

## In Plain View

### The Body as Site of Detection and Inscription in Serial Killer Narratives

*Ein Essay von Steffen Hantke*

At the beginning of every story of murder there is always a body. If the murderer is a serial killer, there is, of course, more than one. More importantly, the bodies left by the serial killer are not likely to be intact and whole. What he leaves behind and what we, the audience, will get to see is the body in pieces, dismembered, scattered. A series of snapshots, partial views, and close-ups, inflicting cold sharp shocks, is all we may glimpse: the head of Benjamin Raspail floating in a jar of formaldehyde in *The Silence of the Lambs*, a finger removed by the serial killer from his landlord's hand in *Kalifornia*, a ziploc bag of fingers recovered from a flooded drainpipe in *When The Bough Breaks*, a surgically severed hand used to leave misleading fingerprints on a wall at a crime scene in *Seven*. In the beginning of Stephen Dobyn's novel *The Church of Dead Girls*, we get a more leisurely "view," as the narrator describes the victims' bodies in meticulous detail:

Their left hands were missing. Each girl had her left hand severed at the wrist. One could see their wrist bones . . . In the photographs, there was a startling milkiness to these wrist bones. The skin and flesh had receded, shrunk back, letting the wrist bones jut from the stumps. Their whiteness and roundness made me think of eyes, blind eyes, because, of course, how could these white bones ever see? (4-5)

Every single body in these texts is part of the project Peter Brooks has identified for all writing and, by logical extension, filmmaking: "Getting the body into writing" and "conversely, getting writing onto the body . . . [as] sign of the attempt to make the material body into a signifying body" (*Body Work* 1). When the serial killer leaves his indelible and unique signature on his victim's body, inspired by the violent fantasies leading to its dismemberment, he fulfills the requirement that Brooks posits for the textualization of the body. "Signing or marking the body," Brooks writes, describing the hero's wound that leads to a crucial moment of recognition in Greek myth,

signifies its passage into writing, its becoming a literary body, and generally also a narrative body, in that the inscription of the sign depends on and produces a story. The signing of the body is an allegory of the body become a subject for literary narrative—a body entered into writing. (*Body Work* 3)

A dismembered body is a marked body, ready to signify, ready to be interrogated as to its meanings. It is a body ready to give up its story, especially when this is a story that revolves around hermeneutic riddles, hidden truths, and concealed identities that need to be brought to light. Because corporeal dismemberment, much like many other gruesome idiosyncrasies that make up the serial killer narrative, is not necessarily a recurring feature of serial murder in real life, the question how bodies find their way into this narrative is tied up with questions of genre. How does the dismembered body of the serial killer's victim signify as a genre marker? How is it transformed into an aesthetic object, conforming to the imperatives of aesthetics rather than empirical truth? How does it shape the narrative? And, if we give it a voice and allow it to speak, what does it have to say about political and ideological concerns beyond the self-imposed limitations of the genre?

For the serial killer, the dismemberment of his victims serves as a metaphor for his own failed attempts at transformation. Dismemberment produces what Mikhail Bakhtin has referred to as “a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” (317). Dismemberment produces “the body of mixed parts and the strangest anatomical fantasies, the free play with the human limbs and interior organs” (347). According to the serial killer, this constant rearrangement defies the finality of our physical existence; as long as the body remains in transition, closure is deferred. Dismemberment, by schizoid syllogistic fiat, transcends bodily existence. Of course, most authors of serial killer narratives will tell us straight up that this is a destructive fantasy. Closure, in terms of the body, means death, and if the serial killer’s attempts at deferring closure produce anything at all, it is death: the death of his victims, and eventually his own death at the hands of the detective. The dismembered body provides physical evidence of a dangerous logic that makes no distinction between literal and metaphorical bodies, a logic so twisted that the bodies it leaves in its bloody wake can rightfully be called grotesque—the term Bakhtin chooses to describe them.

The grotesque body of a dismembered victim in Bruce Robinson’s 1992 film *Jennifer Eight* makes its first appearance in the form of a severed hand, discovered in a landfill on the edge of Eureka, California. Though the rest of the body remains missing, the investigation quickly harks back to a series of unsolved murders that occurred half a year earlier. Only when the newcomer to the Eureka Police Department, Detective John Berlin, played by Andy Garcia, reopens the case, against political pressures from inside his own department, does the narrative begin to “uncover” the series of murders that will eventually reveal the identity of the serial killer, one of Berlin’s colleagues inside the police force. Berlin faces two challenges, first to establish the pattern of the string of killings, and, second, to convince those around him that a serial killer is in fact on the loose. Arriving at the facts in the case and rallying up support based on how convincing his reconstruction of past crimes can be, with the hand as his only piece of hard evidence, Berlin faces a vast investigative and complex hermeneutical task.

In a first step, Berlin’s process of deduction must start with the severed limb and end with the entire body. Without a body, there is no crime. The body must then be transformed into a “crime victim,” a step that takes us from material to social reality. And finally, we move from the crime victim to the inevitable conclusion that there must be a criminal. Of course, the criminal is far more than the person who caused the body’s death. He is, like the crime victim, a criminological, legal, and political construct. Though most of these steps are, of course, common sense, the investigative sequence, which structures so much of the narrative itself, shifts more than once from physical realities to social constructs. The dead body, and by implication its separate parts, must be made to mean something. Physical bodies must be transformed into social constructs before they can be integrated into the complex processes by which culture endows physical realities with social meaning. By having John Berlin’s conviction confirmed that the severed hand proves the existence of a serial killer, we see this process of social construction itself reaffirmed; as Brooks mentions in the passage from *Body Work* cited above, the processes in which bodies are marked and read lend themselves willingly to allegorization. The object of the allegory in this case is Berlin’s role as the organizing consciousness of the narrative, centered around his conviction that there is in fact a serial killer at work.

Yet before he can assume that role, Berlin needs to assert himself against his colleagues’ incredulity. The ensuing crisis of credibility and Berlin’s sense of paranoia are closely connected to the cognitive problem that the law of the series is based on conjecture rather than

hard evidence. Just as the traditional mystery requires a single body, the serial killer narrative requires a series of bodies. In order to establish serial murder, the detective must produce, beyond the physical reality of the dead bodies, sufficient grounds for the leap into conjecture about seriality: one body means murder, two means two murders, three might mean serial murder. With more than three, what increases is merely the statistical probability of serial murder; there is still no moment—Eureka indeed!—in which suspicions suddenly crystallize into certainty. A dismembered body fails to establish such seriality in more than one respect. Either it is too limited a text to contain the complex information necessary to establish the existence of a serial killer. Or, if we look at this body not so much as the text in itself but as a vehicle for the killer's signature, the inscription upon it must by definition remain incomplete because the proper text of the serial killer is of course the complete series. In either case, the dismembered body with the incomplete inscription it carries invites interpretation, perhaps more so than the densely inscribed body of the murder victim in conventional murder mysteries.

As a result of these shortcomings, the dismembered body must be subjected to discriminating scrutiny or, to return to Brooks' textual metaphor, close reading. Since not only the density but also the size of this text are diminished, its visibility must be increased. Consequently, we see the hand from the landfill again when it is under John Berlin's microscope. We see the its image enlarged, projected onto an office wall. Magnified once through the lens of the microscope, then again through the lens of the projector, the single body part becomes a less flawed, more complete text. The signs written upon it that were hidden from plain view now become visible. Since what cannot be seen cannot be read, these additional clues add to the text's overall density. Visual technology moves the spectator closer and closer to the object under scrutiny. However, the gain in partial knowledge must be paid for with the loss of an overall knowledge of the object. The closer we move in, the more we lose sight of the entire body. But since parts is all we have to begin with, the trade-off seems like a fair deal. After all, the partial view always extends the synecdochally reversed promise that, in the end, we will arrive at the complete, whole body. For now, however, the victim's dismembered body is dismembered yet again. In the pursuit of the victim's identity, Berlin and his colleagues quickly move from scrutinizing the entire hand to regarding only the fingertips. The magnified view of the hand shows only their unique patterns and whorls. The crucial clue to the body's identity is discovered not in the fingerprints but in their unique scars, which register as gaps and blank spots in the projection. These physical marks are written on the body by years of reading Braille. The conclusion that the victim must have been blind, which establishes another metaphorical link to the "blind spots" in the detective's cognitive process, get the plot on its way.

As in conventional mysteries, closure to the story of murder victim Jennifer Eight will come with the identification and the elimination of her killer. However, along the way to this final moment we need to reconnect the severed hand to a whole body. Only then will she cease to be one of the "Jennifers," the numbered name assigned by the police to the unidentified victims, and will regain her proper name. It is important to keep in mind here that the body which gives the film its title, Jennifer Eight, is not actually discovered in the course of the narrative. We are told that it will probably surface wherever the killer has deposited it as soon as the snow melts. After most of the film takes place in dark, cold scenes of winter, the closing sequence is the first to take place amidst the first glimpses of the friendly and warm sunlight of spring. Here we get the promise of final closure. Still, the actual moment of Jennifer Eight's discovery is resolutely shut out of the narrative itself. At best, it is implied. To demonstrate that this is not just an idiosyncrasy of *Jennifer Eight* but a convention of the

serial killer narrative in general, and to consider why the visibility of the victims' bodies is withheld in this peculiar manner, another film needs to be brought into the reading.

Dismemberment, the way I have defined it so far, refers to a double process the victims are subjected to. Once they are literally dismembered by the killer, and once metaphorically by the detective. Michael Apter's film *Blink* follows this pattern but displaces the second act of dismemberment from the work of the detective to the work of surgeons performing organ transplants upon the dead body. Inconsolable over the harvesting of organs from a female coworker in a Chicago hospital after her accidental death, the serial killer in *Blink* goes after the recipients of these organs. The governing fantasy at the heart of the killer's pursuit is the reintegration of the loved one's body, which has been systematically dismembered in the process of preserving, extracting, assigning, distributing, and transplanting its individual parts. The lives of all the organ recipients are so unrelated that the governing principle behind the killer's selection of his victims constitutes the narrative's central puzzle for the longest time. Before the detective can identify the killer, he must first establish the existence of a series.<sup>[1]</sup> Apter makes this task much harder for the audience than Robinson because he has the viewer identify not with the detective but with one of the potential victims. The story's central character is Emma Brody, played by Madeleine Stowe, who received a pair of corneas to cure her partial blindness. Whereas the detective's perspective has the power to synthesize all clues in one coherent picture, Emma Brody's powers of vision are, literally and metaphorically, impaired. All she can testify to are the events she herself has lived through, a testimony that remains far removed from the conceptual leap that produces seriality. Though this is true for the "final girl" in every serial killer narrative, a film like *Jennifer Eight* adopts the cognitively privileged perspective of the detective. Once the detective is convinced that a serial killer is on the prowl, we can be sure that the process of establishing this suspicion as fact serves no other goals than the building of narrative suspense and the characterization of the detective as persistent and intuitively gifted.

The body that sets the machinery of the plot in motion remains invisible in *Blink*. As the nameless Jennifer Eight, who will lie hidden beneath the snow until the end of the winter, the woman in *Blink* whose body was selectively "harvested" by a team of transplant surgeons is exempt from visibility. What we see are snapshots of her that surface briefly toward the end of the investigation. What we know about her comes from the killer himself when he tells the story of his compulsion to reassemble, through violent means, what medicine has separated forever. But even his story is fragmentary and remains a shambles of partial truths. He is not given opportunity to explain himself, his affection for the woman, and the nature of their relationship, which, we are lead to believe, existed mostly in his imagination even when she was still alive. For the audience, she remains a mediated figure, filtered through the desires and obsessions of others. Accordingly, the film refuses to visualize her as a fully developed character. As essential as she is as the driving force behind the narrative, the film withholds the sight of her body, her concrete physical presence, from the audience with a peculiar reluctance and coyness.

The organ donor in *Blink* is not only "outside" the narrative because her death occurs before the beginning of the investigation. She only belongs to the series in a limited respect because, even though the killer's murderous spree starts with her, she is not properly one of his victims. Her death and subsequent dismemberment are what the killer's actions are trying to gloss over. This psychological situation also applies to *Jennifer Eight*, in which the killer is attempting to repress the traumatic childhood experience of being raised exclusively in the company of blind children. His experience, like that of the killer in *Blink*, is defined by loss, by an absence, by a painful elision. The visibility of the original victim is tied up in the

killer's own fragmented state of consciousness. Just as the killer's psyche remains fragmented, our vision of his victims does, too. Glimpsing them for brief moments and only partially, we understand their power to motivate the killer in his desire to reassemble the fragments. In a sense, these victims are taken from us the same way they are taken from the killers. All our efforts to retrieve them in their full vitality are futile.

This situation is further exacerbated by the fact that serial murder assigns to the individual victim's body fragmentary status. It is merely one in a series, bearing the burden of representing the victims that the killer has already and not yet claimed. In a manner of speaking, the enigmatic murder at the heart of the conventional murder mystery is "dis-membered" by the serial killer who repeats it over and over. While the enigmatic murder conveys the sum total of all information on the killer, the victim, and the world they share, every single murder committed by the serial killer remains essentially incomplete. The killer's motivation is thus never fully exhausted, as he moves on to the next victim. As many criminologists and sociologists have noted, serial killing confers a status of anonymity upon the victims that exceeds by far that of the victim of an individual, high-profile crime. The serial killer's victims tend to figure as a mere mass. They are impressive as a quantitative index to the killer's proficiency, the equivalent of the casualties of modern, industrialized warfare, which leaves piles of bodies, corpses strewn randomly over vast battlefields. They are more profoundly victimized than those individuals who are vanquished after torturous struggle.[\[2\]](#)

This argument also holds true if we keep in mind that the body of the serial killer's victim could also be considered the surface onto which the text is inscribed (rather than being the text itself). It could be said to function as a mechanism by which the text is made permanent, visible, and communicable. In conventional murder mysteries, the victim's biography, which inscribes itself indelibly upon the body, must be read in order to determine exactly where and when it intersects with the biographical trajectory of the murderer. This of course presupposes that murderer and victim are acquainted. Stranger-killing, or "motiveless crime," makes the biographical inscription on the victim's body largely irrelevant. The task of the detective is to integrate the victim's idiosyncratic biographical features into a larger sociological profile, in which the victim now appears as "typical" of an abstract psychological or sociological category that predisposes it toward victimhood. As individual psychological motivation, the connecting element between the murderer's and victim's respective life story, becomes irrelevant, so does the victim's individuality. Idiosyncrasies are effaced in the interest of "type" or similar abstract patterns of classification. Consequently, the victim's body is only of interest because it serves as the representative of an abstract category and the carrier of a text that does not belong to and originate in it. The effacement of its indigenous text exacerbates the slide into anonymity even further.

Serial killer narratives compensate for this elision of the original victim from the narrative and from visibility by offering a trade-off between the first and the last victim. Bradley Denton's novel *Blackburn*, for example, presents a biographical narrative that describes Blackburn's transformation from an average child into a serial killer. The novel's chapters are numbered according to the progression of victims, not unlike the series of Jennifers in *Jennifer Eight*. But Denton has other things in mind when he uses numerical progression than simply repeating the standard theme of anonymity and dehumanization. As the novel proceeds and Blackburn grows older, we see the body count go up with every new chapter. Occasionally, the progression skips a victim or condenses two murders into one, but ultimately the connection between the killer's coming of age and the steady accumulation of murders is

maintained. This progression culminates with the very last murder, Victim Number Twenty-One, Blackburn himself, who is at last being executed by the State of Texas.

The novel starts not, as we would expect, with Victim Number One, but with Victim Number Two. In the beginning of Blackburn's life-long killing spree is a victim, and consequently a body, which remains invisible. Psychologically and developmentally speaking, there never is a "first victim." This belief is not quite identical to that held by critics who want to deprofile the serial killer. It does not state that childhood abuse cannot be a determining factor, only that, if it is, we can never fully gain access to it. Both points of view do agree, however, that there is no single traumatic event responsible for the child's transformation into a serial killer. Therefore, there is nothing waiting to be identified, classified, isolated, and consciously avoided or eliminated for the sake of society. To posit such a moment would mean an oversimplification of the complexities both of the human mind and of the forces, natural and cultural, that it is exposed to and that begin to work upon it from its first moments in the world. Of course Denton's insistence that the formative moment in the life of the serial killer remains essentially unrepresentable can cut both ways. To critics like Jane Caputi, it means that the killer is removed from the sphere of ordinary human life, in which childhood trauma is generally accepted as an originary moment in human development.

This complex argument aside, though, Denton's choice to begin Blackburn's biography with the second victim draws attention to the importance of beginnings in narrative. Identity, as Celia Lury reminds us, requires "a set origin in time and space" (*Prosthetic Culture* 7). As a rule, serial killer narratives delegate the "set origin in time and space" of the killer's identity and the driving force behind the narrative to a space that remains excluded from that same narrative. To the limited degree that this point of origin is identified with the killer's first victim, that victim's body remains physically invisible and, presumably, unrepresentable. Inversely, the last victim is conspicuously physically present. We are witnessing in copious detail Blackburn's execution, himself presumably as much a victim as all the people he has killed in the course of his life-long criminal career. Blackburn's presence at the moments preceding his death is strongly predicated upon the physical presence of his body: a doctor tapes a stethoscope onto his chest (293) and his body is elaborately arranged and immobilized on a gurney, parts of it are bared (292), the whole of it reduplicated in the blind eye of a mirror underneath which the body is placed. As conspicuously invisible as Blackburn's first victim was, his last victim is thus on display in full physical visibility, a corporeal metaphor for the displacement of the victims by the killer and his status as media celebrity.<sup>[3]</sup>

Just as Blackburn's body is openly on display, the last victims in the two films I have been discussing earlier, *Jennifer Eight* and *Blink*, are as well. True to their respective functional definitions, the killer acts and the victim is acted upon. Neither film makes any pretenses about the pleasure, aesthetically as well as ideologically, that viewers are supposed to derive from looking at the bodies of the two "final girls." *Jennifer Eight* features several scenes in which the camera, once it is identified with John Berlin's gaze, lingers conspicuously on the body of actress Uma Thurman. In one scene, Thurman's character is practicing the cello, unsuspecting of another person present in the room with herself, and Berlin watches her graceful display of physical discipline and concentrated self-absorption. Only the establishing shot makes Berlin an object of the camera's gaze like Thurman, showing both actors' entire bodies. The following close-ups, however, which only show Thurman's body in the interplay of its individual parts, exclude Berlin and so identify the camera's gaze with his.

*Blink* opens with an almost identical tableaux in which Emma Brody, Madeleine Stowe's character, plays the violin on stage, oblivious to the male observer in the audience whose gaze



we come to share throughout the scene. Both films employ camera and editing in a way that predicated the visibility of the female body on its visual dismemberment. Highly reminiscent of the sequence in *Jennifer Eight*, a close-up reveals only Stowe's wrist and arm as they intersect gracefully with the diagonal line of the violin's neck. The shot places great emphasis on the supple movement of the fingers, their agility juxtaposed with the still quality of the shot itself during the seconds before the camera begins to move up the actress's arm to show her face, her eyes, hidden largely by her hair, and her profile. Both the camera's relative proximity to the actress's body and its range and fluidity of motion during the tracing of its surfaces suggests a kind of visual dismembering. The establishing shot that brings together the images in this series of partial views remains deferred. In a later scene that takes place in a bar on Saint Patrick's Day, Detective Hallstrom, played by Aidan Quinn, watches Brody perform yet again. After an establishing shot that shows Stowe's entire body placed on a bar stool, a shot-countershot sequence identifies that gaze as attached to Hallstrom. At that moment, the gaze becomes partial, composed of a series of close-ups, again concentrating on Stowe's hands, arms, and on her face in profile, eyes averted from the viewer.

The idiosyncrasies of Stowe's performance in playing Emma Brody, just as the peculiar details about Thurman's portrayal of her character in *Jennifer Eight*, can be traced back to the fact that both characters are blind, Thurman's completely and irreversibly, Stowe's partially and throughout the course of the film increasingly less so. Their blindness places them in a unique position within the network of gazes that connects the characters in the film and the viewers watching them. By foregrounding the trope of vision and visibility within this process, the films become openly self-referential, commenting on the network of gazes that are exchanged during the process of viewing a film—between the camera and the actors, among the actors on the screen, and between the viewer and the actors. In the murder mystery, this self-referentiality specifically invites us to ask what the value of visual evidence may be in a culture that places great importance on vision as the privileged means of gaining access to the truth; what happens when a woman, who is the object of both male and female gazes and whose physical presence is clearly marked as sexual, cannot return this gaze; and what happens when “we” viewers, both male and female, are granted permission to look at an eroticized female body without having to take responsibility for our gaze.

On the most superficial level, the victims' blindness (or partial blindness) removes them as active agents from the circulation of gazes, renders them passive, and transforms them into objects of desire. Linda Williams, in her influential article on horror film “When the Woman Looks,” has made this argument most concisely and convincingly:

Like the female spectator, the female protagonist often fails to look, to return the gaze of the male viewer who desires her. . . . Blindness in this context [i.e. the blind "'good girl' heroines' of the silent screen"] signifies a perfect absence of desire, allowing the look of the male protagonist to regard the woman at the requisite safe distance necessary to the voyeur's pleasure, with no danger that she will return that look and in so doing express desires of her own. (15-6)[4]

Knowledge and power is encoded within them and their bodies, yet they themselves have no access to this knowledge. Just as their blind eyes represent the blocked-off access to the truth about the world—they do know something about the serial killer, though they don't know what they know quite yet—they also stand for the truth about themselves. This truth is defined by the male gaze directed at them, a gaze that fetishizes their bodies as they themselves are unable to return it. They need the detective to unlock their secrets, make this knowledge accessible, and give it pragmatic value, which is exactly what happens when both films

construe the detective figures as the women's love interests. In the romantic relationship with the detective, they eventually overcoming all anxieties and insecurities they have struggled with before and achieve full social authenticity. In this respect, they are not "final girls," the last survivors in a series of victims, as Carol Clover has defined them in her groundbreaking study *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*. Their role is neither to "stay the killer long enough to be rescued," nor is it "to kill him" themselves (35). They are not "watchful to the point of paranoia" (39), warning the community about the threat whose existence only they are aware of; this is, in both *Jennifer Eight* and *Blink*, the role of the detective. More passive than Clover's "final girls," they function as bodies containing crucial information.<sup>[5]</sup> As long as this knowledge is locked up inside of them, they have no more significance than those of the victims that preceded them. They are surfaces onto which the partial text of the killer's identity is being inscribed, unable to assert themselves against this violent erasure of their own agency. They cannot resist the visual dismemberment that camera and editing perform upon them. For that, they need the detective and his ability to synthesize all hidden and scattered information into a coherent whole, which includes both the clues to the case and the clues to their own identity. Ironically, it is the detective whose gaze, represented by camera and editing, is responsible for their initial visual dismemberment. And it is our gaze, through the camera and from the detective's perspective, that is complicit in this dis- and re-membering.<sup>[6]</sup>

That the two women are also removed from active participation in an erotic circulation of bodies is made clear by the difference between Thurman's and Stowe's use of body language in the portrayal of their characters. By "erotic" I mean both the body as a subject and object of sexual desire, the way Brooks defines it aesthetically in *Body Works*, and as a study like, for example, Lewis Hyde's *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* defines it in broader, more anthropological terms.<sup>[7]</sup> In conversations with other characters, Thurman is almost always shot from an angle that does not show her face. She also actively averts her face. Particularly in her interactions with Berlin, this translates into the bodily equivalent of the two characters' verbal and emotional miscommunications, which are essential to their romantic relationship. Her gestures are made to appear odd and self-absorbed, dysfunctional and uneconomical because they are not directed toward a clearly perceived opposite. Since they lack the physical manifestation of a social point of reference which only vision can supply, they function as clues to the character's inner state. They give her away, reveal her to us against her will. Lacking the resources necessary to play her social role effectively, the character is laid bare even more dramatically.

Stowe's portrayal of Emma Brody, who slowly regains her vision during the duration of the film, is less defined by the lack of a visual point of reference toward which the body's social performance must be directed to give it meaning. Instead, Stowe's body language is defined by a kind of stillness or immobility which, at least to some small degree, makes her an observer, bracing herself against a visual world that is rushing in on her with painful intensity. Her gaze, though it is more clearly directed at objects in the outside world, always remains furtive. She is poised like someone pausing in mid-flight to take a look back at what sent her running. Often her gaze moves from an object's center to its periphery, or from the object itself to its adjacent space, as if to protect itself from the blinding light of truth that emanates directly from that object. Most strikingly, the film immobilizes Stowe's body in this excruciatingly self-conscious position when she is looking at the bodies of others. In one scene she is being interviewed by a female journalist, whose body she cannot help looking at, comparing herself unfavorably to this other body she can hardly make out. In another scene, she is looking at a line-up of suspects. In both scenes, the camera moves in closely on her face. Lighting emphasizes her eyes, making them seem bigger, more liquid and reflective. The



line-up provides a context in which she can safely focus her gaze with unwavering concentration, whereas having her gaze returned by the journalist, she averts her eyes nervously, toning her interest down to furtive glances. In other words, as soon as the gaze encourages social interaction, she withdraws; as long as it safely keeps her separate, she remains visually engaged.

The scenes I mentioned before in which Thurman's and Stowe's characters perform as musicians further underscore this dynamics of looking and being looked at. Since the two women are blind, their performances are explicitly not directed toward their audiences. Being on stage and thus highly visible, their removal from the circulation of erotic gazes is exacerbated even further. If they perform for anybody at all, it is clearly for themselves. Their bodies are there to be looked at but can only be perceived, with due appreciation, in parts and over time. Totality and wholeness are denied, perhaps in accord with the trained musician's surrender to a conditioned reflex that moves "consciousness" into the performing body part. In other words, like the musician's hands or fingers, which take on a life of their own during the performance, each body part is granted visual autonomy through the camera's partial views. This is the rationale the narrative offers for why it directs our eyes toward individual body parts rather than toward the whole: making music particularizes the body and the camera is simply and faithfully translating this fact into the visual language of the film. In other words, the detective's gaze does not dismember the woman's body; the body is already given as a series of isolated, separate parts. The sequence of images—the fingers, the hand, the wrist, the arm, the eyes, the face in profile—suggests connections but ultimately fails to show the whole body. Thus it invites us to read the images on the screen synecdochally, as each single part represents the whole body. Their agility, their deftness and proficiency, their fragility and independence from an organizing, central consciousness represent the character's personality. What this metonymy covers up is the fact that it is a figurative code which presupposes a specific agent: the detective looking at the performing body. Consequently, metonymy is in reality an epistemological operation driven by will and intention, and not simply an ontological fact of the narrative itself. The rationale that this specific gaze is motivated by its object rather than its subject indicates that the narrative would prefer to disavow its own agency. As long as we believe that it is the body of the victim that produces the gaze, we are absolved from the suspicion of voyeurism.

Thematically, these constructions of vision and visibility are wrapped into the discourse of medicine. What *Blink* and *Jennifer Eight* have in common is a consistently developed system of references that equate the institution of medicine with corporeal dismemberment. In *Jennifer Eight*, the severed hand is mistakenly identified as "hospital debris," dumped illegally and thus untraceable and unidentifiable. *Blink* keeps bringing its viewer back, via the theme of organ donation, to the Chicago hospital where a series of surgical procedures and follow-up tests restores Emma Brody's vision. All of the medical procedures performed upon Emma single out an individual body part, a focusing process the film represents with extreme close-ups of her eyes. It is also the connection that the killer has to the hospital which provides the crucial clues to his motive and identity. Throughout the film, the hospital serves as a thematic focal point and as a center for the intersecting narrative trajectories: the witness's crucial encounter with the killer takes place here, Emma Brody's surgeon is introduced as a potential suspect, and it is the place where the original victim's body parts were harvested after her fatal accident.

In the light of the graphic depictions of autopsies in serial killer narratives, it is remarkable that, despite widespread public perception, we hardly ever see the serial killer himself commit a murder.<sup>[8]</sup> The work of the pathologist examining, scrutinizing, invading, photographing,

particularizing, and cataloguing the victim's body, however, triggers public controversy. Unable or unwilling to distinguish one kind of violence from another, audiences perceive all those films as exceedingly gruesome which give the greatest degree of visibility to the aftermath of the violent act, either by displaying the corpse during the autopsy, or by displaying the crime scene, that is to say, the space where the transformation of a living human being into an inanimate object has left physical marks that directly testify to the fact that, at the end of the process, all that is left is dead matter. The body, in these scenes, is always already transformed into dead matter, its coherence compromised and its wholeness destroyed, its insides identified with the sphere of inanimate objects by being literally merged with them.[\[9\]](#)

In the act of the autopsy, which constitutes a persistently recurring element in all serial killer narratives, medicine mirrors serial murder. The relationship between both activities is rich in complexities and ambiguities, though. Both the pathologist and the killer dismember the female body, regard its parts separately without granting the whole the dignity and autonomy of full humanity. Both read the body as a medium for an inscription that needs to be deciphered. And both assert power and authority over the body, obscuring its physical reality by excessively emphasizing it as a social and semiological construct. The killer dismembers to establish seriality as a way to ensure that the text will ultimately remain incomplete; the pathologist dismembers to reconstruct and discover seriality, and then to interrupt the series and terminate it. The effort of the pathologist is aimed at restoring some semblance of autonomy and personhood to the victim. One is an act of destruction, the other an act of reconstruction. In other words, the serial killer dis-members, whereas medicine, through renewed dismembering, re-members.[\[10\]](#)

Brooks, in *Body Work*, identifies exactly the themes that converge in these scenes in the serial killer narrative. His analysis accounts especially for the conspicuous display or gradual revealing of the (in most cases, female) body, and the complex of desires that he himself, in reference to Toril Moi's and Luce Irigaray's readings of Freudian psychoanalysis, has called "the epistemophilic project" (5), that is, "the desire for possession . . . closely linked to the drive to know, itself most often imagined as the desire to see" (9). What we have here, packed densely into the Freudian concept of *Schaulust* (scopophilia), is the exact same thematic configuration of seeing, knowing, and controlling, all converging upon the eroticized body, that I have been tracing throughout *Jennifer Eight* and *Blink* as representative of the serial killer narrative. Complementing Brooks' argument, Ludmilla Jordanova points out that the body's outer layer, to the curious gaze of the physician and/or surgeon, traditionally is seen as a veil that needs to be stripped or penetrated to reveal the truth underneath. "The metaphorical associations of (un)veiling are rich and diverse," Jordanova concludes before she states the connection between killer and surgeon I have been suggesting; a connection that makes both complicit in a framework of "metaphorical associations . . . encompassing religion, . . . clothing, crime, mystery, horror, and deceit of all kinds" (91).[\[11\]](#) Jordanova's insistence that Brooks' scopophilic project is in some form always one of violent intrusion, spread out over "epistemological, actual, and representational" practices (Jordanova 60) makes this connection explicit. Wrestling knowledge from the body is not some abstract process; it literally demands bloodying one's hands.

Yet the medical interpretation of "the opened and properly displayed body," as another critic, Thomas Laqueur, puts it, does not disentangle the body completely from the cultural preconceptions that govern our understanding of it (70). Examining the historical changes during the Renaissance that lead to an increased valorization of dissection over the study and conjectural expansion of canonical knowledge, Laqueur argues that the already existing medical

knowledge was so deeply entrenched in the minds of the medical practitioners that they would only see what they knew and not vice versa (69). “Experience,” so Laqueur, “is reported and remembered so as to be congruent with dominant paradigms” (99). In other words, even though, in the course of the history of medicine, the study of canonical texts becomes an epistemological instrument of lesser reliability compared to the dissection of the human body and the study of its (interior) anatomical details, the process of interpretation always objectifies the body by textualizing and con-/intertextualizing it. The medical gaze, its professed intentions and epistemological discipline notwithstanding, never just “sees” but always “sees as.” The body on the table and under the knife is “seen as” the local manifestation of a larger paradigm. What its insides yield is “seen as” somebody else’s story, be it that of the killer, that of a specific disease, that of gender or race or social class, or that of the history of medicine.[\[12\]](#)

Brooks cites a number of literary examples to demonstrate how the medical profession’s curious, analytical gaze does more than penetrate the body more thoroughly. In sneaking up on it more and more closely, it tends to divide the body into increasingly smaller segments, paying for its ability to generate more data about the individual segment by increasingly losing the sense of the body as a whole.[\[13\]](#) The technology of the x-ray, celebrated around the turn of the century by, for example, Thomas Mann in *Der Zauberberg* and refined into such contemporary procedures as CAT and PET-scans, renders the body transparent to the physician’s gaze. DNA sequencing and other microscopic visualizing and mapping techniques have “defined down” the bodily space under scrutiny to the level of the individual cell and its microbiological constituents. Both tendencies—greater powers of penetration and more incisive procedures of isolating discrete bodily spaces—are structurally analogous to the two stages of dismemberment performed by the serial killer: making the inside of the body visible and cutting the body into pieces. Both the pathologist and the serial killer, through their actions, produce Bakhtin’s “grotesque body.” The end result of their actions is one and the same. Dismemberment violently redefines the demarcation lines that circumscribe “the body as a whole and the limits of this whole,” as well as “the confines between the body and the world and between separate bodies” (315). The look that partializes or penetrates the body ensures that its “exterior aspect is not distinct from the inside, and the exchange between the body and the world is constantly emphasized” (355). In other words, “the grotesque ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separated and completed phenomenon” (318).[\[14\]](#)

When serial killer narratives do not show the bloody aftermath of the killer’s actions, they often resort to the displacement of our horror from the invisible victim to the instruments of torture and murder themselves. For popular film this representational detour is important because it allows the director to circumnavigate the visual restrictions of the ratings system while abandoning none of the lurid and sensational images of graphic violence. Thematically, however, this ostentatious display of weaponry applies as much to the killer as to the surgeon or forensic pathologist. Thereby, the serial killer narratives makes use of something Elaine Scarry in her book *The Body in Pain* calls “the mental habit of *recognizing* pain *in* the weapon (despite the fact that an inanimate object cannot “have pain” or any other sentient experience)” (16). The “human hurt visibly suggested by the object” (17)—Scarry’s example is Amnesty International’s public display of instruments of torture as part of a media campaign to stop the torture of political prisoners—allows the serial killer narrative to compound the killer and the pathologist into a conceptually unified figure. Kay Scarpetta’s scalpel, with which she immobilizes Temple Gault in the closing scenes of Patricia Cornwell’s novel, is simultaneously a tool of medicine and a deadly weapon, an instrument of healing and of destruction.

It has hardly been incidental that my argument in this chapter has spiraled out from the serial killer and incorporated more and more aspects of the world and the figures surrounding him. The course of the argument is symptomatic of the process during which the serial killer narrative systematically shuts off a number of venues conventionally used to define monstrosity. Especially in the medium of film, the serial killer narrative faces great difficulties visualizing the unique type of monstrosity that sets the serial killer aside from the garden-variety murderers that populate conventional mysteries. The films I am discussing all make gestures toward showing us what we want to see, but ultimately they all flinch and retreat into a curious reticence. Most viewers associate this coyness with monstrosity manifesting itself off-camera, with the camera's discrete pan away from the unspeakable event at the last moment. But discretion is too polite a word to describe the number of visual tropes the narrative turns its blind camera-eye to. We hardly ever see the killer murder his victims, which rules out behavior or actions as a site of monstrosity. We hardly ever see the crucial formative moment when the killer's motivation is established beyond the shadow of a doubt, which rules out the psyche itself as a site of monstrosity. And we are dealing with a character whose body is defined by the conspicuous absence of all distinguishing or idiosyncratic features, which rules out the most common of all sites of monstrosity, the body itself. As the possibilities are narrowed down further and further, we begin to wonder where monstrosity can possibly reside.

Judith Halberstam, whose book *Skin Shows* traces the history of Gothic monsters all the way to the present and thus to the serial killer, suggests that modernity initially displaces the mark of the monstrous from the surface to the depths of the body. Psychologized, evil is unrecognizable because it can hide itself behind the facade of normality. Postmodernity moves monstrosity back to the surface where it appears as the absence of identity altogether; behind the mask, Halberstam suggests, there is no face, only another mask or a blank space. At the end of this historical trajectory stands the serial killer, who poses specific problem for a visual medium like film because his unique type of monstrosity is physically invisible. Not only can we not observe it as a permanent condition, we also fail to catch it in the act of emergence or transformation. We never properly see the serial killer "become" a serial killer because he is always the same. Just as his actions are repetitive and monotonous, his appearance is bland. The gaze slides off. Underneath the inconspicuous uniform surfaces of his outer appearance, there is no depth from which the uncanny can explode, violently twisting, expanding, contracting, or changing the outside.

In the light of the killer's lack of all physical markers that manifest something coming from within, monstrosity must come from the outside, a projection. In *Jennifer Eight* this happens twice. While searching the house of the suspect's mother, John Berlin finds an old photograph which shows the killer as a child surrounded by other children in front of the institution for the blind. The killer is the only one of the children who is not blind, and so his face stands out from all the others because his eyes unfalteringly return the gaze of the camera. He is the only one who is aware of being looked at through the photographic lens. His defiance translates into an unsettling moment of aggression, which is felt even from the distance imposed by time and technology. Undistinguished in every other respect from the blind children around him, he is the one who looks back and challenges the power-relations inherent in the otherwise one-directional gaze.

The second scene in which the killer appears as himself shows him watching through a one-way mirror the interrogation of John Berlin conducted by an internal affairs official. The camera, having moved into an unwavering close-up of his face, registers a brief flutter of grimacing, a nervous contraction of facial muscles, which passes in the *Blink* of an eye,

unnoticed by anyone else in the room. The camera's close proximity to the actor's face, the melodramatic lighting from a sharp angle to the side and below, and the grotesque overemphasis of the gesture all contribute toward a moment that remains either overly significant or not significant enough. It is one of these moments I have mentioned before, when audiences respond with a wariness that comes from ironic detachment. What does this facial tic really say about the character? As a symptom rippling over the body's surface, does it not constitute a gross oversimplification of childhood trauma? And, on the other hand: doesn't the overemphasis of the actor's gesture, the conspicuous lighting, and the camera's portentous proximity represent too concerted an effort to mark the killer's body as monstrous? If we are told that we are looking at a body whose surface barely contains the seething, raging forces of monstrosity underneath, are we not being signaled a little too frantically? And doesn't the insinuation that an explosive venting of the character's real personality is imminent strike us as anachronistic and misplaced, considering Halberstam's acute observation that monstrosity just does not manifest itself this way any more? If monstrosity makes an appearance at all in this scene, it is because we project it onto the character, filling the gaps in his performance.

*Blink* conforms to this logic of outside projection. Before the climactic shootout in an underground garage, we see the killer several times in brief, murky flashes. When he is finally eye to eye with Emma Brody, the witness who is to become his next victim, the camera allows us a lingering look at his face through her eyes. Though her sight has begun to mend, it is still distorted. Accordingly, the image of the killer's face wavers in and out of focus, creating a visual distortion reminiscent of that in a Francis Bacon painting. The picture momentarily stabilizes visual information in some segments of the face while continuing its weird pulsing oscillation in others. Just when we are led to the conclusion that it is this look of hatred that marks the killer's face as monstrous, the film superimposes the face of Emma Brody's abusive mother over that of the killer. Her voice chimes in with that of the killer, as both spitefully demand the return of Emma's eyes. The scene makes it clear that it is in fact *not* the hatred in the killer's features that makes them monstrous, but that it is Emma's subjective projection which identifies the killer's features with the larger adverse and destructive forces in her life. Ultimately, monstrosity is in the eye of the beholder.

This means of course that monstrosity, if it is, figuratively speaking, in the eye of the beholder, has moved from the body of the serial killer to the body of his victim. That this body is conventionally gendered female allows Linda Williams to make the following observation, linking the serial killer narrative to its precursors in classic horror film:

This "non-specific male killing force" [of the slasher film] thus displaces what was once the subjective point of view of the female victim onto an audience that is now asked to view the body of the woman victim as the only visible monster in the film. In other words, in these films the recognition and affinity between woman and monster of the classic horror film gives way to pure identity: she *is* the monster, her mutilated body is the only visible horror. ("When the Woman Looks" 31)

Williams' description of the scene of horror applies to the serial killer narrative as much as it does to the slasher film: the victim's "mutilated body is the only visible horror." Monstrosity, when it is inscribed on the killer's body, is only skin deep. This insight is epitomized by the sequence in *The Silence of the Lambs* that shows Lecter's escape from the Shelby County Courthouse, an escape that confronts us with the sight of two mutilated victims. One is the police officer whose body Lecter leaves prominently displayed as a horrible spectacle: this is indeed the victim's body as the sight/site of horror. The other is Lecter himself, his face

unrecognizable underneath he lacerated skin of the other officer. But unlike his victim's mutilations, Lecter's horrifically scarred face is nothing but a mask; it slides off at the convenient moment to reveal the face underneath, a face so inconspicuous that it allows Lecter to slip away in an airport parking-lot and disappear into the crowd.

Lecter's superficial monstrosity is by far not the only example. Audiences gasp in shock when, during the postmortem on one of Buffalo Bill's victims in *The Silence of the Lambs*, Demme positions the camera further away from the victim's body, allowing us to catch the first unobstructed view of the extensive mutilations the killer has inflicted on it. Amiel's *Copycat* takes us through an elaborate series of shots tracking the detective as she enters the victim's apartment. Before we finally see the horrific sight of the victim's body in the bathtub, we are taken past a group of reporters, past her colleagues, through a series of rooms, past a number of conspicuously arranged visual clues, and finally into the bathroom, where, again, we have to sit through a sequence of partial shots of the body. Only then, after the stage has been set carefully and the suspense has been heightened by means of the long delay, do we see the body. Fincher's *Seven*, though one of the films that shows the least amount of on-camera violence, has achieved a high degree of notoriety because it indulges in extreme and extensive visualization of violated bodies (of which few, by the way, happen to be female). For each one of the killer's crimes, we see a body emaciated, tortured, or dismembered, and then eloquently put on display, not only for the detectives but also for us, the viewers. The signs of the victim's mutilations are further displaced and projected upon the space in which the murder takes place. Because the space has been transformed by what has happened, we respond to it as we would to the images of violence themselves. With the moment in *Manhunter* when Graham turns on the lights in the slain family's bedroom, Mann aims for the same effect: the blood of the victims, copiously smeared and spattered all over the white walls, elicits a strong response from the audience. Clues left by the killer in *Seven* are written in the victim's blood on the white carpet of his office, a sight revealed to us only in an overhead shot which we have already anticipated since the detective entered the scene of the crime. If the killer's body shows signs of physical deformation, as it does in a few scenes in *Blink*, they are the product of the victim's distorted gaze that she projects upon him, or, in other words, they are the product of *her* physical deformation or mutilation. With this high degree of visual attention directed at the victim's body, it is neither necessary to have the murders themselves take place before our eyes, nor to show the serial killer spectacularly transforming himself to display his monstrosity.

Further, Williams captures the crucial sense of transition that takes place between the classic horror film and the slasher film. In the classic horror film, the female victim is *as monstrous as* the killer. Both occupy the same position. Williams is interested in demonstrating this "surprising (and at times subversive) affinity between monster and women, in the sense in which her look at the monster recognizes their similar status within patriarchal structures of seeing" (18). Both together constitute the Other within patriarchal phallic masculinity. Williams' argument picks up where Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" leaves off, translating Mulvey's insight that "the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety [of male castration] it originally signified" (Mulvey 29) into the specific genre conventions of the horror film. Freudian conceptions of gender demand that the female body itself must be figured as monstrous because of its conspicuous physical shortcoming, which is perceived as the result of mutilation. In the serial killer narrative, as in the slasher film, the female victim does not occupy the position of monstrous otherness together with the serial killer, she occupies it *instead of* the killer. Monstrosity, so to speak, has slid off the killer altogether, finding nothing to attach itself to, and has instead been transferred to the female victim where



it now resides exclusively. When Williams talks about the “non-specific male killing force” that these films set in motion against the female victims, this is what it comes to mean in the serial killer narrative. Because the sight of the serial killer’s body as disappointingly bland and nondescript is such an essential feature of the narrative, monstrosity is passed on to the victim. It is the sight of the victim’s body that now causes horror and repulsion.

Laura Mulvey describes three “voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent [the] threat” of “woman as representation signify[ing] castration” (32). All three must be enacted on the body of the female victim, but they ultimately refer back to the serial killer. I want to select the two that strike me as most appropriate for this discussion.<sup>[15]</sup> First, Mulvey suggests that “investigating the woman, demystifying her secret” (29) will lead to a disavowal of male fears in the face of what figures as female monstrosity. Together with Jane Caputi and other feminist critics, we can argue that the serial killer has inscribed phallic masculinity onto his victim’s body at the moment he made her into his victim. Consequently, what we will find in the body’s state of dismemberment is a confirmation that the its secrets are in fact not the secrets of a subversive alternative to the dominant order but manifestations of that order itself. To take this argument even further, the violation of the victim’s body performed during the autopsy by the pathologist exacerbates this condition, implicating institutional power in the actions of the serial killer and suggesting that both act in accordance with the same ideological agenda. In the substitution of the female victim’s given state of monstrosity with a culturally imposed one, we can see the serial killer narrative at its most misogynist.

Second, Mulvey’s strategy of “devaluation, punishment, saving the guilty object” (29) plays itself out in all three aspects in the serial killer narrative. The individual body is devalued to the degree that it constitutes merely one single incident in a series; what both the detective and the viewer are interested in is not the individual body but the pattern it is part of. Punishment comes into play, again to go back to Caputi, in the narrative’s ability to terrorize women for the simple fact that they are women. Unlike the slasher film, in which women are punished specifically for taking the sexual initiative, the serial killer narrative imposes a more general patriarchal regime under which women are at risk, not specifically for individual acts of transgression, but simply because they fit a general profile of victims from which the killer selects his prey. The arbitrariness in the selection of victims, together with the killer’s “mythicization,” as Caputi calls it, “terrorizes women [and] empowers and inspires men” (101). Anyone, anywhere, at any time, is at risk to become a victim. Last, it is important to note that the victim we see at risk during the duration of the narrative is actually the one who gets away, the one Carol Clover has so aptly named “the final girl.” The price of her escape, however, is that she must first share the fate of the Gothic heroine. Escaping a number of scrapes with death at the hands of the killer, she must be the object of his pursuit, a damsel in distress, in need of protection by the one character who always seems least capable of providing it, the detective.

On the most pragmatic level, the serial killer narrative employs these strategies in order to generate suspense and to develop thematic consistency. Detaching monstrosity from the killer’s body and attaching it to the victim’s body is necessary if we insist on a monster whose body must always be unmarked and inconspicuous. It solves some of the practical narrative problems posed by this premise. Allowing us to witness how this transferring of properties takes place, films like *Blink* or *Jennifer Eight* can have their cake and eat it, too. Their serial killers are unequivocally evil and monstrous, yet at the same time blend into the background of the narrative where they are virtually indistinguishable from the extras in the scene. The killer in *Blink* is a janitor in the hospital where the crucial scenes of the film take place, while the killer in *Jennifer Eight* turns out to be one of the officers in the Eureka Police Department.

Both films plant the killer right under our noses and generate some of their narrative suspense with the help of the classic whodunnit. In the end, we are to ask ourselves whether we saw it coming: did we pick up on the subtle clues to the killer's identity as he entered into our field of vision? Would we in real life?

Plot considerations provide other practical applications of Mulvey's strategies of disavowal. In *The Silence of the Lambs*, for example, Buffalo Bill's first victim, a young woman named Frederica Bimmel, whose body we never "see" other than in photographs and through the verbal descriptions that other characters provide of her, is the only one the killer actively tries to hide, weighing her down before dumping her body in the river. So far, the story conforms to the familiar pattern, as the first victim is consigned to relative invisibility by both the killer and the narrative. However, Frederica Bimmel does not remain invisible. Even though the narrative still refuses to show her body after it surfaces from the bottom of the river, Clarice Starling eventually discovers, with the help of Hannibal Lecter, that her invisibility is in fact the clue to the killer's identity. The killer hides her body because she is the only one of his victims he is personally acquainted with, the one, as the film puts it, he "covets" because it's what he sees every day. Through her, and only through her, his identity can be traced back to a specific place and thus to a name, a person.

This strategy comes in handy at a moment in which, if we trust Judith Halberstam's argument in *Skin Shows* about the changing faces of monstrosity, it has become difficult to situate monstrosity firmly and convincingly. The description of the serial killer as somebody who succeeds in masquerading as normal falls curiously short of the simultaneous insistence that his crimes are so heinous that no explanation about his possible motivations will ever suffice. In this discursive pattern—the display of an unmarked yet suspicious body on the one hand and the repeated reference to an unrepresentable identity on the other—repeats itself throughout all serial killer narratives' play of substituting the visible for the invisible, the excess or frenzy of representation for the resigned admission that some things cannot be shown. That the serial killer wears the mask of normality, the unmarked skin, as Halberstam would have it, still suggests that underneath the mask, or the multiple masks, is the familiar face of the monster. That, however, is not the case. Underneath the mask, there's nothing. If we want to determine the killer's identity, the closest we will ever come is through a consideration of the order of things he surrounds himself with, among them the bodies of his victims. That changes in the location of monstrosity—from the body's outside (the classic monster) to the inside (the killer inside), and back again, albeit in a very different way, to the outside (the serial killer)—are an index of the difficulties Halberstam is talking about. The serial killer, who is all surface and no depth, leaves us no choice than, literally, to look elsewhere.

It is the curious attenuation of the killer's own visibility that leads me to believe that the "frenzy of the visible," as the serial killer narrative stages it in these specific instances, is meant to distract not from the position that is always gendered female but from the one that is always gendered male. What cannot be shown, as I have argued before, is the essentialized evil that the killer embodies. As long as the narrative continues to insist on the bodily inscription of this abstract property, it must be passed on from one body to another, leaving an empty space at the heart of the narrative.

Following Mulvey's and Williams' suggestions to their logical conclusions specifically in the context of the serial killer narrative, we recognize that with the attenuation of the killer's physical visibility, phallic masculinity itself suffers attenuation. Despite Jane Caputi's strident argument that the serial killer perpetuates a misogynist myth of male superiority and terrorized female victims, critic like Peter Lehman is more on target when he argues that "the

dominant representations of phallic masculinity in our culture depend on keeping the male body and the genitals out of the spotlight” (*Running Scared* 28). Williams’ “frenzy of the visible” is played out here not with the mystery of female sexual pleasure at the center, but with the mystery of phallic masculinity, which the narrative largely equates with the mystery of violence, or essentialized evil, in a culture defined by phallic masculinity. Hiding the male body and its signs of monstrosity, according to Lehman, however, does in fact accomplish nothing to decenter and thus demystify it. That would only be true, if female sexuality and male violence were in fact linked—a link that feminist critics of the serial killer narrative need to reimport into it every time its gendering strategies suggest differently gendered configurations. Keeping the male body out of sight hastens the replacement of the concrete individual male body with the abstract signifier of male dominance. As Lehman puts it, consigning the male body to invisibility does not do justice to the “the crucial, if frequently unacknowledged, relationship . . . [between the penis] and the phallus” (28). Instead of accounting for the complex relationship between the concrete object and the abstract concept, consigning the body to invisibility tends to equate the two, keeping patriarchal power firmly rooted in the body. That this is a concrete individual body, which means that it is fallible, flawed, and prone to all kinds of male shortcomings, triggers anxiety: how is that body to live up to the responsibility of bearing the burdens of representing male dominance? What one cannot see, one cannot see fail. What one cannot see, cannot disappoint.

What the serial killer narrative—though not the serial killer himself—responds to are these anxieties. On the one hand, it attempts to keep male dominance firmly in place, keeping us mystified about the origins of the serial killer’s violent pathology. On the other hand, it makes frequent incursions into his invisibility. When it displaces monstrosity from the serial killer’s to his victims’ bodies, it makes it highly visible, placing it under critical scrutiny by the pathologist, who functions as a stand-in for us, the viewers, and fulfills our scopophilic desires. Connected by their respective doppelgänger bond, pathologist and killer enact a scenario in which, one might say, the culture takes a good, hard look at itself. And what it sees is not comforting, a body in pieces, dismembered, incoherent. No matter if this body, to use Peter Brooks’ words, makes “its passage into writing” as a trope for the culture itself or as a trope for what it produces, the state of either its dismemberment or of its attenuation is a clear indication that the powers which used to guarantee its coherence are waning. Following the feminist implications of this argument, we might say that what is, indirectly, being dismembered here, is phallic masculinity. The killer’s sense of security is as much in jeopardy as that of the whole class of victims he is targeting.

In Dobyn’s novel *The Church of Dead Girls*, this fundamental insecurity about the status of male power and visibility brackets the entire narrative. Like a genetic flaw, is one of the characteristics that one potential serial killer inherits from his predecessor. The novel ends with the serial killer, Donald Malloy, safely eliminated from the community he has terrorized for so long. However, the narrator has managed to steal his hand from the morgue. “By now the right hand and Donald’s body have rotted away, but the left hand is safe. Though the wrist is ragged, the veins and arteries, the tendons and muscles are all visible, and the bone, of course” (388). He admits that he thinks of the killer’s severed hand, “swimming in its liquid,” as his “private teacher,” or as his “own academy,” acknowledging that the visual pleasure he derives from looking at the killer’s hand equals that of the killer in looking at the bodies of his victims. Finally, though, he admits: “I try to think what those fingers felt and I scare myself: the necks of the three girls, their tenderness” (388). What the narrator “visualizes” in this last sentence is his fascination and complicity with the serial killer, his own ability, albeit unrealized, of continuing the series of murders that the killer has started. But why does he scare himself? What is it really that scares a man who can contemplate the grisly spectacle of

serial murder? The reference to the whiteness of the bones in the hand reminds us of the trail of associations connected with the same image in the passage from the novel I quoted earlier on. “Their whiteness and roundness made me think of eyes, blind eyes . . .” The remark is meant to announce the trope of visibility, but the following comment, phrased as a somewhat insecure, alarmed question—“ . . . of course, how could these white bones ever see?”—immediately casts doubts on the single direction of the gaze. The victims’ eyes may be blind, but they do look back. And that is when the balance of power shifts, perhaps uncomfortably so—when it is the killer who is suddenly the object of the gaze, not by an institutional power that is always in some way complicit with him, and certainly not by us, the viewers, who share this complicity, but by the victims who are truly the only ones who can call themselves innocent.

## Notes

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[1] Eric Red’s film *Body Parts* (1991) also plays on this theme, elaborating on the trauma of dismemberment by positing the unsettling possibility that identity resides not in the mind but in the body. Hence, the recipients of organs harvested from a serial killer, or rather the specific body parts they have received, begin to show behavior that is characteristic more of the donor than of the recipient.

[2] Klaus Theweleit offers an explanation for this urge of the killer to reduce his enemies into a formless mass that emphasizes the gender-specific hostility that the (masculine) killer directs at his (female) victims (*Male Fantasies* 409). It is this hostility that Mark Seltzer identifies as the link between the killer’s sexuality and his proclivity for violence (*Serial Killers* 139-40).

[3] Visibility becomes, by inference, then also a way of identifying who exactly the narrative determines to be the “first victim.” In a film like Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, which suggests that Norman Bates’ mother is in fact the original victim, killed by her son in a moment of Oedipal rage, the crucial visibility of her body in the scene when Vera Miles stumbles upon her mummified corpse in the basement contradicts this most obvious of all readings. In all other regards, the film does follow that pattern: first Marion Crane’s body is on display, then the body of her sister is, during the moments when it is threatened by Norman Bates, so that between the two women acting as doubles of each other, we have the conspicuous visibility of the last victim. What remains invisible, however, is the suspected string of victims that is likely to have preceded Marion Crane and likely to have followed Mrs. Bates. Submerged in the swamp where Norman buries Marion Crane’s body, these victims remain invisible, unseen.

[4] Considerable critical attention has been lavished on the analysis of gazes and their relation to power and control in film. Most crucially, this discussion has been stimulated by Laura Mulvey’s seminal article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” published in *Screen* in 1975, an article about which another film critic, Peter Lehman, raves: “Mulvey’s article rightly became a watershed work in the history of film theory and criticism. It managed at one and the same time to be highly provocative and polemical, and its influence directly dominates a decade of work on gender and cinema. Mulvey’s insights were astonishing . . .” (*Running Scared* 6). The trope is even more pertinent here because other serial killer

narratives employ it as well; see, for example, the character of Reba, the serial killer's blind co-worker, in Michael Mann's *Manhunter*. Michael Powell's film *Peeping Tom* has perhaps attracted the greatest degree of critical scrutiny for its treatment of blindness in the context of the serial killer narrative; James Twitchell closes his history of the modern Gothic, *Dreadful Pleasures*, with it, just as Carol Clover treats it as the epitome of self-reflexive horror cinema in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*.

[5] Clover herself has observed that, to the same degree that the formula of the slasher film enters the cultural mainstream and abandons the ghettoized B-grade movie, its depiction of gender roles becomes more conventional and its conception of gender politics tends to become more conservative. This argument certainly applies to the two films under discussion here, both produced on a sizable budget and cast with major name-recognition Hollywood stars.

[6] It is important to point out here that the surface narratives of both films tries to cover up this condition of relative powerlessness by constructing a story for the two women in which they go from an extreme depth of dejection to a more fully integrated, active relationship toward the same world from which they were initially separated. Stowe's character in *Blink* starts out wishing for the numbness she loses when she is beginning to regain her sight after restorative surgery. At the climactic moment during the final shootout in an underground garage, the killer demands from her that she return the eyes she has stolen, which she emphatically declines, an indication that she now embraces the vulnerability that comes with being reconnected with reality and faces the ultimate traumatic childhood event that has led to the onset of what the film suggests is "merely" hysterical blindness. Similarly, Thurman's character in *Jennifer Eight* regains integrity, though not her sight, at the moment when she can comfort John Berlin, who is on the verge of giving up the investigation when nobody wants to share his belief in the existence of a serial killer. In both cases, the logic of the narrative suggests that the films are, in fact, about overcoming the powerlessness that comes with blindness. But this suggestion is made on the surface level of the narratives. At a deeper thematic and ideological level, the films do not bear up this reading.

[7] "It is this element of relationship which leads me to speak of gift exchange as an "erotic" commerce, opposing *eros* (the principle of attraction, union, involvement which binds together) to *logos* (reason and logic in general, the principle of differentiation in particular). A market economy is an emanation of *logos*" (xiv). Hyde's use of the term "differentiation" in this context, a principle that operates by producing difference and particularization, is related to my own metaphorical use of the term "dismemberment." Consequently, re-membering, the faculty of memory and its ability to impose coherence and structure onto separate events in the past, is a process that has clearly erotic dimensions, both in the sense that it creates community in a number of different ways, as Hyde would have it, and in the sense that its object happens to be the female body as the object of the sexually charged gaze of the male observer, as Peter Brooks would have it.

[8] Certain exceptions, like McNaughton's *Henry*, apply here, although they are clearly self-conscious attempts to confront the genre's conventional reticence about showing the grisly work of the killer in process.

[9] It is crucial to note that this specific manner in which violence and its effects on the human body are being aestheticized differs substantially from, for example, a genre like the action film, in which the actual moment of wounding or dismembering itself is made visible. In most serial killer narrative, the moment when this physical destruction actually appears on

the screen is that when the killer himself is being killed. A film like Richard Stanley's *Dust Devil* (1992) stages this moment as an elaborate spectacle, using slow motion shots and repeating sections of the shot from different extreme camera angles.

[10] Even though the dichotomy between intuition and technology in *The Silence of the Lambs* is ultimately decided in favor of intuition, setting an example for other narratives to insist on the profiler's "hunches" as a crucial plot device, Demme and others are fascinated with technology, so much so that representations of technology are often pushed to a point of overt fetishization. I have already made this point in connection with the surveillance technology so demonstratively on display in Mann's *Manhunter*, but I want to avoid conveying the impression that it is exclusively visualizing technology the serial killer narrative is interested in. Technology is fetishized because it lends itself to a didactic educational purpose that alleviates the viewer's Puritan unease about being entertained by illicit subject matter.

In Jeffery Deaver's novel *The Bone Collector*, the detective is a quadriplegic crime scene specialist on the trail of a killer who uses the history of the city of New York as his inspirational text. Besides unloading pages of information on forensic technology on the reader, the novel is crammed full of information on history, often obtained and accessed through technology. At the end of the novel, Deaver includes an index explaining terminology and technology. Information on the history of criminology, such as "Locard's Exchange Principle," on the institutional rhetoric that requires a definition for such terms as "Physical Evidence," and the hardware of high-tech forensics such as "Gas chromatograph/mass spectrometer" are listed here (424-7). By adding in parentheses the abbreviation for most of these terms, Deaver ensures that the reader can function with the same level of rhetorical expertise as the implied author, ensuring a common bond between both and foregrounding that what really matters is not so much the technology itself as its rhetorical uses, its evocative and discursive function.

Similarly, Christ Petit's novel *The Psalm Killer* includes a lengthy section of acknowledgments and a glossary to educate the reader on the political and historical intricacies of the novels' setting, Northern Ireland, and the sources on which the author's knowledge is based. Michael Slade's novels usually contain an "Author's Note" that serves the same purpose, "to create the illusion of authenticity" (*Evil Eye* 419). Though Slade, which is itself a pseudonym for two Canadian authors writing in collaboration, assures his readers that the "real persons, places, or institutions [which] are incorporated . . . are used fictitiously" (419), the bibliography of sources functions ambiguously, assuring the reader not so much of the authenticity of the narrative universe as of its fictional status as the result of textual revision and assemblage. What all these didactic moves ultimately accomplish is to anchor the text firmly in a textual universe, a realm composed of textual knowledge that can be selectively cited, combined, assembled and composed.

[11] Jordanova's very own footnote, added to these remarks, makes the explicit connection, via reference to Eve Sedgwick and E.P. Broadwell, to the conventions of the Gothic romance and its strategies of (un)veiling.

[12] In contrast to Jordanova and Brooks, Laqueur points out that there is a second tradition at work in the history of anatomical illustrations, a tradition that considers the body, no matter what its gender might be, an idealized representation of the human form. This idealization or essentialization causes gender to disappear altogether. It "is simply not true that women, sensual or not, were particularly identified with the object of anatomical study" (74). Citing



statistical evidence, he speculates that, " Perhaps the availability of material rather than sexual politics determined the sex of the generic cadaver." Whether Jordanova and Brooks or Laqueur is correct remains a question that can only be answered by looking at the changing representational traditions and social practices at specific moments in time and in specific cultures and countries. More importantly in the context of this study, however, all three accounts agree that, in one way or another, the dissection of the human body for scientific purposes always involves some form of reductive reasoning.

[13] The same argument that has been made by Michel Foucault about the discourse on sexuality: the more we talk about it, and the more we generate knowledge about it, the less we understand it as a coherent phenomenon.

[14] From a sober and pragmatic point of view, these narrative displacements are necessary because filmmakers must steer clear of any rating for their films beyond an R. The problem of visibility, particularly when it comes to the representation of the dismembered human body or of the actual process of dismemberment, is primarily one of economics and not of aesthetics. Too much violence, too graphic a depiction of the effects of violence on the human body, too strong of a connection between sexuality and violence, and a film's rating goes up from an R, which will grant it widespread circulation and exposure, to an X, which means virtually no economic amortization of the investment in its production. Or, even worse, the film will end up in the limbo of NC-17, where its artistic pretensions may have rescued it from a worse fate yet simultaneously have made it unpalatable to large segments of its potential audience, which will stay away from anything smacking of "art." A similarly murky, unpredictable fate awaits films that are released unrated. These economic considerations determine the aesthetics of film, particularly at a moment when the production cost of film within the Hollywood system have become so staggering that playing the ratings system to its extremes has become an economic necessity.

[15] Mulvey's third strategy is the "substitution of a fetish object," for the unsettling display of the female body. In most cases, the "cult of the female star" (29) fulfills this function of compensating for male anxieties triggered by this display.

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