

From *The Lodger* (1913) to *From Hell* (2001): Uncanny Portraits of Jack the Ripper?

C. Bruna Mancini

University of Calabria, Cosenza, Italy

During the last months of 1888 the populous quarter of Whitechapel, London, was stained with the blood of five women, all booked prostitutes and chronic alcoholics, worthy representatives of the diseases/vices of the Victorian East End. The shrewd and sanguinary Monster who realized these violent murders called himself “Jack the Ripper”, signing with his “trade name” the letters he sent to the Central News Agency and through the press he soon became a myth, the most famous “serial killer” of all time. As a matter of fact, his legend survived, and his evil figure still haunts the pages of books and—of course—the frames of many films; among the most famous: *From Hell* (2001) by Albert and Allen Hughes, taken from the graphic novel of the same name by Moore and Campbell; *Jack the Ripper* (1976) by Jess Franco, with a disturbing Klaus Kinski, but also the TV movie directed by David Wickes in 1998 entitled *Jack The Ripper*; more obliquely, Jack appears also in *The Lodger* (1913) and *Frenzy* (1972) by Alfred Hitchcock. But can these movies be defined as true biopics of Jack? Strangely enough, it seems, these biographies contribute to build the mythic “anonymity” of the Ripper, encouraging (and fascinating) fear and nightmares.

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Introduction

During the last months of 1888 (August-November), a period in which the “respectable” middle classes were obsessed with fears of class conflict and social disintegration, the populous quarter of Whitechapel in London was stained with the blood of five women, all prostitutes recorded by the police and chronic alcoholics, worthy representatives of the diseases/vices of the Victorian East End, and all-probably-killed by the same bloody hand, the sharp knife of a “man-monster”, “half-beast, half-man”¹, who stalked the streets of London in search of fallen women². Walkowitz observed:

C. Bruna Mancini, Lecturer, Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici, University of Calabria.

¹ “London lies today under the spell of a great terror”, declared the *Star*. “Some nameless reprobate, half-beast, half-man, is at large, who is daily gratifying his murderous instincts on the most miserable and defenceless class of the community.” *Star*, 8 September 1888.

² Useful studies of the Ripper controversy include Donald Rumbelow, *The Complete Jack the Ripper* (New York: New American Library, 1975); Tom Cullen, *Autumn of Terror* (London: Bodley Head, 1965); Donald McCormick, *The Identity of Jack the Ripper* (London: Arrow Books, 1970); Alexander Kelly, *Jack the Ripper: A Bibliography and Review of the Literature* (London: A.A.L., 1973); Elwyn Jones, ed., *Ripper File* (London: Barker, 1975); Philip Sugden, *The Complete History of Jack the Ripper* (New York, Carrol and Graff Publisher, 2005).

Most of their [people's] anxieties focused on the East End of London, the scene of the Ripper murders, which symbolized social unrest born of urban degeneracy. A series of journalistic explorations into "Outcast London" published in the tabloid press in the 1880s had familiarized middle-class readers with the sordid and depressing living conditions of the East End poor and reminded them of the dangerous social proximity between vast numbers of casual laborers and a professional criminal class. Among concerned middle-class reformers, these exposes provoked a "consciousness of sin"—to quote Beatrice Webb—and stimulated a multitude of philanthropic activities in the East End, in the form of religious missions, college settlement houses, housing reform, and elaborate social surveys. (Walkowitz, 1982, p. 544)

As Walkowitz remembers, the Ripper murders were the latest of a series of sexual scandals linking highlife and lowlife in London in the 1880s. In fact, feminists had helped to initiate this era through their political mobilization against state regulation of prostitution, white slavery and child prostitution, and had risen up in aid of the defense of the constitutional rights of working-class women. In short, in the three years preceeding the Ripper murders, a massive political initiative against non-marital, non-reproductive sexuality had been mobilized, whose initial victims were working-class prostitutes, precisely those women who had been the original objects of feminist pity and concern³. In the back slums and alleys of Whitechapel, East London, where poor prostitutes, "fourpenny knee tremblers", lived and worked, often bringing their customers into some dark corner to avoid the price of a room, during the "autumn of terror" of 1888 the bodies of the victims of Jack the Ripper were found:

Whitechapel, a notorious and poor locale, adjacent to the financial district (the City), and easily accessible from the West End by public transportation and private carriage. Part of London's declining inner industrial rim, Whitechapel stood at the edge of the vast East End, London's proletarian center, a "city" of nine hundred thousand. To middle-class observers, Whitechapel was an alien place, a center of cosmopolitan culture and entrepôt for foreign immigrants and refugees, whose latest wave consisted of poor Jews escaping the pogroms of Eastern Europe in the 1880s. Whitechapel was also notorious for its transient and homeless poor, living out of doors or in those "thief preserves", the common lodging houses. (...) Whitechapel thus provided a stark and sensational backdrop for the Ripper murders: a moral landscape of light and darkness, a nether region of illicit sex and crime, both exciting and dangerous. (...) Whitechapel Road also proved a magnet for rich young bloods from the West End who would tour the "toughest, roughest streets, taverns, and music halls" in search of new excitements. (Walkowitz, 1982, pp. 547-8)

Against this background, on 31st August the mutilated body of Mary Ann Nichols was found by Charles Cross in Buck's Row (now Durward Street), Whitechapel; the newspapers reported that she was killed by a "murderous lunatic" described as "another Hyde to prey upon the defenceless women of the 'unfortunate' class"⁴. She is considered the first "canonical" victim of "Jack the Ripper". On 8th September Annie Chapman's body was found, ripped and mutilated, in the back yard of No. 29, Hanbury Street, Spitalfields; a description of a man seen with Annie entering a passage nearby was circulated by the police but had no positive feedback. As a consequence of these murders, the Whitechapel Vigilance Committee, under George Lusk, was formed in the Crown public house, Mile End Road. On 10th September seven men were being held for questioning at various police stations. The *Star* suggested that Chapman's eyes had been photographed in the hope that the killer's image might have been seared on the retina. On 27th September the Central News Agency received a letter written in red ink, dated 25th September:

³ See also Walkowitz, 1980.

⁴ Retrieved from http://www.casebook.org/press_reports/east_london_advertiser/ela880908.html?printer=true. For press reports about the cases, see also http://www.casebook.org/press_reports/.

Dear Boss,

I keep on hearing the police have caught me but they wont fix me just yet. I have laughed when they look so clever and talk about being on the right track. That joke about Leather Apron gave me real fits. I am down on whores and I shant quit ripping them till I do get buckled. Grand work the last job was. I gave the lady no time to squeal. How can they catch me now. I love my work and want to start again. You will soon hear of me with my funny little games. I saved some of the proper red stuff in a ginger beer bottle over the last job to write with but it went thick like glue and I cant use it. Red ink is fit enough I hope ha. ha. The next job I do I shall clip the ladys ears off and send to the police officers just for jolly wouldn't you. Keep this letter back till I do a bit more work, then give it out straight. My knife's so nice and sharp I want to get to work right away if I get a chance. Good Luck.

Yours truly

Jack the Ripper⁵

Dont mind me giving the trade name

PS Wasnt good enough to post this before I got all the red ink off my hands curse it No luck yet. They say I'm a doctor now. ha ha.⁶

Originally dismissed as a hoax—police authorities believed the initial letters were a “creation of an enterprising journalist” (Anderson, 1910, p. 138; McNaghton, 1915, pp. 58-59)—the double murder of Catherine Eddowes and Elizabeth Stride, on 30th September, caused the police to re-examine the “Dear Boss” letter, particularly when they learned that part of Eddowes’s earlobe had been cut off from her body. The choice of his so-called “trade name”, his black humour and the bragging boldness of the writer of this letter—if he really was the “author” of those, apparently, unmotivated murders⁷—attracted so much public attention that Jack soon achieved a frightening popularity, “celebrating”, in a way, for the first time the pervasive power of the press⁸. In fact, the popular press, itself a creature of the 1880s, established the Ripper as a media hero “in amplifying the terror of male violence, and in elaborating and interpreting the meaning of the Ripper murders to a ‘mass’ audience” (Walkowitz, 1982, p. 546)⁹. Anyway, his “fame” increased when, on 1st October 1888, the Central News Agency received the so-called “Saucy Jacky” postcard, which might have been written by the same hand; and again, when another letter, arrived on 16th October in a three inch square cardboard box, was delivered to George Lusk. Inside the box there was half a human kidney. This letter, known as “From Hell” (the “address” it came from), appeared on the first edition of the *Daily News* and read as follows:

⁵ “The appellation Jack the Ripper not only describes the savagery of the crimes but instills a certain commonality in the perpetrator. (...) In fact, Jack was a popular name with many famous criminals of the past. (...) Jack the Ripper has transcended mere criminality to become a representation of the dark side of ourselves and hence the Ripper is not longer Somebody but Everybody” (Coville & Lucanio, 1999, pp. 18-19).

⁶ Retrieved from <http://whitechapeljack.com/the-ripper-letters/>.

⁷ Some ripperologists think that the Whitechapel Murders of 1888 were not the work of one man whom today may be dubbed a “serial killer”, but that the murders were “copycat” murders perpetrated by different men, in a highly localized area, amid a community that had worked itself up into a state of “mass hysteria” (see Turnbull, 1999, p. 342). See also Bloom, 1988.

⁸ “Thousand of ghoulish sightseers chocked the approaches to Mitre Square and congregates outside Dutfield Yard. At one time Berner Street resembled a sea of heads from end to end. Windows overlooking the sites were thrown open and seats at them openly sold and eagerly sought. On the fringes of the crowds, costermongers selling edibles from bread and fish to fruit, sweets and nuts, and newsvendors, proclaiming the last particulars, did spectacular trade. [...] Mitre Square and Berner Street continued to attract crows for several days. The same historical scene that had been witnessed after Dark Annie’s murder were re-enacted and as the excitement subsided, the same terror were reawakened” (Sugden, 2005, p. 278).

⁹ “As other historians have noted, the tabloid press incorporated many of the forms and themes of popular culture, particularly those of sensationalist melodrama, the literary convention that shaped the Ripper narrative in all the London dailies, across the political spectrum” (Walkowitz, 1982, p. 546).

From hell.
 Mr Lusk,
 Sor
 I send you half the Kidne I took from one woman and prasarved it for you tother piece I fried and ate it was very nise.
 I may send you the bloody knif that took it out if you only wate a whil longer
 Signed
 Catch me when you can Mishter Lusk.¹⁰

This letter, with its natural errors and its indications of Irishness (in “Sor” and “presearved”, for example), had none of the polished style of its predecessors, and was plainly in a different hand. But what if these letters had been written actually by Jack? Was he suffering a kind of (diabolic) metamorphoses? In fact, over the course of time the bodies of his presumed victims had been more and more dismembered, mutilated, destroyed, just like the grammar (syntax, morphology, phonology) of those letters seemed to be turning toward aphasia: Was Jack’s corrupted and disturbed personality dangerously diverting towards the loss of rules, the complete bestiality? Whatever the truth might have been, the murderer was never caught.¹¹

In short, the faceless “Monster of Whitechapel” became the product of pure Evil, the most foolish and infernal one, soon disappearing into the putrid bowels of London, and able to come back and “get to work” whenever he wanted. Thus, he reached the status of a myth, becoming a (brand) name to chill the blood, a black-caped demon clutching a black bag full of horrors, an elusive black wraith of a murderer who eludes, deludes, and fascinates still today. As Bloom observes:

Jack, like any legendary figure, steps out of historical circumstances and goes into the imagination of the future. Jack is a demon/animal and therefore totally other, therefore unrecognizable and invisible; therefore the perfect criminal. He disturbs the human only to reinforce it. Indeed this monstrosity embeds himself in the imagination of each generation. (Bloom, 2007, p. 107)¹²

From Hell and the Biopic Question

In the famous graphic novel of 2000 by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell, indicatively entitled “*From Hell*”, there is a speculation upon the identity and motives of Jack the Ripper, stating that in the end he becomes “not man so much as syndrome”, “a voice that bellows in the human heart”: “I am a wave, an influence. Who then shall be made safe from me?”, “the Ripper” affirms in one of the last pages. One year later, a film of the same title, loosely based on Moore and Campbell’s novel, was directed by the Hughes Brothers (Albert and Allen). Both

¹⁰ Retrieved from <http://whitechapeljack.com/the-ripper-letters/>.

¹¹ Even if the murders took place in a densely populated area where the local residents kept a close watch on the movements of the inhabitants, “[s]till, there were no witnesses to the crimes; the police could uncover no clues or apparent motives for the murders. Nor could they identify any serious suspects although hundreds of men were detained and interviewed all over London” (Walkowitz, 1982, p. 547).

¹² Bloom, 2007, p. 107. See also Robert Bloch, *Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper*, New York, Dell Publisher, 1989. In the essay “Postimperial Landscapes ‘Psychogeography’ and Englishness in Alan Moore’s Graphic Novel ‘From Hell: A Melodrama in Sixteen Parts’”, Elizabeth Ho writes: “The energy required to kill Kelly causes the boundaries of time to dissolve: Gull hallucinates back to his days as a surgeon performing an autopsy in an operating theater but also forward in time to the present as his exertions cause him to burst into the twentieth century. In an ecstatic hallucinatory state, Gull suddenly finds himself triumphantly brandishing a scalpel in the middle of an open-walled office. He accuses the workers around him of being “numbed” by the “shimmering numbers and... lights” of the twentieth century. “Think not to be inured to history”, he announces, “its black root succours you. It is INSIDE you. Are you asleep to it, that cannot feel its breath upon your neck, not see what soaks its cuffs? See me! Wake up and look upon me! I am come amongst you. I am with you always!” As Gull remains invisible to the present, he delivers his final condemnation: “You are the sum of all preceding you, yet you seem indifferent to yourselves. A culture grown disinterested even in its own abysmal wounds” (10:21)” (Ho, 2006, pp. 99-100).

texts take as their premise Stephen Knight's theory that the murders were part of a conspiracy to conceal the birth of an illegitimate royal baby fathered by Prince Albert Victor, Duke of Clarence. This conspiracy deeply involves Queen Victoria, the painter Walter Sickert, the spiritualist Robert James Lees, William Gull (the eminent Physician-in-Ordinary to the Queen), and the Freemasonry. Therefore, the Ripper murders become an occult ritual, a complex sacrifice, using Victorian London itself as an altar; after all, as the author of *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography* (1929) affirmed: "One theory of the motive of the murderer was that he was performing an Operation to obtain the Supreme Black Magical Power"¹³. The graphic novel, in particular, implies that these murders, happening when they did and where they did, were almost like an apocalyptic summary of that entire Victorian age and prefigure many of the horrors of the 20th century. They also seem to link up with past murders and violence, showing that all time co-exists and it is only our perception that make it appear to progress, as Howard Hinton affirmed in his first published essay of 1884, entitled "What is the Fourth Dimension?". In fact, in the novel Gull's experiences seem to confirm this: During the murders, he has visions of the 20th century to come, and as he is dying he experiences, and appears to influence, past and future events as well¹⁴.

If the novel concentrates on the complex psychology of the characters as well as of the Era, making no mystery of Jack's identity from its beginning, the film is a whodunnit mystery: the Police Inspector Abberline, played by Johnny Depp, is the brilliant and troubled detective, addicted to opium, whose police work is often aided by his psychic "visions" (maybe a rewriting of the psychic-hellish powers possessed by Gull in the novel?). Coming to be involved in the Ripper's Murders, in small stages he discovers—together with the spectators—the question of the conspiracy. After he deduces that Masonic influence is definitely present in these crimes, his superior as well as a high ranking Freemason himself suspends Abberline; but, as he falls in love with Mary Kelly, Abberline continues studying the case. Thus he and we discover that Sir William Gull is the killer, whose aim was to wipe out all the witnesses to prince Edward's forbidden Catholic marriage to Ann Crook, the prostitute who bore his legitimate daughter (named Alice), who is therefore the heir to the British throne. In the film the imaginary portrait of Jack is frightening and diabolic, a mask of craziness and mystery, but it is surely more reassuring than it was in the novel as well as in reality itself. In fact, if in the novel he dies becoming a kind of a superhuman monster, a diabolic spirit who can travel through space and time, we know that in reality the faceless killer disappeared in the streets of London: that dangerous labyrinth or "cancerous cell" devouring the countryside described by Henry James—exactly in 1888, in his essay entitled "London"—as a "murky Babylon"

¹³ *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography*. Retrieved from <http://niontron.com/aleister-crowly.pdf>.

¹⁴ Using Plato's suggestion to portray the relation between true being and the illusions, Hinton proposes an interesting analogy: "As our world in three dimensions is to a shadow or plane world, so is the higher world to our three-dimensional world. That is, the higher world is four-dimensional; (...) The higher being is, so far as its existence is concerned apart from its qualities, to be sought through the conception of an actual existence spatially higher than that which we realise with our senses". In this "higher world": "Each atom at every moment is not what it was, but a new part of that endless line which is itself. And all this system successively revealed in the time which is but the succession of consciousness, separate as it is in parts, in its entirety is one vast unity". For the full text of Hinton's essay, see https://archive.org/stream/fourthdimension00hintarch/fourthdimension00hintarch_djvu.txt. See also David Toomey, *The New Time Travelers. A Journey to the Frontiers of Physics*, NY, Norton, 2007, and <https://higherspace.wordpress.com/tag/charles-howard-hinton/>.

as well as “an epitome of the round world”, a “mighty ogress who devours human flesh”¹⁵. Thus “the Ripper” transcended life to become Art: “Art eternal, Art limitless”¹⁶.

Now, the question is: Can we define this movie a proper “biopic”¹⁷ of Jack the Ripper? In fact, in the film the “portrait”¹⁸ of Jack is almost “imaginative”, a figment of fear and imagination. If the context and the documents on which it was based are accurate and traceable (letters, pictures, articles in newspapers, statements, investigations, and so on), the discovery of the Ripper’s identity, his face and motives—on which the structure of the whole film is constructed—are completely invented, never happened and can’t be proved once and for all. Anyway, the *O.E.D.* defines a “portrait” as “a painting, drawing, photograph, or engraving of a person, especially one depicting only the face or head and shoulders”, but also “a representation or *impression* of *someone* or *something* in language or on film or television” (*Emphasis mine*). In this case, the film directed by the Hughes brothers can be an intriguing case of a “portrait”. Without counting that, as Dennis Bingham affirms in his *Whose Lives are They Anyway?*, the biopic—or biographic picture—is a genuine, dynamic (even if usually unappreciated) genre, a liminal space between biography and portrait, fiction and reality:

The biopic narrates, exhibits, and celebrates the life of a subject in order to demonstrate, *investigate*, or *question* his or her importance in the world; to illuminate the fine points of a personality; and for both artist and spectator *to discover what it would be like* to be this person, or *to be a certain type of person*, or, (...) to be *that person’s audience*. The appeal of the biopic lies in seeing *an actual person* who did something interesting in life, known mostly in public, transformed into a character. (*Emphasis mine*, Bingham, 2010, p. 10)

If the biopic is truly a dynamic genre, this means that its boundaries will be elastic enough to welcome novelty and difference; and sometimes innovation is necessary. For example, in order to depict a portrait-biography of an evil and mysterious shadow like Jack, a bloody monster without a face and an identity, the author of the film could have had no other choice but to transgress/cross the rules of the biopic and its classical structure. In fact, it was more “natural” to build the story on a structure based on a detective investigating the case. After all, every biopic has a basis in reality, and it also aims at “the urge to dramatize actuality and find in it *the filmmaker’s own version of truth*” (*Emphasis mine*, Bingham, 2010, p. 10), to create a “true portrait” of the protagonist as well as of the period concerned, and to reveal the “real person” behind the public persona, turning life into a “story”¹⁹. As a matter of fact, investigation should be the first element of every biopic in order to discover the (biographical-historical) truth. In *From Hell*, for example, detection is central to the narrative texture: Jack is a faceless murderer and Abberline (Johnny Depp) is a Police Inspector, a psychic detective working to discover the true identity of the Monster of Whitechapel. In this case the filmmaker, more than ever, had to “complete” history in order to fill in what didn’t happen with what a viewer might wish to see happen: the

¹⁵ See the wonderful version loadable from the Hathy Trust Digital Library (Original from the Library of Congress): <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?view=image;size=100;id=loc.ark%3A%2F13960%2Ft9v12jm57;page=root;seq=25>.

¹⁶ Coville-Lucanio, p. 80. Without saying that the Irish writer and playwright George Bernard Shaw once remarked that Jack the Ripper did more than any social reformer to draw attention to the intolerable conditions of Whitechapel’s slums. See also the exhibition “Jack the Ripper and the East End”, at London’s Museum in Docklands: <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1807923,00.html>.

¹⁷ Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski, in *Man on the Moon: Screenplay and Notes* (New York, Newmarket, 1999), call the “anti-biopic” a movie about somebody who doesn’t deserve one.

¹⁸ A “portrait” is an artistic representation of a person who, generally, is looking directly at the painter or photographer.

¹⁹ Robert Rosenstone writes that in a visual medium history must be fictional in order to be true. See his *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*, Cambridge, Harvard, 1995.

resolution of the enigma of Jack the Ripper, finally discovering-showing his true face and his motives (in the directors' and scriptwriter's point of view). It was a resolution highly appreciated as for the construction of the structure of the film, even if the true image of Jack is (and should remain) that of a faceless monster haunting the streets of London forever. It is part of his everlasting (demonic) myth. Every other reassuring resolution seems to remain inconsistent.

The Avenger, the Ripper, and the Myth of Invisibility

Notoriously, the first cinematographic reincarnation of Jack the Ripper is the terrible Avenger of *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog*, a 1927 British silent film directed by Alfred Hitchcock, loosely based on *The Lodger*, a horror novel of 1913 by Marie Adelaide Belloc Lowndes. The film is full of images strictly connected to the myth of Jack: "Noisome courts and alleys, hansom cabs, gaslights, fog, (...) newsboys crying out 'mutilation' and a cape shrouded figure of a faceless prowler of the night armed with a long knife and carrying a black Gladstone bag" (Sugden, 2005, p. 1). The only main difference here is that, instead of prostitutes, "the Avenger" kills blond girls venturing all alone in the night. When, in the beginning of the film, the police detectives interview a woman who was an eyewitness to the seventh murder, the spectators can read in the subtitles what she has seen: "Tall he was—and his face all wrapped up". So, when later that same foggy night a tall black figure all wrapped up knocks at the door of Mr and Mrs Bunting inquiring about the room they're renting, the spectators feel that man is the Avenger. And when Mrs Bunting takes him to the room on the top floor of her house, which is decorated with portraits of beautiful young women, all blondes, he looks pale and puzzled. Later she finds him turning all the portraits of the women around to face the wall, and he politely requests that they be removed.

More than the first part of the film is full of evidences against him, and he is often framed with dark shadows in the background or with a shadow shaped like a cross on his face, as he were a vampire, emphasizing the effect of craziness, danger, and evil: a reference to the *German expressionist* tradition. Moreover, Daisy—the daughter of the Buntings—is a beautiful blond girl; so, when we understand that "the lodger" (starring the famous *Ivor Novello*²⁰) is fascinated with her, we start to become afraid for her life. But, as in all Hitchcock's films, in the beginning of it we're given false clues and culprits. As a matter of fact, in the end we come to know that the young man performed by Novello is another kind of an "avenger": in fact, his young sister was the first victim of the popular serial killer, and he vowed to his mother on her deathbed that he would not rest until he had brought the Avenger to justice. Anyway, in the film—unlike the novel by Belloc Lowndes—again the killer is never seen or described. The whole text focuses on this false path, and only in the end, while the young and innocent lodger is surrounded and beaten by a lynch mob, a paperboy interrupts this violence with the news that the real Avenger has been arrested. Thus, immediately, the mob releases him into Daisy's arms, in a keen replica of many famous depositions of Jesus from the cross.

Once again, *The Lodger* seems to be a very strange case of biopic. In this particular case, "the Lodger", the real protagonist of the title, is not the monster spectators think he is from the beginning of the movie; we come to know his story just in the end, in order to understand he is not "the Avenger" the police is looking for. On the other hand, the never-seen protagonist of the movie, the devilish monster we are looking for from the first frames,

²⁰ Hitchcock ironically remembered: "They wouldn't let Novello even be considered as a villain. The publicity angle carried the day, and we had to change the script to show that without a doubt he was innocent" (Spoto, 1999, p. 84).

recalls very vaguely “the Ripper”: he has another “brand name” (“the Avenger” instead of “the Ripper”), and “only” the image people have of him, his violence on women, his “hunting ground” and his inscrutable invisibility seem to coincide with Jack’s. And yet, the public can’t watch this film without thinking of him and his victims torn to pieces, because Jack represents all this. In fact, the film seems to work on his mythical-demonic aura, his bloody legend, his invisibility, and is part of his endless myth. As Moore and Campbell affirm in *The Dance of the Gull Catchers*, the epilogue in comic format of their graphic novel: “Jack is a super-position (and) (...) mirrors our hysterias. Faceless, he is the receptacle for each new social panic”. This is the reason why, maybe, he still haunts us nowadays, in novels, films, songs, pubs and nightclubs, blogs, and digital games. As Deborah Cameron affirms in *The Quest for Jack the Ripper*:

In the strange cultural industry devoted to popular representations of serial killing and serial killers, no product is more durable than what its aficionados call “Ripperology”, the lore of Jack the Ripper. (...) Waiting for Jack to be unmasked is like waiting for the Second Coming—it has the same sacred quality, attracts the same collection of crackpots as participants, moves to the same predictable rhythm punctuated by occasional climactic moments, and in the end is similarly self-defeating. (Cameron, 1994, p. 147)

Hunting the Hunter: *Frenzy* (1972), *Jack the Ripper* (1998) and the Evil “Champion” of the Male/Political Violence

As Judith R. Walkowitz writes in her essay *Jack the Ripper and the Myth of Male Violence*, over the past hundred years the Ripper murders have achieved the status of a modern myth, in particular, of male violence against women: “a story whose details have become vague and generalized, but whose ‘moral’ message is clear: the city is a dangerous place for women, when they transgress the narrow boundaries of home and hearth and dare to enter public space” (Walkowitz, 1982, p. 543). As a matter of fact, interviewed by Anna Davin in June 1973, Mrs. Bartholemew (born 1892, in Poplar, East London) affirmed:

The hunt for Jack the Ripper—I remember that as well as I remember anything—I don’t know if he was in my time or whether it was only talked about. But the boys—horrible little brutes they were—they used to say “Look out, here comes Jack the Ripper” if we were playing in the street some time—and we all used to run. Oh we were proper little cowards. They always pictured him with a big leather apron and a carving knife. (Walkowitz, 1982, p. 543)

As the prototype of dozens of filmic and fictional treatments and as the inspiration for numerous real-life “heroes” of crime, the Ripper has materially contributed—in particular—to women’s sense of vulnerability in modern urban culture. That’s why, maybe—as Walkowitz points out—when readers/spectators and actors in the Ripper drama immersed themselves in the details of the cases, they were equally compelled by the desire to extract meaning out of apparent disorder, to search out the clues to solve the mystery. And we still do it nowadays:

In reviewing the events of autumn 1888, we should be aware of our own voyeuristic proclivities: to the extent that we are trying to derive meaning from the Ripper murders, we are engaged in an intellectual task similar to our Victorian predecessors. (Walkowitz, 1982, p. 547)

It comes to my mind a famous British thriller film by Alfred Hitchcock (again!), entitled *Frenzy* (1972)²¹. The

²¹ Notoriously, the film was based upon the novel *Goodbye Piccadilly. Farewell Leicester Square* by Arthur La Bern and adapted for the screen by Anthony Shaffer.

film tells the story of a serial killer who rapes and kills several women in London (sic!), using his necktie to strangle them to death. The movie opens with a majestic and famous sequence in which the spectator views the Thames River and London, and then moves in on a politician making a riverside speech about cleaning up the river. A crowd listens intently, until a scream interrupts the speech. Someone has spotted some rather unusual pollution: the nude body of a woman floating facedown in the river. As the police move in, a man in the crowd notes this as “another necktie murder”, and starts comparing this killer to Jack the Ripper. Thus we’re reminded that Hitchcock’s London is a city that loves a good murder and that, more in general, London is still (and will be forever) the city haunted by the ghost of Jack.

As Tania Modleski²² points out, of all of Hitchcock’s films *Frenzy* reveals most clearly that violence against women is not the solitary work of a psychopathic killer, but rather a tendency in patriarchal society that implicates everyone who lives in it. In a society threatened by the increasing political power and economic and social freedom of women, the killer’s actions seek to restore patriarchal order and rob women of their agency: maybe only a pale reflex of what had happened in Victorian times. Christine Hoff Kraemer affirms in her essay “‘Every cloud has a silver lining’: Eroticized violence against women in Hitchcock”:

Yet *Frenzy* suggests that women too may desire to view the violation of other women, even as it emphasizes the suffering and horror of Rusk’s victims. Women are among those in the crowd who flock to look at the dead body floating in the river in the film’s opening, and it is a middle-aged woman who asks the inspectors, with apparently prurient interest, “He rapes them first, doesn’t he?” Although she recoils from the offensive response that “every cloud has a silver lining”, it’s clear that the fact of the sex murders is a source of titillation and excitement, one that draws in tourists of both genders. In addition to revealing the systemic workings of a patriarchal society threatened by women’s power, *Frenzy* also rubs the audience’s faces in the connection between eroticism and violence. As audience members, we are made participants in the assault scene with the full knowledge that this horror is what we paid good money to see. (Hoff Kraemer, 2004)

Hoff Kraemer also asserts that *Frenzy* recalls *The Lodger* in its portrayal of ritualized, serial murders of women in London. He writes:

The film is sprinkled with misogynistic but cuttlingly funny verbal satire, from the offhand conversation in the opening sequence about Jack the Ripper sending body parts to the press, to the reference to how “good, juicy sex murders” and the prospect of London being scattered with the bodies of “ripped whores” brings in the tourist trade. (Hoff Kraemer, 2004)

In fact, eroticism, voyeurism, power, violence, mystery, curiosity, and fear contributed (and still contribute) to build the dark myth of Jack. As Bingham writes in the first chapter of his (already quoted) book on biopic, in this genre biographical subjects are defined as different from the prevailing norms: “What makes them different are their talent and their ‘calling’, what Strechey describes here as ‘mysterious promptings’” (Bingham, 2010, p. 36).

In sum, the protagonist of a biopic should be judged by the world he/she inhabits “at best ‘peculiar’ and at worst ‘half-witted’, ‘mad’, ‘crazy’” (Bingham, 2010, p. 36). This means that the protagonist can/should also be the incarnation of the “supreme evil”, just like Jack; even if in this case it is difficult to describe/show his life or part of it, as no one really knows his real identity. In fact, the movies on “the Ripper” always take the form of a search, a detection. For example, I’m thinking of the four-part TV movie *Jack The Ripper* (1998) directed by

²² See Modleski, Tania. *The Women Who Knew Too Much*. London: Routledge, 1988.

David Wickes, and interpreted by Michael Caine, Lewis Collins, Jane Seymour, and Susan George²³, which tells the story of the murderer and his homicides through the hunt of Inspector Abberline (Michael Caine). Using historical characters involved in the genuine 1888 hunt for the killer, the series draw on the same Masonic/Royal Family conspiracy theory²⁴ as the 1978 film *Murder by Decree* by Bob Clark²⁵ and *From Hell*, slowly discovering the “multiform” identity of the Whitechapel Monster as well as the dark face of the British Monarchy/Empire: the image of a lone assassin stalking his victims under the foggy gaslight of Whitechapel would be a mistaken notion inspired by a terrifying nickname, with the secret support of the Crown. Obviously evidences do not exist because the conspiracy made sure that all evidence was destroyed. Thus, the legend of Jack can last forever, undisturbed.

A Monster of Eroticism: The Film Version by Jess Franco, a Journey Into Radical Alterity

Is Jess Franco's *Jack the Ripper* (1976) a proper biopic of the Whitechapel Monster? The film concerns itself with Dr. Orloff²⁶ (Klaus Kinski), a respected physician whose practice is floundering with a string of low-income clients who can't afford to pay. By night, the good doctor moonlights as Jack the Ripper terrorizing the back alleys of White Chapel and its female streetwalkers. In short, it is a sort of Jekyll-Hyde version (without scientific potion), based on double identity and double life, where the names, the characters, and the events narrated do not correspond “faithfully” to the “historical” ones. For example, there is no mention of the letters written by the killer to the Police and no reference to the “Jewish question”, the Police Inspector in charge of the case is called Selby (Andreas Mannkoff), and also the names of the victims are different from the “true” ones; but, above all, in the end the Inspector catches the killer and brings him to justice. Evidently, the film does not bother with historical accuracy; it doesn't even try! The director is interested in Jack the Ripper as a sexual sadist with seriously twisted Oedipal issues. Just think of the scene in which the doctor has a vision of his mother dressed as a prostitute who provokes his wrath taunting him with her past as a whore. That night, into the (bloody) shoes of Jack, he hires a prostitute and cuts off both her breasts: a clear symbol/act of perversion as well as of feminine castration, with Freudian implications.

Differently from the other films on Jack, essentially focused on the detective on the prowl for the murderer, this time the director is very much interested in the killer's motives and modus operandi, realizing—for some critics—the most interesting contribution to the cinematic persona of “the Ripper”. After all, Klaus Kinski is perfect to play this role, with his gargoyle face, his blonde-white hair, his steely blue eyes. While you're watching the movie, there is never any doubt that he is the star-centre of the film, and so is Jack! He becomes, in a way, what Jack really was perceived to be at his times: primordial evil. The blind man who is testimony of the murder of the poor Sally, the first victim on the screen, says he could feel the “aura” of the killer and describes him as a

²³ The series coincided with the 100th anniversary of the murders.

²⁴ The theory was first put forward in the 1960s by Thomas E. A. Stowell who published his claims in a November 1970 issue of *The Criminologist*. His theory was later turned into the best selling *Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution* by Stephen Knight.

²⁵ In this version Sherlock Holmes investigates the murders committed by Jack the Ripper and discovers a conspiracy to protect the killer, and essentially concentrates on the real-life Whitechapel detective Frederick Abberline.

²⁶ Jesus Franco was very much concerned with the character of the mad Dr. Orloff (or sometimes Orlof) who wants to repair his disfigured daughter's face with skin grafts from others. In 1962 he directed *The Awful Dr. Orloff* premiered in Madrid under the title of *Gritos en la noche*, which translates into *Screams in the Night* in English. It premiered in Paris in May 1963 under the title of *L'horrible Dr. Orloff*. The film received a negative reception from critics on its initial release. A sequel to the film was also directed by Franco, and released in 1964, title *El Secreto del Dr. Orloff*.

scared, nervous, mad man that borders on genius, more a victim than an executioner. Obsessed by the vision of his mother, almost naked, who invites him to have sex with her, the doctor reacts by having sex with his victims while they are dying. For the first time, in this film, we can watch him while he's killing them and, then, while he's literally cutting them into pieces, even if they're still alive. All the film, then, is centered on a sort of Sadist "complex", both for the character(s) and the spectators.

The clearest example of that happens when the local Inspector's girlfriend, Cynthia, dressed as a whore in order to help him find the killer, can finally meet Jack; he catches her, takes her to his "lair" and, in a trance state, says: "You damned whore. You'd had loved that, wouldn't you? You were going to finish me off. You were going to kill me. You hussy. And you killed me long ago. When I was a child. I loved you. I loved you and hated you at the same time. But now I want you death because all that's left is hatred. And with your blood I will then cleanse myself of all my sins. Look how beautifully the knife is gleaming" "But you loved me. How can you kill me?", Cynthia replies, consciously playing the part of his mother. "Because you're a whore, mother, a dirty whore", the doctor/Ripper screams, "and I want to see you suffer. I want to destroy you the way you destroyed me back then. (...) When I didn't want you to caress me with your revolting hands, you laughed. You always wanted to caress me with these gentle fingers that were all tender and warm, even when it was cold. And they were so seductive too" he says kissing her fingers, tearing her clothes from her body and then raping her. In a dark corner Frieda, his partner in crime, is watching the scene with sadistic interest²⁷.

In the character of Jess Franco's Jack the two fundamental basic instincts, postulated by Freud, dominating the human being—Eros (the sexual drive or creative life force) and Thanatos (the death force or destructiveness)—are completely confused and unbalanced. His complex psychic drives recall me of Georges Bataille when he affirms that, in essence, the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation: a violation bordering on death, bordering on murder²⁸. It is not a case if the term "dissolution" corresponds with "dissolute life", the familiar phrase linked with erotic activity²⁹. In the film Jack derives erotic pleasure and gratification from inflicting physical pain and humiliation³⁰. In everyday life the doctor seems to have relationship/interpersonal problems with women: he is shy and detached; only when he becomes Jack the Ripper he appears strong and cruel, and he can finally take sexual pleasure harming and tearing his victims apart. Probably the spectator is meant to share—in a certain way—this interest, like his accomplice Frieda, watching the scene and taking pleasure (or hate and disgust) for his bloody acts. In both cases, he/she is experiencing feelings and drives coming directly "from hell".

As a biopic, Jess Franco's *Jack the Ripper* recalls me of what Dennis Bingham wrote on *Citizen Kane* by Orson Welles: even if it is hard to consider it a biography, it can be considered a work that subverts the system, namely, the American mainstream art film. Surely, it falls outside George Custen's definition of the biopic as "minimally composed of the life, or the portion of life, of a real person whose name is used" (Custen, 1992, p.

²⁷ Also the Inspector has a problem with his girlfriend who says that he sees and treats her like a mother figure.

²⁸ Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, translated by Mary Dalwood, London & New York: Marion Boyars, 1962 [1957].

²⁹ In the process of dissolution, the male partner has generally an active role, while the female partner is passive. The passive, female side is essentially the one that is dissolved as a separate entity. But for the male partner the dissolution of the passive partner means one thing only: it is paving the way for a fusion where both are mingled, attaining at length the same degree of dissolution. The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives.

³⁰ Also Frieda has sadistic drives more than once.

6)³¹, because we don't know anything about the true identity of the Ripper and we continually remember that the story narrated in the film is completely invented, just like the names of the characters. Anyway, we have the impression that it perfectly catches the real spirit of the killer, echoing Plutarch's belief that history describes what people do while biography reveals who they are.

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³¹ *Citizen Kane* models a new type of biopic; in fact, as Laura Mulvey, Robert Carringer, Simon Callow, and Louis Pizzitola noted, among others, the film was inspired by Welles and Mankiewicz's desire to make a coy investigation into the life, career, and politics of the publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst., and so to dramatize the relations among capitalism, power, sex, and modern mass media in America.