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# “Unnatural, unnatural, unnatural, unnatural unnatural” . . . but real? The Toolbox Murders (Dennis Donnelly, 1978) and the Exploitation of True Story Adaptations

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## Introduction

- <sup>1</sup> In broaching the question of what exploitation cinema exploits, and even how it exploits what it does, the possibility arises that a film’s style and narration is *itself* engaging in the exploitative process. Dennis Donnelly’s 1978 film *The Toolbox Murders* is a useful case study in terms of style, construction, narrative, and genre. *The Toolbox Murders* centers on the murders of several young women at an apartment complex, and the kidnapping of one teenage girl, Laurie Ballard. The film follows the police investigation, the independent investigation of Laurie’s brother John, and Laurie’s captivity at the hands of the building’s superintendent, Vance, and ends after Laurie’s breaking free from her abductor with an intertitle stating that the film is based on true events. While not transcending its widely regarded status as “exploitation,”<sup>1</sup> it does demonstrate the possibility of being either aesthetically and narratively sophisticated or clumsy. However, when the possibility of the film being based on a true story arises, the perceived flaws woven into the film begin to appear a by-product of adapting a “real-life” event, and accepted as a necessary part of the narrative, in spite of the fact that there is no record of such events ever having occurred.
- <sup>2</sup> My aim, therefore, is to explore this particular text, which closely adheres to traditional conceptions of exploitation cinema,<sup>2</sup> to demonstrate how *The Toolbox Murders* exploits

viewer cognition through the use of “true story” framing and acknowledgement to excuse what can be understood as incoherent narration, based on the definition established by Todd Berliner (2010). To do so, I will engage with discourse on true story adaptation to show how the trope functions within the framework of the story.

- 3 Eric Schaefer (1999) highlights the fact that the marketing of exploitation films has regularly tried to situate narratives within the realm of “real life.”<sup>3</sup> Schaefer writes: “Closely tied to the timeliness of a film, but also to sexual and other aspects was veracity” (109). He further explicates that “[a]udiences were encouraged to put aside what reservations they might have about seeing a disreputable film because it was ‘true’ or ‘factual’” (109). However, *The Toolbox Murders* is anomalous, as the implication that the film is based on a true story is (1) part of, but not central to the marketing campaign,<sup>4</sup> and (2) necessary to the justification of narrative incoherence and ideological incongruity in the film.
- 4 I refer in this essay to narrative incoherence in the manner explored by Todd Berliner in *Hollywood Incoherent: Narration in Seventies Cinema*. Berliner explains that he uses “the word ‘incoherence’ [...] not in its common metaphoric sense of irrationality or meaninglessness but rather in the literal sense to mean a lack of connectedness or integration among different elements. The incoherencies in seventies cinema are like those of a drawer full of knickknacks” (25). In other words, Berliner’s primary thesis rests on the consideration of these seemingly disconnected, unrelated elements as fundamental to experiential complexity for the viewer. Such a consideration is key to the pleasures provided by the viewing of *The Toolbox Murders*, and therefore highly relevant to an analysis of the film’s narration. Similarly, Schaefer notes the commonality of these types of incongruities and incoherencies, stating that “although I will argue that exploitation films operated out of particular ideological positions, these positions were filled with fissures due to the fractured, delirious nature of the films” (94). *The Toolbox Murders* adheres closely to Berliner’s description, though perhaps without the eloquence of his particular case studies.<sup>5</sup>
- 5 It is, however, in the narration of its story that *The Toolbox Murders* becomes an unusual case study. This presents three separate problems: (1) does the process of adapting a true story affect the way in which traditional narrative elements are presented, particularly when the process of storytelling is rendered atypical of classical narration? (2) how does the film itself present these narrative elements, and (3) to what effect?

## Approaches to True Story Adaptation

- 6 Adapting true or historical events is not unproblematic, particularly where theory and theoretical conceptions of adaptation are concerned. Aside from fundamental philosophical questions like “what is true?” and “can truth be known?”,<sup>6</sup> we start to delve into linear narrative conceptions of history. Linda Hutcheon writes that “[t]he seeming simplicity of the familiar label, ‘based on a true story,’ is a ruse: in reality, such historical adaptations are as complex as historiography itself” (18). The implication here is that, in recounting history, even academically adhering closely to supported accounts, one must still be selective and carefully choose how the information is organized. Taking such events and fictionalizing them further complicates the process, resulting in the alteration of facts and accounts and favoring storytelling over veracity.

- 7 Screenwriter Ronald Harwood addresses this concern when discussing his script for *The Pianist* (Roman Polanski, 2002):

*The Pianist* also deals with a dreadful historical event. You can't start glamorizing it, you can't start trying to soften it. You have to tell it as you believe it is. And there is no ultimate truth of it because you can't explain that to anybody, so the truth is very difficult to get at. But whatever the truth is within one on that subject, you have to be true to that truth. (Wilkinson and Price, 2007, 103)

Therefore, Harwood admittedly gauges truth and history from a subjective positioning, which, in turn, allows him to develop an appropriate form and structure for the narrative. However, this form takes on different ramifications precisely because of its relative context to "real" events.

- 8 With regards to violent films like *The Toolbox Murders*, the acknowledgement of the text as having a source in real events becomes an explanation or excuse for the content. Joel Black argues that "[a]rtistic depictions of violence are less likely to seem gratuitous and sensational when, as in the case of *In Cold Blood*, they re-enact actual incidents and can be considered a form of psychological or social documentary" (2002, 113). This statement echoes Schaefer's statement about audiences overcoming their reservations of content based on claims to veracity. However, critical discourses problematize this view. Violent films particularly can be critically accused of disrespectfully sensationalizing or trivializing a tragic event.<sup>7</sup>
- 9 William Verrone argues that discerning the validity of such criticisms is based entirely upon a larger understanding of context: "[a]ttempting to understand how adaptations interact with sociocultural contexts allows us to see how and why directors make certain choices in the adaptation process" (2011, 33). This, in my view, risks placing too much emphasis on the role that culture plays in the establishment and form of an adaptation. I will, however, later humor this position, establishing the film's socio-political context specifically in light of the progress made with women's liberation and feminism in the 1970s, to show how, even within this view, *The Toolbox Murders* proves unusual and ideologically murky.
- 10 Thomas Leitch places the "true story" adaptation within the context of marketing and expectation: "[g]iven that the claim to be based on a true story is always strategic or generic rather than historical or existential, what exactly does it mean? One thing it does not mean is that the film is an accurate record of historical events" (2007, 282). Leitch's comment here is quite apt, as, despite the ending intertitle for *The Toolbox Murders*, there is no recorded evidence for the film actually being based on a true story. Although it purports to have changed the names of the characters, the events have not been connected to any similar events in 1967.<sup>8</sup> While this problematizes an analysis of the film as an adaptation of a previously existing text or events, *reading* it as an adaptation, using relevant theory, reveals the way in which an incoherent narrative can be cognitively processed as, at minimum, *acceptably* incoherent.

## The Narration and Cognitive Effect of *The Toolbox Murders*

- 11 I have chosen this film to analyze with respect to adaptation and the exploitation thereof because the film's structure and form are so unusual that it only becomes sensical and in some cases acceptable once it purports to have a basis in reality.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, I argue

that it is the appropriation and exploitation of the "true story" guise that affects the viewer's cognitive reading of, and response to, the film. The film not only proves to exploit female nudity and extreme violence ("atrocious" or "gore"), but it exploits a specific adaptive framing to excuse a messy and incoherent narrative.

- 12 The film begins inside a car as it is driven at night, religious radio stations are heard on the soundtrack. Interrupting this sequence, there is a flashback to a car crash in which a young woman is killed, with the past event and the current event ambiguously blurring into each other.
- 13 After this introduction, we see a large man wearing all black and a ski mask with a toolbox. He goes into an apartment building, and the film follows him as he uses keys to enter two separate apartments and brutally murder three women, using different items from the toolbox. The police then become involved, begin an investigation, and we are introduced to Vance, the landlord and caretaker. The next sequence presents Laurie Ballard, a 15-year-old girl, Joanne, her mother, and her older brother, John and their home life—the family is close but Joanne works late nights at a bar. The following night, a woman who lives in the apartment below the Ballards is murdered with a nail gun after masturbating in the bath, and Laurie is abducted by the murderer. The police return, but become so concerned with the sex lives of the victims, they miss any useful evidence. John, trying to find his own evidence as to Laurie's whereabouts, goes into the apartments and runs into Kent, a classmate, and Vance's nephew, who is cleaning the apartments. It is then revealed that Vance is the killer, and has tied Laurie up in his house and is dressing and feeding her, treating her as a surrogate daughter to replace his own who was killed in the car crash shown at the beginning of the film. He reveals his religious mania which is the motivation for his murders, as the things those women did were "dirty" and "unnatural."
- 14 The police regularly appear, making no progress at all on the investigation, still fixated on the sex lives of the victims. John discovers Vance's involvement, and Kent confronts and kills John in order to protect his uncle. Kent then confronts Vance and informs him that he used to have sex with Vance's daughter, Kent's cousin, often, and she therefore wasn't as innocent as Vance thought. Kent kills Vance, begins to untie Laurie, but then rapes her. She seems resigned to staying with Kent until she finds out that he has killed her brother and Vance. In the final moments, she is shown looking at the scissors lying next to her that were used to cut her binds, with Kent lying next to her, and in the final shot she is walking through a deserted parking lot at night covered in blood. An intertitle appears, saying:

The events dramatized in this film actually took place in 1967. "Laurie Ballard" spent from 1967 until 1970 in a mental institution. In April 1974 "Joanne Ballard" was killed in a single car accident. In 1975 "Laurie Ballard" married. She and her husband now have one child and live in California in the San Fernando Valley approximately four miles from where her brother and "Vance" and "Kent Kingsley" died.

This synopsis provides a simulacrum of the reasonable cause-and-effect logic of the story itself, but the structure of the narrative is of use here. The film runs 93:49<sup>10</sup>. The first murders retain little narrative import, yet consist of the first 16:49 of the film. The plot does not gather momentum until that point, when the police arrive to begin their investigation. At 19:41, Laurie, the central female character, appears. Even at this point, the uneven balance and pacing of the film becomes evident. At the end of the first of three acts, at 29:02, Laurie is abducted, showing a swift progress from her introduction as

a significant character to her being immediately threatened. At 50:51, just over halfway through, the identity of the masked killer is revealed. This is an unusual step, particularly considering how the film takes pains to disguise the killer's identity—after the first murder, wherein the killer's ski mask is removed, the camera closely follows the mask itself as the killer pulls it on and fixes it over his face, in a way that prevents the viewer seeing who is underneath. Compare this to *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) from the same year where the killer's identity is revealed at the outset and is never a point of narrative tension or suspense, or *Black Christmas* (Bob Clark, 1974), which turns the killer's identity into an element of the narrative drive, supposedly revealed at the end. While the climax occurs over the last 22 minutes, which is not particularly unusual as this comprises the bulk of the final act, the last of the police investigation is shown immediately prior to this at 67:48, with no valuable information revealed.

- 15 The police investigation is a significant point of discussion. While an ineffectual investigation is not unheard of,<sup>11</sup> *The Toolbox Murders* uses it in an unusual way. The introduction of this investigation is typical of this sort of film, especially as it becomes an impetus for John to begin his own investigation because he feels that nothing valuable is being turned up. The problem is that the film returns to the investigation multiple times, each time with no new information and with investigators consistently fixated on the victims' sex lives. This is particularly interesting as sex is an important reason for which the women were killed, and Laurie's relative innocence is why she was abducted, but their repetitive insinuations that Laurie may be highly sexually active feel excessive. Therefore, the frequent reiterations of these sequences prove superfluous with no real narrative import.
- 16 The murders at the opening are extremely violent, quite graphic, and contain little narrative import, or at least, not enough narrative import to warrant the screen time used. The problems with narrative logic is highlighted in the sequence where Vance reveals he is the killer [50:51]. He seems to ultimately want a surrogate daughter to replace his dead one, but why kill women he feels are unvirtuous? The only explanation given is his religious fervor, which doesn't feel like a satisfying explanation for his actions. In fact, that all of these "toolbox murders" occur within the first act and do not reappear for the last two acts of the film not only indicate the title as something of a misnomer, but reveal the inconsistent nature of the film's narrative structure. The murders in the finale, though violent and brutal, are framed in a wholly different way than those in the first act.
- 17 So how does the "true story" label affect the reading of this film? Hochberg and Brooks, in outlining a model of cognitive processes in film viewing, explain that:

First, there is the answer or confirmation to be obtained by the next glance. Second, there are the next expected features or landmarks, not immediately imminent, implied by the current action. Third, the viewer has a set of abstract readinesses, primed by previous events, for whatever may come afterward. Then, if a contradiction or some appeal by the film itself requires it, the viewer can consult and revise the story structure as far as it has developed. (1996, 381)

Using this model, a scene-by-scene viewing experience of *The Toolbox Murders* can result in experiencing a sort of cognitive disarray. The film manages, on a sequence-by-sequence basis, to provide nearly unpredictable narrative information (three death sequences in a row, or the revelation of Vance as the killer at the halfway point), or predictable but useless narrative points (the police investigation), which, when the viewer consults and revises the story structure, manages to find a difficult precedent for

further predictions. However, if the film is watched to the conclusion, the intertitle at the close [90:09] unifies the incoherent narrative in the viewer’s mind, not only explaining that the events witnessed led to further events not depicted, but that the events actually happened and that the filmmakers cannot be made fully culpable for narrative flaws. While technical problems can be placed at the doorstep of the people behind the camera, <sup>12</sup> exploiting viewer expectation and the cognitive force of the information that the film is based on a “true story,” whether *that* is true or not, could be seen as a concerted attempt to not only deflect attention from the filmmakers, but somehow magically absolve them from what would generally be considered a wildly incoherent narrative.

## Ideological Incongruities

- 18 To return to Verrone’s comments regarding context, I will suspend my reservations towards this argument momentarily to explore how exploitation and sociocultural context are seemingly at odds, and how *The Toolbox Murders* supports the muddying of the ideologies of sociological politics and the exploitation film industries. Berliner addresses, in a less broad sense than I will be exploring,<sup>13</sup> what he calls “[m]oral or ideological incongruities, which denote a discrepancy between different ethical beliefs or belief systems. For example, war is noble vs. war is senseless and vain (*Patton*, 1970)” (26, emphasis and parentheses in the original). This is utilized by Berliner as one element of what he deems “conceptual incongruity” (26).
- 19 The feminist movement was a major cultural force in the mid-to-late 1970s in America, and based on Verrone’s stance, it would be valid to argue that *The Toolbox Murders* is a product of this culture. Although I make no claims to representing any particular approach or theory to feminist or gender analysis, I will at this point explore how the film approaches representations of women and sexuality, as this is a significant sociocultural/political subject at the time of production. Ultimately, I would have difficulty coming to a definitive conclusion about *The Toolbox Murders*’ representation of women, primarily because, with regards to gender representation, the film engages with a form of ideological incongruity that Berliner discusses. Accusations of misogyny would not be unfounded: the first act shows nameless women in various states of undress being brutally murdered, their bodies being objects of lust and violence. In arguably one of the most famous sequences of the film, one which is prominently featured on posters and home video covers, as well as the most heavily censored sequence in the UK, the masked killer watches an attractive woman masturbate in her bathtub<sup>14</sup> [23:43] before chasing her around her apartment with a nail gun<sup>15</sup> [25:33]. What was cut from the British Board of Film Classification-approved version and makes the sequence even more emotionally confused, if (with regard to the character at least) clearly misogynistic is that the nude and understandably hysterical woman is consoled on her bed by the killer. She begins to relax and he puts his arm around her, stroking her hair [26:48]. The dynamic becomes vaguely sexual, but once she tries to escape, and the killer (as well as the film itself) visually links the woman with the dead girl in the car at the opening, he attacks again and kills her. This scene in itself ticks two major exploitation boxes—eroticism (an overtly sexual situation and a long period of nudity) and graphic murder—and provides key visuals for the film’s marketing strategy. There is a clear suggestion of the fetishization of the victims’ bodies prior to their murders, and in the case of the woman in the bathtub, there is a fetishization of her body as she masturbates, as she runs from the killer (long

shots of her naked body as she runs, some in slow motion [26:00]) and following her murder, with a shot showing her lifeless eyes, the nail in her forehead, and her bare breasts [27:37]. The film itself appears to engage in and indulge a kind of problematic objectification that it later clearly decries.

- 20 Once the first half of the film is complete, the story reveals the problematic views of the murderer, who overtly adheres to a conservative, patriarchal, and masculinist worldview: women with sexual agency need to be cleansed, and the purest women are infantilized and need to be secured and protected, forcefully if necessary. It could even be argued of Vance’s crimes against Laurie that the kidnapping is secondary to the humiliation of infantilizing her. Vance’s masculinism is also a view that is implicitly spurred by the character’s religious fanaticism. The latter, if considered in retrospect, could be undercut by the sequence with the naked woman in the bathtub. Vance, as the masked killer, watches with seeming relish as the girl masturbates in the bath, and is even appeased when sitting next to her on the bed, venturing to touch her. The sexual implications are directly at odds with the unmasked Vance’s consistent decrying of the “unnaturalness” and filthiness of anything sexual [53:53].
- 21 However, the film also retains a consistency with an observation made by Berliner: “[a]lthough many horror films temper ambivalent emotional responses to fusion figures by making their monsters uniformly repulsive and threatening [...], others exploit the genre’s underlying conceptual incongruities in order to intensify spectator ambivalence” (136). Vance is an ideal example of this type of incongruity: in spite of his patriarchal positioning, female infantilizing, and misogynistic murderous intent, he is still a severely mentally ill person struggling to cope with, and is essentially in denial of, his daughter’s untimely death. There is more than a hint of pathos in Vance’s death via stabbing at the hands of Kent [82:49], who is portrayed as far more unlikeable immediately prior to killing Vance. While Vance is ultimately an abject figure, Kent is, in the end, an incestuous rapist, more comfortable with the death of women than their own sexual agency, as evinced by his simultaneous fascination with a gory crime scene and his extreme aversion to discovering the victim’s dildo [42:34]. The two characters that are violent perpetrators, whether sympathetic or not, are first and foremost unambiguously misogynistic, placing them as the exemplars of an antagonistic ideology, in spite of a potential invitation at the outset to enjoy spectatorially the view of naked women being murdered.
- 22 The police in charge of the investigation are also exemplary of the film’s depiction of misogynistic men. The fact that the police, representatives of the patriarchal law, are fixated on the victims’ sex lives and sexual activities, and hence fail to advance the investigation successfully, demonstrates the film’s negative consideration of patriarchal virginal gatekeeping. By being fixated on feminine sex and sexuality, the police address the heart of the murders, but not the way to successfully rescue the victim—the fallacious assumption is made that she is part of this sexually active pattern. Instead of seeking useful clues and following other lines of investigation (such as locations and movements of the residents and employees of the apartment complex), the police continue to return, repeatedly and disturbingly, to the sexual habits of young women. Although the viewer has insight into the fact that Vance is killing these women due to what he perceives as their sexual impurities, the fixation of the police on unproven sexual activity manages to align the police *with* the killer based on a voyeuristic obsession on the victims’ sexuality.



- 23 Furthermore, and this is key to an analysis of the treatment of gender and sexuality in the film, the rape in the climax is neither shown, nor eroticized. Laurie is screaming, crying and clearly saying “no.” She in no way enjoys it, nor responds positively to Kent’s advances [87:00]. Even more significantly, the concluding sequence deals explicitly with the fallout of rape—Laurie, now emotionally broken, drained, and fragile, sits in bed and listens numbly as Kent talks about getting married [87:58]. Upon discovering that Kent has probably killed her brother, it is then supposed that Laurie kills Kent, and she is seen in the final shot walking trancelike through the city covered in blood [89:35]. The acknowledgement of this point would severely affect the way the film is read from a representational point of view, and would make the film stand out amongst contemporary exploitation cinema.
- 24 This is important to note with regards to narration: the rape is unusually conveyed with regards to its generic contemporaries. *The Toolbox Murders* refuses to exploit this plot point or to mine it for sexual and erotic possibilities. Whether positively or negatively rendered, the tragedy of the story is more potent and is simultaneously at odds with traditional narrative development, or at least cognitive development, resulting in a further undermining of viewer familiarity and experience. The end of the story puts a distinctive cap on a film that consistently pushes against narrative coherence and tells a story that only just makes sense. And it is in the wake of this sequence, during a period in which the viewer is processing his/her emotions that s/he is presented with the intertitle that suggests that the film may be based on actual events, an ending that appears to work to absolve the film’s ideological and moral incongruities as much as its narrative incoherencies, the latter being the overarching framework for which the former, at best, support, at worst suggest.

## What is being exploited?

- 25 In addressing *The Toolbox Murders* and its status as an exploitation film, I have made pointed references to unusual but significant facets and modes of aesthetic and narrative exploitation within the film. It is here useful to detail the process by which I have pinpointed these sources of exploitation, and to highlight what precisely *The Toolbox Murders* exploits, and how this form of exploitation can be conceived as shocking and subversive.
- 26 *The Toolbox Murders*, at least in its first act, adheres closely to conceptions of the gore film, as addressed above. However, there is a distinct failure to sustain the graphic violence and sexuality that is densely utilized in the earlier part of the film. What is significant is that the remainder of the film serves an active role in the justification of the exploitative elements largely limited to the first act. The focus on narrative and characterization that marks the last two acts appears to be a trade for the apparently unbridled, episodic, and little contextualized serial murders of four women, one who appears topless and another who is overtly sexual.
- 27 It is not, however, only the sexual elements and violence that are exploited, though these may be the key marketing points for the film, both foregrounded in advertising materials. As we have seen, the use of the “true story” frame is also exploited, not only as a marketing tool, but also as a narrative device. The fact that the film purports to be based on fact is used in some promotional material, and within the film itself at the conclusion.

This means that the viewer could possibly be aware of this either in advance or in retrospect. While it would be difficult to argue for the “true story” film to be a genre unto itself, and even more difficult to determine whether *The Toolbox Murders* adheres to the structure of such a genre should it exist, it nonetheless remains that this information carries the weight of expectation during viewing—particularly the idea that a “true story” arguably deals with timely, difficult, or uncomfortable subject matter.<sup>16</sup> *The Toolbox Murders* adheres to this not only through graphic violence and prolonged sexual sequences, but also through narrative points such as kidnapping, voyeurism, incest, mental instability, and religious fanaticism. The combination of all these elements, whether the film adheres to a specific generic structure<sup>17</sup> or not, potentially resonates as “true-to-life.” That these expectations are established, supported, and exploited by the filmmakers through claiming to be a “true story” adds a more complex element to *The Toolbox Murders* and its claim to being an exploitation film.

- 28 Furthermore, exploitation is often deemed subversive due to what is being exploited. Each of the above listed narrative points aids the film’s overall subversive nature, and I would argue the film’s pretension to being based in fact is itself subversive. Through the film’s final intertitle before the credits, the filmmakers both exploit and undermine the trust of the viewer. First, by placing the characters’ names in inverted commas within the intertitle, the film implicitly and semiotically suggests that the characters are based on people with different names, who are being protected for any number of reasons. With this the film refers to something outside itself, bringing into relief for the viewer both the real and the fictional world, and creating distinct points of convergence between the two. Secondly, by using specific dates, the film places the so-called “real” events within living memory and a believable rendering of the past, even if elements such as fashion have been contemporized, the events in the film are given a specificity which would render this detail superfluous, were it not real. That the detail *is* superfluous and the events *not* real works as a deliberate deception from the filmmakers directed at the viewers. It also achieves the goal of utilizing an incoherent element (details of no narrative import—conceivably one of Berliner’s “knickknacks”) to render an incoherent narrative coherent. Finally, by explicating the later actions of the characters, even the narratively peripheral Joanne, which have no bearing or connection to the events of the film (i.e., Joanne’s death by car accident and Laurie’s marriage and current area of residence), the film again includes narratively superfluous detail to support the veracity of the events depicted in the eyes of the viewer. In other words, the viewer is prompted to ask: “Why would the film tell me this if it wasn’t true?”

## Conclusion

- 29 An online review of the film *Compliance* (Craig Zobel, 2012) on the website [birthmoviesdeath.com](http://birthmoviesdeath.com) by poster and regular contributor FilmCritHulk—a critical persona that adopts character traits of the Hulk for his reviews, including an all-caps yelling style—says that the “true story” title card:

AUTOMATICALLY PUTS THE MOVIE-WATCHER IN SOME WEIRD SORT OF BIND. WE KNOW WE ARE NOT WATCHING A DOCUMENTARY, OR EVEN NARRATIVE NON-FICTION. IT’S A MOVIE. THUS WHATEVER WE’RE ABOUT TO SEE TAKES ON A QUALITY OF TRUTHINESS; A VAGUE SENSE OF REALISM TO LEND CREDENCE TO THE PROCEEDINGS. (2012, n.p.)

This statement is also applicable to *The Toolbox Murders*. Its atypical narrative structure is briefly rendered acceptable by appropriating the guise of being based on real events. The work addressed by Black, Verrone, Harwood, Hutcheon and Leitch all point to what a messy affair adapting history and reality to the cinema can be, and assuming this is at least an unconscious acknowledgement by the viewer, anomalous elements of structure and style are given the opportunity to be overlooked. Particularly as the final title card in this film goes into such detail: putting the names in quotes, providing specific years, acknowledging geography, and even revealing the eventual actions of the people this is supposedly based on.

- 30 The format is taken even farther than in similar films that assume the "true story" framing addressed by Leitch, like *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) and *Fargo* (Ethan and Joel Coen, 1996). These films provide minimal information in relation to the characters and events. Significantly, these two examples are useful counterpoints, as the intertitles suggesting "true story" adaptations which are not necessarily so precede the narrative, unlike *The Toolbox Murders*; *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* takes such significant liberties with the Ed Gein mythos as to be almost unrecognizably connected, especially as the opening suggests the veracity of invented elements of the story, such as characters and dates. The opening of these films appear as a warning of sorts: a way of suggesting that unpleasant events are to come, whereas *The Toolbox Murders* only claims links to actual events at the end, seemingly by way of explanation, as well as an invitation to re-reading the foregoing events. *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973) and *Animal House* (John Landis, 1978) also include such "where are they now?" captions at the close, but refrain from revealing that the names are not real and do not list dates. This demonstrates a strong attempt to convince the viewer that it is, in fact, based on a true story, therefore attempting to make the film's structure more palatable. Hence, *The Toolbox Murders* exploits and undermines the traditional relationship between a viewer and a film text that purports to be based on a true story. A close cinematic predecessor is *The Honeymoon Killers* (Leonard Kastle, 1969), which, while based on the actual case of "The Lonely Hearts Killers" takes liberties with the facts of the case even within its claim to factuality.<sup>18</sup> *The Toolbox Murders*, however, wholly fabricates its factual source in addition to its fictional narrative, making its narration, including this claim, a unique point of fascination.
- 31 Ultimately, the film still appears to excuse its incoherent narrative through this false claim to being based in fact. FilmCritHulk does not appear to condone this type of approach, stating "HULK SAYS IT ALL THE TIME, BUT 'THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FICTION AND NON-FICTION IS THAT FICTION HAS TO MAKE SENSE.'" (2012, n.p.)

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## NOTES

1. See Thrower (513), Ndalians (129), and a bevy of independent online reviewers, including user reviews on the Internet Movie Database.
2. *The Toolbox Murders* fits comfortably within a development of what Eric Schaefer terms "The Atrocity Film." Schaefer states that "the purpose of the atrocity film was primarily to repulse with images of violence, carnage, or bloody ritual" (285). *The Toolbox Murders* itself follows the tradition discussed by Schaefer: "[n]ever as popular as other exploitation genres, the spectacle of the atrocity film still forged a fresh path which a new generation of exploiters would explore more thoroughly with 'gore films' in the 1960" (285). One can see muted traces of the films of Herschell Gordon Lewis in the first act of the film.
3. Schaefer defines the exploitation film, or to use his term "classical exploitation film" as having five distinct qualities: 1. "Forbidden" subject matter, 2. Low production budget and values, 3. Independent distribution, 4. Mainly exhibited in cinemas without affiliation with the majors, 5.

Fewer prints in release than mainstream films (4-6). This definition is appropriate to the themes, production, distribution, and exhibition of *The Toolbox Murders*.

4. This can be evinced by the fact that the U.S. one-sheet poster, and the two primary radio spots for the film (comprizing the cover, and part of the extras on the Blue Underground U.S. BluRay release) do not make overt mention of it being based on a true story. The film trailer and TV spot available on the same release do implicitly suggest the film's veracity, and the voice-over at the end of both states that it is "A true story."

5. In fact, I would argue that, although there is theoretical overlap, Berliner's approach is more applicable to *The Toolbox Murders* than Schaefer's, as I find the experience of viewing the film closely linked to Berliner's statement that "[a]lthough narrative incongruities trouble a film's organic unity, they add richness and variety to a film that would otherwise come off as merely linear and logical." (32)

6. My answers being "nothing" and "no," respectively.

7. For an example of this discussion at a different point of the spectrum of representations of violence and atrocity, see the discussion of the gas chamber sequence in *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) in Libby Saxton's *Haunted Images: Film, Ethics, Testimony and the Holocaust* (76-91).

8. The voice-over in the U.S. theatrical trailer claims the events occurred on 23 July 1977, which is not only a full decade later than claimed in the film but, according to the March 1978 release date cited on the Internet Movie Database ([http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0078405/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_2](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0078405/?ref_=nv_sr_2)), in an amusing turn, would likely put that as the approximate time of production. In a sense, these events *did* occur near that date, as they would have been the very events filmed.

9. With respect to the slasher genre, Reynold Humphries acknowledges that *The Toolbox Murders* sets itself apart from its contemporaries. In explaining that killers in slasher films as a standard tend to use butcher knives, he isolates the film, saying "*The Toolbox Murders* goes out of its way to be different: the killer carries a toolbox around with him and dips into its contents to perpetrate his assorted murders" (139).

10. Timings based on the 2010 Blue Underground USA BluRay release.

11. Alfred Hitchcock regularly used ineffectual police in his films, such as *I Confess* (1953) and *The Wrong Man* (1956).

12. Such an example is available in the film: a visible crew member appears in one shot of the lethal confrontation between Kent and Vance.

13. See Berliner's damning, and in my view, agreeable, assessment of Robin Wood's (1981) discussion of ideological incongruity (26). This is why I make no claims to represent any ideological position, but merely aim to highlight how this ideological incongruity supports, reflects, and points to the extensive incongruous narratological template of the film. However, at this point I will forego my apprehensions and explore for the sake of argument, Wood's "concern for contradictions in what [...] films are 'trying to say' [1986: 50]" (26, brackets mine).

14. This appears in what I would argue is a sequence displaying masterful editing.

15. The choice of weapon itself is loaded with phallic implications.

16. Even lighter fare like *I Love You Philip Morris* (Glenn Ficarra and John Requa, 2009) aims to confront social issues. Even the zany *The Men Who Stare at Goats* (Grant Heslov, 2009) aims to draw attention to the absurdities of U.S. military experiments, structure, and spending.

17. And, I argue, the perceived veracity of the film is aided by the lack of familiar structure and narration.

18. The case went to trial: see *People v. Fernandez et al.* 301 NY 302, 93 N.E. 2d 859. Court of Appeals of New York, July 11, 1950.

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## ABSTRACTS

1970s horror film and exploitation staple, *The Toolbox Murders* (Dennis Donnelly, 1978), is here used as a case study in incoherent narrative strategy and ideology and explores the incoherencies of this relationship to adapting "true stories." Through an overt intertitle, the film itself implicitly suggests that the events actually happened, listing specific years, current locations, and suggesting pseudonymous protection of the people involved. This comes at the conclusion of a film which contains a number of narratological incoherencies and ideological incongruities, as is typical of exploitation films of the period. Through engaging with Todd Berliner's work on incoherent narration, along with theories of, and approaches to, true story adaptation, this article addresses not only how the film functions, but how it works as an adaptation of "actual events." Furthermore, it addresses how *The Toolbox Murders* is positioned as an exploitation film. Apart from exploitative uses of sex and violence, this paper posits that the appropriation and use of claims to veracity is itself exploitative of both generic exploitation and the viewer's cognitive reception of the closing intertitle trope. This article ultimately asserts that all of these elements work together to create a complex and unusual cinematic experience.

Cette étude de *The Toolbox Murders* (Dennis Donnelly, 1978), classique du cinéma d'exploitation d'horreur américain des années 1970, porte sur les incohérences à la fois narratives et idéologiques d'un film « basé sur une histoire vraie ». En effet, l'intertitre qui conclut le film affirme non seulement que les événements ont effectivement eu lieu, mais indique également des années précises et les lieux actuels afin de protéger l'anonymat des personnes impliquées. En s'appuyant sur le travail de Todd Berliner sur les narrations incohérentes, cet article analyse le fonctionnement du film et son statut à la fois en tant qu'adaptation d'un fait réel et en tant que film d'exploitation. Hormis l'exploitation du sexe et de la violence, cet article avance que prétendre à une vérité est, pour un film, une forme d'exploitation du public aux niveaux à la fois générique et cognitif. Les incohérences du film, si elles sont somme toute assez caractéristiques du cinéma d'exploitation des années 1970, en font néanmoins une expérience cinématographique singulière.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** adaptation, exploitation, histoire vraie, incohérence, *The Toolbox Murders*

**Keywords:** narration, true story

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