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Representation of the Serial Killer in United States Popular Culture:

Evolution of the Hunter-Hero Narrative

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Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of the serial killer genre in United States popular culture. The aim is to delve into Slotkin's *Regeneration through Violence,* and relate the serial killer genre to the hunter-hero narrative that Slotkin elaborates on. In order to successfully attempt this, the thesis also explores contemporary research into the serial killer genre; what are the typical representations of serial killers? What makes the serial killer genre successful and enjoyable for the audience? Afterwards, we relate these contemporary sources to Slotkin's paradigm to form a successful theoretical framework. This theoretical framework is then used to look at various examples in literature, film, series, and gaming in order to test whether the hunter-hero narrative holds true in contemporary examples of the serial killer genre in United States popular culture. Moreover, the aim is to find out whether or not the hunter-hero narrative evolves into a narrative more suited for modern conventions.

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1. Introduction

The United States have their fair share of ‘famous’, or rather infamous, serial killers that are known across the globe. Whoever searches for lists of serial killers on Google, will find a staggering amount of ‘most famous American serial killers’, ‘most notorious American serial killers’ and many others. If you do find a list that is not centred around American serial killers per se, most list will still predominantly feature ‘famous’ American serial killers nonetheless. This does not necessarily mean that the United States have the largest number of serial killer globally, but it does seem that they have had more public and international attention. The American serial killers that almost always make the list, seem to be Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy and John Wayne Gacy (Ranker) (List25). Dahmer was known for killing at least seventeen young men, along with his compulsion towards necrophilia and consuming the flesh of his victims (Biography.com). Ted Bundy is notorious for raping and murdering young women in the 1970s; he is connected to at least thirty-six murders, even though he boasted about numbers in the hundreds. Despite the murders he committed, his charm gave him an immense amount of media attention, lifting his status to that of a celebrity of sorts. Bundy has since been the subject and inspiration of many novels and films, with many fictional serial killers being based on his character (Biography.com). John Wayne Gacy was known for the murder of thirty-three young men and burying most of them under his house. Before he was caught, Gacy was extremely well-liked in his community and known for his performances as a clown at children’s parties (Biography.com). Bundy, Gacy and Dahmer have been and still are, some of the most talked about serial killers from the United States and are still often the subject of or inspiration for novels, documentaries, films, series and games. Because of their notoriety they not only inspired popular representations of the serial killer, but also created a standard for the characteristics of a serial killer in United States popular media.

In this thesis, the aim is to investigate the prevalence of fictionalized serial killers in United States popular culture, as well as find out which characteristics for these serial killers are most commonly used. In order to find these common characteristics, we first have to evaluate several sources that deal with the trope of the serial killer in popular culture; only then can we relate these characteristics to various examples from literature, film & television, and gaming. Therefore an extensive framework into United States popular culture regarding the prevalence of the serial killer in said popular culture is necessary. Beginning with Richard Slotkin's piece *Regeneration through Violence,* the aim is to use the recurring images and narratives that he provides to analyse the representation of serial killers in United States popular culture. The question that I will attempt to answer is whether Slotkin's recurring images and narratives can be linked to current representations of serial killers and serial killing. In addition to Slotkin, I would like to look at Jane Caputi's "The New Founding Fathers: The Lore and Lure of the Serial Killer in Contemporary Culture", as she looks at the current lure of the portrayal of serial killers in contemporary culture. Her piece will therefore help to provide an insight as to whether these narratives and images still occur when serial killers are represented in U.S. popular culture or not.

Additionally, it is important to find out how serial killers are characterised in popular culture; the question is whether there are certain characteristics that are commonly, or perhaps even persistently, used and whether these characteristics can even be called stereotypical. Furthermore, it will be interesting to see whether deviations from these characteristics can still be successful in United States popular culture. In order to investigate whether or not such commonly used characteristics exist, it is vital to look into research done regarding serial killers in popular culture. One example would be David Schmid's *Natural Born Celebrities,* which will give valuable insight into how serial killers receive that much attention and seem to gather a certain amount of fame despite, or because of, their mass murders. Furthermore, Schmid delves into the role of the serial killer in popular culture, which seems to be extremely relevant for our framework and figuring out a norm for the portrayal of serial killers in United States consumer culture. Additionally, Seltzer's *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* and Jarvis' "Monsters Inc.: Serial Killers and Consumer Culture" describe the prevalence of the serial killer and the representation of the serial killer in popular culture. By linking Slotkin, Caputi and Schmid to Jarvis' text and Seltzer's book, the aim is to come up with a hypothesis on whether Slotkin's perceived narratives and images can be linked to the typical characteristics of serial killers and serial killing in contemporary popular culture in the United States. If these narratives and images can be linked to the typical representation of serial killers, it will be interesting to see whether non-typical representations are a deviation from Slotkin's perceived narratives and images.

This thesis will be divided into three separate case studies from the fields of literature, film & television, and gaming. In each individual case study, the aim is to look at several examples of fictionalized accounts of serial killers. With the use of the theoretical framework that has been set up, we will look at how these examples fit into the typical representation of serial killers and which examples do not. Furthermore, we will analyse whether these examples fit into Slotkin's narrative. Because there are so many examples in popular culture to choose from, this thesis will only look at famous examples in-depth to see how the prevalence of the serial killer in popular culture has evolved through time and how exactly Slotkin's narrative holds up against contemporary examples of the portrayal of serial killers..

The first case study, literature, will focus on a combination of classic serial killer novels and more recent popular novels that feature the serial killer. The first novel that will be analysed is the classic *The Silence of The Lambs* by Thomas Harris (1988). This novel focused heavily on the trope that a serial killer could be charming, glamorous and well-educated. It is an interesting classic that inspired many other novels especially regarding the characteristics of a serial killer. The second example will be James Patterson's *Kiss the Girls* (1995). While this book is part of a series that focuses on investigator Alex Cross, *Kiss the Girls* has been adapted into a movie in 1997 and the book has recently received a lot of new attention following Netflix's *Making a Murderer;* one suspect currently on trial for the murder of Theresa Halbach, which is discussed in the documentary, claimed that he made up part of his testimony based on Patterson's *Kiss the Girls* (Netflix). Therefore, *Kiss the Girls* will be an interesting novel to look into. The last novel that will be analysed is Brett Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991). *American Psycho* focuses around Patrick Bateman, a charismatic but insane investment banker. The novel is particularly interesting because it has been quoted as a satire and criticism of capitalist and consumer culture (Hunter). As the novel is quoted as a satire of the serial killer genre, it will be interesting to see if *American Psycho* actually deviates from typical characteristics that occur within this genre.

The second case study will focus on a combination of film and television series, covering some classic and very popular examples. First off, Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) will be analysed. The film was adapted from a novel of the same name by Robert Bloch. While the novel was popular, the film is ranked among the top films of all time and is considered the earliest example of the 'slasher' genre (RottenTomatoes). In 2013, a prequel series to the film was made, *Bates Motel* (2013-), which centres around the origin of fictional serial killer Norman Bates. Because of the link between the film and the television series, despite a time gap between the two of more than fifty years, this thesis will look into both the film and the television series to analyse the evolution of the tropes used to characterise the serial killer Norman Bates and determine whether the characteristics that have been used in the film have changed when making the television series. One of the most interesting examples to discuss would be the television series *Dexter,* which aired from 2006 until 2013. In its eight seasons, the viewer followed forensic technician Dexter at the Miami Metro Police Department working as a ‘blood spatter analyst’. However, Dexter also happens to be a serial killer who exclusively murders people who, according to him, ‘deserve it’; Dexter bases that evaluation on the crimes that his possible victim has committed and therefore often finds his next victim through the criminals that the police department investigates. The interesting part of this series is that the viewer is made to sympathise with and like Dexter and root for him through many of his brutal killings. The series is known for its brutality and gory scenes, but was nonetheless the most popular show to ever appear on *Showtime* (Hibbard).

The last case study will focus on a more recent media form that has become increasingly popular especially since the arrival of ‘Let’s plays’ on media platform *Youtube*. One heavily popular game that has received new attention on *Youtube* because it has been remastered for the Playstation 4, is the interactive drama-action game *Heavy Rain* which was first published in 2010. It was a commercial success, winning multiple Game of the Year awards and selling over three million copies (Islam). The game features multiple characters that the gamer switches with through various chapters of the game; every choice the gamer makes affects the game and its characters. Crucially, the game revolves around the Origami Killer, which you have to hunt down before it is too late for one of his current victims, the son of one of the characters the games plays in certain chapters. The game is interesting because it deliberately points the gamer towards the wrong conclusions, with various twists and turns. In the end, one of the characters the gamer plays turns out to be the Origami Killer. If you play the game right, you save the son. In many other endings you might fail. The second game that will be analysed is the sequel to the immensely popular horror game *Outlast*; in the sequel, named *Outlast: Whistleblower*, the serial killer that is featured is ‘The Groom’. The Groom goes after female patients in order to find his perfect other half by surgically mutilating them (Dodd). The strength of *Outlast* and *Outlast: Whistleblower* lies in the fact that you cannot defend yourself against your assailants; you can hide or you can run, but in most cases these are all the options you have. Both games have been immensely popular in sales as well as in ‘Let’s plays’ on *Youtube* and have therefore gathered much media attention and they have also set a new standard for horror games (Doke). The last game that we will look into is the controversial *Masochisia*. The game is based on real life serial killer Albert Fish and focuses on his youth. In the game, the gamer actually plays Albert Fish, including playing out the mutilation of victims as well as inserting needles into one’s own hand; something that was an obsession for Albert Fish in real life (Blanco). The game is especially daunting because the gamer is the one to carry out the murders, one of which is the murder of a young boy.

Combining the theoretical framework with the individual case studies will provide an interesting view on how the serial killer is represented within United States popular culture. Through the various examples in the case studies, it will be interesting to see whether the theory and analysed sources match with the narratives explored in Richard Slotkin’s *Regeneration Through Violence*. As Slotkin’s *Regeneration Trough Violence* aimed to link recurring narratives to violence in United States history, it will be interesting to see if the typical characteristics that this thesis will determine fit within Slotkin’s paradigm. Additionally, the conclusion will determine whether there has been an evolution through the years in terms of the representation of serial killers in popular culture and what effect deviations from that typical representation have in the popularity of the serial killer trope within popular media.

2. Theoretical Framework

In *Regeneration Through Violence: The Myth of the American Frontier, 1600-1860,* Richard Slotkin aims to formulate a new founding myth for the United States. In his book, he bases his foundation on the violence that has been apparent since the beginning. In each chapter, he delves deeper into that myth before coming to an ultimate conclusion in his chapter “A Pyramid of Skulls”. First off, Slotkin explains the founding myth as essential to a nation: “The mythology of a nation is the intelligible mask of that enigma called the “national character”. Through myths the psychology and world view of our cultural ancestors are transmitted to modern descendants, in such a way and with such power that our perception of the contemporary reality and our ability to function in the world are directly, often tragically affected” (Slotkin, 3). This quote is particularly interesting for this thesis as it directly engages with the current fascination with the serial killer theme; when looking at the relation between Slotkin’s idea of violence being the foundation of the United States and the longstanding interest in serial killers, the link seems to stem from that world view of “our cultural ancestors” that transcends into modern culture. Even though Slotkin points out that the American attitude towards a founding myth has been ambivalent because of the history of colonization and the American population has rather focused on liberation from the past and to “become the scene of a new departure in human affairs” (Slotkin, 3). However, this does not mean there has been no need for a sense of coherence and “a direction in history that myths give to those who believe in them” (3). While the United States wanted to focus on the creation of a certain ‘American Epic’, Slotkin points towards the violence that has been apparent throughout important events in United States history. For example, he states that the cultural ancestors were not gentlemen that composed a peaceful nation, but rather:

> those who tore violently a nation from the implacable and opulent wilderness – the rogues, adventurers, and land boomers; the Indian fighters, traders, missionaries, explorers, and hunters who killed and were killed until they had mastered the wilderness; the settles who came after, suffering hardship and Indian warfare for the sake of a sacred mission or a simple desire for land; and the Indians themselves, both as they were and as they appeared to the settlers, for whom they were the special demonic personification of the American wilderness. Their concerns, their hopes, their terrors, their violence, and their justifications of themselves, as expressed in literature, are the foundation stones of the mythology that informs our history (4).

Additionally, Slotkin points out that myths seem to consist of three basic elements: a hero, a universe in which the hero exists and acts, and a narrative "in which the interaction of the hero and universe is described" (8). Therefore, Slotkin bases his foundation myth on that of the 'hunter-hero'. One example of such a narrative is the emergence of the Puritan Church on the American frontier; "Each man, they held, inherits the dregs of Adam's original sin with his blood, and his corrupted nature must be purged and renewed before he can be saved", or as Slotkin puts it eloquently, "the hunting of the beast" (148). As he explains, "literature of the Indian wars had been entirely literature of exorcism. […] The Indian functions as a scapegoat in this literature of exorcism" (154). In that way, Indians were often seen as the beast that needed to be hunted, overcome, in order for the Puritans to succeed and prosper; "the exorcism of the Indian is likened to the hunting down and slaying of rabid beasts embodying all qualities of evil. In the captivity narratives, bestial Indians are seen as the outward type of the beast that is in every man" (154). This has been, in many ways, the creation of the hunter-hero myth that Slotkin bases his foundation myth on; it is one that features violence to overcome 'the beast', the hardship and man's own sin. In the archetypal hunter narrative that Slotkin presents, there are four basic narrative formats: Conversion, Sacred Marriage, Exorcism, and ultimately Regeneration trough Violence which is typified by "the narrative of Church and the subsequent myth of the hunter, in which the anima-id paradox is embodied (not resolved) in an intimate conflict between male avatars of wilderness and civilization for possessions of the white female captive – a figure who embodies the Christian moral and social law that the hunter both defends and tries to avoid and who therefore, like the Indian opponent, is at once the hero's anima and his soul's most feared enemy" (179). When we relate the structure of 'Regeneration through Violence' to the idea of the serial killer remaining a popular subject in consumer culture, one can argue that the topic is so popular because of the internal struggle that Slotkin talks about: it not only embodies the serial killer as the wilderness, the hunt for justice of the serial killer's victims can be seen as something the audience aspires, but also fears in its interest for the wilderness. It is exactly that paradox that could explain the interest in topics like serial murder in United States popular culture.

Interestingly, the American myth of the hunter has striking resemblances to the creation myths that the Indians seemed to have, where there was no moral disapproval of the hunter. These myths are a clear and distinct departure from the European mythology of huntsmen: "the hunter, at least in the Christian era and in several pre-Christian cultures, has traditionally been regarded as an accursed being. His pursuit of beasts makes him bestial – a figure of lust, rapacity, and materialism" (307). In the evolution of the hunter myth that Slotkin analyses, he points out that the hunt against the Indians as the beast slowly but surely developed into the hunt for an American civilization, one that stepped away from European influence (190-202). Americans therefore accepted the 'violent' nature of the hunter and made the myth into their own founding myth, their own foundation: "it meant adopting the hunter's anti-intellectualism, his pursuit of the material and ephemeral, and his love of exploit and violence for the sake of their blood-stirring excitement" (307). When you link this love of "exploit and violence for the sake of their blood-stirring excitement" to the huge representation of serial killers in United States popular culture, it can be said that the two are definitely linked; if we link the two together, the representation and popularity of serial killers in United States popular culture fits into Slotkin's paradigm wonderfully. It seems that this American foundation myth points towards an American fascination with the ephemeral, the wilderness and therefore the violent; according to Slotkin it excites and captures the American spirit. As Slotkin points out in his chapter "Pyramid of Skulls", he states that the development from the hunt on the Indians as the beast turned into the acceptance and quest towards the idea that the wilderness is the "ultimate development of the terms of the hunting myth", as they "restore original elements of the dream of the West that impelled the first discoverers – the dream of the mythic islands in the ocean-sea that hold both the possibility of eternal bliss and godlike power and the potential for utter death and damnation. In the end is the beginning" (539). Therefore, instead of conversion of the wild lands that they now inhabited, the Americans started the conversion of themselves into those wild lands, accepting it rather than attempting to exorcise it. In order to achieve this, the hunter-hero has to rely on his own "natural" moral code (552). Furthermore, Slotkin states that:

> in a democracy based on the social equality of the upwardly mobile, perpetual motion is as important a sign of social importance as the possession of an established fortune. Indeed, the former is of more value, a sign of lost vigor. The myth of the hunter, as seen by the Indians and by writers like Flint and Cooper, is one of self-renewal or self-creation through acts of violence. What becomes of the new self, once the initiatory hunt is over? (Slotkin, 556-7)

By that standard for the hunting myth, violence seems to be continuously necessary in order for the United States to renew itself. Violence is the catalyst for change. With this notion, Slotkin provides a valuable base for this thesis to build upon.

In “The New Founding Fathers: The Lore and Lure of the Serial Killer in Contemporary Culture”, Jane Caputi talks about the ‘mythicization’ of the serial killer. In her article, she uses Jack the Ripper as an example of such mythmaking: “the mythic Ripper inspires awe and laughter, he is viewed as both hero and monster, and he is hailed by many as a key innovator, not only in the annals of true crime, but also in the imagination of modern horror” (Caputi, 3). As she states, the Ripper is a serial killer that is known by many across the globe and has been featured many a times in several forms of popular culture (3-4). Of course, Jack the Ripper is merely an example of a serial killer that has acquired a substantial level of fame. For example, Ted Bundy has even been named ‘America’s Jack the Ripper’ on multiple occasions, not to mention that Bundy’s execution gathered immense media attention: “On the morning Bundy went to the electric chair, hundreds […] gathered across the street from the prison. Many wore specially designed costumes, waved banners proclaiming a ‘Bundy BBQ’ or ‘I like my Ted well done,’ […]. The most common journalistic metaphors for the overall scene were that of a carnival, circus, or tailgate party before a big game” (4). As Caputi explains, there was such an outpouring of interest and excitement over Ted Bundy that it becomes clear that people are attracted to such serial killers and the murders that come with them. There is a certain level of attraction that makes them a very popular topic for consumer culture. Caputi states that in these fictional accounts, there is always that mysterious side of the serial killer that is never fully explored but intensely highlighted (5-7). In the case of Bundy, Caputi argues, the greatest myth was the concept that Bundy and other serial killers “are complete enigmas. This was constantly reiterated in refutation of Bundy’s claim […] that pornography had influenced his evolution into a sex killer. […] Bundy ceaselessly demanded that people see him as just like them, as ‘sharing a common humanity’” (6). With other serial killers, factual or fictional, there was a different mythical aspect to them; in the case of fictional killers Freddy Krueger from *Nightmare on Elm Street* and Jason from *Friday the 13th*, there was the mystery of paternity. On this mystery of paternity, Caputi argues that “it is mythically necessary to leave the paternity of these killers nebulous and even multiple, for their true father is indeed a collective entity – the patriarchal culture that has produced the serial killer as a fact of modern life. Moreover, these deranged sons must themselves stand in for that absent father, assuming the punitive paternal role” (8). Therefore, factual or fictional killers are embraced as a “desperate attempt to deny or escape destruction through identification with the agent of that destruction”, meaning that the serial killer theme in popular culture offers the audience an option to explore that interest in the destruction that Caputi mentions without having to exhibit that destructive side in real life. If serial killers are observed as a “fact of modern life”, the fictional serial killer offers an exploration of that fact, as does the media attention for factual serial killers like Bundy. This seems to fit extremely well with Slotkin’s paradigm: it is the violence and the horror that attracts and offers an escape from reality, offering the United States population a chance to reinvent and rediscover themselves over and over again through enjoying acts of violence through popular culture.

In *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture*, David Schmid also stresses the immense fame of Jack the Ripper among other Victorian killers. He states there was also an immense pride in the idea that the Ripper might have been an American: “there is a long tradition, beginning with the murders themselves, of associating Americans with Jack the Ripper, in the form of both speculation that the Ripper himself might be American and the contemporaneous American fascination with the case. Although most of the theories about an American Ripper were British in origin, few commentators in the United States rejected such theories outright. Indeed, many took a perverse pride in the idea that Jack the Ripper might be an American, perhaps feeling that the United States should lead the world in all things, including crime” (Schmid, 32). When the British press attempted to make the Ripper into an American character through various pieces of what they claimed to be evidence, the United States press hardly denunciated the idea. Rather, “U.S. newspapers often redirected the focus of discussion and implied American superiority over the British by emphasizing the awfulness of the murders and the wretchedness of the environment in which they were taking place” (42). Moreover, some newspaper embraced the idea of an American Ripper by either drawing attention to similar murders in the United States or by discussing events in the past that seemed to resemble the Whitechapel murders (43-44). From there on out, as Caputi also mentioned, the fascination for the Ripper only grew and inspired many dime novel plots (45). Schmid then quotes Slotkin, arguing once more that the frontier romance and the hunter-hero narrative stood at the beginning of America’s fascination with violence; dime novels seem to be an evolution from that first hunter-hero narrative (46-47).

Moving from sensationalized stories about Jack the Ripper and other serial killers, the United States created a platform for the theme of the serial killer in popular culture; according to Schmid it brings together “two defining features of American modernity: stardom and violence” (105). Film especially is a unique combination of those two, which makes the topic of the serial killer booming in Hollywood. Within popular culture, “the serial killers undoubtedly plays a dominant role in today’s ultraviolent cinema culture […], the serial killer takes place alongside such figures as gangsters, vigilantes and cyborgs in the heavily populated pantheon of contemporary film's violent protagonists" (106). Even though Schmid seems to agree with Caputi that slasher movies featuring serial killers such as Freddy Krueger and Jason seem to have sky-rocketed the interest in seeing the serial killer on screen, it by no means started the audience's fascination with the subject: "Serial killers have been appearing on film since at least 1926, when a young Alfred Hitchcock released *The Lodger*; his movie about Jack the Ripper. Since that time there have been numerous landmarks in serial killer movies […]. A lot of films depend either explicitly or implicitly on the existence of a serial killer celebrity culture" (107-108). As Schmid points out, the success of serial killer films demonstrates the 'salability' of violence to contemporary film, which in turn might have to do with people identifying with serial killers: "Similarly, although I would like to contest the simplistic equation of identification with imitation or emulation, it must be acknowledged that serial killers, much like film stars, do have fans, and this suggests the possibility that the existence of celebrity serial killers is indeed partly a result of the way in which consumers 'identify' with these killers in the sense of wanting to be or think like them. There is certainly ample evidence to suggest that contemporary American interest in serial murder is not exclusively condemnatory" (112-113). Schmid further suggests that this identification is present as a means of self-destruction, something that both Slotkin and Caputi argued as well: "these films are appealing because they potentially offer the satisfaction of a dual and related curiosity on the part of the spectator about celebrities and killers, but this satisfaction can come about only if these films can discipline effectively the unstable structures of identification they generate" (113-114). These unstable structures seem to focus on balancing the subject in order to deny responsibility for both the agents of violence and the audience that watches it, as well as denying complicity; "by either killing the serial murderer or suggesting that the true source of villainy lies elsewhere, these films let their audiences of the hook, letting them enjoy the fame of serial killers within a moralistic framework that relieves them of pursuing the implications of that enjoyment" (114). Therefore, it is exactly that moralistic framework that seems to be the norm when portraying the serial killer in United States popular culture; audiences want to be able to enjoy the violence without having to take responsibility for it.

Mark Seltzer argues in *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* that the topic of serial killing became somewhat of a career choice at the turn of the century, mostly because serial murder and all its representations had replaced the Western as the most popular genre since the 1990s (Seltzer, 1). He describes the serial killer as an embodiment of the combination of the “most basic senses of the body and society, identity and desire, violence and intimacy” (2). In Seltzer’s opinion, the serial killer is an individual who in the most radical form “experiences identity, his own and others, as a matter of numbers, kinds, types, and as a matter of simulation and likeness (‘just like me’)” (4). To support this, he points towards the character of Ted Bundy, who saw people as faceless numbers, each fitting into their own type (5-6). In his own way, Bundy was often viewed as ‘Chameleon-like’, often adjusting his persona to what a situation desired as many other serial killers seem to be known for: “the serial killer is always the ‘stranger beside me’ or ‘everyone’s next-door neighbour’: ‘average looking’ and ‘just like yourself’. The stranger, in the lonely crowd, is one who is near but also far” (10-11). Seltzer further suggests that in cases of serial killing, there is a distinct divide between the private and public life, which further refers back to the ‘Chameleon-like’ characteristic of the stereotypical serial killer (18-20). This in turn makes the serial killer a product of popular culture that is easily consumed by its audience; the serial killer is extreme and horrifying on the one hand, but relatable as well because of this distinct divide between the public and private life. Jarvis therefore points towards the consumerist quality of the serial killer in his article “Monsters Inc.: Serial killers and Consumer Culture”, stating that the label of ‘serial killer’ belongs to the cinema because of the fascination with violence that the audience has; the trope of the serial killer lends itself perfectly as a marketing tactic to allow the commodification of violence (Jarvis, 327-29). He argues that even though there are many competing definitions of the serial killer within the academic community, the fictional representations of the serial killer seem to hinge on certain stable characteristics: “One of the most conspicuous commonplaces in the popular discourses of serial killing concerns the terrifying normality of the murderer. Rather than appearing monstrously different, the serial killer displays a likeness that disturbs the dominant culture” (329).

This seems to be consistent with Seltzer’s claims about the chameleon-like characterization of serial killers in popular culture. Jarvis adds that there are certain similarities between the fictional serial killer and the ‘normal’ consumer, stating that the violence of consumerism is structural rather than incidental, much like the characteristic crimes of the fictional serial killer (330). To further exemplify this, Jarvis uses the film *Se7en* as an interesting example; in the film, the serial killer chooses his victims on their capital vices, in other words exploited by consumerism. Jarvis adds that “by foregrounding ‘sins’ that are central to consumerism and by naming the murderer ‘John Doe’, *Se7en* hints at the hyper-normality of serial killer pathology. Key aspects of consumer sensibility intersect with the trademark features of the serial killer psychology: anxious and aggressive narcissism, the compulsive collection of fetish objects and fantasies of self-transformation” (332). It therefore seems that the portrayal of the serial killer in popular culture is mostly marked by the serial killer’s ‘recognisable’ qualities; the audience relates to the serial killer because of the affinities. The serial killer and the serial consumer therefore merge together as both attempt to reinvent themselves through the consumption of ready-handed fantasies: “Numerous case studies have concluded that serial killers are prone to hyperactive fantasy lives […]. It would be a mistake to dismiss these fantasies as merely the overture to violence; rather, the violence is a means of sustaining the fantasy. By the same token, the practice and pathology of serial consumerism are driven by fantasies that cannot be fulfilled and so are compulsively repeated” (334). In consumer culture, it is the advertisement that keeps the fantasies alive and something to strive for, which more often than not leads to obsessions, which is another strong stereotypical characterization of the serial killer in contemporary culture: “serial killers are often devoted collectors […]. Their histories typically begin with killing and collecting dead animals and when they progress to human prey the murder is accompanied by the taking of a trophy” (338). Some examples of films where the motive of trophy-taking is used are *Psycho,* where the serial killer Norman Bates collects stuffed birds; *American Psycho,* where Patrick Bateman compulsively collects about anything and everything; and *The Cell,* where the killer builds a collection of human dolls (338-339). Jarvis therefore argues that serial killing is driven by a sense of lack, just like consumerism (339). He concludes that “Monsters Inc. is a booming business. The dramatic increase in images and narratives of serial killing in millennial western culture, from the media coverage of historical homicide to the proliferation of fictional and supernatural fantasies of serial homicide, ultimately embodies the *consumption of consumption* in a necrocapitalist order” (343). Considering both Seltzer and Jarvis, it seems that the most common characterizations of the serial killer in contemporary culture rely on the affiliation the audience has with them: by Seltzer’s argument the serial killer is often portrayed as two-faced, normal and identifiable by the audience’s own standards; by Jarvis’ argument the serial killer and the audience share their consumerist qualities, always searching for a way to satisfy their hunger for more.

In conclusion, it seems that there is evidence to suggest that there is a certain standard in place for the portrayal of the serial killer in United States popular culture. First off, the serial killer still often embodies the hunter-hero narrative that Slotkin discussed in *Regeneration through Violence*: the serial killer represents the wilderness, something that needs to be fought and hunted, but also triggers interest and fascination. This fascination for the violence of the serial killer is vital for the portrayal of the serial killer in popular culture. Caputi states in her article that the serial killer is often mythical and mysterious in popular media portrayals, which offers the audience an opportunity to explore and enjoy that violence, without it hitting too close; the actual similarities between the consumer and the serial killer are always kept at a safe and enjoyable distance (Caputi, 5-8). This safe distance is also explained by Schmid, who argues that the audience therefore is capable of denying responsibility for their fascination. By installing that "moral framework" made up of myth, mystery and "letting the audience off the hook", the audience is capable of enjoying the violence without having to account for it.

Secondly, following Seltzer's argument in *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*, the serial killer often embodies the audience in more extreme forms. The serial killer is often portrayed as normal, charming and 'neighbour-like' in the public sphere, while having a complete alternate persona in the private sphere. Once again, this lets the audience of the hook; the chameleon-like characterization of the serial killer offers the audience the shield of the myth as the 'monster' hides in the shades of its private life. The audience is thus capable of identifying themselves with the fictional serial killer without having to account for it because of the mystery and myth that surrounds the killer.

Thirdly, the serial killer has striking similarities to what Jarvis calls the 'serial consumer'; this consumerism is often structural and not incidental, something that also defines the common portrayal of the serial killer. Popular portrayals of the serial killer seem to hinge on the structural and methodical obsession the killer has; the killer is an obsessed and devoted collector. In truth, the consumer seems to share these traits as the consumer is continuously and repeatedly prodded to buy more, collect more, *have more.* The stereotypical representation of the serial killer in United States popular culture is therefore dependent on the affiliation the audience has with the killer.

In summary, the killer in popular culture is often characterized as mysterious and relatable at the same time, as well as an avid collector that is obsessed with fulfilling his fantasies. With this standard for serial killers and its presumed effect on the audience in United States popular culture, the aim is to look at the individual case studies and view whether this standard holds up – and, if it does, whether there are deviations from that norm that have been successful in popular media.

3. Literature

The Silence of The Lambs

In this particular case study, we will look at three examples from serial killer fiction that have been or still are popular examples in American popular culture. The first example that we will look at is *The Silence of The Lambs*(1988) by Thomas Harris as it inspired the famous film from 1991 that featured Anthony Hopkins as the serial killer Hannibal Lecter. The film was met with critical acclaim and high box office scores; it was the third film in history to win five consecutive Academy Awards (Pristin). However, the novel itself was critically acclaimed as well: it won several awards, such as the 1988 'Bram Stoker' Award for best novel (HorrorWritersAssociation).

The novel starts off with FBI-trainee Clarice Starling, who is asked by FBI-agent Crawford to let Hannibal Lecter, a cannibalistic serial killer, fill out a questionnaire for them. In reality, Crawford aims to solicit Hannibal in their search for another serial killer; Buffalo Bill. Buffalo Bill is a serial killer whose modus operandi is to kidnap overweight women and starve them, kill them, and eventually skin them (Harris, chapter 3). While Buffalo Bill's character is interesting, the main serial killer in the story remains Hannibal; even though he is captured and sentenced to nine consecutive life sentences, he is the real horror of the story as he plays with Clarice's mind from the start. Additionally, Hannibal has proven to be an amazingly popular fictional serial killer in United States popular culture. Not only are there four novels by Harris that feature him, there are also three films and a critically acclaimed television series named *Hannibal*(2013-2015). As for the character of Hannibal Lecter, Harris has never been clear about his inspiration for the famous serial killer and has instead claimed various serial killers as the inspiration for Hannibal Lecter. One example would be the Mexican physician Alfredo Ballí Treviño, who Harris encountered in the 1960s when he was a reporter. Treviño killed and dismembered several hitchhikers, as well as one of his close friends (Bacchi). However, it has also been mentioned by Charlotte Greig, in her book *Evil Serial Killers*, that Hannibal Lecter was, at least in part, inspired by serial killer Albert Fish. This is particularly interesting because we will later discuss a game that was based on Albert Fish's murders. Fish was known for the murder of several children, as well as cannibalism

(Blanco). However, these remain theories as Harris was never clear about his exact inspiration for Hannibal Lecter; more likely, he used his experience as a reporter and made Hannibal Lecter out of the combined images of several serial killers.

As it is the character of Hannibal Lecter that became so incredibly famous, we will discuss Hannibal as a serial killer in *The Silence of The Lambs*, rather than Buffalo Bill. In the novel, Hannibal is sentenced to nine consecutive life sentences for the murders he committed. Before he was caught, Hannibal was considered a brilliant psychiatrist and considered extremely cunning: "It's ridiculous, you know; Lecter's a psychiatrist and he writes for the psychiatric journals himself –extraordinary stuff – but it's never about his own little anomalies. He pretended to go along with the hospital director, Chilton, once in some tests – sitting around with a blood-pressure cuff on his penis, looking at wreck pictures – then Lecter published first what he'd learned about Chilton and made a fool out of him" (Harris, Chapter 1). Moreover, we learn directly from the start how interested everybody is in the serial killer that Hannibal Lecter is. Crawford mentions that the "supermarket press" is incredibly interested in him, that they love him, urging Clarice Starling to watch out for them: " 'Didn't a sleazo magazine offer him fifty thousand dollars for some recipes? I seem to remember that,' Starling said. Crawford nodded." (Chapter 1). To top it off, apart from being considered a brilliant and charming psychiatrist, he is extremely curious and will pull every string to find out whatever it is he wants, as Crawford warns Clarice not to indulge him:

> Be very careful with Hannibal Lecter. Dr. Chilton, the head of the mental hospital, will go over the physical procedure you use to deal with him. Don't deviate from it. *Do not deviate from it one iota for any reason.* If Lecter talks to you at all, he'll just be trying to find out about you. It's the kind of curiosity that makes a snake look in a bird's nest. We both know you have to back-and-forth a little in interviews, but you tell him no specifics about yourself. You don't want any of your personal facts in his head (Chapter 1).

However, when it becomes clear that Hannibal will only release details about Buffalo Bill when she tells him about her personal life, she steps away from protocol and indulges him. He was cunning enough to persuade her to do it, to make that mistake. In the novel, he plays with Clarice from the start, turning her own words against her and making her a puppet in his personal show, rather than Clarice being in charge. In chapter nine, Clarice goes to see Lecter and attempt to question him about what he knows about the latest victim of Buffalo Bill.

Instead, she ends up the one being questioned: he all but mocks here with his questions about the remains that were found, suggesting that she knows nothing: “ ‘Dr. Lecter, you started this. Now please tell me about the person in the Packard.’ ‘You found an entire person? Odd. I only saw a head. Where do you suppose the rest came from?’ ‘All right. Whose *head* was it?’ ‘What can you tell?’” (Harris, chapter 9). As you can see, with every question Clarice asks, he juxtaposes one of his own: toying with her as she attempts to extract information. In fact, he plays with everybody from the start and eventually manages to escape when he points Clarice in the direction of Buffalo Bill; he expertly uses the paperclip and parts of a pen that were given to him over the years by unsuspecting guards to pick his handcuff locks (chapter 36) and kills the guards when everybody is focused on capturing Buffalo Bill. He uses the clothing and parts of a guards face to get out of the mental hospital; of course, cunning as he is, he succeeds (chapter 36-39). Everything Hannibal Lecter talked about with Clarice had been strategy, everything he had said had been part of his plan to get out. Hannibal had everybody fooled; while they never trusted his motives, nobody had a clue that he was planning his escape patiently and expertly.

As a serial killer, he does not differ much from the characterization that Seltzer spoke about: in many ways, Hannibal operated as a chameleon. He was considered a respectable member of society, a brilliant psychiatrist that easily surpassed his peers. Behind the shadows however, he was a monster who made his victims into the most stunning dishes that he even occasionally served to unsuspecting guests. Hannibal was charming and incredibly appealing to everyone around him, intriguing to a fault. Moreover, Hannibal was forever courteous and polite (Harris, chapter 3). Oleson argues in “King of Killers: The Criminological Theories of Hannibal Lecter” that Hannibal has had the same effect on readers of the novel: “We love Lecter. He is the paragon of serial killers. There is something about his character that resonates in the popular imagination, and that lures audiences back to the novels and the films in order to spend their time with Lecter. It is this fascination with the character that has made the books and movies into such a profitable franchise” (189). He further argues that we are in part so fascinated by serial killers because of our fascination with Lecter as a character: “the character of Lecter is so skilfully drawn that numerous journalists have written about him as if he was a real figure, blurring the boundaries between fiction and fact. […] Even criminal justice professionals have sometimes written about Lecter as if he was a real offender” (191). However, Hannibal Lecter does not fit every stereotypical characterization that are considered to be common in serial killers, especially because of his cannibalistic tendencies.

While he has the stereotypical traits of intelligence, charm, and mystery, his cannibalistic nature sets him apart, at least partially: while he has the obsessive tendencies that Jarvis explained in “Monsters Inc.”, his obsessive consumerism is in the tasting of his victims. As Olseson argues, cannibalism is one of the biggest taboos in existence (199-200). However, he admits that Hannibal is not regarded with contempt by the audience because of his very character, as opposed to that of for example convicted cannibal Meiwes who was considered a ‘pathetic freak’ more than anything (200). Hannibal on the other hand is considered to be sophisticated:

> Perhaps the public forgives Lecter his transgressions because he dresses his cannibalism in the trappings of a gourmand. Because they forgive him because Lecter is a figure of finely developed tastes who prefers fine books and music, expensive cars, gourmet cuisine, who abhors discourtesy, and who exhibits impeccable manners. […] In Meiwes, the public sees an outsider and a misfit, who, if not insane, is so maladjusted that he cannot conform to even the most rudimentary rules of society (e.g., do not eat human beings). In Lecter, however, the public sees an elite who has shrugged off the conventions of society not because he cannot conform to the rules of society, but because he will not. He prefers not to (200).

This brings us back to his appeal to the audience; he is the stereotypical serial killer in the sense that he is charming and cunning in public and a monster in the shadows of his private life. His charm and intelligence surpass that of everyone around him, as elaborated by his extensive escape plan; he manages to fool everybody with his games and therefore Hannibal Lecter won the game. With this characterization, he fits within Richard Slotkin’s paradigm perfectly; he is in many ways the exact personification of the hunter-hero that Slotkin discussed. As he argued, the hunter was feared for his bestial tendencies, his wild nature. On the other hand, the hunter is something that appeals to the public, as it is fascinating and exciting. As Slotkin suggests, Americans accepted the violent nature of the hunter and made the myth into their own founding myth, their own foundation: “it meant adopting the hunter’s anti-intellectualism, his pursuit of the material and ephemeral, and his love of exploit and violence for the sake of their blood-stirring excitement” (Slotkin, 307). This fits with the immense fame that the character of Hannibal Lecter enjoys; Hannibal Lecter is someone the audience wants to relate to, at least in terms of his charm and intelligence; his ability to surpass everybody around him and toy with them at his will. As Hannibal Lecter remains shrouded in mystery, as his character, his true character, will never fully be revealed to the public, *The Silence of The Lambs* offers its audience that escape that Caputi also mentioned: because Lecter remains at a safe distance for the audience, the audience is able to enjoy the violence in the novel without having to account for that very fact (Caputi, 5-7). Hannibal Lecter is such a famous fictional serial killer because he is something to aspire to in many ways, as explained by Oleson. Therefore, he is in many ways the embodiment of the hunter-hero that Slotkin discussed; something to aspire to, but fear at the same time. It is exactly that combination of fear and fascination that appeals to the audience, and exactly what made *The Silence of The Lambs* and the character of Hannibal Lecter such instant classics.

Kiss the Girls

James Patterson's novel *Kiss the Girls* (1995) recently got newfound attention in the media when it was featured in the documentary series *Making a Murderer*; suspect Brendan Dassey, who was on trial for being an accomplice to the murder of Teresa Halbach claimed that his 'false' testimony was based on the novel. When Brendan Dassey confessed to the murder of Teresa Halbach, he claimed that he used narratives from *Kiss the Girls* (Netflix). This sparked a lot of attention since his confession turned out to be mostly false: in his confession he claimed that he and his uncle had raped Teresa in the bedroom of his uncle's trailer and then stabbed her before slitting her throat. In the investigation of Teresa's murder it soon came forward that there was no DNA evidence of any sorts in the entire trailer, and especially not the bedroom. When questioned about this, Brendan claimed that he made up his entire confession, based on James Patterson's 1995 novel (Netflix). It is true that there is a certain similarity between his story and that of one of described serial killers in the book: the serial killer called Cassanova, captures women and rapes them before he murders them. However, some of Dassey's comments in his confession do not fit with the novel: for example, Dassey claimed that he cut Teresa's hair, but this does occur in the novel. Strikingly however, it does occur in the 1997 movie based on Patterson's *Kiss the Girls* (Freeman). While *Making a Murderer* is not further discussed in this thesis, and it is in no way clear whether Dassey did actually base his confession on the novel or not, it is clear that it sparked new attention for Patterson's novel.

In *Kiss the Girls*, detective Alex Cross investigates two serial killers, Casanova and The Gentleman Caller, when his niece goes missing. He finds out that the two serial killers are communicating as they separately kill in different parts of the United States. However, the two killers do not share their methods: Casanova collects women and keeps them in his 'harem'; he rapes them repeatedly before eventually murdering them. The Gentleman Caller on the other hand cuts off body parts of his victims and keeps them as trophies (Kotker, 42-45). Detective Cross explains their communication with one another as 'twinning', "caused by an urge to bond, usually between two lonely people. Once they 'twin', the two become a 'whole'; they become dependent on each other, often obsessively so… in its negative form, it was the fusing of two people for their own individual needs, which weren't mutually healthy" (Patterson, 243). From this quote, you can see that the obsessive trait of the stereotypical serial killer is already being utilised in Patterson's novel. They are obsessed with one another, and additionally use one another to feed their other obsessions: in the case of Casanova it is the collecting of women for his harem; in the case of The Gentleman Caller, it is his obsession to collect parts of his victims. This fits with the theoretical framework that has been set up for this thesis: as Jarvis explained in "Monsters Inc.", the key features of the stereotypical serial killer are not only their aggressive narcissism, but also their "compulsive collection of fetish objects and fantasies of self-transformation" (Jarvis, 332).

Casanova is someone who truly believes in his own perfection; he is the ultimate narcissist. This is evident in his introduction: "She breathlessly said his name – the name she knew him by at school. But he had given himself a new name; he'd *named* himself, recreated himself. […] Before he was finished for the night, he knew that he really was Casanova – the world's greatest lover" (Patterson). As Joan Kotker points out in *James Patterson: A Critical Companion*, there is a lot of detail in the novel on what Casanova thinks of himself and his actions: "he sees himself as a warrior and he paints his body in vivid colors so that he looks like a savage hunter" (Kotker, 50). However, in truth there is little background provided on the killer and his entire history is a mystery. The reader does not get to know why Casanova is who he is, why he kills. This points back to Caputi's statements about the mystery that often surrounds the stereotypical portrayal of the fictional serial killer: it is the mystery that allows the audience to stay at a safe distance. All the reader comes to learn is that Casanova is actually Detective Nick Rushkin of the North Carolina police department and is cunningly trying to play with detective Cross' investigation.

The Gentleman Caller is in many ways similar to Casanova, apart from his methods. He sees himself as the ultimate gentleman, "always unobtrusive and polite" (Patterson). At the time of one of his first kills, he follows a young couple that attempt to make love in a stolen boat. As they start, there is nothing left of his 'ultimate gentleman': "The Gentleman felt a column of rage welling up inside him. His dark side was bursting through: the brutal, repressed animal, the modern-day werewolf'. After he kills the boyfriend, his 'ultimate gentleman' returns: " 'I didn't mean to scare you'. The Gentleman spoke softly, almost conversationally. 'Don't be alarmed,' he whispered as he reached for the gunwale of the rocking boat. 'We're old friend. To be perfectly honest, I've watched you for over two years.'" (Patterson). The Gentleman Caller seems to have the stereotypical characterisation of being a chameleon (Seltzer). He is capable of changing his persona when he needs to, but at the same time unable to control his urges. He is an excellent example of the distinction between the public life and the monster that hides in the shadows of the private life. In comparison to Casanova, even less is known about The Gentleman Caller. All the reader finds out is that he is actually a medical doctor called Will Rudolph who is extremely attached to Casanova and needs him to feel normal (Kotker, 50).

As it stands, both serial killers are shrouded in mystery, which happens to be a strong theme in the novel: everyone wears a mask. While Casanova literally wears masks to hide his true identity, The Gentleman Caller wears a symbolic mask of courtesy, someone to trust; his true identity of an obsessive voyeur and brutal murderer is therefore hidden in everyday life. As Kotker points out, The Gentleman Caller even touches upon that in the novel, comparing himself to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: "When he is in his 'normal' mode, The Gentleman Caller thinks of himself as the good Dr. Jekyll; when he is in his killing mode, he thinks of himself as the monstrous Mr. Hyde" (Kotker, 52). This theme of 'masks' is also evident in the other main characters of the book, albeit less obvious. This mystery of 'masks' is the strength of the novel as it appeals to the audience. They are able to enjoy the violence that is described, without fully having to deal with the history or reason behind it. The mystery gives them the opportunity to enjoy the satisfaction that Caputi argued, without having to account for their fascination. It is the 'moral framework' that she talks about that is evident in so many representations of serial killers that offers them that opportunity (Caputi, 5-8).

Returning to Slotkin's paradigm, Casanova seems to fit the hunter-hero narrative quite literally, especially in his own mind: he sees himself as a relentless warrior, a savage hunter. At the same time, he regards himself as the world's greatest lover, a hero of some sorts. He is a mysterious killer, who is charming and cunning as the detective who toys with Cross' investigation; he is unrelenting in his idea that he embodies every man's secret wishes (Kotker, 52). However, in many ways, The Gentleman Caller seems to fit the hunter-hero narrative even better: in his self-comparison to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde he is exactly what Slotkin assumed the Indians appeared to be to the Puritans; "bestial Indians are seen as the outward type of the beast that is in every man" (Slotkin, 154). Additionally, Slotkin argued that the hunter-hero narrative is such an appealing narrative because it embodies the 'violent' nature that he claims is part of the United States' founding myth. The disparity between The Gentleman Caller's polite and gentle side, and his monstrous side fit within the idea that the Americans adopted "the hunter's anti-intellectualism, his pursuit of the material and ephemeral, and his love of exploit and violence for the sake of their blood-stirring excitement" (307). James Patterson's *Kiss the Girls* is such a popular and famous novel because it plays into that excitement for violence; it plays into the violent nature that Slotkin assumes as an American foundation, while it also offers the side that the audience would much rather openly relate to; the kind and polite public persona of The Gentleman Caller. The novel therefore offers the audience that typical construction that allows them to enjoy the violence at a safe distance, never having to account for it.

American Psycho

Bret Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho* was published in 1991 and was an immediate controversy. As Ellis himself has stated in an interview with Jaime Clark, it all started when the company that was supposed to publish the book withdrew from the project: "I knew there was a lot of pre-controversy, and there were problems in-house, and the guy who did my covers before backed away, saying it was the most disgusting thing he'd ever read, blah blah blah" (Clark, 79). On top of that, the National Organization for Women called for a boycott of the book and in Australia the sale and marketing of the book was restricted to protect minors from reading it (Sutton). It created new controversy in Canada when it came out that serial killer Paul Bernardo read *American Psycho* as his personal bible (Harron). The novel was seen as incredibly offensive, but Ellis has hit back by stating that he doesn't think there is "anything offensive that you can do in writing" and the controversy was mostly due to people searching for publicity as they slammed it: "That was just everyone coming out of the woodwork heading towards this great target. Everybody who slammed it or yelled about it received a lot of publicity. Everyone got a higher profile because of it" (Clark, 80-83). Whether Ellis' statements about the negative attention *American Psycho* are true or not, it is clear the novel created an uproar; it made the novel into an instant cult-classic, especially when the 2000 film of the same name received favourable reviews.

American Psycho is about 'yuppie' Patrick Bateman, who works as an investment banker on Wall Street. In the novel Bateman narrates his life, from the fancy dinners and parties that he attends with Wall Street Elite to his nightly forays into vicious murder. Other than *Kiss the Girls* and *The Silence of The Lambs, American Psycho* is mostly in first person narrative of a serial killer; the reader is allowed into the mind of serial killer Patrick Bateman, revealing his most inner, and disturbing, thoughts. It therefore changes the typical structure of serial killer novels, which in part created the controversy; it made people uneasy. By being allowed into the private mind of the serial killer, the audience has no way of distancing itself from the violence and therefore feel like they have to account for their enjoyment of such a novel. Freccero argues in "Historical Violence, Censorship, and the Serial Killer: The Case of 'American Psycho'" that the serial killer is usually a "popular American figure of dementia, universally regarded as unthreatening precisely because of his singularity […]. In this sense, the serial killer serves the function of a fetish in public culture: he is the means of the disavowal of institutionalized violence" (48). She adds that through the serial killer we "recognize and simultaneously refuse the violence-saturated quality of the culture, by situating its source in an individual with a psychosexual dysfunction"(48). As we learned from Caputi's article, the audience likes the serial killer to remain, at least partially, shrouded in mystery: it allows them to enjoy the violence without having to account for their enjoyment and deny the relation to their own culture. As Freccero also states, the serial killer is usually presented as an "ideology of violence that presents violence as something originating from the private sphere" (48). That division from the public persona of the serial killer and the monster that the serial killer is in private is what keeps the moral framework in place that allows the audience to enjoy such instances of popular culture. *American Psycho* completely defies that structure, as it places the reader within the mind of the serial killer; directly inside of the private sphere.

Ellis paints Bateman as a typical upper-class white male, a yuppie. In the chapter 'Morning', Bateman immediately describes his luxurious apartment in great detail to the reader:

> In the early light of a May dawn this is what the living room of my apartment looks like: Over the white marble and granite gas-log fireplace hangs an original David Onica. It's a six-foot-by-four-foot portrait of a naked woman, mostly done in muted grays and olives, sitting on a chaise longue watching MTV, the backdrop a Martian landscape, a gleaming mauve desert scattered with dead, gutted fish, smashed plates rising like a sunburst above the woman's yellow head, and the whole thing is framed in black aluminium steel. The painting overlooks a long white down-filled sofa and a

> thirty-inch digital TV set from Toshiba; it's a high-contrast highly defined model plus it has a four-corner video stand with a high-tech tube combination from NEC with a picture-in-picture digital effects system (plus freeze-frame); the audio includes built-in MTS and a five-watt-per-channel on-board amp. A Toshiba VCR sits in a glass case beneath the TV set; it's a super-high-band Beta unit and has built-in editing function including a character generator with eight-page memory, a high-band record and playback, and three-week, eight-event timer. A hurricane halogen lamp is placed in each corner of the living room. Thin white Venetian blinds cover all eight floor-to-ceiling windows. A glass-top coffee table with oak legs by Turchin sits in front of the sofa, with Steuben glass animals placed strategically around expensive crystal ashtrays from Fortunoff, though I don't smoke. Next to the Wurlitzer jukebox is a black ebony Baldwin concert grand piano. A polished white oak floor runs throughout the apartment. On the other side of the room, next to a desk and a magazine rack by Gio Ponti, is a complete stereo system (CD player, tape deck, tuner, amplifier) by Sansui with six-foot Duntech Sovereign 2001 speakers in Brazilian rosewood. A down-filled futon lies on an Oakwood frame in the center of the bedroom. Against the wall is a Panasonic thirty-one-inch set with a direct-view screen and stereo sound and beneath it in a glass case is a Toshiba VCR. I'm not sure if the time on the Sony digital alarm clock is correct so I have to sit up then look down at the time flashing on and off on the VCR, then pick up the Ettore Sottsass push-button phone that rests on the steel and glass nightstand next to the bed and dial the time number. A cream leather, steel and wood chair designed by Eric Marcus is in one corner of the room, a moulded plywood chair in the other. A black-dotted beige and white Maud Sienna carpet covers most of the floor. One wall is hidden by four chests of immense bleached mahogany drawers (Ellis).

As you can read, his description is full of brand names, showing the reader his fine taste, his wealth, and his impeccable style. Bateman is the ultimate consumer, something that Jarvis has argued as well in "Monsters Inc.": "in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), the eponymous Patrick Bateman embodies a merger between ultra-violence and compulsive consumerism. A catalogue of obscene and barbaric atrocities (serial murder, rape and torture) is interwoven with endless shopping lists of designer clothes and fashionable furniture, beauty products and audiovisual equipment, videos and CDs alongside multiple purchases at restaurants, gyms, health spas, concerts and clubs" (Jarvis, 330). It seems like Ellis has presented Bateman as the ultimate consumer exactly because of that combination between his obsession with shopping and his serial murders; it is his perception of the everything in the world, including humans, as something that one has the right to consume (330). This use of humans as consumable products, becomes clear when Bateman comments on himself in the mirror: “Shirtless, I scrutinize my image in the mirror above the sinks in the locker room at Xclusive. My arm muscles burn, my stomach is as taut as possible, my chest steel, pectorals granite hard, my eyes white as ice. In my locker at the locker room at Xclusive lie three vaginas I recently sliced out of various women I’ve attacked in the past week. Two are washed off, one isn’t. There’s a barrette clipped to one of them, a blue ribbon from Hermès tied around my favourite” (Ellis, 370). He sees the body parts of the women he killed as his property, just as much as his fancy furniture and designer clothes. He fashions them as something to be consumed by him, something he owns. This is even more evident when Bateman talks about his first attack on someone: “I feel ravenous, pumped up, as if I’d just worked out… or just embraced the first line of cocaine, inhaled the first puff of a fine cigar, sipped the first glass of Cristal. I’m starving and need something to eat” (Ellis, 132). As Jarvis argues, the bane of Bateman’s existence is “structured by the compulsively circular logics of capitalist reproduction” (Jarvis, 339). If we relate that to Seltzer’s argument in *Serial Killers,* where he describes the serial killer as an embodiment of the combination of the “most basic senses of the body and society, identity and desire, violence and intimacy”, we can see that Ellis placed the reader on equal foot with the character of Bateman (Seltzer, 2). Bateman’s serial killing is no different from ‘normal’ consumerism, something almost everybody is ‘guilty’ of these days. *American Psycho* therefore removes the divide between the reader and the serial killer, making them connected.

Patrick Bateman does not seem to fit with the Hunter-hero narrative that Slotkin argued was the foundation myth for the United States. While Bateman is in every way a hunter, an ephemeral beast that is relentlessly violent, Slotkin argued that the foundation myth is based on contrasts: as stated, the foundation myth that he proposes is one that features violence to overcome ‘the beast’, the hardship and man’s own sin. At the same time, while Slotkin argues that Americans have accepted the ‘violent’ nature of the hunter, it always remains something to fear. There is a distinct connection between their fascination with the violence, the bestial, and the fear of the wilderness it entails. As stated in the theoretical framework, the hunter-hero narrative lends itself so perfectly for serial killer fiction because of the moral framework that is set in place, as stated by Caputi: it captures the audiences interest in the violence, but relieves them of any accountability because of the mystery and the search for justice. In *American Psycho*, there is no such relief: because Ellis placed the reader directly besides the character of Bateman, he “refuses us a consoling fantasy, a fetish for our disavowals; instead, he returns us to that history, to the violence of historicity and to the historicity of violence” (Freccero, 56). It denies the audience the escape from accountability and instead confronts them with their own relation to someone like Bateman. I vehemently believe that this caused most of the controversy; it made people uneasy and unable to even slightly admit to having enjoyed the novel. Because in doing so, they would have to account for the violence in it. As Freccero concludes, the audience wanted a moral framework with which to turn Patrick Bateman into nothing more than a fantasy of “an evil agent as the cause of evil” as they “want a humanist resolution to the monstrosity of the world Ellis presents, want to continue to believe that the killer will be caught and punished, rather than, as Ellis proposes, quoting Talking Heads in the epigraph to the novel: ‘And as things fell apart/ Nobody paid much attention’” (55). In doing so, Ellis denies the reader that resolution and escape from their relation to the character of Bateman. *American Psycho* is therefore an interesting example of how serial killer fiction can evolve into something that steps away from that typical hunter-hero narrative. *American Psycho* changed the serial killer genre, as it crossed boundaries that were, at least according to critics of the novel, not meant to be crossed. It created a pathway for deviations from the typical representation of serial killers and has therefore risen to cult-status in American popular culture. This is especially evident from the success that the film *American Psycho* had in 2000; by the time the novel was adapted into film, the audience was already less affected by the confrontation with their own consumerist qualities and relation to Bateman and actually able to enjoy its premise.

4. Films & Series

Psycho

Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* is an adaptation of Robert Bloch's novel of the same name. In the film, a young woman named Marion Crane takes off with $40.000 from her boss in order to pay off her boyfriend's debt. On her way to her boyfriend, she decided to stay at the Bates Motel because of a heavy rainstorm. While there, it seems that Norman Bates, owner of the motel, is in an unhealthy relationship with his mother; Marion overhears an argument between the two, as the mother is furious that Norman has a woman over in the motel. When Marion returns to her room for a shower, she is stabbed to death by a female figure. This particular scene is one of the most memorable and infamous moments in horror film history, and has become an iconic scene (Hodgkinson). When more people come looking for Marion, they eventually find out that Norman's mother has been dead for over a decade and Norman developed a split personality; alternating between himself and the character 'mother', who is responsible for the killings. As Norman's actual relationship was as unhealthy as was portrayed in the beginning of the movie when Marion thought she heard them arguing, 'mother' gets angry when Norman feels attracted to other women and murders them. The film ends with Norman sitting in a holding cell, while 'mother' is heard protesting that the murders were Norman's doing and that she "wouldn't even harm a fly" (*Psycho*).

The film was a big box office success and is now often considered the first example of the 'slasher' film genre. On RottenTomatoes, the consensus for the film reads: "Infamous for its shower scene, but immortal for its contribution to the horror genre. Because *Psycho* was filmed with tact, grace, and art, Hitchcock didn't just create modern horror, he validated it" (RottenTomatoes). If we consider this, we can assume that Hitchcock also set the standard for the popular portrayal of serial killers in film. For example, it seems that Norman Bates as a serial killer fits the description of the stereotypical serial killer to a fault: as Seltzer explained in *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture,* there seems to always be this distinct divide between the public and private sphere of the serial killer. There is the difference between the charming, next-door neighbour kind of guy and the monstrous serial killer behind the curtain. As Simpson also explains in *Psycho Paths: Tracking the Serial Killer Through Contemporary American Film and Fiction*, the serial killer is often portrayed as a shapeshifter and legendary because of "strategies that relocate the monstrous face behind the human one" (Simpson, 3). Simpson adds that "any given killer has one pleasant or at least nonthreatening face with which to conduct public negotiations and another evil face with which to terrify helpless victims. […] So, in spite of the moral pollution surrounding them and their transgressive actions, and the textual demonization, serial killers remain at least marginally human" (4). Moreover, in line with the theoretical framework, Simpson states that the serial killer serves as an engine that "drives our attraction/repulsion toward and elemental existence where one may be free of civilization and its discontents but also possibly killed and eaten" (5). In the case of Norman Bates, this contrast between public and private persona is quite literal because of his split personality. As Simpson explains, Norman Bates is a prime example of the "murdering madman" as he switches between his personalities. Despite the fact that he is coded as a monster in the film, his tragic and unhealthy history with his mother humanises him, making him capable of earning some sympathy from the audience (11). Moreover, before the audience is aware that Norman himself is the killer, they are made to feel bad for him; trapped by his mother and forced to clean up her mess. Hitchcock made certain of that sympathy by making the voice of 'mother' nowhere near that of the actor that portrayed Bates. Additionally, the 'female' figure that the audience sees stabbing Marion is, in fact, a stunt woman named Margo Epper (Thomas, 368). The audience is therefore never capable of even suspecting Norman of the crime. As Deborah Thomas explains in "On Being Norman: Performance and Inner life in Hitchcock's *Psycho"*, Norman as a character shares that deception with the audience; in his delusions he is not aware anymore that his mother is dead and that, in fact, it is him who is murdering young women (369). However, while it is made clear to the audience that the relationship between Norman and his mother was unhealthy, it is never fully explored. Therefore, Norman Bates remains mysterious, something Caputi stated as essential for the portrayal of serial killers in popular culture. For example, Thomas explains that Norman himself is characterised as soft-spoken and nervous, while the character of 'mother' is harsh, jealous and angry. Norman is presented as "a figure besieged by and withdrawing from the world around him, a world that manifests itself to him in the form of unspoken terrors lurking in the empty air" (374).

As stated before, the difference between Norman and 'mother' is the typical distinction between public and private in the portrayal of serial killers in popular culture, even though the distinction in *Psycho* is very literal, and not as nuanced and mysterious as in for example *The Silence of the Lambs*, where Hannibal Lecter purposely hides his private persona from the world, using his public persona as his mask (Harris). In the case of Norman, this distinction seems to be mostly unintentional; he seems to have "no conscious awareness of his transformations into his mother and back again to himself", which either alludes that he himself is indeed not aware that his mother is dead, or that he refuses to accept that fact (Thomas, 369-70). However, Norman must be aware of more than is shown in the film: as the film makes it clear that 'mother' has killed before Marion is killed, Norman's claim to Marion that his mother is "harmless" and "not a raving thing" seems to be a lie. As Norman is the one who has to clean up his mother's messes, one could assume he knows that someone like Marion is never safe with his mother present; even *if* Norman is not aware that he is 'mother' (*Psycho).* In the conversation with Marion, Norman is asked what he does in a day. When Norman gives no satisfying answer, Marion asks him if his life is empty, to which he replies stuttering that he tends the cabin and the office, and runs errands for his mother. Truthfully, this is exactly what Norman does after 'mother' kills Marion: he is 'tending' to the cabin and running an 'errand' for his mother when he cleans up Marion's corpse and the evidence of the murder (370). Thomas states that this conversation with Marion about his mother alludes to the fact that there is "partial evidence of his struggles with the truth", making his hesitations in his conversation with Marion key elements to this very fact (370). Thomas states that therefore, this distinction between his two personalities are not as distinct as first assumed: "Norman's knowledge is very precariously suppressed, and his identification with his mother and her desires invades even those moments when he is being Norman", which is evident when we consider that shortly before the murder of Marion, Norman is seen spying on her in the shower (374). Thomas suggests that we see the murder as not just a jealous retribution by 'mother', but also as the internal conflict that Norman suffers; on the one hand, he desires Marion. On the other, he wants to punish her. As Thomas explains, the stabbing is a more intense version of the invasion of privacy and space when he spies on her, rather than an act of jealous rage: "Norman-as-mother is a Norman able to make his mark upon the world, rather than remaining a nervous young man unable to do more than keep his distance. The voyeurism is an intermediate state in this journey from Norman to 'mother'" (374). Thomas then concludes that this chaos of conflicting desires is constantly countered by his refusal of the knowledge of what is actually going on, which often seems to leave him in an 'in-between' state (375). As the psychiatrist near the end of the film states, after the murder of Marion "Norman returned as if from a deep sleep", Norman does not turn into an entirely different person when he becomes 'mother', but rather, he goes into a different state of his being.

In conclusion, Norman Bates is presented as a contradictory character, one that has on the one hand a clear distinction between his private and public persona, while on the other hand it can be suggested that the lines of that distinction are blurry. In Hitchcock's *Psycho*, Norman is terrifying because he is so relatable at first; he is trapped by his mother, a poor and handsome, rather charming, young man who cannot get out of the unhealthy relationship with his mother. The audience is made to sympathise with him and as Robin Wood once stated, "we've been led to accept Norman Bates as a potential extension of ourselves. That we all carry within us somewhere every human potentiality, for good or evil, so that we all share a common guilt, may be intellectually a truism; the greatness of *Psycho* lies in its ability, not merely to tell us this, but to make us experience it" (Wood, 148). This 'potential extension of ourselves' is exactly what makes Norman such a fitting example of Slotkin's paradigm: "the hero of the hunter myth is the representative of that spirit in us which demands that the frontiers of our knowledge and our control be ever extended into the unknown wilderness of the natural world, of the yet-unrealized possibilities of our destiny" (Slotkin, 551). Furthermore, *Psycho,* like the hunter-hero myth, allows the audience to identify with the violence while also serving as a concealment of the "reality of painful or perplexing historical situations and to provide illusory but emotionally satisfying solutions for real problems" (561). This is most evident when despite their sympathy for Norman, he is caught for his crimes and additionally, his 'mother' persona takes over completely which releases the audience of their sympathy for Norman himself. Again, the audience is able to enjoy the violence and experience the cyclic regeneration that follows it according to Slotkin, without having to actually account for the violence. As *Psycho* is considered the pioneer in the slasher-genre, it is evident that in American popular film, the typical representation that fits so well with Slotkin's paradigm is largely attributed to the presentation of Norman Bates as a character. For many years, *Psycho* defined the shape of the slasher-genre, all the while allowing the audience to enjoy the violence within the lines of Slotkin's hunter-hero narrative.

Bates Motel

The television series *Bates Motel* is set up as a prequel to Hitchcock's *Psycho* and premiered in 2013 on the channel A&E. The show depicts Norman Bates' descent into madness and there is great detail about the relationship between him and his mother Norma Bates. The television series shows exactly who Norma Bates really is as a character and what effect she had on her son Norman. However, instead of making the series into an homage to *Psycho*, the creators wanted to take the characters and setup as merely an inspiration for their interpretation of what led to the events in *Psycho* (Goldberg). The series' showrunner, Carlton Cuse even said: "The mythology of what you think is what dictates the relationship is not what it's going to turn out to be" (Goldberg). Moreover, the series is set in a modern setting, rather than returning to the 60s of Hitchcock's film. The first season focuses directly on the period where Norma and her son bought the motel after her husband passed away. Directly into the pilot episode, Norma is raped by the former owner of the motel: eventually Norman intervenes and Norma then stabs the perpetrator to death, before asking Norman to help her hide the body and clean up the crime scene. This fits with the theory Thomas had on the character of Norman Bates in *Psycho*: after the murder of Marion Crane, it is Norman who cleans up the bloody scene that he believes his mother is responsible for. Thus, by the time the events of *Psycho* occurred, Norman was already used to cleaning up his mother's mess, even if by that time, it had become his mess. The first season ends with Norman witnessing his teacher Watson undressing and an hallucination of Norma tells him that the teacher is trying to seduce him. Norman rushes home, telling his mother that his teacher was supposed to drive him home, but all he remembers is running home himself. The final shot reveals the teacher's throat slashed, alluding that Norman murdered her; something that is confirmed in the final episodes of Season 2 (*Bates Motel).*

In the series, a lot of the attention goes to Norma Bates as a character, something that was not part of Hitchcock's *Psycho*. While it was confirmed in *Psycho* that the relationship between Norman and his mother had been inappropriate and unhealthy, it was never exactly revealed what happened. Moreover, the film never explored the concept of nature versus nurture; was Norman Bates always dangerous and his mother's behaviour an unjust attempt at sheltering him from himself? Or was it Norma who drove a normal, healthy human being into madness? As LaFave states in "Mother Knows Best: the Overbearing in Coriolanus and Psycho", *Psycho* merely explores the damage that occurs from his childhood: it causes Norman to seek out approval from his mother in every aspect of his life, causing the split personality (28-29). LaFave explains that while *Psycho* shows the consequences of "psychotic jealousy on mothers and sons with unhealthy attachments", the film does not show how these unhealthy attachments formed (32). The audience of *Psycho* therefore lacked insight into Norma's character, mainly because her entire character in the film is Norman's projection of her. This is turn helped create the sympathy for Norman in *Psycho*: Norman seemed to be trapped by his mother's cruel and insane character (32). *Bates Motel* turns that idea upside down: while it shows Norma's unhealthy relationship with Norman and her sudden aggression and violence, it also portrays her as caring and loving towards her son (*Bates Motel).* As LaFave points out, in the series it seems that Norma is "unsteady in her parenting of Norman and more apt to seek for his approval even in situations where she should not, as if afraid of losing him" (LaFave, 33). It places Norma's actions in the context of fear, rather than insanity.

In *Bates Motel*, we clearly see how Norma's overbearing and protective behaviour affects Norman's mental state. Even though Norma is aware that he raped and murdered his teacher, she protects him and urges him to lie. Norman's hallucinations intensify in season three, and he often suffers from blackouts where he is not aware of his actions. In season three, episode "Persuasion", Norman submerges himself in a tub in the hopes of finding out whether he had anything to do with a girl's disappearance. This alludes to his knowledge that is capable of horrible things when he blacks out, something that *Psycho* seemed to deny. In episode "Norma Louise" it is revealed that Norman has always suffered these blackouts, even killing his father in the process. In that same episode, the audience witnesses the descent of Norman into the character of Norma, cooking himself breakfast in her robe. In the final episode of the season, his Norma persona kills a young girl; afterwards Norman rolls the car into a bay, an allusion to *Psycho,* where Norman disposes of Marion and her car in the exact same way (*Psycho).* Season four that shows Norma struggling to keep her son safe, while also getting him the help he needs. Norman switches between his personalities more and more and his killings in his 'Norma' persona continue and intensify. In the season, it is confirmed that Norman convinces himself that it is his mother doing all the killings. In his delusions, he decides to kill both himself and his mother. When he succeeds, his entire mental state falls apart; he is unable to see that she is dead and the season ends with 'mother' playing the piano. As it stands, the fourth season brings the series to a conclusion to what happened in the years before the events in *Psycho.* The last season is said to chronicle the events that happened in *Psycho,* bringing the series to a full circle (Ausiello).

In the end, *Bates Motel* offers the audience an in-depth exploration of Norman's character, as well as that of Norma. The series leaves no room for mystery regarding Norman's character, which does not fit with Caputi's theory in "The New Founding Fathers: The Lore and Lure of The Serial Killer in Contemporary Culture" (5-7). As we found out when we discussed *Psycho,* that particular portrayal of Norman Bates became a very typical representation of a serial killer in popular film. Because *Psycho* is attributed as the first film in the slasher-genre, the characteristics of Norman Bates as a serial killer became a staple in American popular film. It also fit perfectly with Seltzer's theory that serial killers are portrayed as having a definite distinction between their private and public persona's. Moreover, *Psycho* seemed to have been a prime example of the hunter-hero narrative that Slotkin explains in *Regeneration through Violence*. But *Bates Motel* turns all that completely on its head. Throughout the series, we notice that Norman slowly descends into madness and others around him notice it; the distinction between his public and private persona was much less obvious at that time. Moreover, *Bates Motel* completely removes the mystery surrounding Norman Bates' character, revealing everything that caused him to fully split into two personalities at the end of season four. Despite all this, *Bates Motel*'s Norman still fits within the hunter-hero narrative, even though its effect on the audience is much different. *Bates Motel* removes the ability for the audience to enjoy the violence without having to account for it, as it shows Norman as a young boy that suffers from hallucinations and blackouts and is in many ways the victim of his mother's overbearing behaviour. It makes this Norman perhaps even more relatable than the Norman as presented in *Psycho,* because the audience is now aware of exactly what made Norman into the monster that he is. However, Slotkin stated that the hunter-hero narrative hinges on the hunter's ability to reinvent himself through violence: "The hunter myth provided a fictive justification for the process by which the wilderness was to be expropriated and exploited. It did so by seeing that process in terms of heroic adventure, of the initiation of a hero into a new way of life and higher state of being" (Slotkin, 556). Slotkin added that this concept of regeneration through violence is something we have continued throughout the years, and "traditionally associated this form of aspiring initiation with the self-transcendence achieved by hunter through acts of predation" (557). When we look at the character of Norman Bates in *Bates Motel*, does he not fit that description of the hunter that creates self-transcendence through the acts of predation? In his essence, that is exactly what Norman Bates becomes in his 'mother' persona: Norman becomes the hunter. The fact that *Bates Motel* completely removes the mystery surrounding Norman Bates, the audience has no way to set themselves apart from Norman as a hunter. Despite all this, *Bates Motel* has received critical acclaim and has turned into a very popular American television series. So while the hunter-hero narrative still stands, it is clear that the concept and relieve it should offer is changing throughout the years. Between *Psycho* and *Bates Motel*, much of the portrayal of the serial killer has changed, while other factors still remain.

Dexter

Dexter is a television series that aired on Showtime from 2006 until 2013, spanning eight seasons in total. In the series, the audience follows blood spatter analyst Dexter Morgan working for the Miami Metro Police Department. In secret, Dexter leads a life as a vigilante serial killer; often using his work to find his victims. His criteria for selecting his victims are simple; they need to 'deserve' to die because of their actions. Most of the time, these are murderers who have escaped justice. In some cases, Dexter murders them before they can be caught by the Miami Metro PD. He was taught the criteria for his victims by his adoptive father Harry, who saw that Dexter had psychopathic tendencies: after all, Harry found Dexter as a child sitting in a pool of the blood of his murdered mother. In an attempt to protect him, he taught Dexter to only kill through that moral code: the ones he killed had to deserve it according to that moral code (*Dexter*). Even though Harry has passed away, the television often shows Dexter talking to a hallucination of his adoptive father who often gives him advice throughout the series. The hallucination of Harry acts as a way for Dexter to ensure he keeps to the moral code that was set for him. While the series was highly popular on television and Showtime's highest rated series ever (Hibberd), a lot of people were concerned with its premise: in 2008 the Parents Television Council worried that the series "compels viewers to empathise with a serial killer, to root for him to prevail, to hope he doesn't get discovered" and feared especially for the effect the series might have on younger viewers (Independent). While I personally enjoyed the series immensely, I agree that the audience is compelled to root for Dexter. However, as Paul Wilson suggests in "Why Psychopaths like Dexter Aren't Really All That Bad", Dexter does not fit within the conventional portrayal of serial killers in American popular culture: "he is the Robin Hood of serial killers and is unlike some of the other villains in the show, motivated as they are by sexual thrills or desires to brutally dominate other human beings. […] What is different about Dexter is that he knows exactly who he is and what he has to do in life, because Harry equipped him with the mental tools necessary to control his urges. Most of the other serial killers, though their personalities are not as well-developed as Dexter's, certainly don't have his code of conduct" (Wilson, 1-2). Dexter is therefore almost an entirely different species than the serial killers that people have become used to in American popular culture. This does not mean in any way that Dexter does not have certain familiar traits: as per Seltzer's theory, Dexter has a clear distinction between his public and private persona, something his father Harry taught him from an early age. While socially awkward, Dexter is often perceived as charming and his colleagues like him. For most of the series, no one has any clues of his private life as a serial killer. Moreover, as per Jarvis, Dexter often becomes obsessed with the victims he chooses: not only does he stalk them in order to find out everything about them, he keeps specks of blood of each of his victims as trophies. Dexter also fits with the hunter-hero narrative of Slotkin as Dexter is the ultimate hunter of ‘beasts’. He hunts the dangerous beasts in the wilderness, regenerating himself with every monster he slays.

The monsters that he slays are often serial killers themselves and each season features a main antagonist. In season one, this main antagonist is the ‘Ice Truck Killer’, who turns out to be Dexter’s biological brother. This immediately points us towards an interesting parallel: both are serial killers, both kill in similar ways. The only difference is that his brother was not saved by Harry and thus has not learned any kind of moral code. In “Ethics of a Serial Killer: Dexter’s Moral Character and the Justification of Murder”, Simon Riches and Craig French attempt to explain his justification of killing, while he is a serial killer himself. By his own moral code, Dexter should kill himself. French and Riches assume that the Ice Truck Killer deserves to die because his victims do not, unlike Dexter’s victims according to his own moral code. Moreover, the Ice Truck Killer does not have Dexter’s level of control because of the lack of a moral code (123). In season three, this theory also holds up with Dexter’s protégé Miguel Prado: Dexter tries to instil Harry’s moral code onto Miguel but when this proves to be futile, he kills him. As French and Riches conclude, Dexter kills Miguel for similar reasons as with the Ice Truck Killer: “Firstly, Miguel kills innocent people, and, secondly, Miguel is *out of control* – revealing to Dexter, and to the audience, that it is possible to be *taught* the code, yet still not adhere to it” (125). And it is exactly that adherence to the moral code that sets Dexter apart from his victims; while Dexter is a serial killer, he does value a certain kind of moral sensitivity (125). On top of that, Dexter claims from the very first episode that all of his emotions are fake: “My name is Dexter. Dexter Morgan. I don’t know what it was that made me the way I am, but whatever it was left a hollow place inside. People often fake a lot of human interactions, but I feel like I fake them all” (*Dexter,* ep.1). As French and Riches argue, this claim is false. Per example, when the Ice Truck Killer attempts to murder Dexter’s adoptive sister Debra he reacts very emotionally: “Dexter displays signs of distress, worry, and panic – and other emotional reactions that one might expect of a brother (who loves his sister) in response to his sister being endangered” (French, Riches; 126). French and Riches therefore claim that Dexter is emotional, but he has to deceive himself in order to “engage in what he views as his moral purpose” (127). Lastly, Dexter is different from other serial killers because he believes he is doing justice to the world; within the moral code that he follows he attempts to *do good*. Whether that is an actual moral justification for Dexter's serial killings is beside the point: what matters is that, unlike the main antagonists throughout the entire show, Dexter is the only one who wants to make the world 'a better place'. This is what sets Dexter apart from the stereotypical portrayal of serial killers in American popular culture.

David Schmid argues in "The Devil You Know: *Dexter* and the 'Goodness' of American Serial Killing" that *Dexter* as a show baffled "the vast majority of serial killer-related popular culture that has come before it: how to have the audience identify with serial killers in a relatively unconflicted way" (132). *Dexter* found an answer to that problem and that is what made the series so incredibly successful. Schmid states that: "never before has serial killer pop culture been so mainstream, so accepted in American society as with *Dexter*; as such, *Dexter* represents a turning point in the willingness of Americans to embrace the serial killer as one of their own, as the personification of essentially American values" (133). This quote itself shows exactly how well Dexter fits within Slotkin's theory about the hunter-hero and as a series, *Dexter* just seems to be an evolution of that narrative rather than a deviation. Schmid basically offers the same theory as Slotkin in his piece, stating that the show is "merely the latest episode in a long history of American engagement with criminality and violence, an engagement that has helped to define what it means to be American" (133). He argues that despite the fact that the audience shares an intimate relationship with Dexter, which removes the mystery that would normally allow them to deny accountability, "the makers of *Dexter* let the audience off the hook by enabling them to enjoy their relationship with Dexter through placing that relationship within a moralistic framework that relieves them of pursuing the implications of that enjoyment" (136). To make this possible, Schmid argues that the makers of *Dexter* employed the following techniques: first off, Dexter has his own moral code and only kills who he believes, and I believe most of the audience would agree, deserve to die. This is successful because Dexter is therefore made into a vigilante, a hero that stands outside of the law; in many ways he is therefore placed within the hunter-hero narrative, as he faces the wilderness heroically (136-37). Secondly, the makers employ the idea of the "evil Other" aka the main antagonists in every season. These main antagonists set Dexter apart as the 'good guy', the hero of the story. Stan Beeler suggests that "the American psyche has a deeply rooted understanding of justice which insists that the rule of the law must be, from time to time, adjusted by individuals who compare existing legislation to a template of 'natural justice'" (Beeler, 221). Dexter, of course, fits that description of the individual with his vigilante qualities. Beeler suggests, much like Schmid, that "Dexter manages to present unthinkable acts of violence in a forthright manner through the power of abstraction […]. By abstracting the body ports from a once-living being, the series manages to avoid the feelings of disgust that are so important to the graphic depiction of violence more common in slasher films" (224). Because of that combination of the moral code with Dexter's vigilante-like qualities, the audience is able to enjoy the violence without having to account for it because the series expertly makes Dexter the good guy; people want to root for him because, despite his own monstrous activities, he fights and defeats monsters. The fact that Dexter himself is a serial killer matters little to the audience, as he seems to fight for a good cause; despite his own flaws, in the eyes of the audience Dexter attempts to rid the world of evil.

As Ashley Donnelly suggests, Dexter is a new American hero. Most mainstream slasher films offer audiences a sense of justice and security when the killer is caught in the end. While the audience enjoyed the violence of the serial killer, and was certainly fascinated by it, they found relief in the fact that the killer did get caught in the end (Donnelly, 18). *Dexter*, not unlike *American Psycho*, presented the audience with characters "we were forced to identify with and, in some instances, root for" (21). In the case of the novel *American Psycho*, this proved to be problematic at first; the audience was not in any way ready to accept someone like Patrick Bateman as relatable, let alone the fact that he got away with his murders as nobody seemed to care. In the case of *Dexter*, this is very different. His moral code offers the audience "a clear line between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' deviance" (23). Dexter's killings are therefore justified, relieving the audience of their accountability in regards to their relationship with Dexter as a character. As Donnelly concludes, "we've become fixated on rationalizing violence, violence that punishes the wicked and redeems the wronged, and Dexter has become our primetime hero. He's marketable, attractive, witty, and absolute. […] He threatens those that 'deserve' it and poses no threat to those of us who are 'normal'" (25). Therefore, *Dexter* changed the typical conventions the audience has about serial killers in American popular culture: Dexter is *the* serial killer the audience will openly admit to rooting for. This very fact makes *Dexter* ground-breaking in many ways and sets a new stage for the hunter-hero narrative to work in modern times with modern conventions within the serial killer genre.

5. Games

Heavy Rain

Heavy Rain is an interactive game that was developed by Quantic Dream and subsequently published by Sony Computer Entertainment in 2010. In the game, the player plays four different protagonists through various sequences. The main objective of the game is to find the Origami Killer and save a little boy named Shaun Mars, the son of one of the game's protagonists. The game starts off with Ethan Mars, one of the protagonists, who loses his son Jason because of a car accident. Subsequently, Ethan falls into a deep depression and suffers from hallucinations and blackouts from the trauma. Two years later, his other son Shaun is abducted when Ethan suffers another blackout in the middle of a park. It turns out that Shaun was abducted by the Origami Killer and Ethan has to complete a set of trials set by the Origami Killer in order to save his son before it is too late. The Origami Killer's modus operandi is to abduct a young boy in the fall, when the rain is pouring down. Subsequently, the killer puts the young boy in some sort of well. The father of the boy is then subjected to several trials in an effort to save the boy before the rainfall reaches 6 inches and the boy is fully submerged by water and will die by drowning. If the boy drowns, the father also disappears, often leaving the other members of the family unsure of the whereabouts, because absolutely secrecy about the trials is one of the conditions for saving their sons. The boy himself is then later found with an origami figure in his hand and an orchid on his chest.(*Heavy Rain)*.

Apart from Ethan Mars, the player plays three other characters in their search for the Origami Killer and the boy. All playable characters have psychological issues or trauma and the game *Heavy Rain* is therefore grim in character. Scott Shelby is a private detective who used to be a police officer. In the game, Shelby is conducting an investigation into the Origami Killer, claiming to have been hired by families of previous victims of the killer. In the first sequence where the player plays Shelby, he meets Lauren Winter, mother of the second victim of the Origami Killer. Soon, Lauren becomes his partner in the investigation. In the game, Shelby is portrayed as distant and a loner, but very kind. In one of the sequences, Shelby prevents a mother of one of the victims from killing herself and talks her out of it. In the game, Shelby seems to be the most well-rounded, most likeable character based on his character traits. The other two playable characters are Norman Jayden and Madison Paige. Norman is a drug-addicted FBI-agent that is sent from Washington to support the local police force with their investigation into the Origami Killer and finding Shaun Mars. In the game, Norman has access to special glasses and gloves that work with a program called ARI, or “Added Reality Interface”. With this device, he is capable to process evidence very rapidly. His drug addiction stems from the use of ARI, as the drug keeps the mental side effects of the program in check; without it, Norman could lose his grip on reality. Madison Paige on the other hand is not a private eye or an agent investigating the Origami Killer. Rather, she is a photojournalist who suffers from severe insomnia and disturbing nightmares. Because of her nightly issues, she often checks into motels as this seems to be her only way to catch a good night’s rest. She becomes involved in the Origami Killer case after she meets Ethan Mars in a motel and subsequently starts to conduct her own investigation into the Origami Killer, bringing herself into many dire situations (*Heavy Rain)*.

The game *Heavy Rain* allows for several different outcomes depending on the choices the player makes throughout the game’s narrative. As stated by Kromhout and Forceville in “Life is a Journey: Source-Path-Goal Structure in the Videogames ‘*Half-life* 2’, ‘*Heavy Rain*’, and ‘*Grim Fandango*’”, *Heavy Rain* was therefore very unusual when first published: “’Heavy Rain’ is unusual in offering semi-interactive cutscenes: various button prompts come up, and if the player quickly presses the right ones, this determines the outcome of those cutscenes. The player can thus actually influence the development of the STORY during the cutscene. This is turn also allows a game like ‘Heavy Rain’ to consist of complex situations and events, where other games are, for instance, restricted to firing the same weapon over and over again” (109). The player is therefore able to connect more to the story and leave their own stamp on it; this engages the player in a way that was not done before in other games at that time. The player also has to deal with the consequences of their choices throughout the story, such as being able to save the boy or not, the possible death of the father at the hand of either the police or the Origami Killer, and many others. The player is therefore accountable for their actions in the game, that may or may not include severing a protagonists finger and/or murder. Zagal mentioned in “Heavy Rain: Morality the Quotidian, in Inaction, and the Ambiguous” that *Heavy Rain* “highlights the ethical choices and decisions we make in our everyday activities allowing players to practice and reflect on the ethics of everyday life. […] Through the use of a unique user interface, among other things, *Heavy Rain* is able to create player experiences that recreate the immediacy, emotional tension, and ambiguity present in many real-world ethical situations” (2). The game therefore makes the player question their morality by subjecting them to morally difficult or near-impossible choices: for example, when Ethan is tasked by the killer to kill a stranger in order to obtain the next clue in the search for his son, the player has to make that choice. At first, it seems the stranger is ‘merely’ a drugs dealer, but it soon turns out that he has children when he pleads for his life: “’Please… please don’t kill me man…’ he pleads, ‘I’ve got children…’ He then pulls out a photograph of two young girls and points at it. ‘These are my girls, see? This one’s Sarah… and the little one, that’s Cindy.. Please man’ he begs, ‘I wanna see them again. Please’” (Zagal, 9). The player therefore has to choose to destroy a family to save Ethan’s: in order to save Shaun, the player has to kill the stranger. As Zagal argues, the scenes deliberately elicit an emotional reaction in the player as they are forced to make a decision in an extreme situation (10-11).

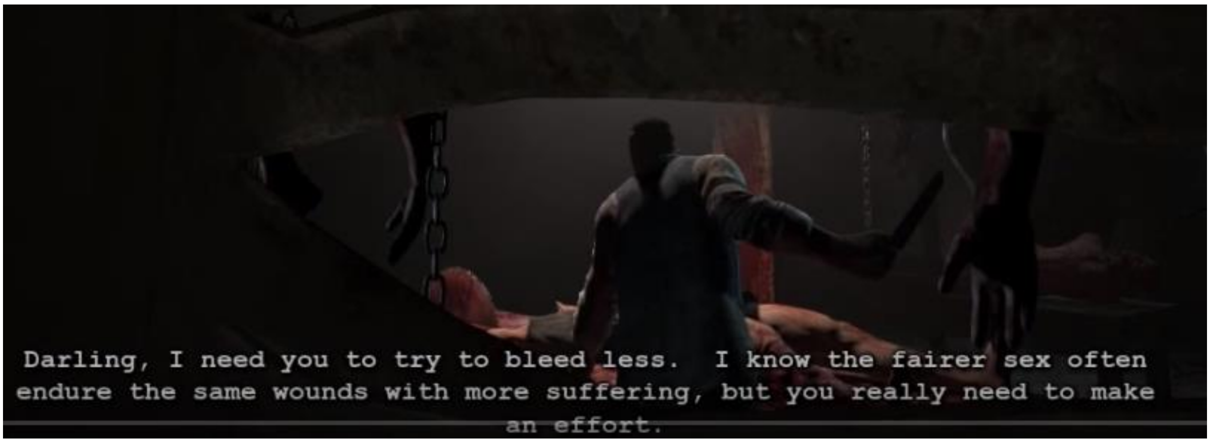
In 2013, the Origami Killer was the 42nd best villain in video game history according to GamesRadar’s top 100 (GamesRadar). This was partially due to the reveal of the killer’s identity, that shocked many players. The background that is provided into the Origami Killer near the end of the game, is sad: the player takes temporary control of a young boy playing outside at a construction site with his older brother John. When they play hide-and-seek, John becomes stuck in a broken pipe that is filling up with water. The younger boy attempts to find out and save his brother, but as his drunk father is unwilling to help, John drowns. The player is then aware that the Origami Killer has to be the younger brother who is taking revenge on fathers that he deems unfit to take care of their sons; if they are able to go through all the trials, they are worthy of their son. The player then still has to find out who the killer is in present day, and it eventually turns out that it is the private investigator Scott Shelby (*Heavy Rain).* This shocked many players and this ‘reveal’ was often critiqued despite the critical acclaim the game enjoyed upon its release (Short). Shelby was portrayed throughout the entire game as a friendly individual that was always keen to help others; nowhere in the game are there any clues that his intent may have been malicious. Shelby was never hired by the victim’s families, but sought them out himself for reasons that are not made explicitly clear even though the player can imagine; Shelby probably wanted to enjoy the fruits of his efforts and see the suffering of the families for himself. Elizabeth Short from Gamasutra felt like the reveal of the serial killer’s identity was a betrayal: “Shelby’s body language and face expressed a patient world-weariness, and his willingness to keep fighting in the face of his own handicaps – asthma, weight, age, world-weariness – made me symphatize with the guy. […] Shelby, in other words, is the most humane of the protagonists, and the one for whom I felt my choices were the most genuinely defining. I was okay with the other characters being killed off – even arbitrarily, even senselessly – if my favourite hero remained alive” (Short). The player was therefore deliberately, and quite extensively, gulled into caring for Shelby, never suspecting that he could have been the Origami Killer (moreover, it was never made clear that the killer could be one of the playable characters rather than a random character). Of course, this shocked many players and seems to fit perfectly with Seltzer’s theory in *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America’s Wound Culture,* that serial killers have a very clear distinction between their public and private persona’s, often seeming the likeable neighbour as nobody is aware of what happens behind that curtain of the public persona (Seltzer). However, the player had access to the private persona of the Origami Killer, aka Scott Shelby: in many instances is able to hear the thoughts of Shelby and there are never any hints that Shelby is anything but a good guy. There seemed to be no mystery to his character, but in the ends it turns out that the player was tricked into believing that. The player is therefore confronted with their previous opinion of Shelby and the actual truth that laid beneath the surface all along.

Heavy Rain is a little more difficult to relate to Slotkin’s paradigm because of the narrative structure of the game. First, the player is in control of four playable characters during separate chapters of the game. Second, the player is tricked into rooting for the killer; fully believing that Shelby was a protagonist rather than the antagonist. However, all four playable characters seem to fit the hunter-hero persona, even Scott Shelby in the end. Contrary to what we saw with *Dexter,* there is no moral-framework that relieves the player of their accountability and relation with the serial killer; while the player believed that all of the actions made by the characters were made in an effort to do the right thing and save Shaun as well as capture the Origami Killer, it is revealed that this moralistic framework is merely a façade. They rooting for Shelby because they believed that he was hunting the Origami Killer; Shelby, just like the other characters, was therefore the hunter-hero they were rooting for to ‘hunt the beast’. However, as it turns out, their hunter-hero turns out to have been the beast all along. As Slotkin has stated, the hunter-hero narrative functioned as a justification of the frontier’s exploitation of the wilderness, with all the violence being the way to regeneration. Here, the player is robbed of that regeneration, at least with the character of the Scott Shelby. Luckily, if the player played their cards right throughout the story, the other characters overcome the beast and catch the Origami Killer; if the player made the right choices throughout the story, they are still able to hide some of their accountability in the victory over Shelby as the hunter-hero-turned-beast. However, if the player fails, they also fail in their embodiment of being the hunter-hero as the Origami Killer, and thus the beast, wins. This very fact makes the game so incredibly interesting; it fits within Slotkin's narrative, but is completely dependent on the player's choices. The player decides, often unknowingly, if the hunter-hero will prevail over the wilderness. The game *Heavy Rain* is therefore not only fascinating, but also disturbing and challenging in its premise.

Outlast: Whistleblower

Outlast: Whistleblower was released in May 2014 as downloadable content to the original game *Outlast* that was released in September 2013. It meant to serve as an overlapping prequel to the original. Both games are focused on a first-person narrative and are set in a psychiatric hospital that is overrun by its patients. Even though there seem to be supernatural elements in both games, the ending of *Outlast* revealed that the 'Walrider', which seemed to be a ghost, was actually a technologically controlled entity of nanites connected to the mind of one of the patients. In *Outlast*, the player embodies a reporter named Miles Upshur who is sent to investigate the psychiatric hospital 'Mount Massive Asylum'. Miles only has his camera with him to shoot footage while he is in the asylum, for which the player is also required to find batteries; without it, the player might not be able to see anything in the darker parts of the asylum. In the game, the player is unable to defend themselves and in order to survive they need to run and hide as they make their way through the asylum (*Outlast)*. This is very different from usual games, as Monforton explains in " 'There Are No Observers Here': The Video Game Gaze in Outlast (2013) and Outlast: Whistleblower (2014)": "in most video games – and the focus of the criticism of the late 1990's in which video games were seen as complicit in the proliferation of school shootings – the player takes up a role as a creator of violence, enacted upon non-player character objects" (61). In *Outlast* and *Outlast: Whistleblower* however, the player is constantly subjected to violence and has no way of enacting it themselves. If the player is caught by one of the patients, they might be stabbed or ripped apart. In one sequence, that the player cannot avoid, the character of Miles is set up in a chair by a self-proclaimed doctor who then proceeds to cut Miles fingers off while the player watches. As stated by Monforton, "the player is, from the outset, complicit in the scene being viewed/filmed, and *Outlast* presents the player with scenes of physical and mental trauma – and then inflicts this trauma on the player" (62). Moreover, the player is tasked with the assignment to film all the events as part of Miles' evidence: "The game's appeal lies in its gruesome images, and filming these gruesome displays of atrocity in the game using the camcorder's record function – a impaled security officer, a bowl of severed fingers, a pile of corpses – prompts written documents to be read by the player, and the collection of these notes is encouraged by the game's structure" (63). One can imagine that would create a harrowing experience for the player that was definitely part of the success of the game, both in sales as well as in Youtube 'Let's play's'. For example, Youtuber Pewdiepie's first Outlast video garnered over sixteen million views (Pewdiepie). The fact that the game was so popular on Youtube, also brings to our attention how much we like to watch such gruesome things. For example, the player at one point films a patient without their knowledge and when the player is finally noticed the patient screams "you like to watch? You're sick!" (*Outlast).* As Monforton points out, this creates an immediate confrontation with the player's complicity in this matter: "in *Outlast* the player has no hand in constructing the violence they film, but in filming these events, the player becomes the author of the images which the game has presented, complicating the question of who creates narrative authorship as well as implicating the player" (63). And, in the case of 'Let's play's' on Youtube, it is much easier to inflict that implication on the one playing it on the videos rather than play the game themselves and therefore implicating themselves.

The story of *Outlast: Whistleblower* is similar to that of *Outlast,* both in strategy and narrative. Instead of Miles, the player takes on the character of Waylon Park who turns out to have been the anonymous 'whistleblower' who pointed Miles towards the asylum in the original. The game opens with Waylon being caught by his employer as he sends files to Miles. Upon this, he is subjected to mental torture that the patients also had to endure. When the 'Walrider' breaks free and creates the chaos that is present in *Outlast,* Waylon is able to escape from his restraints and make his way through the asylum. Once again, the protagonist is equipped with a camcorder. Eventually, Waylon meets serial killer Eddie Gluskin, known as 'The Groom'. When captured by 'The Groom', Waylon learns that Gluskin tortures and mutilates male prisoners' genitals and treating them like his brides; before discarding of them when they die of their wounds or are not 'good enough' for him. In the game, 'The Groom' is heard singing: "When I was a boy my mother often said to me: 'Get married, son, and see how happy you will be.' I have looked all over, but no girlie I can find, who seems to be just like the little girl I have in mind; I will have to look around until the right one I have found" (*Outlast: Whistleblower).* All the player learns about Gluskin is that he was sexually abused by his father and uncle in his youth; before being admitted to the asylum he was a serial killer who mutilated women. As there are no women in the asylum, he resorts to the mutilating of male prisoners to fit his idea of a ‘bride’; some of these mutilations are shown in the game and are very graphic:



Darling, I need you to try to bleed less. I know the fairer sex often endure the same wounds with more suffering, but you really need to make an effort.

Fig.1 “Groom’s procedure”. *Outlast: Whistleblower.* Youtube.

In the game, Waylon is also stripped naked by ‘The Groom’ and approached with a buzzsaw. ‘The Groom’ then attempts to cut into Waylon’s genitals, but Waylon is saved when another patient causes a distraction (*Outlast: Whistleblower*). As stated before by Monforton, the player is subjected to these trauma’s without actual agency over it; they are forced to endure it. While sales implicated that this was not a reason for players to skip this game, the aforementioned success of the game on Youtube does point towards a lot of people rather observing the game from a distance rather than endure it themselves. This theory fits with Schmid’s argument that audiences want to enjoy violence in serial killer media, without having to account for it. As Monforton pointed out, playing *Outlast: Whistleblower* would implicate the player as they themselves choose to ‘film’ the violence in the game. Playing *Outlast: Whistleblower* would also take away part of the enjoyment of the violence, as the players themselves are subjected to it. It is therefore much easier to watch someone else endure it in a video, rather than play through it themselves.

‘The Groom’ himself as a serial killer is very much the stereotype for the portrayal of serial killers in United States popular culture: Gluskin is very charming and courtly, as is also visible from fig.1 above; he soothingly talks to his victim in an attempt to calm him down. In the game, his voice is very persuasive and almost like sweet honey as he says things like: “Did I frighten you? I’m awfully sorry, I didn’t mean to” and “A flower is only as sweet as the soil that nourishes it. And yours needs nourishing, and pruning, and caring” (*Outlast: Whistleblower).* At the same time, it becomes clear that ‘The Groom’ can suddenly switch between his sweeter and soothing personality to and extremely violent and misogynistic one:

"Oh god, are you okay? Tell me you're okay. I hate to think of you suffering without me. Why would you do something like that to yourself? You'd rather die than be with me? Then die" and "You all want to leave me? Is that it? You want to leave me? Fine! Go! You and the rest of the ungrateful sluts" (*Outlast: Whistleblower).* As becomes visible from the dialogue, Gluskin switches very quickly between these personalities when he becomes fed up with either the screaming of his patient, or when they try to escape (like Waylon). At the same time, he switches back to being 'sweet' when he sees another chance to catch Waylon. For example, at one time he says: "Get back here! You're not done dying, you slut!". Moments later, he catches a glimpse of Waylon and states: "There you are! Darling, come back to me" (*Outlast: Whistleblower).* While in the game this does not point towards a clear divide between a public and private persona as Seltzer pointed out as a stereotypical trait for serial killers, one can imagine that this must have been how Eddie Gluskin operated in his life before he went to the asylum. As Gluskin was a serial killer known for mutilating women, he probably found his victims by charming them, seeming overly sweet and caring before eventually brutally murdering them. At the same time, as Caputi stated that mystery is necessary for the audience to enjoy violence without having to account for it, not much is known about Gluskin's previous life apart from the murders he committed and the fact that he was molested as a child. Much is kept in the shadows, which makes it easier for the audience to distance themselves from Gluskin as a serial killer.

However, because the player is subjected to Gluskin's procedures in very close encounters it is difficult to fit Gluskin as a serial killer into Slotkin's paradigm: as is stands, the hunter-hero narrative often relies on violence. The hunter-hero reinvents himself through violence, violence being the catalyst for change. The hunter-hero needs to overcome the wilderness with violence, which Slotkin links to the violent history of the United States; these instances of violence throughout U.S. history are permitted because these provided progress for the United States of America and make the U.S. in what it is today. In the case of Gluskin, while he fits the stereotypical representation of fictional serial killers in United States popular culture, it is difficult to see him as either the hunter-hero or the wilderness/beast that needs to be overcome: because the game hinges on the 'run, hide, or die' strategy, the player has no way to fight back against Gluskin. Instead, the player is the one being hunted and therefore takes the role of the wilderness or the beast in this case. This is further exemplified by the fact that the player 'films' Gluskin's horrific procedures as that is the game's objective. The player is therefore, albeit forced, allowing the mutilations to take place and merely watching them happen. As Monforton pointed out, this immediately implicates the player and makes them somewhat of an accomplice of Gluskin. On the other hand, the player eventually kills Gluskin by ‘accident’: Waylon’s character is hanged from the ceiling by Gluskin and as he struggles to break free, Gluskin loses his grip on the pully system. As Waylon falls from the ceiling, Gluskin is therefore caught up in the ropes and impaled onto a metal bar. Therefore, on the one hand, Gluskin can actually be seen as the wilderness or beast that is overcome by the hunter-hero; but again on the other hand, because the player has had no active hand in this, the player cannot take the role of the hunter-hero effectively. In conclusion, while the game fits with certain elements of the hunter-hero narrative that Slotkin talked about in *Regeneration through Violence,* the game’s strategy and overall narrative make it problematic for the player to enjoy the violence in it. Because the game is so visually disturbing and plays with the player’s accountability by having the player film these disturbing images, the game implicates the player without offering true release from it. *Outlast: Whistleblower,* as was the same with *Outlast,* is therefore a game that challenges the usual narrative for serial killers in United States popular culture and makes the way for even more disturbing, more confronting games to come.

Masochisia

The video game *Masochisia* was released in October 2015 by developer Jon Oldblood. On the Steam store page the developer noted: “Masochisia is an experimental take on psychological horror games as a narrative. Individuals struggling with depression, abuse or mental illness may be uncomfortable with some of the themes. The experience is intended for mature audiences” (Steam). Therefore, before the player is able to buy and download the game, the player is immediately warned for possible effects; it might be triggering or extremely disturbing to certain individuals. In the game, you play a young abused boy on his way to become a brutal serial killer. Throughout the game you can see the boy’s descent into madness as the voices in his head become louder, the ‘angels’ he sees become more demanding, and he eventually gives in.

The story of the game is based on real life serial killer Albert Fish, also known as ‘The Gray Man’. Albert Fish was a serial killer who was executed in 1936 for the murder of several young children, as well as cannibalizing on their flesh. Albert’s real name was Hamilton Fish, but he preferred to be called ‘Albert’ after his dead sibling. He was severely abused in the orphanage he was placed in after the death of his father. However, Albert discovered at a young age that he enjoyed the physical pain and they gave him erections (Murderpedia). As Brown et al. point out in “Psychology of Albert Fish”, these beatings are also said to have spurred his fascination with inflicting pain on others: “he was also said to have become aroused while watching other boys’ beatings” (3). Because Albert enjoyed pain on an erotic level, at the time of his capture an X-ray exam found about thirty needles lodged between his scrotum and anus. Brown et al. also point out that Fish also enjoyed penetrating the skin of his victims in various ways, such as rape (4). One of his most notorious murders and the one that eventually got him caught, was the murder of Grace Budd, a ten year old girl. Albert tricked her parents into letting him take Grace to a birthday party, but obviously there was no such party and Grace never returned. Seven years later, Albert Fish send a letter to Grace’s parents, which gruesomely describes what Albert did to Grace (Brown, Harris and Daniels; 2). This letter is available from various sources and include all of his misspellings:

> My dear Mrs Budd,
>
> In 1894 a friend of mine shipped as a deck hand on the steamer Tacoma, Capt John Davis. They sailed from San Francisco to Hong Kong China. On arriving there he and two others went ashore and got drunk. When they returned the boat was gone. At that time there was a famine in China. Meat of any kind was from $1 to 3 Dollars a pound. So great was the suffering among the very poor that all children under 12 were sold to the Butchers to be cut up and sold for food in order to keep others from starving. A boy or girl under 14 was not safe in the street. You could go in any shop and ask for steak – chops – or stew meat. Part of the naked body of a boy or girl would be brought out and just what you wanted cut from it. A boy or girls behind which is the sweetest part of the body and sold as veal cutlet brought the highest price. John staid there so long he acquired a taste for human flesh. On his return to N.Y. he stole two boys one 7 one 11. Took them to his home stripped them naked tied them in a closet then burned everything they had on. Several times every day and night he spanked them – tortured them – to make their meat good and tender. First he killed the 11 yr old boy, because he had the fattest ass and of course the most meat on it. Every part of his body was cooked and eaten except Head – bones and guts. He was Roasted in the oven, (all of his ass) boiled, broiled, fried, stewed. The little boy was next, went the same way. At that time I was living at 409 E 100 St, rear – right side. He told me so often how good Human flesh was I made up my mind to taste it. On Sunday June the 3 – 1928 I called on you at 406 W 15 St. Brought you pot cheese – strawberries. We

> had lunch. Grace sat in my lap and kissed me. I made up my mind to eat her, on the pretense of taking her to a party. You said Yes she could go. I took her to an empty house in Westchester I had already picked out. When we got there, I told her to remain outside. She picked wild flowers. I went upstairs and stripped all my clothes off. I knew if I did not I would get her blood on them. When all was ready I went to the window and called her. Then I hid in a closet until she was in the room. When she saw me all naked she began to cry and tried to run down stairs. I grabbed her and she said she would tell her mama. First I stripped her naked. How she did kick – bite and scratch. I choked her to death then cut her in small pieces so I could take my meat to my rooms, cook and eat it. How sweet and tender her little ass was roasted in the oven. It took me 9 days to eat her entire body. I did not fuck her, though, I could of had I wished. She died a virgin (Murderpedia).

As you can read, the letter is extremely disturbing and detailed in his description of Grace's murder. This letter eventually led to him being caught and he never denied the murder.

The background into the character of Albert Fish is important in order to successfully analyse *Masochisia.* While the game is only loosely based on Albert Fish, the character of Grace Budd is present from the start. In the game, she features as one of the 'angels' that serve to guide Hamilton, the young boy the player embodies. Of course, at this time, Hamilton has not yet murdered Grace Budd, but she is nonetheless one of the characters in the game. Another one of Albert Fish's confirmed victims is also in the game, the young boy Billy, but in this case, the player is required to kill the boy in order to progress the story. The game itself is relatively short, only spanning about two hours of gameplay. *Masochisia* starts with Hamilton hiding in a shed from his abusive father. The voices in his head eventually convince him to return home, also suggesting he should not fear 'The Gray Man' (*Masochisia*). As became clear from our exploration of the actual Albert Fish, Albert was known as 'The Gray Man'. When Hamilton returns home, it quickly becomes clear that his entire family is extremely disturbed: his mother switches from a loving character to stating that Hamilton is a monster that should have never been born; his father is mentally and physically abusive; his brother is locked up in a room strapped in a strait-jacket. The narrative in the game is very explicit: for example, Hamilton's father explains his hate for Hamilton: "I should have never let her birth you… I stood there with the hanger and the knife…I was ready to carve you from her womb…but your Mother screamed" (*Masochisia*). After that conversation, Hamilton is beaten by his father with a belt. The player is unable to see this as the screen turns black, but one can hear the lashings. Albert Fish's sickly disposition to insert needles into his own flesh is also exemplified in the game. When the voices in Hamilton's head become too loud and the boy gets overwhelmed, the player has the option to insert a needle into Hamilton's palm. The player has to explicitly make this decision by clicking on the needle and actually inserting it into the boy's hand:

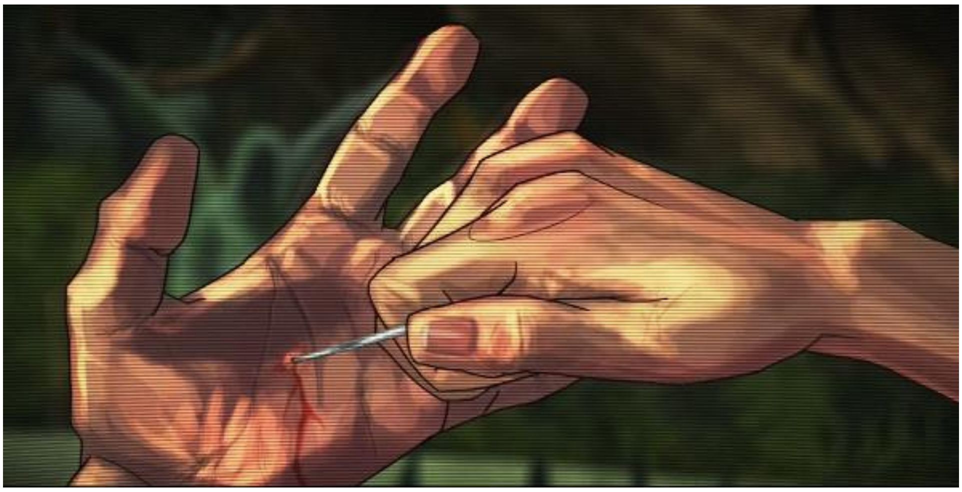


fig.2 "Inserting the Needle" *Masochisia*. Video Game

Eventually, Hamilton meets the 'angels' that supposedly tell him that he is meant for greater things and that he should deliver his father a 'message'. As it turns out, this message is brutally killing his father, which the player has to instigate. Once again, the murder is not seen, but very distinctly heard. Afterwards, the player can see the Father lying on the ground with multiple stab wounds and the knife still sticking out from his side (*Masochisia).* Later, when Hamilton is forced to kill the young boy Billy, the player once again has to instigate the murder, this time having to click multiple times to complete the murder and dismemberment. Again, the player is not able to see the actual murder or dismemberments take place but the sounds are very daunting, as is the end result:

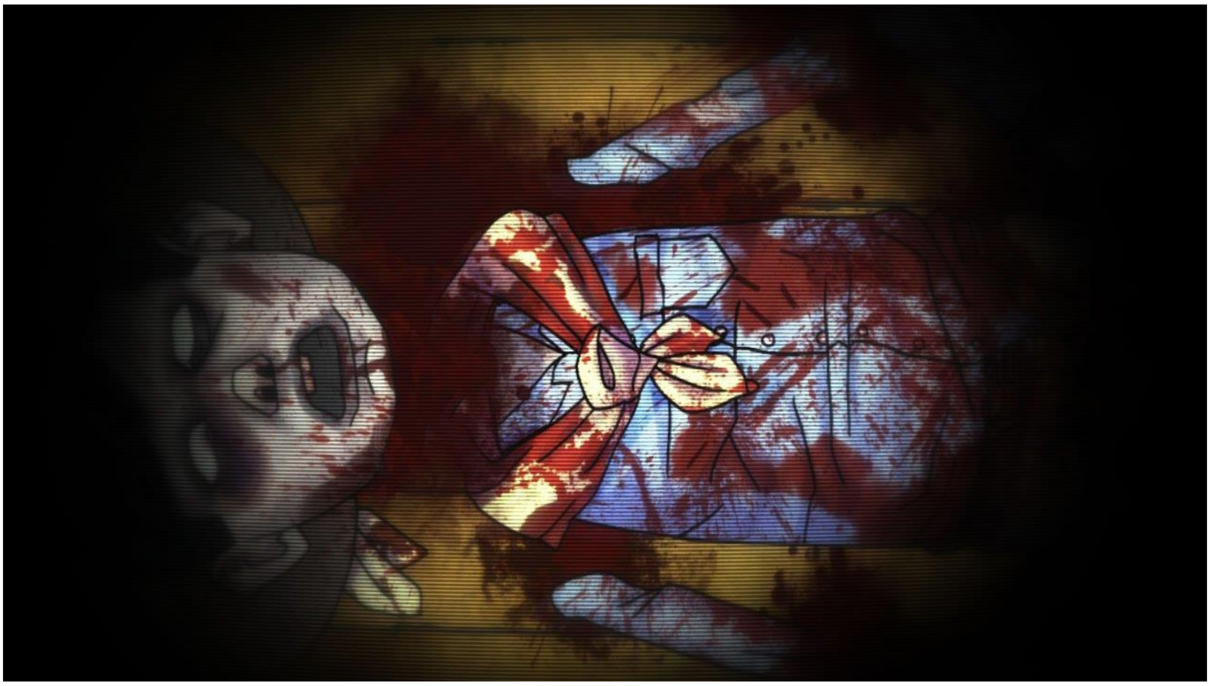


fig.3 “The Murder of Billy” *Masochisia.* Video Game

As you can see, the picture is gruesome and very detailed; it is a young child that lies dismembered on the table. And the player is the one who made it happen. Of course, in order to progress the story, the player no other option. On the other hand, the player could have quit the game if it felt too uncomfortable. Equally disturbing are the messages that will be left on your desktop after you complete each act of the game. When the player completes the game, the screen turns black and gives a final message: “I’ve got my eye on you” (*Masochisia).* The messages that the player then finds on the desktop of their computer are short messages from Hamilton. While their content is not very interesting or disturbing, the mere fact that the game places little messages on the player’s desktop is disturbing enough.

Masochisia is exceptionally haunting and disturbing as a video game and goes a lot further than *Heavy Rain* and *Outlast: Whistleblower* have gone: in this game, the player actively takes on the persona of the serial killer even though they are not aware of this at the time. But as the game progresses, Hamilton kills both his father and the boy Billy under the direction of the player. A reviewer from the Ultimate Game Database mentioned that she was unable to play the game in one sitting, despite its short gameplay span: “The game is best played in one sitting, but it would be completely understandable if it becomes too emotionally overwhelming to do so. I didn’t play it in one sitting” (Nelius). *Masochisia* places the player directly into the character of the serial killer and leaving them no way of denying accountability; whether the players wants it or not, the game implicates them for murdering both Billy and the father. After all, the player has to instigate each and every murder in order to complete the game. As Nelius expertly points out, “exploring the darkest versions of others often means we have to explore the darkest versions of ourselves; not everyone is capable of doing that, and this game forces you to do just that” (Nelius). In terms of Slotkin, the player is therefore both the protagonist of the story, but also the antagonist; hunter-hero ánd beast. In a way very different from the other sources that have been discussed in this thesis, *Masochisia* fits perfectly with the hunter-hero narrative: Hamilton, and thus the player, uses violence in order to change his life. He murders his father, because his father is abusive and needs to ‘receive a message’. Hamilton kills Billy because the angels do not leave him any other choice; he needs to kill Billy if he wants to succeed. Therefore, every murder Hamilton commits is a catalyst for change; his personal regeneration through violence. The player also gets to experience this, but the effect is much more challenging: as Caputi pointed out, the audience of serial killer media do not wish to be held accountable for the violence. Rather, the audience prefers to enjoy the violence from a safe distance. With *Masochisia*, that is impossible; the player has to be the violent agent in it. *Masochisia* therefore takes the hunter-hero narrative to a completely new level that is equally disturbing and fascinating in its premise. Fascinating, because the game was successful and people actually enjoyed playing it; disturbing, because the game was successful and people actually enjoyed playing it (Steam). There is no way to hide from the accountability that the game puts on the player and yet the player is capable to enjoy the game. Therefore, while it negates the theories that were elaborated on in the theoretical framework, it still very much fits with Slotkin’s paradigm. Thus, the game can be seen as an evolution of the serial killer genre that seems to defy theory on serial killers in United States popular culture, but nonetheless features the hunter-hero narrative that seems to have been so present throughout many decades in the United States.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to link Slotkin’s paradigm on the hunter-hero narrative as a founding myth of the United States to the prevalence of serial killers in United States popular culture. In order to successfully do this, we needed to look at contemporary sources that analyse the role of serial killers in United States popular culture. By looking into Caputi’s “The New Founding Fathers: The Lore and Lure of the Serial Killer in Contemporary Culture” we learned that fictional serial killers often have mystery surrounding them; according to Caputi, this mystery is needed for the audience to enjoy the violence in these examples of contemporary culture. Without this mystery, the audience would be confronted by their fascination with the topic of serial killers. Schmid also exemplified the need for the audience to escape accountability; “by either killing the serial murderer, or suggesting that the true source of villainy lies elsewhere, these films let their audiences of the hook, letting them enjoy the fame of serial killers within a moralistic framework that relieves them of pursuing the implications of that enjoyment” (Schmid, 114). Mark Seltzer then added that serial killers are often portrayed as chameleon-like with a distinct division between their public and private persona’s, which Jarvis argued as well: “One of the most conspicuous commonplaces in the popular discourses of serial killing concerns the terrifying normality of the murderer” (Jarvis, 329).

The theoretical framework pointed towards a certain standard for the portrayal of serial killers in United States popular culture: the serial killer is often portrayed as mysterious, relatable in the public persona, but monstrous in the private persona; charming and alluring, but always at a safe distance for the audience. This fits with Slotkin’s paradigm: in *Regeneration through Violence* Slotkin explained that the hunter-hero narrative hinges on the use of violence as a catalyst for change. The stories that therefore featured the hunter-hero narrative were often meant to allude to violence being an acceptable and necessary way for the United States to move forward: “The hunter myth provided a fictive justification for the process by which the wilderness was to be expropriated and exploited. It did so by seeing that process in terms of heroic adventure, of the initiation of the hero into a new way of life and higher state of being” (Slotkin, 556). As we learned, the hunter-hero was violent in nature, but that violence was used to overcome the wilderness and/or the beast. Violence was used to overcome evil and that made it acceptable. This relates to the theme of serial killers in popular culture because the audience, similar to the old stories that Slotkin exemplified in his paradigm, is allowed to enjoy the violence of the serial killer because as Schmid pointed out, there is often that moralistic framework that relieves them of accountability. Because of that moralistic framework, the enjoyment of that violence is made acceptable.

In order to successfully test the theoretical framework that was set up in this thesis, we needed to look at various examples of United States popular culture that featured fictional serial killers; by relating the sources in the theoretical framework to the examples in literature, film & series, and gaming, the aim was to offer a valuable exploration of the serial killer genre, as well as look at the evolution of said genre. By the end, the aim was to find out whether the hunter-hero narrative still fits, even in the most recent instances of serial killer media.

In the literature chapter, we saw that the examples of *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Kiss the Girls* very much relied on the stereotypical representation of serial killers in popular culture. Hannibal Lecter had a very clear distinction between his public and private persona; publicly he was a world-renowned psychiatrist that was considered to be extremely charming and likeable; privately, he cut up his victims and made them into the most stunning dishes for him to enjoy. Lecter fit within the hunter-hero narrative, because, in many ways, he was someone to aspire to be because of his intellect and charm. At the same time, he is fascinating because of his private persona that is wild and exemplified by his love of "exploit and violence for the sake of their blood-stirring excitement" (Slotkin, 307). *Kiss the Girls* is much the same in its representation of serial killers; both serial killers have a clear distinction between a public and private persona, which is further exemplified by the overall theme of 'masks' in the novel. This fits fit Caputi's theory that the audience is only able to fully enjoy the violence when the serial killer remains mostly shrouded in mystery. Much like Hannibal Lecter, the characters of The Gentleman Caller and Casanova fit well within Slotkin's paradigm: the audience is therefore able to enjoy the violence because it is made acceptable by a moralistic framework. *American Psycho* was a more problematic example when it came to Slotkin's hunter-hero narrative. The novel created immense controversy because it was very descriptive and gruesome, without a moralistic framework in place that would serve to relieve the audience of their accountability. As *American Psycho* was seen as a satire on consumer culture, Brett Easton Ellis' aim seemed to have been to relate the audience directly to the character of serial killer Patrick Bateman. *American Psycho* directly confronts the audience and denies them relief of the accountability. The violence is never made acceptable as it seems to be random; moreover, Bateman is never caught because it turns out that nobody actually cared about what he was doing in his private life. As Freccero stated, the audience wanted “a humanist resolution to the monstrosity of the world Ellis presents” but they are not offered such a resolution. Therefore, *American Psycho* turned out to be an interesting deviation from the standard portrayal of serial killers in United States popular culture and opened a pathway to more deviations.

In the chapter Films & Series, we saw that a lot changed in the portrayal of serial killers between the release of *Psycho* in 1960 and the release of the prequel series *Bates Motel* in 2013. While *Psycho* is often cited to have created the slasher genre, and therefore created a stereotypical representation of serial killers in film and series, we saw that there is not much difference between the portrayal of Norman Bates as opposed to the examples of Lecter, Casanova, and The Gentleman Caller as discussed in the literature chapter. In *Psycho,* the audience is made to sympathise with Norman Bates through the limited information on his history that is handed to them. He is relatable in his struggles with his mother, but the audience is relieved of that relation when they learn that Bates is the murderer. *Psycho* fits with Slotkin’s paradigm because it once again features that moralistic framework that allows for the violence in it be acceptable; the audience does not have to account for it because Bates is eventually caught. *Bates Motel* turned out to use the hunter-hero narrative in a very different way from *Psycho*: it removed a lot of the mystery as the audience was made aware of the difference between Bates’ public and private persona and could see the slow descent into madness that Bates suffered. It made this version of Norman more relatable than the version in *Psycho*, especially because of that window into his history. The audience is able to see what made him into the monster that he became. Therefore, while *Bates Motel* stepped away from some of the ‘standards’ we talked about in the theoretical framework, it still relates to the hunter-hero narrative. Because of the events in his youth and his descent into his persona of ‘Mother’, Norman reinvents himself through violence and is therefore initiated “into a new way of life and higher state of being” (Slotkin, 556). In a way, this makes Norman the ultimate hunter for the hunter-hero narrative. Even more game-changing in regards to the serial killer genre is the series *Dexter*: Dexter has a clear distinction between his public and private persona’s, as seems to be a trend in the sources we discussed. However, Dexter is someone the audience roots for, someone they can even see as a hero because he kills other serial killers. Because of his own moralistic framework, he himself is relieved from a lot of the accountability for his actions; after all, he is making the world a better place despite his own monstrous personality. *Dexter* therefore made the serial killer relatable in a way that did not create conflict when no relief is offered. As Schmid pointed out, *Dexter* "represents a turning point in the willingness of Americans to embrace the serial killer as one of their own, as the personification of essentially American values" (Schmid, 133). This makes *Dexter* an excellent fit with the hunter-hero narrative, albeit an evolution of that narrative; because Dexter is made into a vigilante he embodies the hunter-hero that hunts the wilderness. Despite his own violent nature, he uses that violence to slay monsters. This makes Dexter ground-breaking as a new stage for the hunter-hero narrative to work in modern times with modern conventions; in its essence, the message stays the same.

That left us with an exploration of three sources in games. The first, *Heavy Rain* was interesting because it placed the player in the role of the hunter; after all, the aim was to find and catch the Origami Killer while also saving one of his possible victims. In order to catch the Origami Killer, violence is shown throughout the game as a catalyst for progressing. For example, Ethan Mars has to cut off his own finger and murder a man if he wishes to find his son. The player has to make the decision whether or not Ethan Mars successfully completes this trial: if they wish to save the boy, they'll have to allow it. This directly causes the player to question their own morality. As it turns out that the Origami Killer is one of the characters the player plays, the only way the audience is able to escape that accountability is because of the character's tragic history. Moreover, while it seems that there is no distinction between Shelby's private and public persona because the player has access to his inner thoughts, it turns out that the player was tricked into believing that. Once again, that relieves them of their accountability for their actions. The moralistic framework that we discussed in the theoretical framework therefore still holds true for *Heavy Rain*. Whether the game fits with Slotkin's paradigm is entirely dependent on the choices that the player made throughout the game. If the player is able to save the boy and catch the Origami Killer, the player is the hunter-hero that overcame the beast. However, if the player fails, he or she is fully accountable for that. In *Outlast: Whistleblower* this is not much different. While the player does not have the ability to make narrative choices that affect the outcome of the game, the player's accountability is measured in their 'filming' of the game's events through Waylon's camcorder. The player is tasked to 'film' the gruesome events as part of the evidence that Waylon needs. The serial killer featured in *Outlast: Whistleblower* is very stereotypical; he is charming and convincing at times, at other times a monstrous misogynist that finds pleasure in mutilating his victims. At the same time, Gluskin remains shrouded in a lot of mystery, which further lets the player of the hook for watching his violence. However, the player is only partially relieved of accountability because the player is not able to fight back against

Gluskin. The only reason the player is able to walk away from Gluskin, is because he gets impaled on a metal bar by his own mistake. The game therefore does not fit as well with the hunter-hero narrative as the previous examples do, and challenges the usual narrative for serial killers in United States popular culture. *Masochisia* further challenged that narrative; the player is directly placed within the mind of the serial killer. Rather than watch a serial killer, the player has to embody one. In several instances, the player even has to instigate the violence and the actual murders. Afterwards, the player is immediately confronted with the visual evidence of their actions in gruesome and detailed ways. While *Masochisia* completely negates most of the theories discussed in the theoretical framework, the game still fits with the hunter-hero narrative; the only difference is that the player cannot deny accountability and has to be the one to use violence as a catalyst for change. Rather than witnessing the hunter-hero narrative, the player is placed directly within the tropes of the hunter-hero narrative and therefore completely transforms it.

In conclusion, we can see that the hunter-hero narrative is present in every example that we discussed. While the other theories discussed in the theoretical framework seem to lose some of their relation with more recent sources such as *Dexter, Outlast: Whistleblower* and *Masochisia*, we see that the hunter-hero narrative is still very much present in United States popular culture in regards to the serial killer genre. Despite the fact that games such as *Outlast: Whistleblower* and *Masochisia* seem to challenge the hunter-hero narrative, they are still in relation to it. The more contemporary examples of the serial killer genre therefore seem to transform the hunter-hero narrative to fit modern conventions. In the end, violence remains a catalyst for change in the United States, as Slotkin's paradigm still holds true even in these contemporary examples. Even when the shape of the hunter-hero narrative is altered, the essence remains the same: violence remains a necessary evil in order to progress.

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