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3 | Slasher, Serial Killer, and Psycho Movies

> Psychopaths sell like hotcakes.
> —Hack screenplay writer Joe Gillis in *Sunset Boulevard*

> First principles, Clarice. Read Marcus Aurelius. Of each particular thing ask: What is it in itself? What is its nature? What does he do, this man you seek?
> —Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs*

Cody Jarrett, the gangster protagonist of *White Heat* (1949), kills seven people in the course of his movie (not counting himself, in the final explosion); Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, the bank robber protagonists of *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), kill almost a dozen. Yet we do not think of these characters as serial killers or of their films as serial killer films, for their directors (Raoul Walsh and Arthur Penn, respectively) did not frame the films that way. They created multifaceted characters, not unidimensional killing-machines, giving Cody, Clyde, and Bonnie admirable as well as negative traits and thus enabling viewers to identify with them. Moreover, the stories are not "about" killing, *White Heat* being a study in criminal psychopathology, *Bonnie and Clyde* a saga of rebellion against authority, mediocrity, and anonymity. The films depict even violent criminals as sympathetic figures, attractive and heroic—a message that is fundamentally ideological in that it keeps these killers within the human fold.

This chapter pries open the ideological frameworks of violent films to explore what they say about criminal nature.[1] Examining three types of violent cinema—slasher, serial killer, and psycho movies—it tries to see how these differ in their constructions of the archcriminal and to catch them in the act (so to speak) of generating popular beliefs and mythologies about serious crime. Conversely, it identifies some of the scandals, debates, and preoccupations in the broader culture that helped bring these movies into being.

Slashers

The slasher film made its debut in 1974, with Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre,* in which a cannibalistic family preys upon a group of teenagers until one, Sally, ingeniously evading their efforts to dismember her, escapes. The genre found its footing with the 1978 release of *Halloween,* the story of another heroic teenage girl, Laurie (Jamie Lee Curtis), eluding the homicidal Michael, who has escaped from his mental institution. These formula-setters were followed by a string of *Friday the 13th* films (1980, 1981, 1982, and so on), *Nightmare on Elm Streets* (1984, 1985, 1987), *Slumber Party Massacres* (1982, 1987, and 1990), and other variations, and elaborated again by Wes Craven's *Scream* offerings (1996, 1997, and 2000). These low-budget teen horror films feature villains with names such as Freddy and Jason who kill over and over again but cannot themselves be killed; Amazonian heroines who survive through a combination of wit and self-discipline; settings that isolate their teenager protagonists in dangerous situations; and plots that on the one hand punish sexually active teens with death and on the other reward the virginal Final Girl with victory.[2]

On the surface, slashers resemble serial killer and other crime movies: they have villains who kill repeatedly (here, mainly with knives) and almost-victims who scramble up from the depths of disaster to vanquish the villain and save the day (although that day may pass rapidly before the villain returns for the sequel). It is further tempting to include slashers in the crime films category because not only do they have roots in the horror tradition (*The Omen* [1976]; *Carrie* [1976]) but also in crime film history, especially *Psycho* (1960), in which Norman Bates, the weird repeat killer, is tracked down in a hideous isolated place (the root cellar of the decaying mansion) by a heroic victim-surrogate (Marion Crane's sister, Lila)—tracked down but, like Michael, Jason, and Freddy, not conclusively immobilized. Slashers are in fact close enough to crime films to have influenced subsequent movies in the latter category, such as *The Accused* (1988), in which a rape victim gets her revenge, and *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), in which an FBI agent overcomes the serial killer who has trapped her in yet another cellar. Slashers showed Hollywood how to adopt victims' points of view and freshen up its depictions of slaughter.

Notwithstanding these parallels and overlaps, however, slashers are not true crime films. They are not interested in crime and justice but chills and thrills—the ineffable pleasures of threat and revenge. Their action consists primarily of ambushes and mutilations, and their formulaic characters are interchangeable. Moreover, while these characters may look like ordinary teenagers, they are modeled after figures of folklore and myth: vampires, werewolves, creatures who dwell at the bottoms of lakes, maidens in distress, and pure knights with magic swords who invariably win their struggles. Like folktales, slashers revel in repetition and other narrative rituals; if they tell the same story over and over, they do so because individually they are no more than variants on a fundamental tale of threat and salvation, of meeting the monster and overcoming it. Moreover, unlike most crime films, slashers leaven their plots with elements of camp. Scary but ludicrous, satirical and sometimes wry, they ask to be taken seriously and lightly at the same time. Although they punish teenagers for violating the parental No Sex rule, slashers do so gleefully, inducing their own type of orgiastic excitement.

In sum, slashers are fairy tales or fables for adolescents. Folklorist Maria Tatar traces the origins of fairy tales to "an irreverent folk culture that set itself in conscious opposition to the official ecclesiastical and feudal order"; similarly, slasher audiences and even their characters participate in a teen culture different from and consciously opposed to that of authorities. Tatar locates the pleasures of fairy tales in the "charms" of "transgressive curiosity"—in children's fascination "with catastrophic events, with perilous encounters" and their delight in "burlesque violence, which depends for its effect on distortion and exaggeration." Slashers, too, simultaneously punish and reward transgressions; and they, too, are pleasurable because they are silly, encouraging audiences to laugh at themselves even while they cringe in terror. Again like fairy tales, slashers are highly stylized in their violence: No one behaves like Freddy in real life; his killings entertain because they signal, through their excesses, that they are unreal. In both mediums, the meaning of violence is determined by the way it is framed.[3]

The slasher film, then, is a subgenre of horror that is closely related to fairy tales and folklore and has a comic edge. Although it outwardly resembles the serial killer film, the slasher has a different audience and different social functions.

Serial Killer Films

The serial killer figure began to emerge in the late 1970s, in the context of a seismic political shift in American attitudes toward crime and criminals. After a century of liberal efforts to explain criminality in terms of social or medical causes, a more conservative approach began to argue that criminals are not so much disadvantaged or sick as evil—people who are fundamentally immoral, perhaps due to some sort of innate biological defect.[4] At the same time, conservatives redirected crime control policies toward severe punishments and the immobilization of repeat and violent offenders. One sign of the rejection of the rehabilitative philosophy appeared in a 1981 speech in which President Ronald Reagan declared that "the solution to the crime problem will not be found in the social worker's files, the psychiatrist's notes, or the bureaucrat's budget; it's a problem of the human heart, and it's there we must look for the answer."[5]

Another sign of the change showed up in the ideological gap between two movies, both depicting a series of killings, released just three years apart: *The Boston Strangler* (1968) and *Dirty Harry* (1971). *The Boston Strangler,* based on the real-life story of Albert deSalvo, a laborer thought to have raped and murdered up to thirteen women, stars Tony Curtis as not only "a sick animal" with a split personality but also as a rather sweet, befuddled family man. For the last third of the movie he walks around in pajamas and a bathrobe, a patient in a mental hospital who has the full sympathy of his psychiatrist and the district attorney. A text box at the conclusion announces, "This film has ended, but the responsibility of society for the early recognition and treatment of the violent among us has yet to begin." In *Dirty Harry,* in contrast, the sex murderer, Scorpio, is a drugged-out hippie monster who cackles manically and elicits nothing but contempt ("punk," "madman," "creep") from the detective who pursues him. *Dirty Harry* is concerned with not a series of murders but a serial murderer—a person defined by his behavior. Scorpio became a progenitor of a long line of essentially evil serial killers created by late twentieth-century cinema.

Among the factors encouraging this shift in attitudes were improvements in forensics and computerized communications that made it easier to identify the repeat murderers who, in an earlier period, could disappear into a new locale. Another factor was the Federal Bureau of Investigation's willingness in the1990s to fund the psychological

profiling of offenders deemed particularly dangerous.[6] (Troubled by recent public relations fiascos, in the 1990s the FBI seems to have deliberately adopted the image of Jack Crawford, the supersleuth of films based on Thomas Harris's popular novels *Red Dragon* and *Silence of the Lambs.*[7]) Notorious cases such as those of Jeffrey Dahlmer, John Wayne Gacy, and Ted Bundy further heightened the serial killer's profile, especially when they became the basis for movies. In addition there seems to have been an increase in the actual incidence of serial killer cases, although according to Philip Jenkins, the increase merely took the rates back to their early twentieth-century level after a period of decline.[8] Yet another factor was the commodification of the serial killer by criminologists, Hollywood, novelists, and producers of soft porn who recognized a marketing opportunity. Thanks to all these influences, by the 1990s a new criminal stereotype had taken hold in the public imagination, that of the superpredator, more monster than human, psychopathic, sexually deviant, and ubiquitous.

Serial killer films are essentially slashers for adults. Centrally concerned with seriality or regular repetition, they portray killing as a compulsive, recurrent behavior—with the result that they themselves tend to be episodic, little more than a string of similar scenes that build toward neither a climax nor a denouement. These episodes of violence, much more so than the out-of-the-blue attacks of slasher films, are designed as sadomasochistic fantasies, orgies of calculated pain and calibrated bloodletting that invite viewers to identify with the killer, the victim, or both. Gone are the supernatural bad guys of slashers, but the demonic serial killers who replace them are not much more believable.[9] (Some movies do explore the psychology of repeat murderers, but these fall into the psycho films category discussed in the next section.) The thrust of serial killer movies is to construct a stereotype of the violent predator: abnormal, incomprehensible, beyond the pale of humanity, bloodthirsty, sexually twisted, and lurking in our midst, a threat to us all.[10]

In its purest form, the serial killer film focuses solely on the murderer and his (rarely her) exploits. *American Psycho* (2000), for instance, follows the robotic Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale), a young New York City stockbroker, through a spate of recreational killing. Self-indulgent, rich, and bored, Patrick wakes up emotionally only long enough to exterminate someone. *American Psycho* hints, halfheartedly, at various explanations—success has come too easily to Patrick; the slick superficiality of the modern world has deadened him; maybe he

Figure 3.1. Serial killer films such as *American Psycho* (2000), featuring flat, unredeemable characters, echo and reinforce the lock-em-up rhetoric of contemporary crime control agencies. Unlike earlier psycho films, these movies portray criminals as incomprehensible monsters. Photo used by permission of Photofest.

is mentally ill—but none is persuasive, and as Patrick himself observes, "There is no real me. I simply am not there." At the end, he tries to confess, but his companions, lost in their own vapidity, ignore him. The main character of *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1986) is similarly soulless and amoral. Even when serial killer films are based on actual cases—*In the Light of the Moon* (2000) (a biography of Ed Gein), *Ted Bundy* (2002), *Dahmer* (2002), *Gacy* (2003)—they fail to create plausible characters.[11]

While the "pure" serial killer film concentrates on a single character, a common hybrid grafts the serial killer onto the cop movie. The plot in which a police detective pursues a serial killer has a long cinematic history, deriving ultimately from the archetypal plot of the maiden in distress who is saved by a hero from the monster's clutches. This narrative line appears in one of Alfred Hitchcock's first works, a silent film called *The Lodger* (1927) in which a detective roams through the fogs of London in search of a serial killer, the Avenger,

who is doing in blondes. Other examples include *Dirty Harry, Jennifer Eight* (1992), *Copycat* (1995), *Kiss the Girls* (1997), *Resurrection* (1999), *The Bone Collector* (1999), and *In the Cut* (2003). One might go so far as to include a civilian example, *Collateral* (2004), in which a taxi driver who is impressed into chauffeur duty by a serial killer overcomes him in the end and saves the woman.

In some cases, the cop discovers a kinship with the murderer, just as Henry Jekyll long ago discovered a kinship with the revolting Mr. Hyde. This plot twist shows up in *The Offence* (1973), a film made in England by American director Sidney Lumet and starring Sean Connery as a detective brutalized by decades of dealing with violent crime. While questioning a man in the sex murders of young girls, the detective punches the suspect to death. Arrested and questioned, the detective comes to recognize his own potential for violence, including the rape-murder of little girls. A dark film, literally and metaphorically, *The Offence* uses settings (the brutalist concrete architecture of 1960s England, the old heaths being eaten up by expressways and airports) with great effect and constitutes Connery's most interesting film. Because it never clarifies the original suspect's status, we are left wondering if the detective himself might have been the villain. Other movies in which a cop discovers his inner serial killer include *Tightrope* (1984), which follows a detective (Clint Eastwood) stalking a sex-murderer with whom he has close affinities, and *Manhunter* (1986), a Michael Mann film in which the detective tries to catch the serial killer by adopting his thought processes.

However it is constructed, the typical serial killer film markets a stereotype: that of the superpredator who murders on the installment plan and scatters bones in his wake (or body parts in his fridge). All of the "pure" serial killer films and most of the hybrids have been made since the 1970s swing toward conservative criminal justice policies. With their portraits of the criminal as Other and of crime as personal depravity, these films mesh well with the lock-em-up policies of the last thirty years. They not only reflect such policies; they reinforce them with their spectacles of the unrepentant, incurable killer.

Psycho Films

Many authors have written about psychopath films, but because no one has specified what should and should not be included in the cate-

gory, the result has been a confusion of psycho movies with slashers and serial killer films. Christian Fuchs's *Bad Blood: An Illustrated Guide to Psycho Cinema* illustrates one aspect of this problem: Organized around forty-seven real-life "serial killers and murderers" who turn up in movies, the book groups the cases into incoherent subdivisions such as "amok killers," "weirdos," and "Sadean monsters." Such sensationalist, overlapping categories tell us little about either psychopaths or movies. John McCarty's *Movie Psychos and Madmen* focuses more clearly on films, but its very broad reach (from *Fatal Attraction* [1987] through *Friday the 13th*) obscures whatever it is that is distinctive about the psycho film. Philip L. Simpson's more rigorous *Pyscho Paths: Tracking the Serial Killer through Contemporary American Film and Fiction* locates serial killer films in the Gothic tradition and relates them to detective fiction, but it concentrates almost exclusively on three films (*Natural Born Killers* [1994], *Kalifornia* [1993], and *Seven* [1995]), and it is no clearer than the other books about what to include in the psycho movie category.[12]

The clinical literature on the condition of psychopathy offers a way out of this definitional morass. The leading researcher in this area, psychologist Robert Hare, and the leading professional body, the American Psychiatric Association (APA), define psychopathy as a state characterized primarily by a lack of conscience: Psychopaths are incapable of remorse, an incapacity that frees them to offend repeatedly—not necessarily to kill but to prey on others without experiencing guilt.[13] Hare and the APA speak of psychopathy as a constellation of symptoms, including deceitfulness and manipulation, egocentricity, grandiosity, emotional shallowness, impulsivity, shortness of temper, craving for excitement, and irresponsibility. Neither authority expects every psychopath to display every symptom; rather, they apply the *psychopath* label to those who score high on a diagnostic scale by exhibiting a certain number of psychopathic traits.

Drawing on this clinical literature and using its terminology as a heuristic device, we can quite precisely define psychopath movies as films in which the main character lacks a conscience and exhibits other symptoms of psychopathy. If we restrict the analysis to movies that either explore the psychopathic personality in depth or follow a psychopath over a period of time, it becomes clear that these films have their own set of stock characters and their own, distinctive message about the nature of and need for law.[14]

The Stock Protagonists of Psycho Films

Psycho films, unlike slasher and serial killer movies, are not a recent development but have appeared since the first talkies. Thus, they now exist in considerable numbers, giving us a large group of films to analyze. The most revealing way to classify them is by types of protagonists and the impulses that lie behind their evil deeds.

Most rational of the psychos are predators, characters who have an excuse such as money or revenge for their psychopathic behavior, even though that behavior is by definition an overreaction. For instance, the gangster protagonist of the first *Scarface* movie (1932), as his simian face suggests, is animalian in his cruelty, someone who lives ruthlessly by the law of tooth and claw. (Al Pacino closely followed this role model for predacity in the 1983 remake of *Scarface*.) Similarly, Tom Udo, the psychopathic gangster of the first version of *Kiss of Death* (1947), is after money, dames, and underworld power. As played by Richard Widmark in the role that made him famous, Tom Udo combines fatuous stupidity with menace. "You know what I do to squealers?" he asks. "I let 'em have it in the belly, so they can roll around for a long time, thinking it over." In the 1995 remake of *Kiss of Death,* Nicolas Cage is equally chilling as the psychopathically brutal Little Junior Brown.

Predatory psychopaths aren't necessarily gangsters, however. In *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (1992), the psychopath is a nanny, out for revenge. John Christie, the sex psycho whose necrophilia is the focus of *10 Rillington Place* (1971), is apparently a perfectly ordinary homeowner who occasionally offers his services as a physician, while the main character of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999) is an amateur musician. The protagonist of *Night of the Hunter* (1955; played by Robert Mitchum) is an ersatz preacher who has killed twelve widows so far and, as he explains to God in the opening sequence, is now after another "widow with a little wad of bills hidden away in the sugar bowl." Sexually perverted as well, he loathes "perfumed things with curly hair" who weaken his self-control and make him feel unclean. Another memorable Mitchum predator is the ex-convict Max Cady of *Cape Fear* (1962), in which Cady torments Sam Bowden, a lawyer (played by Gregory Peck) who helped send him to prison eight years earlier. Although Sam did nothing more than testify as witness to a rape, Cady's thirst for revenge, overwhelming and unstoppable, can be slaked only by raping Sam's teenage daughter.

Pacific Heights (1990) brings new meaning to the concept of predation with its story of a young couple who rent part of their Victorian fixer-upper to a lodger (Michael Keaton) who, as it turns out, plans to drive them mad and assume ownership of the mansion himself. To this end he destroys his quarters in the house, frightens the owners out of their wits, and tricks them into making blunders, for example by goading the landlord into assaulting him so he can play the victim when the police arrive and have the landlord evicted. *Body Heat* (1981), too, rings changes on the theme of predation by forcing the viewer to share the viewpoint of Ned Racine (William Hurt), the poor chump whom the glamorous Mattie (Kathleen Turner) persuades to kill her rich husband. Not until the end do we realize that Mattie prearranged everything, including her initial encounter with Ned. Even while Ned is off bludgeoning her husband, she is destroying his alibi so she can dump him in prison.

Predatory psychos are Machiavellis—cold, cunning, and calculating. Monomaniacal in pursuit of their goals, abnormal by dint of what they will do to achieve those goals, they are antisocial types who scheme and plot to satisfy their desires. In their single-minded selfishness they resemble the protagonists of serial killer films, but predatory psychos are better developed as characters, and they have excuses for what they do. Moreover, as *Pacific Heights* and *Body Heat* indicate, killing is not necessarily their central purpose in life.

Another type of psycho, gripped by insane desires and incapable of self-control, is far less rational. While these characters, too, are often predatory, their movies emphasize psychological deviation, unpredictability, and lack of self-control. One example can be found in *The Bad Seed* (1956), the tale of blond-haired, goody-goody little Rhoda who has inherited a homicidal gene from her maternal grandmother. Rhoda kills again and again, until she is finally struck dead by lightening. Boris Karloff created another classic example in the role of Frankenstein's monster. Even though *Frankenstein* (1931) is usually classified as a horror film, it is a seminal psycho movie as well, for its monster became a model for subsequent irrational psychopaths. Infantile, only half human, and cursed with a criminaloid's brain, the monster yearns for goodness and light but clumsily destroys the things he loves. Like Norman Bates of *Psycho* (his most famous descendant), the monster is drawn to blonds but impulsively murders them. And like Norman Bates, he is not fully responsible for his criminal acts. In keeping with the psychiatry of the early 1930s, his irrationality is

explained partly in terms of mental retardation, while Norman is more of a 1950s sex psycho. But both films are visually structured around alternating bright and dark scenes that symbolize the main characters' losing struggle between rationality and madness.

The unpredictable, impulsive type of psychopath has generated a host of remarkable film characters. One is Mark Lewis, the obsessive-compulsive scopophiliac of *Peeping Tom* (1960), who photographs women as he impales them. Another is the failed novelist Jack Daniel Torrance (Jack Nicholson) of *The Shining* (1980) who, like little Rhoda and Frankenstein's monster, is governed by homicidal impulses over which he has no control. In *Silence of the Lambs,* Buffalo Bill, too, is helpless in the face of his obsessions. (Hannibal Lecter, in contrast, is a predatory psychopath, and thus able to stay on top of his madness.) Alex (Malcolm McDowell), the exuberantly delinquent protagonist of *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), engages in crime because hurting people is the most amusing activity he can think of.

The differences between predatory and irrational psychos come into focus through a comparison of *Black Widow* (1987) with *Single White Female* (1992). Theresa Russell's predatory widow is motivated solely by greed; the film is organized around her searches for rich husbands and by the hunt for her by a federal agent (Debra Winger). On the other hand, Hedy Carlton (Jennifer Jason Leigh), the psychopath of *Single White Female,* is psychologically twisted. Desperate for a friend, she tries to make her apartment-mate, Ally, more dependent on her by tossing Ally's dog out the window and braining Ally's lover with a stiletto shoe heel. Whereas the Black Widow is unflappable and unchanging, Hedy ricochets among personalities and trips over her own lies. *Black Widow* stresses the cold rationality and extraordinary patience of its predator while *Single White Female* concentrates on Hedy's frantic nuttiness.

A third version of the psychopathic protagonist assumes the right to toy with others and inflict pain. Characters of this type aspire to be supermen, gods who decide the fate of others. They, too, are predatory and mentally unbalanced, but their films emphasize their Nietzschean ambition to rise above the human condition. In *White Heat,* Cody Jarrett (James Cagney) assumes powers of life and death over others by virtue of his leadership of a criminal gang. But, egged on by his ambitious, doting mother (herself a predatory psychopath), Cody aspires even higher, to the "top of the world." Taking this goal perhaps too literally, Cody achieves it in the theatrical final scene

where, cornered by cops, he climbs an oil tank and blows it up, yelling, "Made it, Ma! Top of the world!"—dying in a triumph of deluded egotism.

Bruno, the psychopath of Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (1951), explicitly articulates his sense of entitlement to decide life and death matters for others. Like Cody, Bruno (Robert Walker) is a mama's boy; like Cody, he suffers from strange spells or fits. But Bruno is much more arrogant, a spoiled rich guy, vain, insensitive, presumptuous, and greedy. During the first scene, in the lounge car of the train, Bruno presses his new acquaintance, Guy Haines (Farley Granger), to "Ask me anything, I know the answer." Later, Bruno responds to a remark by Guy with "Oh, I've got a wonderful theory about that." He explains that his absurd father wants him to get a job and

> work my way up. . . . I want to kill him. . . . I want to do something—everything. Now, I've got a theory that you should do everything before you die. Have you ever driven a car blindfolded, at 150 miles per hour? . . . I did. . . . And I'm going to make a reservation on the first rocket to the moon.

It turns out that Bruno is serious in suggesting that he and Guy switch victims, with Guy murdering Bruno's father and Bruno getting rid of Guy's floozy of a wife. "What is a life or two, Guy? Some people are better off dead."

The psychopath of *Seven*, John Doe (Kevin Spacey), plays God by turning New York City into a stage for the production of a medieval morality play. Inflamed by the city's indifference to the seven deadly sins, John Doe creates a Dantesque hell on earth as he punishes one sin at a time, working his way through gluttony, greed, sloth, lust, and vanity. Playing God to himself as well, John Doe arranges to be struck down for his envy of the younger detective's normalcy. On another level, John Doe controls the movie's plot as well, generating this morality play for the edification of Detective Lt. William Somerset (Morgan Freeman) and the movie's viewers, much as God generated the world for the edification of Everyman.

Most Nietzschean of all psycho protagonists is Raymond Lemorne (Bernard-Pierre Donnadieu), the central figure in the Dutch/French version of *The Vanishing* (1988). This tightly wrought film single-mindedly explores the motivations of Lemorne, who appears to be an innocuous man, a chemistry instructor with a wife and two daughters. Despite his bland exterior, however, Lemorne is obsessed with

control, as we gather from his constant counting, measuring, and timing of things. To Rex Hofman, his second victim, Lemorne explains that at age sixteen he realized that he could go beyond "what is predestined" by forcing himself to jump from a high balcony. Although he broke an arm and lost two fingers, he has always been glad that he jumped, because it proved he can defy fate. Then Lemorne tells Rex about a family holiday during which he saved a child from drowning. When one of his daughters congratulated him, Lemorne recalls, he responded, "Watch out for heroes. A hero is someone who is capable of excess." His daughter's admiration, Lemorne continues, encouraged him to think of the worst thing he could imagine doing ("since there is no white without black"). Killing, he casually observes, is not the worst thing he can conceive of.

What makes *The Vanishing* devastating is not just the nature of Lemorne's "worst thing" but the fact that Rex becomes like his killer in his own Nietzschean defiance of fate. After his girlfriend vanishes during a holiday in southern France, Rex spends three years trying to figure out what happened, in the process becoming obsessed and unhinged. Lemorne finally comes to him and starts driving Rex through the night to the spot where Saskia disappeared. At any point during the car trip, Rex could kill Lemorne, or at least break out and escape. But he remains of his own free will. Similarly, in order "to go against what's predestined," Rex agrees to drink the drugged coffee that Lemorne offers him. Lemorne knows all along that Rex will try thus to defy fate. Like the stick insects in the opening and closing shots, Lemorne has learned to catch his prey while remaining motionless and blending in with the landscape.[15]

The Secondary Characters of Psycho Films

Most psycho movies include a predictable secondary character or set of characters. Often these are what we might call good bad-guys, secondary characters whose lesser moral flaws throw the psychopath's monstrosity into higher relief. In *M* (1931) we find an entire underworld of ordinary criminals, all of them shocked to the bone by Hans Beckert's sex murders and anxious to help the authorities hunt him down. Similarly, both versions of *Kiss of Death* contrast their psycho with a criminal who is trying to go straight for the good of his family. In both versions the good bad-guy struggles with the bad bad-guy in a battle that signifies the psychological struggle within the

reforming offender as well as the universal struggle of good against evil. *Night of the Hunter* compares the evil preacher with Willa's first husband, Ben Harper, an essentially decent man who, made desperate by financial woes, began robbing to feed his family. The two criminals share a prison cell together, which is where the preacher learns that Willa and her children are sitting on a pile of stolen money. But whereas Ben, the good criminal, gave money to the family, the other intends to take it away. *Body Heat* makes the good bad-guy, Ned Racine, the unwitting accomplice of Mattie, the psycho-predator. In stark contrast to Mattie, Ned is lovable and straightforward. He's not very smart, as Mattie immediately remarks, and he is unsophisticated, an ordinary fellow with simple lusts. Mattie chooses him for these qualities, which differ dramatically from her own.

Another common secondary character in psycho movies is the pure innocent, a figure who illustrates the weakness of virtue when faced with malice, and hence the need for law. *M* opens with a mother making lunch for a little girl who (it turns out) will never return from school; this maternal figure, along with all the child victims, underscores Hans Beckert's destructiveness. Children again fill the role of lambs-in-danger in *Kiss of Death,* in both versions of which the psycho attempts to prevent the milder criminal from reforming by threatening the latter's offspring. *Night of the Hunter,* casting the psychopathic preacher as a stepfather and the innocent children as his prey, takes on a mythic dimension in which a Bad Father is intent on destroying childhood itself.

The figure of the innocent child matures slightly in *Cape Fear,* becoming sixteen-year-old Nancy, Max Cady's intended rape victim. The innocent is again a very helpless young woman in *Seven,* in which Gwyneth Paltrow's ingenue is overwhelmed by the noise, confusion, and crime of New York City and, eventually, by the psychopath who represents them. Her film husband, Detective David Mills (Brad Pitt), while less innocent, is also young and extremely naive, traits that inspire psychopath John Doe to teach him a lesson. *Frankenstein* includes two innocents, first Little Maria, the playmate whom the monster accidently drowns, and then the bride in full regalia, her gown and long, white train contrasting vividly with the ill-fitting black worsted suit of the figure clambering through her window.

Thanks to the women's movement, the Pure Innocent increased in complexity during the 1990s. First came *Silence of the Lambs,* with

Figure 3.2. Fritz Lang used *M* (1931), based on an actual case, to explore the psychology of a child rapist and murderer. Here we look out of a toy store at the psychopath (Peter Lorre) and his next victim, past dangling marionettes that hint at what is about to happen. Photo used by permission of Photofest.

Clarice Starling, the clear, birdlike naïf who is nonetheless eager to learn and ends up coping heroically with two psychopaths at once. On its heels came *Pacific Heights,* which portrays Patty (Melanie Griffith), the female half of the victimized couple, as a lot smarter and tougher than her partner, Drake. Whereas Drake fights back physically, thus earning a restraining order that forbids him from coming within 500 feet of his own house, Patty combats the psychopath with cunning. She realizes that, if she is to save her house and her life, she must take the law into her own hands. Equally impressive are the transformations of the Pure Innocent in *Single White Female.* Ally Jones (Bridget Fonda), the apartment owner who advertises for a "single white female" roommate, is a bit of a Barbie Doll but no ethereal maiden. Her competence, independence, and generosity contrast with Hedy's mean-spirted dependency. Whereas Ally is poised and self-confident, Hedy is mousy, dreary, and (who can blame her?) filled with self-loathing. Hedy is consumed with guilt about having killed

her twin in childhood, but Ally has the fortitude to kill when necessary and get on with life. The Pure Innocent, perhaps with slasher film's Final Girl in mind, has become a psycho-slayer.[16]

Legal Themes in Psycho Films

Psycho movies are animated by a fundamental dialectic of disorder and control, a struggle that plays out partly through the deployment of stock characters and partly in the films' discourses about law: the need for law; the inadequacy of law in extreme circumstances such as those posed by psychos; and means through which the lawful order can be restored. These legal discourses often revolve around the theme of intrusion. A psycho penetrates a previously lawful space, creates havoc, and immobilizes the law. Rendered helpless, other characters have no idea how to react. They turn to traditional legal means only to find these ineffective. Gradually they conclude that they must take the law into their own hands.

In *M* the psycho intrudes on the nurturing, quotidian world in which mothers fix lunch for children who return from school; Hans Beckert shatters this world with his sex slayings. The first *Scarface* opens with the shadow of an armed man gliding along a wall; Tony Camonte is about to intrude violently on a late-night party. In *Pacific Heights* lodger Carter Hayes not only intrudes into the normal world of the young property owners; he also lures their fluffy white cat, an emblem of Patty and Drake's innocent domesticity, into his own apartment. This happens innocuously, but we know it means doom. Similarly, in *Single White Female* Hedy makes her first entrance into Ally's apartment unannounced and unnoticed. Here, as in most psycho films, the victim is someone with simple aspirations, trying to repair an old house, fixing lunch, arguing with a lover, sobering up after a party. What the psychopath intrudes on, ultimately, is the normality of our ordinary lives. Often the psycho is discovered at the center of a placid family or community, hidden there after the initial intrusion, working (like the nanny of *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*) malignantly from within.

In *Frankenstein* the key scene of intrusion comes relatively late in the film, when the monster penetrates the bride's bedroom. Usually, however, the most powerful images of intrusion occur near the start of a movie, where they start the plot rolling. The preacher in *Night of the Hunter* drives into the movie in an open-topped convertible,

his broad-brimmed hat tilted back, on his way to Willa Harper's place; the cataclysm is about to begin. *Cape Fear* opens with a tracking shot of Mitchum, wearing that hat again, ambling across a town square to the courthouse. More than an intrusion of lawlessness into the territory of law, this is a sexual invasion as well, as the huge cigar protruding from Max Cady's mouth signifies. Cady removes the cigar for a puff, cooly checks out some women passersby, and takes his first step into the court building. Climbing the stairs (and rudely ignoring a librarian struggling with a stack of law books), Cady strolls into Sam Bowden's courtroom. Its intense, multilayered rendering of the theme of intrusion makes this one of the most effective opening scenes in movie history.

The point of these intrusions is not just that the psychopath kills people and sows disorder. The psychopath *is* disorder, the destroyer of predictability in the ordinary world. We need law because the ominous-looking men under the streetlight may be Alex and his droogies from *A Clockwork Orange,* preparing to beat us up and wreck our expectations of normalcy. (Underscoring the anonymous, ubiquitous nature of the psychopath, *Seven* names him John Doe and even denies him fingerprints.) The psychopath is always there, waiting to intrude, to knock innocent people off their feet and take over. What can protect us, if not law?

But even law, we find, is powerless to contain the psychopath, and in fact, it can turn a situation from bad to worse. Two films make this point with special acerbity by featuring a lawyer as the psychopath's main victim and showing that he simply cannot cope.

Ned Racine of *Body Heat* is a lawyer with little ambition, few skills, and almost no integrity. Before he met Mattie, we learn, he botched a case involving a will. He fails to guess that Mattie will use a loophole in Florida inheritance law to walk away with her murdered husband's entire fortune.[17] *Body Heat* concludes with a faint gesture toward the restoration of law and order when Ned, in prison, manages to get hold of a copy of Mattie's high school yearbook and figure out her true identity. But as hunts for the psychopath go, this one lacks promise.

Cape Fear's chief victim is not just a lawyer but Gregory Peck, an actor whose very appearance conveys moral and legal rectitude.[18] Sam turns for help to his old friend the police chief, who uses police harassment to encourage Max Cady to leave town. But Cady has been studying law in prison for eight years and outsmarts them, bringing

in a sleazy lawyer to halt the chief's campaign. Sam, who of course knows his rights, then warns Cady to "stay off my property." Moments later in the garden of his house, Nancy's dog starts yelping and expires, poisoned, with Bernard Herrmann's violins screeching in the background. Evidently Cady is unimpressed by property rights and lawerly injunctions. Sam and the police chief begin wondering whether law should be able to "prevent" crime through denial of civil liberties. "Either we have too many laws," one of them observes, "or not enough." Later, after Max Cady has beaten a girlfriend to a pulp, the police beg her to press charges; but she refuses—another round for Cady in his match against the law.

Cady has figured out how to use the law against Sam: If his daughter is raped, Sam will not ask Nancy to testify. "It's the clinical reports and the questions and the detailed answers that she'd have to give," Sam explains to his wife. "Cady *knows* we'd never put her through an ordeal like that." Running out of lawful solutions, Sam has Cady beaten by thugs, but the moment they leave, Cady goes to a pay phone, calls Sam's house, and announces, "You just put the law in my hands, and I'm going to break your heart with it. I've got something planned for your wife and kid that they'll never forget, and neither will you, counselor." At this point Sam realizes that to save his family, he may have to kill Cady himself. As a lawyer, he is helpless.[19]

Nonlawyer victims, too, discover that the law cannot help. In the first version of *Kiss of Death*, ex-con Nick Bianco (Victor Mature) decides to go straight and turn state's evidence. Encouraged by a good-hearted district attorney, he even testifies at Tom Udo's trial. Justice miscarries, however. Udo walks, and Nick's life is in danger, along with that of his new wife and kids. Realizing that the law has only gotten him into hotter water, Nick takes the law into his own hands and ends up doing what the DA was unable to do by bringing Udo to justice. The second version of *Kiss of Death*, evidently hesitant to portray a good-hearted district attorney, splits this figure into two other characters, one an overly slick DA, the other a compassionate plainclothes cop. Jimmy, the punk who wants to go straight, wears a wire and collects evidence against not only the psychopath but also the DA who cares more about his own career than justice. Order is restored, but with little help from the law. In fact, in this version of *Kiss of Death*, law is incompetent, chaotic, and deadly, incapable of protecting even its own representatives from violence.

In *Pacific Heights* as in some other psycho movies, the law actually protects the wicked. Beset by Carter, their psychopathic lodger, Patty and Drake turn to a lawyer for help; she has to inform them that, unfortunately, the law ties their hands. At another point the law in the form of a restraining order prevents Drake from going back to his own house, leaving Patty stranded there with the psychopath. Carter, they learn from his executor, has "been out of control for a long time"; law has never been able to contain him, though he has a long history of scamming landlords and bilking heiresses. At one point, Patty and Drake do manage to get an eviction order against Carter; but when the bailiff unlocks the lodger's apartment, they find a scene of total destruction—even the toilet is gone. Law fails again. Only when Patty fully realizes the powerlessness of law does she conclude that she herself must act. Rex, in *The Vanishing,* after a similar realization of law's impotence, decides to go after the psychopath himself. In *Seven* the psychopath's lawyer sets up the final scene of the morality play, and the impetuous younger detective allows himself to be manipulated into breaking the law, thus enabling the psycho to win.

The legal order is restored at the end of most psycho movies. In some cases the agent of restoration is a legal authority, such as a law enforcement officer. Examples include *Frankenstein,* in which townsfolk led by local bigwigs pursue the monster to the Old Mill; *White Heat; Black Widow; Silence of the Lambs; Seven,* in which the world-weary older detective decides to remain on the police force; and *Badlands*. In *The Bad Seed,* Nature itself restores law and order. A bolt of lightening wipes out little Rhoda, and this is no doubt fitting since Nature, in the form of a bad gene, created this monstrous brat in the first place. Nature plays a role in *The Shining,* too, where a fortuitous snowstorm freezes the psycho to death, enabling his family to flee the cursed hotel. But most of the time the psycho-slayer is either one of the psycho's victims or a victim surrogate: in *Night of the Hunter,* the elderly woman who saves the children; in *Strangers on a Train,* Guy Haines, who kills Bruno; in *Psycho,* Lila Crane, Marion's sister; in *Cape Fear,* Sam Bowden; in *Pacific Heights,* Patty Palmer, the brainier half of the home-owning couple; in *Single White Female,* Ally Jones, who fittingly wipes out Hedy in the apartment building from which she initially advertised for a roommate.

Psycho movies, then, begin by demonstrating that danger lurks everywhere, even in apparent normalcy. Like death itself, a psycho

may intrude upon us at the next roadside rest stop, or by ringing the doorbell one evening, or by creeping up while we're out bowling with the family. The very randomness of the threat intensifies the need for law. But, the movies go on to observe, law is often powerless, at least initially, against such intruders; thus psychos turn ordinarily pacific people into vigilantes, forcing even lawyers to take up arms. Eventually, the world returns to normalcy with the defeat and punishment of the psycho. In a few interesting exceptions, however, the psycho is not really defeated. Holly survives in *Badlands* to tell the tale. The end of *Body Heat* finds Mattie sunning herself on an exotic beach with a new hunk, almost beyond the reach of Ned in his prison cell. In *Seven*, psycho John Doe engineers his own arrest and death, even while punishing the law in the form of the younger detective. *Psycho* closes with a complicitous smile that may mean that Norman Bates has triumphed after all. More grimly, *The Vanishing* concludes with not the law but the psychopath savoring victory.

By distinguishing among slashers, serial killer films, and psycho movies, then, we gain understanding of the meanings and reception of cinematic violence, and a sense of how violent films vary in their subtexts about criminal nature. The subtextual meanings derive in part from the context in which a film is made, with, for instance, the 1990s sensationalization of serial killing and rhetoric of incapacitation shaping the messages of *American Psycho*. The meanings of violent cinema are shaped as well by the anticipated audience (most obviously in the case of slashers) and even unanticipated audiences (the filmmakers could not have guessed, for example, that a generation of youthful rebels would adopt Bonnie and Clyde as role models). By making the distinctions, we are better equipped to understand what violent movies say about the nature of crime, law, and criminals; we are also better able to understand them as films. We can see why it does not occur to viewers to register *White Heat* or *Bonnie and Clyde* as serial killer films, despite those works' brutal and sequential killings.

Notes

1. For a study that aims at these same ends while using a different kind of film, see Tzanelli, Yar, and O'Brien 2005.
2. The term "Final Girl" comes from Clover 1992.
3. Tatar 1998: 71, 86, 69, 72, 83.

4. On authorities' increased willingness to explain criminal behavior in terms of evil—a willingness that would have been unthinkable only a decade ago—see Carey 2005.

5. Ronald Reagan, as quoted in Jenkins 1994: 10. Jenkins provides an excellent, in-depth analysis of the social circumstances that gave rise to the serial killer boom.

6. Jenkins 1994: chap. 3.

7. Jenkins (1994: 73) writes,

> Thomas Harris provided the FBI's violent-crime experts with invaluable publicity and unprecedented visibility, both crucial in the aftermath of the *Iowa* disaster. As Ressler [Robert Ressler, the FBI profiler who claimed to have originated the term "serial murder"] has written in his remarkably candid autobiography, "The media have come around to lionizing behavioral science people as supersleuths who put all other police to shame and solve cases where others have failed."

On Harris and his influence on the FBI, also see Simpson 2000, esp. pp. 70–73. Harris's novel *Red Dragon* was originally made into a film in 1986 under the title *Manhunter;* the film version of Harris's *Silence of the Lambs* appeared in 1991.

8. Jenkins 1994: 40.

9. See Jenkins 1994: chap. 5 ("Serial Murder as Modern Mythology").

10. Picart and Greek 2003 argue that the serial killer and vampire cinematic traditions converge in "gothic" criminology. While this argument illuminates some serial killer films, it does not apply to them all, and it tends to wash out what is distinctive about the two traditions.

11. Spike Lee's *Summer of Sam* (1999) has more animation than most true-story serial killer movies because, instead of unilaterally focusing on the serial killer (here, David "Son of Sam" Berkowitz), it explores his historical and social context. Another exception, as mentioned previously, is *The Boston Strangler,* based on the deSalvo case; but due to its probing of the killer's psychology, it is better classified as a psychopath movie than as a serial killer film.

12. Fuchs 2002, McCarty 1993b, Simpson 2000; also see Douglass 1981. Another work, Wayne Wilson's *The Psychopath in Film* (1999), defines the psychopath category so loosely as to include Nurse Rached of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), Goldfinger in the *James Bond* movies, and the carouser in *Hud* (1963).

13. Hare 1993; Hare 1994; Hare, Hart, and Harpur 1991; American Psychiatric Association 2000. The American Psychiatric Association's current term for psychopathy is *antisocial personality disorder.*

14. A longer version of this analysis appears in Rafter 2005.

15. The second version of *The Vanishing* (1993), by the same director but with a different cast, is a serial killer film with a slasher ending.

16. A lot of ink has been spilled in discussing why Martin Scorsese's remake of *Cape Fear* is less successful than the original. The basic problem, I think, is

that the characters of both the Pure Innocent and the psycho are diluted. Lawyer Sam Bowden (Nick Nolte in the remake) is more flawed than the original character, just as the other innocent, his young daughter, is less lamblike. Meanwhile, Max Cady (Robert De Niro in the second version) is given a stronger motive for coming after Sam. The net result is loss of the psycho movie's stock characters and with it, loss of the stark struggle between good and evil that one expects to find in this type of film.

17. This same legal loophole is invoked in *Black Widow,* another psycho film in which law protects the lawless.

18. *Cape Fear* was released in April 1962, eight months before *To Kill a Mockingbird,* in which Peck stars as the heroic lawyer Atticus Finch. Anyone who saw *Cape Fear* after 25 December 1962, then, might also have associated its lawyer, Sam Bowden, with Atticus, the very model of legal integrity. On Atticus's image, see Thain 2001.

19. Law is even less effective in the second version of *Cape Fear,* where Cady beats Sam in the race to hire "the best criminal lawyer in the state" and a judge issues a restraining order against Sam.