

Friend or Foe: Serial Killers in Cinema

Liselotte de Beer

Master's Student at the University of Stavanger, Norway

Abstract

The concept of the serial killer is a distinctly human one. What happens when these serial killer figures move from the realm of the real to the realm of fiction? Storytelling is often a key way in which people interact with the world and it is through characters that parts of the human psyche are illuminated. They are often represented as the heroes humans strive to be or as a warning of who humans are not supposed to be. However, what happens when those lines get blurred -- what happens when the darkest of humankind is represented not as foe but as friend? Crime cinema might try to expose atrocities and give the impression that abhorrent deeds will not go unpunished, but it does not always have this effect. Serial killers in cinema often become romanticised or, at the very least, are given excuses for their actions. They are often given allure and a sense of celebrity status. This necessarily warrants an exploration into the way in which serial killers are represented within Hollywood cinema. This includes an examination of how they are characterised and how their character is illuminated through the very fibre of the art of cinema. Using the medium in order to stir up emotions in the audience and to draw them into the story is an essential part of the art of filmmaking. By engaging with the intersection of crime and cinema, it might be possible to come somewhat closer to the reasons for the fascination people have with murder and destruction.

Key Words: serial killer; cinema; representation; characterisation

Introduction

The concept of the serial killer is a distinctly human one. Sadly it is a defining feature that sets us apart, as Tinbergen (1942) states "[m]an is the only species that is a mass murderer, the only misfit in his own society [sic]." What are the implications then when these figures move from the realm of the real to the realm of fiction? Storytelling is often a key way in which people interact with the world and it is through characters that parts of the human psyche are illuminated. Characters are often represented as the heroes humans strive to be or as a warning of who we are not supposed to be. However, what happens when those lines get blurred -- what happens when the darkest of humankind is represented not as foe but as friend? The focus of this paper will be exactly this. It will serve as an examination of the representation of serial killers in contemporary cinema. This paper will consider a theoretical discussion of representation and its importance as well as a discussion on the general representation of the serial killer in cinema. It will also consider a practical analysis of this representation by examining the way in which these serial killer figures are represented on screen and how the filmic medium creates a unique experience and interaction with these figures.

The way in which cinema constructs characters and stories may offer an important view of society and individuals and how they function. Cinematic depictions are crucial in exposing the way society relates to the world and how individuals may relate to each other within that world. It is in the intersection of cinema with fields such as criminology that a space is created in which people can explore or try to understand more of what is happening in the world around them. With the advancements in technology, the screen has become the space where most interactions occur and therefore examining this space has become essential. As Rafter

and Brown (65) discuss in their book *Criminology Goes to the Movies*, film can become part of a grander dialogue in which people, who may never meet, are able to connect and share the experience of having seen certain films. Movies create a space where people can learn to identify certain issues and "work out their own opinions" regardless of whether they agree with a film's message or not. Certainly, this can be extended to whether they agree with the characters' actions or not.

Tales of monsters and brutality have always been around and those tales are often accompanied by some manner of excuse for this type of behaviour. From stories told in the Old Testament that deal with brutality and killing to modern day Television Series' such as *Dexter* or *How to Get Away with Murder*, there is often some manner of excuse brought forward that attempts to justify this type of behaviour. In film, this is equally true and there has surely been a shift from the more dark and disturbing serial killer figures to the redeemable and dare it be said, desirable characters seen on screen today. Serial killers' representation on screen has changed considerably over the years. For example, Fritz Lang's *M*, a film made in 1931 before the term serial killer even existed and a film that would help pave the way for what would become the thriller genre, does not try to convince the viewer to care about the murderer (Saporito). Although, one can note here that the 'defence lawyer' in the film does put forth the excuse that "[n]obody can be punished for something he can't help", thereby implying that it is not the murderer's fault, he was merely acting on impulse (Rafter & Brown 61). The end of the film, however, highlights the plight of the victim. Regardless of whether he should be forgiven because he cannot help his actions, the slain children's lives can never be brought back (Rafter & Brown 62). The message of grief seems to be much stronger than that of the killer. According to Saporito it is clear that there is a difference between *M*'s murderer and the serial

killers portrayed in media today. He notes that the Dexter-type of serial killer that exists today is able to get viewers to sympathise and even support their actions (Saporito). Countless films can be mentioned here, for example, *Extremely Wicked*, *Shockingly Evil and Vile*¹ (Berlinger), which centres around Ted Bundy and his relationship with his girlfriend Liz. The focus seems to be more on their love story than the crimes he committed. Another film that constructs a serial killer deserving of sympathy, is *The Talented Mr Ripley* (Minghella). Here the character of Tom Ripley murders people as far as he goes, most of it in order to keep his secret, but somehow one is made to feel sorry for him, as if he deserved much more from life than he got.

Stories and Society

These cinematic representations are worthy of examination and are important because storytelling is important. As J Hillis Miller (69) states, the human's ability to tell stories is one of the ways in which an orderly world can be collectively built. It is with fictions that the "meaning of human life" is investigated or perhaps even invented according to Miller (69). Stories shape our lives. It may be said that stories have an important role in the making of a culture and as "the unostentatious, but therefore all the more effective, policemen of that culture" (Miller 69). If one then considers the way in which 'monsters' are portrayed on screen in an almost likeable and 'normal' fashion the question opens up of where this places contemporary fiction in relation to its so-called 'policing-function' and perhaps this also says a lot more about society than one would like to admit. The serial killer as Conrich (160) puts it, is a "social aberrant, yet also a cultural construct" and as Bonn states in an article on *Psychology Today*, the serial killer identity can arguably be seen as a reflection of

¹ Hereafter the film will be referred to as *Extremely Wicked*.

society. Interestingly though, very few films tend to deal with the idea that social and cultural elements may play a role in the creation of the serial killer. Perhaps this is an issue of blame shifting and trying to frame the individual as the only one responsible for his or her actions and removing the societal aspect from it.

Stories are furthermore underpinned by ideologies. Mitchell (15) states that it is "clear that representation even purely 'aesthetic' representation of fictional persons and events can never be completely divorced from political and ideological questions." The way in which things are depicted on screen necessarily has an ideological undertone to it and therefore care should be taken with how objectionable figures are constructed on screen. As Sturken and Cartwright (12) point out, the meaning of things is constructed "through the process of representing them". Therefore, it is perhaps through their representation that an attempt is made to understand these individuals, which makes the way they are represented an even more sensitive issue.

According to Mitchell (12), representation is always "of something or someone, by something or someone to someone". There is a relation between all the parts of the representation. If one considers this in relation to film, there is clearly a relationship between the viewer and the film as well as the intention of the filmmaker. The way in which elements are represented on screen has a clear impact on how the viewer perceives them. There is also a certain intent regarding the way in which the message or representation then, is constructed for a viewing audience. The way in which the film uses its elements such as camera, costume, colour and so on, all work together in order to create a certain message or feeling for an audience watching the film (Young in Rafter & Brown 9). These elements work together to create meaning or expose issues on screen.

Scripting Crime

Crime cinema may try to expose atrocities and give the impression that abhorrent deeds will not go unpunished, but it does not always have this effect. Sometimes quite the opposite is true, sometimes murderers are shown and constructed in a way within film and literature that seems to excuse their behaviour or that tries to give them some moralistic advantage. Reasons are provided for their atrocious behaviour, for example that they did it because of their own terrible past, such as can be seen in *Red Dragon* (Ratner) or that they feel they are helping society in some way. Hannibal Lecter, for example, only preys on those who he deems too rude or uncultured to belong to civilisation. In his mind what he does is for the good of society. These excuses serve as a way for an audience to connect to these characters.

A large part of filmmaking and storytelling in general has to do with creating relatable characters or characters that an audience can root for. Here another example can be seen in *The Clovehitch Killer* (Skiles), this film has a 'save-the-cat' moment at the start of the film. A 'save-the-cat' moment refers to the idea that the 'hero' should perform a good deed, such as saving a cat, in order for the audience to root for them as the good guy (Snyder 191). This happens when the father, who is behind several BTK-like murders, swerves to miss a turtle crossing the road and then stops. His son jumps out of the car to move the turtle, and the feeling that is stirred up in the audience is that *both* of these men are good and kind, making the audience invest in someone who turns out to be responsible for a string of murders. A similar moment is seen early on in *Extremely Wicked*, even though this film starts at the prison, Bundy's character is taken to the past quite quickly where he is painted as a kind gentleman who even gets up early to feed Liz's daughter and lets Liz sleep in. Whether or not the viewer knows the real story, these family moments are constructed in a way to make

it resemble a romance film -- even the warm colour palette of Ted in Liz's house adds to this and creates a feeling of cosiness and warmth. The representation of these figures is intertwined within the story and scripts of these films and they are set up for the viewer in the very first moments. Even Hannibal Lecter is somewhat gentle in his first meeting with Clarice in *Silence of the Lambs* (Demme), even if this is just in contrast to the prisoners surrounding him. Although Lecter may not necessarily be seen as the 'main' serial killer hunted in the film, his character is one of the most well known within crime cinema.

Engaging with the Filmic Medium

It is not only within the scripts and characterisation that these figures' representation should be examined. It goes much further than that, into the very fibre of the art of filmmaking. Alison Young (7) emphasises that it is through the "cinematographic dimension of film," that cinema can "elaborate the affective relation between spectator and crime-image" and this is central to the incorporation of the spectator "into the scene of violence and identification in and through the crime-image". It is therefore crucial that cinema takes this responsibility seriously, as it is no longer simply about telling a story but about how that story makes the viewer feel about what they are watching. Film represents characters in an entirely different way from how this may be done in books or photographs. Therefore, analysing films according to the cinematic nature of their medium may reveal intricacies about the character and the story.

Looking at the way in which the film *Extremely Wicked* uses the filmic medium to construct its representation of the serial killer Ted Bundy, reveals an almost contrasting character. On the one hand, the story is known to be that of an

infamous serial killer but on the other hand, the way the film tries to construct him seems to confuse this issue. If one starts with the purely visual aspect of the actor within this film, the problems already arise. Zac Efron, a very attractive and well-know Disney star is cast in the role of Ted Bundy and while his acting is quite riveting, it is the ease of his charm that a viewer should be wary of. The film uses several close-ups, which can make the viewer feel somehow closer to the characters and their emotions are exposed more clearly (Hellerman). There are several shots of Ted that seems to show his vulnerability, moments of shock and sadness and even shots where tears run down his face. These all serve to humanise him, he emerges as a character who has been wronged by the justice system and the way in which his face plays these emotions off to an audience, makes an audience member buy into the idea that maybe, just maybe, he was not guilty after all. The way in which shots are framed in the film seems to show off Ted's vulnerability and it creates a greater sense of intimacy with the character, which can have the effect of identifying with the character. Using close-ups has the effect of drawing the audience "into the subject's space" and it helps the audience understand the character's feelings (Hellerman). The film's focus also appears to be on his devotion for Liz and very little on his crimes. His motivation is almost depicted as if everything is *for* Liz. The way the film is edited and the relation of scenes to one another also reveal a lot about the way this character is represented. There are scenes where his escape is juxtaposed with Liz talking to a new guy, giving the sense that he has to get to her before it is too late. It also almost makes the viewer root for him to break out of prison quicker. When in reality, his escape had very little to do with getting back to her.

The camera is central to the medium of film and it is precisely with this use of camera that the film draws in the audience, making them complicit in whatever they

are viewing. It becomes more of an active look -- the gaze of the viewer holding a great sense of power over what is being viewed. If one considers the film *Psycho* (Hitchcock), for example, it came out in the 1960s and Norman Bates, the killer constructed in the film, is not seen as a hero, quite the opposite in fact. In this film the camera seems to adopt "Norman's point of view, luring" the viewer "into his consciousness" (Rafter & Brown 52). The deeds committed in this film are rather unsettling but more than that, Norman Bates is constructed in a way that does not seem to forgive his actions or try to excuse them. Instead, the viewer is made to feel almost as guilty as Bates with the use of the clever camerawork and cinematic elements all working together to create this feeling in the viewer. The audience becomes a voyeur along with Bates (Rafter & Brown 57).

If one then fast-forwards to the films of the last couple of decades, the place of the camera seems quite different. In *Extremely Wicked*, it is as if the camera is the placeholder for Liz's gaze and therefore much of the way in which Ted Bundy is seen is from a point of love and adoration, even in the moments where she doubts him. Linked to the fact that none of his crimes are actually shown on screen, the viewer feels much less complicit in the atrocities that he commits. Similarly in the film *The Clovehitch Killer*, the camera seems to align the viewer with the son observing what his father is doing -- the implication of this is that there is almost a reluctance to accept the truth, at first at least.

Using the medium in order to stir up emotions in the audience is an essential part of the art of filmmaking and with the advancements in technology and new ways of editing and filming, these representations can become all the more realistic and therefore filmmakers need to be cautious. Filmmakers carry certain responsibility and this is especially true when film can influence "mainstream public conceptions and

understanding of 'crime' and not just of invoking reactions of 'horror' or pleasure" (Kanarakis). Films, as a key method of storytelling, goes further than merely entertaining and, as already mentioned, are intertwined with issues of ideology and the very fabric of the way society functions. Film is foremost seen as a form of entertainment -- an escape from everyday life or from the terrible things happening in the world. However, so much of what can be seen on screen nowadays deals with the very things we are trying to escape from. Why then does it still seem as if this genre of the serial killer (or any murder film, really) is growing? Perhaps creating a vicarious experience. In the cover of a dark cinema audiences can live out their fantasies. This identification with a figure such as the serial killer can certainly be seen as problematic.

Problematic Representations

The problem with the representation of the serial killer on screen or in literature can be taken back to Plato. Plato accepted that literature (by extension film can also be included today) can be seen as a "representation of life" -- but it is for exactly this reason that representation should be banished according to Plato as they may represent "bad persons and actions, encouraging imitation of evil" (Mitchell 12). There is much debate about this issue of whether life imitates art or art imitates life but one thing is certain, it opens up the question of whether the representation of these monstrous figures should perhaps be treated with a bit more care. If the thought is that their depictions are purely entertainment should one not be more careful with the way in which these depictions happen? Especially when they are sometimes constructed not as a killer or monster but as some kind of hero figure who oftentimes just tries to fit in.

There seems to be an argument for and against this type of representation. Representing the serial killer in a hero-esque fashion seems to illuminate the idea that these figures are not always who one might expect. Often these figures are seemingly everyday people, they are fathers, students, church leaders or family men. Therefore representing them on screen in such a fashion could potentially serve to heighten our awareness that these figures could be around every corner. They are not only the obscure and the so-called Other. But rather they are the abnormally normal walking among us. Seltzer (10) quotes a prosecutor who stated that the serial killer is "abnormally normal: just like you or me".

On the other side of this argument, however, care should be taken to not push this particular view of the serial killer too far. Trying to show him as an everyman figure could have the effect of showing him as a romantic hero as can be seen in the film *Extremely Wicked*, for example. This film has moments where it feels more like a romantic drama with the lead fighting to get back to his love. It is only in the dying moments of the film that the viewer sees the true horror of what has occurred and that he was not a wronged man but simply a guilty one. The more these monsters are represented on screen and the more they are forgiven for their transgressions, the more normal and acceptable their presence might become. As I have already mentioned, stories are our way of engaging with the world and if our stories are filled with forgivable murderers and defensible transgressors they run the risk of becoming normalised in our everyday lives.

There may be many arguments as to how serial killer should be depicted on screen (indeed arguments of whether they should be depicted at all). Surely a multitude of reasons exist for the fact that serial killers are portrayed. Perhaps this occurs because giving a redeeming quality or reasons to justify this type of behaviour

may assist understanding the violence and the actions of these individuals. Ruddock states that while it is essential that violence be punished, violence also needs to be understood. Perhaps viewers want to feel empathy for these killers as if trying to understand why they do what they do could help them sleep better at night. Another, and much more disturbing, possibility has already been mentioned, namely that these fascinations with killers exist because their cinematic representations create a space for the viewer to live vicariously through these serial killers -- living out fantasies of anger and revenge and in some way identifying with these individuals. According to Bennett and Royle (70), identifying with a character is to "identify oneself". When it comes to identifying with a serial killer, a dark abyss may be faced and the blurring of the lines between right and wrong may be dangerously close.

Conclusion

Whatever the reasons for these representations and the growing trend of examining the serial killer on screen, it is clear that there is an element of society reflected in cinema. One may never get behind the true reasons as to why these heroic depictions of the serial killer exist in the first place and why so many people revel in them but hopefully by engaging with it more and by asking the difficult questions of society and ourselves, some aspect of it may be understood. As stated by Erich Fromm (23), "[n]othing short of an analysis in depth of our social system can disclose the reason for the increase in destructiveness, or suggest ways and means of reducing it." Perhaps we should even be considering it as something in the self that needs to be confronted, a version of the destructive outcast that lives hidden inside everyone.

Work Cited

- Bennett, Andrew, and Nicholas Royle. *This Thing Called Literature: Reading, Thinking, Writing*. Routledge, 2015.
- Bonn, Scott A. "Our Curious Fascination With Serial Killers." *Psychology Today*, 23 Oct. 2017, www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/wicked-deeds/201710/our-curious-fascination-serial-killers. Accessed 27 Aug. 2019.
- The Clovehitch Killer*. Directed by Duncan Skiles, IFC Midnight, 2018.
- Conrich, Ian. *Criminal visions: media representations of crime and justice*. Edited by Paul Mason, Willan Pub, 2003, pp. 156-171.
- Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile*. Directed by Joe Berlinger. Netflix. 2019.
- Fromm, Erich. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. Penguin Books Ltd, 1977.
- Hannibal*. Directed by Ridley Scott, MGM Distribution Co., 2001.
- Hellerman, J. "Close-Up Shot: How to Creatively Use The Camera Angle." 9 Jan. 2019, nofilmschool.com/Close-up-shot-uses-and-examples.
- Kanarakis, Evan. "Popular Culture Representations of Crime." *The Cud | Thecud*, thecud.com/live/content/popular-culture-representations-crime. Accessed 1 Sept. 2019.
- M*. Directed by Fritz Lang, Vereinigte Star-Film GmbH, 1931.
- Miller, J. Hillis. "Narrative." *Critical Terms for Literary Study, Second Edition*, edited by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, U of Chicago P, 1995, pp. 66-79.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. "Representation." *Critical Terms for Literary Study, Second Edition*, edited by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, U of Chicago P, 1995, pp. 11-22.
- Psycho*. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, Paramount Pictures, 1960.
- Rafter, Nicole H., and Michelle Brown. *Criminology Goes to the Movies: Crime Theory and Popular Culture*. NYU P, 2011.
- Red Dragon*. Directed by Brett Ratner, Universal Pictures, 2002.

- Ruddock, Andy. "Vale Dexter, the Serial Killer Who Changed the Face of TV Violence." *The Conversation*, 20 Sept. 2013, theconversation.com/vale-dexter-the-serial-killer-who-changed-the-face-of-tv-violence-18220. Accessed 27 Aug. 2019.
- Saporito, Jeff. "Since "M," How Has the Serial Killer Figure Evolved in Film and TV." *Film & TV Explained. Analysis for Movie & TV Fans*. | *ScreenPrism*, 12 Jan. 2016, screenprism.com/insights/article/how-has-the-serial-killer-evolved-since-m-as-the-central-figure-in-storytel. Accessed 27 Aug. 2019.
- Seltzer, Mark. *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*. Routledge, 1998.
- Snyder, Blake. *Save the Cat!: The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need*. Michael Wiese Productions, 2005.
- Sturken, Marita, and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture (Second Edition)*. Oxford UP, USA, 2009.
- The Silence of the Lambs*. Directed by Jonathan Demme, Orion Pictures, 1991.
- The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Directed by Anthony Minghella, Paramount Pictures and Miramax Films, 1999.
- Tinbergen, N. "On War and Peace in Animals and Man: An ethologist's approach to the biology of aggression." *Science*, vol. 160, no. 3835, 1968, pp. 1411-1418.
- Young, Alison. *The Scene of Violence : Cinema, Crime, Affect*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2009. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.uis.no/lib/uisbib/detail.action?docID=465606>.