Scream queens: Teen serial killers, Tiktok deaths and Taylor Swift's soundtrack

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Abstract: This paper discusses the relevance of serial killers and psychopaths in contemporary narratives, presenting some narrative strategies that have been used to maintain popular interest in these stories. It will present a concise history of this genre and how Ryan Murphy's TV series *Scream Queens* offered some guidelines for regenerating serial killer and psychopath stories, for instance, by rethinking the moral values that identify the final girls and their antagonists. This paper also analyzes extracts from the TV series, discussing its reference to *Psycho* among many other slashers and American horror movies**.**
Keywords: Pop culture. Serial killer. *Scream Queens*. Contemporary narrative.

Introduction: cultural murderers and serial pop hits

> The rise of the serial killer is a product of the media's attempt to give a face to the faceless predator criminal. If a faceless criminal is a productive motif for media-created crime myths, even more public interest can be generated when we can give that myth a specific name, 'serial murder,' and then give that name an identifiable cast of characters. (SCHMID, 2005, p.15)

In *Natural born celebrities:* serial killers in American culture, David Schmid (2005) points to North American society as an icon of the creation of individual celebrities, either through the acknowledgement of their talents or through the transformation of the self into a market product. The author states that "In a culture based on celebrities, serial killers like Bundy, Dahmer, and Gacy are among the biggest stars" (SCHMID,

2005, p. 1), which may affect American cultural productions. However, as timeless as any cultural artifact can be, it is important to question how these problematic figures have survived in the social symbolic mindset, recreating themselves in order to maintain a continuing fascination over the public. To find answers to this question, this article seeks to understand the phenomenon of the spectacularization of serial killers through the lenses of the creative choices that are made when a cultural product is produced and broadcast.

In addition to their ability to recurrently return to public attention, another issue we must focus on is how the serial killer narratives were able to format themselves to catch particularly the interest of Generation Z, considering that this group was born somewhere between 1995 and 2010. Although serial killer narratives have proved their power to engage with any age range, in a world that is hyper-connected to the internet, and in which social media has become the standard medium for sharing cultural artifacts, these texts had to adapt themselves to ensure their continued existence. With that in mind, a work that we make use of as a starting point for studying the current spread of this genre – the serial killer stories – is *Scream Queens* (MURPHY; FALCHUK; BRENNAN, 2015-2016), a TV show that presents to teenagers and young adults part of the culture of serial killer narratives. The idea behind the show is to compile several famous criminal narratives from film and literature – a project of appropriation that will be discussed throughout my analysis. However, *Scream Queens* also invests in translating its plot to social media language and in adapting the storyline to attract a younger audience, which points to an effort to renovate serial killer narratives.

With in-person book clubs becoming less popular and streaming platforms allowing audiences to experience their products anywhere, anytime, it is also important to discuss the spaces in which culture is shared and debated. *Twitter* has become the *Agora* of the 21st century and this

switch in places of debate – from the in-person discussions to the online format – deeply affected not only how serial killer narratives are produced, but also how any kind of genre or poetic that is able to maintain its relevance. As much as *Twitter* has assumed an important function in society, it is also necessary to mention *TikTok* and other visual/clip social media, since *cuts* from movies and shows are frequently posted on these media, reworking our notions of time. The process of dedicating a few hours per day to watch a complete artistic project was once considered a standard practice, however in the last two decades this relationship with time has become more fragile and rapid, and the attention span to a specific subject has also decreased. In other words, younger generations are less interested in consuming full bodies of work because they would demand more focusing time, which makes these visual social media extremely powerful since the cuts that make it to *TikTok for you* page are the moments that succeed in capturing the audience's attention. Many authors have pointed out that time is currently perceived in different ways. Bauman (2000), for instance, states in *Liquid Modernity* that the notion of time has changed in the past decades:

> Time-distance separating the end from the beginning is shrinking or vanishing altogether; the two notions, which were once used to plot the passing, and so to calculate the "forfeited value" of time, have lost much of their meaning, which – as all meanings – arose from the starkness of their opposition. There are only 'moments' – points without dimensions. (BAUMAN, 2000, p. 118.)

Another important aspect that we must address in this paper is how audiences identify with whatever artwork they enjoy. In the cultural context of thrillers or horror films that focus on the figure of serial killers,

this entails a shift in the American moral balance. When it comes to the fictionalization of any serial killer, this process of self-identification assumes different guises. For instance, there are few men who are likely to admire characters such as *American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman (ELLIS, 1991) – usually *Red Pill* movement participants –, and many other spectators who will try to connect to *The Silence of the Lambs*' Clarice (HARRIS, 1988), each having their own reasons to do so. However, some of these serial killer narratives must reshape their audiences' moral values in order to create engaging characters. Both processes are presented in *Scream Queens*, either in relation to the serial killers or to the protagonist Chanel. What is interesting is how the show uses comedy to pull some moral strings apart, rebalancing their audience's judgment on *right* and *wrong*.

Even with all the brutality and mourning that a serial killer causes within a community, there is still a popular interest in their actions. This kind of narrative lingers on the planning of each murder and on the process of killing itself. This curiosity is partly a response to the spectacularization of death promoted by the way the crimes committed by serial killers are presented in books, movies, and other kinds of cultural media. *Scream Queens* follows the same pattern since most of the murder scenes are performed in a way that audiences will detach themselves from the killing itself and focus on the artistic presentation of the scene. This spectacularization of death and the interested reaction from American audiences may not only reveal important socio-cultural aspects, but also provide substantial information on the relevance of serial killer narratives and their place in the American social mindset.

American superstars: from LaLaurie to the Red Devil

> Sidney: You sick fuckers! You've seen one too many movies.

> Billy: Now, Sid, don't you blame the movies. Movies don't create psychos, movies make psychos more creative!
> (*SCREAM*. Directed by Wes Craven 1996.)

The Hungarian story of the *Bloody Countess*[1] from the 16th century inspired tales, while Jack the Ripper became the main figure of English newspapers in the late 19th century. Those serial killer stories have been around for a long time, and they prove that this is not an American phenomenon; however, there is a very particular aspect of these narratives that is widely spread in the United States: their process of turning real killers into Hollywood superstars. When it comes to older European serial killer narratives, there was an interest in the fictionalization of their crimes, and their characters would also function as representations of evil. The *Bloody Countess* stories, for instance, do not appear to be a model for those spectators who emotionally identify themselves with the story, since we are introduced to a killer who only seeks eternal beauty, even if this means the murder of an inordinate number of young women. Not only the character of the Bloody Countess is understood as evil, but also the whole aesthetics of the narrative, whenever it would be fictionalized, emphasized the brutality and horror of the killing process.

In a similar way, the story of Jack the Ripper haunted the English public more than a century ago; however, it also presented a shift in the way that serial killers are understood by society. Both the media and the State's public institutions did not act to provide safety to the citizens, on the contrary, the failure of the police to arrest the killer and the popular demand for information promoted a spectacularization of the whole process, fed by the sensational coverage of the crimes. Since the authorities

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1   Elisabeth Báthory was a countess who lived between 1560 and 1614 and she has been portrayed as one of first serial killers of all time. According to Bartosiewicz (2018, p.103), she is commonly "portrayed as the 'Blood Princess', murdering young women and bathing in a tub full of fresh blood.".

could not find the culprit, and related murders continued to pile up, the media would present the incidents as lurid fiction, which raised the killer, or killers, to a phantasmagoric presence in people's minds, while boosting the sale of newspapers and popular pamphlets on Jack the Ripper, turning him into an enduring cultural icon. In *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*, L. Perry Curtis Junior (2000) observes Jack the Ripper's longevity in media, highlighting one of the aspects that made the killer so famous, his power over the popular mindset:

> [...] the domestic homicides featured in newspapers fell into the category of knowable communities, because the circumstances and the motives were so easily imaginable to Victorian readers. Interviews with relatives, friends, and neighbors who shed some light on the protagonists made such crimes seem comprehensible. Far different were the Ripper murders, which belonged to the unknowable, if not unthinkable. Refusing to fade into obscurity, the specter of Jack the Ripper haunted the public imagination and provoked nightmares in adults as well as children. And the abundance of books, movies, and television documentaries about Jack in our own time attests to the continuing power of this legendary villain to attract and repel people with almost equal ease. (JUNIOR, 2000, p. 105-106).

In addition to that, it is important to mention that the delay in solving the cases also instigated a social image of Jack the Ripper as a superhuman figure, reinforcing its appeal as a criminal genius who could not be stopped, which brings him closer to the superlative heroes and villains of popular culture. As a consequence, the serial killer is imbued with the ambivalent aura of the antihero, displaying traits of the resourceful hero who disdains the limitations imposed by official law and of the demonic antagonist whose seemingly superhuman power threatens the dissolution of the social

order as a whole.

If the story of the Jack, the Ripper murders became a trending literary topic, Americans would also soon find a way to turn their killers into celebrities. The difference, however, between the previous European stories and how Americans produced and reacted to these narratives is based on a potentiation of the image of the killer. For instance, folk stories about Madame LaLaurie in Louisiana have haunted Americans since her actual existence, and the fictionalization of her life and crimes is often revisited. Delphine LaLaurie was a well-known aristocrat in Louisiana between the 18th and 19th centuries and became even more famous after the local press revealed her violent crimes against enslaved people, which was only possible after a fire that consumed part of her mansion[2]. The earliest stories involving Delphine LaLaurie usually dealt with her actions against enslaved people, as is the case of George Cable's (1889) *Strange True Stories of Louisiana*. What is relevant in LaLaurie's case for our consideration of the way American culture deals with the serial killer figure is how her image and character grew from being a repulsive killer to becoming a pop icon, with not only her story being repeatedly told but also her character traits being turned into a model for fictional serial killers. However, as the character grew in popular interest, more of her cruelty and personality also rose to fame. Following upon this process of LaLaurie turning into a celebrity, in 1946 Jeanne de Lavigne added to the killer's image more personal information about her life and need for brutal killing in *Ghost Stories of Old New Orleans*, which again enlarged the idea of Madame LaLaurie as a natural celebrity, a figure born to capitalize pop culture and folklore.

More recently, Madame LaLaurie's story was revisited by Ryan Murphy in one of the most popular seasons of his blockbuster show

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2   The fire incident is described in Cable's (1889) *Strange True Stories of Louisiana*.

American Horror Story and, besides what was already commonly seen in any fictionalization of her character, he added an important element to the celebrization of this murderer: comedy. Murphy has created a series of shows where he explored the idea of serial killers and psychopaths as born stars, and the formula behind his success is strongly based on either comedy arches or redemption/consolation plots. In *American Horror Story*, both humorous features and redemption scenes presented LaLaurie to a younger audience that might have never met the character before, and watching her being cursed for her crimes by a voodoo queen, who reduces her to a speaking head able only to watch *Oh Freedom,* is somehow laughable, while also consoling to at least part of the audience.

The serial killers featured in *American Horror Story* are, in a way, different from *Scream Queens*' The Red Devil, since most of them are fictionalizations of real murderers, and they tend to work alone. In *Scream Queens*, on the other hand, Murphy adapted the idea of a group of serial killers that work under the same identity, the Red Devil, which appears to be a reference to *Scream*, the 1990s horror saga, in which there was always more than one person hiding behind the costume of the Ghost Face. The Red Devil's target is mainly the Chanels and any other person who would disturb their plan to destroy Chanel Oberlin and her followers. Also, both the Red Devil and the Ghost Face are very "clumsy", which adds to their comic traits by introducing physical comedy in both the series and the film franchise. This also potentializes the image of the murderer as a pop icon by increasing its entertainment value while attenuating its association with any kind of danger outside the screen. There are several moments when we are led to believe that the Red Devil's scheme was set up by a troupe of mindless teen psychopaths, as this conversation between two of the Red Devils implies:

> Gigi: What's wrong with you? I told you to get rid

> of him! We are not kidnappers, we're murderers on the way to revenge. I told you this. That is our brand and if he [another Red Devil] is messing with it, he has to go! No! I don't want to hear about how this is hard for you. You want to know what is hard for me? Try to cook *coq au vin*, while managing this whole year of making a revenge plan without anyone's help. And, since you guys are so clearly inefficient at killing everyone, I now have to come up with an overly elaborate plan. (SCREAM QUEENS, 2015, s. 1, ep. 7.)

Although the inspiration for The Red Devil was more likely Ghost Face than *American Horror Story*, it is impossible to deny the influence of Murphy's formula for representing serial killers and psychopaths. From LaLaurie to the Red Devil, there have been several occasions in which the real meaning of a serial murderer to a community collapsed, and the fictionalization of serial killers transformed them into pop stars. If the killers from *American Horror Story* were presented with a certain level of humor, while the plot focused mostly on their process of redemption, in *Scream Queens*, on the other hand, the serial killers were insistently used as a source of comedy, redirecting the audience's expectations to the humorous murdering scenes and the mystery behind the Red Devil character.

It is all about the classics: do they fit in 280 characters?

> Chanel #2: He's killing me! The Red Devil is killing me! I let him into my room, now I'm being stabbed to death!! Somebody please help! Please! [stabbed in the head and dead; woke up one last time and pressed enter to publish it]. (SCREAM QUEENS, 2015, s. 1, ep. 1.).

In the age of social media, the scene of Chanel #2 being murdered is the result of a set of anxieties. More than a comic relief, it is also a reinvention. From the several murder scenes in *Scream* (which already represented a powerful shift in the way serial killers were represented), there have been multiple attempts to rethink the fictionalization of serial killers and their actions. However, in *Scream Queens*, Murphy presents a different approach to these genre adaptations, since the idea was, as mentioned before, to use the inspiration from *Scream* to think of a serial killer narrative that would have an impact on a younger audience. In the show, Murphy provides the spectator with the regular clichés of a serial killer story, even recreating classic moments from these narratives, but with the understanding of how cultural interests and the perception of time have changed in the last thirty years.

In order to adapt these stories, while also finding a new way of developing them, the showrunner of *Scream Queens* appears to have acknowledged the sense of timing of newer generations, with the result that many of the important scenes in the show are very short. When *Scream* came out in 1996, for instance, one of the biggest stars in the movie was Drew Barrymore as Casey Becker, and her character had less than 15 minutes on screen in the very first part of the film. In a similar way, Ariana Grande was announced among other teen stars who would appear in *Scream Queens*; however, her character, Chanel #2, only appears for a few minutes before the Red Devil kills her in what appears to be both a reference to the death of Barrymore's character in *Scream* and an indication of how murder scenes were supposed to be filmed. The death of Chanel #2 is a three-minute scene that presents an extremely condensed version of Becker's murder. The rapidity of Chanel's death scene provides the audience not only with a set of cultural references related to the genre but also fits perfectly into a mass-shared social media format since *TikTok* videos are not allowed to be more than three minutes long. Before a teenager or a young adult even realizes

it, they are already consuming a serial killer narrative, and the condensed references will trigger all the cultural frameworks that so often capture American audiences.

It is true, however, that serial killer narratives have always used time, or the lack of it, as a substantial ally in the making of a murder scene. If we consider one of the most significant American texts of this genre, Thompson's [1952]/(1991) *The Killer Inside Me*, which was already in the process of turning serial killers into celebrities, many of its murder scenes are frenetic, so much so that a few deaths are not even understood in a first reading. The problem with time in the 21st century is, on the other hand, the fact that not only things are faster, but they are also concurrent, which makes any cultural product become a burst of inputs. When it comes to the murder scenes in *Scream Queens*, the audience has to simultaneously process the murder itself, its circumstances, and its references, but all these elements tend to be unified under a humorous perspective so that the spectator will feel less exhausted in processing all the information on the screen.

A great example of how Murphy used a short span of time to put into place several literary and cinematic references, while also presenting an exciting killing scene, is one of the many attempts by the Red Devil to murder Dean Munsch, interpreted by Jamie Lee Curtis. In the first season, Munsch is taking a shower when the serial killer enters the bathroom to stab her, but Munsch sees him and hits him while saying "I saw that movie 50 times", in a direct reference to the classic stabbing scene from *Psycho* (1960). Once more, there were several layers of meaning involved in that scene, from the fact that Jamie Lee's mother herself starred in the stabbing scene of *Psycho*, to the aesthetics of old serial killer movies overlaid with a humorous tone – all this in less than a minute. This process of condensing meaning in an extremely short amount of time has made it possible for *Scream Queens* to reappear often on TikTok, enabling these cultural inputs

and the show itself to permeate the audience's mind continuously.

Besides the excess of visual information and the sarcastic lines that make most of the killing scenes from *Scream Queens* a substantial renewal of serial killer narratives, comedy, as mentioned before, is the element that ties all these cultural stimuli together. For instance, at the beginning of the first season, the Kappa House fraternity is obliged to receive new members, and we are introduced to one of the newcomers, called Tiffany deSalle, or *Deaf Taylor Swift*. Since the Chanels were unhappy with the new members, they decided to prank them by burying them in the yard, keeping only their heads above the ground. The whole scene is bizarre and chaotic by itself, but The Red Devil sees the prank as an opportunity to kill more people from the fraternity and shreds Tiffany's head using a lawn mower – which directly refers to the killing machine scene in the film *Caligula* (1979) where multiple people are beheaded in a similar way – while she sings *Shake It Off,* by Taylor Swift. All those elements, in juxtaposition, make time become an experience of exaggeration, combining the natural fear of being buried with the excitement of singing a pop hit, while the sense of comedy smooths the process, making the scene an enjoyable and curious incident for the audience to watch; in other words, making it fun.

Chanel *versus* the Red Devil: love to hate or hate to love

> Chanel: "ATTENTION ALL USELESS KAPPA SLUTS – Congratulations! If you're reading this it means you've overcome the limitations of your tiny manatee brains and opened an email. [...] I'm not being facetious, I literally think you should consider undergoing a surgical procedure to remove your ovaries, thereby sparing human race exposure to your DNA. You four trollops ARE THE WORST SPECIMEN OF HUMAN BEINGS EVER BORN and you should all REALLY watch your backs, because if

> this serial killer targeting Kappa house doesn't chop off your heads, I'M GOING TO DO IT! So I can sell your tiny whore brain pans to science. Sincerely, Chanel Oberlin." (SCREAM QUEENS, 2015, s. 1, ep. 12.).

If serial killers and psychopaths are American natural superstars and, at some point, the mourning they cause is transformed into a cultural pop artifact, then we must discuss what may attract audiences to these stories. From the earliest serial killer narratives, the mystery atmosphere and the idea that the murderer was some kind of genius captivate readers, mostly because this is a fictionalization of something that we do not want to experience in real life. It is as if, due to detachment from reality, we were navigating a story full of adrenaline, without feeling the actual pain, both physically and emotionally. However, Americans have developed a special taste for these narratives, creating celebrities out of killers, and adapting traces of their fictionalizations to their cultural movements. One of the most recognizable examples of how American audiences captured *values* from serial killer narratives and produced a whole lifestyle out of them would be the *American Psycho* (2000) movie and its main character Patrick Bateman. In the film, Bateman is introduced as a businessman in the late 80s who, among his other male co-workers, enjoys his status in society and performs extreme narcissistic features. The main character and his network are always competing and envying each other, and this need for being the best man in the corporate field triggers Bateman's killer mindset. Bateman's psychopath fantasies demonstrate how full of hatred and disdain towards women and any other group considered less important to him and his network this savage capitalist environment was and still is. Although *American Psycho* criticizes capitalism and points out how masculinity can be toxic, there is a whole group of men who elected Bateman as an alpha symbol, and they try to copy the character's aesthetics, while also

reinforcing the hate against women and the principle of men's superiority in a neoliberal world.

We cannot say that all the interest people have in Chanel Oberlin and her cronies is related to her being a serial killer, because, in fact, she never killed anyone, not on purpose at least, nor did the other original Chanels. One of the elements that raised the audience's attention to *Scream Queens* is how Chanel Oberlin is basically mean, as it is witnessed in her outrageous personality and her hateful speeches. Emma Roberts' character delivers lines that would throw any regular citizen in jail, as when she calls Tiffany – the girl who got murdered with a lawn mower – "Deaf Taylor Swift". Murphy used Chanel to expose several disturbing situations, and, to a certain extent, used nonsense to explore to the most the absurdities humans can perform in terms of discourse and practices.

Despite her unpleasant personality, Chanel has captivated the audience as well as Bateman from *American Psycho*. For instance, the website dedicated to fanfiction *Wattpad* reports[3] more than thirty fan stories based on the series and the character. The idea of a mean girl, or *Mean Girls* (2004), became popular in the 2000s, being an aesthetic copied by teenagers for over a decade, and the Chanels benefited from that. Both Chanel Oberlin and Regina George, from *Mean Girls*, appear to be purely mean, and their meanness is what carries their stories' plot, that is, their hate speeches and actions are used as the basis from which any narrative derives. This format is employed to the extreme, sometimes also absurd, throughout these characters' rage scenes, and, because of this total disconnection to what reality is, the audiences start to naturalize their behavior, until what was considered totally inappropriate and criminal becomes a comic relief. The capacity to discriminate what should only be tolerated in a fictional environment, however, appears to differentiate most

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3   Available on https://www.wattpad.com/stories/screamqueens. Last seen on January, 15th 2024.

of Chanel's and Regina's fans from Bateman's, since Chanel's and Regina's lovers clearly understand that their characters exist under a fictional pact, while Bateman's fans many times decide to bring to reality his ideals and narcissistic attitudes.

However, if the Chanels voice multiple social prejudices and are tolerated by the audience only because of the humorous nature of their speeches, which turns them into an easy target for criticism, why do people still want to see them in the story? The audience is asked to cheer for the Chanels in their attempt to survive the Red Devil, while simultaneously hoping for the serial killer to end this despicable sorority once and for all. It is under this dilemma that *Scream Queens* provides the public with another clear reference to classic serial killer narratives: the final girl. Originally, these female characters were the only ones able to somehow resist the serial killer's murder spree, and they were always presented to the audience as moral icons. In most cases, this is the reason why they manage to survive in the end, functioning as a mean to reinforce strong ideologies that still influence American society. It is important to notice that the Chanels, on the other hand, rupture with the moral paradigm that most of the final girls have embodied: they are not surviving the serial killer, they are competing against the murderer. This process appears to be the reason why the audience accepts the Chanels since, without being the direct opposite of the serial killer, such as the original final girls have commonly been so far, and displaying no sense of morality or social responsibility, they become strong competitors against the expected *villain,* the serial killer, which places the public as cheering for the competition itself, instead of hoping that the *good* will prevail at the end of the story.

Still, it is important to discuss why people consume serial killer narratives and become fans of murderers due to the detachment from reality this kind of fiction offers. In other words, we must understand the process of creating a fictional environment that works to have the public

aware of the distance between what is being portrayed, and what actually happens in real life. This seems also true and significant when it comes to understand the audience's reception of the Chanels. Even though the mean girl aesthetics is so popular among younger spectators, as we pointed out before, it is important to mention that most people would not be flattered to share any space with Chanel Oberlin. The fact is, however, that the show itself acknowledges how terrible the leader of the Kappa House fraternity and her followers are, and this configures a strategy to captivate audiences by presenting them, to a certain extent, with a relatable sense of self-criticism. Chanel herself expresses the notion that she is not a viable personality to exist in the real world when she is called "an awful person" by Grace, to which she answers: "Maybe, but I'm rich and I'm pretty, so it doesn't really matter.". It is, therefore, a similar reaction to that caused by serial killer narratives: fans love the fact that these characters can only survive with any relevance in fictional contexts.

Conclusion: serial killing and the popularization of the self

> […] there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: I simply am not there. (ELLIS, 2002, p.200-201)

Throughout this text, we have discussed how *Scream Queens* worked with traditional conventions of serial killer narratives and reformulated this very popular genre in order to reach a younger generation. It is true, however, that, unlike many serial murderer narratives, the show was not

focused only on the killer's life, nor had its plot narrated from his point of view. In *Scream Queens*, the audience is provided with a plot with multiple main characters that are connected by the serial killer's rage, and people get to experience the *victim's* attempts to escape from the Red Devil while also being captivated by the dazzling brutalities performed by the murderer. This appears to have helped *Scream Queens* integrate different canonical serial killer narratives, allowing the show to benefit from their successes and, at the same time, popularize the idea of a serial killer star pit against their equally famous and resilient victims, such as Michael Mayers versus Strode from *Halloween* (1978).

By considering this option for a plot with multiple main characters and the creative choice of exposing both the side of the serial killer and of his victims, it is possible to discuss *Scream Queens* also as an *extrapolation* of what has been proposed by the genre so far. From a chronological perspective, the audience has been provided with serial killer stories focused on the murderer's point of view, including some that were narrated by the killers themselves, such as *The Killer Inside Me* (1952), and also with narratives where different focalizations are displayed by an omniscient narrator, such as *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988). Stories that focus only on the victims' perspectives have also had wide circulation, and they also helped elevate the serial killer to the status of a pop icon – this was the case with *Scream*, which was one of the strongest inspirations for *Scream Queens*, as mentioned previously. Murphy's TV series appears to have used all these strategies in order to successfully present itself to the audience since it not only focused on the murderer's point of view in certain points but also dedicated many of its episodes to the other characters involved. The large number of references, intertexts, and even genres, relying at some points purely on comedy, is fundamentally a way of addressing a generation that consumes an inordinate amount of information every minute, and of condensing almost everything Americans have culturally produced so far

in a product that will fulfill the symbolic needs of a society in a constant state of cultural anxiety.

It is also important to highlight the way *Scream Queens* subverts the concept of the final girl by introducing a moral equivalence between the serial killer and the final girls. If we acknowledge the role of other final girls from slasher/serial killer movies, and consider how the opposition between Clarice Starling and Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs* (1988) established a very complex duel in which geniality and moral values would be extremely tensioned, we may easily understand the difference between them and the Chanels. In *Scream Queens*, morality is stretched to such an extent that the serial killer and the Chanels are on the same level, with murder being the only kind of moral deviation not shared between them. Therefore, *Scream Queens* demarcates a rupture with the idea of final girls as some kind of moral personification able to fight the genius monstrous killer by setting its final girls in a position of moral equivalence to the killer and allowing them to duel under similar symbolic rules.

From narratives that potentialize the killer's murdering schemes to the way the murderer's image is portrayed under a veil of monstrous celebrity, there is a strong reinforcement of important symbols for the organization of American society. The imagery created whenever a serial killer story comes out is deeply rooted in the constant need for new celebrities, and *Scream Queens* works on this idea by establishing the deaths caused by the Red Devil as a cultural event, a festival in which, instead of the victims running way, the characters decide to participate until the last act. The Chanels could have left the campus where the Red Devil was hunting them one by one; however, as the plot considers the whole killing campaign as a space to showcase serial killers as the main pop stars in the American scene, they needed to be there so that they could find their spotlight in the socio-cultural arena.

Still, it is important to question whether the capacity of *Scream*

Queens to introduce new generations to serial killer narratives also affected the image of these serial murderers. On the one hand, the way most of the Red Devil's kills seem to include him in the category of the serial killer as a monstrous individual indicates that the popularization of the self, or the celebration of murderers, is as much in place as it was with LaLaurie (CABLE, 1889; DELAVIGNE, 1946.), Lou (THOMPSON, 1952) and Bateman (ELLIS, 1991). On the other hand, *Scream Queens* seems to acknowledge – as *Scream* also did – that the popularization of the self is a process that works in fictional contexts, while real lives are much more regular than what is crystallized in culture. As Nixon (1998, p. 223) pointed out in "Making Monsters, or Serializing Killers", "The real MacDonalds or Gacys, the real Bundys or Dhamers, unlike the charismatic gothic killers […] are deeply dull and blandly ordinary", which is stressed in *Scream Queens* by the fact that the Red Devil, or the group behind him, was simply not the genius that the audience expected. Therefore, the serial killer's capacity to enter the social imaginary has given them the opportunity to occupy an eternalized space as cultural icons, and *Scream Queens* indicates that this process will continue if these narratives maintain their ability to re-work classic references, rethink the perception of time and condense American's deepest social anxieties in the form of a pop festival.

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Scream queens: jovens assassinos em série, mortes no Tiktok e músicas da Taylor Swift

Resumo: *Este artigo discute a contemporaneidade das narrativas de assassinos em série e psicopatas, apontando algumas possíveis estratégias usadas para a manutenção dessas histórias vivas no interesse popular. Discute-se brevemente a história desse gênero e como a série de Ryan Murphy, Scream Queens, apresentou algumas direções para a revitalização das narrativas de serial killers e assassinos psicopatas, como a reformulação dos valores que caracterizam as final girls e seus antagonistas. O texto, ainda, procura analisar trechos da produção televisiva, discutindo as referências feitas a Psicose e diversos outros clássicos slashers e do terror americano.*

Palavras-chave: *Cultura pop. Serial killer. Scream Queens. Narrativas contemporâneas.*