

TIM GROVES and SARAH DILLON

Victoria University of Wellington

Serial killers, style and post-classical narration

ABSTRACT

Serial killer films such as Manhunter (1986), Se7en (1995), The Cell (2000), Natural Born Killers (1994) and Suspect Zero (2004) are characterized by stylistic excess. This excess is particularly evident in the various imaginative acts associated with the intuitive work of the profiler figure, such as flashbacks, dreams, and hallucinations. This article argues that the overtly 'materialized textuality' of these sequences can be interpreted as examples of post-classical cinematic narration (Thanouli 2006: 193). Consequently, these stylistic tendencies seem to provide us with privileged access to characters' mental states that moves beyond a 'structure of sympathy' towards a form of identification (Smith 1995).

KEYWORDS

Serial killer
Post-classical
narration
Identification
Cognitivism
Suspect Zero

INTRODUCTION

Serial killer films and television series are sometimes marked by stylistic excess which is particularly evident in credit sequences and the ways in which the mental processes of the leading detective or criminal profiler are represented. This article will consider the stylized visions, dreams, flashbacks and hallucinations of these protagonists in order to explore the links between identity and textuality in the serial killer genre. We will use *Suspect Zero* (2004) as a case study, although other examples might include *The Cell* (2000), *Nightstalker* (2002), and the television series *Millennium* (1996-9) and *Profiler* (1996-2000). Our analysis is informed by cognitive film theory, principally Murray Smith's account of character engagement and Eleftheria Thanouli's work on post-classical narration (Smith 1995; Thanouli 2006).

PROFILERS

Previous analysis of detectives and profilers has either focused on real-life profilers such as John Douglas and Robert Ressler or on an exceptional character such as Clarice Starling in

The Silence of the Lambs (1991) and most research in the humanities on serial killer films and literature has considered the cultural implications of serial killing or the serial killer - for example, Mark Seltzer argues that the discourse of serial killing forms part of a contemporary fascination with trauma that he designates 'wound culture' (1998). In addition, David Schmid situates the serial killer in relation to celebrity culture by examining high profile cases such as Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer as well as phenomena such as serial killing memorabilia and Phillip Simpson contends that the serial killer is an ambiguous signifier of contemporary society (Schmid 2005; Simpson 2000). On the one hand the killer is an avatar of modernity and on the other a figure whose rejection of reason and extreme violence marks a revival of primitivism.

Perhaps because of these protean qualities, fictional serial killers require the presence of an exceptional character to apprehend them. The protagonist of many serial killer texts is a *manhunter*: a detective, psychologist or profiler who specializes in identifying, stalking, capturing and/or killing serial murderers. Furthermore, these law enforcement figures display an unusual aptitude for their work in the form of exceptional intuition or insight, a capacity for 'pure empathy' such as Will Graham in *Hannibal* (2013 -), or the apparently telepathic abilities of Frank Black in *Millennium* (1996-9) and Sam Waters in *Profiler* (1996-2000); however these 'gifts' are also associated with psychological or physical problems. Such talents enable the protagonists to succeed where conventional police procedure and deduction have failed previously. This may be due in part to the fact that the psychological gifts of detectives and profilers allow them to establish a rapport with their quarry.

CHARACTER ENGAGEMENT AND NARRATION

The sequences that we are discussing develop and intensify the relationship between the spectator and the protagonist of serial killer texts. One critical framework that can be employed to interpret such links is cognitive film theory which stresses the dynamic relationship between the viewer and filmic narration. Film viewers consciously assess, speculate about and revise their understanding of the causal, spatial and temporal dimensions of the narrative as it unfolds. This activity is mediated principally through the viewer's bond with film characters.

Perhaps the best known cognitivist account of this connection is Murray Smith's 'structure of sympathy' (1995: 73-111). Smith proposes that we engage with characters through a system of recognition, alignment and allegiance. We recognize narrative agents as

human individuals and character alignment enables us to understand character behaviour, motivations and feelings, which is linked to a film's formal properties. While point-of-view shots and eyeline matches give some perceptual access to characters' mental states, Smith asserts that the range and depth of the narration are more important factors in providing the audience with detailed information about characters' goals and emotions.

Significantly character alignment usually oscillates between several characters in most classical narrative films. Character allegiance involves a moral assessment of the character based in part on character alignment but also on character behaviour as well as features such as iconography and non-diegetic music. While allegiance may parallel alignment they can also diverge, not least because the former contains an affective component.

Suspect Zero follows the work of two detectives played by Aaron Eckhart and Carrie-Ann Moss as they search for a serial killer (Ben Kingsley) who murders other serial killers. The majority of the film aligns the viewer with Eckhart's character Thomas Mackelway whom we learn is a disgraced FBI agent now working in Albuquerque as punishment. Mackelway is a determined, even relentless cop but also a troubled maverick who suffers from migraines and experiences ominous dreams that are represented in a stylized manner. While *Suspect Zero* constructs this typical protagonist in a sympathetic manner our allegiance is more complicated than we might expect of the crime or serial killer genres because of Kingsley's character Benjamin O'Ryan. O'Ryan dispenses the kind of swift justice that many audience members may tacitly endorse. Moreover, his training in the apprehension of serial killers has caused him enormous psychological damage because he constantly envisages the deaths of murder victims in a form of remote viewing in sequences often marked by a red filter and distorted camera lenses.

The excessively stylized sequences associated with character subjectivity in *Suspect Zero* do more than create sympathy for Mackelway and O'Ryan; they develop an empathic involvement with these characters through perceptual alignment. As Murray Smith points out cinematic sympathy is occasionally supplemented or even enhanced by moments of empathy that may involve emotional simulation or some kind of automatic response (1995: 104). In terms of simulation Smith draws on Richard Wollheim's distinction (1984) between central and acentral imagining. The former involves the ability to imagine the behaviour and even internal states of a character from the inside while the latter enables to us to consider a

scenario without actually participating in it (Smith 1995: 77). Thus the kind of perceptual alignment and narrational depth provided by Mackelway's nightmares or O'Ryan's visions of murder scenes allow us to centrally imagine or empathize with their experiences of and dread about the crimes they investigate.

However, a cognitive approach to character engagement does not adequately explain the aesthetic distinctiveness and effects of the subjective sequences in serial killer texts. We would argue that it is necessary to employ a framework that deals specifically with style. Accordingly we turn to Thanouli's work on post-classical narration. Thanouli contends that post-classical narration emerged as a distinct form of narration in the 1990s in international cinema. While it incorporates some aspects of classical narration including what David Bordwell calls 'intensified continuity' it exceeds classicism by encompassing features such as looser causality, multiple protagonists and complex temporal structures (2006: 188-90). Interestingly one of Thanouli's key examples is *Natural Born Killers* (1994).

Thanouli asserts that post-classical cinema 'flaunts its materialized textuality' through the use of visual 'clusters, special effects (back projections, split screens, matte paintings, miniatures, optical tricks) [...and] spatial montage' (2006: 193, 188). These strategies are manifested in *Suspect Zero* in two examples that are repeated and reworked throughout the film. Firstly *Suspect Zero* employs spatial montage when Mackelway photographs each new crime scene. The images he shoots are presented one by one in an extremely quick rhythmic montage accompanied by the sound of the camera and flashes of bright light in a manner that foregrounds the artificiality of the photographic process. Secondly O'Ryan's manic doodles and scribbles of the crime scenes he sees through remote viewing are represented as a series of images which are often superimposed or layered within the screen space and interspersed with shots which show concurrent events whether real or imaginary.

The manipulation of these images in *Suspect Zero* challenges the conventions of the classical realist text whereby style is subordinated to narrative concerns in order to maximize viewer attention and comprehension. The editing speed of some sequences makes them difficult to perceive let alone understand. This is complicated by the inclusion of material from different contexts and the frequent reorganization of the temporal order of the images in these sequences. Moreover the repetition of scribbles, sketches and photographic imagery seems to exist in a mental state that falls outside the film's conception of real time. The stylized sequences of the film also display the hyper-mediated qualities that Thanouli associates with post-classical narration. *Suspect Zero* combines different media, graphic

layering, visual effects and intensified continuity throughout. '[T]he user is repeatedly brought back into contact with the interface' as Bolter and Grusin suggest in terms of remediation (1999: 33).

For example about halfway through the film Mackelway begins to ascertain O'Ryan's goal of hunting down other serial killers. The camera guides the viewer's gaze to a desk that holds a messy pile of Missing Persons posters containing images of the killer's victims. As the tracking shot continues the images cross-fade and are superimposed onto each other. The film cuts to an extreme close-up of Mackelway looking distressed then cuts to a heavily-grained black-and-white image of O'Ryan's activity. The intercutting between killer and profiler continues as the editing speed gathers pace and the cuts are accentuated by a white flash or sound effect. As the sequence becomes increasingly incoherent we see grainy images of a truck before it fades into choppy hillside shots of two unidentified men seen through a red filter.

During this sequence we are constantly made aware of the multiple acts of representation at play by both confronting editing and the graphic qualities of the image. However despite the reflexive quality of the scene these techniques do not function in a Brechtian manner. Rather than being alienated by a lack of information about the narrative or the departure from the logic of classical narration we are drawn into the text.

As Thanouli claims, 'this new 'windowed world' becomes hospitable to the most subjective experiences, bringing as a corollary a high dose of subjective realism that attempts to visualize the innermost mental and emotional states' (2006: 186). This sequence thus contributes to the viewers' growing impression that we are being invited into Mackelway's internal psychological processes. However this alignment is disrupted by the use of the red filter which the film links repeatedly to O'Ryan's visions and premonitions. Thus the film's style implicates the audience in the character fluidity produced by the respective telepathic abilities of the profiler and the killer.

In this respect *Suspect Zero* arguably reaches its climax around three-quarters of the way through the film when the telepathy between Mackelway and O'Ryan becomes mutually self-aware. O'Ryan has previously communicated with Mackelway through a decaying VHS tape (again, presented in a hyper-mediated fashion) stating that Mackelway will help him 'turn off' the images of the murders of innocent people that he is forced to endure. Mackelway now fully appreciates O'Ryan's purpose in hunting down serial killers, his drive

to find the elusive master killer ‘Suspect Zero’ and the enormous suffering that O’Ryan experiences as a result of his work as a remote viewer for the FBI on Project Icarus. As the sequence cuts back and forth between extreme close-ups of the two men the film uses similar techniques to those discussed previously but adds a fisheye lens and a higher level of superimposition in the representation of O’Ryan’s drawings. In perhaps the ultimate self-reflexive gesture the intercut images of Mackelway show him ripping down wallpaper to reveal the Suspect Zero logo: the eye that is constantly seeing and which cannot close.

Thanouli contends that post-classical narration is marked by different degrees of narrational self-consciousness, knowledgeability and communicativeness compared to classical storytelling. She indicates that post-classical films are consistently exposing the means of their own making and moving beyond character subjectivity as the key means of conveying information. As in *Suspect Zero* Thanouli suggests that the narrating act is highly manipulated and its construction foregrounded while in turn ‘higher levels of narration are recurrently followed by[...]internal or external focalization[...] which disclose[s] the innermost perceptions of the characters through their eyes or their mind’ (2006: 193). Instead of (just) demonstrating that Mackelway has gained additional insight into O’Ryan and is therefore closer to catching him, it represents the most important mental processes of both characters and how these have merged. The narration has become temporally and spatially omnipresent at this point. In formalist terms the act of narration has been laid bare as viewers are utterly aware of the constructed nature of the sequence. Information is conveyed through the overtly materialized textuality of the images rather than characters’ dialogue or physical interactions.

Cognitive film scholars have often criticized the concept of identification (Bordwell and Carroll 1996; Carroll 1988) partly because of its apparent imprecision or because it involves the assimilation of a character’s mental state in the manner of a ‘Vulcan mind-meld’ (Carroll 1990: 89). However it is our contention that the slippery/vague qualities of identification might make it a more useful concept than sympathy or empathy to articulate the blurring of boundaries between Mackelway and O’Ryan in *Suspect Zero*. Identification names a relation *between* people but the nature of the link depends on its context and it can take several forms (Fuss 1995: 4). The specific nature of the psychological connection between Mackelway and O’Ryan matters less than the ways in which the post-classical stylistic framework of the film *performs* the identification between them.

More broadly the problem of identity confusion in *Suspect Zero* is consistent with the discourse on the representation of serial killers in popular culture. Philip Simpson reminds us that the serial killer text is one in which ‘selves blur, conflate [...] and shift with aggravating fluidity’ (2000: 20). Mark Seltzer goes further, asserting that serial killing enacts an identity crisis that can only be resolved through homicidal violence. Neither genetically predisposed toward murder nor the product of an abusive childhood, the construction of the serial killer’s identity occurs through a process of ‘primary mediation’ (1998: 20). According to Seltzer serial killing is characterized by the desire for assimilation into ‘place, or context, or situation,’ as well as a rapport with media and information technologies (1998: 33).

The killer’s distinctive identity only emerges through the displacement of the problem of sameness on to the bodies of his victims. Yet it is not only the detective or profiler whose subjectivity threatens to collapse into that of the serial killer in this genre. Style as well as narration plays a vital role in mediating the audience’s knowledge and assessment of character. However we would argue that film style also functions as a media technology in Seltzer’s terms. Thus the fluid trajectories of style always threaten to erode the clear distinction between the text and ourselves thereby incorporating us into the serial killer’s continuing project of imitation and contagion.

REFERENCES

- Bolter, J. D. and Grusin, R. (1999), *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Bordwell, D. and Carroll, N. (eds.) (1996), *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Carroll, N. (1988), *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Demme, J. (1991), *The Silence of the Lambs*, USA: Strong Heart/Demme Production.
- Fincher, D. (1995), *Se7en*, USA: Cecchi Gori Pictures.
- Fisher, C. (2002), *Nightstalker*, USA: Imperial Fish Company.
- Fuller, B. (2013-), *Hannibal*, USA: Dino di Laurentiis Company.
- Fuss, D. (1995), *Identification Papers: Readings on Psychoanalysis, Sexuality, and Culture*, New York: Routledge.
- Mann, M. (1986), *Manhunter*, USA: Di Laurentiis Entertainment Group.
- Merhige, E. Elias (2004), *Suspect Zero*, USA: Paramount Pictures.
- Saunders, Cynthia (1996-2000), *Profiler*, USA: NBC Studios.
- Schmid, D. (2005), *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Seltzer, M. (1998), *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America’s Wound Culture*, New York: Routledge.

- Simpson, P. (2000), *Psycho Paths: Tracking the Serial Killer Through Contemporary American Film and Fiction*, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Singh, T. (2000), *The Cell*, USA: New Line Cinema.
- Smith, M. (1995), *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Stone, O. (1994), *Natural Born Killers*, USA: Warner Bros.
- Thanouli, E. (2006), 'Post-classical narration: A new paradigm in contemporary cinema', *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 4: 3, pp.183-96.
- Wright, T. (1996-9), *Millennium*, USA: Twentieth Century Fox Television.
- Wollheim, R. (1984), *The Thread of Life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dr Tim Groves is a Senior Lecturer in the Film Program at Victoria University of Wellington. His research interests include serial killer films, contemporary Hollywood cinema, affect, hypnosis, telepathy and psychoanalysis.

Contact: tim.groves@vuw.ac.nz

Sarah Dillon recently completed Honours in Film at Victoria University of Wellington. Her MA thesis will examine haptic visuality in contemporary Hollywood cinema.

Contact: sarah.dillon@vuw.ac.nz

SUGGESTED CITATION

Groves, Tim and Dillon, (2015), 'Serial Killers, Style and Post-classical Narration', in Mountfort, P. (ed), *Peer Reviewed Proceedings: 6th Annual Conference, Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand*, Wellington: PopCAANZ, pp.34-41. Available from <http://popcaanz.com/conference-proceedings-2015>.