"The Dog Doesn't Talk": The Unreliable Narrator of *Mindhunter*

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Abstract— This paper deals with how the character of the FBI agent, Holden Ford, in the Netflix series Mindhunter (2017) skews the representation of the serial killers whom the show explores, as his personal obsessive fascination with the criminals' deviant behaviors makes him a heavily prejudiced chronicler. Holden's preponderance over the narrative unfolding makes him the character most revealed to the audience, and he emerges almost as an unreliable narrator as his attraction towards deviancy dictates the perspective of the portrayal of the criminals. Moving beyond Booth's classic definition of the unreliable narrator, Holden's character colors, and at the same time, aggravates the popular culture obsession with the crime genre. Holden's sympathy seems to lie with the serial killers whose psyches are deeply delved into in this show, as the FBI agent himself teeters towards psychopathic behavior in his dangerously intimate relationships with the serial killers. Hence, this paper seeks to explore how criminology is represented in popular media through such representations of behaviors which are deviant but simultaneously border on the sensational.

Index Terms— Mindhunter, popular culture, true crime, unreliable narrator.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mindhunter (2017) is a Netflix series inspired by the book *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit* by John E. Douglas and Mark Olshaker. Douglas is an American retired special agent who, co-authoring with American writer Olshaker, wrote the semiautobiographical account of the Behavioral Science Unit beginning to profile notorious serial killers such as Wayne Williams, the Atlanta child killers, Ed Kemper**,** and how the FBI developed a process to predict the behavior of wanted criminals.

The TV show revolves around special agents Holden Ford and Bill Tench, who travel around the United States to interview serial killers in different prisons, and with the help of psychologist Wendy Carr, compile all the data retrieved into scientifically usable categories to formulate a process which they call 'profiling'— a process which helps solve ongoing cases by anticipating the actions of suspect. They delve into the psyche of multiple deviant murderers in order to understand the rationale behind their crimes. The series closely follows Agent Ford playing the role of the chronicler who records the interviews, not only for the plot on-screen but also for the viewers. He can be termed as the protagonist of the story, the narrative being heavily focused on Holden's character arc as he stumbles upon the untapped potential of incarcerated serial killers in providing invaluable insight into the criminal mind, struggles to navigate the bureaucratic alleyways to attain permission to undertake this controversial project, to finally sitting across infamous convicted murderers to interview and dissect their modii operandi.

Although the series is about the inception and tremendously important work of the Behavioral Science Unit of the FBI and their immense contribution to the process of modern profiling which still helps the Bureau to solve multiple cases, the character of Holden definitely colors the depiction of the serial killers, making the series more than just a simplistic, objective record of the events which took place. The representation is heavily influenced by Holden's personal propensities and idiosyncrasies as someone who gets entirely immersed in the process and even gets to the point of obsession for his engagement with deviant behavior on a very personal level. The changes in Holden's character over the course of the two seasons is an interesting arc by itself as the audience notices the deterioration of his mental health and collapse of his personal life which align with his concerning increase in interest and proximity to the multiple sociopaths. Holden's centrality in the plot places him in the role of the narrator as it is through his direct experience that the viewer gains access to the world on-screen. His obsessive fascination with the serial killers raises the important ethical question of representation of crime in popular media as the sensationalizing of the content doubtlessly affects public perception. In the case of *Mindhunter*, the central character molds the portrayal of deviancy as it is heavily influenced by the narrator's own psychological inclinations, establishing Holden as a formidable unreliable chronicler.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To recognize how the central character's personal inclinations impinge the process of chronicling in the show *Mindhunter*.
- To understand how the representation of crime in popular media is sensationalized through such narratives.

III. RESEARCH QUESTION

- How does the obsession of popular culture with the crime genre get translated to the representation of deviant behavior in television media?

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

The overarching narrative of *Mindhunter* is that the three primary characters of Holden Ford, Bill Tench, and Wendy Carr embark on a scientific process to decode how the mind of the criminal works through psychological categorizations, which will ultimately lead to an effective procedure of 'profiling' to help solve ongoing or unsolved cases. Damian Cox in his chapter "*Mindhunter*: The Possibility of Knowing Evil" distinguishes the three characters' epistemological approaches to the study. Cox is quick to hint that Holden's character, which is loosely based on John E. Douglas, has the least "scientific" of the three as he functions largely on intuition. He is the one who gets the most personally, and arguably even emotionally, involved with the serial killers they interview, as his engagement with abhorrent behavior ceases to be from an objective distance of a scientist. Ford focuses heavily on "[understanding] serial killers from the inside" [1], which becomes a very complicated approach for the study of a group of people who are inherently sociopathic, manipulative narcissists. His interviews tactics come under admonition of his partners, as they become increasingly problematic with the development of his ego— be it bribing Jerry Brudos, or sympathising with Richard Speck, or his increasing proximity with Ed Kemper. Ford is definitely play-acting [1], but his unethical interventions into a study which ideally should have been in what Carr calls "near perfect laboratory conditions" [2] interferes with the scientific validity of the entire project. Holden's personality is the most revealed in these moments, when the apparent façade seems to be real to be only that, and the viewers begin to slightly question Holden's morality.

This questioning is not by the viewer alone— the characters on screen are seen to share this scepticism about Holden's strategies. Besides the obvious disapproval of Tench and Carr expressed at significant moments, Holden's partner Debbie notes that his subtle manipulative strategy of extracting a confession from a suspect in one of the cases they solve is questionable: she states he "staged it. Like a director." [3]. His methodology fails to be convincingly scientific and ethical, not to mention that bouyed by the success of the efficacy of his developing profiling, Holden becomes increasingly hubristic [4]. His general attitude invariably jeopardizes the authenticity of the study conducted, as his arrogance on being intuitively right on multiple occassions makes him conceited and myopic in certain ways.

Holden's character can easily be pinned as the one to which the audience relates to the most, as is pointed out by Chowdhury and Singh in [5]. The young and enthusiastic agent is power-hungry, overly eager, and narcissistic; that he naturally seems to have an intuitive knack for coaxing the serial killers as well as profiling suspects for ongoing cases add to his ego. He seems entirely unfazed when he encounters extremely aberrant and deviant behaviors, and is seen to almost derive pleasure from the exercise of engagement with henious crimes and their gory details. Hence, the series not only reveals the serial killer's psyche, but also offers an insight into the nature of the investigator. The representation of serial killers and the characters of the detectives is complicated in this audio visual narrative. McFadden [6] talks about the paradox of representability and knowledge found in the show: even though we are privy to exclusive insights into the harrowing details of some of the most infamous murders in crime history and what exactly the killer was thinking while carrying out the terrible crimes, that does not naturally lead to any sort of scientifically infallible understanding of the serial killer's mind. The investigators seem to be in as much dark as the audience— perhaps there is only partial disenchantment from the sensationalised versions of the crimes. Jonathan Groff, who plays Holden Ford on the show, reveals in an interview with the *GQ* exactly this aim of disillusionment of the shows: "One of the big mission statements of the show was to eliminate this idea of the mustache-twisting comic-book serial killer. Because in reality, serial killers often have average IQs. They're not geniuses. They're sad, f*****-up, dark human beings. The idea of the show is to humanize—not humanize their actions but to show them as f*****-up, messy, disgusting humans instead of to romanticize the idea of the capital-S, capital-K serial killers. They're all narcissists. They're all so fame-obsessed. And they all have problems with their moms." [7]. Smith expands on this, saying that *Mindhunter* helps to break off the façade of the romanticized evil being caught by the romanticized hero— the series shows realistic, distrubingly human characters grappling with the possibilities of deviant psychology in a landscape which defies logic in most scenarios and the rationale, if there is one, behind gruesome crimes remains in the dark for the most part [4]. The complex world of the serial killer and the profiler is further complicated by the nuanced representation of the crimes and the criminals in this groundbreaking show which attempts to answer the age old question of "why" criminals act the way they do.

V. METHODOLOGY

This paper aims to place the chracter of Holden Ford within the definition of the unreliable narrator provided by Wayne C. Booth in his work *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), and also the internal tensions of the protagonist within the theoretical framework. Ford's unreliability as the chronicler complicates the representation of the crime genre in the popular media of the Netflix show *Mindhunter*.

VI. ANALYSIS

The first episode the Netflix TV series *Mindhunter* shows FBI Special Agent Holden Ford, after a hostage-negotiator situation, coming back to his apartmend and drinking milk from a bottle. The association of drinking milk with psychopaths is an age old obsession of popular media, be it Alex in Stanley Kubrick's masterpeice *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) or the character of the girlfriend, Rose, in Jordan

Peele's avante garde *Get Out* (2017). Holden drinking milk seems like a small easter egg left by David Fincher, hinting at the later unnerving behavior of the character. He is established as an young, enthusiastic agent who wants to make some substantial change in the world of criminology, questions existing methods and their viability, and is eager to prove himself through his work. He is preoccupied with cases where the motive of the perpetrator is shrouded in irrationality, which brings in psychological complexities in the process of profiling that is developed by the Behavioral Sciene Unit.

Holden's deep interest in deviant criminals is first demonstrated in his presentation to a police precinct about Charles Manson. The other people in the room very clearly express their disgust, but Holden perseveres: he continues talking about Manson and what might have motivated him to behave in the way he did, delving into his family history and struggling to pin down the reason behind his abhorrent behaviour to difficult childhood. Holden looks at the notorious figure and recongises, or atleast tries to, something beyond just the cult leader who instigated henious crimes. This earliest representation of a personality like Manson through the lens of the show's protagonist naturally prompts the audience too to instinctively recongnise not a base, abhorrent criminal but a human who was perhaps a product of his circumstances. This deliberate shift in the general perception of criminals is seen to be a result of the proximity of the narrative to Holden's character; even though the show is a record of the BSU's activities, the viewer experiences it all *through* Holden, hence giving him the important role of the narrator of the story.

Booth proposes that the "unreliability" of a narrator is not simply based on lying or even being deliberately deceptive, it is more profoundly understood through the narrator being "potentially deceptive" [8]. Holden is not cunningly deceptive: his unreliability is a pure result of his own psychological make-up. He is borderline narcissistic, and there are quite a few instances which show him teetering towards psychopathy himself: his unhealthy obsession with serial killers, the ease with which he prevaricates to illicit a confession or information from interviewees, and how he remains absolutely unperturbed when dealing with monstrous abberant behaviour— all these point to a propensity to deviant behaviour. He is not just an admirer, he is so intent on finding out how the criminal mind works that he does not hesitate before putting himself dangerously close to the criminal himself.

Holden can be labelled, according to Booth's categorisation, as the "narrator agent" [8], as he is not just a mere observar but plays a substantial role in the course of the action as well. But what this also entails is that his ideologies slowly creep into the ideology of the larger narrative and hence the representation of something as controverial and sensitive as deviant psychology. There can of course be no viable claim that any individual can exist in vacuum and be

an entirely objective chronicler; there perhaps is no such thing as objectivity in art or any form of representation. It is to be noted that specifically in case of the true crime genre, there will invariably occur certain deviation from the actual turn of events and the actions of the real persons involved. However, in case of *Minhunter*, even though the narrator is not omnipresent or omniscient, he holds a definite power over the viewer. His problematic behaviour does not go unnoticed or unidentified, but there is an extent to which the audience naturally inclines towards the protagonist and even imbibes his personal ideologies. This is how the representation is impinged and coloured by the unreliable narrator, and which is then naturally internalised in the reception by the audience.

The relationship Holden shares with the serial killer Ed Kemper is of particular interest when it comes to analysing representation of crimes on *Mindhunter* and the role Holden plays. Not only does Holden grow quite close to Kemper on a very personal level, well beyond the professional dynamic between an FBI Agent and a convicted murderer or even a researcher and his subject. The lengths to which Holden goes to establish an intimate bond seems dangerously effortless at times: it does not seem that he is pretending to take a liking to him as a part of his strategy but that he actually takes a liking to him as a person. This goes a little beyond just humanising the serial killer: it almost normalizes them. And this attempt at normalization is quite concretely a result of Holden's intervention in the lens through which these characters are portrayed. The discussions and casual conversations that Holden and Kemper share seem like friendly chats at times: Kemper's overt and horrific misogyny do not seem to faze Holden at the slightest. It is not suggested that Holden himself is misogynistic; he shows no such traits. But what is suggested that the deadpan serious face of Holden, never once bertraying any emotions or horror at what he learns, becomes concerning as he becomes increasingly hubristic and egoistic through the progression of the episodes. Holden is definitely putting up a façade and pretending to be friends with someone like Kemper, something that is proved as his guise falls apart in the last episode when Kemper embraces him in a friendly hug and declares him a true friend which triggers a serious psychological breakdown in Holden.

Holden may have been pretending the entire time in front of his interviewees, but that does not negate the fact that he had a frightening nonchalance to the horrors of the cases they dealt with. This definitely shows traces of psychopathic behaviour in himself. That he is socially awkward, speaks in an emotionless monotone, and is definitely an overconfident narcissist add on to the speculation of him not being a "normal" human being. It is not surprising that his dabbling in deviant psychology affects his personal life as well as personality, as he is also shown to be an obsessive workaholic who does not seem to have much of a social or family life. His all-encompassing passion for deviancy manifests in himself staggering towards psychopathic behaviour. "The

division between profiler and killer, hero and villain, thus become murkier" [4]— a result of the unreliability of the narrator who become dangerously similar to the aberrant behavior he is supposed to chronicle.

VII. CONCLUSION

Holden Ford is not a proven psychopath; he is, afterall, based on the real Special Agent Douglas who wrote the book of which *Mindhunter* is an adaptation. Even though the fictional character shows disturbing behaviours, they finally end up revealing the complexities of human psychology and how taxing it is to work in such close proximity to deviancy. It must, however, also be noted that neither Tench nor Carr are this deeply affected by their work— Holden's deep fascination for this particular kind of criminal acts is what takes a toll on his mental health as he fails to keep a professional distance. It is also this obsession of his that seeps into the narrative and alters the course of the typical representation of deviant criminals as one-dimensional evil monsters.

While on one hand the show, primarily through Holden's attraction towards cult figures in the contemporary crime scene, it is also through Holden that there is a certain disenchantment of this elusive world of serial killers. Mindhunter adeptly builds up the serial killers' menacing reputations initially, only to dismantle this perception and expose the relatively unremarkable, dissatisfied, and self-absorbed individuals underneath the sensationalized exteriors [4]. The confession of David Berkowitz, the 'Son of Sam', of how there was no Devil who talked through his neighbour's and gave him orders to go on a killing spree [9] is one of the most astounding moments of disillusionment. Just as Holden stains the narrative to build up an admiration for the serial killer shown on screen, he also simultaneously aids in humanizing them to pitiful, pathetic people, whose depravity cannot be asserted as acts of pure evil or serious psychological issues.

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