

## **Session Five Lecture Notes: Serial Killers III – Portraits & Signs**

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21L.435/CMS.840 - At the Limit: Violence in Contemporary Representation

Things to watch/read for this week as we turn to "Serial Killers III: Portraits and Signs."

This week, we will continue our work with serial killers, but very different ones: we'll watch two films, shot in very different styles – each focusing on the issue of portraits and signs, realism and expressionism, causelessness and grand meta-narratives for the causes of violence. We'll read two short and very helpful pieces: one on realist horror that is a reading of "Henry" and realism more generally; the other is a classic: Mark Seltzer on the serial killer and idea of abnormal normality, role of typicality, problem of identity.

First, heed the title of the week: what is the role of the "portrait" in the title of Henry, and what is the function of signs/clues/traces/metaphors/staging in *Se7en*? These are two figures (the portrait, the sign/trace) that demand reading or attention or decipherment, or we might think of them as "hermeneutic moments" (remember, hermeneutics is the field of interpretation). What are we meant to interpret, detect, read or decipher in each film? Or, is the figure of the "portrait" linked to immediacy, legibility, transparency: in other words, to a figure of the "real" that requires no mediating interpretation?

Also keep in mind the relationship between realism and expressionism: each is a style of filmmaking, but the former attempts to replicate the surface appearance of our ordinary reality, while the latter is marked by self-conscious stylization and exaggeration. They create different relationships to violence and representation, and to spectatorship.

Freeland's article is very interesting for its take on Henry as a form of "realist horror," and I think you'll find her philosophical approach to film interesting. Seltzer's article is a classic and will be very helpful for almost every paper topic: he's interested in the serial killer in general, as a discursive and cultural phenomenon. What is the role of seriality/repetition/iteration in the figure (both construction and representation) of the serial killer? What is the role of typicality, the average, the normal (and also, the exceptional, the abnormal, the unusual)?

These films have very interesting endings: they will be fascinating to compare. (Keep in mind the formulation: "This isn't going to have a happy ending"). We're watching two films by David Fincher this semester – *Se7en* and *Fight Club*; he definitely has an aesthetic, a style, a visual voice – what does that look like? *Se7en* is by far the "slicker", more Hollywood film; *Henry* was distinctly low-budget; how do the different visual, acting, narrative, and formal styles affect how we read the films' narratives? We talked last week about how the film of *American Psycho* increases the role of the detective and law; what is the figure of authority/law/punishment (and all those grand meta-figures for justice) in each film? What does each film suggest as cause, origin and explanation for violence? How do the films both narrativize and grapple with the relationship between meaning and non-meaning? Is violence figured as a trope of non-meaning or the ultimate site of meaning? Attend to the video technology in *Henry*; the "rewatching" scene is justly (in)famous. And attend to the role of the city, the urban, the stranger, anonymity,

crowds, etc. in each film. Who are the victims in each film, and how do we (and the killers) regard/read them?

### **Peras / Telos**

“peras” (limit/boundary) vs.

“telos” (end as purpose/destiny/fulfillment/consummation/resolution)

**This week is titled “Portraits and Signs,”** and this is our last week explicitly on the figure of the serial killer. We’ve talked about problems of postmodernity, late capitalism, waning of affect, depersonalization, issues of commodification, and empty identity (including aesthetic forms of *kenosis*: emptying out) in relation to *American Psycho*. This week, we’re focusing on **portraits and signs**; we’ll keep talking about violence and identity (esp. in relation to Seltzer) but we also have a new set of conceptual issues to focus on.

The past few weeks, we’ve been asking a version of the question of critique: Where can we locate **meaning** in postmodern texts? This week, however, we have something of an **abundance of meaning** – portraits and signs; traces and clues; sites of inscription and staged tableaux, messages and warnings and witnesses and archives... texts that are demanding that they be studied, interpreted, regarded, and read.

**Epigraph for class today:** a quote from a film theorist named Judith Halberstam. She writes, “The monster, as we know it, died in 1963.”

Halberstam chooses that date because it marks the publication of Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Arendt’s account on Adolf Eichmann’s trial that she wrote for *The New Yorker*. Halberstam’s argument is that after Arendt’s redescription of evil as a civil servant “simply ‘doing his job’ or obeying orders”, we can no longer think of the monster as psychologically warped, as wildly hateful, or, as otherworldly—the monster, instead, is a follower and a conformist; the monster is remarkably normal and utterly average... in other words, the monstrous is banal, and the monster could be anyone. If the monster is no longer Other, then we can no longer speak of **normalcy versus the monster, but only the monster as the normal, or the normal as itself monstrous**. If the monster is no longer an imaginary creature—then the monster is the human; the human is now the monster.

And that idea could be seen as the mantra for realist horror that we read about in Freeland, a horror no longer concerned with the figure of the supernatural monster, but the ordinary, everyday, average, and typical monster—or even in relation to the typicality and banality Seltzer identifies in relation to the serial killer as a type or category of person marked by abnormal normality; typifying typicality.

Realist horror is interested in, and often based on, “true stories”: In 1974, Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* deployed a visual style taken directly from documentary aesthetics. The film—based loosely on the murders of a real serial killer—opens with onscreen text that says that announces that the film is based on a true story. While German Expressionism shows us a world that formal devices mark as askew and off-kilter, by the time we get to realist horror,

these films seem to be suggesting that by showing us the world *exactly as it is*, we can see that it already horrific – **horror is already in the world**; it doesn't have to be created.

And real horror (or giving us an experience of real horror) is something that after 1960 becomes of real interest to horror films (in particular):

[marketing something as really real, really true; that mix of pleasure and intellection – screaming vs. talking in last line – is the affective commodity it's selling to spectators ]

**Key Traits of *Realist Horror*: – let's get them on the table:**

mantra “the human as monster”

Specific day, time, place – take place in our world! Camera comes in through motel blinds / catches the lovers unaware, and sees all. In opening of *Psycho*.

Interest in the city (urban space: anonymity/stranger)

Image: washed-out image; drab; ordinary/plot: boring, ordinary moments

Flat affect/flat realism/flat tone (no judgment)

NB: Henry received an X-rating from MPAA (due to “disturbing moral tone”; pointed explicitly to its amoral/neutrality towards Henry)

Surface / superficiality

Averageness/ordinariness of killer (“abnormal normality”)

even killers who are shy, sympathetic or pathetic (Tony Perkins' gentle manner and stutter is an example)

fascination of the realistic monster (human as monster)

foregrounding of spectacle over plot

Freeland: plot and violence are flat and random;

“three r's: random, reductive, repetitious” (134)

in the realm of the possible (no supernatural elements)

But **violence is: highly graphic**; unflinching presentation of disintegrating bodies

And there's a **randomness/contingency/chance** to violence;

—Violence as a result of accident or bad luck

Realist horror films are often highly self-reflexive about violence and technologies of mediation, so often show the processes of framing and representing violence, blur them (offers possibility of critique). See this in *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* in the video-rewatching scene/we'll talk about it.

Realist horror films offer a frisson (a pleasurable fright) precisely by blurring the authentic and the staged, playing the one off the other. This erasure of the distinction between art and life puts into play a series of terms: **immediacy, presence, real-time, authenticity, truth**.

And, finally, **spectacle**: for in the loss of interest in stories and plots that we see in realist horror, we see a new turn towards spectacle for spectacle's sake. And although the monster film was

interested in the **spectacle of the monstrous body** (for ex. Nosferatu's otherworldly and feral body), in realist horror we have a turn to the **spectacle of the victim's suffering body**.

So this week is about portraits and signs, but it's also about presentation and spectacle: about staging violence (though open question of who is staging: director or serial killer/film text or text of violence/art as murder or murder as art)...

Both of our films this week were dealing with the problem of the real by also posing the problem of aesthetics: portraits, staged tableaux, but also photographs, the Western literary canon, the still-life.

So, we're back to the question of meaning in postmodern culture – where to find it? Can we find it? Is there meaning in violence or does violence obliterate meaning (such that you can't say anything about it), but this time it's actually about meaning (not non-meaning or nothingness): In *Se7en*, Somerset says of the staging of gluttony, why risk the time, "Unless the act itself has meaning."

In some ways, *Se7en* and *Henry* are opposites: one is about detection/reading and interpreting clues and finding meaning; the other appears to be about a refusal of retrospection or meaning and an outright resistance to forming a pattern. One demands to be read; one refuses to be read. We'll see if we feel that way at the end.

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