

THE EUROPEAN MONSTER – A COMPARATIVE PORTRAYAL OF THE SERIAL KILLER IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN HORROR FILM*

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Abstract: *Horror film has been amongst the forefront experiments at the time film art took hold in Europe at the end of the 19th century. Georges Méliès's intricate and unique illusory effects presented in his early films were able to construct an eerie and equally entertaining atmosphere that scared and proved to generate anxiety in the public. In the following decades, Europe proved itself to be the right place for the horror film to expand its artistic sensibilities: German Expressionism would intertwine eerie settings with unsettling monster figures in anticipation of ulterior political movements that were equally monstrous in their ideology. Moving forward, as film gained an exponential mainstream appeal in American audiences due in part to the supernatural and extraterrestrial portrayals of monsters, European horror sought to distinguish itself from its*

* “This work was supported by the project “Quality, innovative and relevant doctoral and postdoctoral research for the labor market”: POCU/380/6/13/124146, project co-financed by the European Social Fund through The Romanian Operational Programme “Human Capital” 2014–2020”.

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Anuarul Institutului de Istorie „George Barițiu” din Cluj-Napoca. Series Historica, LXI, 2022, Supliment, 1. Identitate și diversitate în Europa. Istorie, societate, relații internaționale. Lucrările conferinței internaționale, Oradea, 22-27 martie 2022, p. 703-713

American counterpart by focusing on constructing the monster through the lens of humanity: the serial killer. This paper discusses portrayal of the serial killer in contemporary European horror film (1990-present) and the means of which its portrayal extends beyond the horror genre's classic characteristics of this certain trope. By analyzing the serial killer in five contemporary European Horror Films that were produced in Western, Central and Eastern European countries and were released at different times during the last 30 years, the two main goals of this article are to observe the development of the same narrative approach in different but close artistic spaces and to compare and recognize the identity of the Serial Killer as the European Monster whose Western, Central and Eastern European facets are converging to the same intellectual portrayal.

Keywords: film, Europe, identity, horror, monster, serial killer

Introduction

Horror, the film genre, has always been reclusive and secluded, both literally and figuratively. It strays further from the other genres in its scope and narrativity and its insular depictions of affection often juxtaposed by brutal violence and explicit torture could have naturally predicted the end of it before it even began but somehow horror has always been noticed, enjoyed and sought by the general public. This specific genre was one of the first to be explored in film with the release of George Méliès's *The Haunted House* in 1896 being considered the first horror film¹, but also the first vampire horror film², as well as being part of the first wave of films to be released. The attraction towards horror so early in film history can be explained through its entertainment values. Borrowing elements from the circuses of the time and the mechanisms that made use of shadows, lights, and colors, the first horror films made by Méliès were equally humorous, witty and eerie and it was the latter that gained a prominence to the public.

The quality of eeriness is central to the horror film. In contrast to the horror found in literature, where eeriness is dependent on the reader's level of imagination and cultural background, horror film revels itself in illusions of reality that every individual can recognize, no matter their background. Eeriness happens when reality becomes overwhelmed with certain natural factors in an environment where the overwhelming aspect does not represent the standard of the given environment. As eeriness is intrinsically tied to sensorial

¹ Georges Méliès, Jacques Malthête, Laurent Mannoni, *L'œuvre De Georges Méliès*, Paris, Martinière, 2008. p. 337.

² Phil Hardy (ed.), *The Overlook Film Encyclopedia: Horror*, *The Overlook Film Encyclopedia*, vol. 3, New York, Overlook Press, 1995, p. 253.

perception, the environment is prone to subjective assertions. In other words, eeriness is in the eye of the beholder but paradoxically the beholder can instantly recognize it as unnatural or overwhelming without a given knowledge. Freud agrees that the ability to recognize eeriness without a proper pre-understanding is rooted in the consciousness's power to remember familiarity through the lens of unconsciousness³. He calls this ability *unheimlich* which translates to unhomely or the uncanny, the horror's primordial and one of its greatest assets. The uncanny is the original point that allows eeriness to occur, and the circumstances are always the same: the familiarity is tainted with an object/subject that almost resembles familiarity but not quite. The individual will fear a context that up until now, it has always been familiar and comforting and so, from this point onwards, the interaction and activity in this certain space will generate tension and anxiety. This mechanism represents the backbone of horror, but the uncanny, specifically, is suited for the horror film due to its very close ties to reality. The film is a depiction of reality, the one that can be perceived biologically, first, and metaphorically, second. Horror film employs the concept of uncanny in a context where an element is adamantly unfamiliar and threatens the balance of familiarity. Freud recognized the uncanny at the sight of lifelike dolls in dolls shops and centered his perceptions on the basis that they intrinsically carry a characteristic of unease and disturbance. Horror film borrowed this exact characteristic in building the monster.

The monster is an elusive entity. In its natural state, the monster is repugnant and exists as an element that disturbs the familiarity to such degree that it will corrupt the environment, but the monster is also the element that elicits attention, more so, it demands it⁴. This specific characteristic seems to place it at the center of horror film. It is often portrayed as naturally repugnant, physically disfigured, or having unnatural physical features. European horror films such as *The Golem* (1915), *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922) built frightening monsters that have become emblematic over the decades. On the other hand, Americans were developing their own kind of horror film with an emphasis on the entity – the creature – releasing films such as *Dracula* (1931) and *Frankenstein* (1931). *Dracula* has gone on to be considered a classic of the genre and its rendition of a blood loving monster who preys on humans has taken a rather campy approach to contemporary audiences⁵. But nonetheless, the film sparked a wave of Hollywood produced horror films that were interested in capitalizing on the attraction of the grotesque and the uncanny. *Invasion of the*

³ Sigmund Freud, *Art and Literature*, (ed.) Albert Dickson, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985, p. 340.

⁴ Mark Jancovich. *Horror, the Film Reader*, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 39.

⁵ Robert Spadoni, *Uncanny Bodies: The Coming of Sound Film and the Origins of the Horror Genre*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007, p. 45.

Body Snatchers (1956) released two decades later, introduced a science fiction approach to the monster: the human forms as parasitic duplicates. Hollywood explored the physicality of the monster in any way it could, and the portrayals succeeded in stabilizing certain rules and regulations within horror film.

The European horror took a highly intellectual approach on the monster. Moving further on from extraterrestrial faces and grotesque figures, European horror finds a new monster in the serial killer. *Peeping Tom* (1960), a British horror film, has become a landmark in developing a deeply human serial killer that is incapable of resisting the monstrosity of killing⁶. The serial killer was instrumental in popularizing the slasher genre in the US, but Europe would see another use for this type of monster. The Italian giallo implemented the serial killer trope in many of its films, *La ragazza che Sapeva Troppo* (1962), *Blood and Black Lace* (1964) where the serial killer shared common ground with gothic settings and crime narrative plots⁷ to *Tenebre* (1982), arguably giallo's greatest effort⁸. The horror of the serial killer delved into other territories, making use of the documentary stylistics to desensitize the serial killer but amplify its relatability and humanity.

Methodology

Approaching the Serial Killer as the European Monster, my paper uses the comparative analyses to explore the way in which this monster is portrayed in films in productions that share remarkably similar artistic directions and are interchangeably influenced by each other. I have chosen five different Contemporary European Horror films that explored the typology of the serial killer, and I will discuss the construction of the monster in each film, specifically. In order to define the serial killer as the European Monster, these films were selected on the following criteria: a) they would all need to be produced in Europe, b) they would all need to be released in the period of 1990–2019, as to be considered contemporary, c) they would all need to approach the concept of the serial killer in their narrative, d) they would all need to come out of five different European countries and lastly, e) at least one of them has to be produced in Eastern Europe. The five films are: *Man Bites Dog* (Rémy Belvaux, André Bonzel, Benoît Poelvoorde, 1992), *Benny's Video* (Michael Haneke, 1992), *Hannibal Rising* (Peter Weber, 2007) *Kill List* (Ben Wheatley, 2011), *Be My Cat*:

⁶ Peter Hutchings, *Historical Dictionary of Horror Cinema*, Lanham, Md, Scarecrow Press, 2008. p. 203.

⁷ Ken Gelder, *The Horror Reader*, London: Routledge, 2000. p. 330.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

A *Film for Anne* (Adrian Tofei, 2015). For the sake of this paper, I will discuss the particularities of the monster that are found in the construction of the horror film to conclude that the serial killer is the definitive European Monster.

The Horror of Teenage Boredom - Benny's Video (1992, Michael Haneke)

Psychopathy seems to be a recurring theme in horror film regarding the exploration of the serial killer. Both *Psycho* and *Peeping Tom* featured two psychopathic serial killers who approached the act of killing from a personal space. Norman Bates's reasons were tied to a familial narrativity, while Mark Lewis wanted to record death as he allows it to happen by his hands to his victims. Both approaches are equally monstrous, but they become horror acts because of the psychological conditions of these characters⁹. However, the latter shares common ground with another European Horror film killer: Benny, a teenager character from *Benny's Video*, a sort of horror directed by Michel Haneke. *Benny's Video* is hard to be labeled directly as a horror film, in part due to its seemingly lack of any horror elements mentioned earlier. Instead, the horror is carried by the teenage character and his actions and his reaction (or lack thereof). Benny, a 14-year-old teenager, is passionate about cameras and videos. He is enthusiastic about filming everything he considers interesting to such degree he is not afraid to capture explicit violence on camera. In the film's turning point, he invites home a teenage girl whom he had just met and in a game of provocation, he kills her with a slaughtering gun while capturing the horrific incident on camera. The entire film deals with the aftermath: Benny is unaffected and shows no remorse over his actions, carrying on with his daily life, while the parents, in their pragmatism, are left to take care of the body.

Benny's transformation into a killer has its roots in a juvenile psychopathy brought to the surface of familiarity and consciousness by boredom. Even though the character is engaged in multiple activities, and he has a group of friends for socializing, psychopathy is allowed to take hold by boredom. He is not as curious as he is bored with the prospect of his artificial life. He watches films that expose him to violence. He captures the explicit slaughter of a pig on camera, and he watches it repeatedly, but once he reenacts the act of killing, nothing changes. Boredom once again takes hold, and the character goes back to watching violent films and mundane news. When confronted, he answers to every question with a quiet and calm behavior. The lack of reaction to his mother's emotional

⁹ Bruce F. Kawin, *Horror and the Horror Film*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 174.

breakdown underlines the persistent psychopathy of the teenager. His boredom is taken to another extreme at the end of the film, where he goes to the police and confesses his acts, despite the effort made by the parents to cover it. His response is also made in a disingenuous manner, leaving the responsibility to the parents.

It would be unfair to call the character a serial killer. He is only seen committing one murder during the entire film. However, the lack of any sort of emotion following the violent incident and the display of apathy towards the parents, friends and teachers are enough to conclude the argument that Benny has no regard for human life. He does not care what happens, he is indifferent to the suffering of others and more so, in the end, through his confession to the police, it is implied that he implicitly wants to cause discomfort and suffering to his parents. While it is difficult to label *Benny's Video* as a horror film, Haneke has taken a very violent approach to the idea of mundane, corrupting it with acts of extreme unfamiliarity. His statement on the prevalence of violence in society always reassures the idea that violence is a violation of others¹⁰ and Benny represents the physicality of it: he commits violations repeatedly. Based on this behavior, Benny is inclined to violate others whenever he sees fit without considering the repercussions. The violent nature of the society does not justify his actions. Ultimately, it makes him a monster.

A Mockumentary of the Serial Killer - Man Bites Dog (Rémy Belvaux, André Bonzel, Benoît Poelvoorde, 1992)

Similar to *Benny's Video*, *Man Bites Dog* (Rémy Belvaux, André Bonzel, Benoît Poelvoorde, 1992) is not deliberately a horror film. It is a mockumentary that focuses on Benoit, a serial killer, and his daily activities. The acts of killing made by Benoit naturally fall into the category of horror and the directors are explicitly showing the violence on camera, often partaking of it as well. There are acts of brutal violence towards distinct categories of people: Benoit kills older women, families, children and friends as well without a second thought. But unlike Benny from *Benny's Video*, Benoit is an extremely extroverted individual with a keen intellect and a versatile cultural background. All these traits offer him a very charismatic personality that often shows a paradoxical situation: he is very approachable but incredibly violent. While not considered a horror film by Belgian film critics at the time, the international film critics saw it as a horror film, but rather an unconventional take on horror¹¹. The narrative of the serial

¹⁰ Steven J. Schneider, *Fear Without Frontiers: Horror Cinema Across the Globe*, Godalming, FAB, 2003, p. 180.

¹¹ Patricia Allmer, Emily Brick, David Huxley, *European Nightmares: Horror Cinema in Europe Since 1945*, London, Wallflower Press, 2012, pp. 43–44.

killer implies murder, but violence is showcased here as being unsensitized, even if it retains the brutality. The murders become situations where horrible moments are happening, but outside of them, the film does not follow any of the genre's rules. In fact, the only intersection with the horror genre is the trope of the serial killer and its exploration.

Benoit represents an extroverted version of a serial killer. The character is a psychopath with strong narcissistic tendencies. His behavior is erratic and dynamic, his speech is majestic, and his verbal incursions display a degree of empathy towards the filming team. The uncanny element of *Man Bites Dog* is the serial killer trope itself. It is based on an everyday man capable of unimaginable horrors when killing, so the viewer would not suspect his intentions, until the moment of violence. When the moment is consummated, the film avoids the horror in favor of comedy. In these situations, the serial killer is humanized in a parodic way. Benoit cries sometimes, he displays emotions and affection, and he goes on drunken rants and speeches. The mechanism is effective in establishing a process of diminishing the horror throughout the film in such ways that Benoit becomes almost likeable and certainly comical at times.

The mockumentary style also emphasizes the distinctive approach on the serial killer trope. We see Benoit talking to the crew or to the camera, posing himself as a real individual with a real crew, filming real and gruesome situations. This practice is commonly known as a snuff film, a film in which supposedly someone is really killed¹². *Man Bites Dog* takes the premise of a snuff film and validates everything that happens as real. This method coupled with the trope of the serial killer are two important factors in considering *Man Bites Dog* as a horror film, but more so, they also validate the horror of the character. Despite his best display of human emotions, Benoit is still a horrific serial killer. He still kills in cold blood whenever he wants, he still performs acts of intense violence, and he even motivates others to join him in his killing spree. The demise of Benoit at the hands of other killers is equally explicit: he is shot in the head, but not before witnessing the murder of his girlfriend and his family in the most brutal methods possible.

The Beginnings of the Horror's Most Notorious Display of Cannibalism - Hannibal Rising (Peter Webber, 2007)

Hannibal Lecter is arguably the horror film's most notorious serial killer. *Manhunter* (Michael Mann, 1986) is the first appearance of this serial killer but in an already apprehended state. In *Manhunter*, Hannibal Lektor is being

¹² Peter Hutchings, *Historical Dictionary of Horror Cinema*, Lanham, Scarecrow Press, 2008, p. 296.

touted as one of the most perverse criminals with an affinity for cannibalism. Years later, with the release of *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), Hannibal Lecter became a household name in horror. The film has gone on to win major film awards, including the Academy Award for Best Picture and the Best Actor for Hopkins's portrayal of Lecter¹³. Continuing the narrative of the Manhunter, *The Silence of the Lambs* sees Hannibal Lecter helping an FBI agent into apprehending a dangerous serial killer, but on this occasion his incursions are far more important and essential to the development of the main character, Clarice Sterling. The audience is left to their own devices to find out the exact criminal history of Hannibal Lecter and the monstrosity of it, but *The Silence of the Lambs* offers a glimpse of the horrifying manipulations and schemes that Lecter is capable of.

The release of *Hannibal Rising* (Peter Weber, 2007) almost two decades later saw the exploration of the Hannibal Lecter's history and his first experiments with both the act of killing and the act of cannibalism. Compared to the other films from the franchise, *Hannibal Rising* is a coproduction involving several European production studios and an American production studio¹⁴ and the European influence is seen throughout the film: the French actor, Gaspard Ulliel brings a sociopathic and highly intelligent Lecter to life, while the character's story expands on roughly two decades and on disparate European locations. Born into an intellectual family, Lecter goes through the trials and tribulations of the war, witnessing the deaths of his parents to war violence and the death of his little sister to cannibalism. After he escapes the war-torn country, he flees to France, where he turns his traumatic past into a quest for vengeance. The film focuses on the violent nature of this vengeance while managing to justify Lecter's horrifying inclinations.

Hannibal Rising portrays the serial killer as a potent individual capable of displaying both incredible intellectual sensibilities and extremely violent sociopathic inclinations. He is not actively portrayed as a monster, but he is humanized to such a degree his sociopathy seems to be the only plausible outcome. Of all versions of the European Monster, Hannibal Lecter is the only version that knows exactly the nature of his killings. A resolve to his long-standing trauma. The horrifying aspect appears when his solution becomes a sadistic pleasure justified by his high intellect. His curiosity becomes a hunger for more knowledge, ultimately transforming itself into a literal hunger: his signature cannibalism.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 212.

¹⁴ *Hannibal Rising*, UniFrance, available online at <https://en.unifrance.org/movie/28192/hannibal-rising>. Retrieved February 11, 2022.

The Serial Killing as a Violence Enabler in Folk Horror - Kill List (Ben Wheatley, 2011)

Kill List (Ben Wheatley, 2011) employs the trope of the serial killer in a method similar to *Man Bites Dog*, but it takes a more pragmatic stance. The serial killer from Wheatley's film kills for a living and he does not display tendencies of narcissism or psychopathy. He is a hitman. He kills targets for money. Furthermore, the serial killer is placed within a horror setting, where as the plot progresses so do the horror elements: a dead animal in the yard and a strange symbol marked behind a mirror by a character. Later, a blood pact is signed between the hitman and his contractor and the targets express gratitude at the hitman for killing them. Several other elements of similar nature are converging into a narrative that extends beyond the initial crime film. *Kill List* becomes a folk horror that uses the trope of the serial killer (the hitman) to enable its violent narrative.

Folk horrors focus on cults and their discovery by an outside member. The outside member becomes a sacrifice or becomes one of the cult members, either living with the cult or dying at the hands of it. *Kill List* manages to remain ambiguous on this narrative aspect of the folk horror genre, but the outside member in the film is constructed to be naturally violent. Much like the serial killer from *Man Bites Dog*, he is very familiar with the prospect of murder, but unlike *Man Bites Dog*, the murders are often calculated and planned. When an explicit torture scene occurs, the metamorphosis of the serial killer occurs too, on screen. He starts to exist within the confines of the trope, allowing and enabling violence because he wants to destroy and annihilate based on his own deductions, not a prior list of targets. The serial killer becomes the violence enabler in a film that was not concerned with labeling the portrayal of violence as its main method to scare.

The explicit showcasing of physical torture creates an unpredictable narrative. It implicitly changes the narrative onwards and the rules by which the genre is constructed. The cult no longer represents a monstrous authority. It has become an element that enables the transformation of the hitman into a ruthless serial killer, a monster himself, whose acts of immense aggression are not part of a purportedly divine power, as the trope is constructed in folk genre, instead it is just human power taken to a point of extreme¹⁵.

¹⁵ Michael Newton, *Cults, human sacrifice and pagan sex: how folk horror is flowering again in Brexit Britain*, "The Guardian", 2017. Available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/apr/30/folk-horror-cults-sacrifice-pagan-sex-kill-list>. Retrieved February 12, 2022.

The Birth of the Romanian Serial Killer - *Be My Cat*: A Film for Anne (Adrian Țofei, 2015)

Romanian Horror Film is a concept that is yet to be explored. Romania seems to be a fitting choice for shooting horror, especially American Horror Films¹⁶, but there are few Romanian Horror Films produced in Romanian language. Three Romanian Horror Films have been made so far: *Miss Christina* (Romanian: Domnișoara Christina) (Viorel Sergovici, 1992), another remake of *Miss Christina* (Alexandru Maftei, 2013) and finally, *Be My Cat: A Film for Anne* (Adrian Țofei, 2015). While the first two films, the original and its remake, tell the love story of a man and the ghost of a woman and the horror that often originates from this supernatural setting, the third one is built around a similar pattern found in the films discussed earlier in this article. *Be My Cat: A Film for Anne* tells the story of Adrian who is trying to get the attention of the American actress, Anne Hathaway, by directing a film for her. The film is built around the concept of found footage and in a method very similar to *Peeping Tom* or *Man Bites Dog* and it creates the impression of being real.

Be My Cat: A Film for Anne remains an interesting concept from a production perspective, but it represents an important milestone in Romanian Horror Film: the birth of the Romanian Serial Killer. Of all serial killers presented earlier, Adrian from *Be My Cat* is the most formal representation of maniacal psychopathy: Adrian behaves erratically, followed by moments of calculate actions. He seems obsessively invested in his ideation on the American actress and becomes increasingly deranged when confronted by the other actresses. Narratively, *Be My Cat: A film for Anne* does not offer an elaborate portrayal of the serial killer, but instead it offers the necessary characteristics to place the trope into a degree of monstrosity. The director is not interested in showing other motivations to the trope. Adrian exists as the monster in the horror film and his motivation is the enabler of violence. However, the violence shown in *Be My Cat* is not explicit. The horrible murders are suggested through screams, pleadings, and effective acting, but they are not explicitly constructed to demand a repulsive reaction.

The Romanian Serial Killer is similar to its Western European counterpart, but the approach resembles the minimalism of the Romanian New Wave. The Romanian New Wave has intended an informal approach of the serial killer in Cristi Puiu's *Aurora* (2010, Cristi Puiu), where the central character decided to murder several people in cold blood. However, Puiu's *Aurora* cannot be labeled

¹⁶ Irina Marica, *Halloween special: Horror movies shot in Romania*, "Romania Insider", 2020. Available online at <https://www.romania-insider.com/halloween-horror-movies-shot-romania>. Retrieved February 12, 2022.

as a horror film because its central character is not constructed as a monster. It is in Țofei's *Be My Cat* that the Romanian serial killer is truly born. He kills people because he wants to, and the specific reason is as vague as any other fleeting desire.

Conclusions

The Contemporary European Horror Film seems to be quite interested in continuing the exploration of the serial killer trope. As the research has stated, the three directions of the European Horror have developed the serial killer as following:

1) The Western European Horror has seen the serial killer expand its characteristics well beyond the issue of monstrosity with portrayals that are not concerned with using the trope of the serial killer to scare, but rather with desterilizing the trope and recontextualizing it at the fringe of horror.

2) The Central European Horror treats the serial killer trope with cynicism and radicalism, focusing on creating the horrifying setting by corrupting the most forbidden aspect, the minor. More so, Haneke looks at the teenage serial killer from a place of sadism: the minor is utterly indifferent to the gravity and the consequences of his actions.

3) The Eastern European Horror, with Romanian Horror Film in particular, has chosen the serial killer as the monster that initiates the genre's tradition. Unlike the other European representations of the serial killer, the Romanian approach prefers to define the trope by its traditional characteristics: maniacal psychopathy and a desire to kill rooted in vague or unattainable motivations.

The serial killer is the most potent monster of the European Horror Film. While in some cases, the trope suffers from (or rather, benefits from) transgressions, in other cases, such as the Romanian Film, the serial killer is embraced as being the first monster to explore in an otherwise virtually unexplored genre. It is only fair to conclude that the Serial Killer is the veritable European Monster.

