

Documenting A Serial Killer: The Films of John Borowski

Richard Gawel

Northeastern Illinois University

The term “serial killer” is defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation as a person who commits “three or more separate events in three or more separate locations with an emotional cooling off period between homicides” (Schechter, 2003, 7). Throughout history, the concept of a mad man or woman hunting down innocent victims and killing them for seemingly no reason other than their own pleasure has both terrified and mesmerized people. Though not technically “serial killers”, historical figures such as Vlad The Impaler, a 15<sup>th</sup> century Wallachian Prince who became notorious for impaling his enemies on large stakes that were erected in the ground while he ate amongst the blood and carnage, and Elizabeth Bathory, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian Countess who became known as “The Blood Countess” for not only being a violent ruler, but also supposedly bathing in the blood of young virgins to preserve her own youth, will be forever remembered for their ghastly crimes against humanity (Schechter). However, despite their horrific acts of blood lust and evil, they have found a place within people's fascination of the dark side of the human spirit, being immortalized in classic novels such as Bram Stoker's “Dracula” and even in modern day films such as “Hostel”. Some examples of notorious murderers who achieved an “evil icon” status for their brutality and more accurately fit the profile of a serial killer as defined by the F.B.I. include Francisco Guerrero, a late 19<sup>th</sup> century murderer in Mexico who became famous for decapitating his female victims, Belle Guinness, a mother of three children who was responsible for the slaughter of at least twelve people on her Indiana farm, and, probably most famous of all, the notorious Jack The Ripper who, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, brutally murdered and mutilated at least five women in and around London, England. Fueling Jack The Ripper's legend is the fact that, to this day, he still remains unidentified and, like Vlad The Impaler and Countess Bathory, he has been immortalized in film and literature. More modern serial killers include Ed Gein of Wisconsin who served as the inspiration for films like “Psycho” and “The Texas Chainsaw Massacre” for not only killing, but also for grave robbing and dismembering the dead, John Wayne Gacy the “Killer Clown” who murdered 33 young men near Chicago during the mid seventies, and Jeffrey Dahmer, also of Wisconsin, who was responsible for the deaths of 17 men and boys during the 1980s (Schechter). For

as ghastly as their stories are, their tales of depravity and debauchery continue to intrigue many people. Perhaps this is because they offer a glimpse into a madness that most will never know. Or maybe people's fascination with these real life monsters is more of a cathartic experience, offering a release of internalized, socially unacceptable behavior. Whatever the case may be, people will continue to seek out their stories to satisfy their curiosity for the macabre.

According to Barnouw (1974), the role of the documentary filmmaker takes on many forms. He or she can be an explorer like Robert Flaherty who traveled to exotic, uncharted territories to bring back images and stories of unknown cultures. He or she can play the role of an advocate like John Grierson who, instead of focusing on the lives of distant, foreign people, filmed the lives of people closer to home, bringing to the forefront of people's attention the unknown, often times ignored, plight of the underprivileged in hopes of changing their lives and bringing about social reform. He or she could also take on the role of a painter, like Jean Painleve, whose intention for film was not so much narrative, but more a way to experiment with a new art medium and push the boundaries of what can be shown on film and how it can be shown (through innovative camera use and manipulation through editing.) The role of a chronicler was to retrace historical figures or events. Through the use of archival resources such as still photography and artifacts, scripted scenes with actors, and narration, the chronicler can recount stories from the past in a more naturalistic way than a fictional film can, bringing to the public slices of history that are enlightening and inspiring as well as terrifying and grotesque. Documentary filmmaker John Borowski's career has been that of a chronicler, recounting the lives of men from America's past that epitomized the dark side of the American dream.

John Borowski was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois and his obsession with the art of film began at an early age when he and his mother were frequent visitors to the local theaters to catch a movie. She would even endure going to many an R rated horror film with him because of his growing interest in the genre. This fascination with horror film as well as literature (Edgar Allen Poe and Vincent Price being among his favorite creators of the macabre) would continue throughout his entire

life. He would later become interested in the work of horror film auteurs David Cronenberg (“Scanners”), George A. Romero (“Night of The Living Dead”) and John Carpenter (“Halloween”), but his biggest influence in film was Alfred Hitchcock with “Psycho” being his all time favorite film.

John Borowski made his first horror movies as a teenager with an 8mm camera with a friend. Together, they would create monsters with rudimentary special effects and use fake blood to tell their stories. This humble beginning in the cinema led to him attending Chicago’s Columbia College where he would graduate with a Bachelor’s degree in film. He was trained in both fictional and documentary filmmaking with an emphasis in fictional films and, to this day, Borowski’s passion is truly for fictional narrative filmmaking. However, according to Borowski, documentary filmmaking is much more feasible for someone working with little or no budget because they allow for funding and the piecing together of material over a long period of time. As an independent filmmaker without the benefit of funding from a major film company, Borowski has chosen to create documentaries for this reason and successfully combined his passion for filmmaking with his love for the macabre by choosing serial killers as the subjects for his films.

To date, John Borowski has made two documentary films and is currently working on his third. His first film, entitled “H. H. Holmes: America’s First Serial Killer”, chronicles the life of Herman Mudgett, a man who had a “castle” built in the Englewood neighborhood of Chicago where he would lure unsuspecting tourists visiting Chicago to their deaths in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. His second film, “Albert Fish”, tells the story of a serial killer, pedophile, and cannibal who preyed upon young children in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both men, now legends in the annals of crime history, were truly human monsters and, with the help of artists like John Borowski, their stories continue to haunt and terrify people even today. When choosing subjects, Borowski says he prefers to base his movies on people that have not yet been portrayed in film yet and are “rich in psychological aberrations”. His interest in criminal psychology further pushes him to chronicle the lives of men who are driven by madness and the pursuit of destruction and human suffering for personal satisfaction.

“H. H. Holmes: America’s First Serial Killer” was released in 2004 by John Borowski’s own production company Waterfront Productions. By combining archival photographs and newspapers of the late 1800s, instruments and props also of the same era, dramatizations featuring actors playing the parts of Holmes and his victims, interviews with modern day experts, and a narration by actor Tony Jay, John tells the story of Herman Mudgett, a man who was physically and psychologically abused as a child by his father and school bullies. On one such occasion of torment by his schoolmates, Herman was forced to confront a human skeleton, which was propped inside of a doctor’s office, alone in the dark. This experience, though terrifying for the young Herman, fueled his interest in human anatomy. He began conducting crude experiments on small animals and followed his pursuits to the University of Michigan where he earned a medical degree in 1884. During his years in college, Herman perfected his skills as a con artist as he continuously scammed insurance companies by taking out life insurance policies on fictional people and then producing a corpse to collect the money. Where Herman found these bodies is a matter of speculation (either by grave robbing or murder.) In 1886, Herman Mudgett arrived in Chicago under the name of Doctor Henry Howard Holmes and opened up a pharmacy in Chicago’s Englewood neighborhood. He became a pillar of the community and a few years after his arrival, construction began on a building that would later be known by the public as “The Castle”. This building stood three stories tall and housed shops and a bank on the ground floor with hotel rooms on the two floors above. In the basement, however, was Holmes’ secret laboratory complete with torture racks, a dissection table, and an oven large enough to cook a human body. By hiring and firing construction workers on a daily basis, only Holmes knew the true layout of the interior of the building which also contained hidden passageways, chutes that could carry bodies down from the second and third floors to the basement, and hallways and doorways that led to nowhere. Chicago’s World Fair of 1893 became the perfect opportunity for Holmes to satisfy his need for blood as he would be able to lure innocent visitors to their deaths by inviting them to stay at his “castle”. Several of these visitors would never be heard from again. The authorities would

eventually apprehend Holmes after a failed insurance scam and, while in prison, Holmes confessed to 27 murders although it is believed that the true body count may have exceeded 50 (because forensic science was not yet an advanced form of investigation, the actual number could not be determined) (Borowski, 2004).

John Borowski's Waterfront Productions released "Albert Fish" in 2007. With this film, Borowski delves into the life of a man who was a real life "boogeyman" preying on innocent, young children and feeding the nightmares of the American public. Like H. H. Holmes, Albert Fish's childhood was plagued by abuse. He was placed in a Christian orphanage at the age of five and, while living there, he witnessed and experienced beatings at the hands of those who ran the home. Reportedly, he also began to derive sexual pleasure from these beatings and from the abuse he saw inflicted on others. As a young adult, he became a prostitute and engaged in unusual sex acts with both men and women and developed an interest for urine and excrement. At the age of 28, he married for the first time and raised 6 children with his wife all the while continuing to have violent sex with young men. He was employed as a traveling house painter, which gave him the opportunity to travel across the country making money and seducing children with whom he could have sex and/or kill. Because of the abuse he endured at the orphanage, he developed the desire to inflict pain on others as well as be hurt himself. This underlying passion for abuse carried with him his entire life as did a deep interest in religion. He seemed to be particularly fascinated by stories from the Bible in which torture and violence were the basis (crucifixions, beheadings, etc.) and he interpreted these stories literally, believing that there was virtue in pain and that sexuality was wrong. The Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac influenced Fish into thinking that he needed to sacrifice a child in order to rid himself of sin. This twisted path Albert Fish led culminated into what was probably the most horrific act he committed in his criminal career, the kidnapping and murder of 6-year-old Grace Budd in 1928. He entered her parents' home under the pretense of hiring her older brother for work and convinced her parents to let him take her to his niece's birthday party. Charmed by his demeanor and wealth, her parents agreed

and Fish too young Grace Budd away to her eventual slaughter. Years later he was apprehended by the police and, while in prison, he wrote to the mother of Grace Budd one of the most startling confession letters ever penned by a criminal. In the letter, he explained in shocking detail how he killed, dismembered, and ate her. It went on to explain that she died a virgin and this, according to artist serial killer expert Joe Coleman as interviewed in Borowski's film, further reveals Fish's literal interpretation of the Bible that sex is sinful and that by killing her, he saved her soul. Albert Fish was put to death via the electric chair in 1936 (Borowski, 2007).

In these films, the viewer witnesses John Borowski's talent for narrative story telling, his craftsmanship as a director, and his love for horror. In both films, Borowski utilizes live actors to further portray the lives of the men he is documenting. However, with "Albert Fish", this use of actors is taken to a new level as he has them reenact scenes from the Bible as well as the religious visions Albert Fish experienced. This helps to show the extent of Fish's madness and his literal view of what the Bible taught him. With the use of photography and newspaper clippings from the years in which these men murdered, the audience is given genuine, historical evidence of their crimes and the authentic props (such as the surgical instruments and flashlights used in his Holmes film) that Borowski has his actors use in their dramatizations that not only serve to provide a historical reference, but also further demonstrates his dedication to his projects and the lengths he goes to in order to bring to the screen the most accurate portrayal of these men's lives. The modern day experts that he interviews for his films such as serial killer novelist Harold Schechter, crime artist Joe Coleman, as well as forensic experts and psychoanalysts give the audience further insight into the psyche of these killers, recounts of their methods and victims, and testimony to the law enforcement of the days in which they committed their crimes and how they were ultimately caught. Over all of these representations of his subjects is the narration of their stories as spoken by Tony Jay whose unique, low voice further exemplifies the horror behind these killers' lives. His words lead the viewer through every gory detail of their crimes. When asked why Borowski chose Tony Jay as the narrator for both

of his films, he responded that he ideally would have wanted his childhood hero Vincent Price to act as the story teller so he wanted a voice actor that could convey the same type of maliciousness. He went on to say that he had always wanted to work with Jay since he had heard his voice in Walt Disney's "Beauty and The Beast".

The filmmaking process for John Borowski begins with exhaustive research of the subject in which he is interested and this includes investigations into newspapers and photo archives of the past, visits to historical institutions as well as the childhood homes of the murderers and the courts in which they were tried. After the research aspect is completed, he then begins work on the script, which includes writing the voice over narrations. The next step of the process for Borowski is the actual recording of the narration followed by the creation of storyboards and casting calls for actors. The dramatizations are then filmed either in a studio or on location and everything is then edited together by Borowski himself. The final step of the process involves finding a music composer and sound designer and completing an audio mix for the film.

The problem faced by many documentary filmmakers is how to present the facts of their subject and make it interesting enough for an audience. Some documentarians run the risk of their films being classified as fiction if they skew their facts too far from reality as well as putting too much of their own feelings and viewpoints into their movies. John Borowski says that he presents his material in an objective manner by focusing on only the facts of the cases. He says that the dramatizations allow him an artistic license to be creative, but is careful to infer to the audience that they are just simply reenactments used to create mood and atmosphere and are not actual historical scenes. He goes on to say that because of the extreme nature of serial killers' lives and their crimes, it isn't necessary to stray too far from their actual stories. Borowski feels that many documentaries come across as boring when they merely cut back and forth between photographs and interviews, so he tries to break that monotony by incorporating these dramatizations in his films which not only further captures the audience's attention, but also moves the film along much like a fictional narrative.



Although he is unsure of exactly what impact his films have on its viewers, his intention is to create a feeling of dread and fear within the audience as well as a disturbing atmosphere (which is very much apparent.) However, his films also drive home a sociological message that violence breeds more violence (Borowski, 2007). This message is very much evident within his subjects' biographies. H. H. Holmes was the product of a harsh upbringing and suffered abuse at the hands of his father and his peers. With no social networking scheme to fall back on and seemingly no emotional support, it can simply be hypothesized that Holmes internalized all of his aggression and hatred for those who have hurt him during his youth. This internal darkness grew throughout the years and eventually bled its way out of his soul and he was able to become the physical manifestation of the evil he was harboring inside. The same is very true for Albert Fish who shared a similar story of abuse as a child. The physical, sexual, and psychological violence he encountered at the orphanage in which he was raised fueled his desire to hurt and be hurt, to punish and be punished. Couple this, again, with a lack of a positive social network and no emotional support, Fish had no choice but to rely on himself for defense against the cruel world in which he grew up. With no one to teach him otherwise, he interpreted the Bible as a very literal message from God that taught him that salvation can be achieved through making others suffer. Albert Fish was a powder keg of evil that exploded against the society that raised him. Borowski's third film (still in production) is another documentary about a serial killer. This time, his subject is a man by the name of Carl Panzram, a man Borowski himself describes as a lifelong prisoner who was brutally abused in various U. S. state prisons who would later kill people in retaliation for being tortured. Along with this sociological message that violence breeds violence, Borowski feels that people are drawn to stories about serial killers because they are fascinated by what could drive a human to commit such evil against another human being. People who want to know how and why these mad men and women tortured, killed, and cannibalized innocent victims. It is a sick, dark curiosity into the heart of darkness and, although some people may not be interested in the horror movie genre, Borowski feels most people do have a true interest in real crime and the people who commit them. The more

brutal the crime, the more interested people seem to be in them which perhaps raises another question: How much does the media influence modern day psychopaths? This is a question that will long be pondered by psychoanalysts and philosophers. And though Borowski himself may not answer this question, he certainly proves that the breeding ground for serial killers resides in their childhood as well as in a lack of emotional support to those who most certainly need it the most.

As mentioned earlier, John Borowski is an independent filmmaker who creates his movies over the course of several years without the benefit of assistance from a major film company to provide support. Undiscouraged by this, Borowski presses forward simply because of his love for film, a love that he has carried with him his entire life. Because he works within the independent market, he faces the same obstacles so many filmmakers attempt to overcome in order to get their work out to the public. A problem that he routinely encounters is when he looks to distributors for funding, but is turned away and told to return when his project is completed and when he does return, he is often times given no money or guarantees. Another problem that Borowski faces is when his films are uploaded to the Internet and find their way to share sites in which people can download his films for free without Borowski receiving any money for it. A sign of his resiliency is his persistence in the face of such adversity to press forward and continue to make films on the independent market, funding his movies himself, and spending years to complete a project that he sees through every step of the way. He says he is inspired to continue to make films by, what he perceives as, an abundance of “awful” movies that are released. This pushes him to be even more creative and become more technically adept. He also states that he is inspired by classic films from the past proving that there was indeed a time in which the majority of movies that made their way to the big screen were worth watching. He feels that documentaries will continue to fall behind the fictional narrative market because, sadly, they will always be seen as generally boring and instructional. However, Borowski does not believe the movie market is so much separated by documentaries versus fictional films as it is independent films versus major releases with major releases clearly leading the way because of the drive to make more and more

money (probably contributing to the release of so many movies that appeal to the masses, but lack any social relevancy.)

John Borowski has successfully combined his passion for the macabre and filmmaking by creating visions of a nightmarish reality based on men that were truly living monsters. The material with which he works is far more terrifying than anything that can be fabricated in a Hollywood factory. His passion for what he does is evident in the lengths he goes to get his films made: self funding, self producing, hours upon hours of research, script writing; every aspect of the movie making process is overseen by Borowski knowing that his films may only be viewed by a smaller audience because of the lack of funding and distribution. Yet, he continues to persevere and follow his dream showing the size of his heart for the art form that he has adored since he was a child watching and loving horror films. Borowski has said that he would eventually like to make a fictional film (probably a horror film about a serial killer!) (Borowski, 2007) and when he does, audiences will be able to see the true extent of his imagination by watching a film directed by a man who has spent years researching and documenting some of history's most depraved and diabolical murderers. With this background, his insight into the makings of a killer, and his acknowledgement of the social relevancy that films are capable of, people can expect his future endeavors to be not only horrifying and entertaining, but perhaps also a reflection of the very society in which they live begging them to question the world around them.

## References

Barnouw, E. (1974). *Documentary: A History of The Non-Fiction Film*. New York:

Oxford University Press.

Borowski, J. (Producer, Writer, Director). (2004). *H.H. Holmes: America's First Serial Killer*.

United States: Waterfront Productions.

Borowski, J. (Producer, Writer, Director). (2007). *Albert Fish*. United States: Waterfront

Productions.

Schechter, H. (2003). *The Serial Killer Files*. New York: Ballantine Books.