

Portrait of a serial killer: Intertextuality and gender in the portrait film

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Abstract: This article presents a feminist analysis of the serial killer portrait film – a cycle of contemporary low-budget films featuring serial killer protagonists. Although unusual within serial killer cinema for their frustration of identification and suspense, portrait films remain locked into wider popular discourses around serial murder, particularly in their intertextual aspects. In the portrait film, this results in a tautological construction of the serial killer (he kills because he is a killer, he is a killer because he kills) that places him not only beyond understanding but also outside society and, so, unconnected to normative constructions of masculinity.

Keywords: serial killer cinema, Peter Sutcliffe, gender, genre, intertextuality.

Authors: Karen Boyle and Jenny Reburn

Corresponding author:

Karen Boyle, Professor of Feminist Media Studies, University of Stirling, FK9 4LA.

Karen.Boyle@stir.ac.uk

Biographies:

Karen Boyle is Professor of Feminist Media Studies, and Director of the Centre for Gender & Feminist Studies, at the University of Stirling. She is the editor of

Everyday Pornography (Routledge, 2010), author of Media & Violence: Gendering the Debates (Sage, 2005) and has published widely on gender, genre, violence and representation.

Jenny Reburn recently completed a PhD at the University of Glasgow. Her research interests include screen violence and depictions of gender.

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The serial killer has always been understood in and through popular culture, emerging as a figure of historical, criminological and popular significance not with the first instance of multiple killings, but with the first widespread narrativisation of an ongoing case of serial murder in the popular press. We refer, of course, to the 1888 femicides in Whitechapel, attributed to “Jack the Ripper”. In contemporaneous press accounts of these murders, fictional antecedents provided a compelling hook on which to hang the story as well as a ready-made narrative structure for its telling. As such, the serial killer was, from the outset, understood intertextually, in relation to other (factual and fictional) killers and through serialised narrative forms with their own generic conventions. This has created an interesting tension in popular discourse, for whilst the serial killer is widely constructed as a unique individual (Cameron and Frazer 1987), this has itself become formulaic through its repetition in both factual and fictional accounts whether in film, television, novels, true crime literature, press reporting or even serial killers’ own accounts of their crimes (Cameron and Frazer, 1987; Biressi, 2001; Gregoriou, 2011; Bartels and Parsons, 2009; Brady, 2001). It is this tension between the individual and generic or formulaic---and, specifically, what that means for feminist understandings of serial murder---which is at the heart of this article.

Our specific focus here is what Jenny Reburn (2012) has called the serial killer portrait film: a cycle of contemporary low-budget films which focus on real-life (male) serial killers with the claim to offer insight into the killer and his crimes. Typically low-budget, featuring actors who are relatively unknown outside of the cycle, often exhibiting poor production values and usually released straight to DVD, these films are unusual among serial killer narratives in that they demonstrate little interest in seriality: murders are out of sequence; there is little attention to patterning (victim type or method of killing); and they are almost completely lacking in suspense. The crimes are represented as more random than serial and the killer more chaotic than organised, clever or cunning. But whilst they may subvert some aspects of serial killer discourse, portrait films are formulaic in other ways, insisting on understanding the serial killer as an isolated individual outside of social and cultural forces, whilst simultaneously being densely intertextual to the extent that they often

make little sense without prior knowledge of this and other (factual and fictional) killers.

As such, the portrait film offers a useful point from which to reflect on the position of the serial killer within popular discourse more generally. We begin by revisiting some of the feminist arguments about serial killer discourse as the foundation upon which our subsequent analysis is built. We move on to provide an introduction to the portrait film. As we will discuss, this is a primarily US cycle with the marketing for many of the films situating their narratives in a broader “national” discourse around serial murder. Indeed, despite the status of the 1888 Whitechapel murders as the prototypical serial killer case, this type of crime is commonly understood as a particularly American phenomenon, partly due to the FBI’s intervention in serial killer discourse from the 1970s onwards (Jenkins, 1994; Schmid, 2005; Seltzer, 1998).

However, in the final section of this article, we focus on a rare British example of the cycle---Skip Kite’s 2011 film *Peter: A Portrait of a Serial Killer*.ⁱ This is a particularly interesting film for our purposes, firstly because its central character---Peter Sutcliffe, nicknamed the Yorkshire Ripper by the British press during his killing spree---is so clearly positioned in an intertextual web, albeit one with obviously British origins (referring back to the Whitechapel killer). Whilst we are less interested in national than in gendered discourses around serial murder, this article demonstrates how these discourses have circulated and developed in a trans-Atlantic context. As we will show, Peter exhibits formal and thematic continuities with the US-films, not least in the ways in which it closes down historically and socially specific ways of reading Sutcliffe’s crimes. Sutcliffe’s murders of 13 women in Yorkshire (England) between 1975 and 1980 became a flashpoint for feminist activism in the period and, subsequently, generated considerable feminist critique: in relation to the crimes themselves; the police investigation of them; and their media representation (e.g. Hollway 1981; Ward Jouve 1986; Bland 1992). Yet, as we will demonstrate, Peter ignores this context, individualising explanation whilst drawing on well-worn---but apparently gender-blind---generic clichés to do so. It thus constructs a privileged position for the “knowing” spectator--- the spectator who is knowledgeable about serial killers in general, and Sutcliffe in particular---which curbs the radical potential of the film, closing down the possibility of reading Sutcliffe and his crimes socially, culturally or historically. The serial killer is kept out

of reach, his “madness” the only explanation for his crimes, an explanation which simultaneously renders him individually unknowable and generically recognisable, and which makes no demand on its spectator beyond the world of the film itself.

Feminist analyses of serial killer discourse

Although instances of repeat killing do occur in the real world, the term “serial killer” is a discursive category informed by codes and conventions drawn from popular culture as much as from criminology or psychiatry. In emphasising the mediated nature of serial killer texts, feminist cultural critics Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer affirm that all accounts surrounding real killers, from journalistic and true crime literature to police and psychiatric records and statements made by killers themselves, “are not ‘the truth’; they are yet more constructed texts” (1987, xiii).

The clearest example of this is the figure of Jack the Ripper. Although the crimes attributed to Jack the Ripper did happen, “Jack” as the lone figure held responsible for those crimes was (and is), as Jane Caputi (1988, 22) describes him, “a collective male invention”. The moniker “Jack the Ripper” originated in a letter sent to the Central News Agency---quite possibly penned by a journalist---claiming responsibility for the crimes and taunting the police (Walkowitz 1982). In the absence of a named perpetrator, Jack---widely deemed the “first” serial killer---was an essentially fictional figure: not an individual but an “outline, a repository, a type” (Caputi 1988, 14). In the apparent absence of historical precedent, commentators in 1888 reached for fictional analogues---most notably the doubled figure of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde---in attempts to make sense of, and make a story from, the crimes (Walkowitz 1982). From these origins, the serial killer became an almost mythical figure, and, as feminist critics have argued, this has functioned to conceal historical particularities in specific crimes, the power structures which influence the form violence takes and the connections between the serial killer and other violent men (Walkowitz 1982; Cameron and Frazer 1987; Caputi 1988; Boyle 2005), whilst contributing to the construction of the killer-as-celebrity, even--- paradoxically--- when his identity is unknown (Schmid, 2005).

Whilst the absence of a known perpetrator makes the Whitechapel murderer a particularly clear example of the fictionalisation of the serial killer, the recurrence of

this “type” is evident in the use of “Ripper” to describe later real (and fictional) killers, including Sutcliffe. While there are similarities between the 1888 murders and those in Yorkshire 90 years later (the apparent targeting of prostitutes, the sense of community panic, the bodily mutilation), the overt linking of these murders suggests the enduring appeal of the “type” established in the emergent mass media in 1888. This is further demonstrated by news coverage of three femicides in the Yorkshire city of Bradford in 2010, which highlights the later killer’s similarity to, and alleged fascination with, Sutcliffe. In a report following the 2010 killer’s arrest, The Sun--- Britain’s biggest-selling daily newspaper---claims that one of his victims was killed “outside the home of the Yorkshire Ripper” and highlights connections between the men on a map pinpointing locations significant to each set of crimes. An inset to the main story describes the Yorkshire Ripper case and pictures Sutcliffe and three of his victims (Taylor 2010). Serial killing is thus presented as an essentially intertextual crime: any new instance only makes sense in relation to what has gone before, and the links with previous stories extend the serial nature of the discourse itself.

Yet, although it is widely recognised that these killers are nearly exclusively men,ⁱⁱ there is little possibility within the popular frameworks described here of reading these crimes in relation to masculinity. While it would be a mistake to read serial killing as inherently misogynist (not all victims are female), feminist critics have argued that serial murders are popularly constructed as acts of self-affirmation through which a particular kind of male subjectivity is confirmed (Cameron and Frazer 1987, 166-8). These roles are less easily occupied by women whose “subject status is continually being negated” (ibid, 168). Additionally, strong cultural associations between murder and the figure of the male romanticised rebel helps to account for fascination with the serial killer, a figure often afforded a “folk hero status” for his defiance of authoritarian legal and social codes (Boyle 2005, 62; Caputi 1988), as seen most recently in the television series Dexter (Showtime, 2006-2013). However, the possibility that the social and cultural construction of masculinity may be a contributory factor in serial murder---understood in relation to a continuum across which male violence per se is normalised (Kelly 1988)---is obscured by narratives which isolate the killer and individualise understanding, usually in relation to mental illness.

The intertextuality of these accounts also suggests that the serial killer cannot exist without publicity, that his crimes are meaningless without the media. The act of

writing about serial killers---critically or not---could therefore be argued to extend their significance. This is the dilemma for critics of popular culture. By positioning these men at the centre of our analysis we run the risk of contributing to the very discourse we set out to critique. At the same time, cultural critics, and feminist critics in particular, can---and have---made important interventions in serial killer discourse and, by elucidating and examining its features, have sought to reveal the generic qualities of the killer, positioning him not as an exceptional individual but rather as a predictable one; not a hero but a stock figure whose actions echo broader cultural constructions of masculinity (Hollway 1981; Ward Jouve 1986; Cameron and Frazer 1987; Caputi 1988; Cameron 1994). This is, arguably, a politically important move in that it seeks to puncture the self-worth of serial killer accounts whilst also exploring the nature of broader investments in serial killer discourse---and it is this project that we aim to contribute to here.

The portrait films are useful objects for analysis in this context as, on one hand, they seem to be totally invested in the notion of the serial killer as a unique individual, worthy of portraiture. On the other, their marketing and intertextuality suggests that the killer is a culturally recognisable figure precisely because he is generic. In the next section, we will provide a brief introduction to, and overview of, the cycle which considers these tensions in more detail.

Portrait of a serial killer

The term “portrait film” was coined by Jenny Reburn (2012) in her work on serial killer cinema. Reburn uses the term to classify a group of low-budget films---mainly straight-to-video/DVD releases from 2000 to the present---which focus on a real serial killer, typically a white, US male. In these films, the killer is the protagonist and has the greatest amount of screen time, but whilst they often promise insight into the killer’s mind or motivation, they typically fail to deliver any explanations for his violence. As these films have not enjoyed wide-distribution, we want to briefly provide some background information about the cycle and the intertextual context in which it operates.

While the portrait film became a recognisable cycle in the 2000s, it began in the 1980s with two films about Henry Lee Lucas: Confessions of a Serial Killer (Blair 1985) and the more celebrated Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer (McNaughton

1986) which remains unique among portrait films in the critical and commercial success it attracted. The influence of Henry on the cycle is acknowledged in our---and Reburn's---description of them as "portraits". In art, portraits aim to represent the personality as well as the physical likeness of an individual and the term suggests a desire to probe the subject in a more impressionistic, abstract way than other examples of serial killer discourse, which usually take a more linear, "faithful" attitude to established facts. In contrast, portrait films---from Henry onwards---are often "loosely based on" an individual and his crimes, and despite relying on the audience's prior knowledge to make sense of the film frequently diverge from known facts. In this way, the portraits have a paradoxical relationship with the true crime genre, echoing true crime's status as both entertainment and source of knowledge (Biressi, 2001) while undermining any sense of authenticity by changing or omitting important elements of the story--- aspects which are immediately apparent to regular consumers of true crime. Interestingly, the portraits often draw attention to their construction, contrasting the actor's embodiment of the killer with photographs, sound recordings and filmed footage of the known-killer. Whilst at times the similarities are striking (as is the case in Peter), in others it is the disparity between original and copy which is most notable. This is not as jarring as it might be however, as the actor's failure to properly imitate the original adds to the sense that the killer is always slightly beyond the reach or comprehension of "normal" people. That the lead characters are typically played by actors relatively unknown outside of the cycle is important here as their often unpolished acting styles paradoxically add both to the claims of authenticity and our awareness of the "gap" between actor and killer. These casting decisions also mean that these films focus on---and arguably participate in--- the celebrity of the real-life killer, with these relatively unknown actors carrying little intertextual baggage of their own to dilute or redirect our attention. All of this enhances the construction of the killer as a unique individual who cannot be easily or adequately represented or understood.

That the portraits begin with Henry Lee Lucas is significant. Lucas was arrested in 1983 and in the months that followed confessed to his involvement in up to 600 murders across the US. He later retracted his confessions and many were proven to be false. Nevertheless, Lucas became an influential figure in the development of serial killer discourse in the US in the 1980s (Jenkins 1994), and continues to be a figure of fascination with two subsequent portrait films---Henry:

Portrait of a Serial Killer Part 2 (Parello 1996) and Drifter: Henry Lee Lucas (Feifer 2009)---also taking his alleged crimes, or confessions, as their starting point. Interestingly, even the 2009 film, which recognises his confessions to be false, remains focused on Lucas as an enigmatic figure who is incomprehensible both to diegetic characters and the spectator. As such, the 600 murders are significant only as they figure in his story: the question is whether or not Lucas's account of them is fictional. This is troubling insofar as the murders themselves were not fictional. But with its relentless focus on Lucas, the question of who did commit those murders is never asked, perhaps because the likely answer troubles the cultural fascination with the serial killer as a unique individual. If, instead of Lucas, we have hundreds of killers, then noticing what these perpetrators share (almost certainly, gender) becomes unavoidable and the portrait film's emphasis on individual psychology (albeit generically framed) becomes untenable.

Lucas is not the only killer to have multiple films of this kind devoted to him.ⁱⁱⁱ But it is not only the subject matter which is repeated. The cycle is dominated by a few directors (Fieffer, Parello and Lommel), with a number of writers and producers also working across multiple films and the same actors cropping up in different roles. Many of the films share a distributor (Lions Gate), the DVDs feature trailers for other portrait films and there are various "serial killer boxsets" on offer. Thus, whilst the films themselves do not highlight seriality---unlike more mainstream serial killer thrillers (Dyer 1997)---viewing a number of these films does contribute to a sense of patterning and sequence lacking in individual films. Moreover, the repeated use of the term "serial killer" in their marketing draws attention to the killer as a "type" and, at the same time, positions him as distinctive within the broader, and often national, pantheon of serial killers: he is "America's first" (Ed Gein) or "America's most infamous" (Ted Bundy). Arguably reinforcing the prominence of nation in these taglines, the films themselves often have a very imprecise sense of place with central characters frequently shown in liminal spaces (roads, rivers) enhancing the sense---which begins with Lucas---that the threat posed by the serial killer is diffuse and pervasive. Whilst in more mainstream serial killer fictions this legitimates the use of new technologies of surveillance and investment in law enforcement at a Federal level, the portrait film typically has little explicit interest, investment or faith in law enforcement at any level (Reburn, 2012). In this respect, although representing a UK case, Peter is typical of the cycle more broadly in that its

police officers exist on the periphery, unable to contain the killer or give structure to his narrative.

Importantly, this intertextual referencing frequently situates real life killers alongside their fictional counterparts. This comparison is often made with the stated intent of stressing the portrait's authenticity. So, for example, Henry is "not Freddy, he's not Jason... He's real", the comparison with the monstrous figures from the Nightmare on Elm Street and Friday the 13th franchises not only emphasising the factual basis of the film but also implying that Lucas' crimes share elements of their fictional antecedents. The affinity with fictional horrors is suggested in other ways too: promotional images are dominated by red and black; DVD covers reproduce images of victims and victimisation; and DVDs often include trailers for fictional horror alongside other portraits. By repeatedly inviting comparison with fictional analogues, the meta-discourse surrounding these films arguably contributes to the mythologisation and celebrity of the serial killer---even when the films themselves are more complex---at the same time as suggesting that they are generic, almost cartoonish, figures. In this way, the intertextuality of serial-killer narratives (film, television, news reporting, literature, true crime books, magazines, television and websites) produces one long serial (killer) narrative in which each new instalment is claimed to offer something distinctive, something more---more explicit, more revealing, more accurate, more violent---than what has come before (Boyle 2005, 67). Notably, victims are reduced to a type or a position in the killer's sequence. In portrait films, victims are rarely named, their profiles are altered, killings are extracted from time and placed in montage sequences which rob victims of individuality, and one or two victims are usually used as emblematic of them all.

Yet, for Reburn (2012), notwithstanding the broader context in which they circulate, the films themselves offer an interesting twist on the ways in which serial killers are typically represented, eschewing the emphasis on suspense and an investigative structure which provides the viewer with a relatively "safe" position for identification. In contrast, the portrait film is often chaotic, almost utterly lacking in suspense, and frustrates attempts at identification---even with the killer. Reburn acknowledges that there is a radical potential in these films' ability to confuse and unsettle, with the messy and achronological narratives rendering the killer devoid of characteristics which have rendered the serial killer a folk hero in other contexts (e.g. intelligence, an ability to control himself and others, keen organisational skills).

Indeed, Reburn suggests that the portrait film can therefore offer a limited critique of violence and its actors. To the extent that the films frustrate viewers' expectations (e.g. of suspense, clear explanations, explicit violence, nudity, a conclusion) they usefully shed light on more mainstream and acclaimed fictional representations in The Silence of the Lambs (Demme 1991) mould. Nevertheless, Reburn is wary of claiming that these films are necessarily progressive, noting that they tend to frame the crimes as manifestations of individual deviance and frustrate attempts to read serial killers and their crimes socially, culturally and historically as feminists have done. As such, the gendering of violence, its actors and victims, goes unremarked.

In the final section, we will explore these issues in more detail in relation to Peter: A Portrait of a Serial Killer. The British origins of film and subject makes this an unusual example of the portrait film^{iv} and it also largely eschews links with exploitation horror in its marketing. That despite these differences the intertextual web it draws on still frustrates understanding makes it a compelling case study with which to demonstrate the pervasive nature of some of the conventions we have outlined in this section.

Peter: A case study

As noted above, Peter: A Portrait of a Serial Killer takes as its subject the so-called Yorkshire Ripper, Peter Sutcliffe. This real-life referent is persistently highlighted, both in the film's marketing and its aesthetics, yet at the centre of the film's account of Sutcliffe is a clearly fictionalised relationship between the incarcerated Peter (Walt Kissack) and "his" psychiatrist, Dr Spencer (Gary Sharkey). In the film's final moments, it is revealed that Spencer is a figment of Peter's imagination: Spencer is---in effect---Peter himself. Thus the central premise of the film speaks to many of the conventions we have discussed so far: it presents the serial killer as an outwardly normal, internally-divided figure; it suggests that understandings of the serial killer are necessarily individualistic and psychological (at the same time as this explanation itself becomes generic); and it demonstrates the blurring of fact and fiction in serial killer discourse. The twist ending, combined with the lack of a clear account of the case itself, further suggests that the film privileges an intertextual spectatorship. It rewards---perhaps demands---prior knowledge,

whether gleaned from memory, news reporting, documentary, drama-documentary or true crime.^v It invites its audience to play the role of detective, not in a conventional sense (whodunit is known) but by piecing together fragments to, first, make sense of the film and, second, build a picture of the man. That this picture is ultimately unrevealing seems to be the point.

Here, we will first consider the marketing of the film before moving on to discuss its opening moments, focusing on how fact and fiction are interlaced to suggest the layers of intertextuality at work. This leads into a discussion of the function of the fictional Spencer before we finally turn our attention to the treatment of the victims.

The factual roots of the film are widely emphasised in its marketing yet, even here, there is a sense that the “facts” about Sutcliffe are only ever known remotely. The DVD cover^{vi} is dominated by an image of Kissack, styled to look eerily like an early-1980s Sutcliffe in an image familiar (certainly in Britain) from its widespread use in the press and true crime genres. The accompanying text (“A portrait of a serial killer /Peter Sutcliffe---The Yorkshire Ripper”) flags up the factual basis of the film at the same time as alluding to its generic antecedents, both in terms of serial killer history (the “Ripper”) and its filmic representation (the titular referencing of McNaughton’s Henry).^{vii} The blurb on the back extends the claims to accuracy and insight, promising “to reveal for the first time ever the astonishing TRUE story of ‘The Yorkshire Ripper’”. Yet, alongside these claims is an apparently unproblematic conflation of the factual and fictional. So we are promised that the film will explore not only Sutcliffe’s childhood and crimes but also “his ongoing psychological treatment”, which, as we have noted, is represented in the film by Peter’s alter-ego, the fictional Dr Spencer. The apparent lack of self-awareness about this blurring of fact and fiction---in a context where the filmmakers are otherwise at pains to stress the film’s authenticity---is suggestive of the extent to which this has become a normative and unremarkable feature of serial killer discourse. Indeed, in press accounts of the film archived on the film’s official website, Spencer is simply referred to as Peter’s/Sutcliffe’s “psychiatrist”, the twist ending---and what this might mean for the film’s claims to authenticity---conveniently ignored.

The use of Richard McCann in promoting the film is also worthy of comment. McCann is the son of Sutcliffe’s first victim, Wilma McCann, and his words both adorn the DVD cover---“It was like having the ripper in my living room”---and

preface the film. Without in any way minimising his personal trauma, it is relevant to note that McCann---who was five years old at the time of his mother's murder---has never met Sutcliffe. His authentication, then, draws on knowledge of what is publicly available about Sutcliffe, largely through media accounts. McCann's endorsements serve a further function, distancing the film from more exploitative fare and suggesting that it has the support of those most directly affected by Sutcliffe's crimes. Yet, this is a portrait film which is singularly focused on the killer: the victims are barely mentioned and are treated as interchangeable at best. The prominence given to McCann's endorsement diverts attention from this and also from the gendered dynamic at the heart of the crimes. Instead, the film is set up as offering one man an understanding of another and, indeed, as the film develops, the journey into "the dark and twisted mind" of the serial killer which its promotional material promises, is repeatedly figured as a male quest.

This is set up in the film's opening sequence. Following McCann's words (which appear both on screen and on the soundtrack, voiced---apparently---by McCann himself), the film opens on a Yorkshire Television ident from the 1970s/1980s which leads into a visualised countdown prefacing genuine footage of a male psychiatrist's televised appeal to "the Ripper" from this period. The soundtrack accompanying the countdown is a confusing melange: we hear a male voice counting down from ten and other voices which seem to belong to crew working in the gallery of the prime-time news programme, but which occupy a different sonic space to the countdown. At the end of the countdown a new male voice comes in, still associated with the media space---"Ok, Yorkshire Ripper take one"---before we cut to the original television footage of the psychiatrist from the late 1970s.

This sequence is significant for our analysis for a number of reasons. First, the countdown and off-screen voices suggest that the film offers a "behind the scenes" access. Whilst this resonates with the marketing claims about revelation, it is striking that this privileged access is linked to media representation and, specifically, to male voices. Although it is not apparent on a first viewing, the countdown is provided by the actor playing Dr Spencer. Retrospectively, this takes on a particular significance, prefiguring Spencer's use of hypnosis on Peter throughout the film and, in light of the twist ending, suggesting that the entire film is anchored to Peter's psyche. The film thus makes no distinction between the factual (the archive footage of the real male psychiatrist's televised appeal) and the fictional (Spencer's hypnosis of Peter), nor

between apparently external understandings of Sutcliffe and his motivations (the contemporary news reports) and the film's attempt to journey inside Peter's mind (the reference to hypnosis and the fictional alter-ego). That the significance of the countdown only becomes apparent as the film progresses underlines our point that the film makes certain demands on its spectator who is invited to read these clues, to become involved in a game of detection. However, as we have suggested, this game appears to have only male players, with the female victims---as we will discuss further in a moment---featuring as unsubstantial and largely anonymous figures in the killer's sequence.

As the film progresses, the dramatised reconstructions are more firmly linked to Peter's hypnosis sessions with Dr Spencer, suggesting they are Peter's memories. These sessions allude to a strong tradition in serial killer discourse of seeking clues to the killer's crimes through his childhood (Seltzer 1998). In particular, the repeated images of a boy sitting alone in an attic suggest progress is being made in comprehending Peter: the camera is closer to the child on each occasion and moves slowly towards him during each sequence, suggesting we are getting closer to the root of the adult's pathology. The film taps into popular ideas of psychoanalytic therapy, yet finally reinforces Sutcliffe's inscrutability. Further, the hypnosis device frames other sequences in which Peter is not (could not have been) present. This contributes to the narrative chaos and underlines the lack of any clear sense of chronology or progression, frustrating not only identification but also the conventional pleasures of suspense and seriality associated with serial killer narratives.

In common with other portrait films, the opening sequence privileges spectators who have some fore-knowledge of the case. There is, for instance, no on-screen caption to identify the real-life psychiatrist or specify at what stage in the investigation his televised appeal took place. When a caption is eventually used---placing us in Bradford, Yorkshire, in January 1981, and then narrowing in on Sutcliffe's address---prior knowledge is still required to make sense of where this fits in Sutcliffe's story (it is the night of his arrest). Yet, having positioned us with Peter just prior to his arrest, the film then cuts away to archive news footage from earlier in Sutcliffe's killing spree, frustrating attempts at identification and giving little sense of time or place.

Indeed, as the film progresses, archive footage is often spliced so as to completely muddle the chronology. Whilst the psychiatrist in the pre-credit sequence

refers to the then-unknown killer's eight victims (dating this excerpt to early 1978), immediately after the credits we cut to a news report of Sutcliffe's arrest. This is edited together with a further four pieces of archive footage which jump back and forward between different stages of the story: a mid-investigation appeal for help; a post-trial interview with Sutcliffe's father; a mid-investigation plea for public assistance in identifying the killer from his handwriting and a voice-recording; and a 1975 statement from the Assistant Chief Constable of West Yorkshire Police---in all cases, a male spokesman and/or reporter is used. Without knowledge of the case, the appeal regarding the killer's handwriting and voice (which, later in the investigation-- --though not in the film---were revealed to be hoaxes) is particularly confusing as it refers to the hunt for a man who is clearly not the Peter we see on screen. The uncontextualised news clip therefore not only runs the risk of confusing viewers but also establishes that the details of the case are only important insofar as they relate to (the search for) Peter. There is no possibility of reading the significance of these moments in relation to the widespread feminist criticism of community, media and police which followed the case (Ward Jouve 1986). Instead we are offered a part in a game, asked to piece together disparate elements to make sense of the killer.

References to Sutcliffe's self-justifications for his crimes---the real killer claimed that he was cleaning the streets of "filth" in response to a divine mission--- are similarly decontextualised within the film. Perhaps because Sutcliffe's street-cleaning mission itself chimed with earlier cases (notably that of Jack the Ripper), that he (like his predecessors) enacted this "mission" by killing women---and initially women in prostitution specifically---appears as a given, the misogyny of the crimes so unexceptional that it effectively becomes invisible. Instead, the film lingers on religious iconography to allude to Sutcliffe's alleged motivations: crucifixes adorning Peter's home and cell; his drawing of Christ on the cross; and a repeated, highly stylised image of a cross which has no anchor in the dramatised diegetic world. Simplistic discussions about good and evil between Peter and Spencer are often indistinct or cut short. As such, the film refers less to the real case and the 13 women murdered by Sutcliffe, than to popular ideas around this type of killer and his embodiment of "evil". The surreal Gothic imagery which accompanies each reference to religion displaces any explanation onto an unknowable, metaphysical---and, crucially for us, apparently gender-neutral---plane which resists scrutiny.

This sense that the film offers an impressionistic collage of well-worn clichés

in place of insight is heightened when we consider the figure of Dr Spencer. The physical styling of Spencer---he is tall, with a somewhat cadaverous face, often wearing a dark coat and hat and carrying a black bag---is reminiscent of many depictions of Jack the Ripper. It is not uncommon for doctors (and, since the hugely successful Thomas Harris Lecter novels, psychiatrists) to be depicted as serial killers.^{viii} Spencer's hypnosis sessions, during which he appears capable of probing Peter's deepest thoughts without effort, are similar to Lecter's quasi-supernatural ability to invade the thoughts of others. For the spectator steeped in serial killer lore, in this doubling of the killer and psychiatrist lie clues as to Spencer's status. The serial killer as "split personality" can be traced back to the crimes associated with Jack the Ripper (Schmid 2005; Tithecott 1997; Walkowitz 1982) and remains a standard, populist way of interpreting more recent crimes (e.g. Taylor 2010). The discovery that a discrete character is actually an alter ego of another character is in itself fairly common in the serial killer film.^{ix}

The Gothic is also evoked in the film's use of mirror imagery to suggest the fragmentation of Peter's personality. In the scene on the night of his arrest mentioned earlier, we see Peter's face only in reflection as he gazes into his bathroom mirror. The multiplication of the killer's face (the mirror has three sections) finds echoes in many other portrait films---most obviously in Henry. As Peter's reflection gazes out to the viewer we are invited to look for reason and meaning, but this proves impossible as this gaze does not confront us with the "real" Sutcliffe but instead refers to an array of other representations. Indeed, later in the film there is a fleeting moment when Peter looks into his car's rear view mirror to see not his own reflection but Spencer's. This offers another "clue" for the observant spectator but does not get us any closer to understanding Sutcliffe or his motivations.

This inscrutability and reliance on the Gothic is particularly interesting given the director's claims that he sought to highlight Sutcliffe's ordinariness as a corrective to representations which he felt "let [Sutcliffe] off the hook" by depicting him as monstrous.^x However there is little evidence of his averageness in the film. The film is preoccupied with entering his mind rather than understanding his life in a social, cultural or historical context: we rarely see him interact with others prior to his arrest, for instance, and, in prison, he speaks only to Spencer and his guards. Peter is not unique in this respect: indeed, entering the killer's mind is frequently the promise of true crime texts, documentary features and more mainstream fictional depictions of

the serial killer. As a result, the killer's acts are removed from context and explained through his individual psychology. This tendency arguably empowers the killer, partly by downplaying his culpability (he will inevitably kill because he is a serial killer) and also through constructing him as the only resource of information about his crimes.

As we have argued, the film consistently privileges an individualistic attempt at understanding Sutcliffe but, even then, retreats into cliché, offering neither a clear account of the crimes nor any sustained explanation for them. Instead of explanation we have an intertextual web of associations which---in their familiarity---seem to offer a way of understanding Sutcliffe, at least to the extent that they engage the spectator in an active process of detection, of making sense. But the explanations either become tautological (he kills because he's a killer) or, because they remain under-developed, are unconvincing (he kills because he lacked love). The emphasis on individual psychology also negates the need for feminist analysis of the case, its investigation and representation. It is notable, for instance, that despite the film's extensive use of archival news footage, there is no reference to the Reclaim the Night marches or Angry Women protests which took place in the region in response to the crimes and police failures. Similarly, notorious incidents which demonstrated a degree of broader social support for the Ripper and disdain for his victims---such as the hoax letters and calls mentioned above, or the apparently appreciative chanting of the Ripper's "score" from the terraces at Leeds United football ground---are also ignored.

Most striking, however, is the complete marginalisation of the victims. This is Peter's story and the film adopts his lack of concern about his female victims who exist largely in the abstract, as a number or sequence of images in an archival news report, or as a category of person lacking individuality (prostitute, student, mother, daughter). The only woman given any real screen time in the dramatised sequences appears---like Spencer---to be a fictional construct, a type rather than a person. Jan (Tracey Wilkinson) appears in a number of scenes in Peter/Sutcliffe's local pub, a stereotype of the coarse, flirtatious prostitute-figure Sutcliffe professed to loathe. Her scenes have no obvious bearing on Peter's crimes---she does not become a victim and, indeed, never explicitly interacts with Peter within the diegesis---but there is a suggestion not only that she "stands in for" the unseen victims, but also that her behaviour is, at the very least, triggering for Peter. The way Jan is depicted is

reminiscent of numerous representations of the victims of “Jack the Ripper”. Her drunkenness, flirting, vulgarity and association with the tawdry pub (in which Peter seems out of place) echoes the depiction of the victimised prostitutes of The Ripper (Meyers 1997) and From Hell (Hughes Brothers 2001), and Walkowitz (1982: 552) finds similar stereotyping of the women killed in 1888 Whitechapel. Jan’s portrayal also recalls more recent journalistic/true crime depictions of serial killer cases which shift agency from the killer to the victims’ addictions (Gregoriou, 2011). In one scene, which has no obvious real-world referent, Jan injects drugs in the toilet before returning to dance wildly and become embroiled in a fight with another woman whose partner has been eyeing her up. Given the film’s deliberate avoidance of visual evidence of Peter’s/Sutcliffe’s crimes, this sequence---which opens with a disembodied voice-over demanding “we want to know why”---positions the pub as the film’s primary crime scene/seen and Jan its only active aggressor. Despite appearing to avoid voyeurism by excising the killer’s violence from the narrative, the film obscures the misogyny apparent in his murders and in the media and public responses. The intimacy suggested by the title---using just his first name--- is thus shown to construct an utterly individualised portrayal, cut loose from wider social contexts yet, paradoxically, dependent for meaning on prior knowledge of over a century of serial killer discourse. The film itself, of course, is one further example of this discourse and further bolsters Sutcliffe’s notoriety.

As we have shown, then, Peter is a deeply contradictory film and, in this respect, it is representative of the serial killer portrait film cycle (Reburn 2012). The insistence on its authenticity in its marketing and framing suggests something of the extent to which the discursive construction of the serial killer has become normalised such that its discursive functions are rendered invisible: this is what serial killers are. At the same time, the possibility of any analysis of the crimes---and, specifically, any feminist analysis which takes into account a broader socio-cultural context---is denied. Whilst the film---like the cycle as a whole---offers no coherent point of identification, the “journey into the dark and twisted mind” which it offers is repeatedly figured as a male quest. Thus, not only does the film ultimately privilege Peter/Sutcliffe himself as the ultimate authority on his crimes, it also negates the gendered-reality of the crimes as the identities and lived-realities of Sutcliffe’s victims are a mere backdrop for a cacophony of questioning male voices.

Conclusion

In watching and writing about the portrait films, we have often found ourselves questioning what pleasures these films offer to their spectator. That the portrait films eschew the pleasures offered by seriality, disrupt identification and frustrate expectations of suspense make them striking within the broader context of serial killer cinema (Reburn 2012). But this can also make them confusing, and sometimes boring, to watch. There is radical potential in this, not least as these films offer an interesting vantage point from which to then re-examine the more conventional pleasures associated with popular serial killer cinema and to question the ethics of the modes of spectatorship they promote. Yet, as we have demonstrated, portrait films remain locked in to an understanding of the killer as a unique and puzzling individual worthy of the focused attention of portraiture. The pleasures these films offer are, therefore, those of detection, of reading clues, unravelling the puzzle to arrive at some understanding of the serial killer. This may place greater demands on the spectator than other forms of serial killer cinema, but what these games of spectatorship typically reward is intertextual knowledge of both individual cases and serial killer discourse more generally---a knowledge which is itself masculinised within the diegesis. They thus legitimate the (male) spectator's fascination with the serial killer and indeed turn this into both a certain kind of cultural capital and an end in itself.^{xi} In the increasingly tautological construction of the killer in which these films participate, the central character is "revealed" to kill because he is a serial killer, and we know he is a serial killer because he fulfils certain popular expectations about who that killer is, what he does and how he behaves.

The circularity of this discourse means that other ways of understanding the serial killer and his crimes are largely precluded. He is isolated and differentiated from the society which produced him. In Peter this means that both the support for, and criticism of, Sutcliffe expressed at the time of his crimes is largely ignored. As feminist accounts of his crimes, the investigation and media coverage have importantly demonstrated (Hollway 1981; Ward Jouve 1986), Sutcliffe's killing career was arguably prolonged not only by the hoaxer who derailed the police investigation, but also by the police themselves. The lack of priority accorded to the initial stages of the investigation revealed that the police (and media) shared something of the killer's disdain for women in prostitution. A portrait of the killer divorces him from this context and also risks replicating his treatment of his female

victims as disposable. This not only produces a limited understanding of the case, but---more seriously perhaps---suggests that, as serial killing is about individuals, it is not a problem which requires any kind of societal solution. A feminist approach which understands the linkages between the crimes of the serial killer and those of other violent men, would, on the other hand, insist on the importance of working to challenge the cultural construction of masculinity and its association with violence as a vital step in the process of prevention and protection. If Peter was to be presented not (or, at least, not only) as a serial killer but more explicitly as a man, how might the film open up different ways of understanding his crimes?

Those of us working within media disciplines are able to make modest interventions in these debates when we investigate the serial killer not as a hero, but rather as a generic and self-referential male figure. As we suggested at the beginning of this article, this offers the possibility of puncturing the sense of prestige accorded the serial killer in popular contexts. It also offers opportunities for making explicit that which remains unexplored in the kinds of films we have discussed here: that is, that serial killing and its representation remains a predominately male preserve.

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ⁱ To avoid confusion we will refer to the film as Peter, its central character as Peter, and the real-life killer as Sutcliffe.

ⁱⁱ Although Aileen Wuornos has, in various contexts, been labelled the "first" female serial killer, many cultural critics have questioned this designation based on Wuornos's initial claims that she acted in self-defence, killing male clients who were violent towards her. This ambiguity is reflected in the film treatments of her case, such as Overkill (Peter Levin, 1992) and Monster (Patty Jenkins, 2003). Although coinciding with the portrait cycle, the Wuornos films do not share its characteristics, being far more concerned with motivation, chronology and capture than the films discussed here.

ⁱⁱⁱ See BTK Killer (Lommel 2005) and BTK (Feifer 2007), Ted Bundy (Bright 2002) and Bundy: A Legacy of Evil (Feifer 2008), Ed Gein (Parello 2000) and Ed Gein: Butcher of Plainfield (Feifer 2007), and The Secret Life: Jeffrey Dahmer (Bowen 1993) and Dahmer (Jacobson 2002).

^{iv} In our research, we have identified only one other British example of the portrait film : Cold Light of Day (Fhoina-Louise, 1989), which is based on the murders committed by Dennis Nilsen in London between 1978 and 1983. Like Peter, the film relies on prior awareness of this killer to make sense of a notably uneconomic narrative which uses disjointed scenes and a disorientating lack of chronology to hint vaguely at a Gothic/psychoanalytic motivation rooted in the killer's childhood, without offering a coherent explanation for his crimes. The timing of Cold Light of Day, three years after Henry, underlines that film's influence on the few British portraits.

^v Although it is beyond our scope to comment on the numerous relevant sources here (see <http://www.execulink.com/~kbrannen/index.htm#book01> for a list of television and true crime texts), it is germane to our argument to note that the emphasis on detection, chronology and understanding in many of these texts provide readers/viewers with the background required to make sense of Peter's more chaotic narrative. The intertextual nature of these prior representations is nicely demonstrated by the 1999 documentary Manhunt: The Search for the Yorkshire Ripper (Gwyneth Hughes, 1999) which---as well as referencing the 1888 killings through the use of Sutcliffe's press-given nickname---positions itself in relation to Michael Mann's Manhunter (1986), the first film adaptation of Thomas Harris' first Lecter novel. This earlier programme thus similarly foregrounds an Anglo-American context for its account of Sutcliffe and his crimes.

^{vi} We refer here to the High Fliers' 2011 Region 2 DVD.

^{vii} Like Henry, Peter seems to have originally been intended for theatrical release on the arthouse circuit. However, in practice, with the exception of a few screenings in the community directly affected by Sutcliffe's crimes, and a small number of festival screenings,

Peter followed the release pattern of other portrait films to DVD.

^{viii} Time After Time (Meyer 1979), A Study in Terror (Hill 1965) and From Hell (Hughes Brothers 2001) each depict Jack the Ripper as a doctor.

^{ix} See, for example: Psycho (Hitchcock 1960), Eyes of Laura Mars (Kershner 1978) and Thr3e (Henson 2006).

^x See <http://www.peterthefilm.com/>. Accessed August 29, 2012.

^{xi} This is not to deny that women are consumers of true crime genres (see, for example, Browder, 2006), but rather to argue that the portrait films, by eschewing the figure of the investigator (a role which, since at least The Silence of the Lambs, has been open to female protagonists) and marginalising victims, the portrait film presents a very male-dominated world in which knowledge is figured as essentially male.