TOO HUMAN INHUMAN: A PARADIGM SHIFT IN CONTEMPORARY CRIME FICTION

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Abstract – Actual sociology of deviance outlines moral pluralism or even fragmentation which characterize the social moral order. The paper assumes that social reality can be mirrored in media products, influencing their cultural trends, due to the fact that in the consumer society the product should maintain its appeal to the public. The actual moral ambiguity of social order has been thus resembled in crime fiction. The analysis clearly shows a transformation through a historical confrontation of serial killer mediatized representations, comparing Hitchcock's Norman Bates in *Psycho*, and the character of Dexter from the homonymous tv show. The paper outlines a passage from the 'monsterification' of the former's psychopathy to the humanization of the latter's homicidal inhumanity.

Keywords: monsterification; serial killer; inhumanity; media representation of crime; psychopathy.

1. Introduction

There is a sociological dilemma regarding the relationship between real crime and its media representation, dimensions of reciprocal influence if any, and which social features or society structures media depictions of crime suggest.

According to the cultural perspective, crime fiction is a product of the mass media communication system, and it could construct a peculiar vision of crime eventually with a progressive *cultivation* (Gerbner 1972, 1973). We should admit anyway consume practices bidirectionally mold and shape media content and products, especially in the television and cinema domain if we consider fiction as a cultural product in the capitalistic market. Last orientation in media studies suggest socially and culturally contextualizing individuals and their consuming media as means of evasion, learning, and construction of own reality (Williams 1986).

Authors will try to point out a dissolution in crime fiction of a clear-cut distinction between deviance particularly crime, and conformity, that is parallel to the same factual phenomenon in post-modern society (Saponaro 2018). Modern society during the post-second World War period, considering the cold war political climate produced a strong reinforcement of moral cohesion, a burst of disapproval on violent crime and especially social in-group lethal violence like homicide. Particularly cruel or dangerous criminals were socially construed as monsters and at the top of the ladder serial killers became a media symbolic icon of inhumanity. On the contrary, since the seventies and exponentially after the twist of the XXI century, deviance is fading into a moral pluralism more than moral relativism. Moral pluralism fragments the distinctive feature of deviance: negative social reaction of majority at disapproved behaviors. Blame and disapproval are not a reinforcement mechanism of moral cohesion as in Durkheim's view and historical context anymore, but they are diluted and fragmented in a varying set of social circles. Fifty years later, actual society obscures borders between deviance and conformity which have melted due to moral pluralism, and criminals are not perceived as sharply differing from law-abiding people to point to be outside 'humanity'.

It is possible to trace an identical paradigm shift in cinema and tv crime fiction from the demonization of the monster to the contemporary humanization of traditionally *inhuman* criminal, the serial killer. Even a polarization has emerged in this change, tracing a comparison of two iconic serial killer characters (see Figure 1): *Norman Bates* in 1960 Hitchcock's famous

movie *Psycho* and *Dexter*, contemporary XXI century protagonist of an American television crime drama mystery series whose first episode was aired in 2006.
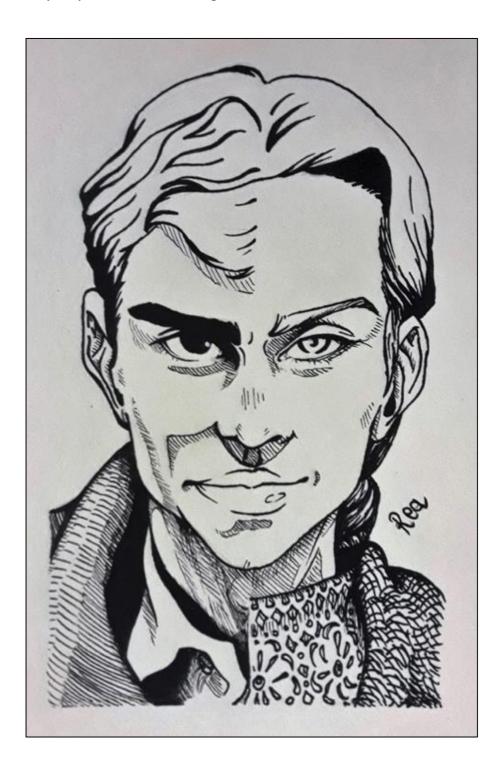
Figure 1, 2
A portrait of a double-faced Norman Bates suggesting his splitting personality.
A portrait of Dexter playing his parenting role; Copyright 2021, Andrea De Leo.

2. Monsterification of serial killer: 1960 Hitchcock's movie *Psycho*

Norman Bates runs a secluded motel. He has killed his mother and his lover, mummifying her corpse ten years before and as a consequence of the trauma because of their morbid incestuous relationship. Norman's personality split into him and her mother even with external dialogues between the two. A real-estate secretary Marion Crane that has stolen $40.000 from her employer to cover her boyfriend Sam Loomis's debts, stops for the night at the motel. The movie telling Norman's sympathy for her goes on with her murder in the famous shower scene and then he kills private investigator Milton Arbogast hired by Marion sister's Lila and Sam.

The character of Norman Bates is a paradigmatic example of fictional *monsterification*. Monsterification refers to divarication between fictional elements and real facts about criminals emphasizing social repulsion through the choice of the most dehumanizing attributes. Even he has been modeled on the historical figure of a real serial killer, Ed Gein, his main horrifying features are amplified and emphasized. The serial killer and psychopathic representations of unexplained violence, as part of our *spectacular* culture fascinated by violence and brutality, help to foster the socially constructed subjectivity of the dangerous individual.

2.1. Criminal monsters between fiction and reality

The pervasive discourse of the monstrous and of human monsters as caricatures of madness and danger, has focused since the beginning on the mythic figure of the psychopath whose construct is historically ill-defined (Cleckley 1941; Gough 1948; Sutherland 1950; Hare 1991, 1993, 1996), becoming the main figure of modern monstrosity in a cultural matrix that

heightens the public's sense of the fear of criminality, the fear of the unknown, the fear of the unfamiliar (Federman, Holmes, Jacob 2009). Psycho movie inhumanity fictional features:

- The same title *Psycho*;
- Supposedly incestuous mother relationship;
- Matricide for morbid jealousy;
- Marion's homicide motive: morbid jealousy of Norman's split personality corresponding to his mother;
- Mummification of the mother body;
- Substantially unaltered Bloch's novel historical figure model: Ed Gein; he killed his domineering mother, sealed off a room in their home as a shrine to her, and dressed in women's clothes;
- Split and alternative personality;
- Technique to emphasize the contrast with normal reality: monochrome.

The title *Psycho* indicates someone who has serious mental problems and who may act violently without feeling sorry for what they have done. Some clinical elements of psychopathy pointed out by Cleckley are common traits of serial killers such as lack of remorse or shame, inadequately motivated antisocial behavior, pathologic egocentricity, and incapacity for love or general poverty in major affective reactions (Cleckley and Cleckley 1988, p. 338-339). Hare revised the seminal work of Cleckley and elaborated the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R), which is a tool currently used to rate a person's psychopathic tendencies, a clinical rating scale that provides researchers and clinicians with reliable and valid assessments of psychopathy (Hart, Hare, Harpur 1992). The main core constellation of affective, interpersonal, and behavioral descriptive characteristics remained egocentricity, impulsivity, irresponsibility, shallow emotions, lack of empathy, guilt or remorse, pathological lying, manipulativeness, repeated violations of social norms and expectations, disregard for the law (Hare 1996). When properly administered by a qualified professional, the PCL-R provides a total score from 0 to 40 that reflects the degree to which the individual matches the prototypical psychopath suggested by a score of 30 or above. Each of the twenty items organized into four dimensions (interpersonal, affective, lifestyle, and antisocial) is given a score of 0, 1, or 2 according to the extent to which it applies to a given individual (Hare and Neumann 2008, p. 219). Cleckley (1988, p. 317) interestingly analyzed what he called "fictional characters of psychiatric interest" because he alleged that the poet, the novelist and the dramatist, "who spend their lives in serious effort to put down in various forms a reflection of their human experience must sometimes encounter the psychopath or at least fragments of such behavior, hints of such an attitude" and so through their inexplicable insight and by their special talent, have had conveyed what they had accurately sensed in the life about the psychopath. He mentioned a lot of fictional characters revealing psychopath clinical traits starting from Heathcliffe as presented in *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, going through the character Rags in *The Story of Mrs. Murphy* by Natalie Anderson Scott, who he defined a faithful portrayal of the psychopath and ending with Charlie Carewe in *The Incredible Charlie Carewe* by Mary Astor (Cleckley and Cleckley 1988, pp. 317-326). The main difference with Norman Bates is that the character was born as an explicit portrait of a criminal psychopath even in the title. The dehumanization of the character derives from the fact that psychopathy as a personality disorder does not affect self-consciousness nor other mental functions like memory, but Norman acted in the movie unconsciously as he were his mother due to split personality and he could not recollect the event. This fits the modern Western culture trend to accentuate the hidden danger of the psychopath "with its more clear-cut images of the dangerous individual, as the most popular genre of film related to the body and to representations of bodily violence in our culture" (Federman, Holmes and Jacob 2009 p. 36). Moreover, the term psycho instead of psychopath has an offensive dimension and clearly

referred to the protagonist has the effect to dehumanize him objectivating his identity in the worse pathological aspect of his mental illness.

The same supposedly incestuous mother relationship is a cultural enhancement of dehumanization. According to anthropological and sociological studies, incest has been highly stigmatized, and it constitutes a social taboo in quite all human civilization history and geographical areas whatever its explanation. It is interesting to notice that there were types of incestual union considered *normal* and so formally accepted, just as happened in the Graeco-Roman Egypt society. Thanks to the analysis of the historical and social features of those cultures, it is possible to support the hypothesis that almost all modern societies have maturated moralistic perspective, unlike just some past cultures. It seems that those cultures have experienced specific circumstances that allowed them to override our moral-based judgment on incest, to the point of perceiving close-kin sexual relationship and marriage as something usual and normally accepted. This element results in the recognition of the human behavior not as part of an immutable *natural law*, but instead "in all its various degrees and varieties of manifestation, whether of indulgence or avoidance, it is still a part of human culture, and deserves, quite simply, to be explained" (Shaw 1992, p. 293). Some reasons have been proposed to explain the evolution of incest from a socially accepted practice to the immoral conception of the construct. Seligman has identified the incest taboo as a social regulation (1935). Her theorization starts from a confrontation with Westermarck (1922), about the lack of research progress on pair incest-exogamy. Seligman has proposed to search a correlation between the construct and certain influential conditions, rather than trying to explain or trace the etiology of every kind of human custom, focusing on examination of the family structure, typified by the incest prohibition. She goes on considering which of his attribute has been particularly influential on the quite universally wide-spreading symbolic evolution of the taboo (Seligman 1935). Moreover, Westermarck (1922) assumes that it is possible to consider the practice of incest as declining, due to natural selection. However, he adds that his theory of exogamy, characterized by the elimination of destructive tendencies and the preservation of useful behavioral variation as a mold for a good oriented sexual instinct of the species, cannot interact with the biological explanation (Seligman 1935). This perspective has been morbidly questioned by Bixler (1982), who asserts that analysts of the incest taboo were too tied to the idea that cultural determinants alone were a sufficiently good explanation of incest avoidance, based on evidence given by the royal family's examples in Egypt, Hawaii, and Peru. Bixler (1982) states that those supports are not enough to justify the rejection of the interactionist thesis, which expands the research of causes towards numerous fields of study.

To sum up, it is difficult to untie the controversy knot (Leavitt 2013): Tylor's sociocultural roots (1889) relying on the *rules of exogamy* (persons having relationships outside their consanguineal community), tied different kinship groups and communities together in mutual aid for survival; Westermarck's Darwinian (1922) natural selection of universal aversion to sex among persons raised in intimate proximity premising that inbreeding had a deleterious effect on the offspring of closely related mating pairs. No fully sociological theory of incest as social regulation cannot be proved or disproved (Seligman 1935). Incest taboos prohibition and regulations are amongst the most fundamental generative elements in systems of social relationships (Shaw 1992). Apart from Ptolemaic Egypt, it is so rare that that can be assimilated to *universal* deviance in time and space socially construed as conflicting against same humanity features.

Thirdly, multiple personalities or dissociative identity disorder is a quite modern symbolic icon of psychopathology, a crisp pictorial monsterification. On the contrary, it has not been commonly diagnosed (Kluft 1991) and best conceptualized as both a complex, chronic dissociative disorder, a post-traumatic condition initiating from abuse, or traumatic childhood experiences whose main features are a disturbance of identity and memory (McDavid 1994, p.

29). It is still so highly controverted to be defined as "difficult to understand, difficult to diagnose, difficult to treat, difficult to discuss objectively" (Kluft 1999, p. 3) or even a fad, not a disease, because "hard empirical data that check the construct in a multidimensional way are absolutely in short supply and are based in part on instruments that hardly allow a meaningful separation between normal and pathological dissociation" (Freyberger, Spitzer, Gast, Rodewald, Wilhelm-Gößling, Emrich 2007, p. 267). Art and science, facts and fiction about the splitting personality disorder are strictly intertwined since the book *Three Faces of Eve* (1957), purported to tell the story of Thigpen and Cleckley's patient, Chris Costner Sizemore, diagnosed with the disease. It inspired the even more famous American mystery drama film with the same title whose screenplay was written having the two psychiatrists as consultants. It gave attention to the disorder, and it could have boosted the diagnoses increasing number of clinicians began to report cases with increasing frequency due to a link to the treating clinician expectations and interests. The phenomenon of many personalities per patient evolved from the case of *The Three Faces of Eve* when Thigpen and Cleckley (1957) described three personalities in a single patient up to more than 20 two decades later (Piper and Merskey 2004, p. 597). This boosted the 1990's highly polarized debate about its possible iatrogenic etiology (Weissberg 1993), at the end even recognized by Kluft (1989), instigated and sustained by clinicians' interest to diagnose it. Fiction creating social reality facts.

The main features are present in the final scene that goes down in the police station, where a prison psychiatrist explains that Norman had killed his mother out of jealousy of her new boyfriend.

> Dr. Richmond: I got the whole story, but not from Norman. I got it from his "mother". Norman Bates no longer exists. He only half-existed to begin with. And now, the other half has taken over, probably for all time... Now to understand it the way I understood it, hearing it from the mother... that is, from the "mother half" of Norman's mind... you have to go back ten years, to the time when Norman murdered his mother and her lover. Now he was already dangerously disturbed, had been ever since his father died. His mother was a clinging, demanding woman, and for years the two of them lived as if there was no one else in the world. Then she met a man... and it seemed to Norman that she threw him over for this man. Now that pushed him over the line, and he killed them both. Matricide is probably the most unbearable crime of all... most unbearable to the son who commits it. So, he had to erase the crime, at least in his own mind. He stole her corpse. A weighted coffin was buried. He hid the body in the fruit cellar. Even treated it to keep it as well as it would keep. And that still wasn't enough. She was there, but she was a corpse. So, he began to think and speak for her, give her half his life, so to speak. At times, he could be both personalities, carry on conversations. At other times, the mother half took over completely. Now he was never all Norman, but he was often only mother. And because he was so pathologically jealous of her, he assumed that she was as jealous of him. Therefore, if he felt a strong attraction to any other woman, the mother side of him would go wild. [to Lila] When he met your sister, he was touched by her, aroused by her... he wanted her. That set off the "jealous mother" and "mother" killed the girl. Now after the murder, Norman returned as if from a deep sleep, and like a dutiful son, covered up all traces of the crime he was convinced his mother had committed! Sam: Why was he... dressed like that? District Attorney: He's a transvestite! Dr. Richmond: Ah, not exactly. A man who dresses in women's clothing in order to achieve a sexual change or satisfaction is a transvestite. But in Norman's case, he was simply doing everything possible to keep alive the illusion of his mother being alive. And when reality came too close, when danger or desire threatened that illusion... he dressed up, even to a cheap wig he bought. He'd walk about the house, sit in her chair, speak in her voice. He tried to be his mother. And, uh, now he is. Now that's what I meant when I said I got the story from the mother. You see, when the mind houses two personalities, there's always a conflict, a battle. In Norman's case, the battle is over; and the dominant personality has won. (*Psycho* 1960)

The mummification of the mother body substantially recalls Robert Bloch's *Psycho* 1959 horror novel. The Hitchcock's film is an adaptation of the novel and its historical figure model: Ed Gein.

2.2. Ed Gein and his Psycho movie Doppelgänger

Ed Gein is remembered as one of the most impactful American criminal figures, also known as the Plainfield Ghoul or the Butcher of Plainfield, for killing, body snatching, manufacture of furniture and clothing in human skin. He has been represented through newspapers and via cinema as a *sick individual*, carrying his name to the later generation, up till now. That is the case with lots of notorious films, such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974), Deranged (1974), The Silence of the Lambs (1991),* and *Psycho.*

The focus refers to the peculiar themes linked to Gein and the reflection of his tendencies marked and enlightened by the fictional character of Norman Bates.

Gein killed his domineering mothers, sealed off a room in their home as a shrine to her, and dressed in women's clothes. Even if Ed Gein was not even strictly speaking a serial killer because the number of victims and the cooling-off period does not fit the definition later proposed, he can be considered the most horrific killer till nowadays due to his mummifying and tanning human skin.

Figure 2
On the left: Norma Bates in Psycho (1960) https://psycho.fandom.com/wiki /Psycho (1960)?file=Psycho_15.jpg, retrieved on 10/06/2021; On the right: Gein's ghastly objects included human face masks and cutlery made from arm bones Photo / News Corp Australia. https://www.nzherald. co.nz/world/who-was-the-mother-of-the-most-depraved-serial-killer-of-all-time/T75XZ2O7K7AGAP5LBGP KDKHVV4/, retrieved on 10/06/2021.

His childhood was troubled because of an abusive father and a strict fanatical mother. She was a very influential figure in Gein psychology. She kept her children, Gein, and his older brother, in a state of almost total isolation: their life was reduced only to the scholastic and farm environment. It has been supposed that, due to her religious fanatism, she had passed the concept of the world's innate immorality, the abhorrence of alcoholism to her children. Her conception of women's nature was problematic, namely, all were prostitutes except for her. Sex was acceptable only for procreation. According to some posterior reconstructions, she used to read the Bible to her children, focusing on the passages of the Old Testament, that were full of death, murder, and divine punishment descriptions (Head and Williams 2007).

The story tells that at the age of ten, the sight of his parents slaughtering a pig triggered Gein an orgasm (Sutton 2020). This experience can be potentially seen as an element fitting

even with the controversial Macdonald triad theory[1], in particular with the section regarding animal cruelty, although the action was not directly committed by him. At the age of twenty-one, she made both her sons promise to practice sexual abstinence and never to get married. Promise allegedly broken by Gein's old brother, whose mysterious death has been related to this episode (Sutton 2020). This Gein's mother's morbid possessiveness and jealousy have been evidently transposed in the movie and it is a pillar of the narrative framework concerning Norman's motivation to kill.

After his mother's death, in 1945, Gein seemed to lose "the only wire that still preserved its mental Health", according to psychologists and that was likely the trigger of his murderous exploit that make him famous (*Ivi*). The discovery of the first found victim in Gein's hut, allowed the police to investigate his house, now remembered as the *House of horrors*. It was found a wide range of memorabilia, made of skin and different parts of human bodies arranged in a disorderly manner, except for his mother's room. That one was very clean and kept as a shrine in memory of her (Jenkins 2006). During the interrogation, he admitted he started reading on Nazism, on torture and embalming, right after his mother's death, to try to resurrect her. He also had made a habit of reading the obituaries of the local newspaper, to organize his schedule for body snatching and mutilation and drying of those corpses. He also admitted that he wanted to exhume the body of the same mother but failed because of the inaccessibility of her corpse (Sutton 2020). Again, both these elements, serial homicide set off and the preserved memory of the mother, are present in the *Psycho* original movie. Norman explicitly started to kill after his mother's death, and he even mummified her body on the famous rocking chair.

After his arrest, Gein was diagnosed with late-onset sub-psychotic schizophrenia as sexual psychopathy, and his love-hate relationship with the mother was acknowledged as the main cause of his later evolvement into a psychotic mental state. After the woman's death, Gein felt the urge to become a woman. Indeed, the bodies he collected were intended to be used as components for a "woman's dress"(*Ivi*). This practice has made him known as a *monster* who used woman's skin as a transvestitism ritual. All these aspects of Gein's personality were precisely transferred to the main features of Hitchcock's Psycho movie Norman Bates character. As previously noted, they are depicted in the police station final scene when Dr. Richmond and the District Attorney respectively, said that he was so pathologically jealous of her, and he assumed that she was as jealous of him and that he was a transvestite, even if to keep alive the illusion of his mother being alive.

It is difficult to discern real fact from Block's fictional novel and Hitchcock's movie, despite some artistic liberties and inaccuracies. It seems very clear that both the media representation of Gein and the character of Norman Bates are large cultural symbols that reflect contemporary issues about motherhood, sexual deviance, and masculinity (Sullivan 2000).

3. Humanization of Inhumanity: 2006-2013 American television drama *Dexter*

Dexter is an American television drama that was broadcast on the cable channel Showtime from October 1, 2006, to September 22, 2013. When Dexter was a baby, he had his mother killed in front of him. Her corpse was dismembered, and he was left completely immerse in her blood in a container. He has been adopted by a policeman Harry. Foreseeing his future behavior when

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[1] The term MacDonald triad, or Homicidal triad, was first coined by John MacDonald in his article entitled "The Threat to Kill" (1963). MacDonald observed three coincidental behaviors as warning signs for later aggression which were unique to his patients who had reportedly tried to kill someone: (1) bed wetting past the age of 5, (2) animal cruelty, and (3) fire setting in childhood. Nowadays the theory is controversial because the empirical research especially focusing on enuresis has doubted that it could be a valid predictor (Parfitt and Alleyne 2020, p. 300).

he started experimenting to kill and dissectionate animals[2], Harry has trained him to mimic social human behaviors despite his lack of emotions and empathy and to channel his impulses according to a *Code*, to kill only proven killers eventually escaped to justice. He has become a police crime scene bloody stains expert. He has a brother who became a serial killer as well but without his humanity elements and a stepsister Debra, a member of same police department.

3.1. Media deconstruction of a monster

Dexter is an apparent paradox depicted employing a truly effective fictional device: Dexter's introspective voice-over. On the one hand, Dexter is the criminology handbook prototype of a serial killer, a plastic and iconic representation of their debated psychopathy personality disorder features, lack of empathy and remorse, indifference to social relations, and inability to feel emotions deeply. On the other hand, he can internally discuss his *disturb* and mimically transcend it. He got to have even a family developing caring attitudes towards his wife and son. Many times, his internal dialogue reflects doubts, desires to make them happy, and approaches to daily life problems any partner and father would have. Humanization fictional features in the tv show:

- The same title Dexter;
- No incestuous relationship with the mother;
- Rejection of quasi-incestuous relationship with his adoptive sister Debra loving him;
- Drug addicted vulnerable not domineering mother murdered by others (her pushers because she was an informant);
- Social parenting vs. biological parents;
- *Dark Passenger* is not a split and alternative personality but an obscure alter-ego.
- *The Code*: a moral set of rules;
- Having a normal family: a wife and a son – emotions;
- Technique: voice-over.

The title is a proper noun denoting a specific person and symbolically a human identity. If one imagines *Psyco* movie called *Norman*, all the monstrification effect would vanish. Effectively if one does not know *Dexter* script or see at least a part of one episode of the tv series or the pilot it very hard to infer the character is a serial killer or a criminal.

Then it is possible to outline the humanization of psychopathy passing from Norman's absolute lack of empathy at least to Dexter's cognitive empathy (mentalization) and at the end a sort of emotions on their own. He begins to understand human emotions, and inside his inner dialectic arrives to explicitly deny being a *monster* but *something* in the middle between the *man* and the *beast*. This outlines a morally complex character that facilitates audience identification because he is more realistic and relatable to the viewers as compared to the idealistic superheroes of the past (Granelli and Zenor 2016, p. 5060). The technique of voice implements a double narrative register: what is happening and the Dexter's inner experiencing world. It strengthens this moral ambiguity link between the spectators and the character, explaining audience sympathy, because it conveys Dexter's thoughts and emotions enabling "[…] to understand what he is thinking about, as it presents an insight into his mind" (Bond 2010). Look at these paradigmatic examples from the script.

> Dexter: …See, I can't help myself either. But children? I could never do that.
> Not like you. Never... ever... kids.
> Mike Donovan: Why?

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[2] A clear recall of MacDonald triad. See note no.1.

> Dexter: I have standards.
> Dexter: [voiceover] Harry was a great cop here in Miami. He taught me how to think like one; taught me how to cover my tracks. I'm a very neat monster. ("Dexter", Season 1, Episode 01)
>
> Dexter: [voiceover] Harry taught me that death isn't the end. It's the beginning of a chain reaction that will catch you if you're not careful. He taught me that none of us are who we appear to be on the outside. But we must maintain appearances to survive. But there was something Harry didn't teach me... The willful taking of life represents the ultimate disconnect from humanity. It leaves you an outsider, forever looking in, searching for company[…]. ("Popping Cherry", Season 1, Episode 03)
>
> Dexter: [voiceover] I love Halloween. The one time of year when everyone wears a mask … not just me. People think it's fun to pretend you're a monster. Me, I spend my life pretending I'm not. Brother, friend, boyfriend – all part of my costume collection. Some people might call me a fraud. [...] I prefer to think of myself as a master of disguise. ("Let's Give the Boy a Hand", Season 1, Episode 04)

The famous code, killing only verified killers missed by the criminal justice system, is a narrative expedient different from a *normalization* of deviance because Dexter shows a clear awareness of good and evil distinctions. His moral code, killing only proven killers, does not shake the rule against homicide, but only serves to channel his impulses in a more personally and socially acceptable way.

> Dexter: [voiceover] ...And what about me? Maybe I'll never be the human Harry wanted me to be. But I couldn't kill Tony Tucci, that's not me either. My new friend thought I wouldn't be able to resist the kill he left for me. But I did. I'm not the monster he wants me to be. So, I'm neither man nor beast. I'm something new entirely – my own set of rules. I'm Dexter. Boo. ("Let's Give the Boy a Hand", Season 1, Episode 04)
>
> Dexter: [voiceover] Rita will be devastated if I'm arrested. Her husband was a crackhead and her boyfriend's a serial killer. It's kind a hard not to take that personally. ("Return to Sender", Season 1, Episode 06)
>
> Dexter: I have a dark side, too. [Rita laughs] What? I do.
> Rita: Somehow, I doubt that. You have a good heart, Dexter. You're not like Paul; you don't hurt people.
> Dexter: [another pause] Innocent people. [pause] I don't hurt innocent people. ("Circle of Friends", Season 1, Episode 07)
>
> Rudy/Brian: Tell me something: your victims. Are they all killers? Dexter: Yes.
> Rudy/Brian: Harry teach you that? Dexter: He taught me a code. To survive.
> Rudy/Brian: Like an... absurd avenger? Dexter: That's not why I kill.
> Rudy/Brian: You can be yourself around me. Who. Am I? Dexter: A killer. Without reason or regret. You're free. Rudy/Brian: You can be that way too.
> Dexter: But the code...
> Rudy/Brian: [laughs] Dex! You don't have a code. Harry did. And he's been dead ten years. You can't keep – keep him sitting on your shoulder like Jiminy fucking Cricket! You need to embrace who you are now.
> Dexter: I don't know who I am. ("Born Free", Season 1, Episode 12)

Moreover, his humanization passes through his role of caring and loving father, finally denying even by facts his psychopathy. Look at the following paradigmatic examples in Episode 1 of Season 6, "Those Kinds of Things". Little Harrison is growing up, and Dexter is forced to start looking for a good preschool for his son. Angel suggests this one, a Catholic preschool (and a

fast track to better schools). Dexter and Debra bring Harrison there, but when the nun asks Dexter about his religious beliefs, he tells her he doesn't believe in anything. That doesn't make a good impression on the nun, and Dexter seems put off by the religious symbols at the school. Back at his car, he modifies that and tells Debra that he believes in a set of rules so that he doesn't get in trouble. She tells him that sounds like something for a puppy and that it sounds cold and empty. Later, he realizes that even though he doesn't need any religious beliefs, his son *might* (especially since Dexter doesn't want him to grow up like his father - and his Dark Passenger).

Therefore, in a later scene, Dexter returns to the preschool and apologizes to the nun, telling her that he is ignorant about religion, but wants the best for his son. She seems impressed that he made the effort and says she will try to get him into the school. Harrison the son of Dexter has the occasion to attend a Catholic pre-school.

Figure 3
Our Lady of the Gulf Preschool, https://dexter.fandom.com/wiki/Our_Lady_ of_the_Gulf_Preschool

> Dexter: [Voiceover: I guess it's fitting that I end up where I've left so many others. I only wonder if the world is going to be a better place without me. It's wrong what people say about dying. I'm not flashing back over my life, over the lives I've taken. I'm thinking about the life I'll miss. Harrison. I'll miss watching my son grow up.]
> Woman: [To Dexter] Are you OK? You are very lucky. God is looking out for you. ("This is the Way the World Ends", Season 6, Episode 12)
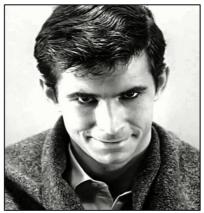
Figure 3
On the left Dexter and his son, http://www.dexterdaily.com/2010/12/dexter-best-quotes-of-season-5.html; On the right Norman Bates, https://lamenteemeravigliosa.it/alla-scoperta-di-norman-bates/

3.2. The incest: the moral detachment of Dexter from a social taboo

It has been stressed that Hitchcock's *Psycho* suggested Norman Bates incestuous mother relationship as a cultural enhancement of dehumanization. The main trait of Dexter character has been presented since the beginning a strong moral ambiguity. His behavior is suspended between Dexter's Dark Passenger, which is the inside mastermind of his homicidal aptitude, and the Dark Avenger, the role he plays, killing the killers, well perceived by the audience. The narrative theme of fraternal incest, even if they are non-biological siblings, explicated by the strong love of Dexter's stepsister, Debra, for him and her choice to protect him from the police, was undertrack since the beginning and is fully realized by her only in the season six finale. The sharp difference with *Psycho* is that Dexter shows a marked moral detachment, refusing to come into the incestuous relationship. It is a deliberately monster deconstruction by the showrunners to maintain audience empathy with the character as expressed by Scott Buck: "It's funny to me that people could happily accept Dexter as a serial killer, but once Deborah has a love for her brother, that that's where the 'ick' factor for them comes in" (Molloy 2011).

No doubt, as observed *infra*, it is, anthropologically and sociologically an actual 'ick factor'. The showrunners have applied a sophisticated communication technique dealing with moral ambiguity, distancing Dexter not only from a hypothetical *normal* behavior of a psychopath, but also from incest. Bandura highlighted the tendency the audience can manifest to relate to morally ambiguous characters in his theory of moral disengagement (1999), according to which the viewers use rationality to justify or redefine as moral an immoral behavior. In contrast with this view, Haidt (2001) developed the social intuitionist model, proposing that judgments on morality are based on emotions felt in response to *moral violations*, a matter of emotion and affective intuition than deliberate reasoning, usually a post-hoc construction, generated after a judgment has been reached (Greene and Haidt 2002). When it comes to consensual incest, it is common knowledge to consider it universally condemned, even in the absence of effective damage or victims, however, the consensual nature of the practice delays the viewer's negative moral judgement. The model of social intuition provides a double process of morality based on moral intuition (emotion) and moral cognition (reasoning). In Greene and Haidt opinion, this is important in understanding how people make judgments that do not follow to a logical process with rational answers (2002). Zillmann with the theory of affective disposition for all entertainment experiences states that viewers identify only with those characters who act in accordance with their own moral code (Zillmann 2000). Yet Dexter is clearly characterized by strong moral ambiguity (Lane 2001; van Ommen,

Daalmans, Weijers, Eden, de Leeuw, Buijzen 2017). *The Code* founds Dexter's murdering motivation and it is "his own reason-based ethics and strictly imposed moral rules by only killing the immoral" (van Ommen, Daalmans, Weijers, Eden, de Leeuw, Buijzen 2017, p. 379; Gregoriou 2012). On the one hand, the narrative offers the audience childhood trauma as a psychological base for Dexter's serial killing urge stimulating an emotional positive moral judgement and so empathy, and a morally 'right' reason for Dexter's unlawful behavior, from a cognitive perspective and rational reasoning. On the other hand, the series displays Dexter sometimes executing innocent people and thus rationally problematizing the justness of his actions because self-interest rather than merely the need for justice can push the murders (van Ommen, Daalmans, Weijers, Eden, de Leeuw, Buijzen 2017, p. 379; Gregoriou 2012). The moral ambiguity is the key to the humanization of the character.

The circle is close by the theme of fraternal incest introduced in the series by the evolution of Debra, who becomes a woman aware and scared of her feelings towards her not biological brother. Dexter refused the possible incest with his sister, as a socially defined normal behaviour, in opposition to Debra's. Even if she is a police lieutenant, she decides to protect her brother till the point of reversing the dynamics featuring the figure of Dexter as the immoral figure, despite well-being perceived as a *dark avenger*, and the figure of Debra as the moral one, according to the normalized vision of society.

4. Conclusions

Since the Seventies, the sociology of deviance has outlined a process of moral differentiation and a progressive fragmentation of social moral order. Sumner (1994) even claimed the *death* of the concept of deviance which would lack contemporary heuristic value due to the dissolution of its distinctive feature: negative social reaction of the majority towards disproved behaviors (Saponaro 2018). The paper assumes that social reality can be mirrored in media products as well because consume practices bidirectionally mold and shape television and cinema media content and products. In the consumer society, the product should maintain appeal to the public.

The analysis shows a clear historical transformation through a comparison of serial killer media representation: on one side, the character of Norman Bates in Hitchcock's 1963 *Psycho* movie and on the other side, fifty years later, Dexter, a contemporary protagonist of an American television crime drama mystery series started in 2006. It is outlined a clear-cut passage from Black and White social moral order symbolically embodied in the *monsterification* of the former psychopathy to the ambiguous moral grey derived by the humanization of Dexter's homicidal inhumanity.

As the authors noted *infra*, modern society during the post-second World War period produced a strong reinforcement of moral cohesion, a burst of disapproval against violent crime and especially social in-group lethal violence like homicide. Particularly cruel or dangerous criminals were socially construed as a monster and at the top of the ladder serial killers became a media symbolic icon of inhumanity. It has been stressed that Norman Bates is the fictional doppelgänger of a real psychopathic serial killer, Ed Gein. Some of his supposed behaviors, most culturally and symbolically *detaching* him from humanity, markedly incestuous mother relationship, mummification of human bodies, and cross-dressing, have been transferred and possibly emphasized in Norman, and adding a kind of splitting personality disturb, just to be sure of his de-humanization.

Fifty years later, the actual moral ambiguity of social order, a fading grey covering borders between deviance and conformity due to moral pluralism has filtered in crime fiction and criminals are not perceived as sharply differing from law-abiding people and they are not

outside *humanity* anymore. Media representation of inhuman serial killers has changed, and we have *Dexter* show in 2006. Even if the complexity of the character goes beyond the limits of the present paper his humanization is openly reflected in the *Code*, a moral rationalization and canalization of his homicidal urge, the narrative moral kaleidoscope effect between the Dark passenger and the Dark Avenger, the rejection of a quasi-incestuous relationship with his adoptive sister Debra loving him, having a normal family, a wife and a son, with apparent paternal caring attitudes. All these elements are then explicitly adopted by showrunners to maintain the appeal of the character and the empathy of the public.

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