

In True Crime We Trust: The Artifactuality of John Douglas and Mark Olshaker's *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI Elite Serial Crime Unit* (2017) and Netflix's *Mindhunter* (2017)

Emily Alice Farmer

HJEAS

ABSTRACT

Consumers of true crime often take for granted that, as the name suggests, the stories its authors present are wholly true to life. As the following article will demonstrate, however, these consumers are cunningly guided to this fallacious conclusion. Using John Douglas and Mark Olshaker's *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI Elite Serial Crime Unit* (2017) and Netflix's 2017 *Mindhunter* series as case studies, this article will explore how readers' first (and likely their lasting) impression of authenticity is shaped by rhetorical, visual, and aural tactics. To support the discussion, Baudrillard's concepts of consumer society and of simulacra, Derrida's (2002) concept of artifactuality, and Genette's notion of the paratext will be utilized to elucidate the strategies at work in establishing authenticity in true crime. (EAF)

KEYWORDS: artifactuality, authenticity, Baudrillard, Derrida, true crime.



Introduction

True crime is a genre that, thanks to the purported transparency its name offers, is often regarded to belong to the realm of non-fiction. Indeed, it cannot be denied that a true-crime text provides “the story of real events” (Murley 6). Stories whose origins are traceable to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century newspaper reports on murderous criminals and whose use of salacious depictions satisfied the consumers' appetite for death and violence (Murley 7–8). An appetite which, at the time of writing (2024), shows no signs of waning, even though what a true-crime text offers is only a version of the “real events” that have occurred. One of the reasons for the insatiable appetite is that, as Julie B. Wiest discusses in her article on the representations of serial killers in American and British media, “[s]erial murder is deeply embedded in Western cultures, and serial killers have become perverse icons as legendary as other monsters known throughout history in cultural myths” (327). The excitement produced by the glorifying language used to embellish the (grains of) truth associated with any given

serial killer bestows upon them the mythical status Wiest speaks of and encourages consumers of true crime, as scholars such as Jean Murley herself did when first introduced to the genre, to “consume the volumes [of true crime] like candy” (1). If we take Murley’s metaphor a step further, it is not difficult to see how consuming true crime can become a mindless activity; the finished product, which purports to be authentic and truthful, overshadows the processes used to make the true-crime text a desirable sweet treat.

While various true-crime scholars such as Murley have noted that true-crime narratives are “shaped by the teller and imbued with his or her values and beliefs about such events” (6), scholars have, overall, paid little attention to the paratexts used by the genre. According to Gérard Genette, a text’s paratext “constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public” (2). The idea of the paratext as a strategy is integral to this article because the discussion will explore how paratextual elements are utilized to assure consumers of the proposed authenticity of a true-crime text. As Jonathan Gray observes of the power of paratexts: “paratexts tell us what to expect, and in doing so, they shape the reading strategies that we will take with us ‘into’ the text” (26). One can see, therefore, how a paratext not only introduces a consumer to their chosen piece of media, but that it also encourages a certain perception of the media to be retained by the consumer.

To demonstrate how impactful first impressions and paratexts can be on the consumer’s belief in the authenticity of a true crime narrative, the paper will use John Douglas and Mark Olshaker’s *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI Elite Serial Crime Unit* (first published in 1995 and reprinted with an updated introduction in 2017) and Netflix’s 2017 *Mindhunter* series as case studies. These two true-crime texts have been selected for this study because their paratextual tactics cleverly obfuscate the artificiality of their narratives. In order to execute this analysis, the book jacket and excerpts from the introduction will be utilized alongside the thumbnail and trailer of Netflix’s *Mindhunter*. Select scenes from the first episode that feature in one of the series’ trailers will also be discussed to expand on the argument that paratexts incorporating emotional rhetoric encourage a consumer’s trust in a text’s authenticity.

Since it will be argued that producers of true crime employ tactics rather than techniques, both Jacques Derrida’s concept of “artificiality,” and Jean Baudrillard’s thoughts on the mechanics of the consumer society

will be utilized to elucidate this crucial distinction. In *Echographies of Television* (2002, first published in French in 1996), Derrida speaks of “artifactuality,” a portmanteau term combining the words “artifact” and “actuality,” to discuss the content broadcast by television networks, specifically news programs. Despite Derrida’s specific use of the term, artifactuality also more broadly facilitates the recognition that while “there is *actuality*” in true crime, insofar as “the ‘facts’ that . . . constitute actuality” are presented to the consumer (42), we are also able to recognize that the “facts” represented are choices that are “calculated, constrained, ‘formatted,’ [and] ‘initialized’” (3). To elucidate how the “calculated” use of paratexts evokes promises of authenticity for the consumer of true crime, Baudrillard’s *The Consumer Society: Myths & Structures* (1998) will be called upon because his work demonstrates how objects are designed to, as George Ritzer summarizes Baudrillard’s thoughts on advertising, “produce a sense of intimacy where, in fact, none exists” (13). A production which ensures that we live, Baudrillard laments, “sheltered by signs, in denial of the real” (*The Consumer Society* 34). To further elucidate this argument, Baudrillard’s concept of the simulacrum will also be incorporated as it facilitates an examination of the artifice of true crime in a wider context. Thus, through the application of artifactuality and Baudrillard’s thoughts on the effect of the consumer society on our navigation of the world to the use of paratexts in true crime, it will be shown how the genre gives us “not reality but *the dizzying whirl of reality*” (34). That is to say, true crime maintains its promise of authenticity by disorienting its consumers with dizzying waves of paratextual trickery.

Before the artifactual simulation of true crime through the chosen case studies is discussed, it is necessary to contextualize the subsequent study by introducing Douglas and his “mind hunter” profession, using his own words from the book’s updated introduction. In the late 1970s, Douglas worked in the Behavioral Science Unit (BSU, which later became the Investigative Support Unit, ISU) of the FBI’s National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime at Quantico, Virginia. It was during Douglas’s time there that he observed the emergence of a new type of criminal in America: “the serial offender, who often doesn’t stop until he is caught or killed, who learns by experience and who tends to get better and better at what he does, constantly perfecting his scenario” (Douglas and Olshaker 19). To counter the devastation wrought by these individuals, Douglas knew a “new weapon in the interpretation of certain types of violent crimes, and the hunting, apprehension, and prosecution of their perpetrators” was needed by law enforcement (14). The “new weapon” was required to take,

Douglas states, “the behavioral approach to criminal-personality profiling, crime analysis, and prosecutorial strategy” (20). This process became known as profiling. Douglas contends that curating serviceable profiles on a serial offender’s criminal behavior pattern requires the collation of data extractable from prosecuted violent individuals. Furthermore, Douglas believed that it was only possible to gather this data (motive[s] and modus operandi) from the offenders themselves, so he and other members of the BSU/ISU visited a range of violent offenders and interviewed them about their offences (14–15). In doing so, Douglas posited that the greater the amount of data, the greater the likelihood that the criminal would be caught (20).

From the brief overview given above, it would not be unreasonable for a reader of Douglas’s narrative to assume that his behavioral approach to criminal investigations led to the apprehension of all the known serial killers. This eventuality, however, is not the case; Douglas may claim that profiles are used to “*assist* local police in focusing their investigations” (Douglas and Olshaker, 20), but the reality is that the best they can do is hinder an investigation. As David Canter, psychologist and developer of investigative psychology in the United Kingdom, declares: “Speculations about the mind of a criminal have never helped a real-life investigation” (qtd. in Seymour). Canter’s criticism certainly ironizes Douglas’s own claim that civilians do “more harm than good” in their efforts to help with criminal investigations (Douglas and Olshaker xiii). The “art of profiling” then (229), as Douglas so sincerely calls it, is not as authoritative as he would have us believe.

Regardless of whether Douglas and the development of profiling are of use to law enforcement, it is the packaging of his theories that is of consequence to this study. True crime is a genre that promises to make the horrific violence it depicts safe by capturing and punishing those responsible (Murley 1). Therefore, the authoritative way Douglas speaks of his career and the trajectory of profiling speaks to the authenticity an uninformed consumer may ascribe to other aspects of a true-crime text and provides the incision through which this article will investigate a true-crime text’s artifactuality.

Selling the “truth”: The art(ifice) of packaging

When buying a book, it is fair to say that many of us are guilty of not following through with the purchase because we do not like its visual appearance. For the true-crime text, its cover carries a special significance in

this regard because not only must it be visually appealing to the consumer, but it also needs to be capable of creating a bond of trust between the consumer and the purported authenticity of the narrative. As the adage goes, sometimes less is more, and this is undoubtedly the approach Arrow Books took in their design of Douglas and Olshaker's book, *Mindhunter*; the cover is minimalist, with the large, capitalized, bold title taking center stage to catch the attention of the casual peruser (fig. 1):

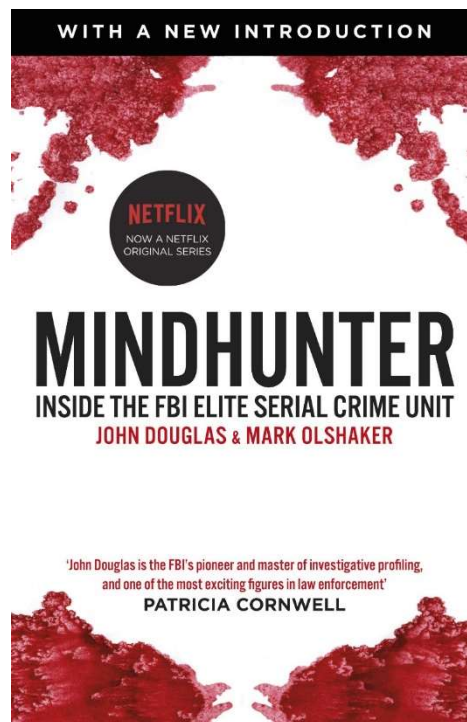


Fig. 1. The front cover of *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI Elite Serial Crime Unit*, 2017 Arrow Books edition.

Here, we see the written text's first instance of a "calculated," in Derrida's terms, production: the title *MINDHUNTER: INSIDE THE FBI ELITE SERIAL CRIME UNIT* implies a neutrality that belies the subjectivity of the account the consumer will receive. Promising the consumer insight into an infamously secretive organization is intended to persuade them that the knowledge they will encounter throughout the book is privileged information reserved only for those willing to trust their narrator(s). Achieving this level of trust is not as difficult as it may appear when it is

considered that many of the genre's narratives are not, as Laura Browder observes, "read for plot, but for [their] detailed description" (125). Many consumers desire the unpalatable details which sensationalize the deaths of the victims as they simultaneously glorify those who murdered them. It is, therefore, significant that blood spatter has been chosen to frame the front cover, as it is a strategic nod toward the gory details given in the narrative. In Maria-Eirini Panagiotidou's exploration of the symbolism associated with the color red, she highlights that "the presence of red functions metonymically to recall the presence of the body and potentially a wound from which it originated" (237). To have such a visceral metonymic symbol occupy *Mindhunter's* front cover prompts the consumer to speculate upon the corporeal consequences of the proposed narrative.

The visual significance of the blood-spattered covers is heightened, furthermore, by their emulation of the forms generated by Swiss psychologist Hermann Rorschach's inkblot test. In *Psychodiagnostics: A Diagnostic Test Based on Perception* (1951, originally published in 1921), psychoanalyst Rorschach describes the inkblot test, an experiment he devised to test "the perceptive power of a subject" (18). The preparation for the experiment, Rorschach insists, is simple: "a few large ink blots are [to be] thrown on a piece of paper, the paper [is then] folded, and the ink spread[s] between the two halves of the sheet" (15). A process Rorschach then repeated until he had created "a suitable series of [ten] figures that is not so simple as might appear at first glance" (15). Rorschach then asked his patients to tell him what they saw when they looked at the inkblots. While many of the responses were "somewhat stereotyped" (15), Rorschach observed that "[n]ormal subjects speak of the 'interpretation' of the figure spontaneously" whereas "[c]ases showing congenital or acquired defects of intelligence want to 'recognize' the pictures" (17). Despite the homogeneity of the patients' responses, Rorschach believed the test "to be of diagnostic value" with "almost unlimited applicability" (183). If a diagnosis of a person's personality were needed, for example, Rorschach pledged that the inkblot test could be relied upon to provide answers (183).

The significance of the blood-spattered front and back covers of *Mindhunter* is twofold: on one level, the inclusion of the inkblot-like form seeks to assure the consumer that the text is undergirded by scientific methods. Methods which are, it must be noted, admissible in a court of law despite the conflicting opinions on the test's validity (Wijdicks 72). On another, the form invites the consumer to invest personally into the narrative by encouraging a contemplation of their own interpretation of the

blood. A contemplation which may lead consumers to wonder whether their interpretation mirrors those given by individuals guilty of violent crimes. Given that the paratexts used by Douglas and Olshaker in their composition of *Mindhunter* frame the narrative as genuine and without artifice, it can be seen how the inkblot reminiscent of blood spatter guides the reader to, as Marcel Danesi observes of the lure of biopic films, “zero in on the serial killer and see him up close” (62). The inclusion of the Rorschach-like blood spatter, therefore, serves as a conduit through which the consumer can be mentally intimate with the interiority of the serial killers while also maintaining a safe distance from them through the vicarious experience of reading.

Therefore, by having the blood spatter frame both the title and subtitle, it is indicated to the consumer that they will receive a detailed narrative of an actuality that can be trusted. It can be trusted because, much like the “shop-window, the advertisement, the manufacturer and the *brand name* . . . impose a coherent, collective vision” (Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* 27) for a consumer, so too do the paratexts used in the production of true crime. The contents of Douglas and Olshaker’s *Mindhunter* are not, in Baudrillard’s terms, “a sequence of mere objects, but a chain of *signifiers*” (27). Signifiers that, Baudrillard further elucidates, work together to “signify one another reciprocally as part of a more complex super-object, drawing the consumer into a series of more complex motivations” (27). In the case of true crime, the “complex motivations” that arise from the paratextual “signifiers” are those which generate a vision of authenticity that obfuscates the reality of the narrative, one that has been purposefully constructed to depict this assumed authenticity. As the levels of signification brought about by the title, subtitle, and blood spatter are recognized, it can be seen how these paratexts function as an integral part of the authentication process of true crime. These three introductory paratextual elements provide the initial frame of the text for the consumer; their presence, as Gray highlights of visual “entryway” paratexts, “hold considerable power to direct our initial interpretations, telling us what to expect and establishing genre” (79). Thus, the overall tone and visual framing of the title and subtitle encourage the reader to believe that Douglas and Olshaker’s narrative will not hide behind artifice.

The ability of a title to demonstrate to the consumer that the subsequent narrative can be trusted is not to be underestimated. As Wendy Laura Belcher highlights in her discussion of article titles, a title “is the highway billboard” of a piece of work, “[i]t is an announcement meant to

draw readers to your work” (203). However, for true-crime texts, an alluring title such as the one provided by Douglas and Olshaker may not be enough to seduce the consumer. Therefore, further calculated tactics must be employed to demonstrate the authenticity of the classified information offered by the text. In the case of Douglas and Olshaker’s work, the purported authenticity of the title is further supported by an endorsement given by Patricia Cornwell, a prolific author of American crime fiction. In her endorsement, Cornwell remarks: “John Douglas is the FBI’s pioneer and master of investigative profiling, and one of the most exciting figures in law enforcement” (fig. 1). While Cornwell’s endorsement reflects the actuality of Douglas’s position in the FBI, the language used to describe his career trajectory is formatted to inform the readers that they can trust the author’s narrative. The terms “pioneer” and “master” are not to be taken lightly, but they are especially significant in this instance because they inform the reader that not only does Douglas’s narrative detail his establishment of investigative profiling, but also that he is the absolute authority on the matter. Moreover, the direct and authoritative tone of the endorsement establishes the author’s purpose—as Caroline Reitz similarly discusses in her paper “Laughing and Crime: Fugitive Tone in Contemporary Female Crime Narratives” for the conference *Captivating Criminality 11: Hybridisation and Generic Experiments in Crime Fiction* (2024). In this instance, Douglas and Olshaker aim to assure the consumer that their account is trustworthy. At a superficial level, Cornwell’s endorsement appears to underpin the authors’ purpose. Acquiring a recommendation by a well-known author such as Cornwell is an example of, as publisher at The Friday Project, Scott Pack remarks in an interview with *Independent*, “a wider marketing drive to create a shorthand for readers” (qtd. in Clark). Accordingly, in the case of first impressions, it becomes clear that Cornwell’s endorsement is a necessary authenticity assurance tactic in the wider marketing context. It is so because the ever-increasing volume of true crime available to consumers means that a text must be as attractive as possible, and one way to achieve this is to provide a recommendation that one assumes reflects the contents of the book. However, it is a process that often, unfortunately, sees many approached authors respond with “[j]ust say whatever you want,” or “I haven’t got time . . . Just make it up” (Clark). Thus, consumers are likely to take endorsements such as Cornwell’s at face value because they are not privy to the processes by which the support is acquired.

Consequently, the consumer's fleeting interaction with a true-crime text favors the authors because the endorsement gives the narrative an authenticity that many purchasers may not investigate further. To a certain extent, Cornwell's position as a well-known author negates the irony that she is a writer of fiction rather than fact because her extensive oeuvre awards her with the automatic assumption that she is an authority on all things crime, whether fact or fiction. Furthermore, Cornwell's language bolsters this authority: her endorsement lacks qualifiers of certainty; instead, the endorsement is presented as a statement of fact. The front cover's accompanying banner proclaiming a "new introduction" sustains this perception (fig. 1). Including a paratext such as this assures the consumer that they are being kept abreast of all the latest developments; they are not relegated to the dark (recesses of mind). With the application of a Derridean framework, we can see that Cornwell's words and the banner work to assert the neutrality of the "facts" presented in Douglas's text, in the same way that the "facts" are presented on television. "Facts" which are, Derrida warns, confusedly called "information or communication" (3). By this, Derrida means that the "facts" are perceived by consumers as neutral and without artifice. Moreover, if we are to agree with Baudrillard that "[t]he consumer society is also the society of learning to consume, of social training in consumption" (*The Consumer Society* 81), we can see how the rhetoric used in the endorsement trains the consumer to not only invest trust in Cornwell's summation of the veracity of Douglas and Olshaker's narrative, but also the endorsements provided for other true-crime texts they may encounter.

To further support the consumer's perception of *Mindhunter's* authenticity, the text's back cover also works to gain the trust of the consumer by promising an educational and reassuring experience: "Douglas has looked evil in the eye, and made a vocation of understanding it," reads the first line of the blurb (fig. 2). Following the tone used by Cornwell, the use of "vocation" in the blurb suggests the author's selfless deciphering of evil benefits all: Douglas has done the unthinkable; he has been able to make sense of the senseless. The blurb signals to the consumer that Douglas has been able to transcend the standard capabilities of true crime, which can typically only provide "metaphysical discussions about the nature of evil" (Browder 127). Douglas has been able to achieve this task by personally "understanding" the "individual case histories including those of Jeffrey Dahmer, Charles Manson, [and] Ted Bundy" (fig. 2). Murley argues that these three figures "have become landmarks in the American popular

imagination” (4). Stressing Douglas’s knowledge of the individual “case histories” of each “landmark” perpetrator is a deliberate tactic to invite the consumer to invest their trust in Douglas because this communicative style comes with, as noted by Browder, “[an] air of authority enhanced by the journalistic, ‘non-literary’” approach (125). In addition, due to their status as “landmarks in the American popular imagination,” the names Dahmer, Manson, and Bundy serve as actuality buzzwords in that even those who do not read true crime will more than likely be aware of these persons, and this factor cements their trust in Douglas’s authorial position. To spotlight these individuals on the back cover is, therefore, a narrative tactic to place them on a pedestal of authenticity similar to that of Douglas, obscuring the boundary between fact and fiction.

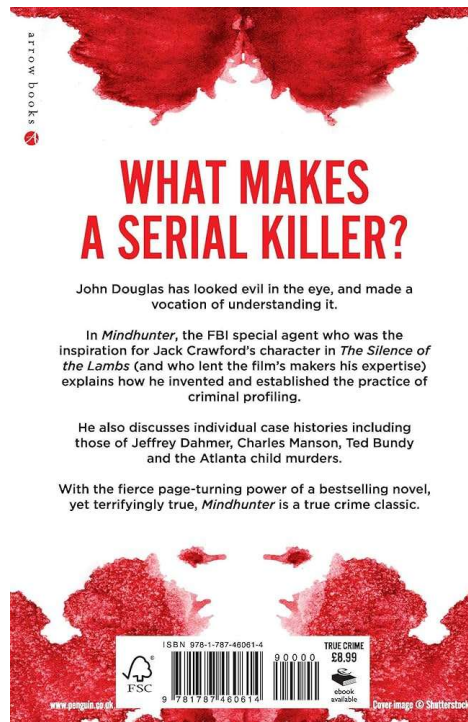


Fig. 2. The back cover *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI Elite Serial Crime Unit*, 2017 Arrow Books edition.

As the consumer comes to the end of *Mindhunter*’s back cover, the final line of the blurb does nothing to clarify the boundary between the fact and fiction of the text. It only serves to shroud it further: “With the fierce

page-turning power of a bestselling novel, yet terrifyingly true, *Mindhunter* is a true crime classic” (fig. 2). The implication that *Mindhunter* is a “fierce” page-turner indirectly suggests a fictionalized account. However, the reader is quickly assured that what they are about to read is “terrifyingly true.” If the consumer experiences the *Mindhunter* narrative as the blurb’s final line suggests, future encounters with the genre will result in an increased passive readership. Research has demonstrated that, as Marissa Harrison highlights: “typically, the more one is exposed to an alarming stimulus, the less unsettling it becomes over time” (19). Not only will increased exposure to “alarming stimuli” decrease a consumer’s sensitivity to acts of cruelty, such as the crimes detailed by Douglas and Olshaker, but it will also contribute to an escalation in insensitivity to the fictionalization of fact in true crime.

Visuals tell tall tales too

As has been demonstrated thus far, the book jacket of Douglas and Olshaker’s *Mindhunter* creates an “artifactuality” for the consumers of the text using primarily rhetorical devices. Rhetoric is indeed a powerful tactic through which authenticity can be established, but visual and aural tactics are of special importance to the consumer’s first impression of the true-crime text’s authenticity. The “actuality” of a true-crime text’s “artifactuality” is reinforced by the immersive experience of television with its oral and visual devices. As Derrida remarks of his experience with cinema in an interview with Antoine de Baecque and Thierry Jousse: “[it] is completely different from that of reading, which imprints a more present and active memory in me” (24). This notion of presence and activity that cinema can produce, and by extension, the *Mindhunter* series, benefits the created “artifactuality” of its purported authenticity. In moving from telling to showing, we can see how place, space, and characterization become increasingly important for displaying to the consumer that they will receive an “authentic” experience.

To understand the extent to which visual and aural tactics obscure the artifactuality of a true-crime text, it is first pertinent to reflect upon the *Mindhunter* series thumbnail shown on Netflix. The thumbnail demonstrates little of “the facts” in Derrida’s phraseology, which Douglas and Olshaker’s book purports to possess. Aside from the genre categories describing the series as belonging to “Crime TV Dramas, TV Programmes Based on Books, Mystery Programmes,” the viewer does not receive the same forceful assertion that the narrative they will be consuming is entirely truthful, in the sense that if they are not familiar with the book that the

series is based on, they will be unlikely to invest the same level of trust in the narrative's authenticity. From the thumbnail, a clearer sense of artifice is presented to the viewer, yet as the discussion will go on to illustrate, it is soon relegated by the show's trailer.

How, then, does the series establish a strong sense of authenticity for the viewer? The mechanics of Netflix's operating system can be credited for aiding this endeavor: much like a book's title needs to grab the attention of its potential reader, Netflix utilizes a mechanism which auto-plays a show's trailer when the user hovers over the thumbnail to attract their viewers. The distribution of a narrative such as *Mindhunter* through a streaming platform such as Netflix, which enables autoplay, heightens the power of visual and aural tactics employed to purport authenticity. Scholars such as Mark Stephen see "the trailer section [a]s the most valuable section of the preshow commodity" (98). Its significance derives from the insight of the series it provides in a fraction of its run time: the trailer supplies the viewer with tantalizing excerpts designed to entice. The lure of the *Mindhunter* trailer is achieved through increased scene cross-cutting, whereby the viewer is inundated with visual and aural cues. It is important to recognize here that the trailer is the product of a careful editing process which is purposeful in the point of view it is putting across. In the first instance, these cues give the viewer access to various characters, and the plotlines that reference the real perpetrators and their crimes are also interwoven. Furthermore, these introductions are fragments of the "complete" stories consumers believe they will encounter. Moreover, by viewing the trailer as the televisual manifestation of the shop window, the consumer is able to see, in Baudrillard's terms, authenticity "offered there in a glorious *mise-en-scène*, a sacrilizing ostentation" (*The Consumer Society* 166). In the same way that there exists a potential exchange between the window shopper and the object within, there "clearly exists an invitation to real, economic exchange inside the [true crime] shop" (166). Yet for consumers of true crime, the exchange involves the suspension of disbelief for the promise of authenticity proposed by the tailored narrative of the trailer. The *Mindhunter* trailer thus operates as an extradiegetic paratext which, in a similar manner to that of title sequences, "form[s] a contract with the audience and establishes expectations" (Klecker 406). Expectations which are, on the part of the consumer, assumed to be mutually beneficial; the consumer will enjoy an authentic narrative if they buy into the message proposed by the extradiegetic paratext of the trailer and the series benefits

from a larger viewership, resulting in an increased likelihood that the series will be renewed.

In the case of *Mindhunter*, the effectiveness of the “actuality” created by its trailer is further fortified by the precedence given to the serial killers present in the narrative. When Agent Holden Ford is asked (who is Douglas’s characterization), “Tell me, who’s the one you want more than anything?” by Ted Gunn, the head of BSU, he responds: “Manson” (figs. 3 and 4).



Fig. 3. Trailer for Netflix’s *Mindhunter*, season 1 (Penhall 00:23)



Fig. 4. Trailer for Netflix’s *Mindhunter*, season 1 (Penhall 00:25)

By foregrounding Manson in the trailer and matching the narrative route taken by Douglas and Olshaker in their book, the show's authenticity is strengthened for the viewer. To a certain extent, Manson was and still is a celebrity figure in the American cultural imagination. As Murley pinpoints, "[p]art of the reason why the American public was both fascinated and horrified with the Manson case was that it offered something for everybody, in that it spoke to and about a multitude of contemporary preoccupations" (67). Manson is used here as a point of commonality between the real yet fictional figure of Ford and the audience to reassure them that their continued fascination with Manson is warranted because if there continues to be representations of this individual, surely there must be more to say. Indeed, more than thirty books have been written on or about Manson since he committed his crimes (Parkinson and Jones). To place Manson at the center of the trailer's narrative, therefore, is to invite the consumer to recall other Manson-focused texts. In turn, the consumer is encouraged to frame their trust of *Mindhunter*'s authenticity through intertextual lenses. This notion becomes especially significant if one does not move on with consuming the whole series. As Gray elucidates: "When we move onward to the film or program, those paratexts help frame our consumption; but when we do not move onward, all we are left with is the paratext" (26). Thus, it is immaterial whether the consumer watches only the trailer or continues on with the whole series; the utilization of Manson as the focal point of the trailer creates a paratext which shores up the series's authenticity regardless of the length of the consumer's engagement with the narrative.

Given the priority ascribed to perpetrators such as Manson in the trailer, it follows that characterization is a valuable tactic for concealing the artifice of the Netflix *Mindhunter* narrative. Indeed, the actors involved with the project have been particularly vocal about the actuality of the events they were tasked with representing. In an interview with Matt Grobar for *Deadline*, Cameron Britton, who plays Edmund Kemper, recalls how he "responded to [Kemper] being a real-life person, being able to see interviews with him. [Britton] found the realism to be a lot scarier, that he's just a regular guy" (Grobar). With Britton's attention to detail in his representation of Kemper, it is no surprise that the artifactuality of his casting engenders the viewer to, in Derridean thinking, "confuse the analogous with the identical" (Derrida 24). A reality which is conceivable when one sees how uncannily alike Britton and Kemper look (fig. 5).

Furthermore, if character names often operate, as Gray asserts, “[as] intertextual ‘guides’ on how to read a text” (32), it follows that the casting of an individual who bears an uncanny resemblance to a real person, guilty of real crimes, is a paratextual tactic used to “guide” the consumer’s belief in the narrative’s authenticity. The cast of actors for *Mindhunter* ultimately tells the consumer how the series wishes to be received: as authentic and true. Actors such as Britton, therefore, are chosen to encourage consumers to suspend their disbelief in the artifice of the *Mindhunter* series so that they immerse themselves in its “authenticity” more freely.



Fig. 5. Side by side of actor Cameron Britton and serial killer Edmund Kemper (Smith)

“We are in this together”

Drawing on real people allows series such as *Mindhunter* to assure the reader that the stories they are consuming are predominantly based in fact. But, as Derrida reminds us, “[n]o matter how singular, irreducible, stubborn, distressing or tragic the ‘reality’ to which it refers, ‘actuality’ comes to us by way of a fictional fashioning” (3). True-crime texts detail distressing and tragic realities; they comprise “depiction[s] of the social contexts and ordinary life details of both victims and killers” (Murley 44). Due to this characteristic of true crime, many consumers tend to focus on the content of the narrative rather than how it is produced and packaged for

them. As Derrida laments, we “are never sensitive enough to the fashioning of realities” (3). As discussed above, casting and characterization play a prominent role in this lack of sensitivity.

However, in terms of the wider conditions that bring about insensitivity toward the fictional fashioning of reality, Baudrillard’s notion of the simulacrum provides a persuasive rationale. In *Simulations* (1983), Baudrillard claims that reality is represented to us through a series of images and posits that it takes four successive phases for an image to become a simulacrum: first, “it is the reflection of a basic reality”; second, “it masks and perverts a basic reality”; third, “it masks the *absence* of a basic reality”; and finally, “it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (11). Once the image becomes a simulacrum, Baudrillard states, “[t]here is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity” (*Simulations* 12). By applying Baudrillard’s framework to the written and televisual renditions of *Mindhunter*, both narratives are shown to be simulacra: In the first phase, *Mindhunter* purports to represent the true stories of the crimes committed by individuals such as Bundy, Dahmer, and Manson, and in the second, it is the use of paratexts in the case of this discussion that begin to illuminate the perversion of the represented “basic reality” by *Mindhunter*. Then, as the image of *Mindhunter* transitions into the third phase, it is revealed that the paratexts obfuscate the artifice of the two narratives, culminating in the fourth phase whereby the consumer is enveloped by the simulation. A bind that many, if not all, consumers will be happy to be engulfed by because consumers are comforted by these simulations, as Baudrillard posited in his earlier work, *The Consumer Society*:

A miraculous security: when we look at the images of the world, who can distinguish this brief irruption of reality from the profound pleasure of not being there? The image, the sign, the message—all these things we “consume”—represent our tranquility consecrated by distance from the world, a distance more comforted by the allusion to the real (even where the allusion is violent) than compromised by it. (34)

Consumers thus, as Danesi discusses in his work on the *Dexter* (2006–2013) series, “detach the image [of the serial killer] from the screen” to “generalize it to everyday life, whereby [they] start a process of confabulation that involves the image at its center” (72). The consumers’ primary means of engagement with the world becomes “image-driven” (Danesi 72), and

results in the “collapsing into a mindset where fiction and reality are perceived as a simulacrum with one informing the other” (Danesi 72). While true crime as an image is incapable of encapsulating the reality of the true stories of the crimes detailed in the written and televisual renditions of *Mindhunter*, the extent to which the paratexts indicate toward an authentic representation is, as this final section will go on to discuss, enough to make the consumer willing to accept the simulation by inviting them to be complicit in the blurring of fact and fiction.

Concerning Douglas and Olshaker’s narrative, the authors directly address the readers with this enticing proposition in the updated introduction: “we invite you once again to embark upon the hunt with us” (xxviii). As the final line of the introduction suggests, the phrasing assures the reader of the text’s tone: they will take part in the “hunt” for the interiority of serial killers. Furthermore, by viewing the introduction as a paratext, remembering that Genette sees them as “threshold[s]” (1), it can be seen that the introduction operates here as a bridge between the promise of the consumer’s involvement and the actuality that the authors see the consumer as central to the propulsion of the narrative. Positioning the reader as working alongside the author(s) of any given true-crime text is a tactic that, Murley observes, creates “a great deal of tension between emotional identification with and distancing from the killer” (5). Creating such a “relationship” between the reader and perpetrator(s) is particularly consequential for Douglas and Olshaker because it strengthens the bonds of authenticity in the “artificiality” they are seeking to create. By convincing their reader of their insider status, the writer, as Murley identifies, “attains credibility not by showing himself with the killer, . . . but because the reader is allowed more intimate and immediate access to the story” (57). Douglas’s involvement of the reader in the “hunt” for serial killers clouds their ability to distinguish between fact and fiction because they are positioned as collaborators in the narrative.

The consumers’ sense of intimacy and collaboration with Douglas and Olshaker’s text is further reinforced by the authors’ deployment of emotional identification. The authors do this by calling on the metaphor of the serial killer as a predator hunting its prey, resulting in a narrative that marries verifiable facts with seductive but ultimately fictitious representations. Invoking such mental images for their readers enables Douglas and Olshaker to make it difficult for the consumer to see past the artifice because the “hunt” for “evil” overwhelms their ability to see past the artifice of the narrative. Of course, as the discussion has repeatedly

drawn attention to, drawing on real stories allows narratives such as *Mindhunter* to compound the promise of devastating fact over curated artifice. Douglas and Olshaker are, therefore, guilty of capitalizing on the vulnerability of the “distressing” and “tragic” events to engender empathy in the readers. In continually inviting readers to identify with the subjects of a true-crime text through emotive rhetoric, the consumer’s ability to see past the artifice of narrative is steadily decreased by their strengthening identification.

With this thread of thought in mind, it is important to demonstrate the translation of consumer identification into the visual form. In the same way that Douglas and Olshaker, as writers, can address the reader directly, so too can a visual form such as Netflix’s *Mindhunter*. In *Mindhunter*’s first episode, during Road School, Agents Ford and Bill Tench discuss their lack of unity with the police forces they are “teaching.” Ford muses, “What do we have in common? What unites us? What keeps us all awake at night?” (figs. 6, 7, and 8). The use of “we,” “us,” and the fact that the viewer is directed to meet Ford’s gaze through the shot positioning constitutes the viewer as allies of both Ford and the police. While thinking about the framing of this particular scene, it is appropriate to consider Derrida’s thoughts on the use of the teleprompter: “What are we to make of the interposition of this text that someone reads while pretending to look straight into the eye of a viewer whom he or she can’t see?” (43). The questions asked by Ford do not manifest “naturally,” just as they do not for the reader of the teleprompter; the writer of the series has constructed them, but the perceived immediacy of television masks the “artificiality” of the interaction.



Fig. 6. Agent Ford in *Mindhunter*, season 1, episode 1 (00:46:50–59)



Fig. 7. Agent Tench in *Mindhunter*, season 1, episode 1 (00:46:50–59)



Fig. 8. Ford's gaze in *Mindhunter*, season 1, episode 1 (00:46:50–59)

The implied objectivity of Netflix's *Mindhunter* is further reinforced by the scene that follows Ford's verbal introspection. While introducing the concept of profiling serial killers to the police force of Fairfield, Iowa, Ford projects the real-life mugshot of Manson and remarks: "Monster, right?" (fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Charles Manson in *Mindhunter*, season 1, episode 1 (00:47:03)

In the visual rendition of Douglas's "vocation," the camera replaces the writer and directs the consumer's attention through seemingly detached and neutral narration. In doing so, the camera induces the viewer to regard Ford's characterization of Manson as objective and indisputable. As referenced earlier, Manson fascinates the American public, and while the same concerns do not plague the twenty-first-century audience, the horrors of his legacy have lived on. Manson continues to be present in the American psyche because, as Danesi remarks of serial killer fiction more widely, "the serial killer books [and shows] are part scary narrative, part cautionary tale. They have allowed us as a culture to imagine the serial killer as a collage of images, from modern-day monster to suave bad boy" (26). Representations of serial killers by texts such as *Mindhunter* thus become simulacrum that replace the reality of the individual and their acts.

The immediate introduction of Manson to the viewers through detached narration is significant, furthermore, because it, as Murley observes, "imbues true crime with a sense of timelessness[;] . . . events are fixed in the everhappening present moment" (57). A situation which guarantees that the consumer continues to be disoriented by, as Baudrillard observes of our interactions with "live reporting, the newsflash, the high-impact photo, [and] the eye-witness report" (*The Consumer Society* 34), "the dizzy sense of a total presence at the event" (34). The allusion of the consumer's "total presence" at the true crime event is further bolstered by the representation of criminals through the televisual form: the living image of figures such as Manson will be kept alive and thus serve as an ever-

present reminder of the actuality created by the series; “true crime on the small screen affords visual intimacy, as murder is literally brought into the home” (Murley 110). Derrida’s view on television further supports this notion; “[it] will convey what will continue to stay alive, or rather, the immediate image, the living image of the living: the timbre of our voices, our appearance, our gaze, the movement of our hands” (38). Moreover, as the consumers continue to allow themselves to be cast adrift in the whirls of simulated reality, their awareness of the artifice of this “living image,” as Derrida calls it, is depleted. Thus, the analysis of figure 9 shows that with the character of Ford appearing to meet the viewer’s gaze, there is an invitation for them to enter the simulation and agree with his labeling of Manson as “monster.” Furthermore, the lack of the indefinite article “a” demonstrates the desire to categorize Manson as the ultimate representation of “evil,” a choice which aligns with many people’s views of his “living image.”

One calculated tactic particularly significant for the escalation of trust in the presentation of Manson’s “living image” in Netflix’s *Mindhunter* is the use of lighting or lack thereof. As the set designer of *Mindhunter* Steve Arnold describes, “many scenes are shot with minimal amount of light, [and] the sets themselves are for the most part fairly light in value and color, allowing for the opportunity to silhouette the actors” (78). Admittedly, the viewer is not shown Manson in his corporeal form. However, this does not negate the fact that the scene’s lighting provides a solid basis for authenticity when it is considered in conjunction with the recognition that Manson’s actual mugshot takes center stage (fig. 9). Consequently, the viewer is compelled to focus on the image of Manson and the “monster” narrative created for him by both the subjective viewpoint of Ford and the assumed objective camera perspective. Focusing on this detail of the narrative demonstrates how the deliberate decisions made to construct an engaging narrative undergo a process of perceptive erasure, which culminates in the consumer trusting the narrative’s veracity. The scene has succeeded in establishing what Baudrillard would call “a reality, [an] image, [an] echo, [an] appearance” (*Simulations* 95). Thus, with the consumers’ increasing engagement with such simulacra, the paratextual tactics used to produce them, unfortunately, work toward minimizing the consumer’s sensitivity to the “fictional fashioning” of the artifactualities presented to us through mediums such as true crime.

Conclusion

Shortly after the second season of Netflix's *Mindhunter* aired in 2019, Canter unapologetically remarked that "Douglas's writings should be in the fiction section" (qtd. in Seymour). As the discussion has demonstrated, however, both iterations of Douglas's narrative have been designed in such a way as to make it challenging for the consumer of true crime to accept Canter's statement. The paratexts and other tactics, such as identification, used by Douglas and Olshaker and Netflix's *Mindhunter*, obscure the artifice at the heart of the narratives. Derrida's framework of artifactuality has provided a helpful lens with which to realize the duplicity of the "information" given by Douglas and Olshaker and shown by its serial counterpart. Baudrillard has been particularly useful for homing in on the ways in which consumers relate to this assumed "information." "Few objects today," writes Baudrillard, "are offered alone, without a context of objects which 'speaks' them" (*The Consumer Society* 27). True crime is not offered to consumers alone; there are many other simulations that collaborate to produce the final simulacrum, one which supersedes the actuality of the real story.

Furthermore, both media's consumers are often guilty of passively receiving the information given to them as they trust the medium's authority. By calling on both Baudrillard and Derrida then, not only are we able to recognize the paratextual tactics and not techniques used to establish a consumer's trust in a true-crime text's authenticity, but also that, as Derrida reminds us, "[w]hat is 'transmitted' 'live' on a television channel is *produced before being transmitted*. The 'image' is not a faithful and integral reproduction of what it is thought to reproduce" (40). Therefore, we must keep a critical eye on narratives that describe themselves as true crime, especially regarding their artifactuality.

Emily Alice Farmer is a third-year PhD student at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Hong Kong Baptist University.

This essay is part of the block *Hybridisation and Generic Experiments in Crime Narratives*.

Works Cited

Arnold, Steve "Mindhunter: Not Your Typical FBI Crime Series." *Perspective Magazine*, Nov./Dec. 2018, 70–79. Web. 28 Oct. 2024.

- Baecque, Antoine de, et al. "Cinema and Its Ghosts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida." Trans. Peggy Kamuf. *Discourse* 1–2 (2015): 22–39. *Project MUSE*. Web. 28 Oct. 2024.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. Trans. Chris Turner. London: Sage, 1998. Print.
- . *Simulations*. Trans. Paul Foss et al. New York: Semiotext[e], 1983. *Internet Archive*. Web. 11 Nov. 2024.
- Belcher, Wendy Laura. *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks: A Guide to Academic Publishing Success*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2009. Print.
- Browder, Laura. "True Crime." *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction*. Ed. Catherine Nickerson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010. 121–34. Print.
- Clark, Nick. "Why Blurbs Remain Important in the Digital Age." *Independent*, 21 Dec. 2012. Web. 28 Oct. 2024.
- Danesi, Marcel. *The "Dexter Syndrome": The Serial Killer in Popular Culture*. New York: Peter Lang, 2016. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques, and Bernard Stiegler. *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*. Trans. Jennifer Bajorek. Cambridge: Polity, 2002. Print.
- Douglas, John, and Mark Olshaker. *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI Elite Serial Crime Unit*. London: Arrow Books, 2017. Print.
- Fincher, David, dir. *Mindhunter*. TV-series, season 1, episode 1. Netflix, 16 Aug. 2017.
- Genette, Gérard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. New York: Cambridge UP, 1997. Print.
- Gray, Jonathan. *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. New York: New York UP, 2010. Print.
- Grobar, Matt. "Mindhunter Breakout Cameron Britton Taps into Psychology and Cold Intelligence of Real-Life Serial Killer Edmund Kemper." *Deadline*, 14 Jun. 2018. Web. 28 Oct. 2024.
- Harrison, Marissa A. *Just as Deadly: The Psychology of Female Serial Killers*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2023. Print.
- Klecker, Cornelia. "The Other Kind of Film Frames: A Research Report on Paratexts in Film." *Word & Image* 31.4 (2015): 402–13. Web. 28 Oct. 2024.
- Murley, Jean. *The Rise of True Crime: Twentieth Century Murder and American Popular Culture*. Connecticut: Praeger, 2008. Print.
- Panagiotidou, Maria-Eirini. *The Poetics of Ekphrasis: A Stylistic Approach*. New York: Springer International, 2022. Print.

- Parkinson, Justin, and Luke Jones. "What Explains the Continuing Fascination with Charles Manson?" *BBC News*, 18 Nov. 2014. Web. 28 Oct. 2024.
- Penhall, Joe. Trailer. *Mindhunter*, TV series, season 1. Dir. David Fincher. Netflix, 16 Aug. 2017.
- Reitz, Caroline. "Laughing and Crying: Fugitive Tone in Contemporary Female Crime Narratives." Captivating Criminality 11: Hybridisation and Generic Experiments in Crime Fiction Conference, 27 Jun. 2024, Eszterházy Károly Catholic University, Eger, Hungary. Conference Paper.
- Ritzer, George. Introduction. *The Consumer Society: Myths & Structures*. Jean Baudrillard. Trans. Chris Turner. London: Sage, 1998, 1–24. Print.
- Rorschach, Hermann. *Psychodiagnostics: A Diagnostic Test Based on Perception*. Trans. Paul Lemkau and Bernard Kronenberg. Switzerland: Verlag Hans Huber, 1951. *Internet Archive*. Web. 8 Nov. 2024.
- Seymour, Tom. "The Real Mindhunters: Why 'Serial Killer Whisperers' Do More Harm than Good." *The Guardian*, 19 Aug. 2019. Web. 28 Oct. 2024.
- Smith, Thomas. "*Mindhunter*: See how close the show's serial killers are to the real thing." *NME*, 26 Oct. 2017. Web. 28 Oct. 2024.
- Stephen, Mark. "Trailer Failure. . .?" *Cinema Technology* 1 Nov. 2015. 98. Web. 28 Oct. 2024.
- Wiest, Julie B. "Casting Cultural Monsters: Representations of Serial Killers in U.S. and U.K. News Media." *Howard Journal of Communications* 27.4 (2016): 327–46. *Taylor & Francis Online*. Web. 28 Oct. 2024.
- Wijdicks, Eelco F. M. *Frames of Mind: A History of Neuropsychiatry on Screen*. New York: Oxford UP, 2024. Print.