



True Detective and the Attraction of Evil

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This thriller in the form of an anthology is a clear example of the rise and fall that TV fiction can undergo from its first to its second season. Created and written by Nic Pizzolatto, the eight episodes in the first season, which went to air on HBO in summer 2014, submerge viewers in a sordid and disquieting investigation being carried out by two antagonistic police officers on a serial murder case. Yet the show drew fans not by the police officers' investigations, but because of the deep discussions Matthew McConaughey's and Woody Harrelson's characters got into. The change of storyline, cast and location it underwent in its second season did no favors to what had been one of the revelation series of the year.

A pair of detectives in Louisiana's Criminal Investigation Division, Marty Hart and Rust Cohle, are assigned a crime in 1995 that bears markedly strange features typical of a ritual murder. In the course of the investigation, as events are revealed, we see not only their reactions to the crime, but also how the powerful emotional shocks accompanying these crimes affect their lives. This emotional buffeting is exchanged in the context of the complex relationship between the pair.

Years later, in 2012, a new case given to two other detectives reopens the investigation. Marty and Rust, who have left the Criminal Investigation Division, are interrogated separately about the events of 1995. This shows the repercussions those events had on their lives. The situation prompts both men to open a new investigation on the fringes of the official one, leading to identification of the perpetrator, confrontation with him and to the case being solved.

The entire history of film is rich in figures depicting horrific behavior, personified by characters who display psychopathic behaviors, projecting evil onto their surroundings. Such characters populate a gallery of portraits covering extremely diverse makeups, from the psychopath of subtle yet malevolent manners in *The Night of the Hunter* (Charles Laughton, 1955), masterfully acted by

Robert Mitchum, the serial killer of *Seven* (David Fincher, 1995) or the later *Zodiac* by the same director (2007), *No Country for Old Men* (Joel and Ethan Cohen, 2007) or the perverse criminal dwelling within Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991). Although all of these offer some common features, they also display marked differences in their behavior. The figure of the monster goes back to investigations carried out on serial killers and ritual crimes, covering both the characteristics of the criminals and their victims, as well as their *modus operandi*.

In *True Detective*, the monster is a serial killer who is described to us as having the qualities of a sadistic and perverse psychopath, or as someone with an antisocial and sadistic personality disorder. In this sense, this person meets most of the behavioral characteristics of serial killers. The killer's criminal profile includes premeditated behaviors, the use of deceit, a precise choice of victims, a progression in criminal action (kidnapping, torture, mutilation, death) and disposal of the body with a return to his habitual activities. The monster of the series is skillful in his criminal actions, at the same time as he appears to engage in normal behavior in his occupation, which keeps him in touch with the child popu-

lation among whom he selects his victims. His crimes are planned, always choosing the most vulnerable victim. And he does so in a broad yet identifiable radius of action, in which he carries out his actions of capture, torture and death. In such actions, he furthermore leaves a recognizable trace through unnecessary elements or features in the carrying out of the crime. However, these traces accompany the crime, constituting elements that, in one way or another, enable the same perpetrator to be identified: the tying, wounds and torture inflicted on his victims, the arrangement of the bodies for discovery, and the presence of strange objects around them.

In fact, throughout the season, we only know this character through the result of his crimes, the plot's unifying thread. The ritual crime that launches the investigation leads to discovering a long chain of murders and disappearances of children and young people that has been occurring over time, all seeming to point to the same author. Nevertheless, the storyline also gradually reveals the direct or indirect participation of other agents. Only at the end of the series is the monster revealed as a flesh-and-blood person, characterized in his living situation by an atmosphere of degradation and incestuous relationships. The sole reference to explanatory or etiological elements in his behavior is expressed in a line he himself pronounces: "You know what they did to me? Hmm? What I will do to all the sons and daughters of man".

Serial killers have long held a morbid fascination for viewers, and still do. This is partly linked to showing the relationship between an external appearance of normality in everyday behaviors and criminal actions that reveal an absolute disregard for victims. It is likewise to do with showing highly elaborate criminal procedures, in which sadism and pathological sexuality appear together and are shown openly in public. This is especially so, as in the case of *True Detective*, when the victims are children and young people.

This type of behavior has been investigated for years, both from the police and forensic examiner's perspective as from the psychiatric viewpoint. American studies state that 1% of homicides committed in the US are performed

by serial killers, and even go as far as estimating there are 150 to 300 serial killers in that country. So they constitute a significant social and criminological phenomenon, even if their clinical classification remains under debate, despite a definition of the clinical symptoms having been arrived at within the sample of criminal psychopaths as far back as the 1940s. Obviously, this is a controversial question, since inclusion or not within psychiatric classification of psychopathies and personality disorders also concerns the legal imputability of the criminal acts and behaviors of such subjects.

Equally controversial is identification of the etiopathogenesis of such disorders, in which it is difficult to define to what extent the biological, psychological and social components intervene in the genesis and maintenance of such criminal psychopathic behaviors. While participation of a psychogenic component based on childhood experiences of situations of physical and sexual maltreatment and abuse is generally admitted, the absence or distortion of such social and affective bonds also appears to be relevant, related to acquisition of the necessary emotional maturity, capacity for relationships and constructive exchanges, as well as the incorporation of social values. The line the monster uttered above seems to refer to a vengeful attitude, in response to humiliations, maltreatment or harassment suffered in his childhood.

The other side of the coin is represented by the victims, children and young people who have been kidnapped, tortured and killed. The series shows us just one case that did not lead to the victim's death, since they manage to rescue the victim at an advanced stage of the process. Immediate and long-term serious psychological consequences are shown as the victim's incapacity to develop psychologically and emotionally. Years later she lives shut away in a psychiatric institution, and displays the mental functioning of disconnection characteristic of autism. This framing of the character speaks of the serious consequences that may foreseeably stem from an extreme, prolonged traumatic experience on the still-forming mind of a child or adolescent. For all the above reasons, the figure



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of the serial killer, such as we have analyzed here, becomes configured in the collective imagining as the representation of evil.

Productions that depict the figure of the psychopath, the serial killer and the monster tend to present viewers with characters or antagonists who constitute a counterpoint, in the shape of common personalities, who in contact with the lead characters reveal new aspects of themselves. In this interaction between these two contrasting characterizations, not only the protagonists' lives but their minds are affected. This likewise occurs in *True Detective*, so we will try to include it in the analysis we conduct.

It is commonly accepted that exposure to traumatic events generates psychological consequences in the exposed subjects, and clinical history offers numerous examples of such situations. People who have been exposed to a traumatic event, whether experiencing it themselves, witnessing it, or recognizing its consequences, receive a psychological impact. This is still greater when deaths or threats to physical wellbeing have occurred. Each person responds to the event in a different way, according to their own psychological makeup, but a certain degree of fear will habitually have been generated, a hopeless response, or they will have experienced intense horror. The psychological consequences possess a certain specificity, linked to their memory, making themselves felt in dreams, or in maintaining a persistent psychological –and sometimes intense– unease with everything related to the traumatic event. Some symptomatic manifestations of such consequences are shown in physiological alterations that can affect not only sleep and appetite, but habits and behaviors.

True Detective shows how contact with a crime of special characteristics acts as a traumatic event that affects the investigators in charge of investigating it. Below, we will analyze in what way the series presents the psychological characteristics and certain psychopathological elements of the main characters, Cohle and Hart.

Cohle is described in the series through his behavior and comments about himself, and the opinions of others interacting with him. Yet it is necessary to store all these descriptive elements

in the information he provides us regarding his life story and reactions to different significant life events. It is relevant to consider an initial block of events and their evolution since childhood. He is the son of an affair of his mother's with a soldier on leave. She abandoned both the father on his return and her two-year-old son. Father and son move to Alaska, where they live in an isolated situation, until Cohle decides to return to Texas. There, he marries and has a daughter, experiencing family life for the first time. The accidental death of his daughter ends his marriage in a destructive emotional context for the couple. Once more he experiences abandonment through his wife leaving. His daughter's death, both the fact itself and its consequences on family and himself, seems to become a determining event in his later evolution. A job transfer from the Larceny division to Narcotics begins his descent into hell. Living undercover for four years among drug traffickers, he begins abusive substance use, takes part in violent acts, causes several deaths and reaches a borderline situation, causing him to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital. The diagnosis remains unclear, since he says that "for a long time after, I... I didn't really sleep. Nightmares, PTSD, exhausted nerves, whatever". The description of his state prior to admission is compatible with the clinical symptoms known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), understood as a set of individual reactions to exposure to intense stress factors. This presupposes a one-off or ongoing, intense, emotional reaction to one or several such factors, for a brief or prolonged period. The point of departure may be situated in the death of his daughter and later family decomposition, when presumably a process of identity was being initiated at the family's core, creating the corresponding affective bonds, a sense of responsibility and participation in a shared project. This loss does not lead to full grieving, and the couple's consequent rupture prompts him to act in an ever more precipitate and self-destructive fashion, repeatedly putting his own life at risk.

Once he is released from hospital, he refuses an offer of retirement on "a psych pension" and asks to be transferred to the homicide division. So he chooses to rejoin the police force, to once

more form part of a group, playing on the duality of identity and belonging. In his new job, the case he and Hart are assigned activates the character's main conflicting cores afresh, centering on the loss of his daughter, and giving him a need to get to the heart of the matter, to solve the case so as to face his own conflicts. The successive discoveries he will make, the appearance of new criminal cases committed against children, once more bring to the fore his inner conflicts, leading him to act increasingly more obsessively, so that he will start to disregard any legal or moral limit that might curb his own behavior. He thus repeats his behavior from the time when he worked undercover in the narcotics squad, including substance abuse and participating in violent actions. His disciplinary suspension from the force leads him to follow a path towards increasing isolation in which he pursues his own individual investigation, meanwhile establishing a continued pattern of alcohol consumption that is abusive and self-destructive.

Throughout the narration, references appear to the perceptions Cohle has at different times, formulated as a perception disorder known as synesthesia. He defines it as "a misalignment of synaptic receptors and triggers... alkalis, colors, and certain metallics. It's a type of hypersensitivity. One sense triggers another sense. Sometimes I'll see a color and it will put a taste in my mouth. A touch, a texture, a scent can put a note in my head." Nevertheless, in a certain scene a perception appears that insinuates hallucinatory content, as when, from the car in which he is traveling, he sees a girl waving at him, leading him to ask Hart if he believes in ghosts.

Cohle sustains his life continuity in a life philosophy that gives him a certain rationalization, stability and strength to face his own self-destructive impulses. He bases it on relevant authors and texts, summarizing as: "I'd consider myself a realist, alright? But in philosophical terms I'm what's called a pessimist. ... Means I'm bad at parties." He believes "human consciousness is a tragic misstep in evolution. ... We became too self-aware ... programmed with total assurance that we are each somebody, when in fact everybody's nobody. ... And I lack the constitution for suicide."

The resolution of the case, in a fresh collaboration with Hart, seems to open up a new life perspective for him, as if he had finally managed, for the moment, to break the infernal cycle his life had become.

The series presents PTSD in a manner similar to habitual diagnostic descriptions and classifications, but one should not forget that this diagnostic has very broad margins of application. It arose after the Vietnam War to respond to the many cases of soldiers who displayed the psychological and emotional consequences that fighting in the war had caused in them. It was formulated as a diagnosis to group reactions that showed certain similarities. Even so, the effect of war and the traumatic experiences suffered always has an individual background due to each individual's life baggage, and is expressed in differing intensity, characteristics and recovery capacity. True Detective seems to place the final accent on capacity for individual recovery, despite the succession of traumatic events, and their intensity and duration. It also focuses on the way they affect the character. Perhaps too, they put one in mind of another evolution, more of a definitive collapse, or of prosecuting risk behaviors that lead to him recognizing he is incapable of committing suicide.

Meanwhile we would emphasize that the series does not provide any information on the treatment or treatments Cohle undergoes during his hospital admission, though it is plausible to assume that he was on a detox program linked to the substance abuse and addictions that resulted from his time in the Narcotics division.

Let us now look at the character of Hart, an individual with no special biographical background worth mentioning. As the series opens, he is married with two daughters, and his family situation seems to be following a track displaying no significant elements. However, winds of unease appear to be blowing in the figure of his wife Maggie. This family environment will be progressively affected by Hart's involvement in the case he has been assigned. The character's slow involvement in a storyline full of dark aspects, which gradually reveal a chain of ritual crimes whose victims are the young and the innocent, little by little increase his emotional tension. This experience ends up



causing him to indulge in compensatory behaviors, such as drinking more, and marriage infidelities. Both sorts of behavior seem to have the aim of an emotional release for him, but also of family preservation. However, they end up unleashing the opposite effect: a distancing from his family, about whom he is less and less concerned, and Maggie leaving, because she does not accept his affairs. Likewise, his behaviors in and outside the home become increasingly violent, particularly when he kills a detainee, as well attacking two young men in the police station who had been having sex with his adolescent daughter. This situation goes through two different phases. In the first, Maggie throws him out, and only accepts him back after he has undergone a process of giving up alcohol and attending relationship therapy. However, a new affair leads to their definitive break-up as a consequence of Maggie's conscious choice to be unfaithful with Cohle in a situation she provokes. Later it is revealed that she manages to re-orientate her and her daughters' lives in a new marriage, from then on appearing as Mrs. Sawyer.

Hart's character does not display precise psychopathological characteristics, but personality traits that in habitual contexts rather characterize him as a person with social skills, who is funny and quite an extrovert. He has no particular interests beyond his family life and social relationships, both in and outside work. Nevertheless, subjected to a stressful situation, as occurs with the investigation to which he is assigned, he starts a process whereby his emotional tension progressively rises, and increasingly violent behaviors appear that compromise his family project. The increase in emotional tension due to the investigation and the discoveries as they are revealed leads progressively to a situation of a lack of control and non-governing of his own behaviors, which are increasingly orientated toward obtaining immediate compensations through the consumption of alcohol or extramarital sexual experiences. These are elements he describes as essential, or rather, as the result of a need to awaken his mind and get some relief.

In any case, the series shows us in what way a progressive stress situation, such as confront-

ing a series of ritual crimes in which children have been maltreated and murdered, can affect the mental and emotional balance of a "normal" subject, unleashing a series of behaviors that end up destroying the life project that this person has been building.

The series' development reveals a well-formed narrative. Nick Pizzolatto's script shows a consistent narrative thread that gives coherence to the whole of the production, in particular in relation to the lead characters' psychological characteristics. They offer us descriptive elements of his personality traits and biographical data on which his behaviors and reactions may be based. The evolution of events and the protagonists' involvement and behaviors maintain a clear connection with the opening scenes and their biographical background.

The references to clinical and psychopathological aspects fall within the acceptable margins of professional descriptions. In this way, they help to understand the behaviors and to offer an understandable view of the responses of the individuals subjected to especially stressful or traumatic conditions, both in the personal and professional sphere. On the whole, the series enables a humanized approach to the characters and a certain degree of identification with them, attuning to their transformations and suffering. This means that even their most unsuitable behaviors or psychopathological references do not have a stigmatizing effect.

The scarce references to therapy procedures in the series does not enable an evaluation of their suitable or correct nature, though at certain moments explicit mentions to couples therapy, detox measures or therapy groups appear.

The series analyzed provides a description of evil through criminal behaviors of diverse natures, the product of a serious personality disorder in which the notion of rules or limits does not exist. Only the satisfaction of one's own desires and needs prevails, linked to perverse content. Neither does the character have the notion of guilt as an element in the service of self-control and reparation. Evil is also depicted as an expression of revenge and as a path that leads to confrontation culminating in self-destruction.

Nevertheless, what is perhaps worth highlighting from the series are those figures that, departing from different personal characteristics, are attracted to and even fascinated by the evil they have come across in their professional lives, in its specific manifestations, which the case is investigating. They are characters both fragile and also provided with the necessary strength to equip them to rebuild their lives and create fresh personal projects. They are capable of being reborn through their confrontation of crime and violence, and of building a contention dike

via healthy relationships in order to evolve toward those milestones that carry them toward their life goals. We would also stress the importance that the series grants the relationship between both characters: highly conflictive at different times, but which plays a significant role in their personal recovery. The friendship that binds these characters exists within a relational and affective framework that endows them with humanity, enabling them to develop capacities for each of their recoveries, and on which their capacities for resilience also lie.