

Thesis Outline

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THESIS OUTLINE

Violent Cinema: The masculine investment in female victimhood

OUTLINE

In my thesis I'll explore the fictionalisation of 'true' crime, in which the subjects of violence are often women. I would like to discuss the broader place of fictionalised violence towards women in an image-based society and the interrelation between forensic imagery and its fictionalised versions. The text will examine the correlations and differences between 'real' violence and its cinematic depiction in order to understand how cinema turns violence against women, and specifically the death of women, into art and entertainment... and why I find this form of fictionalisation so appealing. 'This bloodstained physical dismembering is a curious thing: it's both the catastrophe itself and the subsequent method of trying to understand,' Melissa McCarthy writes in her book *Sharks, Death, Surfers*. This is a suitable quote that covers what I hope to achieve with this thesis: I want to understand how female victimhood translates to the silver screen, and how male phantasies shape and distort this process.

In my writing, I will specifically focus on screen violence derived from two major historic events: The first one is the Black Dahlia murder case; the gruesome murder of Elizabeth Short, which launched one of the most celebrated manhunts and media spectacles in history.¹ which happened in Los Angeles, 1947 and the Tate/Bianca slaughter, a multiple homicide that shocked the United States in 1969. Both crimes spawned many novels, movies and other fictionalisations. After a general introduction which links my personal history of tragedy and death to cinematic violence, I'll dive into the history of the LA crime genre and describe how its cinematic counterpart Film Noir has impacted cinema.

The Black Dahlia case inspired a book, upon which *True Confessions* (1981) was based. The Tate/Bianca murders gave rise to Tarantino's *Once Upon A Time... In Hollywood* (2019). I'll take these two influential movies as case studies in order to understand the genre and its implications on the masculine investment in female victimhood better.

⁴ Hudson, M & Babliss, S. (2006) *Exquisite Corpse: Surrealism and the Black Dahlia Murder*



5: A scene from *True Confessions* (1981)²

² 1981 © Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. All Rights Reserved.



6: *Forensic imagery of Elizabeth Short.*³

It is no coincidence that both these LA-based events had bled heavily into fiction and film. Both tragic horrors unfolded in the Los Angeles surroundings and had ties to the glamorous realm of Hollywood. Elizabeth Short was an aspiring actress and Sharon Tate was a rising Hollywood star married to a well-known director. The tragic narratives of these victims can be easily fit into the 'hardboiled' LA crime genre, for the female murder in sunny Los Angeles is the main plot device.

In this thesis, I will take the movies *True Confessions* (1981) and *Once Upon A Time... In Hollywood* (2019) which are both on a respective historical significant LA crime. I will compare the historical facts and the forensic evidence and examine the way filmmakers visualise the violence that is derived from the actual murders and its forensics, in order to explore the interrelation between true crime and the LA crime fiction.

I'll analyse the gendered power dynamics and masculine fantasies that underly the narrative tropes in cinema. Why am I (and so many people with me) drawn to the true crime genre in which mainly women are victim? Did male fantasies of power gave rise to the LA crime genre? What does Hollywood's obsession with cinematic violence tell us about society and more important, what does my obsession tell me about me and my artistic practise? These are questions I want to answer in my thesis.

³ The body Elizabeth Short as found on the scene. 1947. Unknown LAPD photographer.

WHY

As someone who has a deep fascination for crime fiction, I think it would be necessary and fruitful to explore this interest, so I can understand why I'm so personally engaged by crime fiction, and the depiction of violence and death (on a screen). My stepmom killed herself when I just turned eighteen and this event had a profound impact on me as a person as well as an image maker. This tragedy happened in a time when a consumed many violent films. In recent years, I have found that my artistic practise is always connected to (female) victimhood, and its fictionalised depiction in particular.

My planned graduation project involves a unsolved British murder case that happened during World War II. In 1943, four boys found a skeleton inside a hollow Whych Elm in Hagley forest, a private forest near Birmingham. After following up on every lead, the police failed to find the culprit, even though an unknown person chalked messages onto walls which nicknamed the victim as Bella. Till this day, the haunting murder remains unsolved and the true identity of Bella remains unclear. The compelling case sparked many theories, some rooted in evidence, while others are more imaginative. I plan to combine the forensic material from this case with five fictional stories centred on the unidentified women whose skeleton was found. In each of the stories, the female protagonist is a completely different character, but she will meet the same tragic demise (her dead body being stuffed inside of a tree).

This project can be perceived as problematic, since I, a man, purposely 'kill' the female protagonist in my writing, but more important is that main goal of the project is not to exploit the death of this unidentified woman, but to give this tragic unidentified woman a narrative and understand my own stake in her victimhood. I want to explore the open ending of this unsolved crime, thus giving Bella an identity through fantasy that's contradicted by (forensic) photography. I'm particular fascinated by the fact that the story of Bella is not set in stone; I'm able to construct my own truth as to fill in the gaps, although the story remains rooted in reality through photographic evidence. The grainy pictures functioning as some sort of metaphorical skeleton. I have a vivid imagination and a taste for telling stories, and I think with this project I could tell several, which together form an ambiguous piece of art that reflects on more than the story itself; on the perception of violence, the power of ambiguity and the weight of photographic evidence.

I think the concept of my thesis strongly resonates with my graduation project and will hopefully amplify it's quality. Furthermore, I think further diving into my personal interest for cinematic crime can help me to articulate better what drives my artistic practice... and help me understand why I tend to work around specific themes and aesthetics. In my thesis, I focus specifically on the 'hard-boiled' LA crime genre, which was very popular in the 1940s and 1950s, and has heavily influenced Hollywood. This literary genre lays at the root of many male fantasies that were and still are predominant in (mainstream) American cinema. This genre sparked 'flawed male knight': a character trope that takes some form of stake in female victimhood. With this thesis, I want to explore and learn to understand how this particular character and it's narrative implications have shaped me.

METHODOLOGY

For my research, I want to read academic writings from authors that have a practice or research field that touches upon 'true' crime, violence in media and forensic photography as well as feminist literature on power dynamics and the male gaze. In my thesis, I want to include two films and other visual media. I want to take screenshots of these particular media and include them in my thesis in order to support the text.

I want to learn from:

- Academic writers with a specific expertise on the subject like Carol J. Clover and John Tagg.
- Movie reviewers
- 'Hard-boiled' crime writers like Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and James Ellroy
- Writers who wrote about the hardboiled LA crime genre and noir films
- The experiences of writers who lived and wrote at the time of the historical significant murders of The Black Dahlia and the Tate/Bianca slaughter. (Such as Joan Didion)
- The opinions and analyses of popular culture creators and platforms such as Ryan Hollinger, Filmento and Goodbadflicks
- My fellow students
- My tutors

TEXT FORM

I want to write a research paper that's divided into several chapters. In addition to the chapters, I'll add two case studies, in which I'll dissect and analyse scenes from two significant movies. I plan to write my thesis in an essay-styled manner; build up by citations from other writers, but with a personal and cogent undertone.

OVERVIEW

Violent Cinema: The masculine investment in female victimhood

Introduction (1000 words)

- A personal motivation in which I link the suicide of my stepmom to a hanging scene in noir film Sin City (2009)
- A brief introduction of the main topic of my thesis: the interrelation between literature about LA's 'knights in shining armour', 'true crime' and fictionalisations of crimes
- An example (case study) of Dennis Wheatley's interactive book Murder Off Miami (1936)

Chapter I - The interrelation between true crime and LA noir fiction [2000 – 3000 words]

- A brief history of 20th century 'hard-boiled' LA crime fiction, (Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and James Ellroy) and their cinematic influence (The Maltese Falcone, Double Indemnity and Chinatown)

- A description of two major historical Los Angeles crimes and their literary and cinematic reflections:

1. The Black Dahlia murder case
2. The Tate/Bianca slaughter

Chapter II - Case study 1: True Confessions (1981) [2000 words]

A critical and analytic 'dissection' of the film in comparison to its source material (The Black Dahlia murder case) using literature, reviews and personal observations. I'll focus on three key scenes:

1. The discovery of the body; comparing this scene with forensic material
2. The scene where the victim is displayed at the morgue: comparing it with forensic material

and discussing the fantastic elements in comparison to its 'true' crime source.

3. The scene where the protagonist finds the place of the murder

Chapter III - Case study 2: Once Upon A Time... In Hollywood (2019) [2000 words]

- A critical and analytic 'dissection' of the film in comparison to its source material (The Tate/Bianca slaughter) using literature, reviews and personal observations. I'll focus on three key scenes:

1. A scene in which Sharon Tate goes to her own movie. I'll discuss the way this scene is shot, and what phantasies are at work here.

2. Cliff Booth visits the Manson hippies at the Spahn Ranch. I'll discuss the narrative trope that Cliff Booth is portraying in these scene and discuss the role of violence in the scene.

3. The ending scene, in which the Manson hippies are brutally murdered. I'll discuss the differences between the actual happenings and the meaning that is implied here.

Chapter IV - The male movie knight: investment in victimhood [2000 words]

- Further comparison and exploration of the male fantasies projected on women in the case studies

- Further deconstructing the 'flawed movie knight' which is a clear expression of male mastery over women, in which violence against women is a functional device that exists in order for the protagonist to get validation

- The implications of violence against women in cinema in the post me too era

Chapter V - Conclusion

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