

Guilty Pleasures: New Hollywood Violence and the 1960s True Crime Cycle

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***Abstract:** This article focuses on a cycle of late 1960s true crime films depicting topical mass/serial murders. It argues that the conjoined ethical and aesthetic approaches of these films were shaped within and by a complex climate of contestation as they moved from newspaper headlines to best-sellers lists to cinema screens. Whilst this cycle was central to critical debates about screen violence during this key moment of institutional, regulatory and aesthetic transition, they have been almost entirely neglected or, at best, misunderstood. Meeting at the intersection of, and therefore falling between the gaps of scholarship on the Gothic horror revival and New Hollywood's violent revisionism, this cycle reversed the generational critical divisions that instigated a new era in filmmaking and criticism. Adopting a historical reception studies approach, this article challenges dominant understandings of the depiction and reception of violence and horror in this defining period.*

Keywords: reception studies; film cycles; New Hollywood; violence; true crime; 1960s

In June 1968 *Kine Weekly* columnist Derek Todd identified a current cycle of true crime films based on topical mass/serial murder cases and, in most cases, recent bestselling books. He suggested that this Anglo-American production cycle had been triggered by the success of *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and Richard Brooks' 'equally horrifying' adaptation of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1967). Titled 'should we be exploiting the harmonics of horror?', Todd's article pinpointed the recently released *The Boston Strangler* (1968) and in-production *10 Rillington Place* (1971), both directed by Hollywood veteran Richard Fleischer, as evidence of the escalating number and morbidity of such films. He believed this 'new trend' raised ethical questions for film industries and audiences. Whilst, he suggested, these films must be understood in the context of earlier horror and crime cycles, he warned that 'we are on the brink of a more disturbing development: a number of semi-documentary features examining recent real life murders of a peculiarly sensational kind.' He continued, 'The time has come, it seems to me, when film-makers must ask themselves: are human tragedies recently retailed in the quiet of a courtroom – and still sounding harmonics of horror – quite the right material to exploit for presentation to a mass audience?'¹ Todd's issue was not with the appropriateness of the material per se, but its appropriateness as 'entertainment' for a 'mass' cinema audience, and its confusion of cultural categories through the melding of documentary realism and horror cinema aesthetics.

Todd's comments must be understood in the contexts of the recent or, in the case of *The Boston Strangler*, ongoing murder investigations the films detailed. This cycle of films also coincided with the suspension (1965) and subsequent abolition (1969) of the death penalty in Britain. This is an issue that *10 Rillington Place* speaks to explicitly through its focus on the initial execution of the wrong man. This cycle of films also needs to be situated historically in relation to wider debates about the media's influence upon the 'permissive society'; ongoing changes in film censorship and classifications (in the U.S. the suspension of the Production Code and its replacement with an age-based classification system in October 1968;² and in the U.K. the British Board of Film Classification's relatively liberal approach under John Trevelyan from 1958-71);³ a generational critical split in opinions on New Hollywood's emphasis on youth audiences' tastes for more explicit sex and violence; increasing pressure from within sections of Hollywood for restrictions on film violence following Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy's 1968 assassinations, and so forth.⁴

The body of literature on screen violence focusing on this period is such that 'the deployment of, and debates over, cinematic bloodletting and carnage from "the Sixties" have become the touchstones of discussions of subsequent movie violence and provide the standard by which such violence is considered.'⁵ In looking at this transitional period for Hollywood, however, scholars have focused almost solely on films that depict *explicit* violence that is *implicitly* contextual – the graphic bloodletting of Arthur Penn and Sam Peckinpah's revisionist gangster films and westerns as metaphors for the Vietnam War – rather than these true crime films that *explicitly* depict contextual violence – recent murder cases and the ethical issues they raise – through more *implicit* representational modes. The critical debates these films raise(d) are important not just because they have been excluded from the scholarship that foregrounds the generational division between critics over New Hollywood's stylised violence, but because they mostly reverse these generational critical divisions.⁶

A parallel discursive struggle between a range of film practitioners, critics, medical professionals, even the perpetrators of the crimes, resulted in a very different mode of depicting violence that combined realist documentary styles with psychological-horror traditions associated with 'Old Hollywood'. This article utilises the term 'Gothic realism' to describe the dialectical mode of representation that filmmakers such as Brooks and Fleischer employed in seeking to represent recent sensational crimes in a sensitive and truthful way. Contemporary interviews with the directors and the critical reception of their films reveal a shared concern for filmmakers and critics with developing an appropriate aesthetic for representing topical true

crime. The issue was prescient because the aforementioned censorship changes had made it possible now for Hollywood to put recent serial/mass murder cases onscreen.⁷

This article will challenge dominant understandings of this transitional period in cinema history and film criticism by adopting a predominately historical reception studies approach to reviews, interviews and reports taken from the most influential American and, to a lesser extent, British newspaper critics and trade presses. In doing so it will reintroduce these contested and controversial true crime films that are important to scholarly debates about film violence and horror cinema, but have been largely discounted by both fields of study. Through the analysis of the complex discursive struggle over this disregarded cycle of 1960s true crime films this article contributes to the theoretical and historical study of film and media cycles and the contexts in which they are produced and circulated. It also challenges dominant understandings of the depiction and reception of violence and horror in this defining period and uncovers critical reception trends that run counter to prevailing scholarly narratives on New Hollywood.

Serial murders and media cycles

According to Phillip Simpson ‘the serial killer subgenre, most strictly speaking, dates from the late 1970s or early 1980s with the coinage and widespread dissemination of the term “serial murderer”.’⁸ The fictional(ised) literary and filmic serial killers of Thomas Harris and others emerge with the FBI’s authoritative naming and classification of serial killing in this period. However, both the term ‘serial murder’ and the subgenre Simpson identifies can be traced back to the mid-1960s.⁹ A cycle of best-selling true crime books and Hollywood films depicting recent homicide cases emerged to feed public interest in the phenomenal escalation and shift in the nature of murder in the U.S. Following a long downward trend in the national murder rate, it doubled for the period 1964-74 and the character of these murders shifted significantly towards stranger killing (victims murdered by people they do not know). This resulted in a sizeable increase in unsolved homicides. The period also saw significant and corollary changes in the judicial and psychological characterisation and treatment of suspects, defendants and criminals.¹⁰ All of these factors coalesced to escalate and change the nature of true crime discourse in newspapers, magazines, books and films, as the unknowable, psychotically-motivated murderer became a staple across these media forms. Jean Murley explains, ‘the kind of killers treated in true crime books changed during the 1960s, largely due to the change in the most sensationally gruesome crimes being committed, and the growth of a large media-machinery that could hype and inflame fears about such crimes.’¹¹

Murley also highlights this period as the moment when true crime began to establish the psychological and biographical conventions we identify with it and, largely as a result, its recognition as a serious literary and to a lesser extent filmic genre. She explains that ‘until the 1950s, literary true crime consisted of warmed-over collections of old and tired cases, and murder narration outside of the magazines stagnated.’¹² In shifting towards the individual biographies and psychologies of recent murderers, late 1950s and 1960s true crime writing drew upon and aligned itself with recent psychological developments in trying to understand, even empathise with the personal histories that led to the psychopathic and sociopathic personality disorders driving these individuals (or in many cases, pairs of individuals) to kill. To become a respectable literary genre, therefore, the repetition and seriality of earlier crime writing was eschewed for explorations of highly topical ‘crimes-in-context’ and the individual psychologies and circumstances that produced them. Murley sees this literary mode as becoming ‘fully embodied’ in Capote’s *In Cold Blood* and Gerold Frank’s *The Boston Strangler*, and reaching its ‘full frightening potential in film versions of these books.’¹³

Cinematic depictions of factual murder cases stretch back to the mid-1910s, but Alfred Hitchcock’s 1926 silent *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* (based upon Marie Belloc Lowndes’ 1913 novel) was the first narrative focusing on the crimes and detection of a serial killer as its main subject.¹⁴ *The Lodger* was remade four times, including an almost shot-for-shot sound version in 1931, and the Ripper inspired dozens of other, particularly, American, British and German films. This recycling of the Ripper fits the pre-1950s literary model of revisiting the same cases. Fictional(ised) serial killers appeared in a number of other crime films and Gothic melodramas across the classical era, most notably in the films of Fritz Lang and Hitchcock. Hitchcock loosely based his thriller *Rope* (1948) on the 1920s Leopold and Loeb case, which Richard Fleischer – the director of *The Boston Strangler* and *10 Rillington Place* – revisited more faithfully in *Compulsion* (1959).¹⁵ Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) was pioneering, however, in being based, via Robert Bloch’s 1959 novel, upon a recent and particularly gruesome serial killer, Ed Gein, whose murders were committed from 1954-57; and in establishing the prototype for future cinematic depictions of the pitiable psychopath.

The critical and box office success of *Psycho* is widely understood in horror scholarship to have instigated a significant shift in the genre’s critical reputation and psychological preoccupations. This shift is not seen to be fully felt until the decade’s end when Roman Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) established the model for ‘adult horror’ which would reach its full commercial potential with William Friedkin’s horror blockbuster *The Exorcist* (1973).¹⁶

Mark Jancovich has challenged the dominant critical perceptions of the pre-*Rosemary's Baby* period in which Hammer and A.I.P.'s classic Gothic and monster-movie remakes are the predominant trend, by highlighting major creative and financial investments by major studios, directors and stars across the 1960s.¹⁷ Rather than characterised by a simple and consistent trend, horror production in America and Britain was marked by complex cultural exchanges and collaborations, melding talent and tropes of Old Hollywood Gothicism, European art-cinema and British kitchen-sink realism, in some cases working across the same films.¹⁸

The middlebrow pretensions and pop-Freudian sensibilities of these films – which had legitimised horror as a respectable genre after World War Two – frustrated the sensibilities of leading film critics in the early to mid-1960s, including the influential *New York Times* critics.¹⁹ This coincided with a wider contestation over Freudian psychoanalysis which was marked, according to Eli Zaratesky, by ‘mass diffusion and precipitous decline’. He asserts that a ‘second demonic Freud [...] for whom reason arose from madness’ filtered into social protest and popular lifestyle movements and drove scholars such as Jacques Lacan, R.D. Laing, and Michel Foucault to question the distinctions between analyst and patient, healthy society and sick individuals, and sanity and madness.²⁰ The true crime cycle must be understood in relation to these converging psychological, political and cultural contexts, all of which contributed to the discursive struggles over cinematic violence within film criticism and the mainstream press reports discussed below.²¹

The scholarship on movie violence sees New Hollywood as emerging within, to some extent resultant of, a major critical split between established and emergent film critics around the explicit depictions of violence in *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Dirty Dozen* (1967) and *The Wild Bunch* (1968). This generational conflict, and subsequent shift in power, was played out across a series of extended articles about *Bonnie and Clyde* by the *New York Times*' long-standing chief film critic Bosley Crowther and Pauline Kael, then freelance critic for *The New Yorker*.²² Raymond Haberski suggests that Kael exploited Crowther's being out-of-synch with contemporary sensibilities over the film to ‘supplant the critic who had been her professional opposite’ and consolidate her status as the critical voice of the new generation.²³ Crowther decried the aesthetics and ethics of the ‘slapstick’ *Bonnie and Clyde* and its ‘sadistic’ audience, whilst younger critics like Kael hailed it for giving expression to a collective experience and sensibility borne of a culture saturated with violence. The critical community aligned – and in some case realigned – their opinions with Kael's and joined her in attacking, and ultimately, deposing Crowther.²⁴

Screen violence scholars have focused almost entirely on New Hollywood's allegorical westerns and gangster films that depict *explicit* violence that is *implicitly* contextual, whilst ignoring the true crime films based on recent murder cases that offer *implicit* depictions of *explicitly* contextual violence. The films within this cycle – according to Todd and the other critics who discussed them – are *In Cold Blood* (based upon Capote's 1966 book on Dick Hickock and Perry Smith's 1959 Clutter family murders), *The Boston Strangler* (based upon Frank's 1966 book claiming Albert DeSalvo was the strangler of 13 women between 1962-1964), *No Way To Treat a Lady* (1968) (an adaptation of William Goldman's 1964 novel inspired by the Boston Strangler), *Targets* (1968) (based on the 1966 University of Texas sniper Charles Whitman), *The Honeymoon Killers* (1969) (based upon the 1940s 'lonely hearts killers' Raymond Fernandez and Martha Beck), *10 Rillington Place* (based upon Ludovik Kennedy's 1961 book about the 1950s John Christie murders and trial) and *Badlands* (1973) (based, though more loosely, on Charles Starkweather and girlfriend Caril Ann Fugate's 1958 murder spree). This cycle would also have included William Friedkin's unrealised Moors Murder project, *Beyond Belief*, which made it to draft script stage in 1968, but the project was abandoned after questions were raised in the British press and parliament.²⁵ The rest of this article focuses on the contested critical reception of the first two films, *In Cold Blood* and *The Boston Strangler*, but also offers some discussion of the reception of the last film, *Badlands*, which, it will be argued, marked the end of this film cycle in its shifting approach to true crime material, and the concurrent emergence of true crime as a predominantly televisual genre.

Old horrors and New Hollywood

In a seven page pictorial on the production of *In Cold Blood*, published in *Life* magazine, Jane Howard detailed the 'eerie' parallels between the looks and lives of real killers Perry Smith and Dick Hickock and the unknown actors who were restaging their murders on location at the original crime scene (fig. 1). She praised director Richard Brooks' 'chilling insistence on re-creating reality' through his casting decisions and location filming, explaining, 'Like ghosts returned to the Kansas wheat fields, two young men go through the events that give the town of Garden City a macabre fame.' Confusing past and present tenses, Howard's description – like the accompanying images – characterised Brooks' commitment to re-enact the Clutter family murders with uncanny detail, as a conjoined ethical and aesthetic project. According to the article, Brooks felt he needed to eschew the Hollywood gloss of Technicolor and famous

faces in order to be truthful and respectful not only to the events and victims – including the killers, victims of social and psychological deprivation – but also to his audience. A number of articles and reviews positioned Brooks' commitment to 'real' actors and locations as a virtuous struggle between creativity and commercialism, with the director as lone artist fighting the studio moneymen; Columbia wanted popular stars Paul Newman and Steve McQueen to play the roles of Smith and Hickock.²⁶

A *New York Times* article conducted prior to commencement of filming was more challenging in questioning Brooks on where the line between an ethical 'devotion to realism' and 'catering to the morbid interests of the public' lied. The reporter asked the director how he was going to 'avoid making a movie that was merely sensational on the one hand, or just documenting on the other?' Invoking a cultural distinction between serious art and Hollywood horror, Brooks suggested that he saw his role in capturing the ethos of the events as a 'kind of Greek tragedy American style'. He continued, 'I'm not interested in Hitchcock stuff [...] Not this piddly neurotic stuff. If I thought the movie did not have a relevance to a general social problem, I wouldn't be making it.'²⁷ Brooks' distinction between documenting and sensationalism, via Hitchcock's psychological horror techniques, is significant here, as he foreshadows the critical terms by which his film and the wider cycle of true crime films were debated. Despite Brooks' claims to eschewing Old Hollywood modes, the film is indebted to classic horror and film noir tropes, particularly in its symbolic use of graphic matches and superimposition in editing. A sense of fatalism is instilled from the outset through graphic matches of transport and locations that tie together characters who have not yet met but whose conjoined fates are in motion; whilst Smith's explicitly Freudian motivations are visualised through the superimposition of his abusive father's face over that of Herbert Clutter – and the bullying Hickock – during the murders. The film, therefore, looked back to older Gothic traditions and techniques in bridging the gap between the symbolism and suggested horror of the Production Code-era and New Hollywood's explicit violence; a necessary compromise given the sensitivity of the material they were dealing with. The ethics and aesthetics of this dialectical approach – conceptualised in the introduction as Gothic realism – became a key discussion point at the moment of transition from one critical generation to the next, particularly at the *New York Times*.

In December 1967 it was announced that America's leading film critic Bosley Crowther, now in his sixties, would be replaced as the *New York Times*' chief critic following 27 years in the role. Renata Adler, still in her twenties, would replace him. It was implied at the time and has since passed into academic dictum that Crowther's extensive and unremitting

polemics against *Bonnie and Clyde* had revealed him to be out-of-touch with contemporary tastes and the *New York Times*, eager to chase the new youth market, exploited this to replace him.²⁸ Before stepping down, Crowther wrote a laudatory review of *In Cold Blood* which he welcomed as ‘totally, gratifying different from its counterpart *Bonnie and Clyde*’. Using the review to have a final rant against his *bête noire*, Crowther contrasted the ‘subjective and sympathetic portrayal’ of *Bonnie and Clyde* to *In Cold Blood*’s ‘sharply objective, unromantic and analytical’ treatise on violence.²⁹ Haberski argues that Crowther has been mischaracterised as conservative and pro-censorship in film scholarship, almost entirely based upon his criticisms of *Bonnie and Clyde*. Conversely, he suggests, Crowther was a crusader for the freedom of filmmakers and audiences throughout his career. His violent reaction to *Bonnie and Clyde* was resultant of his dismay that the freedoms he had helped fight for had been used to sensational rather than serious ends by a cynical new generation.³⁰

Crowther saw *In Cold Blood*’s objectivity as emanating from the experience and approach of Hollywood veteran Brooks, a writer and director strongly associated with the type of filmmaking Crowther had long championed – ‘downbeat’ films combining documentary realism with social relevance.³¹ This included the ‘bold’ and ‘realistic’ *Crossfire* (1947), based on Brooks’ novel *The Brick Foxhole* (1945), which, according to Crowther, was the first film to deal with an anti-Semitic murder.³² Making a patronising generational distinction, he praised ‘how much more aware and adult [Brooks’ film was] in its evaluation of the explosiveness of violence and crime’ in comparison with *Bonnie and Clyde*. Crowther located the film’s maturity in its conjoined ethical and aesthetic approaches, suggesting Brooks’ ‘nervously fragmented and graphically documentary style’ and decision to use a flashback structure allowed the spectator to experience the ‘cold brutality of the crimes [...] but completely without generating sadistic feelings in the audience.’ By implication Crowther suggests that the (younger) audience for *Bonnie and Clyde* do enjoy such ‘sadistic feelings’.³³

A month later, Crowther’s replacement Renata Adler wrote a second *New York Times* review for *In Cold Blood*. Stretching over two pages, her lengthy polemic challenged Crowther’s evaluation of the film on every aspect, announcing her arrival as the *New York Times*’ new critical voice. Adler highlighted the film’s fidelity to Capote’s book, but for her this is where the problem lies, with its structure and characterization serving to tease the audience whilst denying ‘any truth beyond the scope of conventional journalism.’ In attacking the film’s simultaneous ethical and aesthetic failure – or more accurately deception – Adler linked the film not just to the ‘elaborate tease’ of tabloid journalism but also to the horror genre’s appeals to the corporeal rather than the cerebral. She taunted, ‘This is not the Grand

Guignol, but [...] a serious study of violence etc, and a treatise on capital punishment. A liberal intellectual double feature. It is, of course, nothing of the kind.’ She challenged Brooks, and Crowther’s claims to objective realism and social responsibility, explaining that the ‘pacing of the book (and now the movie) has been set up in such a way that only the killers have any reality at all.’³⁴

Whilst Crowther praised the film’s flashback structure for withholding explicit violence, Adler protested that it creates a troubling identification and artificial tension in the audience. Drawing upon her observation of the sell out-crowds at New York’s Cinema 1, she explained that ‘the audience is relaxed, talking, laughing with the killers, waiting’ for the first 90 minutes of the film before ‘it perceptibly draws its breath’ for the murder re-enactment which it has been primed and promised by the film’s dialogue and editing. Whilst Adler condemned the director’s exploitation of ‘every technique of cheap fiction’, she saw the film’s audiences as equally complicit, highlighting, ‘The book, the movie, the killers, the audience are stalking the family together.’ Adler’s critique of the film (and its audience) provoked a number of letters to a ‘Movie Mailbag: *In Cold Blood*’ section, all from men, justifying the film’s (and resultantly their own) ethical stance. Only one backed Adler’s response as the ‘only true review’ of *In Cold Blood*.³⁵

Brooks’ film did, in fact, receive other critical reviews, particularly from younger critics like Kael and Roger Ebert.³⁶ Whilst Ebert praised the film for its realism, commending that ‘every detail of the film, from the physical appearance of the actors to the use of actual locations like the Clutter farmhouse, was chosen to make the film a literal copy of those events’, he condemned ‘the self-conscious “art” that Brooks allows into his film. It does not mix with the actual events.’ These included the manipulative overdubbing of ‘conventional Hollywood spook music’ and the subjective use of graphic matches to foreground a Freudian reading of events.³⁷ Andrew Sarris criticised Brooks and his film even more explicitly, for their indebtedness to classic horror tropes, complaining that ‘the movie is motivated by the kind of facile Freudianism that is supposed to have gone out in the forties.’ Critiquing the dialectic this article is characterising as Gothic realism, Sarris continues, ‘the whiplash documentary style of much of the photography clashes with the tired German expressionism of dreams and hallucinations, and the mixture is a bit dishonest.’³⁸

Divided critics and desensitised audiences

Like Brooks, the director of *The Boston Strangler*, Richard Fleischer, established his Hollywood career in the 1940s and 1950s directing crime films such as *Body Guard* (1948) and *The Narrow Margin* (1952) – later designated classic film noirs – but also the aforementioned *Compulsion* based on the Leopold and Loeb trial. By the late 1960s, however, Fleischer was mostly known for blockbusting family adventure films like *Fantastic Voyage* (1966) and *Doctor Dolittle* (1967). Focusing on these family blockbusters rather than Fleischer's earlier crime films, American and British critics were confounded by the generic mismatch and questioned the middlebrow director's suitability for this material. Kael condescended, 'what sort of revelation could have been expected from a decent, Hollywood-factory sort of director', whilst the *Daily Mail* described *The Boston Strangler* as being 'as sick a contrast as Richard Fleischer could have found to directing *Doctor Dolittle*'.³⁹

Fleischer sought to address these concerns and criticisms. In a subsequent interview for *The Times*, the director highlighted the two ethical and aesthetic questions he had asked himself in deciding on both *The Boston Strangler* and forthcoming *10 Rillington Place*. The questions were: at what point in history to make the films, and what degree of violence to show? He suggested that the former question was answered by motivation – does this question need to be asked now? – and the second question was one of balance – 'show too much and you run the risk of gratuitous sensationalism; show too little and you falsify the nature of the murderer. After all, it's easy to feel compassion for Christie or the Boston Strangler if you never see what they actually did.' *Times* critic Michael Billington interpreted the film's conjoined ethical and aesthetic sensitivity as incompatible with Hollywood commercialism and sought to distance Fleischer from his earlier 'genre films [which he veered from] to works that embody his personal convictions'. Employing a metaphorical equivalence with the *Boston Strangler*'s revelation that its eponymous character had been taken over by a second personality, Billington explained, 'Fleischer the crusading campaigner is increasingly taking over from Fleischer the ever reliable Hollywood professional.'⁴⁰

The distinction between sensationalism and seriousness – or more accurately, the correct balance between them – is central to the discussion of *The Boston Strangler* as it moved from page to screen. Gerold Frank stressed that his account based upon hundreds of hours of interviews and extensive research into court, police and psychiatric records was 'within the limits of human error, true' but was still 'as baffling as any fiction'.⁴¹ The book follows chief

detective Frank Bottomly's investigation as it lead to 'the most extraordinary and sustained self-revelation yet made by a criminal' – perpetrator Albert DeSalvo's realisation that he has multiple personality disorder and is (also) the Boston Strangler.⁴² In a preproduction interview, the film's producer Robert Fryer described this shift from police procedural to psychological horror as 'when Dr Jekyll discovers he is Mr Hyde.'⁴³ This second half of the film certainly shifts towards a more Gothic style, employing a complex symmetry of doubling. This is enacted in the use of editing and *mise-en-scène* to connote the psychological splitting of DeSalvo – such as through the sustained close up of the suspect and his reflection in a one way mirror during questioning in the psychiatric unit – but also in suggesting DeSalvo's equivalence with hardboiled detective Bottomly. This is achieved through graphic matches but also structural parallels with the narrative; for example, following his questioning of DeSalvo, there is a corresponding confessional scene in which Bottomley, played by Classical Hollywood icon Henry Fonda, reveals to his wife that he is enjoying his interrogation and resultant immersion in the Strangler's psyche a little too much. Fleischer reserves more explicit and expressionistic Gothic *mise-en-scène* for these scenes of questioning in the psychiatric unit where DeSalvo's past and present and conflicting personalities blur and collide. For example, as DeSalvo struggles to recounts his steps on the day of one of the murders, a classic matte technique is used to superimpose a colour image of his face in the present next to the spectral black and white image of his elderly victim. The flashback takes on an increasingly surreal quality as the colourised DeSalvo in the present turns to follows her through a crowd in black and white. A zoom-in on the old woman's face, positioned within an iris shot of DeSalvo's head, becomes a zoom out from a mannequin's face. The camera pans out to a wide shot that follows the same old women as she walks through a disused shop full of naked mannequins.

Following the book's publication, DeSalvo retracted his confession and challenged that he was not in a fit state when he was questioned nor when he signed the book contract. He went on to file a \$2m injunction against Twentieth Century Fox for the damage the film would do to his reputation and chance of a fair trial. The judge refused to ban it, ruling that 'far from being an exhibition of violence and insanity to no purpose', the film was 'a very responsible treatment of vital sociological problem.'⁴⁴ Critics were more sceptical about the film's ethics and aesthetics. The most indicting review of *The Boston Strangler* came from now established *New York Times* critic Adler, who condemned that it 'represents an incredible collapse of taste, judgment, decency, prose, insight, journalism and movie technique, and yet – through certain prurient options that it does not take – it is not quite the popular exploitation film that one might

think.⁴⁵ For Adler, the film failed as both seriousness and sensationalism – it fell into the middlebrow category of neither good art nor good trash, largely through its pretention to be more than just a horror film. Kael shared Adler’s concern regarding the dishonesty of using Hollywood gloss and sociological pretensions to give ‘cheap exploitation’ a veneer of cultural respectability– as with *In Cold Blood*, Kael explained, ‘the good taste of *The Boston Strangler* is a form of inadequacy.’⁴⁶ Adler’s review was challenged in the *New York Times* by Arthur Mayer – a long-standing figure in New York cinema culture whose career straddled and blurred distinctions between sensational horror and serious art cinema – who distanced *The Boston Strangler* from typical Hollywood product through its ‘unusual taste and restraint’.⁴⁷ In particular, Mayer challenged Adler’s aesthetic competencies in not understanding and appreciating the film’s imaginative use of ‘multiple panel images’ to evoke mass paranoia and panic– for Adler ‘the effect is like flipping continuously among TV commercials’, the definitive throwaway aesthetic.⁴⁸

Fleischer uses this onscreen montage technique repeatedly in the first half of the film – typically overdubbed with reportage and vox pops interviews – instead of crosscutting to indicate simultaneous planes of action. For example, a soundscape of TV interviews with frightened women provides a continuous soundtrack whilst a series of changing panels within the frame display a montage of images and sounds of women scrambling to deadlock their apartments (fig. 2). Fleischer had explained to Bosley Crowther that he hoped that this mood of panic and paranoia would be ‘conveyed more correctly and [...] more engrossingly’ through this technique.⁴⁹ Fleischer’s hopes were, to some extent, vindicated by *Boston Globe* reviewer Marjory Adams who said of the technique, ‘This is how we in Boston regarded the events that kept the city in fear for so many months.’ Despite appreciating the film’s artistic direction and ‘praiseworthy attention to detail’, she remained unconvinced that the film should have been made. Whilst she commended its potential to sensitise women to the dangers of violence, she felt the film might be too topical, particularly given that that ‘the end has not yet been written on the DeSalvo case.’⁵⁰ Adams’ review came in the wake of a series of articles and letters in the *Boston Globe* debating the ethics and efficacy of the film. These discussed everything from its adverse effects on Boston’s cultural image, to scouting for Bostonian extras to enhance the film’s authenticity – an approach that not only replicated *In Cold Blood*’s casting strategy but that also was a response to the *Globe* readers’ massive demand to be in the film.⁵¹

Adams ambivalence over the appropriateness of the techniques and timing of the film was shared by the *Chicago Sun Times* Roger Ebert, who suggested that *The Boston Strangler*

‘requires a judgment not only on the quality of the film (very good), but also on its moral and ethical implications.’ Ebert raises questions about the *raison d’être* of this film and the appropriateness of the medium, suggesting that Frank's original book was ‘written with the most honorable intentions’ but the film is a ‘deliberate exploitation of the tragedy of DeSalvo and his victims’. Questions around Hollywood as a commercial genre cinema and, as a result, the audiences it attracts came to the fore. Ebert explained:

Although the film's treatment of the murders is restrained and intelligent, it is being promoted in singularly bad taste. Outside the theater there's a door that flaps open and shut, while lurid photographs of the strangler's victims rotate inside. What sort of person is attracted by this approach? I can't forget two young girls sitting near me in the theater. Near the film's end, Tony Curtis (as DeSalvo) has a long and difficult scene in which he pantomimes one of the murders. It is compelling, brutal and tragic. And these girls were laughing. They were having the times of their lives. My God.⁵²

Ebert's implication was that it was horror fans – particularly the ‘déclassé’ drive-in or grindhouse crowds for Hammer Horror or Roger Corman's A.I.P. films – who were attracted by this type of lurid horror film ballyhoo.⁵³ The film's wider marketing campaign does corroborate Ebert's concerns over Fox's promotion of *The Boston Strangler* as a horror film. For example, the poster misrepresents the thirteen victims (and the actresses who portray them) by presenting them as all young women. As a result of this misrepresentation, the semiotics corresponded with those of other contemporary horror posters, which interpellated youth audience by showing characters around the same age as them within film promotion (fig. 3). In actuality half of the Boston Strangler's victims were over 60, with some in their 70s and 80s. Whilst Ebert lauded the explicit violence of *Bonnie and Clyde* for provoking a ‘truthful’ dialogue with its contemporary moment and its cutting-edge audience, he characterised Fleischer's commercially-motivated film as one aimed at consumers attracted by the promise of a ‘marketable title’ rather than more cerebral provocations.⁵⁴ Ebert's problem therefore was not necessarily with the ethics of addressing these ‘real events’ onscreen, but that in presenting and promoting them as ‘entertainment’, the film was attracting the wrong type of audience and wrong type of reading strategy. Ebert's distaste for the film and its audience was based more on cultural distinctions around middlebrow taste than generational ones, disregarding it as pitched at ‘approximately the level of a *Reader's Digest* article’.

The final film in this true crime cycle engendered a stylistic shift away from the Gothic realism of the previous films, and resulted in a (re)alignment of critical consensus. Rookie director Terence Malik's loose and poetic dramatization of Charlie Starkweather's cross-country murder rampage in *Badlands* was welcomed by American critics as a positive shift in onscreen depictions of violence, and provoked the British press to declare a 'renaissance in American cinema'.⁵⁵ In contrast to the approaches of the late 1960s true crime films, Ebert commended *Badlands* for making 'no attempt to psychoanalyze' its protagonists or attribute 'any symbolic meaning' to their actions, but rather to 'observe them, most of the time, dispassionately'.⁵⁶ The *New York Times*' Vincent Canby (Adler's replacement after she returned to the *New Yorker* in 1969) concurred with Ebert, praising that 'Mr Malik spends no great amount of time invoking Freud to explain the behaviour of Kit and Holly, nor is there any Depression to be held ultimately responsible. Society is, if anything, benign'. The film's dispassionate tone and eschewing of psychological and sociological explanations was appreciated as 'the truth of *Badlands*, something that places it very much in the seventies in spite of its carefully recreated period detail.' Situating the film, and its protagonists, within a media context not of Ebert's overstimulated grindhouse audience, but of the desensitised 'television generation run amok', Canby ascribed Kit and Holly's disaffection to the 'difference between the way life is and the way it is presented on the small screen, with commercial breaks instead of lasting consequences'.⁵⁷

Badlands, therefore, marks both the culmination of the journey to find an appropriate cinematic aesthetic for true crime narratives, and a concomitant redirection of psychological and sociological approaches to the genre onto television, the medium which, ironically, was increasingly pinpointed as a negative influence on violent crimes. Despite the occasional high-profile exception within commercial cinema, from the mid-1970s American television has become the dominant medium for exploring the motivations and machinations of topical serial killers and their crimes. The first dramatic representations of America's most infamous mass/serial killers have been in TV movies, mini-series and documentaries such as *The Deadly Tower* (1975) (Charles Whitman), *Helter Skelter* (1976) (Charles Manson), *The Out of the Darkness* (1985) (David Berkowitz), *Deliberate Stranger* (1986) (Ted Bundy), *To Catch a Killer* (1992) (John Wayne Gacey), and so forth. Extended over consecutive nights or series of weeks, these TV shows exploit serial narrative's tease of cliff hanger endings, whilst conversely legitimizing themselves through television's civic and sociological functions.

Conclusion

Richard Fleischer's *The Boston Strangler* concludes with the audience observing murder suspect Albert DeSalvo in the white cell of a mental institution with the superimposed onscreen directive (or disclaimer): 'This film has ended but the responsibility of society for the early recognition and treatment of the violent amongst us has yet to begin' (fig. 4). Whilst older critics like Bosley Crowther saw these probing true crime films as extending the honest and honourable liberal traditions of Old Hollywood at its best – providing an antidote to New Hollywood's cynical nihilism – the new generation of critics saw through the use of 'fancy statements', like the one above, as merely alibis to allow hypocritical middlebrow audiences to enjoy 'perversions with polite reassurances.'⁵⁸ The divergent ethical and aesthetic strategies for representing violence in this late 1960s period – one implicitly revealing topical crimes-in-context and the other using explicit depictions to evoke a collective social trauma – split critics along generational lines, but not in relation to simple pro-censorship v. anti-censorship or conservative v. liberal dichotomies. The product of their transitory institutional, regulatory and critical contexts, these true crime films were shaped within and by the complex climate of contestation over their conjoined ethical and aesthetic approaches as they moved from newspaper headlines to best-selling books to cinema screens. Sitting uneasily within this transitional cultural moment, these contentious films contemplated the repressed horrors of the past, and problems of and for a perceived more liberated generation. In falling between the gaps between past and present, art and exploitation, seriousness and sensation, this cycle has mysteriously disappeared from film and media histories, despite, or perhaps in spite of disclosing a competing narrative of the political and social sensibilities and sensitivities of 1960s cinema culture.

Word count: 7,992

Notes

¹ Derek Todd, 'Should We Be Exploiting the Harmonics of Horror', *Kinematograph Weekly* (1 June 1968): 12.

² James Monaco, 'The Waning Production Code and the Rise of the Ratings System', *The Sixties: 1960-1969*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, pp. 56-66.

³ Tracey Hargreaves, 'The Trevelyan Years: British Censorship and 1960s Cinema', in Edward Lamberti (ed), *Behind the Scenes at the BBFC: Film Classification from the Silver Screen to the Digital Age*. London: BFI Publishing, 2012, pp. 53-71.

⁴ Robert Wendeler, 'Hollywood Writers and Actors Lead Fight on Movie Violence', *New York Times* (17 June 1968): 44.

⁵ J. David Slocum 'The "Film Violence" Trope: New Hollywood, "the Sixties", and the Politics of History' in Steven Jay Schneider (ed), *New Hollywood Violence*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004, p. 20.

⁶ Stephen Prince, *The Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998; Stephen Prince, *Classical Film Violence: Designing and Regulating Brutality in Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1968*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003; Schneider 2004.

⁷ During this period in Britain, the BBFC also initiated an ‘important change of policy’ on representing recent British murder cases onscreen. From 1962 to 1969 the BBFC was approached by a number of filmmakers, including the Boulting brothers, wishing to make a film about post-war British serial killer John Christie, but the Board rejected these proposals citing a longstanding ‘50 year rule’ and more recent ‘30 year rule’ on appropriate distance from a crime case before it could be put onscreen. A January 1970 memo explained that ‘in 1969, on receiving a proposal for the filming of *10 Rillington Place*, this policy was reconsidered, and it was decided that it would be unreasonable to maintain a general rule of this kind, and that in the future each case would be considered individually and on its own merits.’ BBFC, *10 Rillington Place* file. London, BBFC Library, 1970.

⁸ Phillip L. Simpson, *Psycho Paths: Tracking the Serial Killer through Contemporary American Film and Fiction*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000, p. 14.

⁹ The first usage of the term ‘serial murderer’ is attributed to German film critic Siegfried Kracauer in 1961, but was popularised by British author John Brophy in his 1966 book *The Meaning of Murder*, in which he declared Jack the Ripper ‘the most famous of all serial murderers’. Michael Newton, *The Encyclopaedia of Serial Killers*. New York: Facts on File, Inc, 2006, p. 237.

¹⁰ Roger Lane, *Murder In America: A History*. Columbus: Ohio State University, 1997, pp. 268-269.

¹¹ Jean Murley, *The Rise of True Crime: 20th-Century Murder and American Popular Culture*. Westport: Praeger, 2008, p. 47.

¹² Ibid, p. 51.

¹³ Ibid. p. 154.

¹⁴ Jack the Ripper probably made his first screen appearance in the 1915 British-Gaumont short *Farmer Spud and His Missus Take a Trip to Town*, in which a waxwork Ripper comes to life and chases the farmer and his wife.

¹⁵ *Compulsion* took its name and psychological detail from Meyer Levin’s best-selling 1956 book of the same name.

¹⁶ Kevin Heffernan, *Ghoul, Gimmicks and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953-1968*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, pp. 180-201.

¹⁷ Mark Jancovich, “‘Antique Chiller’: Quality, Pretention and History in the Critical Reception of *The Innocents* and *The Haunting*” in Murray Leeder (ed), *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, pp. 115-128.

¹⁸ Leading classical Hollywood directors came to Britain to make prestige horror films focusing on contemporary final girls tormented by psychopathic young men in swinging London settings (Otto Preminger’s *Bunny Lake is Missing* [1965]; William Wyler’s *The Collector* [1965]); whilst the hottest British new wave directors and stars looked back to 1940s Gothic cinema tropes and settings for their follow-up projects (Jack Clayton’s *The Innocents* [1961]; Karel Reisz’s *Night Must Fall* [1964]).

¹⁹ Tim Snelson, “‘Bad Medicine’: The Psychiatric Profession’s Interventions into the Business of Post-War Horror”, in Richard Nowell (ed), *Merchants of Menace: The Business of Horror Cinema*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, pp. 93-108.

²⁰ Eli Zaretsky, ‘The 1960s, Post-Fordism and the Culture of Narcissism’, in *Secret of the Soul: A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Vintage Books, 2004, p. 308.

²¹ There is a redolent example of this convergence of discursive terrains in the Production Code records for *In Cold Blood*. On 10 August 1966, Senator Robert Kennedy forwarded a letter from clinical psychologist Dr Paula Elkisch to Geoffrey Shurlock, then Director of the Motion Picture Production Code. Elkisch’s letter called on Kennedy to try to block the production of *In Cold Blood* – on the grounds of its ‘glorification [...of the] deeds of the insane’ and potential impact on the ‘psychology of adolescent, in fact [on] the emotional health of our nation’ – but the Senators letter to Shurlock is non-committal in his opinion on the proposed production. Shurlock forwarded the letters from Elkisch and Kennedy to writer-director Robert Brooks on 16 August with the equivocal statement that the letters ‘speak for themselves’. *In Cold Blood* was subsequently approved for certification with the proviso that the label ‘suggested for mature audience’ was included on publicity. MPAA, ‘*In Cold Blood* Production Code records’. Los Angeles: Margaret Herrick Library Digital Collections: <http://digitalcollections.oscars.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15759coll30/id/6583/rec/21>

²² Bosley Crowther, ‘Movies To Kill People By’, *New York Times* (9 July 1967): 65; Bosley Crowther, ‘Another Smash At Violence’, *New York Times* (30 July 1967): 59; Bosley Crowther, ‘Bonnie and Clyde Arrives’, *New York Times* (14 August 1967): 36; Pauline Kael ‘Bonnie and Clyde’, *The New Yorker*, (21 October 1967): 147-71.

²³ Raymond J. Haberski, Jr., ‘Did Bonnie and Clyde Kill Bosley Crowther?’ in *Freedom to Offend: How New York Remade Movie Culture*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007, p. 194.

- ²⁴ For example, Joseph Morgenstern of *Newsweek* retracted his earlier negative review agreeing with Crowther and, a week later, wrote an entirely positive one. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
- ²⁵ National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. L3/10-12, Emlyn Williams, 'Beyond Belief Draft Screenplays', 1968-69; Alec Greenhalgh, 'MP Opposes Film on Moors Murders', *Guardian* (6 November 1968): 5.
- ²⁶ Jane Howard, 'A Nightmare Lived Again', *Life Magazine* (12 May 1967): 98-101, 103-104.
- ²⁷ William Cotter Murray, 'Returning to the Scene of the Crime', *New York Times* (16 April 1967): 15.
- ²⁸ Haberski, p. 195. In Roger Ebert's article, he explained the pressure more traditional critics were facing to revise their opinions on *Bonnie and Clyde*: 'Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* attacked the film on three different occasions. Last week, it was announced that Crowther will retire.' Roger Ebert, 'Bonnie, Clyde and the Critics', *Chicago Sun Times* (10 December 1967).
- ²⁹ Bosley Crowther, 'Of Color, Crime and Punishment', *New York Times* (17 December 1967): 99.
- ³⁰ Haberski, pp. 177-188.
- ³¹ Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, p. 72.
- ³² Bosley Crowther, 'Ten Best Films,' *New York Times* (28 December 1947): XI. Although it is the source for *Crossfire*, Brooks' novel actually dealt with homophobia rather than anti-Semitism.
- ³³ Crowther, 'Of Color, Crime and Punishment': 99.
- ³⁴ Renata Adler, 'Cold Blood, Cheap Fiction', *New York Times* (28 January 1968): 1.
- ³⁵ Gene Philips 'To the Editor', *New York Times* (24 March 1968): 11; Nicholas McDonald, 'Chilling Enough' *New York Times* (24 March 1968): 11; Tom Andrews, 'What It's About', *New York Times* (24 March 1968): 11; Gary B. Claps, 'To the Editor', *New York Times* (24 March 1968): 11,13.
- ³⁶ Pauline Kael, 'In Cold Blood', *Going Steady*. London: Temple Smith, 1970, p. 102, 166.
- ³⁷ Roger Ebert, 'In Cold Blood', *Chicago Sun Times* (6 February 1968).
- ³⁸ Andrew Sarris, 'The Graduate; In Cold Blood,' *The Village Voice* (28 December 1967): 329.
- ³⁹ Kael, p. 167; Cecil Wilson, 'Curtis Wrings Most Out of the Strangler', *Daily Mail* (14 May 1969): 14.
- ⁴⁰ Michael Billington, 'Richard Fleischer', *The Times* (10 October 1970):20.
- ⁴¹ Gerold Frank, *The Boston Strangler*. London: Pan Books, 1967, p.5.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ⁴³ Marjory Adams, 'Boston Strangler Film-Bound', *Boston Globe* (17 September 1967): 19, 22.
- ⁴⁴ 'Did He Kill? Did He Sign? Strangler Case Vs 20th – Fox Pic', *Variety* (14 October 1964):. 1, 76.
- ⁴⁵ Renata Adler, 'The Boston Strangler Opens', *New York Times* (17 October 1968): 52.
- ⁴⁶ Kael, 'The Boston Strangler', *Going Steady*, p. 166.
- ⁴⁷ Arthur Mayer 'Boston Strangler' and 'Barbarella', *New York Times* (10 November 1968): 11. Arthur Mayer started his film career in the silent era doing promotion for Goldwyn Pictures and then Paramount, before moving into film exhibition when he took over the Rialto Theatre in Times Square in 1933. Booking almost exclusively 'B' horror and crime films, he developed the model for future grindhouses and established his identity in the *New York Times* as 'The Merchant of Menace' through the 1930s and 40s. However, Mayer combined this proclivity for low culture with a taste for European art cinema – becoming the leading importer and distributor, with partner Joseph Burstyn, of films such as *Rome Open City* (1945) in the immediate post-war period. In the 1960s, he lectured on the movie business at universities including USC, Columbia and Stanford. In hearing of Crowther's retirement he sent a laudatory letter to the *Times* thanking the critic for his key role in shaping a more liberal cinema culture by championing the controversial European art films he imported. Arthur Mayer, 'A Critic For All Seasons', *New York Times* (10 December 1967): 176. See also: Tim Snelson and Mark Jancovich, "'No Hits, No Runs, Just Terrors": Exhibition, Cultural Distinctions and Cult Audiences at the Rialto Cinema in the 1930s', in Richard Maltby, Phillippe Meers and Daniel Biltereyst (eds), *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 199-211.
- ⁴⁸ Adler, 'The Boston Strangler Opens': 52.
- ⁴⁹ Bosley Crowther. 'Hollywood Tries Multiple Image', *New York Times* (30 April 1968): 40.
- ⁵⁰ Marjory Adams, 'Tony Curtis Excellent in the Boston Strangler', *Boston Globe* (8 November, 1968): 26.
- ⁵¹ M.L.A., 'Audible Audience', *Boston Globe* (12 November 1968): 22; Adams, 'Boston Strangler Film-Bound': 19, 22.
- ⁵² Roger Ebert, 'The Boston Strangler', *Chicago Sun Times* (22 October 1968).
- ⁵³ David Church, *Grindhouse Nostalgia: Memory, Home Video and Exploitation Film Fandom*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015, p.48.
- ⁵⁴ Roger Ebert, 'Bonnie and Clyde', *Chicago Sun Times* (25 September 1967).
- ⁵⁵ Richard Roud, 'Apple pie Bedlam: Richard Roud on a Renaissance in American Cinema', *Guardian* (27 November 1973): 14.
- ⁵⁶ Roger Ebert, 'Badlands', *Chicago Sun Times* (15 October 1973).
- ⁵⁷ Vincent Canby, 'Malik's Impressive Badlands Screened at Festival', *New York Times* (15 October 1973): 50.
- ⁵⁸ Kael, 'The Boston Strangler', p. 166.