EXPLORING MENTAL DISORDERS IN THE SERIAL DYNAMICS OF SLASHER SERIES ON CABLE TV

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the industrial conditions that inform contemporary representations of mental disorders in cable slasher television series. Drawing upon interviews from third-party sources with network showrunners and executives, the paper illustrates the role of serialization in shaping mentally ill characters and the ways in which certain narrative strategies, particularly pertaining to character development, are employed to explore their perceptions and rationalize their behaviors. With a focus on two case studies, A&E's *Bates Motel* (2013–2017) and MTV's *Scream: The TV Series* (2015–2016), the inspection suggests that the shows provide depictions to address their producing institutions' audience-targeting objectives and therefore propose the significance of seeking mental care for such conditions.

1. **INTRODUCTION**

Slasher television series, a mainstay on contemporary American cable television, is exploiting certain mental disorders to support the complex development of the main characters. These narrative approaches function to distinguish programming schedules by utilizing such conditions for the audience-targeting purposes and institutional priorities of some cable networks. Such storytelling practices also reinforce serialization as a core constituent of many primetime series programs to potentially keep audiences invested for multiple seasons. In the process, they explore what the characters experience, highlight their symptoms, and link their perceptions to specific narrative events to justify their behaviors and evolution throughout the narrative. These storytelling procedures contribute to the construction of dynamic mentally ill characters.

Slasher horror dramas are produced by an expansive number of cable networks, positioning them as indispensable cultural products to the competitive television landscape. Examples include FX's *American Horror Story* (2011–), A&E's *Bates Motel* (2013–2017), MTV's *Scream: The TV Series* (2015–2016) and *Scream: Resurrection* (2019), USA's *The Purge* (2018–2019), and NBC's *Chucky* (2021–). Within this diverse set of programs, there are shows that manipulate the representation of mental disorders to lure specific audience segments that are deemed lucrative for their institutional objectives. These networks make assumptions about their viewers, and as a result, manipulate certain narrative features and employ characters in a way that could address these socially relevant issues.

Research concerned with television depictions of mental illness showcase that portrayals have historically stereotyped the condition with characters mostly restricted to lower socioeconomic groups and formed as victims of abuse (Elliot and Byrd 1982). These characters are typically depicted as violent, and this stereotyped construction lingered as a norm on television. Donald L. Diefenbach's (1997) content analysis of American television displays that characters with a mental illness were ten times more violent than other characters on television. More recently, a study conducted by Scott Parrott and Caroline T. Parrott (2015) highlights that representations in contemporary American crime dramas have limitedly progressed. The physical appearances of characters with mental illness have evolved but their behaviors remain violent with one in two mentally ill characters acting violently. These inquiries pay close attention to the development of specific

depictions without offering a thorough interpretation of the industrial context that enables these evolving portrayals. Contemporary narrative design conditions are influencing character representations on television and although violence remains to be associated with depictions of mental illness, depending on the focus of the narrative, there are nuances to their portrayals and the narratives investigate the various facets of a character's personality to justify these violent acts. These complex character formulations are facilitated by a competitive television landscape that supports the commissioning of programs that provide portrayals that can be deemed original and distinguishable from the clutter of available programs.

Scholars investigating series commissioning on cable television argue that contemporary shows focus on offering complex characters that are morally ambiguous and manifest dubious characteristics (Mittell 2015, Smith 2019b). Their studies focus on the protagonists of these shows without offering a thorough interpretation of the ways in which the narrative canvas of contemporary complex series provides opportunities for the creation of complex antagonists, especially killer characters in horror dramas. Trisha Dunleavy asserts that,

> It is in the context of this enlarged canvas that some specific elements of complexity come to the fore as ways to stimulate and sustain the kind of intense audience engagement that non-broadcast networks are seeking through the offer of this drama. (2017: 105).

This expanded narrative canvas, afforded by an emphasis on serialization with an aim for series longevity, introduces possibilities for devising a variety of characters. Although Ahmad Hayat (2022) investigates the complex features of the killers in contemporary slasher series programs, the interpretation focuses on the thematic meanings that the shows propose and the extent to which the developments promote viewpoints about social issues such as teenage accountability and incest. Despite the study's mention of dissociative identity disorder (DID) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that the characters experience, they are understated because the examination is concerned with illustrating how the dynamic construction of the killer characters function to support the networks' brand identities. This article builds on this interpretation by focusing on how these mental conditions are explored and utilized to complement the designs of contemporary slasher series on cable television. The explora-

tion demonstrates that slasher series on cable television has the capacity to represent mental states in ways that could magnify the significance of these conditions to the sensitive millennial audience that networks seek to address, pinpointing the audience-specificity that Anthony N. Smith (2019b) upholds as fundamental to the narrative design conditions of production institutions. Smith explains that,

> Due to increased processes of audience segmentation within media cultures in the late twentieth century, which broader patterns of societal fragmentation partly drove, it is especially important to account for the specificities of intended audiences when mapping narrative design conditions over recent decades" (2019b: 38).

These conditions, as will be discussed later in the article, motivated television networks to target niche audience groups instead of aiming for heterogeneous viewers. This examination exhibits how these niche targeting objectives inform the creation of shows that provide in-depth explorations to construct rationalized depictions that depart from the conventional stigmatized portrayals of characters with mental disorders, which have historically typified horror representations, and illustrates how the emphasis on serialized storylines pave the way for the implementation of scenes that convey their feelings and perceptions and contribute to their complex formation.

A&E's *Bates Motel* and MTV's *Scream: The TV Series* are the focus of this essay's assessments. Both shows are notable exemplars of slasher series commissioned for the basic cable sector and represent the audience targeting practices of their producing institutions. The premiere of *Scream: The TV Series* in 2015 marked the show as the most watched on MTV and functioned to lure the network's 12–34 preferred demographic (Maglio 2015). *Bates Motel,* however, set a premiere record for A&E and was able to attract the network's coveted 18–49 and 25–54 audience groups (Brown 2013). To illustrate how the shows explore mental conditions, the analyses focus on the narrative strategies that are manipulated to rationalize and develop character behavior. Specifically, I examine the arcs of the characters to identify the scenes that contribute to the exploration of their mental states. Additionally, I integrate interviews from third-party sources with show creators and executives to highlight the link between the narrative choices and the objectives of the producing institutions and illuminate how the niche audience-targeting strategies in-

form the characteristics and development of characters with mental disorders.

These representations are made possible by the industrial changes that have materialized in the television landscape. Certain technological advancements have contributed to contemporary innovations in storytelling practices. The next section details these developments and their role in the facilitation of serialization as a narrative occupant increasingly formulated in contemporary scripted programming. It also foregrounds how these industrial modifications pave the way for network brand distinction and audience niche-targeting, informing the narrative features and mental disorder exploration.

2. CONTEMPORARY SERIALIZATION & NICHE PRIORITIZATION

Amanda D. Lotz argues that, "Television as we know it —understood as a mass medium capable of reaching a broad, heterogenous audience and speaking to a culture as a whole— is no longer the norm in the United States" (2014: 2). Changes to the medium resulted from specific technological alterations that fragmented the heterogenous audience that networks and advertisers were comfortable reaching. These developments facilitated the modification of programming formats as networks began to focus on building niche audience groups and adapting to the competitive environment.

Until the mid-1980s, television was characterized by certain norms that dictated programming practices (Lotz 2014). Viewers had a narrow choice of program options and the dominant big three networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC pursued the widest possible audience. Such conditions informed the production of a narrational mode that emphasized the episodic over the serialized. These shows offered episode-specific dilemmas that are resolved by the end of the episode with characters returning the following week without any recollection of past events. The economic allure of syndication motivated this static form of characterization, facilitating the out of order airing of episodes on affiliates and other networks.

However, the introduction of linear and nonlinear cable networks restructured the television landscape, forming what Lotz (2014) labels the multi-channel transition era. During this period, which lasted until the early 2000s, the emergence of new broadcast and cable channels expanded audience choice and control over what to watch. Viewers were no longer relying on the big three networks to access content.

Instead, they were inclined to choose from a variety of networks.. These industrial modifications further fragmented audiences, prompting narrative designers to gradually incorporate serialized elements into their series designs to keep audiences invested in their shows. Jason Mittell clarifies,

> As the number of channels has grown and the size of the audience for any single program has shrunk, networks and channels have grown to recognize that a consistent cult following of a small but dedicated audience can suffice to make a show economically viable (2006: 31).

At the center of these serialization attempts is the emphasis on character complexity, featuring as a staple of contemporary shows and functioning as a serviceable component for series longevity. With a focus on conflict continuation, character investment began to permeate series programming. Michael Z. Newman explains that this emphasis contributed to character development and asserts that, "Continuing stories make characters more likely to undergo significant life events and changes. In reaction to these changes in circumstances the characters themselves are more likely to change or at least grow" (2006: 23). This paper's examination showcases how character change and growth materialize, especially in the case of characters with mental disorders, to build dynamic mentally ill characters and serve the objectives of the producing institution and form a cohesive serialized narrative. To achieve this analytical objective, a thorough reading of the character arc is conducted for the extraction of instances that highlight their perceptions or contribute to the development of their mental states. As defined by Newman, "An arc is a character's journey from A through B, C, and D to E" and "Character arcs may stretch across many episodes, seasons, and the entirety of a series" (2006: 23). It is through these character arcs that viewers are invited to perceive the storyworld and comprehend the characters' decision-making process to justify their actions and behaviors.

Along with these serialization efforts, the fragmentation of viewers encouraged networks to define their brands and develop niche-targeting strategies. Networks began distinguishing themselves through their brand identities and developed shows that are specifically designed to address their niches. Rogers, Epstein, and Reeves define this as the era of TVIII and note that, "where TVI was the age of mass marketing, and TVII was the age of niche marketing, TVIII, at least at this juncture, must be considered the age of brand marketing" (2002: 48). Such branding initiatives motivated the introduction of niche-specific networks. For instance, cable networks like Lifetime and WE specifically pursue women as their main audience segment by developing programs that are female-centric. Others redefined their brands and programming schedules to lure certain generations, which is highlighted in MTV's attempts in targeting their teenage audience groups and USA's generational studies that focus on understanding millennials (Hayat 2022, Smith 2019a). These modifications are reflective of the institutional audience-specificity that Smith (2019b) describes as a building block for contemporary narrative design conditions. Institutions, Smith argues, could "intend a narrative text for, say, a specific class, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and/or age group within a given national market or across multiple nations" (Smith 2019b: 38). Such audience-specific considerations inform storytelling practices, character construction, and social issue explorations.

With network branding and audience-specificity being central to program conceptualization, networks are prompted to make assumptions about their niche audience groups as they formulate their productions. The millennial generation, which is at the forefront of many targeting strategies because of the group's spending power, is a prominent segment for the cable sector. Smith asserts that "Entertainment cable channels, because of the prevailing understanding of millennials as desiring content concerning social causes, are incentivized to brand themselves, not as enablers of escapism, but as providers of socially aware programming" (2019a: 455). This led some networks to conduct audience research to better understand the perceptions and preferences of their viewer segments and as Ahmad Hayat notes, "these studies are meant to help the network evaluate their content in light of the concerns of their target audience" (2022: 106). However, different networks, as the analysis will illustrate, because of their brand identities, overall programming strategies, and corporate positioning perceive their audiences distinctively and their characters are designed accordingly.

To interpret how the portrayal of mental disorders is linked to the producing institution's audience-targeting approach, this article inspects the arcs of the main characters and draws upon interviews with executives and showrunners to unravel the process of constructing complex mentally ill characters, detail how the emphasis on serialization facilitates these storytelling procedures, and demonstrate that certain niche-targeting strategies inform the character designs and conveyances of contemporary slasher series

programming. Dunleavy (2017) argues that the industrial restructures and the increase of complex storytelling strategies formed a model of complex seriality that entails characteristics that reflect the ambitions of cable networks by utilizing six narrative strategies that are intended to differentiate their portrayals from broadcast offerings. These are conceptual originality, series-like problematic, unusual integration between the dilemma of the central characters and the overarching story, the deployment of morally conflicted lead characters, the embedding of additional scenes, and the in-depth psychological investigation of lead characters (2017: 105). This article borrows the embedding of additional scenes and analyzes how it is manipulated to depict mental disorders and build characters in cable horror dramas. However, the examination provides a narrower approach to the strategy, reconceptualizing how it is employed in contemporary horror dramas. Even though the strategy is a constant feature of a form that Dunleavy defines as complex seriality, it is also utilized in horror dramas that fall under the category of complex series, a model that unlike Dunleavy's complex seriality shows, is geared towards featuring episodic and serialized elements for advertiser purposes and both casual and devoted audience commitments.

The adopted concept from Dunleavy's evaluation, embedding of additional scenes, serves to clarify character motivation. Dunleavy explains that, "As scenes that usually interrupt rather than progress the overarching story, they provide details that support the understanding and/or investigation of key characters" (2017: 113). In horror dramas, these scenes not only display character motivation, but also facilitate the revelation of narrative data that contributes to the discovery of character perspective and event ramification for comprehension purposes. In many instances, they operate as hallucinations, flashbacks, or dream sequences that highlight specific incidents or illuminate a character's mental state. While doing so, these scenes function to support the development of characters, provide explanations for certain behaviors, and justify actions.

3. COPING WITH PTSD ON MTV

Because MTV is a network that is devoted to offering programs that accommodate teenagers and young adults, they constantly reexamine their programming strategy to ensure that it is sufficient with storylines and issues that have the potential to attract the generation that the network seeks to appeal to at a certain point of time. As a result, the network conducts generational studies to understand its audience base and develop programs accordingly. This reinvention activity is a reoccurring procedure for MTV. According to the network's president Stephen K. Friedman, "Unlike other brands that get a lock on the audience and age with them, we have to shed our skin and reinvent ourselves" (Chozick 2021). When the network decided to address the millennial generation in 2008, they embarked on a research project to better understand the generation's personality. This research approach continued to inform their decision-making regarding original commissions, influencing the production of *Scream: The TV Series* in 2015.

Set in the small town of Lakewood, the show follows a group of high school teenagers and their troubled relationships. It specifically focuses on Emma Duval, the show's protagonist and survivor of the town's killing spree. Lakewood was agonized by a series of murders that were committed by a masked killer who targeted Emma and her friends and whose identity remained unknown until the season finale. After being exposed to multiple horrific murder scenes and experiencing the loss of loved ones, Emma's mental health gradually deteriorated. This was further emphasized in the first season's finale where she discovered that the killer was her own sister, Piper Shaw, and that her mother, Maggie, had abandoned Piper and kept it as a secret to protect Emma from knowing the family's disturbing past, which was a love story between Maggie and Piper's father, a disfigured serial killer who snapped after being constantly bullied by other schoolmates. Although the revelation shocked Emma, she had to protect herself and her mother from Piper's attack. Therefore, in self-defense, Emma killed Piper, but the incident impacted her mental health and caused her to take a three-month mental retreat away from Lakewood. Her stay at a mental ward was unexplored on-screen but the implication functions to rationalize the character's behavior in the second season.

Emma returned to Lakewood after a three-month hiatus and the second season follows her journey in trying to overcome these traumatic experiences and protect the rest of her friends by stopping a new killing spree that was being committed by another masked killer in Lakewood. By devoting the first season to exposing Emma to multiple crime scenes and the shocking revelation of the killer being her own sister, the show develops the character's experience and showcases the events that are informing her mental state in the second season. In this way, the narrative is manipulated to divide

the entire arc into two sets. The first season functions as a backstory to set up Emma's psychological conflict in the second season. Showcased through multiple scenes that are scattered across the season, the character experiences episodes of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This is normally conveyed through hallucinations and nightmare sequences about the killer and her childhood memories. For instance, a dream sequence in episode four showcases the masked killer attacking Emma. In the sequence, the killer removes the mask and to Emma's surprise, the killer is revealed to be Emma herself. Here the sequence functions to highlight Emma's self-condemnation. Because Piper Shaw killed Emma's friends to punish her, Emma feels guilty for her friends' deaths. Thus, the sequence does not progress the overarching story but details the character's emotional distress. Another nightmare sequence has Emma kissing her boyfriend, Kieran Wilcox, and the killer walks into the room and stabs him to death. The nightmare reveals the character's anxiety about losing loved ones, reinforcing her mental state and PTSD. These embedded scenes are placed to add depth to the character and foreground her feelings. They are also essential for building character empathy by offering narrative data that displays Emma's concerns, augmenting the development of the character in the process. Rather than constructing her mental state as superficial, the narrative suggests that her PTSD ensues from disturbing events and the scenes function to complement character motive.

This development of Emma is afforded by the show's serialization efforts. Executive Producer Jill Blotevogel asserts, "That's been the biggest balance taking a slasher movie to TV —finding a way to keep the world normal enough to keep the teen dynamic and your soap opera elements, but also reminding people that it's Scream" (Pickard 2015). The writer points to the significance of serialization in shaping the narrative by referring to the soap opera, which is an ongoing serial format that keeps storylines unresolved for multiple seasons. Hallucinations and dream sequences have historically been available to serials and series programs but devoting these scenes to thoroughly investigate a character's mental state, especially the way in which *Scream: The TV Series* links these scenes to the character's backstory, rationalizes the character's behavior and contributes to the overall growth. The sequences utilize the narrative canvas to not only provide details about the character's mental condition, but to also justify her actions in subsequent episodes. Her anxiety about losing other friends and her hesitant reactions to new crime scenes manifest that the character's past encounters

have contributed to the formation of her present personality. Instead of depicting Emma as violent due to her exposure to such murders, she is portrayed as responsible and caring. The more friends she loses, the more considerate and caring she becomes, intensifying her mission of stopping the killer and solving the case. Blotevogel emphasizes caring as a considerable attribute and states that, "It has to be about characters. They're going to be terrified but we want them to care about the group as a whole" (Goldberg 2015). Emma learns and reacts to the murder cases, and this is highlighted in her attempts in stopping the killing spree and protecting the rest of her friends despite her PTSD episodes. It is through this complex character building that the narrative creates an empathetic representation. Viewers are invited to identify with Emma's experiences and the process of building her PTSD supplement the character's arc design.

This character formulation is motivated by MTV's landmark generational study in 2013, "The New Millennials Will Keep Calm and Carry On", which reveals that millennials are "consciously taking time to self-soothe, disconnect, de-stress, de-stimulate, and control inputs" (MTV 2013). Emma's mental retreat before returning to Lakewood is both self-soothing and de-stressing. It is a way for the narrative to highlight the significance of self-care for mental health. Even though it functions to justify the character's PTSD episodes in the second season, it also proposes that Emma's ability to control and overcome these episodes stem from her rehabilitation, assisting the character in solving the murder cases and finally exposing the masked killer. In this way, the narrative is promoting these mental self-care procedures, and this storyline development encourages millennials to recognize such mental conditions. This depiction is constructed in a way that suggests addressing and coping with the condition rather than strictly stigmatizing it. This is further expressed in the formation of the killer's character. Contrary to Emma, Piper Shaw's failure to seek mental care after being abandoned worsened her condition, turning her into a violent serial killer. This is also the case with Kieran Wilcox, who turns out to be the new killer in season two. Thus, violence is linked to those who fail to seek care for their mental disorders.

Emma's responsible and nonviolent behavior is also derived from the study's responses. According to the report, 84% of millennials believe that "It's really important to always be prepared and have a plan" which demonstrates that the generation values responsibility, and 74% eschew viewing videos about violence which foregrounds the majority's hostile perception regarding violent behavior (MTV 2013).

In both seasons, the killers record videos of their crimes and spread them across social media. They also send them directly to Emma from an unknown phone number. Although the content of the videos impacts her mental health, Emma's repulsive reaction when watching these violent videos embodies the study's responses. Therefore, this character design is essential to the show's storytelling endeavors. A complex character with features that are relevant to the preferences of the network's preferred generation increases the show's chances of keeping audiences invested. Additionally, the development of the character's mental condition highlights the concerns and proposes approaches for addressing them, making the character more empathic for the targeted audience to engage with.

4. SYMPATHY FOR THE KILLER ON A&E

The emphasis on targeting a younger audience segment is also evident in the programming endeavors of A&E. In 2013, the network redefined its brand which facilitated the development of scripted programming shows that have the potential to lure the millennial audience group, a segment that was underemphasized in their objectives. Prior to this branding reformulation, A&E's Executive Vice President and General Manager David McKillop preserved that, "I want to keep our 25-54, but I really would like to make some headway in the 18-49, especially in the rankings" (Dobbs 2013). Because the focus was on luring audiences in the 18-49 range, a demographic that consisted of a large portion of the millennial generation, A&E's production of *Bates Motel* foregrounds a provocative social issue with a killer who is depicted struggling from dissociative identity disorder (DID).

This type of social issue formation is motivated by broader industrial notions about the generation's perception of social matters. Anthony N. Smith (2019b) maintains that television networks perceive the millennial generation to be delicate and sensitive, insisting that "various cable channels have reshaped their images in light of the millennial generation becoming an increasingly vital target demographic group for the industry" (Smith 2019a: 444). A&E was also attentive to the preferences of younger audiences and their programming ambitions, which were inspired by their corporate positioning and broader institutional priorities, led to their creative risk-taking initiatives. An exploration of DID and the various aspects of a character's personality tied to a controversial social issue like incest suits these risk-taking programming

ventures. According to McKillop, "'Be Original' is much more than a tagline, it's a rallying cry for our programmers and marketers to always take creative risks, perpetually innovate, inspire and engage the next generation" (The Deadline Team 2013). Therefore, risk-taking is an approach that the network perceives to be an engagement strategy for the younger generation, informing the ways in which the show exploits incest, medical neglect, and DID.

The series showcases the killer's perspective and highlights the events and interactions that have contributed to his mental state through the show's serial structure. Underlining the emphasis on serialization, McKillop asserts that "Bates Motel is one of my favorite programs that I've ever had the opportunity to work on, and it's highly serialized" (Dobbs 2013). The embedded hallucination and flashback scenes that are employed to showcase Norman's DID support the growth of his condition and serve their serialization intents by raising questions about the causes and consequently paving the way for the formulation of a continuous narrative.

Bates Motel explores the relationship between Norman Bates and his mother Norma. Throughout its five-season span, the show manifests that Norman is interested in developing a romantic relationship with his mother. These incestuous aims are the driving force behind his killing motive as he is shown blacking out, hallucinating about his mother while having sex with other women, switching identities to adopt Norma's identity, and his crimes are usually committed during these instances. The show highlights that the condition is derived from the killer's childhood trauma that Norma has failed to address. For instance, Norman's first blackout occurs when he is sexually engaging with Miss Watson. During the sexual intercourse, Norman hallucinates, envisioning himself to be Norma, and his speech pattern changes before proceeding to kill Miss Watson. He then leaves the crime scene and starts having flashbacks that show glimpses of the incident without a complete recollection of what had happened. To reassure him, Norma confesses to Norman that when he was seven years old, he also blacked out and killed his father, Sam Bates, to protect her from domestic abuse. Despite Norma's realization of the matter, she covered up the crime to keep Norman from being taken away, marking her failure in providing adequate care for her child. The hallucination scene, where Norman perceives himself to be Norma, is embedded to showcase his delusions. On the other hand, the flashback of the killing of Miss Watson highlights Norman's disorganized thoughts and informed his questioning of the incident and served to make the character look for answers that could

explain his behavior. Thus, the scene motivated character action and exposed the character's memory loss, revealing a symptom that is typically associated with DID.

This arc construction, from failing to recollect any memories of the killing of his father to recollecting glimpses of the killing of Miss Watson, details the gradual progression of his DID condition. The hallucinations and flashbacks are employed to provide context and unveil Norman's mental state and detail his experience. Through these scenes, the narrative highlights Norman's perception during the incidents and after committing the crimes and failure to rationalize the events. They also function to demonstrate the development of another identity that progresses throughout the narrative until it evolves to the point where Norman is shown dressing, physically behaving, and speaking like Norma. This progression would lack context without the embedded hallucinations and flashbacks that display the character's memory gaps and the existence of another personality. Showrunner Carlton Cuse emphasized these serialization attempts and the aim of building Norman's condition over the course of multiple seasons by stating that,

> We see Norman's progression happening over a longer time frame. What exactly happens to Norman over time is interesting and compelling to us as storytellers. We're not instantly going to turn him into a serial killer of the week; that's not happening. Right away, there are many facets and dimensions to his personality that we want to explore (Goldberg 2013).

The hallucination scenes also illustrate the other facets that Cuse mentions and facilitate the transformation of the character, justifying his development from an innocent teenager to a ruthless serial killer. Although this occurs during the span of multiple seasons, the hallucinations progress to manifest Norman's internal struggle. In later seasons, Norman hallucinates about Norma telling him what to do to those whom he is interacting with. There are also hallucinations that feature Norma warning him from allowing other people to interfere in their relationship. These hallucination scenes display the interaction between both of his identities and demonstrate the growth of his other persona, setting up and justifying the character's lust for killing and complete identity switch, from Norman to Norma.

These scenes are also employed to establish the storyline for further revelations that contribute to the exploration of

Norma's dubious behavior. The incidents motivated Norman to question his memories, forcing Norma to explain past events and her involvement in trying to address these situations. Such revelations illuminate Norma's approach towards her family. Norma's ill-advised cover ups and disregard for Norman's trauma harmed his development, and these disclosures function to formulate a sympathetic representation of Norman. This is especially evident in the scenes that follow Norman's first blackout. After failing to recollect the memories of the incident with Miss Watson, Norman cries and attempts to take his life. This character reaction is underpinned by the hallucination and flashback scenes that explored his mental struggle, facilitating the sympathetic depiction and foregrounding that the killing was unintentional and beyond his control. When asked about Norman's characterization, McKillop responded by saying that,

> I see Norman more as a sympathetic kid who has demons, but everybody wants him to succeed. The great thing about the show is that we know where it ends, so you're almost rooting for Norman not to end up where we think he ends up. I think Norma is maybe more of an anti-hero, especially the way that Vera [Farmiga] plays her. She is one of the most talented actresses out there, and she's created this persona who's just trying desperately to be a great mother but can't get it right (Dobbs 2013).

Norma's behavior is antiheroic not only because she had covered up the crimes, but also because she failed to seek medical attention for her son, positioning Norman as a victim of medical neglect. In this way, the narrative suggests that a mental disorder like DID must be addressed rather than ignored, emphasizing the significance of treating the condition to prevent its development which, as shown by Norman, could yield violent behavior. These conveyances are made possible by the incorporation of the hallucination and flashback scenes that delve into the character's mental state and provide opportunities for character investigation, postponing narrative closure by raising questions about Norman's mental health especially as he continues to kill more victims.

This form of character construction also serves A&E's brand identity and distinction endeavors. As a cable channel, A&E is part of multiple networks that are owned by A&E Television Networks, LLC, a joint venture that also owns other cable channels including History and Lifetime. Both the History channel and Lifetime typically target older audience

segments. A&E, on the other hand, was looking to separate its identity and possibly lure certain advertisers. With Bates Motel focusing on an antiheroic middle-aged mother who is trying to parent her only son, and a teenager who is trying to cope with a mental condition, the network was attempting to accommodate their preferred millennial generation but also engage a secondary audience group. McKillop elucidates, "If we can get older men [from History] and older women [from Lifetime], and then maybe younger adults across the board on a single project, that would be pretty spectacular" (Dobbs 2013). This form of commissioning prioritizes a segment without disregarding other demographics, signifying the eminence of *Bates Motel* to their general programming strategy.

5. CONCLUSION

This study contextualizes contemporary representations of mental disorders in slasher cable programming. It illustrates the industrial conditions that enable these storytelling innovations and the ways in which PTSD and DID are meticulously formed to support the programming aims of specific cable networks. More specifically, the assessment details the link between these depictions and the emphasis on serialization and the audience-specificity of these production institutions.

As showcased above, the audience targeting practices of A&E and MTV shape the narrative designs of their programs, inform the development of characters with mental disorders, and highlight their perspectives and rationalize their behaviors. These portrayals either function to constitute a sympathetic character, which is the case in *Bates Motel,* or emphasize medical care for PTSD, which is illustrated in *Scream: The TV Series.* In both cases, the strategy of the embedding of additional scenes is employed to explore how characters with these specific conditions perceive their symptoms and react to situations and events. This storytelling procedure reinforces serialization as a core component of the shows. As displayed in the analysis, the scenes raise questions that keep the narrative ongoing and provide opportunities for character investigation and event ramification. Moreover, they provide meaning to character behavior and facilitate the discovery of other personalities or reveal crucial narrative data. Although Dunleavy (2017) argues that this strategy is implemented to investigate key characters rather than progress the overarching narrative in complex serial shows, this paper foregrounds that in complex slasher series, the strategy is executed to

investigate central characters and justify the actions that contribute to solving their dilemmas. In the process, these scenes function as a character discovery mechanism.

This study demonstrates how specific narrative strategies in contemporary slasher series reflect the viewpoints of characters that are suffering from mental disorders and foreground the aesthetic possibilities of their serialized structures. Further examination may look at the consequences of these complex representations and their impact on audience perceptions of mental disorders. The assumption is that since these narratives are more complex with mentally ill characters developed throughout the narrative, the nuanced formulations could yield varying but more progressive outcomes, especially in shaping perspectives and ideas about mental disorders. Moreover, these complex constructions can bring about social awareness to these matters, encouraging viewers to identify and empathize when encountering these conditions. They are also influential in reducing stereotypes about mentally ill characters, deviating from their historical stigmatized portrayals, and thus, offering a more explanatory and positive depiction. This, however, does not imply that these complex representations are completely addressing the stereotypical prevalent portrayals that have pervaded media content for decades. Rather, it suggests that these nuanced representations are attempts to move beyond the static characterization of mentally ill characters, specifically in slasher cable series.

Despite the article's findings, there are other facets that also contribute to such developments in mental disorder representation in contemporary slasher shows. Further research can investigate the economic particularities of cable networks and how an institution's revenue model impacts characterization and social issue representation. There are horror dramas that explore other mental disorders and utilize different narrative strategies to construct characters and frame these conditions in various ways. Streaming video on-demand services are also investing in the creation of horror dramas that offer in-depth depictions of mental disorders. These streamers focus on servicing taste communities rather than the conventional approach of targeting demographics that are typical of television institutions. As a result, their portrayals are designed for building content libraries rather than developing seasonal programming schedules. As illustrated, such institutional priorities inform the utilization of narrative strategies, the design of serialized elements, and therefore depictions of mental disorders.

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