



SEQUENCING THE SERIAL KILLER

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to identify how the serial killer is portrayed in the title sequences of modern television shows. The modern age has witnessed a proliferation of television shows that showcase a deep study of crime amongst other topics. Within this genre there is an increasing focus on the serial killer who is becoming a North American cultural icon, while originating in its regeneration from the Gothic tradition. Subsequently, the popularization of the television show has also been trademarked by opening title sequences that start each episode. This title sequence uniquely marks a condensation of the show's key themes and messages, becoming a microcosm of the show; it introduces the audience to the show's unique premises during each episode. But despite previous research on serial killers' depictions in cultural products and the effect of a television's title sequence on its audience, they both have not been studied together. Thus, being established within the domain of cultural criminology (which attempts to study crime within the framework of its culture), this paper seeks to conduct a qualitative content analysis of television shows' title sequences that uniquely portray a serial killer as either a main protagonist or antagonist from the timespan of 2005-2015. The main objective of this analysis is to clarify how the modern serial killer is illustrated and consumed by the modern public.

Keywords: *popular criminology, serial killers, television shows, title sequences, cultural anxiety*

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INTRODUCTION

Serial killers are a prominent component when it comes to modern-day, western cultural products. Primarily, they are featured in a number of mediums including movies, books, and television. Consequently, they (as cultural products) have a tremendous effect on the general populace who regularly consume such representations (Smith, 2011). When one stops and takes a step back from this trend, the fascination and mass appeal of fictionalized serial killers seems rather morbidly absurd. An individual, who murders a minimum of three individuals with a cooling off period as a popular topic in media is bizarre (LaBrode, 2007). Crimes for financial gain or emotional motivations may be placed within reasonable territory, but the systematic killings of innocent, vulnerable, and a usually unknown victim is a strange phenomenon to explore and popularly consume (LaBrode, 2007). However, research has indicated that the serial killer embodies and reflects the anxieties and fears society holds at the time (Jarvis, 2007; Schmid, 2005); which can help explore why there is a growing interest in the serial killer personality.

With the rise of television as a popular medium, this fascination has also spread to the realm of series television (Bednarek, 2014). This allows for a unique and in-depth analysis of the serial killer in a form that is evocative of the “serial” novel from its Gothic history (Wills, 2014). Television serials, as they have evolved over time, have come to incorporate a unique introductory segment called a *title sequence*. This concept essentially introduces the viewers to the show and also maintains the function of introducing and providing key thematic elements to their audiences (Bednarek, 2014; Bell, 1992). Therefore, keeping in mind the cultural fascination and embodiment of the serial killer along with the prominent usage of television title sequences, the following paper has sought to explore the following research question: How do contemporary “Serial Killer” television shows of the past decade (2005-2015) depict the serial killer as culturally significant persons (who embody societal tensions) and what are their ensuing implications? This question will first be answered by outlining previous research in this topic area in the form of a literature review. Next it will discuss the methodological details of the ensuing research study. Then it will highlight the key findings from the conducted qualitative content analysis in the next section. Finally, it will conclude with the findings’ significance, implications, contribution to criminology, limitations, and thoughts on further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic research on serial killers (as defined earlier) has been prevalent since its origin in the Gothic literary tradition; which began in Europe in the mid-eighteenth century and investigated elusive atmospheres of the supernatural - combining both horror, mystery, pleasure, and awe that emphasized the bizarre and paranormal (Wills, 2014). The study of both mythic monsters and the bestial human (like vampires and werewolves), as well as real life serial murders starting with Jack the Ripper in the late 19th century, have generated significant curiosity amongst academics in the Gothic tradition and serial killers (Schmid, 2005; Wills, 2014). Scholars in the form of storytelling that has seamlessly blended historical fact and folklore have traced this fascination with the serial

murderer; it has been evaluated in the lens of a cultural phenomenon that is now inseparable with western culture (Jarvis, 2007; Smith, 2005; Schmid, 2011). In regard to this, it is important to note that the focus of this paper will be within the domain of cultural criminology, or the study of crime and criminality in the context of society's culture. Cultural criminology analyzes societal imaginations as they are captured in cultural products. The current fictionalized serial killer has been evaluated in-depth within this framework and conclusions claim that its Gothic origins are still strongly rooted, despite having been redressed for the twentieth-century audience, such that the modern serial killer is referred to by Simpson (2000) as the neo-Gothic Villain (p. 15) and by Wills (2014) as the post-Gothic serial-killer (p. 68). This emphasizes how modern interpretations of serial killers are still viewed through the lens of monstrosity and otherness adopted by the Gothic tradition. Scholars have agreed cultural products constructed around serial killers reflect the moment's anxieties, fears, and doubts on both a societal and individual level (Hamilton, 2011; Jarvis, 2007; Schmid, 2005; Simpson, 2000; Smith, 2011; Wills, 2014). Donnelly (2012) remarks: "The serial killer figure...is a malleable manifestation of social anxieties" (p.21). So, serial killers' transgressive appetite, through simultaneous experiences of revulsion and pleasure, projects the audiences' fantasies and nightmares onto these *monsters* (Hamilton, 2011).

Subsequently, cultural criminologists have realized that there is a growing need to understand the projections of crime and criminality in popular cultural products, including serial killers, alongside their potential effect on the larger populace (Ferrel, 1999; Rafter, 2007; Welsh, Fleming & Dowler, 2011; Gregoriou, 2010; Smith, 2011). These efforts help to identify the social anxieties that are shared in a broad public domain, which will be unpacked, by carefully identifying the effects of specific representations with each other. This relational process is key in articulating the uneasy place the serial killer occupies in our cultural imaginations (Smith, 2011). These analyses have been supplemented with many publications from other discourses, exploring slightly different caveats of the same phenomenon. Gregoriou (2012) unpacked ideologies of a famous television serial killer by assessing a series of message boards dedicated to the television show. They highlighted the intertextual opinions of contributors who saw the crimes to be interchangeable with fact and fiction. Others explored how the serial killer is explicitly portrayed in the image of a white male endorsing a highly gendered and racialized ethos that was actively working towards its own self-preservation (Santaularia, 2010; Phillips 1998). Phillips (1998) undertook this research by focusing on recording exchanges between critics in a village discussion surrounding the cultural product. Some took a very different approach and conducted a randomized control trial that sought to monitor the influence of audio in serial killer television, specifically soliloquized narration, on viewers' perception and affinity towards the serial killer (Semmler, Loof & Berke, 2015). Meanwhile, other scholars focused on the musical score as a contributing factor to delineating specific perceptions of a murderer (Fahy, 2003). All these various types of inquiry have sought to tackle the serial killer cultural phenomenon in television serials from different angles. It is important to mention that there are other well-established fields and discourses within the criminological discipline that also dissect and study the serial killer as well, such as scientific based approaches and criminal profiling. But because this study is exclusively based within the cultural criminology domain they have not been tapped into for the purposes of this analysis. Consequently, in light of the aforementioned

research and with what Bednarek (2014) refers to as the 'new golden age of TV', there is a serious lack of research on television series' title sequences in the serial killer sub-genre.

Television title sequences are included in the majority of television series. They function as the thematic introduction of the show to its viewing audience, marking the beginning of each episode. This continuity between all episodes remains one of the few constant factors within most shows, despite any other changes within its content (Bednarek, 2014). As a result, title sequences work as a show's thematic bedrock, a microcosm of the entire show. Despite previously conducted qualitative content analyses (Bednarek, 2013; Bell, 1992; Gripsrud, 1995; Moschini, 2011) and quantitative content analyses (Benarkek, 2014) of title sequences, there is no available research on how these sequences thematically introduce serial killers to their audiences, especially within its respective sub-genre. To fill this gap, research into title sequences in this paper will function as a proxy of delineating a consolidated view of how serial killers are thematically portrayed in serial killer television shows.

Furthermore, this paper will deal with the title sequences from *modern* television shows in the contemporary context of crime and its representation in society. Crime stories and news in the context of the selected time period (2005-2015) cover a lot more stories that are based within crime and criminality alongside the repeated failures of crime control strategies (Levi & Wall, 2004; Los, 2002). This prevalence of what Los (2002) calls *Bad News Media* (media that emphasizes the negatives and failures of controlling crime) has led to a societal insecurity with their own safety from their surroundings. This, coupled with the focus on exterior threats after 9/11, crime and safety became issues that the public coalesced around and condemned. The populace became committed to their own protection and minimizing chances of victimization in a risk prone society (Levi & Wall, 2004; Los, 2002). Constituted with this is Ulrich Beck's (1992) conceptualization of the *Risk Society* whereby risk is established within all aspects of modernity. Risk becomes a central component of our everyday lives and society has responded with *reflexive modernity*: where the uneven distribution of risk is to be reacted to and protected by the individuals themselves. The individual has to take charge of their personal safety in the face of heightened crime and thus become *responsibilized* (Beck, 1992). They are themselves blamed for their own lack of precautions in the risk society. This theme of responsabilization and the risk society is going to help inform the context of the research conducted as a modern framework of society.

Alongside the societal tension at play in contemporary society, it is noteworthy to mention the psychological aspect of the serial killer, as that sheds light on society's cultural representations of such figures, including title sequences. LaBrode (2007) in her work seeks to investigate the similarity and distinctions between psychopathy and the conditions of anti-social personality; she identifies that both biological and environmental factors affect ones' disposition, in the real world, to become a serial murderer. Serial killers' pasts share unexpected similarities between real-life histories and personality dispositions of serial murders, lending to past experience that germinates in a desire to kill (LaBrode, 2007). Garrison (1996) further expands on this notion as he outlines on Dr. Wertham's 1937 theory (an application of a Freudian theory) of Catathymic Crisis - a five-step process that leads an ordinary person to become a serial murderer. What seems to be intriguing is the first step of the process, which instigates the entire phenomenon, and according to this theory,

is a thinking disorder of some kind. It is this mental deviation that lends itself to an inception of a thrill or desire to kill, ultimately leading to a superficial catharsis of pleasure and or dominance (Garrison, 1996). The beginning of such urges seems to form a pattern originating from some sort of childhood trauma or tragic/flawed family history, “The normal bonding that should occur... does not occur and the child does not develop the sense of self with relation to the real world or the proper connection between punishment and action” (Garrison, 1996, p. 6). As a result, they resort to creating a fantasy world that becomes their new reality, one, which they control. Knight (2007) supports this view, claiming that serial murderers can be viewed as safeguarding their own vulnerabilities, and a person whose desires are to carry out sadistic killings are rooted in their blemished early history. As such, evil becomes the experienced pain of one materializing onto another in the action of brutalizing. Such that an evil actor (serial killer), especially in regards to a repeat offender, presupposes an evil action (the killing) (Knight, 2007). But Russel (2009) claims that the opposite is also possible, based on human intuition and his research, that an evil action does not require an evil doer – he admits that “...a person blamelessly can become evil” (p. 248) as well. He does admit that in what he calls the *autonomy-favoring account*, there are evil people who are disposed to act in such a manner without the authority or instruction of authority figures, and that that is the most likely and agreeable explanation of serial killers, albeit rare (Russel, 2009). This discussion becomes important when interpreting the results of the qualitative content analysis because it may help inform notions of the serial killer that were used in the conceptualization of the television shows. This insight will allow for a more in-depth analysis of the serial killer representations in the significance segment of this paper as it forms part of the cultural interpretive framework that the research is based in.

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of adequately studying how serial killers are thematically portrayed in television title sequences, a sub-genre of crime television had to be carefully selected. Being cautious not to include detective shows, court/legal shows, and others sub-genres that do not feature serial killers as their main concern (although depicting them in some scenes), the ensuing sample only included television serials that were constructed around one main protagonist or antagonist who is a serial killer. This effectively restricted the sample to television shows that are strictly grounded in exploring a serial killer’s individual character, and thus a major thematic concern is transferred to its respective introductory title sequence.

The sample was further confined to the past decade: 2005-2015. The rationale for this selected time period is because, “...like many other contemporary cultural forms, television is mutating” (Mackey, 2006, p. 149). So, in order to accurately study *contemporary* media representations of the serial killer, a decade forms an appropriate time interval for this purpose. Otherwise, results would dip into past portrayals of serial killers, and consequently, reflect different societal anxieties and ideologies (Simpson, 2000; Schmid, 2005). Moreover, aspects that further consolidated the viability, accessibility, and practicality of the ensuing research restricted television shows that did not meet the following criteria: they had to be spoken in the English language and produced in

North America OR accessible on Canadian Netflix. Accordingly, these restrictions consolidated a sample that is confined to appropriately assessing the aforementioned research question and distributed through a service that is accessible to Canadian English speakers.

Therefore, in order to identify television shows that fell between the aforementioned parameters, influenced by Rafters (2007) methodology, a “power search” was conducted on both Canadian Netflix [www.netflix.com] and the Internet Movie Database [www.imdb.com]; “serial killers” and “serial murderers” were used as search phrases that produced a total of six television shows that fit the established criteria: *Dexter* (2006 – 2013), *Bates Motel* (2013 – current), *The Fall* (2013 – current), *The Following* (2013 – current), *Hannibal* (2013 – 2015; possibility to continue), and *Wicked City* (2015; cancelled). This sample size, although small, is a comprehensive and representative selection within the chosen timeline and serial killer sub-genre. All six of these television show title sequences were easily accessible, four of which were viewable on Canadian Netflix, and the other two [*The Following* & *Wicked City*] were found on YouTube [www.youtube.com]. In addition, all the selected title sequences vary in length, ranging from a mere three seconds [*The Fall*] to a long ninety-six seconds [*Dexter*]; this averages to approximately twenty-seven seconds.

A qualitative content analysis will be conducted on the sample’s title sequences which is advantageous because it works to uncover the deeper meanings of the visual sequences that cannot be highlighted by other methods (Bednarek, 2014; Moschini, 2011). From the three prevalent forms of qualitative content analyses, the conventional form that attempts to directly decode categories for interpretation straight from the data, as opposed to the directed approach (that starts from a relevant finding/theory) or the summative content analysis (the focus of keywords or content and their ensuing interpretation), will be used (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This method is the best for attempting to derive meaning from a set of data without having any prior notion of what results to expect. Therefore, the title sequences will be explored in order to reveal a key thematic snapshot of each television show itself as well as other central messages that collectively attribute all five serial killers.

It is noteworthy to mention that the ensuing qualitative content analysis, which in conjunction with cultural criminology’s framework of identifying crime and deviance in its cultural context, gives attention to the continuous creation and generation of meaning. This meaning is elicited from interactions and the constant interplay of images and sound, which are based within the subjective realm of interpretation (Hayward & Young, 2003). The works of previous scholars who have undergone similar qualitative content analyses exemplify this subjective interpretation that leaves out differing meanings and messages. For example, Smith (2011) in his study on *Dexter* season one, supports her view of the serial killer as a figure that is as monstrous as he is a superhero by recounting various scenes throughout the season that reaffirm the proposed interpretation. Some scenes that could hold various different interpretations are taken to hold single meanings to reaffirm and support her argument. Moreover, Jarvis (2007) contends “...the commodification of violence in popular culture is structurally integrated with the violence of commodification itself (p. 326)” by analyzing transparent links within several fictional accounts of serial killers in films and books. She attempts to promulgate this theory by using a wide-ranging array of examples from a diverse group of products, but at the same time these could hold differing meanings for differing

spectators. Thus, in her effort to illustrate a serial killer as a serial consumer, she utilizes various subjective forms of evidence that she interprets in a particular way for the purposes of her research. Similarly, other academic research identifies this same element of interpretive flexibility and bias in their work (Bednarek, 2013; Bell, 1992; Gripsrud, 1995; Moschini, 2011). Hence, it becomes clear that a qualitative content analysis only sheds light on part of a cultural product(s) messages that depend on the interpreters own cultural bias and position that may differ from many others. Consequently, this element of interpretation is to be found in this ensuing paper and kept in mind; and the results of such a paper are in no way objective realities.

Moreover, in the process of interpreting the six title sequences, the underlying framework of Bartels & Parsons (2009) identification of the mass murderers as sympathetic, classified as a repressed serial killer, and driven by an inner fantasy or urge was utilized. Additionally, the underlying cultural framework that will be employed is that of the post 9/11 context of heightened security, increased risk of innocent victim attack, and a fear of the unknown which constitute the modern moral panic (Levi & Wall, 2004). In light of this, the sample's television shows have been analyzed extensively and have revealed two key overarching themes: 1) unpredictability of serial killers, and 2) their elusive two-faced façade.

ANALYSIS // FINDINGS

Unpredictability of Serial Killers

Bates Motel's title credit features the show's name in the form of a blue neon billboard in front of a pitch-black background. The billboard, although an everyday sighting in the modern world, elicits a sentiment of disorder with its flashing neon lights. It does not appear that the sign has just turned on or is old, which would explain the constant flickering. Rather it seems as though the light is new and regularly behaves in such a manner. This effectively elucidates a sense of dysfunctionality and unpredictability which is also furthered in the sequence's shifting camera angles. The sequence opens with a focus on a short beam of flickering blue neon lights, which the audience cannot place in context [Refer: IMAGE 1A]. The camera then jumps back for a split second to reveal a dark billboard [other than the flickering lights in view] that cannot be read. Just as quickly, the view changes to reveal the letter "E", from "motel", looking at it from downside-up. The letter "E", as it can be viewed, goes from being unlit to flickering. This happens only to swiftly jump to a close up of the "E" for less than half a second. The camera then moves to the "M" in *motel*, and finally the "S" in *Bates*. These repetitive, immediate, and short jumps between visual frames create and signify a very sporadic feel that is paradoxically both systematic and uncontrollable. All of this takes place in the first six seconds of the title sequence, conveying a clear message of something being hidden, looming, and unpredictable between the flickering lights. The title sequence ends with a panning of the entire billboard, which eventually lights up entirely for two seconds before going dark. This demonstrates the unpredictable nature of the serial killer whose murderous qualities can flicker to fruition at any time and take over his personality, just as the billboard was revealed at the end of the title sequence.

The two other television title sequences that employ a black backdrop are *The Fall* and

The Following. Both of these title sequences are very short in length with the former being three seconds long and the latter five seconds. In their short timespan, both of these only showcase the name of their respective show. More so, the title sequences are introduced to the audience very dramatically and unexpectedly by cutting a scene during the first five minutes of the show in its climax. This already projects a spontaneous feeling that catches the viewers' off-guard, cultivating the theme of unpredictability.

The Fall's title sequence portrays the name of the show in neon white, similar to the neon blue used in *Bates Motel*. The backdrop is not plain black but rather the bright white is contrasted against a grainy textured background similar to denim jeans [Refer: IMAGE 2A]. Again, this eludes to the darkness of the subject matter, but the overlay of the white and black in the background texture does not present any part as being pure white or pure black in the latter title sequence. Furthermore, in the short three seconds the light distribution on the background shifts from left to right making the left side much darker than it previously was while the camera slowly zooms in [Refer: IMAGE 2B]. As a result, this evokes a sentiment of thematic ambiguity: that nothing is truly at any extreme and light and dark are continuously shifting and changing. Knowing if a person is good or evil becomes difficult, as there is no dichotomous black and white distinction. Shades of grey and shadows define identities and consequently present the unpredictable aspect of human nature. This could be a reference to the two primary characters in the show, a detective and a serial killer –despite being on opposite sides of the cat-and-mouse game, neither of them are at the polar extremes of good and evil. Rather, there is an overlay of good and bad in their respective characters and the overarching thematic concerns of the television drama lies in this moral ambiguity and unpredictability.

The Following presents a simpler title sequence that features the name of the show in white coloring on a solid black background. Even though this title sequence seems to clearly demarcate white and black, it does so as a means to draw more attention to the darkness. Having no texture, unlike that of *The Fall*, leaves the viewer to use their imagination to fill in for the excessive darkness. This darkness is further emphasized when the five second title sequence within the last two seconds are completely dark, void of the hopeful white text. Leaving the audience with merely a black screen in the middle of the episode effectively elicits a sentiment of uneasiness and of the unknown. The text's sudden disappearance creates a sense of unpredictability as the only light, representing goodness, is swallowed entirely by the growing darkness, alluding to the serial killers' positive qualities overwhelmed by his desire for evil. The only movement that occurs during the entire five seconds is that of the text which slowly grows in the first three seconds of screen time evoking a theme of growth in the show. That something (i.e. the serial killer) is growing in the pitch-black background and is indiscernible yet ever present.

Subsequently, instead of using a black backdrop like that of *Bates Motel*, *The Fall*, & *The Following*, *Hannibal's* title sequence conveys the same uneasiness and impulsiveness, but with a white background. The white is deeply contrasted with a deep red liquid that floats onto the screen, defying gravity. This floating liquid seems to be on a defined trajectory, as it seems to be forming a specific shape. It is not until the shape is formed into human body parts and faces that it is fully realized to be floating blood particles [Refer: IMAGE 4A; blood forming the rib cage], revealing

the lust for blood the serial killer has. Even though the floating blood seems to be on a course to create such images, it continuously has blood drops diverging from the set path. This is continuous throughout the entire title sequence and illustrates a sense of divergence and spontaneity that is easily characterized as unpredictable. This evidently evokes an atmosphere of uncertainty that encapsulates the serial killer's behaviour as being both deliberate and impulsive. Moreover, the floating blood also conveys an unnatural element that further supplements the unpredictable nature of the show's serial killer.

The title sequence of *Wicked City* opens with a view of a city from a distant hilltop or cliff-like point of view. The sky is filled with warm colors whilst the ground is dark as a white streak *cuts* across the middle of the screen [Refer: IMAGE 5A]. This grabs the audience's attention as the show's title emerges from this white *cut*. By the manner in which it emerges it delineates an aggressive mark on a picturesque image. This presents the unpredictability of serial killers who can emerge and spread violence even in the most romanticized settings. Even in the mindset of watching something with warm colors on a faraway hilltop, there is still the possibility that one can witness or be subjected to a *cut* from a killer. Such that the cut mark that becomes the "I" in "WICKED" is not a mistake, but a deliberate action as its entire creation is witnessed in the beginning of the title sequence [Refer: IMAGE 5B]. Moreover, the backdrop of the city, which is later learned in the sequence to be Hollywood, is a densely populated metropolis. This populated area is presumably the origin of the "cut" and for this reason the serial killer is imagined to reside in that location. This adds to the fear of not knowing who within urban societies presents a sudden, unpredictable threat.

Dexter's title sequences also use sporadic editing to convey the sense of uneasiness to supplement the dual interpretation of the character's morning routine and his unpredictable behaviour. When Dexter is shaving in the early part of the visual sequences, he apparently cuts himself. As blood drops into the washroom sink basin, the view immediately shifts and reveals more blood [Refer: IMAGES 6B]. What's notable is that there is no apparent transition between the three distinct frames and it jumps rapidly from one to the other. This irregular editing of frames is further observed in many other instances, from him cutting suspicious looking ham and cooking it, to the rapid disappearances of food from Dexter's plate, to the immediate blending of coffee. These examples coalesce to create a perception of irregularity and unpredictability in Dexter's daily [paradoxically] routine. Additionally, this sporadic editing is supplemented with intense close-ups such as Dexter's lips as he eats his food and the cutting of oranges that resemble human flesh in a sequence that does not embody a 'regular' routine, but something that diverges from the normal. Dexter initially cooks and eats meat only to then cook eggs and eat them. He thereafter makes coffee but decides to cut oranges instead. These clips in a linear sequence do not form a coherent link and instead work together to create a very intense experience that ultimately depict Dexter as being unpredictable while at the same time having a strict routine, a seemingly contradictory persona.

Elusive Two-Faced Façade/Appearance

Bates Motel's title sequence features blue neon lights flickering on a billboard with the

deliberate encasing of the blue neon lights within a greyish metal coating [Refer: IMAGE 1B]. The blue neon lights that trace the insides of the metal casing visually represent the “soul” or life force of the billboard, as it is literally illuminating each letter. This double layer seems to represent people who have two appearances: one when the light is on and the other when it is turned off. As a result, this same phenomenon could be an allusion to the show’s serial killer who has a flickering personality that is elusive to his peers. The growing dual personality is clearly illustrated in the billboard’s flickering, that serial killers may seem and act normal until their inner desires flicker on.

Likewise, in *Wicked City*, after the primary white cut has been made onto the screen, black letters emerge from it. This creates the name of the show on the viewing screen. The blackness that emerges from a *white* cut suggests the emergence of darkness or evil from something that appears to be pure (as in white) [Refer: IMAGE 5B]. Such that darkness and light mutually exist, as both are part of one another and without both white and black, the title of the show would not have been able to be constructed accurately (as the white cut represents the “I” in “WICKED”). Successively, as the title spreads across the screen in black letters, the view moves backward to introduce the back of the famous “HOLLYWOOD” sign before coming to an end. This backward view connotes and illustrates the supporting structures of each letter that elucidates the structure and effort that goes into maintaining an appearance or façade. The Hollywood sign, thus, becomes indicative of a serial killer’s carefully crafted appearance that is shown to the world. By offering this “behind the scenes” perspective, viewers are reminded to question appearances as they can be a façade serial killers utilize to conceal their deepest violent desires.

Subsequently, *Dexter’s* title sequence opens with a mosquito on Dexter’s skin that is smashed momentarily after. This scene in and of itself comprises a powerful message of exterminating beings that strive to harm people. This is a metaphorical illustration of the entire show’s thematic and structural undertone. It is then when the show’s name is seen, all in capital letters. However, as the name appears blood droplets drip onto the screen whilst the red letters of Dexter are further deepened into a blood red by a mystical force moving behind Dexter’s name [Refer: IMAGE 6A; the deepening color can be seen already in the E, and partially in the X & T as well in this image]. This hints at a duality within Dexter’s personality which is further exemplified and supplemented in the morning routine of Dexter in the remaining sequence.

The audience witnesses the carefully captured close-up shots of Dexter’s morning regime from shaving, preparing breakfast, cooking meat and eggs, squeezing blood oranges, brewing coffee, brushing and flossing his teeth, to even putting on his morning shirt and tying his shoelaces. All aspects of this apparently inconspicuous morning routine have been dubbed with a double meaning. They are imbued with a sense/layer of disgust and dread as having an alternative interpretation that favors the act of killing, emotional vacancy, and qualities that instil a hunch of uneasiness. Dexter’s everyday activities that seem normal are in fact questionable and unnerving; this lends to the viewpoint that serial killers in the show maintain a dual personality. Conveying the thematic concern of the everyday threat of normalcy and the everyday threat of the unknown, the title sequence presents a simple act of tying a shoelace as an act of garrotting someone. This apparent façade that masks the true atavistic individuality of a serial killer is systematically constructed and maintained as is represented when Dexter locks the door to his apartment and walks away as

normally as possible.

Subsequently, *The Following's* short title sequence in its darkness and ambiguity lends its thematic base to the entire show: little is known about the show's respective serial killer and the darkness functions as a means to imagine his influence and growing power without actually knowing anything about him. Also, it is noteworthy to mention that *The Following*, in portraying the show's name, intentionally has a much smaller "THE" than the "FOLLOWING". This difference in text size alludes to a different interpretation and focus than if all the letters were the same size, as is the case in *The Fall's* title sequence. Hence, both title sequences illustrate the importance of appearances and even the small factors account for a greater impact. *The Fall*, other than having the same size text for all of its letters, features the show's name in a white neon light. Yet what is particularly interesting is the title sequence's background. As the sequence progresses a light passes through the background, changing the diffusion of light on the screen – this example again elicits a sentiment of change: that the serial killer can change his appearances and characteristics according to the situation. But the background also showcases prominent white streaks that seem to be alternations made to the background – that in order to maintain a set appearance (like the background) work needs to be conducted regularly. Consequently, both title sequences together evoke a serial killer's aptitude to be both morally ambiguous as well as attain a growing and prominent threat in the darkness. In the two title sequences, although very similar, evoke particularly different interpretations, stressing the importance of appearances.

Hannibal's title credits feature the faces of some of the show's characters as they are being filled with floating blood. This similarity between all the faces does not differentiate between race and status and views the subjects in their facial structure in the medium of blood. This representation removes markedly important aspects of the faces and views them in simplistic ways, carrying with it a depth that questions appearance. A question that can arise is what remains if all aspects of the individual are removed except the human individual's body structure and blood? Perhaps this animalistic view of people in their natural form is how serial killers view others: as flesh and blood and nothing more. Additionally, the faces of all the people within this title sequence have their eyes closed, with the exception of the face at the end [Refer: IMAGES 4B]. The last face visibly has his eyes open and is looking straight into the camera and thus, right at the audience. Without even watching or knowing the series, a viewer could make the educated assumption that the last face is that of the serial killer. This detail becomes important in understanding the serial killer's acknowledgement of appearance and subsequently, his careful attention to it. This demarcates the serial killer's dual nature making him aware of both his inner self and outward appearance. The inner self is reflected in the flowing of blood to create his facial features whereas his outward appearance is represented in his open eyes.

DISCUSSION // SIGNIFICANCE

All six-title credits, while offering different thematic snapshots of their respective television show's exploration of the serial killer, exhibit an ominous sensitivity that expresses a sense of

uneasiness to its viewers. They collectively use unique methods to illustrate how serial killers are unpredictable and have a constructed façade, such that they are predators who reside in our cities and may interact with us in our daily lives, while having a hidden flickering evil inside of them. Nonetheless, the thematic illustrations of these serial killers are reflected in what Simpson (2000) refers to as, "...the human need to personify free-floating fears, aggravated by the perplexing indeterminacy of the postmodern world, into specific, potentially confinable, yet still ultimately evil, threat" (p. 2). Such that the thematic snapshots illustrated and extrapolated in the previous section illustrate and reflect societal anxieties, doubts, and fears with each other and the unknown. Additionally, these interpretations further elucidate the sentiments of evil as having been an entrenched part of their disposition in their early history, as evident from the continuous theme of darkness and uneasiness of these title sequences. Evil is not something that the serial killers do in response to an immediate threat or commands of an authoritative figure, but is an action as a result of their own individual desire for the catharsis and power that ensues (Garrison, 1996; Knight, 2007; LaBrode, 2007; Russel, 2009). This is to gain a sense of dominance in a world that they do not fully understand or have rejected for their own fantastical world view (Knight, 2007; Russel, 2009). They are evil beings that mask themselves under a *normal* guise in order to carry out their abhorrent desires. Yet, the viewers are meant to identify with the serial killers as an anti-hero. This calculated endeavor by the writers seems to be appealing to the inner most desires of their viewers who have wishes that may be inappropriate to address (similar to this is the appeal with recent anti-heroes like Batman's Joker and Deadpool). The question of what aspect of the human nature that these representations are appealing to directly (and successfully with the rising interest in such characters) are not the same in all viewers. The subjective personal experiences and desires of each individual is on some level fulfilled in these fictionalized representations of serial killers.

The media consumer, therefore, is not the passive consumer of a monolithic exertion of the hypodermic needle; but rather, is an active member of the audience who dynamically responds to media stimulus – the Laissez-Faire Model (Lam, 2015). Audiences, alongside their fulfillment of socially immoral behaviours, also view representations of the contemporary serial killer as a reflection of their personal fears and anxieties. Anxieties and fears of dangers lurking in unpredictable and random situations that are unpacked by either decoding media stimulus' meaning in the form of a negotiated or oppositional reading. This means that there is no objective meaning to any cultural product as each audience member interprets them through their own cultural lens (Lam, 2015). This is why the title credits take on a very lucid yet ambiguous form and hold great interpretive value. Therefore, the conducted analysis of contemporary serial killer representations in television title sequences is just one of the polysemous interpretations amongst a multitude of perspectives. This is primarily because viewers will interpret and assign values to the cultural products using their own interpretive frameworks that may differ from the one used in this analysis.

Moreover, the qualitative content analysis elucidates a societal anxiety of the known as unknown in a post 9/11 context where security is a priority in society (Levi & Wall, 2004; Los, 2002). The serial killer title sequences frame the familiar and everyday of society as simulated by serial killers and thus a source of danger. "The serial killer constitutes a polluting presence outside of

the bounds of the community yet remains recognizably and disturbingly human...he is frighteningly average and 'just like you or me' (Smith, p. 390)." The known could be inciting evil tendencies like the flickering neon lights in *Bates Motel* or the cutting into the picturesque in *Wicked City* at any time. Normalcy of everyday life is no longer a common place of safety and security in the modern context of Beck's (1992) risk society and responsabilization: there are societal fears of imminent attacks from within local communities that are 'familiar' territory and fears of attacks from external threats in the post 9/11 context (Levi & Wall, 2004). The global anxiety against the infiltration of a disguised killer peer who is unnaturally viewing others [*Hannibal*], masquerading under their daily lives [*Dexter*], or unseen in the blur of darkness [*The Fall & The Following*] is deeply prevalent and concerning in this interpretation. Media representations of the serial killer provokes audiences to imagine the worst, as well as to confront personal isolation, such that the previously presented themes of serial killers' dual personalities and unpredictability are frightening elements to this modern post 9/11 context (Levi & Wall, 2004). This leads to the significance of the conducted study of serial killers to the criminological discipline, and to what Rafter (2007) refers to as popular criminology. Moreover, according to the principles of 'risk society', members of society need to take charge of their own safety and need to take the necessary precautions for the well being of their loved ones – and not be entirely dependent on external factors like the government for protection against harm (Beck, 1992). Individuals need to be responsible and protect themselves from great danger and evil that can pounce on anyone at any moment.

Studying media representations of crime, and in this case, media representation of serial killers specifically, has real effects on people as it helps to inform audience fears, opinions, emotions and perspectives of crime. Predominately, this is because popular cultural products are accessible and entertaining, enabling them to be more easily consumed than academia (Lam, 2015). Thus, active audiences consume cultural products and interpret them to reflect their own personal experiences as meaning is not inherent in signs and imagery. Rather, meaning within cultural products is a relational process as it is generated through a contrast and a question of effects that are rooted in individual and societal experience (Lam, 2015). Therefore, in an attempt to uncover some of these interpretations, this study was conducted to delineate some of the cultural projections that may have been insinuated from serial killer television shows.

As such, implications of the conducted analysis point towards the construction of fear and individualism in society. The aforementioned study has generated a viewpoint of societal anxiety towards a world that is characterized as comprising of suspicious individuals who cannot be trusted, are unpredictable, and possibly have a dual-personality; security and criminality both become unstable in their projections onto the modern 9/11 context and risk society. If indeed this representational experience via the title sequence holds value in the populace's eye, it delineates a cultural anxiety of one's neighbor. Alongside such noteworthy findings, there are some limitations in the research conducted: 1) the active interpreting audience can formulate different meanings from the same studied title sequences based on their own subjective worldviews that questions the applicability of the conclusions drawn in the argument to general populations; 2) the sample size of the research was small and the implications of such a study could perhaps be insignificant in effectively revealing the cultural ideologies of serial killers during the time of the mass production

of various cultural products. They may just present perspectives of a niche audience. Therefore, in light of this, future research should be formulated on exploring how serial killers are exemplified in other contemporary cultural products so that they can determine if there is any difference. Moreover, this research paper has demonstrated the value of deconstructing popular forms of media consumption, regardless of their apparent meaninglessness or length. A title sequence in the context of a television show or other popular cultural products may not seem too significant at first, but after unpacking it within a certain subjective cultural framework, it reveals key themes of contemporary North American culture and society. This concept lends support for further research in cultural criminology, to delve into research of other media microcosms that contain key thematic snapshots (i.e. show name, trailers, plot summary).

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APPENDIX



Image 1A



Image 1B



Image 2A

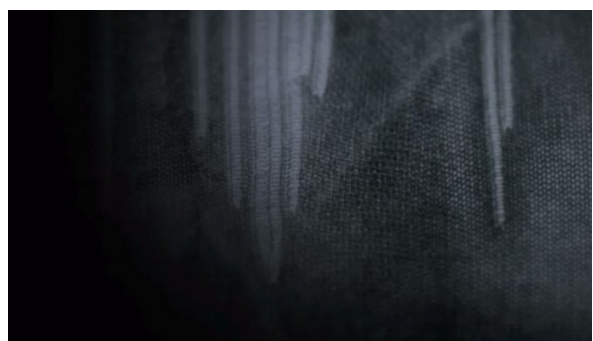


Image 2B



Image 3A



Image 4A



Image 4B



Image 4B



Image 5A



Image 5B



Image 6A



Image 6B



Image 6B