circumstances surrounding the event.
Handguns and personal weapons such as fists, feet and hands figured prominently as murder weapons in the three entertainment justice programs, although blunt and other objects appeared to be the weapons of choice in several murder incidents depicted on *The Practice* (see Table 2 below).

**TABLE 2: Weapon Use in Murder Incidents Presented**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Law and Order</th>
<th>The Practice</th>
<th>NYPD Blue</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gun</td>
<td>8 (31%)</td>
<td>5 (25%)</td>
<td>8 (40%)</td>
<td>21 (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hands, Feet or Fists</td>
<td>8 (31%)</td>
<td>5 (25%)</td>
<td>4 (20%)</td>
<td>17 (26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knife</td>
<td>2 (7.5%)</td>
<td>3 (15%)</td>
<td>3 (15%)</td>
<td>8 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blunt Objects / Other</td>
<td>4 (15%)</td>
<td>7 (35%)</td>
<td>2 (10%)</td>
<td>13 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poison / Drug</td>
<td>2 (7.5%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explosive</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Weapon</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>3 (15%)</td>
<td>4 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>29 (100%)</td>
<td>21 (100%)</td>
<td>25 (100%)</td>
<td>75 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Percentages are based on incidents in which weapon use is known.*

It should be noted that in a few cases (6%), no weapon was used to commit murder. For example, in one episode of *Law and Order*, a baby’s death was caused by starvation; in an episode of *NYPD Blue*, a baby choked to death on its own vomit while in another episode a baby who was left in a country field died from exposure; in another *Blue* episode, a man died from a broken neck when a bag full of stolen clothes fell on him from two stories up. The fact that three of the victims in these no-weapon murder incidents were babies calls attention to the vulnerability of children who are dependent on their caregivers to keep them alive.

According to official reports, firearms are the weapons used most often in the commission of murder, especially handguns, usually following by knives or cutting instruments and personal weapons such as hands, fists or feet (Silverman and Kennedy 1993; Fedorowycz 1996; FBI 1999; Zawitz and Fox 2000). This makes sense given the lethal nature of guns compared to other weapons. Weapon use featured in the murders on *Law and Order* and *NYPD Blue* support this official finding, although knives were substantially underrepresented as murder weapons in all three of the justice programs. It might be argued that guns add to the drama and excitement of the overall plot line of entertainment programs or that shootings might be easier to stage than stabbings, which may, to some degree, account for the under-representation of knives as murder weapons in the three justice programs analyzed.

Furthermore, although Miethe and McCorkle (1998) content that men are more likely to use guns and women are more likely to use knives in committing murder, this pattern was only partially revealed in the analysis of the three justice programs. Male killers on *Law and Order*, *The Practice* and *NYPD Blue* were more likely than female killers to use both guns and knives; only three women characters chose guns as the murder weapon and only one female character chose a knife. Interestingly, females were shown as more likely to use no weapon at all, letting the victim starve to death, exposing the victim to the elements or being responsible for an accidental choking because of neglect. In addition, males were more likely than females in these
justice programs to use their hands, fists or feet as weapons; with the exception of character Pepper Garrison in *Law and Order* episode #209 and character Laura Kendrick in episode #220, it would seem that female murderer characters did not like to get their hands dirty.

Supporting research and official statistics, the relationship between offender and victim was classified as known in 80 percent of the murder incidents depicted in the three justice programs. A host of official and research reports confirm that murder victims are likely to know their assailants (Holmes and Holmes 1994; Fedorowycz 1996; FBI 1999) with acquaintances emerging as the largest category of known offenders followed by family (FBI 1999). For *Law and Order*, 75 percent of the relationships involved offenders and victims who were known to one another with 25 percent involving strangers. The largest category for known relationships was familial (42%) involving spouses, siblings, a parent killing a child, or a child killing a parent, followed by acquaintance (33%) including lovers. Likewise, 81 percent of the relationships for *The Practice* murders involved known offenders while 19 percent involved strangers. Both familial (35%) and acquaintance (35%) relationships were featured slightly more prominently than other known relationships (30%) such as doctor-patient, police-suspect and teacher-student. Furthermore, 84 percent of the relationships on *NYPD Blue* involved offenders and victims who knew each other while 16 percent involved strangers. Here, acquaintance relationships emerged as the most common (48%) of the known relationships, followed by familial relationships (33%). Overall, then, offender-victim relationships depicted in the murder incidents featured on the three entertainment justice programs fit the pattern described in the official records and research literature. However, these depictions of known relationships tend to contradict previous studies that point out that media are likely to depict violent crimes as random acts committed by strangers (Howitt 1998).

On *Law and Order*, females were as likely as males to be killed by strangers; six female victims and six male victims were killed by strangers in the 8 murder incidents involving a stranger relationship. Additionally, two out of three of the spouse murders involved female victims and both victims who were murdered by lovers were female. Females were more likely than males to be killed by strangers on *The Practice*; seven females and one male were killed by a stranger. Female victims also comprised the majority of spouse murders on *The Practice*; four out of five of the victims of spouse murder were female. On *NYPD Blue*, males outnumbered females (9 to 1) in being killed by strangers. In addition, all of the victims of spouse murder or murder by a lover were female. The analysis plotting gender against offender-victim relationship, then, does fit the established research pattern that females are more likely than males to be killed by an intimate such as a spouse or lover (Silverman and Kennedy 1993; Wilson, Daly and Wright 1993; FBI 1999; Zawitz and Fox 2000). However, only the murder incidents depicted on *NYPD Blue* reflect the consistent pattern that males are more likely than females to be killed by strangers (Silverman and Kennedy 1993).

As well, official records and research reports have long noted the importance of alcohol and/or drugs in the commission of violent offenses including murder (Wolfgang 1958; Luckenbill 1977; Reiss and Roth 1993; Fedorowycz 1996; Bureau of Justice Statistics 1998; Miethe and McCorkle 1998), especially alcohol. This pattern was not, however, significantly highlighted in the three justice programs analyzed. Alcohol and/or drug use by either victim or offender was noted in only a small number of incidents, 15 of the 75 murder incidents or 20
percent. Interestingly, drugs figured more prominently in the murder incidents than did alcohol, especially among victims.

By far, the most common location for the murders/attempted murders presented by the three entertainment justice programs was residence, comprising slightly more than half (52%) of the known locations for murder (see Table 3 below), followed by street/road/highway (27%).

**TABLE 3: Location of Murder/Attempted Murder for Murder Incidents Presented**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Law and Order</th>
<th>The Practice</th>
<th>NYPD Blue</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victim’s Residence</td>
<td>3 (11%)</td>
<td>6 (32%)</td>
<td>9 (39%)</td>
<td>18 (26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offender’s Residence</td>
<td>5 (18%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (9%)</td>
<td>7 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Residence</td>
<td>4 (14%)</td>
<td>5 (26%)</td>
<td>2 (9%)</td>
<td>11 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street/Road/Highway</td>
<td>9 (32%)</td>
<td>4 (21%)</td>
<td>6 (26%)</td>
<td>19 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car/Other Vehicle</td>
<td>3 (11%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (9%)</td>
<td>5 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace</td>
<td>1 (3.5%)</td>
<td>2 (10.5%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>4 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution (hospital, prison)</td>
<td>2 (7%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Area (park, abandoned</td>
<td>1 (3.5%)</td>
<td>2 (10.5%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>4 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>29 (100%)</td>
<td>21 (100%)</td>
<td>25 (100%)</td>
<td>75 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Percentages are based on the total number of incidents in which location is known.

**Note+:** Percentage totals may not always add up to exactly 100 due to rounding.

Victim’s residence was the most common murder location on both The Practice and NYPD Blue while street/road/highway was the most common murder location on Law and Order. Interestingly, on Law and Order, more males than females (7 to 3) were killed on the street while more females than males (8 to 4) were killed in a home or residence. Furthermore, intimate and familial relationships comprised the bulk of murders that occurred in a residence shared by both victim and offender. Similarly, on The Practice, females were more likely than males to be killed in a home or residence. Moreover, all of the murder incidents that occurred in shared residence involved spouse murders. For NYPD Blue, just a little over half of the victims (53%) killed in a residence were female; this pattern was not as pronounced as the pattern revealed for location and gender of victim for Law and Order and The Practice. Murders that occurred in a shared residence were spouse murders, involving female victims. More males than females were killed on the street; all six of the victims killed on the street were male.

Official statistics and the research literature confirm that the most common location for murder is the home, followed by street, road or highway (Miethe and Meirer 1994; Perkins and Klaus 1996). All three of the justice programs fit this official picture for location as well as support the research findings that females are more likely to be killed in homes while males are more likely to be killed in the street (Fedorowycz 1996).

Moreover, the murders/attempted murders presented in the three entertainment justice programs support the common finding that few homicides involve multiple offenders and fewer involved multiple victims (Zawitz and Fox 2000). Indeed, only two incidents of mass murder
and two incidents of serial murder were depicted. Furthermore, there were multiple offenders in only 12 of the 75 (16%) murder incidents and multiple victims in only 7 of the 75 (9%) murder incidents. In some cases, however, murder incidents resulted in multiple defendants who did not actually participate in the murder but were deemed co-conspirators or were contractors of hired killings.

Factors concerning the context of murder are also important to examine such as whether a murder was planned or spontaneous and whether a murder occurred in the context of another crime such as rape or robbery. Interestingly, the results do not fit the general pattern that most murders are not planned but are situationally-induced acts of violence (Miethe and McCorkle 1998) as nearly one-third (32%) of the murder incidents presented across the three justice programs were planned (see Table 4 below).

### TABLE 4: Context Factors for Murder/Attempted Murder Incidents Presented

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Law and Order</th>
<th>The Practice</th>
<th>NYPD Blue</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planned</td>
<td>13 (45%)</td>
<td>8 (38%)</td>
<td>3 (12%)</td>
<td>24 (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argument or Dispute</td>
<td>7 (24%)</td>
<td>4 (19%)</td>
<td>7 (28%)</td>
<td>18 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felony</td>
<td>4 (14%)</td>
<td>2 (10%)</td>
<td>7 (28%)</td>
<td>11 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4 (14%)</td>
<td>6 (28%)</td>
<td>5 (20%)</td>
<td>15 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td>5 (20%)</td>
<td>7 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>29 (100%)</td>
<td>21 (100%)</td>
<td>25 (100%)</td>
<td>75 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Percentage totals may not always add up to exactly 100 due to rounding.

Almost one-half (45%) of the murder incidents on *Law and Order* were planned with five (38%) of the planned murders being contract killings and two (15%) being spouse murders. Similarly, a little more than one-third (38%) of the murder incidents on *The Practice* were planned with one planned incident involving the murder of a spouse. Planned murders were less common on *NYPD Blue* with only three (12%) of the murder incidents being planned, one of which was a contract killing. Thus, it would seem that only *NYPD Blue* fits the overall research that murder is typically spontaneous rather than planned.

According to the research literature, the spontaneity of murder is often due to the fact that many murders occur in the context of an argument or dispute (Polk 1994; FBI 1999; Zawitz and Fox 2000). This is supported, to some degree, by the finding that nearly one-quarter (24%) of the murder incidents presented across the three justice programs occurred in the context of an argument.

Research also suggests that murders are likely to occur in conjunction with the commission of a felony (Miethe and McCorkle 1998; FBI 1999; Zawitz and Fox 2000). Fourteen percent of the murder incidents on *Law and Order* occurred in the context of a felony, specifically burglary, robbery and rape. Likewise, 10 percent of the murder incidents on *The Practice* occurred in the context of a felony such as rape and robbery. As well, a substantial 20 percent of the murder incidents on *NYPD Blue* were classified as felony murders, involving a range of crimes such as burglary, motor vehicle theft, rape and robbery. Miethe and McCorkle (1998) further contend that felony murders are more likely to involve strangers than persons who
are known to one another. In support of this general pattern, three of the four felony murders on Law and Order, one of the two felony murders on The Practice, and four of the five felony murders on NYPD Blue involved a stranger relationship.

In addition, the murder incidents presented on the three justice programs coincide with the gender-by-gender pattern reflected in official statistics and the research literature that males are most often the murder victims of male offenders, while females are also more likely to be murdered by males (Fedorowycz 1996; FBI 1999). In the episodes of Law and Order, for example, there were only five incidents in which females killed males, and only five incidents in which females killed females. In the episodes of The Practice, there were only three incidents in which females killed males and only one incident in which a female killed a female. Furthermore, in the episodes of NYPD Blue, there was only one incident in which a female killed a male and two incidents in which a female killed a female. Thus, the murders presented to viewers by these justice programs reinforce the officially created notion that males are likely to be killed by males and that females are also likely to be killed by males.

Officially, it is also the case that, where women commit murder, victims are likely to be family members (Fedorowycz 1996). The results of the analysis of the three justice programs support this, with 9 of the 17 (53%) murders committed by women involving the killing of a family member such as a spouse, child, parent or sibling.

Moreover, the research literature confirms that murder is predominantly intraracial (Hewitt 1988; Miethe and McCorkle 1998; Zawitz and Fox 2000); that is, people are more likely to be killed by members of their own racial or ethnic group than to be killed by members of other racial or ethnic groups. The murders presented in the three justice programs demonstrated quite strongly that murder is indeed intraracial. Only two murder incidents depicted on Law and Order were interracial; in episode #211, for example, a Hispanic male robbed and killed a white female and in episode #222, two young black males beat a young white male to death. In addition, there were no known incidents of interracial murders on The Practice and only three interracial murders depicted on NYPD Blue. In episode #139, for example, a black male shot an off-duty white police officer; in episode #142, a white male drug addict killed his black male supplier; and in episode #146, three black males killed an elderly white male in the course of stealing his car.

In sum, for the most part, the murders/attempted murders presented on Law and Order, The Practice, and NYPD Blue fit the general patterns revealed by official reports and research literature. The murder incidents depicted support the official picture of murder as a male-perpetrated, intraracial act of violence most likely committed by someone known to the victim and frequently committed in the home. The television murders also highlight the use of handguns as the murder weapon of choice, although they under-represent knives and other cutting instruments as alternative weapon choices, instead emphasizing the use of body parts such as hands, feet and fists which are, in reality, less likely to be lethal. Furthermore, these television murder presentations support Miethe and McCorkle’s (1998) observation that television crime dramas tend to give the impression that most murders are meticulously planned. Indeed, the over-emphasis on planned murders on television masks the spontaneity of real-life murder, which is often the result of an argument or dispute or fuelled by alcohol and/or drugs.
Special-Type Murder

The 75 murders presented on the justice programs were further classified into special-type murders depending on whether clearly defined characteristics were present. If the murder occurred between spouses, then it was classified as a *spouse murder*. If the murder involved at least one person hiring another to kill a third party, it was classified as a contract killing, or a *murder-for-hire*. A murder was designated a *mass murder* if it involved multiple victims at one point in time and was designated a *serial murder* if it involved multiple victims over a period of time. Furthermore, murders that occurred in the context of a drug transaction were appropriately labelled *drug-related murders*. Any murders that did not fit within these categories were not considered special-type murders. For a breakdown of these special-type murders across the three justice programs, see Table 5 below.

**TABLE 5: Special-Type Murders Presented**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Murders</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spouse Murders</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder-for-Hire</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass Murder</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serial Murder</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug-Related Murder</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fifteen percent of the murders presented involved persons who were murdered by their husband or wife. For example, the *Law and Order* spouse murders included: Walter Grobman, who hired someone to murder his more successful civil court judge wife; Charles Hallenbeck, an elderly man with Alzheimer’s who killed his wife in a fit of jealousy; and Maggie Callister, a woman under the influence of her financial advisors, who planted a bomb on a helicopter which killed her husband and five other passengers. *The Practice* spouse murders included: Pierce Stanton, a man who strangled his wife in order to escape an unhappy marriage; Raymond Oz, a man on the verge of senility, who killed his wife during a paranoid state in which he believed that she was trying to kill him; Louise Morgan, who was accused of deliberately running over her husband with their sport utility vehicle because she had grown to dislike him; Zachary Kingman, who struck his wife in the head with a hammer in order to pursue an affair with another woman; and Scott Simpson, who shot his terminally ill wife in the head to alleviate her suffering. Finally, the *NYPD Blue* spouse murders included: Dwight Gunther, a man who was fed up with his wife so he killed her and packed her body away in some suitcases; Harvey, a physically abusive husband who fractured his wife’s skull during an intense beating; and Pete Mangrini, an organized crime boss who was suspected of killing his wife and hiding her body out of state.

Admittedly, these incidents of spouse killings may not appear to be the most common when they are compared to real-life reports of spouse murder, but they do follow some of the general patterns established through research. For example, spouse murder tends to be a male crime (Langan and Dawson 1995). All but two of the spouse murders presented on the justice
programs involved husbands killing their wives, the most common type of spouse murder. Interestingly, only one of the murder presentations showed a clear history of domestic violence, even though spouse murders are likely to occur when there is a pattern of spousal abuse (Fedorowycz 1996). As well, four of the spouse murders were planned, deliberate murders, suggesting that, at least in the context of prime-time justice shows, husbands and wives plot the murders against their spouses rather than murder during the course of an argument or because of a history of violence, the more common real-life contextual factors (Hotaling and Sugarman 1990; Pan, Neidig and O’Leary 1994). One of these planned spouse murders was a contract killing, in which the husband hired someone to kill his wife; this single incident supports the official finding that very few spouse murders are the murder-for-hire variety (Langan and Dawson 1995). Finally, only one of the murders presented revealed that alcohol was a factor in the spouse killing, which fails to highlight the role alcohol and/or drugs often play in spouse violence (Hotaling and Sugarman 1990; Pan et al. 1994; Langan and Dawson 1995).

Overall, then, a somewhat distorted image of spouse murder emerges from the entertainment justice programs. While the spouse murders depicted support the image of spouse murder created by official reports and research literature as being a predominantly male crime, they fail to acknowledge that such murders are mostly spontaneous, growing out of general discord or a history of abuse, with alcohol and/or drugs often playing a crucial role.

Less than 7 percent of the total murder presentations were classified as contract killings or murder-for-hires in which a person hired another person to kill a third party. In one Law and Order episode, Walter Grobman hired a petty thief to kill his wife for thirty thousand dollars. In another Law and Order episode, socialite Regina Mulroney hired a man with mob connections to cover-up the murder of a man by her daughter; the hired killer shot the dead man in the back of the head, execution-style, and then shot two other people in a similar manner in order to give the illusion that all three murders were the work of a serial killer known to the police. In another episode, stockbroker Bruce Valentine hired Mitchel Sims, a friend who was knee-deep in gambling debts, to kill a co-worker to prevent him from revealing Valentine’s involvement in stock fraud; Valentine paid Sims forty-five thousand dollars for his efforts, though Sims ultimately killed himself. As well, in a further episode, Andy Palone agreed to fund two brothers’ drug manufacturing lab in exchange for them eliminating a young woman who threatened to expose Palone’s involvement in insider trading. Furthermore, in one episode of NYPD Blue, Joaquin Enriquez hired another man to kill his brother because he was in love with his brother’s wife.

Interestingly, handguns were used in three of the contract killings presented and a shotgun in another. In one of the contract killings, the victim was strangled. The use of guns in the presented contract killings makes sense since guns are the most lethal weapons and would therefore be expected to be used in order to “take care of business”.

There were few incidents of mass or serial murder presented on the justice programs, which supports the official rarity of both types of murder (Reiss and Roth 1993). One of the incidents of mass murder occurred on Law and Order which involved the case of Dennis Trope who open fired on a group of pre-med students in Central Park, killing fifteen and wounding another twelve. The other incident of mass murder occurred on NYPD Blue, which involved the
murder of seven men who were bagging cocaine when two cocaine addicts decided to steal the cocaine and eliminate any witnesses. Interestingly, the two serial murder incidents presented or referred to both occurred on The Practice. Several episodes highlighted the exploits of George Vogelman, a character introduced during the 1998/1999 season. Represented by Ellenor Frutt of the Donnell firm, Vogelman was acquitted of stabbing and beheading a woman whom he had met at a bar. Later, dressing up as a nun to disguise himself, Vogelman stabbed Lindsay Dole, one of the firm’s other partners, who ultimately survived the attack. During the season under study, Vogelman also tried to stab Frutt who narrowly escaped with her life when her roommate shot Vogelman as he lunged at her. It is clear that the Vogelman character was on his way to becoming a serial killer, one who dressed up as a nun and stabbed female victims with whom he couldn’t establish a romantic relationship. In addition, in another episode the Donnell firm was asked to represent a convicted serial killer in his petition for release from a psychiatric hospital on the grounds that he no longer suffered from the condition that made him commit the heinous acts for which he was confined; Walter Arens, a diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic, had tortured and murdered five young girls. Furthermore, there was one incident of serial murder alluded to in an episode of Law and Order where several murders were executed in a style similar to a serial killer known to the police as the .44 Calibre killer.

Presentations of drug-related murders were rare across the three justice programs. Only two such incidents could be identified, both depicted on NYPD Blue. For example, in one episode, two cocaine addicts came across a group of seven men who were bagging cocaine for a supplier; they stole the cocaine and killed the men to avoid identification (Note: This case was also an example of mass murder). In another episode, a young man shot his supplier in a drug transaction that turned sour. These couple of incidents clearly do not provide viewers with a clear understanding of drug-related murder and especially do not highlight the current official trends that show an increase in drug-related homicides (Wellford and Cronin 1999).

Explanations for Murder

Since the majority of criminal incidents presented by the three entertainment justice programs related to murder, it was instructive to focus on the explanations provided specifically for the murder presentations, looking first at general motives for murder. According to Miethe and McCorkle (1998), criminologists tend to differentiate between expressive and instrumental motivations. Expressive motives are those that derive mainly from emotional responses or psychological reactions such as anger, jealousy, resentment, frustration, fear, love or general dislike. Instrumental motives derive from a desire to obtain some personal goal or end such as money or status enhancement. Murderers may also be motivated by some mental illness or defect that essentially controls their responses to situations. Table 6 below summarizes the various motives ascribed to offender characters in the three justice programs.

Expressive motives were most commonly ascribed to the offender characters who committed murder, with more than half (56%) of the characters committing murder out of emotive responses such as jealousy, anger, frustration, or fear. This bodes well with the research literature which emphasizes a predominance of expressive motives for real-life murder (Luckenbill 1977; Polk 1994; Block 1995). While much less common (18%), instrumental
TABLE 6: Motives for Murder on Law and Order, The Practice, and NYPD Blue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Law and Order</th>
<th>The Practice</th>
<th>NYPD Blue</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expressive Motive</td>
<td>23 (66%)</td>
<td>13 (50%)</td>
<td>13 (50%)</td>
<td>49 (56%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental Motive</td>
<td>9 (26%)</td>
<td>3 (11%)</td>
<td>4 (15%)</td>
<td>16 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Illness</td>
<td>3 (8%)</td>
<td>8 (31%)</td>
<td>3 (11%)</td>
<td>14 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
<td>3 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>4 (15%)</td>
<td>5 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>35 (100%)</td>
<td>26 (100%)</td>
<td>26 (100%)</td>
<td>87 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The total number of motives (87) exceeds the total number of murder incidents (75) to account for multiple motives that were ascribed to an offender as well as multiple offenders where motives may have differed, such as in the case of a contract killing.

Motives still figured prominently in the justice program murders; such motives were evident in some of the contract killings in which the killer was paid for committing the act, in cases where the offender stood to benefit monetarily by the murder because of an inheritance or promotion, and in cases in which another economic crime was the primary goal, such as robbery or burglary.

Surprisingly, a substantial percentage (16%) of the motivations were considered the result of some mental illness or defect. Take for example the case of a ten-year-old character, Jenny Brant. In one episode of Law and Order she was labelled by an evaluating psychiatrist as a sociopath, a “textbook serial killer”, who had committed her first murder and was likely to continue unless she was put under psychiatric care. In an episode of The Practice, murder defendant Raymond Oz was described as mentally unstable; the motive for killing his wife was that he was under a paranoid delusion in which he believed she was trying to kill him. Furthermore, in one episode of NYPD Blue, Detectives Sipowicz and Sorenson make it known that they believe the murderer, Roger Unquist, is a crazy psychopath who killed his parents and then tried to get a woman he held hostage to provide an alibi for him. Despite these common presentations of mentally ill murderers, mental illness is rare among violent offenders (Monahan 1992), with paranoid schizophrenia actually being the most common mental illness linked to violence (Lunde 1976; Bartol 1995). Only one of the fictional murderers was presented to be diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. It would seem, then, that the mental illness-violence connection remains a strong theme in contemporary television justice programs, a theme also found in the program content of their prime-time predecessors, albeit to a much greater degree (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorelli 1981; Fabianic 1997).

The preoccupation with motives, whether expressive, instrumental or the result of mental illness, calls attention to the individualistic nature of most popular explanations of crime which tend to locate the “cause” of criminal behavior within the individual; that is, people commit crimes because of something uniquely inside them – a feeling of jealousy, a biological deficiency, an emotional instability, or some desire to achieve a personal goal. Motives, by their very nature, are individualistic. Everybody who commits murder commits it for a uniquely different reason, although there may be some commonality across motives. The tendency of the popular justice programs analyzed to focus on and even highlight particular motives detracts away from theoretical explanations of criminal behavior that go beyond individualistic explanations to include more encompassing sociological explanations. It may be that
entertainment programming is simply not equipped for social theoretical explanations or that producers and scriptwriters see little entertainment value in including more sociologically-based explanations in their program content. Regardless, focus on motives in entertainment justice shows allows individualistic explanations, rather than other explanations, to take center stage and, ultimately, to find a place in the viewing audience’s perceptions and knowledge-base.

To their credit, there were some attempts to present more sociologically-based explanations by these contemporary justice programs. In one episode of *Law and Order*, for example, lead character McCoy places blame for the mass shootings on the gun manufacturer for making it easier for the offender to kill the women in Central Park by manufacturing a weapon that is easy to convert into an automatic firearm. McCoy further blames the state of New York and the United States in general for allowing firearm companies to make such products. Here, McCoy scratches the surface of a simplistic sociological explanation that essentially shifts the blame from the individual to the social environment in which he lives. In another *Law and Order* episode, the social environment is emphasized as a particularly important influence on individuals by laying the basics for a violent society hypothesis. In this case, the murderer character, John Talford, is presented as a violent teenager who is the product of the violent society he lives in. It is explained that John has been socialized by his father to “be a man” by learning how to fight with deadly martial arts weapons that are easily accessible via the Internet and by imitating fight scenarios depicted on the violent video games he plays. The argument is, of course, that John Talford (and other teenagers like him) cannot help but be influenced by this ever-present emphasis on violence. It’s not John, but society, that is to blame for his violence aimed at a rival classmate.

Interestingly, there were a couple attempts at constructing a conflict theory of crime, which emphasizes the natural division in society between those with power and those without (Turk 1969), and sees law as a tool of the powerful (Chambliss and Seidman 1971). When wealthy socialite Pepper Garrison escapes criminal prosecution for the murder of her daughter in an episode of *Law and Order*, McCoy and Carmichael (the lead prosecution character) express displeasure with the discriminatory legal system. Carmichael comments that “the laws for the rich are different” to which McCoy responds cynically, “What laws for the rich?” It is clear that the prosecutors are acutely aware of the power differential that exists within the law and within the criminal justice system. Furthermore, the central issue in an episode of *The Practice* highlights the powerful/powerless distinction often at work in the legal system. Here, Rebecca Washington defends an indigenous young man, Ronny Vaga, who confesses to a hit-and-run homicide. It is suggested that real estate tycoon, Teddy Barrington, is actually paying Vaga to say that he was driving to prevent being exposed as the one who, under the influence of alcohol, hit and killed the woman. Not only does this point out that the rich and powerful can use their money to avoid criminal prosecution but also that the poor and powerless are willing to take the fall.

Other sociological explanations found in the justice programs include feminist theory and subcultural theory. For example, an episode of *Law and Order*, which presents the case of a baby who starves to death because he was not fed sufficiently with breast milk, highlights the pressure many mothers face by society, through special interest groups, to breast feed their babies. When they have difficulty, these women are made to feel inadequate and are labelled
“bad mothers”. The overall argument here is feminist in nature. As well, an episode of *NYPD Blue* puts forth the subculture of violence theory (Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967) by emphasizing the police subculture as one in which violence is taken-for-granted and expected under certain circumstances, such as when offenders disrespect police officers or challenge their authority.

Although attempts at sociological explanations were made in the entertainment justice programs, the explanations were, for the most part, fairly unsophisticated, simply blaming society for the individual offender’s actions, or were somewhat obscure so that they were likely to go unnoticed by the average (non-criminology trained) viewer. As well, the explanations fail to hit upon some of the more unique sociological explanations for murder and violence which include: structural explanations which call attention to racial inequality (Messner and Golden 1992) and labor instability (Crutchfield 1989) as potential sources of conflict and violence; routine activities theory (Cohen and Felson 1979) which states that crime depends on the intersection of a motivated offender, a suitable target and an absence of guardianship; interactionist interpretations (Luckenbill 1977) which highlight the series of stages through which offenders and victims of violence proceed; and phenomenological theories such as those advanced by Katz (1988) which stress that the causes of crime are constructed by offenders themselves in ways that are compellingly seductive, often stemming from emotional logic and moral appeal.

**DISCUSSION**

It is clear that the analysis revealed both divergence and convergence in comparing mediated murder presentations with official statistics and relevant research literature. One of the most obvious distortions in the presentation of crime in the three entertainment justice programs was the overrepresentation of violent crime, especially murder. The overemphasis on relatively rare incidents of violent crime such as murder may be attributed to the escapist nature of entertainment television (Sacco and Kennedy 1998), which is fueled by the tendency to dramatize crime shows by presenting extraordinary rather than ordinary events. It is precisely because murder is not the stuff of everyday life that it finds itself a prominent feature of entertainment television. Violent crime, especially murder, strikes at the very core of our humanity and is therefore fascinating, dramatic and entertaining. It is no surprise, then, that murder remains the most marketable crime in the entertainment television industry.

The demands of entertainment in television may also account for the divergence of other portrayals. For example, the overemphasis on planned murders may be attributed to the need for dramatic effect. Likewise, the under-representation of knives as murder weapons may indicate a belief among writers and producers that guns have more dramatic appeal than knives or that shootings are viewed as more dramatic than stabbings. In any event, it is important to keep in mind that the aims of television are centered around creating drama and ensuring entertainment. It is likely, then, where murder presentations depart from real-life murder, the intent is geared toward entertainment rather than deliberate disillusion.

Despite incidents of divergence, there was plenty of convergence between the murder presentations and real-life murder. This might be partially explained by the increasing complexity and sophistication of contemporary television programming. Indeed, Selby and
Cowdery (1995) contend that television programming has become much more complex and sophisticated such that producers are striving for more “realistic” portrayals which do not sacrifice entertainment value. It may be also that as television programming becomes more sophisticated, so do television viewers; viewers, then may be an important force in demanding more realistic television presentations, which may account, to some degree, for the convergence of the mediate presentations and real-life murders revealed in the analysis. In addition, contemporary entertainment television has witnessed a wave of “reality TV” programming in recent years. To keep pace with so-called “reality shows”, fictional entertainment television may be attempting to incorporate a modicum of “fact” within fictional settings in order to create the illusion of “reality” that seems to be so popular as an entertainment format in contemporary television.

Sophistication and reality show competition aside, however, convergence between mediated murder presentations and real-life murder may simply be coincidental rather than intentional. Where factors enhance the drama or advance the storyline, they may be readily incorporated. For example, it may be argued that having relationships between offenders and victims might advance the overall plot, contribute to character development, and increase the dramatic effect of the storyline. Thus, rather than trying to portray murder more realistically, the depiction of relationships between murderers and their victims may simply be a way of meeting the demands of dramatic and entertaining television production.

Television presentations may be an important force in shaping viewer conceptions and attitudes and thus potential implications of the murder presentations analyzed should be discussed. An obvious consequence of the overrepresentation of violent crime in prime-time justice programs is that it may lead the viewing audience to overestimate the amount of violent crime, especially murder, in society. To be fair, however, it must be noted that the three entertainment justice programs analyzed do center around specialized themes in their overall storylines. For example, the detectives on *Law and Order* are part of a specialized homicide unit and thus it is expected that murder would play a central role in the criminal case depictions. Similarly, the detectives on *NYPD Blue* are part of a special investigations unit, which handles major cases so that murder would inevitably surface as the majority of major case investigations presented. In addition, the Donnell firm of *The Practice* has built a considerable reputation for defending clients accused of murder; it would therefore be likely that many of the cases handled by the defense attorneys in this show would be murder or attempted murder cases. It can be argued that regular viewers of these justice programs may be subtly aware of and are able to appreciate the specialized nature of these programs and therefore come to expect some exaggeration of violent crime, especially murder. While it is true that these justice programs exaggerate violent crimes, especially murder, it does not follow that viewers are not sophisticated enough to realize the overrepresentation of violent crime compared to the real world they live in. In fact, many people are acutely aware of the distortions of crime presented by the media (Surette 1992) and may actively discount media images and messages (Howitt 1998). Nevertheless, viewers may still overestimate the amount of violent crime based on distortions presented by these popular television justice programs. Indeed, it is well noted that the public often has a distorted view of the nature and extent of crime in society and tend to overestimate the amount of violent crime in both the United States and Canada (Roberts and Doob 1990).
With the exception of the focus on planned murders, the three contemporary justice programs revealed portrayals of murder that more closely resemble official portrayals than analyses of previous justice programs have revealed. Therefore, viewers of *Law and Order*, *The Practice*, and *NYPD Blue* are able to get a glimpse of the overall nature of murder through these fictional presentations. Furthermore, although the murder incidents depicted on the three entertainment justice programs highlight the real-life rarity of mass and serial murder as well as murder-for-hire, they tend to mask the more common-place murders that are drug-related and tend to somewhat sensationalize spouse murder. Nevertheless, the fictional murder incidents do emphasize the real-life danger that women often face from male spouses and lovers, calling attention to an important gender-specific social problem.

It should also be noted that all of the murders presented were interpersonal in nature—people killing people. What is not highlighted, in presenting murder in such a manner, is the irony that more people are killed not by the hands of other people but through corporate wrongdoing such as pollution, industrial accidents and unsafe working conditions (Reiman 1998). By neglecting any focus on corporate crimes that kill, television presentations reinforce the popular and legal definitions of what constitutes “murder”. This not only serves to legitimize legal definitions of murder but keeps corporate wrongdoing leading to death outside the scope of legal sanction. The neglect of corporate crime in murder presentations is not surprising since mass media may have a vested interest in keeping corporate crime swept under the rug, so to speak. Nevertheless, the neglect of corporate crimes that kill may inadvertently influence viewer conceptions of corporate crime and of murder.

Prime-time explanations for murder still tend to be overly individualistic. The consequences of these usually individualistic and rather simplistic explanations of crime, is the subtle deflection away from more complex social-structural causes of crime and criminality. Indeed, Barrile (1984) contends that individualistic explanations of crime reduce crime to “a personal trouble”, thereby successfully avoiding the sociological causes of crime such as poverty, unemployment, discrimination, judicial bias, classism and racism. These structural explanations are not only more complex, but they may be better predictors of individual criminality.

Even more importantly, prime-time television’s failure to consider distinctly sociological explanations of crime has consequences for public understanding of crime and for policy initiatives. For students of criminology, who are exposed to the individualistic explanations of crime offered by entertainment television, it may take several intensive sociological courses to counteract these media-created impressions. It has been the researcher’s experience, for example, in teaching both second-year and third-year criminology courses that students tend to offer individualistic explanations of crime and criminality more often and more readily than social structural explanations. In addition, policies created to solve the problem of violence may be inadequate if they reflect media-inspired individualistic explanations, which advance the solution to crime as a matter of adjusting individual personalities rather than altering the social structure.
CONCLUSION

The over-representation of violent crime, especially murder, in contemporary prime-time television justice programs may lead viewers to overestimate the amount of violence that occurs in the world around them. Nevertheless, in presenting murders that closely resemble real-life murders, television justice programs may serve to broaden viewer understanding of violence and murder as a whole, though one can only speculate, without thoroughly investigating the relationship between television viewing and viewer knowledge, the effect such presentations may have on viewers.

Although portrayals of murder by prime-time justice programs keep pace with official patterns concerning the circumstances surrounding real-life murder, explanations provided for murder via prime-time television are somewhat inadequate, over-emphasizing individualistic motives and downplaying important social-structural factors. Thus, while viewers may gain a fairly good understanding of murder and the circumstances in which murder occurs by watching shows like Law and Order, The Practice, and NYPD Blue, they are not likely to achieve a comprehensive understanding of why murder is committed. Rather, viewers will need to seek out other sources if such an understanding is to be obtained.

ENDNOTE

* Direct correspondence to Dr. Danielle M. Soulliere, University of Windsor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, 401 Sunset Avenue, Windsor, ON N9B 3P4 Canada (E-mail: soulli6@uwindsor.ca).

REFERENCES


THE COMPULSION OF REAL/REEL SERIAL KILLERS AND VAMPIRES: TOWARD A GOTHIC CRIMINOLOGY

by

Caroline Joan Picart
Cecil Greek
Florida State University

ABSTRACT

The most gripping and recurrent visualizations of the “monstrous” in the media and film lay bare the tensions that underlie the contemporary construction of the “monstrous,” which ranges in the twilit realm where divisions separating fact, fiction, and myth are porous—a gothic mode. There appear to be two monstrous figures in contemporary popular culture whose constructions blur into each other, and who most powerfully evoke not only our deepest fears and taboos, but also our most repressed fantasies and desires: the serial killer and the vampire. The social construction of these figures, in feature films that invoke the genre traditions of the documentary, melodrama, horror-psychological thriller, and romance form a significant section of this article; it is the easy slippage between cinema-verité depictions and horror-psychological thriller narrative modes that renders the gothicization of the serial killer as vampire compelling. This social construction will not only cover the cinematic depictions of these figures and their significance in terms of a critique of popular culture, but also in terms of contemporary criminological theories concerning how to discuss “evil” in relation to depictions of crime and the deviant. The ongoing fascination with the serial killer, both in the Hollywood film and criminological case studies, points to the emergence of a “gothic criminology,” with its focus on themes such as blood lust, compulsion, godlike vengeance, and power and domination. Rather than assuming that film is a medium that tells us little about the reality of criminological phenomena, gothic criminology as envisaged here, recognizes the complementarity of academic and aesthetic accounts of deviant behavior.

INTRODUCTION: MONSTERS AMONG US

Edward J. Ingebretsen (2001) writes: “Monstrous bodies are the remarkable presences that appear as signs of civic omen, or trauma, and which demand interpretation: they offer a bit of each, apocalypse as well as utopia.” Indeed, the etymological roots of the term “monstrous” may be arguably traced to their Latin roots, monere (to warn) and monstrare (to point to) (Picart, 2001), though monsters, as former portents of the divine, have a more complex genealogy than such an etymology can capture (Hanafi, 2000). Nevertheless, it is important to track the most gripping and recurrent visualizations of the “monstrous” in the media and film in order to lay bare the tensions that underlie the contemporary construction of the monstrous, which ranges in the twilight realm where divisions separating fact, fiction, and myth are porous. It is important to note the tensions of this narrative: the “monster” or contemporary “fallen angel” is simultaneously a figure of horror and repulsion, as it is of fascination and charisma; both subhuman and superhuman; and remarkably similar to the “normal” and strikingly deviant at the
same time. There appear to be two monstrous figures in contemporary popular culture whose constructions blur into each other, and who most powerfully evoke not only our deepest fears and taboos, but also our most repressed fantasies and desires: the serial killer and the vampire as creatures compelled to kill. The social construction of these figures, in feature films that invoke the genre traditions of the documentary, melodrama, horror-psychological thriller, and romance, form a crucial part of this article. This social construction will not only cover the cinematic depictions of these figures and their significance in terms of a critique of popular culture, but also in terms of contemporary criminological theories concerning serial killers’ rationality and freedom of choice, or lack thereof, in committing these crimes. The ongoing fascination with the serial killer, both in the Hollywood film and criminological case studies, points to the emergence of “gothic criminology,” with its focus on themes such as blood lust, compulsion, godlike vengeance, and power and domination.

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF GOTHIC CRIMINOLOGY

Drawing from Haggerty’s (1989: 16-17) description of the gothic novel and Stanford Lyman’s (1990: 60-61) development from it of a “gothic sociology,” a starting definition of gothic criminology can be stated. “The Gothic novel,” George E. Haggerty tells us, “finds its most fruitful mode of evocation in delineating an imaginative response to the objective world that is grounded in the emotions.” A Gothic criminology, by contrast, expresses itself in depicting the architectonic paradox of the supposedly objective moral universe--viz., the natural preternaturalism that has contributed to its construction. Where Gothic fiction instructs its horrified readers in the unreal horrors attendant upon a realistically imagined fictional world, Gothic criminology teaches its readers about the actual horrors that produce and prevail in the social construction of modernity. Where Gothic literature offers “scientifically objective terminology and clearly empirical observation as a means of establishing intensely private, subjective experience,” Gothic criminology employs “preternatural imagery and occult fantasy to evoke in the reader an intellectual understanding of the actual world and to inspire a praxiological response to it.”

Gothic criminology as employed in this article gestures towards an account that moves in between the realms of gothic fiction and film, which entertains its horrified and fascinated readers with unreal horrors attendant upon a realistically/cogently imagined fictional world, and factual cases (of serial murderers) framed in gothic terms, which are essential to plotting the social construction of where evil resides within modernity. Furthermore, a gothic criminology that examines the prevalent use of such preternatural imagery or occult fantasy can prompt a critical response to how crime is theoretically modeled and popularly constructed, and assist in the development of a praxiological response to both “real” and “reel” worlds, which are intertwined in complex ways.

The roots for a gothic criminology can be seen in the early writings of American sociologists such as E.A. Ross (1907) and Robert Park. Ross, an important speaker and writer in the Progressive Movement, published Sin and Society in 1907. In it, Ross described a new breed of monster, the criminaloid, responsible for bringing great suffering to the masses through the practice of unmitigated greed and lack of concern about worker safety or survival. Ross was referring to the “robber barons” of turn of the century American capitalism and their horrible
record on such issues as wages, factory and job site safety, use of child labor, etc. Ross, a small town resident by birth, was appalled at the disparities in wealth and power that had emerged in America’s urban jungles such as New York (Burns, 1999).

Robert Park, later sociology chair at the University of Chicago, took a more global perspective on the phenomenon of “vampiric capitalism,” in his journalistic critiques of western exploitation within Africa, both of its peoples and resources (Lyman, 1992). American sociology, after the 1920s, would reject the use of both journalistic and philosophical analyses of evil for a more thoroughly scientific methodology (Greek, 1992). However, the discipline then was left with great difficulties in discussing evil (now referred to as deviance) without transvaluing it as sickness (Menninger, 1973) or as sign of social malaise or anomie (Orru, 1987), leaving treatises on the nature of evil to more ethnographically inspired writings such as criminal biographies, novels, plays, and ultimately screenplays.

Gothic criminology seeks to return to the primordial origins of deviant human behavior, much as Lyman’s (1978) *The Seven Deadly Sins* attempted to return the discussion of evil as socially constructed to sociological discourse. The criminal justice system and citizens alike, draw upon the combined work of true crime writers, FBI profilers, journalists and Hollywood screenwriters in their quest to flesh out the nature of serial killing. The focus on the twilight region of fact, fiction and myth is important because it gets at the ambivalent workings of the social construction of these contemporary monsters, employing an analysis of the cinematic depictions of these monsters (using categories such as class, gender, sexuality and race). The “compulsion model” of serial killers is certainly implied in film and explicitly scientized as fact in the behavioral profile literature produced by the FBI and other law enforcement investigators. Both the serial killer as vampire and the “mind hunters” (i.e., FBI Behavioral Science Unit) who relentlessly track them operate in keeping with the gothic tradition (Simpson, 2000).

The social construction of the monstrous as evil is clearly seen in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s (1996) introduction to *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. It may be summarized in the following way: the monster’s body is a “cultural body” that serves as a harbinger of “category crisis,” which renders porous categories of knowledge and form, and makes fluid the realms of fear and desire. Using language steeped in Christian theological allusions, Cohen tells us that the monstrous, like one of Dante’s hellish creatures, guards the “borders of the Possible,” and is “difference made flesh, come to dwell among us.” Cohen’s framework is important because it shows how the languages of theology and the Gothic imagination lurk, inhabiting the most secular of entertainment and “factual” realms. In all the films that we will discuss, we aim to excavate how formal Gothic modes form a symbiotic relationship with theatrical modes of horror and melodrama, in keeping with the political need to shape public notions of good and evil, normality and monstrosity, fact and fiction.

Rather than assuming that film is a medium that tells us little about the reality of criminological phenomena, gothic criminology as envisaged here, recognizes the complementarity of academic and aesthetic accounts of deviant behavior. By demonstrating the overlap of vampiric themes in serial murder films, “primordial evil,” using Paul Ricoeur’s phenomenology, becomes recognizable as an essential narrative feature of the dread that “senseless murderers,” like serial killers, seek to inspire, eliciting the same type of response as a
vengeful deity. As Jack Katz (1990) stated: “Our original sense of deviance is through a nonreflective, sensual awareness of evil in the forms of dread, defilement, transgression, vengeance, sacrilege, sacrifice, and the like.” Such narrative patterns are discernible in the films that paint the converging portraits of serial killers and vampires, which we examine, using a gothic aesthetic. This is significant because traditionally, as Pirie (1977) points out, though there is a natural link between serial killers and vampires (as mass murderers), the two are usually set apart because of a conventional desire to separate a realistic account from an account of fantasy. Thus, he argues, “the true life psychopath is very rarely a source for vampire movies. There is a world of difference between the psychological horror of mass murder and the dreamy romantic atmosphere of the undead” (17). Yet contemporary characterizations of serial killers converge with those of vampires, making the gothic aesthetic not an obscure 18th century oddity, but a rhetorical feature of everyday life.

**SOCIOLOGICAL COMMENTARIES ON CONTEMPORARY FASCINATION WITH SERIAL KILLERS IN REAL AND REEL LIFE**

Others have focused on the sociological and criminological significance of the serial killer craze. Caputi (1987) sees both the rise in serial killing and the cultural fascination with the phenomenon in fiction and film as indicative of male sexual dominance. Defining “sexual murder” as sexually political murder or functional phallic terrorism, Caputi (1987:2) argues that serial killer films include the following typical elements (64):

1. The films refer to Jack the Ripper and the established tradition of sex crime.
2. The killer corresponds with or gothically doubles with the police or media.
3. The mother is blamed for her son’s criminality, as a result of psychological or physical abuse.
4. The killer claims to love his victims, “helping” them by killing them.
5. The female victims are ultimately responsible for their own demise (either the killer mentions this or the plot construction naturalizes this).
6. The killer is waging a holy war against women, punishing them for their sexuality, aggression against men, feminism, etc.

Newitz (1999) similarly focuses on the gender identity anxieties of (hetero)sexual murder as “the serial killer kills off the ‘feminine vulnerability’ in himself when he kills women, and thus proves himself a man.” In contrast, Jenkins (1994) criticizes Caputi for ignoring female serial killers (who more often work in health-related professions) and limiting her analysis to feminist perspectives. He views the rise of conservative Protestantism in the 1980s and 1990s as a major factor in the shift from images of serial killers as psychologically damaged human beings to monsters.

While Jenkins (1994:81) also discusses the decline of interest in the psychological background of serial killers, Grixti (1989: 153) sees the rise of depictions of real life monsters as indicative of the uncertainty in which we currently live and its resulting fears. “Feelings of fear …derive from the conviction of loss of control and the sense of helplessness which become dominant in situations when the cognitive system can neither assimilate the environment into its own structure, nor adapt itself to the structure of the environment.” When environmental controls are weak, magical solutions for controlling the monstrous are sought. As each era has its own
fears, certain crime-related genres tend to dominate during these periods. Thus, gangster films emerge in the 1930s, film noir in the 1940s, science fiction in the 1950s, horror films in the 1970s, and serial killer films in the 1990s each dealt with their era’s most troubling tensions (Rubin, 1999: 42).

Along a parallel track, Mark Seltzer (1998) discusses the rise in interest in serial killing as an example of America’s “wound culture”—the “public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound.” As those who pass traffic accidents cannot seem to help but look at the carnage, the exploits of serial killers are depicted in documentaries, docudramas and fictional films, and large audiences avail themselves of these images. Similarly, Richard Tithecott (1997:9) describes the different ways in which we construct the serial killer in our own image. We are both “thrilled and horrified by what we see, that we exist in a kind of horror movie which we write and perform for ourselves daily.”

Unnoted in previous literature except for Simpson’s (2000) is a striking similarity between the mythic characterization of a vampire and the description of a serial killer: both kill out of an overpowering compulsion, and in similarly periodic and patterned ways. It is this interesting convergence between criminological theory and popular cultural representations that forms a significant section of this analysis. In other words, what enables the gothicization of crime and in this particular case, serial killers, is a narrative mode that moves across fact (“verité”) and fiction (horror, melodrama). This movement across the narrative visual modes of the “authentic” documentary and the “fictional” is particularly evident in purported “true stories” of serial killers like Henry Lee Lucas and Ed Gein. In each of these accounts, the attempts to sketch the portraits of “real men” and to “explain” their supernatural compulsions to kill become reduced to gothic tropes. These “real men,” gothicized into “reel archetypes” become either a monstrous cipher (Henry) or an offspring of Psycho’s Norman Bates, the conventional victim-monster (Ed Gein).

THE GOTHIC VAMPIRE

Prior to examining how contemporary cinematic characterizations of serial killers have appropriated gothic vampire conventions, it is important to lay out a concise characterization of the relevant properties of the gothic vampire.

The gothic vampire is an undead entity that is compelled to drink human blood. Yet human blood represents more than just life, which this undead creature needs in order to rise. As Pirie points out, quoting Ernest Jone’s On the Nightmare, “blood is frequently an unconscious equivalent for semen and emphasizes the amount of sexual reference that abounds in even the oldest of vampire lore” (12).

The romantic image of the vampire as both satanic rake and alienated being seems derived from Lord Byron’s own self-portraiture. Indeed, Byron was fascinated by the vampire, and was described by a contemporary, Blessington, as ‘taking the part of a fallen or exiled being . . . existing under a curse, pre-doomed to a fate. . . that he seemed determined to fulfill’ (Pirie: 18). John Polidori, Byron’s physician-drug provider during that fateful summer tryst with the
Shelleys in 1816 that spawned the twin gothic tales of *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre*, is reputed to have stolen the idea from Byron (20). In an attempt to capitalize on his association with Byron, who by then had distanced himself from Polidori, the doctor developed the story and sent it in to the *New Monthly Magazine* under his name, but it was republished under Byron’s name in 1819 (23-24). Nevertheless, it is Polidori-Byron’s version that first establishes the image of the vampire as an aristocratic decadent and seductive, charismatic anti-hero, who feeds upon the blood of young girls. Bram Stoker’s version immortalizes this same image, with its ambivalent tensions. Indeed, because of Stoker’s influence, as filtered through numerous stage adaptations of *Dracula*, and even more Universal series horror movies of the 1930s and 40s and Hammer films of the 60s, “the vampire seems perpetually about to caress and violate the beautiful, reclining body of a mesmerized, and in some fashion, willing, virginal young woman” (Waller, 1986: 21).

Despite *Nosferatu*’s (1922) deviation from Stoker’s novelistic characterization of the vampire as a well-groomed, impeccably mannered demon, to a skeletal, contorted and shuffling monster, *Nosferatu* maintains a central feature of the mythology of the gothic vampire. This feature is simply that the landscape in which he operates must in some way correspond with his character. As Pirie notes: “The vampire may be the active agent of terror, but the passive agent is the landscape he inhabits” (41). To render the vampire an “authentic” or believable figure, one needs gothic settings that render his wild work “natural”—whether they be wooded English hillsides, a lonely stretch of east European moorland, or even the urban jungle setting of New York, among others. These comprise the main relevant characterizations of the cinematic gothic vampire; there are other more nuanced features that we take up later in our discussion of individual films.

**THE EMERGENCE OF THE MODERN VAMPIRIC SERIAL KILLER**

Though Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) is often credited with ushering in the age of the modern horror suspense film, Mike Hodges (2001), in his documentary, *Murder by Numbers*, notes how serial killer movies emerged in the late eighties as a defining genre in mass entertainment. Similarly, though cinematic depictions of the vampire legend long predate the late 1980s where our discussion begins (e.g., most notably Murnau’s *Nosferatu* in 1922, and Browning’s *Dracula* in 1931), the vampire myth, as we will argue, has been given new impetus through its being integrated with the serial killer narrative. As we shall show, the most glamorous instance of this blurring of vampire and serial killer constructions is Anthony Hopkins’ elegant portrayal of Hannibal Lecter—a figure of immense popularity, quite unlike the rat-like *Nosferatu*. It is important to note that the return to an ambivalent interpretation of the vampire-serial killer as an elegant and glamorous character, despite his odiousness, is actually more in keeping with Bram Stoker’s novelistic interpretation of the character. As Pirie (1977: 26) points out:

... With brilliant ingenuity, Stoker disguises his anti-father and anti-Christ in smooth anglophile charm. In one of the very few biographical facts we have, Harry Ludlam quotes Stoker as often laughing to his friends about ‘how he made his vampire monster wait hand and foot on Jonathan Harker... at the castle.’ Even when Dracula is about to pitch Harker out of the front door into a pack of
wolves he speaks ‘with a sweet courtesy which made me rub my eyes it seemed so real.’

Though there have been precedents of the contemporary characterization of the serial killer-vampire figure, such as Lang’s *M* (1931), Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), and Powell’s *Peeping Tom* (1960), in the interests of clarity and compression, the focus of this paper will remain on the period of the late eighties onwards and will concentrate on a collection of both well known and some more obscure American films like *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (produced in 1986 but not widely released until 1990), *Ed Gein: The True Story* (2001), *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Immortality or The Wisdom of Crocodiles* (1998), and *Hannibal* (2001). The first two films purport to have some connection to “true” stories of how these serial killers became transformed into the monstrous figures they became, and are crucial to illustrating the contemporary popularity of cinematic serial killer narratives; furthermore, they also illustrate how a gothic criminology connects reel worlds with the look of the “real” world, while still mythologizing the serial killer as a gothic construction. The last three films exploit the contemporary seductive glamour of the vampire myth to render the serial killer a charismatic and elegant Übermensch, transcending bourgeois distinctions of good and evil. Though there are other serial killer films that debut during this period (such as *Seven* (1995), *Copycat* (1995), *The Summer of Sam* (1999), *The Cell* (2000)), none of these films have either the pseudo-documentary quality that *Henry* and *Ed Gein* are packaged to have (and thus their implicit claim to factuality, alongside their gothic themes), or the overt references to the vampire legend that *Silence of the Lambs*, *Immortality* and *Hannibal* utilize (and thus exploit the mythic power of the vampire narrative, with the contemporary twist that eroticizes him). We aim to show how a “natural” slippage from the realms of the natural/ “cinema verité” to the supernatural/mythic is what enables the gothicization of the serial killer as vampiric.

It is also important to note that all of the main characters in these specifically chosen films are all white males—a rare area in which fact and fiction converge in so far as most serial killers who have been caught fit this raced and sexed demographic, with a very small majority being women, and African Americans constituting 10% (though their numbers appear to be on the rise), and Latino, Asian and Native American groups comprising about 2-3% (Bahn et al, 1995). Naturally, being white and male are neither necessary nor sufficient to becoming a serial killer (trauma, such as physical and/or sexual abuse, alcoholism or addiction, low self-esteem, deep seated hostility and a proneness to depression, reading and viewing of violent pornographic materials; all resulting in a powerful urge to indulge in compulsive and violent fantasies), but it is striking that in both the factual accounts and the popular imaginary, it is the white male who simultaneously occupies the dangerous and endangered positions of being the victimized Monster (the serial killer as abused son) and glamorous and superhuman predator (as vampiric seducer and genius).

In film, one of the rare exceptions to the white perpetrator (which still corresponds with the factual racial demographics of serial killers, with minorities not being typical) is Bernard Rose’s *Candyman* (1992) and its sequels. Candyman is the revenge seeking spirit of a post-Antebellum black artist who made love to a young, white female patron only to suffer revenge at the hands of the girl’s father and an accompanying mob. Candyman had his arm hacked off, honey poured over his body to attract bees to sting him to death, and his body burned on a pyre.
His spirit now resides in the Chicago projects of Cabrini Green and attacks both residents and visitors to the apartment complex. Told as a gothic tale with Chicago depicted as a city beset by plague, Candyman seeks only to have the legacy of his fate remembered and continues to kill lest citizens forget what happened to him (and by implication the memory of all blacks who suffered at the hands of lynch mobs). He ultimately finds a white woman willing to be seduced by him in sacrificial exchange to save the life of a kidnapped black infant he holds hostage; she eventually becomes his bodily reincarnation after she, too, dies from burns, torched by a fearful and angry mob. Though subtle, this film also conflates and ambivalently glamorizes serial killing and vampirism. Candyman, like the vampire, possesses the capacity to hypnotize his prey, such that they appear to desire their victimizations. Candyman’s kiss, which is marked by swarming bees emerging from decomposing flesh, underneath an elegant, fur-lined robe, parallels the bodily horror evoked by the vampire’s physical Otherness clothed by his mythical wealth. The film’s visual treatment of blood, which oozes as a rich, red fluid in copious amounts, is certainly symptomatic of both serial killer and vampiric cinematic narratives.

**FACT AND FICTION IN PROFILING SERIAL KILLERS: HENRY AND ED GEIN, REAL OR REEL?**

Both *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* and *Ed Gein* purport in some way to connect with the “true stories” behind the myth of a particular “monster,” such as Henry Lee Lucas or Ed Gein. In *Henry*’s case, the advertising rhetorical stress on “He’s not Freddy, He’s not Jason, He’s real” shaped expectations of “authenticity” by making the claim that Henry Lee Lucas, the “real-life serial killer,” was the basis of the film. Yet in both films, this implicit claim of laying bare “the truth” regarding how these monsters became what they were is problematic.

The attempt at simulating a “real-life” quality is particularly apparent in three sequences of *Henry*. The first is the opening sequence, which requires a detailed description of specific segmentism. This sequence uses a montage of scenes that seem to give the film a semi-documentary feel, which John McNaughton, the director, prefers to describe as a “cinema verité” style, thus giving it a more “arty” trademark. This opening sequence juxtaposes the two sides of Henry’s life: the violent and the mundane. It begins with an extreme close-up of a dead face; the camera then pulls back in a circular motion to reveal the naked body of a bruised woman with a bloody gash across her abdomen. Her body lies in a grassy field, which, in stark contrast, the background sound codes as idyllic through the use of the sounds of birds twittering and leaves rustling in the breeze. An unsettling musical score, Henry’s leitmotif, overlays the sounds of nature. (This set of shots is interestingly coincident with the style of David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* (1986), which also styles itself as an independent and “arty” film, despite its use of “pulp” material for its subject matter.)

A cut moves into an extreme close up of someone crushing a cigarette, and as the camera moves back gradually, we slowly see the figure of Henry (Michael Rooker), a soft-spoken young man, rise from yet another mundane meal at one of these ubiquitous “greasy spoon” diners. As he pays for his meal, he compliments the young waitress on her smile before he walks out to his car, as the camera looks up at his retreating back from a low angle.
The camera then pans across a liquor store counter to reveal the strewn bodies of a middle-aged couple whose faces are partially obscured by the crimson flow of blood that oozes from bullet holes in their head. The same haunting leitmotif returns as an acoustic flashback occurs: the sounds of a gun firing, a woman screaming, and a man barking: “Shut up!” Sirens wail as the musical leitmotif wanes.

Another abrupt cut to Henry, this time showing his face in a close-up, as he listens to country music while he is driving down the highway.

The camera pans from the bloody sheets on a bed to a blood spattered bathroom, where a woman who is provocatively semi-nude (wearing a garter belt, stockings, and high heels) is sitting on the toilet, her hands bound. Blood runs down her body, and a bottle is planted in the side of her face. The mundane sounds of a phone ringing and the water trickling mingle with the same leitmotif as an acoustic flashback occurs: a woman, aroused, coos “oooh baby”; a man shouts “shut up, bitch . . . die . . . die . . .die” with the sound of glass being broken intruding.

The opening sequence is particularly striking because it immediately breaks a standard feature of slasher/horror films: there is no lack of mutilated bodies on display, but instead of showing how the violence is actually done, it is almost a snapshot of the aftermath of the violence that we view. It is the acoustic flashback that enacts the scenes of violence for us, and yet because it is in the past, this enactment is muffled, and jarringly dissonant with the sometimes peaceful and beautiful, and at other times, everyday surroundings within which these extraordinarily brutal crimes have occurred. What results is a rupture: the film appears to set up the audience expectation that this is going to be a movie about “the real” and that it will eventually explain how and why these murders occurred. But like the faded sound track, inevitably, all the film leaves the audience with is a standard gothic trope: the image of monster as mysterious “lack” or absence: Henry’s portrait as a serial killer remains consistently out of focus.

In the scene that is supposed to provide a clear reason for why Henry kills, Becky (Tracy Arnold), in a dialogue that resembles the later conversations between Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) and Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) in *Silence of the Lambs*, tries to trade her vulnerabilities for intimate confessions from Henry. Becky offers her own confessions as an ill-fated go-go dancer who married a no-good husband who wound up in jail. She married hastily in order to escape from her abusive father, who would visit her bedroom at night, and hit her if she fought back. Using this as emotional capital, she asks why Henry killed his mother. The camera stays steadily in a close up on Henry as he looks at her, though as if unseeingly, with dead eyes and barely concealed anger and disgust. He recounts that his father was a drunk, and that his mother, a whore, would make him wear a dress and watch her go about her business with her customers. Unlike the earlier sequences, there is no acoustic flashback; the camera stays unflinchingly steady and unabashed, relying on no external dramatic gimmicks, once again lending the scene a look of documentary “realism.” The problem is that visual clarity is betrayed by the fuzziness and incoherence of Henry’s “authentic” confession: he contradicts himself, and cannot seem to remember whether he shot, stabbed or bludgeoned his mother to death.
The final scene of note is probably the scene that has generated the most controversy, which McNaughton labeled the “heart” of the movie: the “home invasion” scene. A Rolling Stone reviewer summarized this scene in the following way:

In the film’s most terrifying scene, the one that prompts the walkouts, Henry and Otis attack a suburban family and videotape the deed. “Take her blouse off,” Henry tells Otis, who is grabbing a struggling housewife. “Do it, Otis. You’re a star. Cinematographer Charlie Lieberman . . . turned a camcorder over to Rooker to shoot this scene as Henry would. The footage—grainy, unfocused, crazily angled—makes the carnage joltingly immediate (Travers, 1990).

What the review does not mention is that this three minute scene, shot once again, cinéma-verité style, without editing, in a long shot, produces an intense documentary realism that not only makes the audience believe it is a “real” thing going on in “real” time. That is, we believe we are peering through the camera’s lens at something diegetically occurring at that time. Yet the camera pulls back to show the two killers, Henry and Otis (Tom Towles), sitting on a couch, thoroughly absorbed in watching the violence, reviewing their earlier exploits raptly. The implication is obvious: that we, exactly like the killers, have thus far been visually consuming the film in the same way the killers are, as entertainment that looks “real.” Isabel Cristina Pinedo (1997) details some of the strongest reactions recorded by film critics:

As Hal Hinson reports, “it’s hard to know how to react. . . we feel as if we’ve been drawn into something we didn’t expect; as if unwittingly, we’ve become accomplices in the making of a snuff film” . . . Similarly, Eleanor Ringel declares, “Then, we’ve pretty much let down our guard, the filmmaker smacks us in the face with one of the most shocking sequences I’ve ever seen on film.”

What therefore emerges as a “real” depiction of Henry and Otis’s propensity for violence is revealed as something we, however ambivalently, share. The gaze of the camera is deflected from the “truth” about Henry and Otis, to the truth about us, the viewers. Once again, the “truth” regarding why Henry does what he does remains dim and obscure; despite the look of realism that characterizes his “portrait,” nothing more than a gothic cipher emerges.

In the final sequence, Henry gazes blankly at his image in a mirror at a hotel room; after his morning toilette, he leaves the hotel room that he is supposed to have shared with Becky the night before. But Becky is nowhere to be seen, and we are initially led to believe that he has perhaps abandoned her. The answer unfolds via a return to the narrative technique used at the beginning of the film: via an acoustic flashback. As Henry drives off, leaving behind him Becky’s bulky and bloodstained suitcase, we hear a woman’s screams. Henry’s “portrait” remains a gothic mask; the portrait that promises a close-up of the serial killer’s soul remains a bland surface, mirroring back the audience’s unsatisfied desire for “the truth” regarding how Henry became the soulless monster he became.
Similarly, *Ed Gein* begins (and ends) with bleak documentary footage of the well-known killer’s arrest in his hometown of Plainfield, Wisconsin. Once again, the audience’s expectations are primed to see “the truth” about why and how Ed Gein became the cannibalistic necrophiliac who created a “woman suit,” and whose crimes provided the inspiration for *Psycho*’s Norman Bates, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*’s Leatherface and *Silence of the Lambs*’ and *Hannibal*’s Hannibal Lecter. There is a clear “forensic” look to this film, which bears a certain resemblance to the look of “upmarket TV dramas, especially *Prime Suspect* whose first ever episode . . . dealt with a serial killer of prostitutes” (Atkinson, 2001).

Yet there are clear problems to taking the movie’s claim to “authenticity” simplistically. In order to explain Ed’s (Steve Railsback, who had played Charles Manson in an earlier film, *Helter Skelter*) actions, the movie resorts to creating the monster-behind-the-monster, popularized by Hitchcock’s *Psycho*. Ed’s mother, Augusta (Carrie Snodgress), whose misdirected and excessive religious zealotry, physical abuse, sexual repression, and “bedtime” stories of the more lurid sections of the Book of Revelation from the Bible, emerges as the reason why Ed becomes what he is. There is evidence to support the view that many of Ed’s complexes arose from his tangled relationship with his mother, but the film, in deflecting the responsibility of monstrosity from the abused son to the abusive mother, simply falls back on stock representations of the mother-as-devouring-and-poisonous-figure, yet another standard gothic fixture. In one scene, Ed prays to his mother’s grave, asking that she be returned to him; a raven suddenly hovers in circles in the sky, breaking the stillness with its cries. Later, as Ed sets out to claim his first victim, Mary Hogan (Sally Champlin), a quick close-up of the raven implies that his mother’s “ghost” (whether as a subjective delusion or an objective fact is immaterial in this characteristic blend of horror and psychological thriller) is present and urging him on to commit the crime. (The popular *Crow* films use a similar motif.) Unfortunately, this way of framing the story can be traced to the all-too-familiar Hitchcock rendition of Robert Bloch’s novelistic rendition of Gein’s life, in which it is the “monstrous mother,” a product of pop psychology and Gothic cinematic representations, which constitutes the compulsive urge for why Gein commits the heinous acts that have granted him a certain mythic status.

Repeatedly, the movie makes allusions to Hitchcock’s *Psycho*. When Ed re-enters the general store to murder Collette Marshall (Carol Mansell), the camera is at an extreme high angle, looking down at the dwarfed characters, as if from the point of view of a bird of prey; this is a signature Hitchcock-ian move. The resemblance to Anthony Perkins’ Norman Bates has been noted by film reviewers. For example, Carl Cortez (2001) remarks: “Steve Railsback stars as Gein and plays him as a maniacal little simpleton. In fact, Railsback seems to be resurrecting the ghost of Anthony Perkins (via Norman Bates) in this performance, but missing the humanity Perkins brought to his famous *Psycho* role.” Later, when Ed has been arrested and is committed to an asylum, the Hitchcock-ian flourishes are all over the place: the camera zooms into a close-up, with the shadows of the outline of a window in low key lighting at Ed’s back, often signifying entrapment in the Hitchcock-ian universe. Like Hitchcock’s Norman, Ed’s monologues, shot in close-up or medium close-up, reveal a character steeped in self-delusion and madness, in contrast with his quiet and self-effacing veneer. The ending inserts the same documentary footage of Ed being arrested, but this time, zooms into the interior of the car where Ed sits, a diminutive figure that tries to cover his face with his gloved hands. The juxtaposition of the documentary footage once again is supposed to bolster the authenticity of the look we
have at Ed Gein—but the style of the montage sequences built around the embedded documentary bear such a striking resemblance to Psycho that it is difficult not to collapse Hitchcock’s Norman into Chuck Parello’s Ed. As the closing credits begin, we are shown Ed uttering a prayer as he lights a match as asks that “this evil spirit [be stopped] from invading [his] body;” then he is shown exhuming his mother’s body from a high angle shot in low key lighting; then he is shown in close-up fiercely enunciating his mother’s views concerning whores; then placidly calling the mental institution that houses him a “good place” where people treat him “nice”[ly]—only to grin and say that one drawback to the place is that there are some people who are “really screwed up.” The closing sequence ends with a black background that states matter-of-factly that he died at the asylum and was eventually buried beside his mother and brother. Yet the last image we see is of Ed, tearfully and vehemently proclaiming his mother “a saint”—a portrait not altogether different from Hitchcock’s wild-eyed and tight-lipped Norman, whose thoughts, revealed through a voice-over, are those of his “mother” deciding to be “silent” just in case anyone is watching. Gein’s mother, played by Carrie Snodgress, is a tall and thin woman with a low, husky voice, who repeatedly calls Ed “boy”—once again a derivation from Psycho, rather than from “real life” because Gein’s mother was obese (which explains why the women Ed killed were large—a fact that Silence of the Lambs more accurately details in its graphic depiction of “Buffalo Bill”’s skinned victims).

This brings us to the second feature film that Ed Gein references repeatedly in its gothically styled “true” rendition of Gein’s portrait: Jonathan Demme’s Silence of the Lambs. When Brian Hillman (Frank Worden) descends into the darkness of Ed’s basement to find Colette Marshall’s nude body hanging upside down from the ceiling, gutted like a deer, the scene is shot like Clarice Starling’s (Jodie Foster) penetration of Jame Gumb’s (Ted Levine) basement. In both, the subjective point of view is used, and the camera pans over the details of contents of the underground, bringing to light its obscene contents. Later, as Sheriff Jim Stilwell (Pat Skipper) sits, dumbfounded at the discovery that the quiet man who used to babysit his young boys is someone who finds lurid descriptions of Nazi war crimes entertainment, the scene is shot in a manner again reminiscent of the ending of Silence of the Lambs. A fast-paced montage, transitioning in keeping with the flashing of cameras taking shots (very like the ending of Silence . . ., after Clarice has shot Gumb and the contents of his basement are being documented), reveals the numerous items that abound in Ed’s house of horror: a heart steeped in blood in a skillet on the stove, various body parts floating in a bottled solution, the “woman suit” and the belt of human nipples resting on a mannequin. Finally, the scene in which Ed emerges from his farmhouse, clad in his “woman suit” (from a dried facial mask and wig to labia strapped on to his pelvic area) is eerily reminiscent of the haunting scene in Silence . . . where Gumb cavorts and poses nude in front a camera, as he pulls his penis between his legs to make himself appear female. Yet the impact of both scenes is different: while Gumb’s cavorting scene is terrifying, Gein’s is oddly funny, particularly when he scurries back into his farmhouse, as if terrified that someone would see him, after he has spent the past two minutes beating his drum of human skin and carrying on loudly, like a stereotypic “savage.” If Henry’s portrait is dimly lit and out of focus, Ed’s portrait is too well lit and obscured by prior renditions, resulting in the “real” Ed emerging as a caricature. The result, as one critic notes, is that “the original cannibal now seems like a pale imitation” (Ed Gein, 2001). Nevertheless, both Henry and Ed Gein fall back upon gothic tropes in order to “explain” the unnatural compulsions of these two well-known serial killers.
In the same way one could take issue with *Henry* for removing all traces of a homosexual liaison the real life Otis claimed he and Henry had, one could take issue with *Ed Gein’s* implication that the murders of Mary Hogan and Bernice Worden (Colette Marshall in the film) took place within days or months, rather than three years. Nevertheless, one common “truth” that both portraits draw of these two serial killers is that they were abused sons—and as such, emerge as figures both imperiled and perilous; sympathetic and horrifying; all-too-human and unrecognizably monstrous. A key symptom and expression of this liminal space they occupy as simultaneously dangerous and endangered is that they suffer and are empowered by a compulsion to kill in a patterned, ritualistic way. The easy slippages between fact and fiction, and the ambiguous positioning between the “documentary” look, the “arty” independent film look, and the splatter film look, are precisely what enable the gothicization of these narratives of real serial killers, as enduring reel life myths.

**CONVERGING MYTHS: SERIAL KillERS AND VAMPIRES**

In *Silence of the Lambs* (1990), *Immortality* (1998), and *Hannibal* (2001), the figures of the vampire and the serial killer blur into each other. For example, the face of the monstrous in *Silence*... is initially visualized through Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins), a brilliant but institutionalized psychiatrist known as “Hannibal the Cannibal.” Admittedly, there are technical differentiations between cannibals and vampires, but *Silence of the Lambs* and *Hannibal* conflate these two, such that Hannibal’s vampiric and hypnotic gaze (which is characteristic of vampires, not cannibals) becomes inextricable from his blood-soaked, man-eating teeth (which is ambiguously placed in between cannibalism, an atavistic “real life” horror, and vampirism, a supernatural horror). More pertinent, in terms of the history of film (as opposed to literature), there is certainly precedent for the conflation of cannibalism with vampirism in zombie films like George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), which spawned a host of derivatives, like *Horror Express* (1972), *Children Shouldn’t Play with Dead Things* (1972), *The Living Dead at Manchester Morgue*, also released as *Don’t Open the Window* (1974), *Fear No Evil* (1981), *One Dark Night* (1982), *Zombie* (1979), and *Dawn of the Dead* (1979). According to Gregory Waller, Romero’s presentation of the living dead in *Night of the Living Dead* was derived from Richard Matheson’s novel, *I am Legend*, which strips vampires of their ability to transform themselves in mists or bats, their legendary wealth, and of their need to be invited into a home in order to invade it (275). *Silence of the Lambs* and *Hannibal* continue this conflation of vampirism and cannibalism, but restore to the serial killer-cannibal the vampire’s aristocracy, combined with a supernatural intelligence and the ever-present threat of his barely contained physical power, which “rationally” explain Hannibal’s ability to terrorize and feed on others’ terror.

In *Silence of the Lambs*, Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster), a student at the FBI academy, probes Lecter for clues in an attempt to identify and apprehend a serial killer nicknamed Buffalo Bill (Ted Levine). Lecter, who feeds Clarice tidbits of information in return for details of her personal history, becomes one of the film’s ambivalent figures of monstrosity: intriguing and horrifying at the same time. It is not difficult to catch the allusions to the myth of the vampire in the film’s characterizations of Hannibal.
Dr. Chilton (Anthony Heald), the administrator of the asylum, in tones meant to frighten Clarice (and the audience) describes Lecter as “a monster. A pure psychopath” (Tally, 1989). Chilton, briefing Clarice on her way to visit Lecter for the first time, shows her a snapshot that proves that the madman is capable of extreme physical violence. The audience is spared from sharing Clarice’s look at the photograph. Nevertheless, Chilton’s graphic description of Hannibal’s devouring of one of the woman’s eyes and her tongue, while his blood pressure remained constant as eighty-five, leaves a powerful mental imprint precisely because of the absence of the specific image of the nurse’s mutilation. Indeed, Lecter menaces not simply by assaulting, but by possessing a terrifying ability to insinuate himself into the minds of his patients/victims (and the audience). The other characters in the film recognize this subtle threat. “Believe me,” FBI section chief Jack Crawford (Scott Glenn) warns Starling, “You don’t want Hannibal Lecter inside your head.” Craig McKay, the film’s editor describes Lecter as “leaning back, drinking it all in, vampirically” as he elicits personal information from Clarice (Bliss and Banks, 1996). One of the guards echoes this sentiment when he asks Clarice whether Lecter is “some kind of vampire.” Traditional concepts of monstrosity clearly inform the film’s portrayal of Lecter; nevertheless, he is tellingly characterized in terms of an attractive and fascinating monster—in keeping with contemporary (and original novelistic) characterizations of vampirism as a suave Count Dracula (rather than a clumsy and inarticulate Frankensteinian creature) who achieves penetration not so much by force as by the allure of his Otherness.

Alongside his apparent elegance, the film figures Lecter’s monstrosity in terms of his ability to return the gaze—to echo, even in confinement, the voyeurism of Norman Bates. It is important to note that in *Silence* . . . Ed Gein’s cannibalism was split apart from his gender uncertainties and fetishistic obsession on obese women’s flesh. Cannibalism, conjoined with vampirism’s ability to hypnotize and seduce, became a feature of the powerfully heterosexual, upper-class and brilliant Dr. Lecter; and the desire to become a woman, conjoined with vampirism’s gender uncertainties, became a feature of the gender-disturbed, blue-collar and not-so-brilliant Jame Gumb.

The exchanges between Clarice and Lecter in the psychiatric ward reveal the complex interpenetrations of the vampiric gaze. His first appearance was carefully staged: Clarice finds the doctor, awaiting her approach, standing in the middle of his well-lit, glassed-in cell, staring out at her. Lecter’s monstrous gaze, like Dracula’s, is uncontained by his cell, penetrates, threatens, and controls the scene. The cell was carefully designed to promote this effect. Demme recalls in an interview that “Kristi Zea—the production designer—and I spent a tremendous amount of time trying to deal with the bars on Lecter’s cage,” eventually opting to dispose of the offending obstructions altogether (Smith, 2001). Demme was concerned with showing each character’s face clearly, transmitting an unobstructed gaze between Lecter and Clarice, his protégé and analyzand (*The Silence of the Lambs*, 2001). Later, Lecter’s wardens fit him with a mask, which, although it obscures his face almost entirely, leaves his eyes expressively visible. The specially constructed and eminently recognizable prop reveals the significance of his monstrous and hypnotic gaze.

As reviewers of the film and observers of pop culture have noted, Lecter became a wildly popular figure, enacting on a larger scale the dynamic of Clarice and her strange attraction to the “therapist.” Novelist A. L. Kennedy observes “the nice folks in my cinema just cheered” at the
triumphant ending where Hannibal Lecter announces his intentions for yet another cannibalistic dinner date (Kennedy, 1995). Anthony Hopkins, celebrated for his performance of the character, explains that he wanted to defy the expectations of the audience when it came to the horror of Hannibal Lecter. “The thing is not to act in a frightening way,” he explains, “I meant to play Lecter very friendly and very charming, very silky and seductive (Seidenberg, 1991).” David Sundelson (1993) describes Lecter’s ambivalence with the oxymoronic phrase “flashes of highbrow savagery.” As Hopkins implies, his character’s monstrous power emerges not despite but precisely because of his genteel, cultured dignity.

While his propensity to create gourmet meals from his victims does indeed horrify, he stands in clear contrast to the simply offensive “Multiple” Miggs and the other inmates of his ward. Maintaining a calm, commanding presence in his cell, Lecter never physically threatens Clarice; instead, he plays an almost gallant role. Hopkins himself describes Lecter as the “prime dark angel” of the film’s fairy-tale structure, emphasizing the grotesque attractiveness or elegant savagery of his character. He acknowledges that the story is “all very erotic” (Grobel, 1994). Critics have observed the intimacy and implied attraction of Lecter’s relationship with Clarice, and the film itself does nothing to dispel the notion. For example, upon Clarice’s arrival in Memphis, Lecter remarks, since she had gone to all that trouble to interrogate him again, “people will think we’re in love.” His caress of Clarice’s hand, shot in close-up at the conclusion of this scene, emphasizes that Clarice’s interests on some level involve more than simple questioning. The allure of Lecter’s monstrosity, the film reveals, brings Clarice back time and again.

Driving home the charisma, rather than the repulsiveness, of Lecter’s monstrosity, the editing process cut out the most overt representations of his violence from the final version of the film. Chilton, for example, shows Clarice a photograph documenting Lecter’s assault on a nurse, but the film does not treat the audience to the same view. The most violent scenes (Lecter’s escape from the Shelby County courthouse) emphasize his power and brutality but at the same time deny the graphic details. At the conclusion of the attack, the camera switches from a low-angle shot to a high-angle view of the madman calmly surveying the domesticated cell, a phonograph, his drawings, and (ironically) a copy of Bon Appetit accessorizing the scene (The Silence of the Lambs, 2001). Ted Tally’s (1994) discussion of the editing process reveals that shots of Lecter’s escape elaborating upon the madman’s brutal violence were cut, ostensibly in the interest of pacing. The resulting rendering, however, not only moved the plot along but also produced the image of Lecter as a brilliant, refined, and dangerously sympathetic character.

Similarly, Po Chih Leong’s Immortality centers principally on Steven Grlscz (Jude Law), a strikingly handsome London medical researcher, who seduces women before he kills them and drinks their blood. In the scene that reveals his modus operandi, after he has saved Maria Vaughn (Kerry Fox), from committing suicide by preventing her from throwing herself on the tracks of an oncoming train at a Tube station, he woos her and they become lovers. One night, Grlscz (pronounced “Grolsch”) brings Maria flowers, and they commence a romantic evening together. The cinematic coding of Steven as a vampire grows particularly strong in this scene. He and Maria play a game, in which they sit far apart, and he asks her whether she trusts him, and he commands her to close her eyes. She half-jokingly replies that she does not trust him, but obeys. The camera shoots from overhead, to reveal the top of Grlscz’s head and the shadow it casts; gradually, the shadow of his head lengthens impossibly, and we cut to a close up of Steven
gazing upon Maria’s face, which is in shadow. The shadow disappears and Maria opens her eyes (a point of view the audience shares) to find Steven sitting at the far end of the room. She laughs in astonishment and delight, thinking that it is a magic trick meant to amuse her. Grłscz again commands her to close her eyes, and he repeats the same “trick,” this time kissing her on the forehead and nose and withdraws from kissing her lips when she leans forward with her eyes closed. The third time, Grłscz places a thick silver band on her finger and commands her to open her eyes. To the audience familiar with the cinematic traditions of vampire lore, the signs are all there: the vampire’s irresistible seductive charm; the expressionist shadows cast against a surface in order to signify the approach of the vampire; the use of the vampire’s ring to claim a bride. The vampire’s ring, signifying his authority, his supernatural powers, or heritage, is cinematic, rather than literary in origin, and seen in a multitude of movies such as *House of Frankenstein* (1944), *The Vampire’s Ghost* (1945), *Blood of Dracula* (1957), where the ring is now a medallion, *Horror of Dracula* or *Dracula* (1958), *Taste the Blood of Dracula* (1970), and *Dracula Today* or *Dracula A.D. 1972* (1972).

A sharp cut ensues to reveal a steamy erotic scene in which the lovers kiss each other passionately on the stairs; in the bedroom, Steven holds Maria’s hands behind her back as they fall on the bed. He climbs on top of her, running his hand along her face, as she responds, aroused. The low angle close up at his face, from her point of view, reveals him to be strangely detached. At the height of her passion, he suddenly covers her mouth, twists her face sideways, and bites her neck, as blood spurts on the wall. She struggles but he holds her down, continuing to sink his teeth into her neck. The camera moves further back to show that the blanket has become drenched with blood, and he sits up, his mouth ringed in crimson. The deep brilliance of blood, introduced very early in the film (as blood drips from a car somehow suspended high up among some trees on to Steven’s hand as he looks up), is also a hallmark of vampire films, and is a consistent feature as the plot unfolds. In addition, later shots of Grłscz also show him wearing a long black coat that swirls like a cape around him, reminiscent of the black cape that the archetypal vampire usually wears.

However, there is some difficulty with labeling Steven a vampire. If he is one, he is very different from the standard cinematic depiction. He does not have fangs, he can walk in broad daylight, he can touch crucifixes, and he is a medical researcher who reveals genuine compassion for his patients. Yet there are also clear hints that he is something other than human—perhaps even superhuman. For example, he moves faster than any ordinary human being can, as evidenced in the single fight sequence (reminiscent of Hong Kong martial arts films in which Leong specialized) in which Grłscz effortlessly overcomes an entire gang of thugs in order to save Anne from being raped. In addition, Grłscz almost unconsciously assimilates other peoples’ attributes to become his own; it is as if he is a blank slate upon whom the imprint of those who grow close to him (and thus become marked as potential victims) are burnt in. Thus Maria’s ability to write the opposing lines “I love you” and “I hate you” simultaneously later become transmuted into his ability to compose lines of poetry and to draw a portrait of Anne Levels (Elina Löwensohn), his final prey and love interest. Grłscz also possesses the ability to expel all the negative emotions his victims have felt toward him by coughing up a daggerlike crystal (a theme that has Cronenberg-ian resonances with its emphasis on the physical externalization of emotional tensions, such as in *The Brood*). His “unnaturalness” as a serial killer and gothic creature is visualized in the scene where he squats at a beach, after he has
The camera shoots him from a low angle, as he sits, a dark, brooding figure with his hands clawlike, and his body heaving strangely, like a bird of prey momentarily resting.

The title of the film was originally *The Wisdom of Crocodiles*, which illuminates one main theme of the film. During scenes of lovemaking with Anne, Steven, in a voiceover, tells his new lover that human beings have three brains: a human brain, which overlays a mammalian brain, which in turn overlays a reptile brain. Thus, Steven concludes his bizarre “bedtime story” with the words that every time the psychiatrist asks someone to lay on the couch, one is in effect being asked to lie down with a horse and a crocodile.

As the movie continues, we find out that Steven is more “crocodile” than human; though malice is not one of his flaws, like a vampire or a serial killer; he is compelled to kill, and to kill ritualistically in a patterned way. When he is ready to kill his victim, he lines his bed with a disposable silver sheet, which catches most of the blood, and becomes his victim’s shroud. Every month, he must feed upon a woman’s blood, not for her blood itself, as popular vampire lore would have it, but in order to consume the love that resides in her blood so that he may continue to live. When he genuinely falls in love with Anne, and fights the compulsion to kill her off, his body fails to heal, and in a haunting sequence that mimes the progression of AIDS, his body begins to degenerate.

Yet like the serial killers immortalized through film in both “cinema verité” and popular horror genres (of which psychological thrillers constitute a subgenre), Grlscz emerges as a figure both sympathetic and terrifying. It is clear that he detests his condition, and is in search of that mythic woman who could love him “perfectly” and thus cure him of his affliction. Steven seems more like a victim driven to kill by his own nature, rather than a sadistic predator who enjoys his victims’ suffering. In addition, Grlscz’s friendship with Inspector Healey (Timothy Spall) may have been initially motivated by selfish motives (i.e., he saves the inspector, who was tailing him, from a gang of thugs perhaps in order to throw suspicion off himself as a murderer), but the friendship between the two men later deepens and is cemented by mutual confessions. Grlscz also assimilates one characteristic feature of the inspector: the habit of crushing the very end of a burning cigarette with his fingertips. This acquisition of bodily “signatures” is a sign of intimacy usually reserved for one of his female victims. In the final moments of the film, which are slightly reminiscent of one of the concluding sequences of *Bladerunner* in which Rick Deckart (Harrison Ford) hangs from a ledge as Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer), Anne hangs perilously from the side of a building as Steven hangs on to her. She has chosen to jump rather than to become his victim, and it appears that he is determined to claim his prize. After struggling in vain with him, she uses the ornamental chopstick she had used to prop up her hair (an Oriental family heirloom that signified that the owner of the chopsticks would always be safe and well fed) to stab Grlscz’s hand repeatedly. He somehow manages to swap hands, and like Roy Batty (with his own hand impaled by a nail), who unexpectedly saves the bladerunner who had come to kill him, Grlscz pulls Anne to safety and allows her to escape as he bleeds to death. The final sequence of the film shoots from high above, once again in a Hitchcock-like style, to reveal Grlscz, clad from head to toe in black, his bleeding hand punctured, as if by stigmata, and his body twitching in the final throes of fear and pain. Grlscz thus emerges as a stylish, charismatic,
and even sacrificial vampire-serial killer figure, with whom the audience identifies, despite his monstrosity.

Finally, Ridley Scott’s *Hannibal* takes this process of identifying with a glamorously compelling and deadly vampiric character or “dark angel” even further. Whereas *Silence* . . . was peripherally about the relationship between Lecter and Starling, and particularly in Thomas Harris’ original novel, more about Starling’s determination to make it in an alpha-dominated male profession, the hinge upon which *Hannibal* turns is the cult worship of the seductive and malevolent doctor. As Todd R. Ramlow (2001) observes: “As the character’s immense popularity suggests, there is something about Lecter that appeals to ‘us,’ there appears to be some level on which ‘we’ all wish we could be a little more like him, which is precisely what the filmmakers are banking on.” Charles Taylor (2001) puts his finger on the pulse of this hybrid of slick and arty cinematography with necro-thriller content when he declares: “Scott’s ‘Hannibal’ is the apotheosis of serial-killer chic, the prestige movie version of a Manson T-shirt. No longer a villain, Lecter is now the hero, the superior being given the power of judgment over all the other characters—the serial killer as arbiter of taste.” One way in which this identification between monster and audience is forged in *Hannibal* is by creating an even more odious monster in Mason Verger (Gary Oldman), a former victim whom Hannibal had “hypnotized” to rip off his own face, as Hannibal fed the pieces to the dogs. Another way is to focus on the degree of corruption within the FBI, embodied particularly in the Justice Department ladder climber, Paul Krendler (Ray Liotta), who accepts payments from Verger in order to disgrace Starling, and thus transform the distressed agent into unwitting bait to lure out Hannibal. As Ridley Scott (2001) remarks in the director’s commentary on the film, Hannibal, like Clarice, is “pure in his own way”—he seems to have a sense of honor and ethical responsibility to those who do not violate his sense of civility, such as Clarice and Nurse Barney Matthews (Frankie Faison). In fact Hannibal in this sequel, unlike *Silence of the Lambs*, seems compelled to kill only if his sense of “good manners and taste” are assaulted. Thus, a narrative device that *Hannibal* uses, in order to put the audience squarely on his side has been used in a prior film: Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange*. In both films, what appears to be an omniscient or objective point of view is revealed to be the killer’s point of view such that his murderous acts seems justified. In *Hannibal*, all of the doctor’s victims are varieties of what he calls “free range rude,” including the avaricious, the lustful, and the pedophilic. Thus, it only seems poetic justice (tinged with very dark, sardonic humor) when he murders them, in a Dante-esque fashion, such that their deaths mirror their crimes. (*Seven* uses a similar approach, as each of the victims representing the seven deadly sins is murdered by getting their “just desserts.”) For example, Inspector Francesco Pazzi (Giancarlo Giannini) is hanged and gutted, like his famous ancestor, for similar crimes of greed and treachery (to Hannibal). Mason Verger is condemned to being eaten by the man-eating hogs he had bred to make Hannibal suffer; the death he had dreamt of inflicting on Hannibal becomes his own. Paul Krendler is forced to eat delicately spiced and sautéed pieces of his own brain in front of the horrified and drugged Clarice, in atonement for his “rudeness” to Clarice. In all of these instances, it is Hannibal’s point of view that justifies why these punishments are fitting and just. And in all of these instances, it is Hannibal’s equanimity that renders the gore “entertaining” because we are drawn into sharing his point of view, without realizing it, in contrast with Henry’s “home invasion” scene mentioned earlier.
The allusions to the vampire myth continue in *Hannibal*. Director Ridley Scott (2001) describes Hannibal’s videotaped appearance during his murder of Pazzi (seen from the point of view of Clarice, who is viewing the footage) as reminiscent of *Nosferatu*, one of the most famous German expressionist depictions of the vampire legend. As Hannibal walks through the streets of Florence, with his Borsali hat tipped at a rakish angle, his coat billows around him like Dracula’s cape. Like the vampire, Hannibal seems to glide effortlessly through doors, and moves into and out of places with a speed and silence impossible to humans. Like the count, Hannibal flirts suavely and successfully with women, such as the inspector’s wife, Allegra Pazzi (Francesca Neri), and seems to be able to hypnotize his prey into inflicting pain upon themselves, like Mason Verger. Like the vampire, Hannibal possesses an uncanny command over animals; the man-eating hogs avoid him, and Krendler’s guard dog is clearly intimidated by him. Like a vampire that “sleeps” until he is awakened, Hannibal is in “hibernation” and comes out of a “ten year retirement” only when he hears of Starling’s disgrace. (One movie review (Elliott, 2001) puns: “He’s back . . . in all his gory”—drawing parallelisms between this contemporary vampire, and an earlier equally fashionable Frankensteinian monster: the Terminator.) Artie Megibben (2001) once again renders explicit the Gothic appeal of *Hannibal*:

> Ever since the night Renfield met Dracula, moviegoers have had an appetite for blood-sucking villains with class. And not since Bela Lugosi has a villain had more class and style than Anthony Hopkins’ Hannibal Lecter. He quotes the classics. He’s a patron of the arts. And his fangs are as acquainted with Bulugar caviar as with the soft, supple flesh of his victims. Hopkin’s Lecter does not so much snarl as purr—whispering seductive innuendoes set to opera music—an approach matched only by Eden’s subtle serpent.

Thus, though both the serial killer and vampire movies we have surveyed end up with a similar conclusion regarding the nature of voyeurism in relation to the visual (i.e., that part of the visual pleasures of these films is that we share the killers’ points of views at various points), it is interesting that our reactions to this realization is very different in *Henry*, as opposed to *Hannibal*. Perhaps it is because *Henry* seems too “real” with its rootedness in the blue collar world and the gritty streets of Chicago, and its use of cinema verité, in contrast with *Hannibal*, which is an unabashed glorification of the serial killer as genius, vampire and dark angel rolled into one, with its polished cinematography, Florentine locale, lush mise en scene, and beautiful musical score. It is clear that the issue of class clearly creates a different type of identification in these two genres. Nevertheless, there is a clear sense in which the cinematic representations of serial killers and vampires, as “mythic” and “real” figures, blur into each other as simultaneously dangerous and endangered creatures who are driven to kill by compulsions as strong as the reflex to breathe. And it is the “authenticity” of easy slippage across the cinematic modes of “documentary” and “fiction” that enables the gothicization of serial killers as vampiric.

**DISCUSSION: THE COMPULSIONS OF “REAL” SERIAL KILLERS**

Though it may now be impossible to separate real serial killers from their reel life counterparts, as the two have been conflated over the last twenty years in the popular imaginary (Jenkins, 1994), a summary of the prevailing behavioral science perspective as generated by the
law enforcement community (and criminologists sympathetic to the law enforcement perspective) is in order to serve as a point of comparison with fictional, cinematic imagery. This perspective has come to the forefront within criminology, as traditional psychological and sociological explanations cannot adequately explain the nature of sadistic serial murder.

Robert Ressler (n.d., Court TV), considered by some as the original "Profiler," coined the phrase "serial killer,” based on twenty years of tracking down killers for the FBI. Because he grew up in Chicago, Ressler first became fascinated with the criminal mind during the "Lipstick Murders" in 1946. He eventually studied psychology as a way to understand what motivates this type of criminal behavior and the “demon” that pushes a killer over the edge, as well as to establish a pattern that could have some predictive power in determining the killer’s next violent act. While he worked with the FBI, Ressler perfected the art of the interview. There he worked closely with other agents, including Pierce Brooks, a former LAPD detective who helped found the FBI’s Violent Criminal Apprehension Program in 1985 (Ressler and Shachtman, 1982). Through numerous visits to prisons and scores of conversations with convicted killers, he was able to explore whether a killer is driven by an "irresistible compulsion or a compulsion that cannot be resisted." This “compulsion model” is important to delineate because it outlines how the imaging of the serial killer-vampire figure intersects with a theoretical model of what motivates serial killer behavior.

A serial killer, according to Ressler, is someone whose violent crimes must have claimed more than three victims, at different times, places and events. This type of crime involves some premeditation or planning that is spurred by an overriding fantasy, formed early, which “drives” this type of killer to commit repetitive crimes. Dr. Helen Morrison, a Forensic Psychologist at the Evaluation Center at Chicago, adds the following characterization: that a serial killer, by the time he is an adolescent, is totally focused on sexual fantasies in an “experimental” sense. She cites a higher body count than Ressler; no less than ten homicides of a brutal, violent and ritualistic nature (i.e., a “cookie cutter” format) are required in order to establish that the killer is indeed a “serial” killer (Bahn et al, 1995).

Robert Hazelwood, a former supervisory Special Agent of the FBI, forms a clear taxonomy that distinguishes between a “serial” killer, a “spree” killer and a “mass” killer. A “serial” killer, like Gacy, commits murders with a certain “periodicity;” a “spree” killer, like Starkweather, may commit several murders separated by time and place, but all these murders are connected to one incident; a “mass” murderer, like Manson or Smith and Hickock (In Cold Blood), kills four or more people at one location at one time. Hazelwood also makes the provocative suggestion that serial killers have existed as long as humans have existed, and that myths concerning “werewolves” probably emerged because of the degree of mutilation wreaked on their victims by serial killers (Bahn et. al., 1995). Lycanthropy remains an important Hollywood theme, as modern American tourists find themselves turned into werewolves in the primordial English countryside (An American Werewolf in London (1981)) or the primitive subterranean worlds of Paris (An American Werewolf in Paris (1997)).

What is common to all of these characterizations of serial killing is the powerful effect of violent fantasies, which serve as a compulsive force that impels these individuals to kill in a periodic or cyclical and ritualistic way. Much of what is meant when we talk about "cycles" of
sexual fantasy is based on the vaguer notion of "biological or natural clocks". This is what enables the more or less accurate prediction of when the perpetrator needs to strike again. Although a basic understanding of sexual urges and needs is called for, we are concerned here with abnormal sexual urges and needs, particularly those that call for repeated or serial behaviors. In this sense, therefore, we can make comparisons to other addiction processes, such as the Victimization cycle and the Cycle of Violence associated with Domestic Violence, as in the following diagrams (Nashville Metro PD):

With the addiction cycle, there's a distinctive "shame - pain" sequence, although with minor forms of dysfunction, the shame part may only be low self-esteem. The part that determines the addiction is when the person comes to associate continued use of the addictive agent with relief from pain (Lindesmith’s theory of addiction). And the pain can be anything, even something as mild as the stress or hassles of living. There are a number of addictive agents. Here's a partial list: alcohol, drugs, work, money, control, power, food, sex, pornography, approval, relationships, physical illness (hypochondria), exercise, cosmetics, academics, intellectualism, religiosity, perfectionism, cleaning, organizing, materialism, and collecting things.

With the battering cycle, there's a relatively short battering incident in which the person is out of control, followed by a period of apology, gift giving, and a "honeymoon" phase in which the batterer is trying to be contrite with "hearts and flowers." Then, the batterer starts fault finding and becoming verbally abusive. Jealousy develops, and the domestic partner can usually sense the tension building. This leads to a state of fear, helplessness, and inability to control the environment, which usually serves as ample ground for a precipitating or provocation incident (provocation if the partner "provokes" a scene to get it over with), which leads again to a battering incident.

Using the addiction and battering cycles as models, the serial killer fantasy re-enactment cycle may thus be diagrammatically represented:
Fantasy occurs well in advance of the crime, and for the serial killer, fantasy evolves into a compulsion. The subsequent behavior keeps true to the flavor of the original fantasy. For some, a symbol, such as a buck knife, represents the original fantasy, or more accurately, a link to the unrealized fantasy waiting in the mind for an opportunity. The crime itself is also the fantasy played out by the offender. The script is cast and well rehearsed in the mind. The victim is only inserted into a role that the offender needs for the fantasy to come true. Sometimes the victim will be called by a name that is of special importance to the offender. The fantasy becomes the motive and establishes the offender’s signature.

Control refers to the way in which the offender keeps the world he creates with the victim true to his fantasy. Domination is the primary characteristic that is enhanced by sadistic sex, torture, mutilation, and murder. Some offenders feel they do not have control until the victim is dead, so they kill immediately, and then turn to freely mastering the corpse. Others will take their time, engaging in repeated torture, escalation, and de-escalation of torment with the victim. As one serial killer interviewed by Tomes (2002:33) stated: “As you strangle someone their eyes go through several stages. First fear and anger, second, total panic, third, complete surrender, and lastly the 1000 yard stare of the dead. Also, if you are still raping a woman as she dies-when her body goes into final death spasms, her pussy grabs and pulls on your dick as if it is milking it.”

Control is also expressed in the staging and ritual displays at the crime scene as well as in the location choice of the assault. Jack Katz (1990), in his discussion of monstrous, premeditated murder emphasizes the importance of time and place to the perpetrator’s attempt to control every aspect of the event. Similarly, Kenneth Burke (1965) recognized the importance of “scene” as motivation for human behavior. For example, standing at night on the edge of a precipice overlooking the sea might itself impel the onlooker to jump and commit suicide. Likewise, Katz’s killers wait for the dead of night and imprison their victims in basements or other confined spaces prior to carrying out their murderous acts. The discussion of deeply rural areas, abandoned farmhouses, and dark cellars, as places that serve as clichéd or “natural” backdrops for such murders or where bodies are dropped or buried resonates with the Gothic imagery that fills such descriptions (Simpson, 2000: 33).
Katz goes on to note the godlike persona of the killer. The gothic killer takes life away as a vindictive god does, without warning or remorse. Like a primordial god, the killer, in his total control of the victim, is an object of dread. In this sense the contemporary serial killer has replaced the mythical monsters of previous ages. According to Philip Jenkins (1994: 16): “... popular stereotypes of these threatening outsiders have come to assimilate most of the characteristics that in earlier societies were attributed to a variety of chiefly imaginary external enemies, including vampires, werewolves, and cannibals. All represent the threat of a reversion to primitive savagery, manifested most blatantly in acts of cannibalism and mutilation.”

Unlike Lombroso’s (1911) atavistic evolutionary throwbacks, the modern serial killer lives among us unrecognizable by outside physical features that might give away his primitivism. Monsters, as contemporary factual and fictional accounts tell us, are not “out there,” completely discernible through an obvious physical aberration, but reside within ourselves and the enclave of the “normal.”

Disassociation refers to how the offender successfully blends back into society, the thick superficial veneer of personality that is entirely disassociated from their violent criminal behavior. Serial killers carry their abilities at self-protective behavior to an extreme, although not to the point of multiple personality. They are intelligent to avoid detection, but they often "overtry" to avoid leakage to their true nature. Many are married or in a relationship, but they are disassociated. For example, New Jersey’s “Ice Man” Richard Kuklinski left his wife and two daughters’ home only to kill; otherwise he was the perfect house husband. The depth of the fantasy determines the depth or degree to which they disassociate. The offender knows fully well what behaviors are not acceptable to society, and to disassociate, they seek out "respectable" jobs, mates, and social activities that offer the best "front." In captivity, they often make model inmates. As a case study illustrating this point regarding serial killers, speaking of Jeffrey Dahmer, Tithecott (1997: 18) said remarked: “Dahmer is ‘the average-looking man,’ a ‘former tennis player, the son of middle-class parents,’ who has the appearance of being ‘a nice guy.’ But Dahmer, the boy next door, is also he who emitted ‘wolflike howling’ and ‘demonic screams’ when he was arrested, and when we read that ‘many witnesses quoted in the press have attested to his extraordinary Jekyll-and-Hyde transformations when drinking,’ we have little trouble in constructing Dahmer as the latest descendant of Stevenson's character(s). When we tell stories about our monsters, we like to imply that their monstrosity is everywhere, only hidden from view, concealed within.”

Reenactment is a behavioral aspect involving attempts to relive the fantasy. Reenactments are almost always sexual in nature, involving acts of masturbation, uses of pornography, or playing with souvenirs, trophies, or props. These things stimulate the offender, but they also reinforce the escalatory aspect of a serial killer’s fantasy because the only thing they can control at this point is themselves. It is at this point also where the planning for future crimes occurs.

There's an additional way to think about the stages in this cycle, and that is to think of them as phases (Norris, 1989: 23-35). During Phase 1 (aura phase) twisted thoughts occur as the killer fantasizes about his next victim. Next, Phase 2 (trolling) begins as the killer goes out to
look for the perfect victim. During Phase 3 (seduction) the trap is laid, often using “lures.” Phase 4 (capture) occurs when the victim is at her/his most vulnerable moment, as there is no escape from her/his captor. This is followed by Phase 5 (the kill) in which the perpetrator’s suppressed emotions are let loose. During Phase 6 (totem or trophy) the killer collects souvenirs or leaves props at the scene as reminders. Phase 7 (depression) follows the crime. This appears to be a withdrawal period, as the euphoria from the kill disappears, leading to a restarting of the cycle.

Whether the methodology employed in profiling is ultimately successful in catching such criminals is hotly debated. As former FBI agent William Tafoya pointed out regarding cases such as the Unabomber, real profiling, despite its claims to success, has had a very spotty record (Witkin, 1997). Other critics of profiling include Philip Jenkins (1994: 70-72) and Philip Simpson (2000). Pat Brown (n.d.), herself a sexual homicide investigator, goes even further in criticizing the limited utility of profiling:

To date, the general procedure has been to send in crime scene and autopsy information and limited details concerning the crime and the victim to a profiler who then sends back a report. The process pretty much stops at this point. The investigators add it to their pile of data using whatever they feel has some merit . . . The fact that there is no literature proving profiling to be of any measurable benefit to the investigative process is disturbing.

Are profilers therefore truly any better prepared to prevent future killings or to capture killers on the loose than the quasi-superstitious, quasi-scientific Dr. van Helsings of the vampire tales were equipped to stop Draculas? Only time will tell.

CONCLUSION: GOTHIC CRIMINOLOGY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

If this were a traditional criminological analysis, we would in all likelihood at this point analytically compare what is “known” about real serial killers to the media and filmic stereotypes in which they have been socially encrusted. Some of that work has been done admirably, such as that by Douglas and Olshaker (1998), who differentiate between the “facts” of the “real” Ed Gein versus his mythicized split screen personae, like Hannibal Lecter (the cannibal) and Jame Gumb (who skins his victims to create a “woman suit”). Like Rafter (2000), we believe such a turn has limited utility when discussing the complex world of film as embedded in the everyday—or at least yokes the discussion of film to very limited parameters. While such an approach might be useful for the serious academic or real life profiler, the fact remains that for ninety-nine percent of the population, the discussion of serial killing is a porous mixture of fact and fiction, scholarly and journalistic accounts, and profiler and academic studies. The persistence of an approach rooted in discussions of evil, over a more scientific, “bias-free” clinical analysis parallels the distinction between fictional film with its reliance upon agreed-upon societal myths and stereotypes, and documentary with its matter-of-fact approach to reality. Both may be needed to offer a more complicated and nuanced picture of this phenomenon, particularly as this paper has shown that the line between fact and fiction is not static or fixed—which does not mean there is no such thing as "fact," but that "facts" are always complexly imbricated with "fiction," just as "fiction," in order to appear authentic and narratively compelling, must possess verisimilitude. The existence of evil within the world is communicated through gothic constructions, through
the rhetorical and visual positioning of, among other examples, serial killers, genocidal dictators, or the corporate disregard for human life brought on by “vampiric capitalism” (Lyman, 1992).

Thus, serial killer mythology, as one instance of gothic criminology, is a societal construction; a genealogy of its origins shows that it is difficult to sift fact from fiction in a clear, unproblematic way. As Hodges (2001) points out, the FBI profiling unit read both crime fiction and true crime accounts, before turning to the interviewing of actual killers. In addition, discussion of whether film depictions of serial killers differs from the profiler accounts is impossible to sort out, as just as profilers rely upon crime fiction, crime fiction writers such as Thomas Harris spend considerable time interviewing profilers and reviewing their case files (Snyder, 2002). While the Harris characters are composites and their behaviors embellished, the verisimilitude to real life killers remains.

Similarly, FBI BSU members Ressler, Burgess, and Douglas admit the connections with fictional detective novels and their fascination with details (Simpson, 2000:79). Crime scene analysis, whether forensic or psychological, looks for clues in the smallest of items found at the crime scene. Just as the naturalized serial killer descriptions have their origins in the supernaturalized Gothic mode, the contemporary mind hunters (the profiler/detectives) do as well. As Simpson (2000: 80) points out, the profiler “magically” discerns the killer’s identity by constructing a text from crime scene clues: “The act of reading carried out by profiling represents a pseudoscientific attempt at mastery or control of the unknown author’s ‘literary’ project. In fact, profiling is an attempt to appropriate the text’s language in order to identify the author…The profiler enters into an oddly personal power struggle with a completely imaginary enemy as manifested in the physical traces left behind by a real but anonymous individual. …The sympathetic bond between detective and criminal illustrates the literature of serial murder’s easy merging of the Gothic romance with doubling.” Doubling, derived from the gothic notion of the Doppelgänger, is a literary device in which two characters are used to display different sides of one personality. A “good” character, in order to track down and capture an “evil” character successfully, has to enter into the mindset of his predator-prey, and in effect become like him. When asked about the toughest aspect of being a profiler, John Douglas (2000) responded that he is often quite ill, as he must reenact the crimes in his own mind over and over again in order to solve them.

Further exploration of the gothic nature of serial killer films and their depictions of murderers and those who try to catch them is certainly apropos, in order to explore the complex, twilit realm between fact and fiction called the “gothic,” which we all inhabit. Gothic criminology represents a return to the primordial origins of deviant behavior, and as such allows for the reintroduction of the notion of evil into criminological discourse. Often without acknowledgement criminology has borrowed from gothic accounts, but secularized them in the quest to scientize the discipline. For example, Edwin Sutherland’s (1949) classic White Collar Crime is largely a restatement of E.A. Ross’ earlier Sin and Society (1907). Other works of the first generation American sociologists, who were strongly tied to the Social Gospel movement, appear in secularized versions of texts on social problems (Greek, 1992). As serial murder may be unexplainable in reference to traditional theories of deviant behavior, contemporary criminological theory regarding the social construction of monstrous crimes may be
supplemented fruitfully by discussion that is more inclusive of approaches drawn from literature, philosophy, and film.

ENDNOTES

* Direct correspondence to Caroline Joan Picart, Florida State University, English Department, 405 Williams Building, Tallahassee, FL (E-mail: kpicart@english.fsu.edu).

REFERENCES


http://www.courttv.com/onair/shows/mugshots/episodes/ressler.html


http://www.eonline.com/Reviews/Facts/Movies/Reviews/0,1052,82655,00.html

http://www.christiancritic.com/movies/hannibal.htm


Nashville Metro PD. (no date). Domestic Violence Warning Signs. 
http://www.police.nashville.org/bureaus/investigative/domestic/symptoms.htm


Ramlow, Todd R. (2001). “Hannibal Lecter, C’est Moi,” PopMatters Film, 
http://www.popmatters.com/film/reviews/h/hannibal.html


http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/review/2001/02/09/hannibal


http://www.rollingstone.com/mv_reviews/review.asp?mid=73047&afl=imdb

http://www.corpusdelicti.com/impress.html


THE MOUSE WHO WOULD RULE THE WORLD!
HOW AMERICAN CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFLECTS THE THEMES OF DISNEYIZATION

by

Matthew B. Robinson
Appalachian State University

ABSTRACT

This paper specifies the relationships between the trend of Disneyization and the increasingly efficient, scientific, costly, and control-oriented systems of American criminal justice. Disneyization is the process by which the principles of the Disney theme parks are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world. It is related to the concurrent phenomenon of McDonaldization, which has been more widely written about and even applied to criminal justice. This paper discusses the trend of Disneyization and then illustrates how the main elements of Disneyization (theming, dedifferentiation of consumption, merchandising, and emotional labor) typify American criminal justice activity. Much of the paper is concerned with media coverage of crime and criminal justice, given the intimate relationship between it and criminal justice system processes.

INTRODUCTION

Social scientists often predict future societal trends and document past and current trends, including criminogenic trends. From these analyses, factors such as poverty, unemployment and underemployment, income inequality and transfer of wealth, real wage declines, and corporate downsizing are noted as important for understanding criminality (Feagin, 2001). Rarely do criminologists and criminal justice scholars focus on the effects of larger trends that are encouraged by America’s capitalistic culture. Two examples are the related trends of McDonaldization and Disneyization, both of which are part of America’s growing dominance over the rest of the world, what scholars call “globalization” or the “global culture of consumption” (Waters, 2002).

America’s growing dominance over the rest of the world (or at least the parts we want most control over) is being led by large corporations such as McDonalds and Disney, each of which is backed by the full support of the U.S. government. Evidence of this is the spread of
McDonald's restaurants all over the globe and the emergence of Disney theme parks in several countries, as well as mainstream media outlets owned by Disney (i.e., ABC, ESPN). The potential result is that no matter where one travels, he or she will still be there, because everywhere will be the same. Waters (2002: 215) suggests the possibility of “a homogenized common culture of consumption.” This means that as all societal institutions become McDonaldized and Disneyized, it will increasingly difficult to differentiate one place from another and fewer unique places will exist.

Using numerous computerized search engines and databases, I found only one previous piece of scholarship dealing with McDonaldization and criminal justice, and not one concerning Disneyization and criminal justice. In his article, “Three Strikes as a Public Policy: The Convergence of the New Penology and the McDonaldization of Punishment,” Shichor (1997) demonstrates how the metaphors of getting “tough on crime” and fighting a “war on drugs” have led to penal policies based exclusively on deterrence and incapacitation, as well as longer prison sentences, a rapid growth in the prison population, and prison overcrowding. Shichor compares the use of the three-strikes law in California to McDonaldization, “the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world” (Ritzer, 2000: 1, emphasis in original). Three-strikes laws, now in place in over half of the states in America, were meant to increase efficiency of the criminal justice process, were to be based on scientific prediction of dangerousness, and were to protect citizens through a cost-efficient mechanism (Zimring, Hawkins, and Kamin, 2001).

Shichor illustrates how the opposite of what was expected with three-strikes laws has occurred, at least in California. Huge amounts of money are being spent in the application of the state’s three-strikes law on relatively minor offenders, courts are backlogged with additional trials, and correctional facilities are overpopulated. More recent research on this law shows how it is being used disproportionately against relatively minor offenders and against racial minorities (Zimring et al., 2001). Similar to the fast food industry, “rationalized” methods of delivering products have produced irrational results (Schlosser, 2001); we end up getting the opposite of what we are promised. This is the core argument underlying McDonaldization as a social process. Criminal justice policies may be thought of as irrational when their benefits in terms of reducing crime are outweighed by the harms they cause. By most accounts, three-strikes laws meet this definition of irrational (Robinson, 2002a).

Another essay was recently published that assesses the degree to which all aspects of America’s criminal justice systems have become McDonaldized (Robinson, 2002b). This essay builds upon that paper by analyzing relationships between criminal justice practice in the United States and the trend of Disneyization. Throughout, I illustrate how Disneyization of American criminal justice can bee seen in irrational criminal justice policies. As noted earlier, irrational criminal justice policies are ones that have questionable efficacy in reducing crime and/or that do more harm than good, such as interfering with the delivery of social justice (Robinson, 2002a). To date, there has not been a single piece of scholarship published with addresses how this trend affects the practice of criminal justice in the United States.
WHAT IS DISNEYIZATION?
AND HOW DOES IT RELATE TO MCDONALDIZATION

Disneyization is a term coined by Bryman (1999a: 26), which refers to “the process by which the principles of the Disney theme parks are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world.” This term was posited in Bryman’s article, “The Disneyization of Society.” Bryman relates this process to McDonaldization and says it really parallels it quite nicely. McDonaldization is made up of four elements, including efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control through nonhuman technology. These are understood as follows:

• **Efficiency** refers to “the optimum method for getting from one point to another” or for achieving some goal (Ritzer, 2000: 12). In the fast food industry, efficiency is imperative, as the term “fast” implies;

• **Calculability** is “an emphasis on the quantitative aspects of products sold ... and services offered ... In McDonaldized systems, quantity has become equivalent to quality; a lot of something, or the quick delivery of it, means it must be good” (Ritzer, 2000: 12). In the fast food industry, more for your money is better than less for your money;

• **Predictability** refers to “the assurance that products and services will be the same over time and in all locales (Ritzer, 2000: 13). In the fast food industry, the goal is to make one’s entire dining experience completely consistent with all previous visits; no matter where you go, the product will be exactly the same;

• **Control**, the final element of McDonaldization, means that as many aspects of production and consumption are governed by strict rules and an emphasis on a single way of doing things. In the fast food industry, control is often achieved through the use of nonhuman technology (Ritzer, 2000: 236).

Any system or institution that stresses efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control could be described as McDonaldized. Ritzer’s main claim is that the incredible success of the fast food industry has promoted copy cats in numerous other systems and institutions, including hotel chains, shopping malls, oil change and auto repair businesses, and so on. My recent paper (Robinson, 2002a) illustrates how the ideal goals of America’s systems of police, courts, and corrections have become subjugated by the real demands placed on them by our McDonaldized fast food nation. In this paper, I show how police, courts, and corrections have increasingly begun to operate in accordance with the goals of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control, sometimes even at the cost of interfering with justice and not effectively reducing crime.

The existence of Disneyization implies that the famous entertainment giant, with its enduring symbol of the Mouse (i.e., Mickey), has gained so much power and influence over our culture that it is worthy of separate attention. Like McDonaldization, there are four main elements of Disneyization, including theming, dedifferentiation of consumption, merchandising, and emotional labor. These terms can be understood as follows:

• **Theming** is the packaging of images to attract people and sell products. Although Disney did not invent theming, it certainly popularized its use. Disney, after all, does operate the nation’s most popular theme parks;

• **Dedifferentiation of consumption** denotes “the general trend whereby the forms of consumption associated with different institutional spheres become interlocked with each
other and increasingly difficult to distinguish” (Bryman, 1999a: 33). In the theme park industry, this term refers to the inability of park visitors to realize that the corporate goal is to inspire visitors to spend as much money as possible in its shops and restaurants;

- **Merchandising** is “the promotion of goods in the form of or bearing copyright images and logos” (Bryman, 1999a: 36). Disney, of course, has licensed and sold its images on just about everything. It now operates its own stores outside of its parks, located in many malls. Schlosser (2001: 40) calls Disney’s marketing strategies “synergy,” which refers to the corporation’s efforts to sell its products by using other institutions such as the fast food industry;

- **Emotional labor**, the final element of Disneyization, is the use of coercion to force employees to behave in a given way. In the case of Disney, there is a mandated image and set of behaviors for employees, one of cleanliness, friendliness, and helpfulness.

Like McDonaldization, Disneyization also relies on control. For example, millions of people visit Disney World and have a good time without concern for criminal victimization. Little street crime occurs at Disney’s theme parks, other than theft, which makes it easier for people to enjoy themselves. It is the controlled environment to which the low crime rates are attributed (Shearing and Stenning, 1997). The controlled environment also makes it easier to control people’s behavior. For example, Disney uses fountains and flower gardens as physical barriers to limit the choices people can make about where to walk. Visitors are given constant instructions in order to decrease the probability of confusion and trouble-making behavior. Guests are also constantly under surveillance by employees. According to Shearing and Stenning (1997), the control at Disney’s theme parks is subtle but no less orchestrated. It is specifically designed to prevent problem behavior.

Any system or institution that is characterized by theming, dedifferentiation of consumption, merchandising, and emotional labor could be described as Disneyized. Given that the two trends discussed above are so similar and that our systems of police, courts, and corrections reflect McDonaldization, it is likely that they also reflect Disneyization. It is increasingly difficult to differentiate McDonaldization and Disneyization as social trends, now that the McDonalds restaurant chain has partnered up with Disney to sell hamburgers and movies through its commercials: each has the same goal of maintaining and promoting a certain image to sell its products. Bryman (1999a: 42) writes: “Many institutions may be described as both McDonaldized and Disneyized,” and thus McDisneyized (Ritzer and Liska, 1997; Bryman, 1999b). Some “institutions may be McDonaldized but not Disneyized or Disneyized but not McDonaldized or may even be Disneyized in some respects and McDonaldized in others.” My previous research demonstrates that America’s criminal justice systems have been McDonaldized. Yet, no previous published research has discussed relationships between criminal justice system practice and Disneyization, although American criminal justice practice does reflect Disneyization in several ways. The remainder of the article assesses the parallels between the trend of Disneyization and American criminal justice processes. Much of the paper is concerned with media coverage of crime and criminal justice, given the intimate relationship between it and criminal justice system processes.
DISNEYIZATION IN AMERICAN CRIMINAL JUSTICE

The evidence reviewed in the rest of the article suggests our systems of justice have been affected by the elements of Disneyization, including theming, dedifferentiation of consumption, merchandising, and emotional labor. In the sections that follow, I show how crime and criminal justice have become themed (theming), how this tricks consumers into buying more criminal justice (dedifferentiation of consumption), and ultimately, how this allows certain interests to make money off of crime and criminal justice (merchandising). Finally, I examine the issue of emotional labor in criminal justice.

Theming

The most significant example of theming in American criminal justice actually concerns processes that occur outside of the justice system, processes that emanate from the media. I include it here because many scholars now see the intimate connections between media institutions and agencies of criminal justice (e.g., Kappeler, Blumberg, and Potter, 2000; Merlo and Benekos, 2000; Potter and Kappeler, 1998; Robinson, 2002a; Surette, 1998). For example, Robinson (2002a) puts forth a model of myth-making and documents the sources of injustice in the criminal justice system. Based on the research showing that America’s criminal justice systems of police, courts, and corrections are most focused on the same types of crimes that are broadcast in the mainstream media and that police, courts, and corrections are highly affected by media coverage of crime and criminal justice, Robinson argues that one must consider the media when assessing criminal justice processes. It turns out that media packaging of images of crime and criminal justice are the major source of theming in American criminal justice (Kappeler et al., 2000).

Media is an umbrella term for a wide range of sources of news-related information and the mass media are “media that are easily, inexpensively, and simultaneously accessible to large segments of a population” (Surette, 1992: 10). These sources include newspapers, magazines, books, television, radio, film, and recordings that are organized within a hierarchy of controlling institutions. The inner ring of the media (Hess, 1981) consists of the major news media outlets such as ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, major news magazines such as Time, Newsweek, U.S. News & World Report, national papers such as the New York Times, the Washington Post, USA Today, and the Wall Street Journal, and the Associated Press (AP) wire service. These are called the inner ring sources because they are main sources of information for Americans about many issues and problems (Marion, 1995). Obviously, crime is a major issue and problem in society; hence it is usually news (Merlo and Benekos, 2000).

Sources of inner ring media have greater influence than other sources of media. Once they create a theme that pertains to crime or criminal justice, it will be broadcast all over the nation (Surette, 1998): “The organization at the top of the media hierarchy decides what counts as news” (Harrigan, 2000: 120). This is true because most journalists consult these sources for their own news and reporters of crime news commonly copy what other media reporters are doing (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1992). Logically, when reputable sources cover crime problems in the media, other reporters will take their lead and follow with their own stories that are very similar in nature.
American corporations, through the inner ring of media outlets they own and control, define problems and identify crises and thereby determine the issues that will be brought to the attention of political leaders and American citizens (Harrigan, 2000). Ben Bagdikian’s (2000) book, The Media Monopoly, chronicles the ever-growing stranglehold that major corporations have on America’s news. Research shows that the mainstream media are owned by a handful of corporations (Graber, 1996; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Kappeler et al., 2000; Parenti, 1993). As I mentioned earlier, the Disney Corporation now owns ABC News and the ESPN networks.

The main effects of the media on people include altering their perceptions of the criminal justice system (Van Horn, Baumley, and Gormley, 1992) and distorting facts about crime (Marion, 1995). In terms of crime, violent crimes are over-represented in the media (Surette, 1998), especially the “most terrifying crimes” and those committed by strangers (Scheinold, 1984: 55) on the streets (Kooistra, Mahoney, and Westervelt, 1999). This was true during most of the 20th Century, with periodic breaks for coverage of more pressing issues such as economic recessions, war, or specific crime types such as drug war turf battles, school shootings, terrorism, or juvenile crime waves. Studies show that violence, including homicide, is covered on prime time television at a rate hundreds to one thousand times its actual occurrence (e.g., see Lichter, Lichter, and Rothman, 1994).

At the same time, corporate crime and white-collar crime are downplayed or ignored (Parenti, 1993:10; Steel and Seger, 1988:77). Occasionally, such acts are discussed in the media, including recent cases such as the Enron and WorldCom financial scandals and the Ford/Firestone fiasco. Of primary interest to the media are the rarest and most egregious examples of crime, which may explain why these cases were covered in the first place; coverage of these cases suggested to the viewer that these cases are atypical in American business even though they are not. Television news generally shows violence at a rate much higher than its incidence in society would seem to justify (Newman, 1990). As noted by Krajicek (1998:4): “Murder and sexual offenses are the marquee offenses ... and certain cases, generally based upon their nubility or celebrity, are anointed for extravagant coverage.” Even among murders, it is the most heinous and bizarre of all murders that tend to be most widely discussed in the media (e.g., see Paulsen, 2000).

Krajicek (1998: 180), a former crime reporter, describes crime news: “Take a predisposition toward simplicity and anecdote, add unsophisticated reporting, a degenerating peer culture, an overworked news staff, the rapture of sex and celebrities, and – poof! – you’ve got today’s crime journalism.” His analysis suggests that the media:

- Provide crime-anxious Americans with excited accounts of horrible crimes;
- Present tenuous evidence that the crimes, however anomalous, could happen to each of us;
- Seek out accountable individuals, judges, probation officers, and devised snappy slogans to neatly package the problem; and
- Serve up images of scowling politicians and their podiums thumping about the latest legislation that surely would stop such atrocities ... “We’re finally getting tough on crime. We’re no longer coddling criminals. We’re making America’s streets safe again.”

This type of coverage follows the established themes about crime and criminal justice that have been promulgated over the past few decades as the country’s as the country’s justice systems
have gotten bigger, tougher, and more costly.

By focusing on certain types of crimes over others, the media are thus involved in “constructing” the typical view of crime, even when they are only reporting “extreme, dramatic cases: the public is more likely to think they are representative because of the emphasis by the media” (Chermak, 1995: 580). Potter and Kappeler (1998: 7) explain: “Media coverage directs people’s attention to specific crimes and helps to shape those crimes as social problems.” This results in Americans being much more concerned with violent crimes such as murder, even though they are much more likely to be victimized by property crimes such as theft and burglary. This is a clear example of theming because the crime theme is generated by big business with a clear goal of selling products. In fact, Americans end up willing to buy even more of the same – more police, more death penalty, longer sentences, and so forth (Robinson, 2002b).

When the media ignore harmful acts committed by the wealthy, such as white-collar crime (Potter and Kappeler, 1998; Surette, 1998) and corporate crime (Evans and Lundman, 1987; Randall, 1995), it is troubling for one major reason: the harms associated with such acts clearly dwarf all street crimes combined in any given year. Neglect of this topic stems from the risk of libel suits, interrelationships between media and business, a pro-business orientation in the media, and difficulties associated with investigating white-collar crime (Potter and Kappeler, 1998: 15). The bottom line appears to be that any story that might interfere with the bottom line of corporate America, such as continuous, hard-hitting series of reports about a corporation’s willingness to kill people for money, will not be tolerated because it would call into question the credibility of unfettered capitalism as currently practiced in the United States.

In terms of how the media cover criminal justice, the early steps in the criminal justice process (such as investigation and arrest by law enforcement) are emphasized, and the later steps (such as plea bargaining, sentencing, and punishment) are ignored (Potter and Kappeler, 1998). Most real criminal justice cases receive no coverage from the media; those rare cases that are covered are the most atypical cases. One result is that false conceptions of “ordinary” are gained from “extraordinary” cases. Think of the O.J. Simpson case, which led Americans to think the court system is slow, inefficient, and more interested in the “rights of criminals” than the “rights of victims.” Never mind the fact that more than 90% of accused felons do not receive trials because of the fast and efficient practice of plea-bargaining, generated by a huge caseload and insufficient resources (Robinson, 2002a).

According to Haltom (1998: 157) media coverage of crimes in the America’s courts “tends to emphasize ‘crime control’ values” such as assuring “security from wrongdoers, just deserts, and punishment” while simultaneously devaluing due process concerns such as Constitutional protections of the accused. Haltom maintains that only in celebrated cases (such as the O.J. Simpson trial) do the media highlight due process values. These celebrated cases are more likely than the typical case to result in acquittals, thereby producing cynicism in Americans about the courts and the criminal justice system.

Mainstream media are very unlikely to discuss acts of deviance committed by major corporations who own the outlets and those that are like them (such as McDonalds and Disney). For example, consumers do not see the reality of McDonald’s and Disney; we do not learn of the tremendous harms caused by our fast food nation (Schlosser, 2001) or how the image of Disney
employees is manufactured and controlled in line with corporate interests (Bryman, 1999b). Exploitation of workers and harms caused by eating poor diets of fast food are not seen in mainstream media institutions.

America’s police and courts are focused squarely on the acts that are viewed as most serious because of their supposed harmfulness and frequency of occurrence (Robinson, 2002a) – the acts that receive most priority for police arrest and criminal conviction in the courts are those that are defined as “serious” by the criminal law (these are the same acts focused on by the media). Yet, the evidence is very clear that these acts of “serious” crimes are actually far less serious than white-collar and corporate crime, because they cause less damage and occur less frequently (Reiman, 1998; Rosoff, Pontell, and Tillman, 2001; Simon and Hagan, 1999). Yet, our prisons have filled up with these people, making the United States the world’s leader in incarceration (Robinson, 2002a). It is the existence of the dominant crime theme that accounts for this condition. This serves as evidence of the Disneyization of American criminal justice.

Dedifferentiation of Consumption and Merchandising

Theming in the media about crime results in fear among certain groups (Chiricos, Eschholtz, and Gertz, 1997; Eschholtz, 1997), and wide exposure to television and other media forms can “dull the critical-thinking ability” of Americans and lead to apathy (Harrigan, 2000: 131). This makes simplistic solutions to complex problems more appealing and creates disinterest in other important issues among Americans. While Disney uses theming to package images to attract people and sell products, the media rely on police and politicians to construct themes of crime and criminal justice that sell more of the same criminal justice to tax payers – it reinforces the status quo (Beckett, 1999; Gest, 2001). Promising alternatives to our rough and tough criminal justice systems are virtually ignored by mainstream media.

Ironically, theming by the Disney Corporation and theming of crime and criminal justice in the media both promote so-called “family values” and a certain moral order (Ritzer, 2000) even though each acts in ways that end up interfering with the strength and stability of the family. One striking example in criminal justice is the loss of eligible males to date in African American inner-city populations because of involvement in the criminal justice system (Robinson, 2002a).

So, it is now well established that there is a dominant crime-theme in the United States, one that appears across the country in our mainstream media. Because of the way the media cover crime stories, crime seems to be everywhere, seems to be out of control, seems to be likely to effect us all (Robinson, 2002b), even when street crime is actually decreasing. Criminal justice facilities are everywhere, as well, especially as more and more prisons are built across the country (Irwin and Austin, 1997). Schlosser (2001) demonstrates how fast-food restaurants have spread across the nation like wildfire. I would suggest that criminal justice growth and media coverage of crime are as responsible for the homogenization of our nation’s cities as the spread of fast food restaurants. It seems like no matter where you go, the same restaurants are there and crime is a major problem causing fear in the local inhabitants.

Because images of crime and criminal justice tend to be created by the corporate giants who have control over mainstream media outlets (Bagdikian, 2000), we should expect them to
generate images that serve their own interests. Generally speaking, corporations have the same interests as the fast food and theme park industries: to attract customers and make profits. This takes at least two forms: first, it tricks consumers into buying more criminal justice (*dedifferentiation of consumption*); and second, it allows certain interests to make money off of crime and criminal justice (*merchandising*). Media images of criminal justice tend to produce loyalty to the status quo (Potter and Kappeler, 1998), just as restaurants and theme parks aim to encourage brand loyalty in their customers. Currently, in the wake of terrorist attacks on America that killed hundreds of police officers and firefighters, the status of the police officer and firefighter has been elevated to the status of hero (which is certainly a welcome change). One irony is that the demand for any product on which their logos appear is so high that counterfeiters are now illegally benefitting from the manufacture and sale of the September 11th tragedy. Another irony is that legitimate concerns related to police brutality, corruption, and other related issues are being muted in order to maintain the illusion of unity among all Americans. One example is that at the most recent meeting of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS, March 2002), only 23 out of 140 papers on policing (16%) and of 705 papers total (3%) dealt with topics such as corruption, inappropriate use of force, profiling of minorities, and similar topics (Robinson, 2002a). This is hard to believe given the recent Rampart Corruption scandal in Los Angeles, the Houston Police Department drug scandal, and similar incidents across the country’s largest cities.

Restaurant and theme parks are in the business not necessarily to produce high quality products, but rather to make money. Similarly, American criminal justice has become increasingly aimed at serving limited financial interests (Reiman, 1998). For example, companies such as the Corrections Corporation of America, Cornell Corrections, Correctional Services Corporation, and Wackenhut Corrections Corporation now run their own correctional facilities for profit. These corporations run prisons that increased their inmate populations 2,000 percent (2000%) from 1987 to 1996 by using organized lobbying techniques to influence state legislators (Sarabi and Bender, 2000). Once businesses have vested interests in making profits on crime control, it is logical that business-friendly government will do whatever it takes to assure a steady supply of offenders, so that the criminal justice system can continue to pay off (Christie, 2000). Perhaps this is why correctional officer hiring and training has become the “fastest-growing function” of government (Lilly and Knepper, 1993: 155). Kappeler et al. (2000: 45) write that enormous sums of money and millions of jobs are created by criminal justice, including about $65 billion by private security alone.

Television and print executives aim to sell their product – whether it is entertainment or information – to consumers. Advertising in the media allows corporations to sell their products through entertainment (e.g., commercials), and through information (e.g., print ads). This is a form of *merchandising*. While theme parks such as Disney license and sell their images on just about everything, the criminal justice system is not in the business of selling goods and services directly to consumers through advertising. Instead, the system benefits from the selling of crime to consumers and the selling of criminal justice through particular images created in its programs. Consequently, consumers are unable to see criminal justice as a business that benefits limited financial and moral interests (Christie, 2000; Reiman, 1998). Others end up supporting more criminal justice merely for the jobs that are provided when new prisons are built in their neighborhoods. This is a form of *dedifferentiation of consumption*, whereby consumers become more interested in economic concerns than concerns about doing justice and reducing crime.
Politicians are now touting prison labor as a way to compete with imports from countries where labor costs are very low (Pigeon and Wray, 2000). Even though about 75,000 prisoners now produce goods for use in the public sector and another 2,500 work for the private sector, most inmates working in our nation’s prisons (about 600,000) work to reduce costs of their imprisonment (Freeman, 1999). Nevertheless, confusion clearly exists in consumers and politicians about the purposes of confinement, even with popular television shows about prisons on numerous channels.

Although crime and criminal justice have always been attractive to viewers, only recently have crime shows become the most watched programs on television, crime novels become among the best selling books in the nation, and crime has been used to sell products to consumers. It is only in the past ten years, with the birth of television shows such as COPS, America’s Most Wanted, and Unsolved Mysteries, that crime shows became cash cows for networks. The popularity of contemporary television shows such as Law and Order (which has actually spun off into 3 different shows), CSI (Crime Scene Investigation), Homicide, NYPD Blue, The Sopranos, Crossing Jordan (about a crime fighting medical examiner), The Court and First Monday (both about the U.S. Supreme Court), The District (about the Washington D.C. police department), and so on, proves that viewers tune into broadcasts dealing with crime and criminal justice. These shows, which achieve high ratings for major television networks, allow advertisers unfettered access to consumers. The goal of the advertisers is to sell as many products as possible to people who are seeking a better quality of life (Galenano, 1996). Ironically, the more viewers are exposed to television, the more likely they are to see the world as a “mean and scary place,” meaning the more they are likely to fear crime and support tougher criminal justice approaches (Robinson, 2002a).

Virtually all of this crime and criminal justice commercialism is based on illusion rather than fact (Kappeler et al., 2000), just as commercials for fast food and theme parks offer distorted pictures of reality (Schlosser, 2001). In the case of crime and criminal justice, media images tend to emphasize the most bizarre and violent crimes and give far more attention to law enforcement and corrections than to courts (Robinson, 2002a). Crime and criminal justice commercialism diverts our attention from larger and more important harms (Chermak, 1995), particularly acts of violent corporate crime (Simon and Hagan, 1999). Similarly, commercials for fast food and theme parks never mention the harms associated with the production of their products, including workplace injuries and deaths, the exploitation of cheap labor, promoting unhealthy eating habits, spreading disease, and destruction of the natural environment (Schlosser, 2001). Recent editions of the television show, Frontline, produced by the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), discussed harms produced by big tobacco corporations and by American meat companies. Such cases are not profiled by more mainstream television outlets such as ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, and so forth (these outlets serve up what has been called McNews – see Ritzer, 2002 – they only discuss such cases when tobacco corporations or meat packing corporations are sued in civil court).

The only publicly discussed solutions for crime problems tend to sound easy and prepackaged (Krajicek, 1998), perfect for the fast food audience. The fast food industry has perfected the quick, low quality meal, available with little thought and effort. Similarly, politicians offer little more than sound bytes when discussing issues of crime and criminal
justice. This is true for both major political parties. For example, Platt (2001) uses direct quotes from the Democratic and Republican Conventions to show how each party tries to “out tough” the other in criminal justice policymaking. This is related to Disneyization, as well, because Disney creates a world where a family can escape to and find everything it needs to complete its fantasy vacation. In other words, Disneyization is as much about offering quick, easy solutions to complex problems as is McDonaldization. My supposition is that as Americans come to expect quick, easy solutions to food (McDonaldization), entertainment (Disneyization), and even shopping (what might be called WalMartization?), this likely affects their expectations for achieving other goals as well, including the reduction of crime. So, in essence, the successful intrusion by Disney, McDonalds, WalMart, and other similar institutions now greatly affects expectations of Americans for crime reduction and justice.

Emotional Labor

The final element of Disneyization is emotional labor, which is the use of coercion to force employees to behave in a given way. In the Disney theme parks, there is a mandated image and set of behaviors for employees, one of cleanliness, friendliness, and helpfulness. This is also true of McDonaldized systems – so there is a specific set of qualities for fast food employees.

The importance of emotional labor is seen in criminal justice in perhaps one way – the move to community policing witnessed over the past two to three decades. Community policing can be understood as a crime prevention partnership between the police and the community (Wrobleski and Hess, 2000). Although the term has no clearly defined set of characteristics in practice, in philosophy it is aimed at solving problems before they become crimes rather than merely reacting to crimes after they occur. That is, it is an approach aimed at identifying problems with the community before they lead to crime (Goldstein, 1990).

Community policing is rooted in a problem-solving approach but is not the same as problem-solving policing. Most scholars consider community policing to be a philosophy or management style toward policing rather than an actual set of strategies to reduce crime. It involves some form of community partnership aimed at addressing factors that produce crime, fear of crime, and problems unique to the community. Problem-oriented policing, often seen as an element of community policing, is practiced in line with the SARA model (scanning, analysis, response, and assessment). Problem-oriented policing begins with scanning or efforts to discover problems (often crime-related) in the community by officers and/or the community. After a problem is discovered, an analysis of the problem is conducted in order to understand its etiology. Then, a reasoned, planned response is initiated and ultimately evaluated in order to see if it is successful. If not, more analysis occurs and a new response is designed and implemented.

Community policing grew out of the realization that professional policing did not effectively reduce crime and was not satisfying to certain segments of the population (Wrobleski and Hess, 2000). From roughly 1920 to 1970, American policing was more professional in nature, meaning it placed a high value on efficiency and crime fighting while being separate and distinct from public influence. Community policing instead places more emphasis on providing services to the community and increasing police-community relations (Gaines, Kaune, and Miller, 2000: 178) in part because of the realization that the success of formal social control
depends, at least partially, on informal social controls in a community.

The philosophy of community service is a form of emotional labor because it requires officers to behave in a certain way, to maintain a certain image, one that is friendly and helpful. Unfortunately, this image is only maintained in certain neighborhoods and in interactions with some segments of the population. In the nation’s inner cities, zero tolerance policing is militaristic and brutal, and results in differential use of force against the nation’s poor and people of color (Robinson, 2002a).

According to the National Criminal Justice Commission, community policing is based on the notion that police “should serve residents in a neighborhood rather than simply police them” (Donziger, 1996: 160). Yet, one significant problem with community policing is that many minority communities “feel both overpoliced and underprotected – overpoliced because the drug trade flourishes with the same vitality as before, and underprotected because police are often slow to respond to 911 calls from minority neighborhoods.”

Legislators have voted to place more police in these neighborhoods, based on the belief that there is more crime there and that more police will reduce crime, even though the scientific evidence suggests otherwise (Kelling et al. 1974; Police Foundation, 1981). This is why the National Criminal Justice Commission concludes that “we need to learn how to police better before we add new police” (Donziger, 1996: 160, emphasis added). Better policing may in fact reduce crime. Less than 5% of officers nationwide are assigned to crime prevention efforts (Bayley, 1994); smart community policing would invest more resources toward problem solving approaches that are proactive rather than reactive.

Some police officers have rebelled against the idea of community policing, having come to the profession with the expectation of being law enforcement officers instead of spending most of their time providing services to the community (Wrobleski and Hess, 2000). In order to be a community police officer, however, police are forced to behave in line with the mandate of the Law Enforcement Code of Conduct, passed by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP). Much criminal justice work is still dehumanizing, but the move to community policing, where police spend more time providing social services and customer services in a friendly and helpful way, changes the image of police to be more consistent with a fast, friendly, entertaining workforce. The fact that it is forced is what makes it consistent with emotional labor of Disneyization.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper specified relationships between the trend of Disneyization and America’s criminal justice systems. Disneyization is the process by which the principles of the Disney theme parks are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world. This paper illustrated how the elements of theming, dedifferentiation of consumption, merchandising, and emotional labor have come to typify criminal justice operations in the United States.

From the analysis presented, it is clear that our systems of police, courts, and corrections can be described as Disneyized, but to a degree less than they have been McDonaldized
Disneyization and the criminal justice system / 81

(Robinson, 2002b). America’s criminal justice system does rely on theming, dedifferentiation of consumption, and merchandising. To a lesser degree, the element of emotional labor is present, as it seems to characterize the move to community policing. To the degree that community policing is coercive and forces police employees to behave in a given way that they would not normally behave, we can say that recent changes to American policing are consistent with Disneyization.

The analysis showed that theming of crime and criminal justice is widespread in the nation’s mass media outlets. This theming, controlled by wealthy corporate interests, has great effects on American perceptions of crime, criminals, and the criminal justice system. I suggested that theming tricks consumers into buying more criminal justice, a form of dedifferentiation of consumption. It also allows certain interests to make money off of crime and criminal justice, a form of merchandising. Specifically, it was shown that media coverage of crime and criminal justice is supportive of more of the same, the status quo – more police, more courts, longer sentences, more prisoners, and so forth – all of which benefits large corporations and their employees.

Media coverage of crime and criminal justice also reinforces the validity of the criminal law, thereby encouraging police to continue to arrest street criminals, courts to convict them, and correctional facilities to punish them. That these acts of street crime are actually less harmful and occur less frequently than acts of corporate and white-collar crime is not relevant to the Disneyized criminal justice system. As others have suggested, America’s systems of criminal justice may be about much more than just reducing crime and doing justice. They may, as part of a larger social process of Disneyization, be aimed at maintaining the image of crime as a street level phenomenon (theming), maintaining power by tricking consumers into buying more of the same (dedifferentiation of consumption), and actually making money off of crime (merchandising).

Others have suggested that American criminal justice policy is not evidence driven (Walsh and Harris, 1999) but is instead directed by misinformed, partisan politicians (Houston, 2001; Houston and Parsons, 1998) whose goals may not be to implement policies that will work (Sherman et al., 1997). Their goals may instead be to create policies that will get them elected and re-elected (Robinson, 2002a). To the degree that this is true, American criminal justice policy is not necessarily aimed at achieving justice and reducing crime, but instead may serve the functions of controlling certain segments of the population and serving limited financial interests (Reiman, 1998). The interests served by criminal justice operations include wealthy corporations who benefit from the expansion of criminal justice. This increases the believability of the Disneyization of America’s criminal justice system.

ENDNOTE

* Direct correspondence to Professor Matthew B. Robinson, Appalachian State University, Department of Political Science and Criminal Justice, Boone, NC 28608 (E-mail: rooblinsmb@appstate.edu)
REFERENCES


Bryman, A.  


PUBLIC ENEMIES, PUBLIC HEROES: SCREENING THE GANGSTER FROM LITTLE CAESAR TO TOUCH OF EVIL

by

Tony Hilfer
University of Texas

Book: Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening The Gangster From Little Caesar to Touch of Evil
Author: Jonathan Munby
Publisher: University of Chicago Press
Year: 1999

Jonathan Munby’s book on gangster films has four main threads: an argument that gangster films, contra Adorno’s reading of Mass Culture ideology, subvert rather than recuperate the dominant ideology; that they were, for cause, a main target of film censorship; that the gangster genre transmuted in response to historical change; and that film noir was less a dramatic new departure than a continuation of the gangster genre. These threads are interestingly interwoven to give us a new and useful view of the genre and its political intimations.

The argument on subversion is supported by Munby’s mini-history of the forms of film censorship which were themselves responsive to historical conditions. Munby uses the censors’ aversion to the gangster genre as a central argument against Adorno’s dictum in “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” that the culture industry reliably deflects any questioning of the power elite. Munby asks: “If the post-Crash talking gangster only ‘reinforced’ older success mythology and governing laws, why did it warrant censure” (p. 16)? Another thread of Munby’s argument implicated in this question is how the introduction of sound into motion pictures revolutionized the gangster film. His argument is that “pre-Crash silent-era gangster films were part of a general middle-class moral crusade to both redeem and stigmatize the ethnic ghetto. The latter was subjected in fiction and film to the conventions of moral ‘uplift’ narratives” (pp. 4-5). But the revulsion from the financial powers implicated in the Crash combined with the new technology of sound to give both motive and possibility for ethnically and ideologically oppositional voices.

Munby focuses on the gangster classics, Little Caesar, Public Enemy, and Scarface. That these films upset the cultural authorities is evident: in 1935 the genre of gangster films was banned and Public Enemy and Little Caesar were not allowed to be re-released until 1953 and even then not for export lest they give a bad impression abroad of American life (p. 107). The protagonists of these films were Italian American in the first and third and Irish American in the second. The actors of these roles were two Jewish Americans, Edward G. Robinson and Paul Muni, playing Italians, and Jimmy Cagney playing what he was, an Irish American. These three actors all came from the mean streets of the lower East Side and they conveyed an ethnic lower-class, markedly urban, and markedly not urbane voice. In one respect, however, they might seem traditional American heroes but in a very different key. The historian Richard Pells, cited by
Munby, sees the gangster hero as “a psychopathic Horatio Alger” (p. 17). The films imply their rise to (temporary) success may not be so different from the approved model. Even their psychopathology, more apparent in *Little Caesar* and especially in *Scarface* than in *Public Enemy*’s Tommy Powers, may not work in an unequivocally negative fashion. It can appear as a form of energy, of power, that fascinates more than repels us.

The argument has been made that just these features of the gangster film recuperate more than oppose the prevailing values. Is not the valorization of success and power reinforced by baring the ruthlessness of their pursuit? And contrariwise do not these films always have a scene where the authorities denounce the antisocial ways of the gangsters? And do not the gangster protagonists end up dead, even in the gutter, thus showing the futility of their ethos? Indeed these motifs are a constant of thirties gangster films but Munby argues that they are double coded. Munby cites the uncomfortably convincing argument Tommy Powers uses against his conventionally honest brother:

Mike enlists to fight in World War I; Tommy thinks he’s crazy. Mike works a legitimate job as a ticket collector on the trams; Tommy sees this as self-exploitation. Mike attends night school in an attempt to improve his social and economic lot; Tommy’s reaction is that Mike is only ‘learning how to be poor’ (p. 52).

It sounds rather like a script from Berthold Brecht.

Munby’s argument chimes with Robert Warshow’s classic essay on the gangster film which shows how ambivalence about the American values of individualism and success are embodied in the violent conclusion of the gangster film: “No convention of the gangster film is more strongly established than this: it is dangerous to be alone. And yet the very condition of success makes it impossible not to be alone, for success is always the establishment of an individual pre-eminence that must be imposed on others, in whom it automatically arouses hatred; the successful man is an outlaw. The gangster’s whole life is an effort to assert himself as an individual, to draw himself out of the crowd, the final bullet thrusts him back, makes him after all, a failure” (p. 133). This represents a general failure precisely of the quest for success: “In the deeper layers of the modern consciousness, all means are unlawful, every attempt to succeed is an act of aggression, leaving one alone and guilty and defenseless among enemies: one is punished for success” (p. 133). Tommy Powers, lying in the gutter full of bullet holes, put it perfectly: “I ain’t so tough.” As for the moralizing frame of the gangster film, Munby shows that not only did the censors of the Hays code externally impose it but also that it could itself become a subversive device.

Thus the censors insisted that a framing scene be added to *Scarface*, though its director, Howard Hawks, objected so strenuously that he refused to participate in shooting the added scene. But the frame turns out to turn the tables on the authorities, congregated in a newspaper office, reveal their status “first by accent and second by the content, style, and vocabulary of the spoken communication. These figures of official society deliver their moral diatribe about gangsterdom in distinctly Anglo tones” (p. 59). Moreover, the addition is in marked visual contrast to the body of the film: “The camera remains fixed and static, filming
from a stable establishing-shot distance. The scene is brightly and flatly lit. All this is surely out of character with the rest of the film’s use of extreme high- or low-camera angles and chiaroscuro low-key high-contrast lighting. The imposed ideology of the scene is sabotaged by its foregrounding as ‘artificial and ideologically imposed’” (ibid.). Surely the last thing censors wish is to be discerned mucking about in the film, spoiling the audience’s pleasure. Another apt instance Munby cites is the framing scene in _Asphalt Jungle_ where the police commissioner describes the protagonist Dix as a cold-hearted murderer when the audience has been shown he is the most honorable character in the film. In the film’s affecting final scene we see Dix die as he desperately tries to return to the Kentucky horse farm of his youth, making him emblematic of betrayed American rural values.

_Asphalt Jungle_ differs from the thirties cycle of gangster films in that its protagonist is a displaced country boy rather than to the mean streets born and that he is a follower, not a leader. This and other postwar syndicate gangster films respond to a new historical situation born of the mass organizational necessities of World War II. Americans emerged from the regimentation of the army to a newly regimented home front, corporate America. Alienation is no longer ethnic but generalized. The gangster is no longer an exaggerated image of the individualistic entrepreneur: “most syndicate films concern the plight of an individual (normally a syndicate foot soldier) working against an impersonal and brutal system. Most obviously, such films constitute ways to dramatize people’s general concerns about the relations of power between themselves and the organizations they serve” (pp. 126-7). An intensified subjective focus is evident in these films, an aura of entrapment and psychopathology. The psychopathology is notable in the postwar Cagney gangster film, _White Heat_ where Cagney’s character (Cody Jarrett) suffers from a mother complex and crippling psychosomatic headaches. Cody Jarrett is deprived, as the postwar gangsters frequently were, of ethnic edge and is a less attractive character than Tommy Powers. Thus the FBI agent played by Edmond O’Brien could be conceived as the protagonist of the film. But Munby arrestingly argues, “the appeal of Cagney’s performance rests in part on his rejection of the sinister aspects of a conforming culture embodied in Edmond O’Brien’s faceless (and duplicitous) undercover FBI agent” (p. 119). In support of Munby’s argument I would challenge anyone to remember a single line of Edmond O’Brien’s or to forget Cagney/Jarrett’s final defiant “Made it Ma! Top of the world!” This is followed by his explosive apotheosis, another instance where the violent end of the gangster does not necessarily function morally.

Munby also briefly notes a critically neglected film of this period, Jules Dassin’s _Brute Force_, a prison film in which “the prisoners are cast as common men whose ‘normal’ bourgeois desires lead them to crime. The psychologically unstable paranoiacs in this film are not the incarcerated criminals but the prison guards and warden” (p. 163). It is not coincidental that Dassin soon after was blacklisted and had to leave for Europe in order to continue to make films.

The HUAC ‘investigation’ of Hollywood film was another of the changing faces of censorship Munby examines. In the course of the book he shows the different motives and strategies of Will Hays, the representative of rural Protestant values, Joseph Breen, who brought an urban Catholic perspective, and, finally, of Eric Johnston who attempted to make Hollywood an exemplar of “the postwar liberal consensus” of democratic capitalism (p. 172). If anything Johnston’s emphasis on a relentlessly positive outlook, on the social engineering of a more benign society, seems more sinister than the prohibitors of the thirties. Nevertheless some nicely
ugly movies emerged in the film noir genre, which Munby argues was not a distinct new genre so much as a transmutation of the gangster film:

The increasingly preponderant fascination with crime on the American screen after World War II was understood in its day not as something new or discontinuous with Hollywood’s traditions, but as a rejuvenation of the illicit themes and issues associated with the earlier depression-era gangster cycle. The postwar crime cycle we now call film noir was received as an awkward reminder of problems whose resolution had been postponed by the need to prosecute the war (p. 7).

Munby sees the end of this new cycle in *Touch of Evil*, arguing that after it only neo-noir was possible.

This last claim seems at the least debatable, especially in the absence of a definition of neo-noir, hardly a self-evident category. Although Munby has some provocative observation about film noir this part of his book seems a bit sketchy, not as well thought out as the chapters on gangster films. In sum, although the overall argument of Munby’s book is persuasive and his book is a major contribution to the study of the gangster genre and is suggestive in relation to genre study generally, I do have a few general reservations and a few particular quibbles.

I like his argument against Adorno’s unqualified attack on Mass culture. But I think there is something to be said for a more mediated view such as the one argued by Munby’s bete noire, Robert Ray, whose book, *A Certain Tendency of Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*, Munby almost obsessively recurs to. Munby attacks the concept he attributes to Ray that:

The gangster film only ostensibly related to the changing ‘real’ world and actually played out the familiar oppositions that had come to structure much of traditional American (western) mythology: country (small town) versus city, individualism versus community, self-interest versus social responsibility, corruption versus virtue, desire versus gratification, leisure versus work, sexual expression versus moral rectitude (p. 26).

Munby convinces me that gangster films accentuated “hyphenated identity as a competing authentic American condition” (p. 26). But Ray mentions only one gangster film, *Angels with Dirty Faces* as carrying over this western structure and does not claim it to be typical of the genre. Moreover Ray’s analysis of Hollywood film is more nuanced than Munby represents it as being. Ray is writing about a tendency in Hollywood cinema, not about all Hollywood films. And he makes a good case for the tendency of classic Hollywood films to reconcile contradictions by converting “all political, sociological, and economic dilemmas into personal melodramas” (Ray 1985, p. 57). Thus “*Casablanca* displaced American anxiety about intervention in World War II into Rick’s hesitation about helping Victor Laszlo” (ibid.). The pattern is indeed remarkably consistent as is that of the individualist hero, even one conspicuously contemptuous and avoidant of community becoming the community’s savior as in *Casablanca, Stalag 17*, and to a comic extreme in *The Outlaw Josey Wales* wherein the alienated protagonist, played by Clint Eastwood at his stoniest, spends most of the film trying to flee community only to become the paterfamilias of a community organized around his protective strength.
That this is not the whole story Ray acknowledges. Indeed Ray argues against “the formalist essentialism in which certain stylistic procedures are labeled in advance as inherently ‘repressive’ or ‘alienating’ regardless of the ends they serve or the contexts in which they appear” (Ray 1985, p. 8). Here he is talking camera angle and lighting but surely his dictum applies as well to genre. Ray and Munby seem then on the same page when Munby argues against Mary Ann Doane’s technically essentialist claim that sound in film was ideologically reactionary in helping to intensify Hollywood’s reproduction of a seamless and natural image of the world (Munby 1999, p. 42). Ray even supplies a useful rule of thumb for subversive effects, noting Charles Ekert’s argument that “truly effective challenges to Hollywood’s prevailing ideology surface in those moments within a movie when the emotional quotient is simply excessive in terms of the narrative needs—emotion, in other words, that remains inadequately motivated” (Ray 1985, pp. 18-19). One thinks of Cody Jarrett/Jimmy Cagney atop the petroleum tower, ecstatically proclaiming “Top of the world!” This is not to say that we are all being urged to blow up parts of the county we reside in or to take to the streets demanding economic justice. There is no sure measure of the actual political effects of mass culture products—or those of high culture, for that matter—on their audiences.

This is an old and ongoing debate. In a seminal early essay collection entitled Mass Culture (1957) the two editors, Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White were in diametrical disagreement. For Rosenberg, “At its worst, mass culture threatens not merely to cretinize our taste, but to brutalize our senses while paving the way to totalitarianism” (p. 9). Whereas White deplores the tendency of “xenophilic critics who discuss American culture as if they were holding a dead vermin in their hands” (p. 14). In the 1950s critics from both the political right (Ernest van den Haag) and the political left (Irving Howe) were at one in looking with alarm at mass culture. One gets the impression from Munby that this is still the case and he is embattled on all sides in his affirmation of a mass culture genre but surely this no longer the case. The newer critiques are more along the line of Carol Clover’s breakthrough study, Men, Women, and Chain Saws, which not only disputed Laura Mulvey’s orthodox dogma that Hollywood film is always structured around the sadistic male “gaze” at the female object but dared to proclaim slasher films (e.g., Texas Chain Saw Massacre and Halloween) and rape-revenge films (e.g., I Spit on Your Grave) were equivocal, tangled, and to some degree even oddly progressive rather than uniformly fiendishly misogynistic in their sexual politics. Clover had a notably tougher row to hoe than Munby in her revisionary study and made good on it. She convinces me that Thelma and Louise was, if anything, a watered-down version of I Spit on Your Grave. I would like to close on Clover’s expression of alarm at the decline of the mostly independently made low-budget horror movie, an instance that parallels the decline of the gangster film as Munby so well analyzed it:

Deprived of the creative wellspring of the low tradition, I suspect, larger studios are more likely than before to imitate their own tried-and-true formulas and less likely to take a flier on the kind of bizarre and brilliant themes that can bubble up from the bottom. (Clover 1992, p. 236)
ENDNOTE


REFERENCES


REVIEW OF _THE PERREAUS AND MRS. RUDD: FORGERY AND BETRAYAL IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY LONDON_ *

by

Jessica Warner
Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Book: _The Perreaus and Mrs. Rudd: Forgery and Betrayal in Eighteenth-century London_
Author: Donna T. Andrew and Randall McGowen
Publisher: University of California Press
Year: 2001

I am by training an historian. And because I am an historian, I suppose that I should care about history in a serious way. Sadly, I do not. At night, instead of heading off to the library, I go home and watch TV, dividing my time between _Court TV_, _City Confidential_, and reruns of _Law & Order_. I never seem to tire of these shows. On the contrary, each time I watch a courtroom spectacle, whether real or staged, I experience the most exquisite frissons of _schadenfreude_. I eye the defendant and tell myself that I am smarter, and I eye the prosecutor and tell myself that he or she is a fool, and that had I committed the crime, I would have gotten away with it.

In 1775, even as the American colonies verged on open revolt, all of London was riveted on a case every bit as sensational as those that routinely fill my evenings. Two brothers, Robert and Daniel Perreau, stood accused of forgery. At first, the common-law wife of Daniel, the redoubtable Mrs. Rudd, confessed to the crime; nobody, however, chose to believe her story, leaving the two brothers to stand trial. The case immediately attracted attention, both in the press and among the public at large. For starters, all three parties to the offense were social-climbers, and one, Mrs. Rudd, claimed a pedigree allowing her entree into London’s most exalted social circles. The two brothers, moreover, happened to be twins, thus further complicating the thorny problem of determining who had done what.

What made the case especially titillating was the prospect that one or all of the parties might hang for the offense. No one, however, seriously thought that this would happen, that is, until Robert and Daniel were both convicted and sentenced to hang. It was at this point that Mrs. Rudd was also charged with forgery, notwithstanding a previous grant of immunity. This, however, meant that evidence that she had given against herself could not be used in her trial; it also helped that she happened to be defended by what might today be called a “dream team,” each of whom was prepared to badger, mock, and humiliate the witnesses for the prosecution. In the end, Mrs. Rudd was acquitted, if only on a technicality; even so, her reputation was in tatters, and to that extent polite society could derive some satisfaction from the outcome of the trial. Not so with the brothers Perreau. Here public opinion was sharply divided: some pitied the brothers, believing them to be the unwitting dupes of the scheming Mrs. Rudd, while others reviled them, seeing in their handsome visages the very face of
upstart greed. Whatever the merits of their case, the brothers’ fate was sealed when Mrs. Rudd was acquitted. To the end, they insisted on their innocence. This was in fact highly unsettling: unlike most condemned felons, the Perreaus steadfastly refused to accept the justice of their verdict, and by so doing they succeeded, if only posthumously, in rehabilitating their reputations.

Even today it is a riveting story, and the contribution of Andrew and McGowen is to link it to the larger preoccupations of the defendants’ contemporaries. Above all, the authors ask good questions, each time providing detailed answers. Why, for example, was forgery a capital offense? Their answer, one that is entirely convincing, is that forgery, like theft, was a crime that especially affected men and women of property, most of whom routinely parlayed reputation into credit. Under the circumstances, “If seemingly honest dealers were exposed as unworthy of the trust bestowed on them, if reputations could not be relied upon, then the wealth so ostentatiously displayed in London might well prove to be an illusion.” And the authors are on especially strong ground in their discussion of fashion—and of the ways in which the Perreaus and Mrs. Rudd exploited it as they sought admittance into London’s highest social circles:

... the make-believe world of fashion... held out promises, especially for people who wished to rise quickly. For the world of fashion was in tension with the world of birth and fixed hierarchy. The latter claimed a static and stable character, while the former not only exposed a dynamic principle but revealed the shifting composition of the upper classes. Fashion depended upon consumption, upon display and leisure. It required wealth, but it converted wealth into taste. If it announced exclusion, it also offered a principle of mobility, a means to translate money into elegance. (125-126)

The research is first-rate. Over the course of a detailed and exhaustive narrative, there were only two missteps, both entirely minor. On page 9, the authors seem to imply that complaints about bad behavior at public executions were somehow recent. These were in fact complaints of long-standing. And on page 23, the authors speak of “a country growing richer.” This was doubtless true for a good many people, including the exalted circles to which both the Perreaus and Mrs. Rudd aspired, but the fact remains that most people, as measured by real wages, were growing poorer in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Perhaps there should have been a few paragraphs about those people, if only to bring home why the Perreaus and Mrs. Rudd took such extraordinary risks in their scramble to befriend and bilk the well-to-do.

But again, these are entirely minor quibbles, and in no way do they detract from the solid research that went into this book—or from the ways in which the authors succeed in using a seemingly superficial scandal to cast light on some of the darker undercurrents of eighteenth-century England. That said: this is an oddly disjoined book, a function, I suspect, of having two cooks in the kitchen. The book starts with a compelling description of the trial and subsequent execution of the two Perreaus, but after that the narrative loops and becomes overly long. As far as I can tell, the two authors took on separate chapters, each presumably speaking to a particular area of expertise. The problem is that the discussion then starts to
repeat; there are also occasional inconsistencies. There is, for example, a great deal of overlap in the discussion of how the press covered the trial; Mrs. Rudd is for the most part called “Mrs. Rudd,” but is in spots simply called “Rudd”; and only late in the game do we discover that the Perreaus, with their distinctive surname, were of Huguenot stock.

In fairness, this is not an easy story to tell. And Andrew and McGowen are right in linking the trial and the anxieties that it aroused to larger currents in the social and economic history of late Georgian England. But their attempts to do so necessarily come at the price of maintaining a seamless and pleasing narrative. Under the circumstances, collaboration was probably not the best way to go; at the very least, it should have been attempted on a very different basis, with one author controlling the narrative and the other taking on a complementary and more technical task.

ENDNOTES

* Direct correspondence to Dr. Jessica Warner, Center for Addiction and Mental Health, 33 Russell Street, Toronto, ON M5S 2S1 Canada (E-mail: Jessica_Warner@camh.net).

1 See, for example, Bernard Mandeville, *An Enquiry into the Causes of the Frequent Executions at Tyburn: and a Proposal for Some Regulations Concerning Felons in Prison, and the Good Effects to Be Expected from them. To which Is Added, a Discourse on Transportation, and a Method to Render that Punishment More Effectual* (London: J. Roberts, 1725), and *The London Magazine; or, Gentleman’s Monthly Intelligencer*, February 1751, p. 82.