

The Persona of *Se7en*

Jason Scott, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

In this essay I wish to explore the notion of film 'persona'. I propose that the persona provides a model for understanding the reception and consumption of the individual film, considering how it is discursively characterised. I hypothesize that this construction of the key characteristics and associations for the film will not simply reduce to the standard critical categories of genre, auteur, stars and nationality or at least not as these categories are generally understood in academic terms. Instead, the persona will feature some specific combination of these and other concepts. This configuration is engendered by the film's marketing campaign rather than derived from the film and so is potentially inconsistent with the film, either in specific details or emphasis. In the case of the British reviews of *Se7en* (1995), then, my case study suggests the persona is primarily defined in respect of particular tropes; the sins, darkness, serial killer, David Fincher and the stars, Brad Pitt and Morgan Freeman. The film's genre is favourably determined in relation to the serial killer subject matter, with an association with *The Silence of the Lambs* (1990), and differentiated by the sins. The style of the film, and its quality of realism, are developed in respect of the trope of darkness and Fincher. Almost invariably, the critics emphasise the visual darkness of the film that readily conflates with its metaphoric darkness, the bleak tone of the film, whilst eliding the shift to light that also characterises the film (Dyer, 1999: 61, 78). The respective stars contribute divergent connotations to the film.

I define the persona of a film as "the connotations which the entire [marketing] campaign including publicity and promotion creates for the film" [following Wyatt who defines the persona in passing in relation to the 'image' for High Concept films] (Wyatt, 1994:105). The persona, then, constitutes the 'consumable identity' of a film. This consumable identity is evidenced in the epiphenomena surrounding a film, the intertextual network of "posters, ads and trailers, as well as an extensive array of intermedia coverage which features pieces on stars, directors and the making of films" which identify a film as a commodity (Klinger, 1989: 5). I retain Wyatt's term persona since it emphasises both the construction of salient (or surface) details and yet also the unity binding these factors. Whilst the Concise Oxford Dictionary definition of persona stresses its conventional association with a human personality, persona also connotes the selection and presentation of an 'acceptable' aspect. Similarly to star persona, or star image as defined by Richard Dyer, the persona of a film is a *complex totality*, a construction that is amenable to (structured) polysemic readings (Dyer, 1979: 63). Significantly, the film distributors attempt to police the persona of the film primarily through the key elements of the marketing campaign; the press pack, press releases, posters, ads and trailers. I will proceed to outline the persona of *Se7en* in relation to analysing this film's press release and reviews. Whilst the press release does not shape the way reviewers write about the film, it does establish a conceptual framework. As I shall demonstrate in relation to *Se7en*, reviews frequently draw upon this framework using tropes evidently derived from the press release rather than the film. The variation amongst press releases for different films demonstrates that each is a specific attempt to police discussion of its film rather than simply a listing of information conventionally required by the reviewer.

The persona effects product differentiation, both as a marketing and legal function. Product differentiation is constructed in terms of "plotline, stars, production value, genre, social relevance and difference/similarity to other films (originality)" (Wyatt, 1994: 99). The legal function is interwoven with marketing. The persona, encompassing the production status of the film, the director, the stars and all other authorial subjects, is a discursive manifestation of the legal and economic circumstances of production -- the 'package', personnel, story rights and financing.

What are the defining characteristics of the persona and what are the aspects or features that comprise it? What form does the persona take? Marketing puts the persona into circulation but the persona is not determined by marketing. Primarily discursive in nature, the persona is transient and heterogeneous, a composite of features of the film and film production foregrounded and designated as valuable (or vivid). These features are the commodified elements: character/stars, style including mise en scène (setting/costumes) and cinematography, subject matter/genre (which might relate to production trends), spectacle and realism (Klinger, 1989: 12). David Bordwell suggests a list of film properties that critics valorise: important subject matter, realistic treatment, logical story line, spectacle, intriguing characters, valid message, novelty within sameness (particularly for remakes and sequels), are all features of the persona with value attributed to them (Bordwell, 1989: 37). These features of the film and film production are activated in the persona, primarily as semantic fields, "a set of relations of meaning between conceptual or linguistic units"(ibid. p.106). Bordwell suggests that the critic's reconstruction of a film, by means of activating semantic fields, produces a "model film", often by means of "personification" (ibid. p.161, p.245-6). I suggest that before, during and after the act of viewing the audience (including critics) constructs a 'model film' which is their individualised coherent version of the persona.

Persona of *Se7en*: The Press Release and Reviews

I propose that by considering the press release and further analysing the conceptual and verbal influence the press release sustains within the reviews, it will be possible to characterise the particular features of the persona of *Se7en*. How can I interpret the classifications, categorizations, description and interpretations made by reviews to derive the connotations for the film? Historical reception studies, and in particular its use of textual analysis of reviews, provides an established methodology for engaging with *actual* understandings of film. How can I account for the connotations and associations figured in individual reviews in respect of reviewer agency, the film 'text', context and extra-textual factors? Again, reception studies assumes some relationship between textual readings, or descriptions, and extra-textual components. Historical context and the horizon of expectations provide a background set or frame which helps journalistic reviewers and audiences make sense of and describe the film (Staiger, 1992: 195 and 1986: 22). Reviews, advertising, talkshows and "even films about making films" "make available a limited number of 'appropriate' interpretive strategies" (Staiger, 1986: 20). Barbara Klinger has suggested that each film dwells in a shifting habitat of meaning, at different points in its history (Klinger, 1994: xvii). A critic, like any "reader interpreting any work of literature or film will be drawing upon interpretive frames historically available to him or her, and these frames will be influential even in the act of perception or the process of comprehension and evaluation" (Staiger, 1992: 21). Hence, amongst these historically appropriate reading strategies are "groupings of films, such as genres, modes, styles and authorial sources", the stability or

nonstability of which are questioned by reception studies, as are other discursive structures for interpretation which likewise undergo historical shifts as proposed by Michel Foucault (Staiger, 1992: 11, 16). Reception studies provide various approaches to audience discourse that are variably applicable to critics' discourses: cultural studies contributes Hall's decoding/encoding model and conversely Schroder's multi-dimensional model (Schroder, 2000: 245); social semiotics practised by Hodge and Kress; ethnographic approaches, illustrated by Schroder; communication studies, such as Corner; and discourse analysis developed by Barker and Brooks. Whilst I am primarily deriving my methodology from Bordwell's rhetorical analysis, elaborated in his *Making Meaning* (1989), this shares key similarities with Barker and Brooks' use of discourse analysis [unsurprisingly since rhetorical studies provides a key antecedent for discourse analysis]. Barker and Brooks provide a breakdown of characteristics by which audience discourses might be described: repetitions, connections, distinctions, implications, key concepts, modalities and puzzles (Barker and Brooks, 1998: 52). Each of these characteristics provides a trace of the contingent ways by which audiences understand films by making key aspects salient. Barker and Brooks proceed to associate these discursive formations with particular 'practical logics' of how audiences engage with a film -- on the basis of minimal knowledge audiences determine "what is likely to be meant by a title, a poster, a star, a review" and hence make the decision to watch the film and how to engage with it (ibid.).

I choose to primarily adopt the textual analysis exemplified by Janet Staiger in her *Taboos and Totems* (1993) but combine this with the systematic potential of Bordwell's rhetorical analysis. I attempt to isolate the means by which certain semantic fields are activated and I identify which tropes feature within the press release and reviews. Practising textual analysis on the individual texts, I locate traces of the construction of the persona of *Se7en*. Textual analysis incorporates various approaches and perspectives and as part of a reception studies approach constitutes for Janet Staiger, "the best means currently available for analysing cultural meanings" (Staiger, 1993: 14). Working through these recurrent tropes I shall determine the extent to which the reviews reproduce unalterably certain tropes whilst adapting others. By considering the respective treatment of the tropes from the press release in the reviews and the variety of emphases by which certain tropes are privileged and repeated by each review I shall characterise this wider network of meanings that defines the film's persona. My analysis is based upon the UK press release for the theatrical release of *Se7en*, sourced from the BFI archive which evidently is identical to the US version, except for the addition of an alternative cover sheet providing the contact details of the UK distribution company. In other cases the differences between versions of the press release for particular territories will influence variations in the persona for different territories.

Textual analysis is predicated on the promise of a methodical, rigorous attention to the text but, as with any interpretative approach whether applied to the film or the review material, it is subjective and to some degree impressionistic. I have analysed the reviews with my own version of the persona in mind. I have identified particular semantic fields as being privileged in several ways: by repetition, by the use of variations in register or tone to highlight, by features of format, by organisational features of the text and by implication and structured absence as well as through the use of rhetorical devices. Within repetition I include literal repetition, the use of synonyms and pleonasm. Additionally, tropes might recur through conflation wherein two variant terms or meanings are blended into one, or through metonymy and homological repetition across conceptual levels or fields. This includes relating subjects within the film to the real world. Register and tone might include the use of puns, the factualised or informative use of objective description, opinion, acknowledged or given

authorial legitimacy and opinion given as fact as well as narrativised material. Hence, specific semantic fields might be marked by the address of the text.

Formatting features which are salient include title headers, text highlighted in bold, italicised, or capitalised and other decorative elements reflexive of the 'written' quality, the mediated nature, of each text. These would also significantly include captions for photographs and the photographs themselves. Organisation of the text involves both the ordering of textual features and ordering and juxtaposition of particular tropes. Implication might take the form of structured absence, the circumlocution of a term, possibly clichéd, by the use of more specialist alternative synonyms or the complete avoidance of a concept. Alternatively, implication might be associational by means of reference or analogy. Rhetorical features might include metaphor, the use of specialist terminology or unusual terms for the purpose of vividness or expressiveness as elocutio and revelation, that is, the explicit expression of something figured as undisclosed, symptomatic or implicit. Bordwell characterises the various types of semantic relations, the cluster, the doublet, proportional series and hierarchies, such that they relate directly to repetition and relations of contrast.

The Sins Trope

The first trope I consider in the press release, which is used to construct a clustered semantic field is that of *sinners* or *sins*. A quotation from Chris Pula, New Line Marketing Chief who oversaw the marketing of *Se7en*, suggests the star of the movie was "the crime, the seven deadly sins," (Matzer, 1996:14). Noting the conflation of the crimes, murders and sins, we can identify how the sins are used to provide significance and difference for the film's generic serial murder plotline. The sins are easily associated with the film title and this association is developed by explicit reference to the seven sins and seven murders and implicitly by each complete listing of the sins. The sins are clearly privileged by the entire marketing campaign; they feature throughout the press release as well as being listed and referred to in the advertising poster and film synopsis. The sins are emphasised by capitalisation in the press release and such expressive characterisation as "the diabolical denominator" or "catalyst" that links the murders within the film and distinguishes the film itself. Ultimately, the press release emphasises the sins by the inclusion of a section "About the Seven Deadly Sins". This provides definitions for each deadly sin, biblical and dictionary, and includes references to international literary works which feature the sins, some of which feature as dialogue references in the film. The capitalised sins provide a relation between the real world and the diegetic world, like the character/star unit, being both of and extrinsic to the film. The section on the sins is distinguished in terms of the encyclopaedic register, which contrasts with the more journalistic tenor of sections on the cast and production staff. The listing of all seven sins in the press release serves to encourage similar reference in reviews. Also, the particular ordering of the sins, and ordered reference to the film's murders with the sins and murders being explicitly equated, suggests implicitly a serial structure to the narrative. Reference in this section to the "striking" paintings of Hieronymous Bosch also contrives to construct a relation between the filmmakers, most notably Fincher, and the medieval artist. This implication is prepared for by the press release since Fincher has already been validated for the movie frames appearing like oil paintings. In a sense then, the sins, both as a feature of the film and as aspects of the persona, can be seen to mark the difference of *Se7en* in relation to genre; to films about serial killers, perhaps most notably in comparison to *The Silence of the Lambs* or to other police procedural thrillers. At the same time, by association with the

literary works referenced and the paintings of Bosch, the marketing seeks to appropriate values conferred on these for the film, as well as developing connotations for the moral and philosophical interests of the film including its apocalyptic overtones.

The sins trope is invariably reproduced by the press reviews, most commonly by explicit reference to the "Seven Deadly Sins" (or "seven deadly sins"). Almost all the reviews maintain the association with the title whilst at least one interview explicitly explains the title, "seven connotes the deadly sins" (McLeod, 1995: 16). The trope is used to differentiate the film, in terms of genre and the character of the serial killer but also continuing from the press release by attaching other connotations of sins. The murders and sins are variously identified, with the murders described as "based on" (McLeod, 1995: 16, Malcolm, 1996: 9, French, 1996: 12), "inspired by" (Brett, 1996: 33, Johnston, 1996: 8, Billson, 1996: 10, Grant, 1996: 35, Harry, 1996: 32), "patterned around" (Andrews, 1996: 11), "to illustrate" (Brown, 1996: 31, Newman, 1996: 10), "to represent" (Curtis, 1996: 13, Davenport, 1996: 20), or otherwise fitting or "appropriate to" the sins (Higginbotham, 1996: 7, Johnston, 1996: 8, Romney, 1996: 35, Walker, 1996: 32). Elsewhere, the victims or their bodies are equated as personifying or representing the sins. The identification is clearly overdetermined, not simply by the press release and marketing campaign that equate the sins/murders as the characteristic feature of the film but also by the word play on 'deadly sins'. Only two of the reviews explicitly draw attention to this double meaning by awkward repetition of the term deadly; "if their sins are deadly, their deaths are horrific" (Cameron-Wilson, 1996: 10) and "a series of deadly murders 'inspired' by the seven deadly sins" (Brett, 1996: 33). Otherwise, the reviews make this conflation without acknowledgement, even in the form of punning. However, the sins are a subject for puns and word plays, particularly emphasised by inclusion in the headline or title of individual reviews. These include; "Built for Sin" (Taubin, 1995: 82), "Sin has seldom looked so good" (Johnston, 1996: 8), "See it before you go sinning" (Cameron-Wilson, 1996: 10), "Shock of the serial sinner" (Walker, 1996: 32), "Nasty, sordid, gruesome, but a sin to miss this hit" (Tookey, 1996: 44) and "Deadliest of serial sinners" (Davenport, 1996: 20) [Janet Staiger has noted the prevalence and significance of puns in review headlines in her case study of *The Silence of the Lambs* (Staiger, 1993: 146). For further examples of review headlines see my References where headlines feature as review titles where applicable.].

The focus of the majority of review headlines, then, is the sins, although other titles refer to the serial killer and darkness tropes. As well as being privileged in describing the theme or concept of the film, the sins are also used by the reviews to make associations prefigured by the press release. Hence the film is associated with artistry in connection with the sins, in some cases by allusion to Hieronymous Bosch (Tookey, 1996: 44 and Davenport, 1996: 20) or else with the individual murder scenes being related to artistic tableaux or installations [as installation and also akin to Damien Hirst and Francis Bacon (Johnston, 1996: 8), in relation to Hirst (Taubin, 1996: 23), related to Pop Art and performance art (Walker, 1996: 32) and tableaux (Elliott, 1996: 65)], and "masterpiece" (Curtis, 1996: 13). Similarly, the film is defined as moral; "a morality tale", "a vision of evil", a parable, an "illustration" or "critique" (implicitly a sermon) of the sins, participating in an "apocalyptic debate" [as moral tale (Tookey, 1996: 44, Billson, 1996: 10), as illumination (Higginbotham, 1996: 8), as vision (Davenport, 1996: 20), as illustration (Cameron-Wilson, 1996: 10), as critique and parable (Amidon, 1996: 6) and as apocalyptic debate (Curtis, 1996: 13)]. The film is here understood as being about part of the content of the film, applying the reflexivity field as a review heuristic (Bordwell, 1989: 112). As I suggested previously, the listing of the sins suggested by the press release and taken up by approximately a quarter of the reviews also provides biblical and medieval connotations, as well as 'vividness' by means of the use of words out of

common usage such as "gluttony". Similarly the use of terms like "hell" and "apocalypse" are marked by, and mark, the connotations of the *sins*. The treatment of the term "darkness", the trope involving darkness as a metaphor, also relates to the connotations for the sins.

The Darkness Trope

I would suggest the cluster of connotations elicited by the press release treatment of the sins, including the extratextual references and the biblical definitions, informs the treatment of the trope of darkness, most often synonymised in the reviews by the middle English word 'gloom' (gloom in Cameron-Wilson, 1996: 10, Romney, 1996: 35, Higginbotham, 1996: 7, Billson, 1996: 10, French, 1996: 12 and Curtis, 1996: 13 with murk in Billson, 1996: 10, Brown, 1996: 62, and Taubin, 1995: 23) which characterises the film as dark, both visually and in mood, and as possessing a medieval quality (the apocalyptic register, as in the sermonising address within and of the film).

The trope of *darkness* is perhaps equally consistently emphasised by the press campaign and more readily informs the genre and style aspects of the persona. Extratextual evidence suggests that darkness was an overdetermined, overriding, feature of the campaign, with the image of the film represented within TV spots, print ads and posters with a consistent look; "slimy, dark and menacing," to "maintain that display of darkness on every level" (Matzer, 1996: 13). Notably, Amy Taubin in *Sight and Sound* relates the success of *Se7en* to the "arresting", "murky" print ads (Taubin, 1996: 23). The film synopsis again verbalises this feature, referencing the "dark and daunting underworld that metropolitan homicide detectives encounter on a daily basis." We can trace the conflation of visual darkness and the metaphoric darkness of the subject matter, here specifically related to the real world, which is continued in the press release and the vast majority of reviews by selective choice of synonyms for darkness and metaphorical descriptions of the film's narrative. The conflation is also made explicit in relating the style of the film to the subject matter and the film production process. The filmmaker's preference for expressive realism is cited as motivating the *mise en scène* and cinematography: "the eerie look and mood of the film" in which the setting (diegetic and set design) "reflects the moral decay of the people in it"; each murder scene "illustrates" a sin. Subsequently, the press release concentrates on the visual darkness of the film, developing the trope in discussion of the technical aspects of production. The metaphoric darkness remains a distinguishing feature, "the disturbing ending" cited by Arnold Kopelson, the producer of the film, and implicitly by association made in the section on the sins. However, the darkness trope is subsumed to characterisation of the film style within an informative toned narrativisation of the film production process. Here reference is repeatedly made by use of loose synonyms such as "shadows", "silhouettes" and etymological variations, "dark", "darkness", "darks" as well as antonyms, some simple others strict; "lightness", "brighter", "whites", "lighter", "sunlight". This repetition is further elaborated by the use of technical terminology, the acronym C.C.E. describing the silver retention process used in some prints of the film.

By contrast, the organisation of the press release, which succeeds this discussion of the technical merits of the film's visual darkness with the comparison of the film to oil paintings (implicitly to Bosch, as above), creates further conceptual links to the trope as a means of distinguishing the style of the film. In relation to the trope of darkness the press release features an important absence, a structured absence mitigated by this concentration on the

technical paraphernalia of visual darkness, in effacing the supplementary trope of *brightening*. This trope, which complicates the description of the visual in the film, is found in few of the reviews, as discussed below. However, as these reviewers illustrate, the look of the film, the particular lighting regime and the settings, undergoes a development with the narrative. In this instance we can recognise an important justification for the analysis of the persona. The persona can demonstrate contradictions and inconsistencies in comparison to the film itself. One might propose that the press release avoidance of the brightening trope is predicated on securing a simpler characterisation of metaphoric and visual darkness in order to ease word of mouth and accessibility/appeal. The darkness trope, like the sin trope, functions to differentiate the film but in this case by integrating the subject matter and the style of the film.

The darkness trope, as in the press release, is used by the reviews in order to associate the subject matter and distinctive style of *Se7en*. Predominantly the reviews concentrate on the visual darkness of the film and its diegetic settings. However, almost equally common is explicit or implicit use of darkness as a metaphor to define the mood or tone of the film's depiction of the narrative. Hence, the cinematography and *mise en scène* are readily associated with the subject matter of the film and its particular take on genre. Amongst the synonyms for darkness found in the reviews are "gloom" and "murk", which both singularly conflate these different senses of darkness and, as proposed above, carry etymological connotations attached to their usage and origin. Around two thirds of the reviews, either by careful use of synonyms or by a combination of terms, conflate the visual and metaphorical meanings of darkness. Since this conflation is implicit in the overall marketing campaign, and easily readable, I would suggest that the darkness trope contributes to the persona primarily in relation to this dominant reading and the consequent association of style and subject matter. Where a distinction is made between the visual and metaphoric darkness inherent in the film this is developed as a sophisticated interpretation of the film. This is most often found in the more highbrow reviews except where it is punned, "dark subject matter and even darker sets" (Grant, 1996: 35). This particular conceptual distinction can be considered a secondary or subordinate inflection of the darkness trope as part of the persona. Similarly, as mentioned in respect of the press release, the associated trope of brightening is predominantly elided. Only two U.K. reviews make such a reference, either explicitly, the "voyage from claustrophobic murk into blinding light makes for vivid dramatic metaphor" (Andrew, 1996: 62), or implicitly, to the climax under a "blazing sun" (Sutcliffe, 1996: 7). This omission can be understood in relation to the successful policing of the persona as well as the minimal coherence hermeneutic of review journalism, which prohibits unnecessary complication. Nonetheless, the reviews do organise a semantic field around the trope of darkness with some degree of complexity. For instance, darkness is often defined within a relation of binary opposition with light or some related antonym. The reviews variously figure darkness as a term in a pair or triplet either combining different senses of the trope or else making an association with the related tropes urban, rain and dirt/decay as detailed below. Darkness is also organised as a term in relation to David Fincher and his aesthetic. Hence, darkness constitutes an extensive clustered semantic field and contributes to the persona in terms of subject matter, style, authorship, genre and realism.

The Serial Killer

The dominant generic trope, excepting the contribution to the generic persona of darkness, is the *serial killer*. This defines the generic aspect of the persona in relation to a serial killer subgenre of the thriller genre and also relates the film to the particular example of another serial killer film, *The Silence of the Lambs*. Again, I suggest the press release prepares this trope by implication, with avoidance of the term 'serial killer', and by association. The preferred terms of the press release and the synopsis are "series of murders" and to describe the murderer, "killer", "cunning and meticulous" and "intelligent and criminally creative". The murders themselves are characterised as a "masterpiece", generating a vague homological relation between the character of the killer and the *mise en scène* of the production process similar to that hypothesised with the darkness trope. That the serial killer trope functions to dominate the generic characterisation of the film, despite the term being replaced by synonyms, shall be demonstrated in reference to the reviews. The press release barely mentions the bodies of the victims, albeit as masterpieces, but in describing the settings of each murder scene in relation to the first five capitalised sins and by suggesting the "authentic and raw" quality of the look of the film it prefigures the graphic description of the murder scenes and victims found in some of the reviews. In a similarly oblique manner, the press release constructs the direct link between *Se7en* and *The Silence of the Lambs* by economic reference to the film in connection with *Se7en*'s composer Howard Shore who previously scored this other film. Reference is achieved solely by use of formatting brackets within an oxymoronic sentence; "Featuring a haunting score by award-winning composer Howard Shore (*The Silence of the Lambs*), the film is a visual triumph." The statement awkwardly attempts to conflate the score, the visual style of the film, which had been the subject of the preceding paragraphs and an implicit comparison with *The Silence of the Lambs*, particularly in terms of 'award-winning' quality. That the comparison with *The Silence of the Lambs* was anticipated by the marketing team is evidenced by their choice of review blurbs in the quote ads that ran the week before the U.S. release, which emphasised comments "comparing the film favourably to *The Silence of the Lambs*" to complement the Siskel and Ebert two-thumbs-up evaluation (Matzer, 1996: 15).

Where the serial killer occurs in reviews, invariably with the words "serial killer" which were notably absent from the press release, it is used to define the genre or subject matter of *Se7en* or to qualify the classification of the film as a 'thriller'. As previously suggested, there seems little or no equivocation within the reviews concerning the film's genre except to dismiss the saliency of the 'buddy-cop' genre or else to suggest a hybridised form. The serial killer trope is used in more than half the reviews to expressly define genre, either describing a serial killer genre or else, in the vast majority of reviews, invoking a subgenre of the thriller. This qualification is made either explicitly, most commonly simply as "serial killer thriller" or implicitly by combining the definition of the genre as thriller and subject matter as serial killer. Alternatively, again in over half the reviews, the serial killer is used to define the subject matter of the film either thematically, as the "concept" (Romney, 1996: 35), or else as the character subject of the narrative. Genre and subject matter are conflated around the serial killer trope, often with description of each combined concisely in a single sentence, and hence the trope contributes significantly to the construction of the persona. In terms of the ease of description of the film in this way, this conflation relates to the currency of word of mouth and also to the 'high concept' film. This conflation is also relevant to the utilisation of the *The Silence of the Lambs* trope by the reviews. Frequently *The Silence of the Lambs* is referenced by reviews to define *Se7en* in terms of similarity or difference in respect of genre or subject matter. Additionally, the character/star unit of the murderer is associated by reference to Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins). This comparison also functions evaluatively, either explicitly or else by associating connotations of quality (Oscar winning),

originality or affective horror attached to *The Silence of the Lambs* (see Jancovich on this film as 'quality horror', 2001: 35). The subject matter or character of the murderer is compared more frequently. However, the implicit term of reference for *The Silence of the Lambs* is genre with regard to the common conflation of genre and subject matter throughout the reviews and to a convention of review journalism that identifies genre by association with another specific film. It is notable, nonetheless, that evaluative comparison of the two films depends on the vivid recall of features of *The Silence of the Lambs* or its persona. Hence, hyperbole such as "the nastiest thriller since *The Silence of the Lambs*" (Tookey, 1996: 44), "much more powerful, disturbing and memorable than *The Silence of the Lambs*" (Davenport, 1996: 20) and "like *The Silence of the Lambs*, a genuine original" (Malcolm, 1996: 9) exploits the currency of key aspects of the persona of *The Silence of the Lambs* and economically defines *Se7en* in terms of both difference and similarity across other aspects of its persona -- genre, subject matter, stars, style and realism. The association between Shore and *The Silence of the Lambs* is mostly implicit, with those reviews that praise Shore's composition also including reference to *The Silence of the Lambs* elsewhere in the review text (Tookey, 1996: 44, Davenport, 1996: 20 and Billson, 1996: 10).

The Dirt, Urban and Rain Tropes

A semantic field operates around several tropes that are related to the darkness trope and a characterisation of the film as realistic in some sense, albeit stylised. These are the *urban* trope, characterising the milieu of the diegetic world both as setting and the isolated urban situation of the characters, the *dirty/decayed* trope, characterising the sordid settings of the murder scenes and the *rain* trope. Within the reviews these tropes are repeatedly combined with or subordinated to each other or the darkness trope. Within the press release they are similarly predominantly figured in combination. The urban trope is treated differently, with the film's setting being implicitly associated with New York whilst explicitly defined as an "unidentifiable metropolis". This is motivated in order to authenticate the realism of the film by relating the diegetic world to the real world experience of the scriptwriter, Andrew Kevin Walker, who describes New York as a "cauldron of unpleasantness" and that of Arnold Kopelson, who cites the "danger" of the city. Apart from this contradictory reference, which functions however to draw attention to the self-consciously "unidentifiable metropolis", all the references in the press release to the urban, dirty and rain tropes occur together. These three tropes, repeated by the use of synonyms, antonyms and pleonasm, are combined in relating the film style and the technical aspects of the production process to the crucial requirement for realism. They are also each associated with either the visual or metaphoric sense of darkness; the "large city -- dirty, violent, polluted, and often depressing", the challenge of creating a "rainy identifiable metropolis" equated with co-ordinating "the eerie look and mood of the film", and the sloth murder scene with its "feel for decay and the urgent need for cleanliness". In fact, one might suggest that these tropes and that of darkness activate a complex and extensive clustered semantic field which is used in characterising the subject matter and the style of the film as well as defining a particular realism. Since these tropes are combined in the press release, and connoted in the print and TV ads, it is possible to assign considerable significance to their contribution to the construction of the persona of the film. These tropes do not relate simply to a conventional genre yet through these and other tropes of the press release, particularly serial killer, the film's genre is determined sufficiently for reviewers not to equivocate in classifying the film.

In the reviews, the dominant trope of the semantic field is that of darkness, particularly in regard to the conflation of visual and metaphoric darkness as analysed above. However, each review organises the connotations of darkness by combining this trope with these other supplementary tropes. For example, the most frequent combination pairs darkness and rain to define the milieu of the film. The urban trope commonly features as a tertiary term in the cluster, specifying the setting of the film. The city is almost invariably associated with incessant rain and secondarily, darkness. The urban trope, however, as in the press release, is distinct in providing two further connotations, that of the unnamed city setting and the contradictory association with New York. Around half of those reviews which include the urban trope describe the city as anonymous, whilst similarly, though not exclusively, half make the connection with New York (the anonymous city features in Andrew, 1996: 62, Andrews, 1996: 11, Romney, 1995: 35, Higginbotham, 1996: 8, Amidon, 1996: 6 and French, 1996: 12 whilst New York is named in Andrew, 1996: 62, Malcolm, 1996: 9, Walker, 1996: 32, Davenport, 1996: 20, Wright, 1996: 21, French, 1996: 12, Sutcliffe, 1996: 7 and Curtis, 1996: 13. Additionally, Sutcliffe, 1996: 7 features reference to "Gotham City" which combines both readings). Remarkably none of the U.K. newspaper reviews identify the city as Los Angeles, the shooting location for the production, although even the mainstream U.S. reviews are mistaken in this respect. The choice of emphasis on either the unnamed city or New York informs the connotations of the urban trope. The unnamed city is used to connote a symbolic setting and privileges the relation between style and the darkness semantic cluster. In contrast, New York is used to denote reality and is hence associated with realism. The dirt/decay trope generally features as subordinate to the urban trope and directs the connotation of this trope to realism, especially when featuring alongside the rain trope, with the synonym "grit" best expressing the association with verisimilitude, realism of the setting and subject matter (Elliott, 1996: 65). Alternatively, "sordid" (Walker, 1996: 32), (Tookey, 1996: 44) and "filth" (Davenport, 1996: 20) carry moral overtones. This cluster of meanings and conceptual units, particularly around the darkness conflation, demonstrate the heterogeneous nature of the persona. Although some reviews define the film primarily in terms of style, foregrounding style over content in relation to these tropes whilst others privilege realism, the persona manages these disparate versions.

David Fincher

David Fincher, the director of *Se7en*, is predictably privileged by the press release and marketing campaign. In the poster Fincher is positioned significantly above the film title, "A film by DAVID FINCHER" and features as a direction credit. The body of the press release text further establishes the hierarchical relation of the contributing personnel evident in the persona, privileging the two stars before mentioning any of the other filmmakers. Fincher is included in the list of filmmakers derived from the credits block of the synopsis, poster and adverts in the opening of the press release. Subsequently the press release narrativises the production and pre-production of the film, and so Fincher is referenced after Andrew Kevin Walker, the originating screenwriter, and Arnold Kopelson, the producer who retained the director. Kopelson describes Fincher with particular allusion to his "aesthetic". Additionally, a quotation from Fincher defines the quality of realism in the film. *Fincher*, then, is used as a trope to distinguish and understand the style of *Se7en* and its particular realism. As an author, at least in the press release whilst clearly not in the reviews, Fincher is subsumed to the organising contribution of the producer. Fincher is associated with the cinematographer Darius Khondji in attributing the distinctive look of the film, the use of CCE, and is validated

by a Kopelson quotation for the likeness of the film to an "oil painting". In the section about the filmmakers, Fincher is given precedence, with cursory reference to *Alien3* (1992), his directorial debut "sci-fi thriller", and his music video background. This serves to preclude any association between this film and *Se7en*, although many reviewers compare them in relation to Fincher's direction and dark aesthetic. The preclusion can be explicated by the relatively poor box office and critical reception of the *Alien* sequel.

Throughout the reviews, *Alien3* is the most frequently referenced film and invariably is cited in association with Fincher. Several of the reviews formulate a binary opposition around the comparison of the two films with *Alien3* identified negatively as a failure (although in one case the blame for this is located with the studio, absolving Fincher) and *Se7en* contrasted positively as a success of filmmaking. However, an equal number of reviews derive neutral or positive associations from *Alien3*. Hence, a similarity between the two films is posited, particularly in terms of darkness and style. Fincher is thus utilised by the reviews to personify the aesthetic and darkness of *Se7en*, attributing auteur intention. In fact, Fincher is often used as the key term of reference in positioning *Se7en* according to a conventionally perceived style/realism axis. Notably, Fincher is criticised when style is judged to "overpower reality" (Elliott, 1996: 65), whilst being validated when the reviewer adjudges "for once, the stylisation fits the subject-matter" (Billson, 1996: 10). Fincher, then, becomes the locus around which are organised the aspects of the persona of realism and style and the different connotations of the cluster around darkness. This focus on Fincher in understanding the style and realism of the film predicates the way in which the other filmmakers are often subsumed to the reviews' treatment of the director. The reviews frequently validate *Se7en* as innovative or original and associate this with Fincher's fresh authorial vision or attribute this collectively to Fincher, Khondji and Walker.

Pitt and Freeman

The star pairing of Brad Pitt and Morgan Freeman is privileged by the marketing campaign, alongside the sins, to summarily define the film. The stars' names feature in the poster and synopsis and alongside their likeness in all the advertising formats. In the various elements of the marketing campaign the pairing is constructed with an explicit balance of emphasis and focus on the contrast between the stars, which parallels the contrast of the characters within the narrative. Although the credits and biographical details on the two stars are undoubtedly strictly contractually determined, the press release text manages this balance by associating each star with specific tropes and aspects of the persona of the film. The extratextual evidence suggests the stars critical and popular appeal was problematic to the marketing campaign in being inconsistent with the "psychological thriller" audience for a film of such "darkness" (Matzer, 1996: 13). The task for the marketing campaign was the coherent and consistent positioning of the film, developing the darkness, the film's noirish quality and similarity to *The Silence of the Lambs* whilst capitalising on the star appeal of Pitt and Freeman.

The press release contributes to this consistent construction of the persona by explicitly combining within a single sentence references to Pitt and his *Legends of the Fall* (1994) success and Freeman, with the award nomination for *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), with the "mystery-thriller" / "series of murders" subject matter of the film. Although Pitt is given credit precedence, the press release follows the order of appearance listing by defining

his character/star unit, "Detective David Mills (Pitt)", after that of Freeman. Pitt is secondarily associated with discourses of realism applied to the film, particularly with respect to his "physically challenging" role, alluding to a micro-narrative of a much reported arm injury sustained whilst filming and in connection with his SWAT police training for the role with connotations of 'method' acting. His biographic listing defines him as a "prominent" actor, an award nominee and concentrates on contrasting his previous roles. Pitt is defined primarily as a star, in terms of celebrity, as well as in association with the realism of the film.

"Lt. William Somerset (Freeman)" denotes Freeman's character/star unit and constitutes the primary term in the contrasting of the two character/star units, creating a bipolar opposition. Whilst denying the 'buddy-cop' classification for the film Freeman ascribes depth to his character, constructing a clear explicit parallel with the depth of his own acting by likening the character to an actor. The background information on Freeman details his own many awards and nominations, expressively characterising him variously as "extraordinary", "graceful" and "multitalented" whilst also further emphasising his stage background. Hence Freeman is primarily defined as an actor with connotations of quality, depth, and experience and as the key term of a contrast with Pitt.

However, *Freeman* and *Pitt* are primary tropes in the construction of the persona occurring with equal frequency. Additionally, it is the pairing of the two stars and their character/star units which is often emphasised by reviews. The contrast described between the two characters, sometimes conflated with the stars' differences, is used to subsume the buddy trope. Commonly, tabloid newspapers and middlebrow magazines privilege the stars whilst broadsheets and specialist or highbrow publications privilege the director. However, Morgan Freeman transcends this trend, presumably due to the connotations he provides of quality and acting and dominates some broadsheet reviews. This division is realised in part by the more likely use of the star interview format or inclusion of star quotations in the popular media review and the use of directorial citation in the broadsheets and specialist publications. Clearly, this distinction demonstrates the importance of stars to the popular reach of promotion, mitigated by the media fascination with celebrity.

In parallel with the press release the reviews develop specific associations around the character/star units of Pitt and Freeman. The association made by the press release between Brad Pitt and realism is rarely adopted by the reviews, whilst *Se7en* is positioned as a Pitt star "vehicle" (Elliott, 1996: 65). In over half of the reviews Freeman is associated with quality, as an actor foremost, with particular allusions to qualities such as depth, intelligence and maturity. Far less frequently do the reviews reference his Oscar and other award wins or else infer Oscar quality in this part. Since Freeman is defined as mature, intelligent and with depth of character, the conflation of the contrast between the two characters and the two stars is eased. Clearly, this is an intentional consequence of the pairing by the production. Particularly, Freeman dominates the contrast between his acting and that of Pitt but within the conflation the Somerset character often dominates the contrast with Mills.

Kevin Spacey is credited separately in the press release and his participation in the movie is downplayed; reviewers are "encouraged not to disclose his participation in the film". Thus, the reviewers are self-consciously given privileged information which they are encouraged to conceal or elide in their texts. Clearly this secrecy aspect of the trope has a rhetorical resonance based on the idea of revelation since if the Doe/Spacey character/star unit was not thus distinguished it would either be far less notable or might undermine the privileged

pairing of Pitt and Freeman whilst the mysterious identity of the killer and casting of Spacey invokes a review trope defining the "diabolical killer" (Curtis, 1996: 13).

This attempt to prohibit mention of Spacey, or his role, in the reviews achieved varied success. Amongst those reviews which feature the serial killer/actor unit, fractionally more keep the actor unnamed and maintain the enigma although sometimes providing clues to his identity (Grant, 1996: 35 and French, 1996: 12). Those sceptical reviewers who do reveal the identity of Spacey are in the minority and either characterise the narrative introduction of the serial killer as enigmatic (Walker, 1996: 32) or name Spacey in order to compare the serial killer/actor with Hannibal Lecter (Billson, 1996: 10 and Harry, 1996: 32).

I have suggested that the press release constructs several tropes that inform the persona of the film. Some of these tropes do not directly correlate with the features of the persona -- genre, stars, production values -- but I have attempted to analyse the network of meanings that characterise the film. In addition to those mentioned, the title *Se7en* constitutes a thematic trope, an enigma connecting the number of sins, murders and days. The film is constructed as different, unorthodox and enigmatic by the press release. Arnold Kopelson explicitly suggests the word of mouth potential for the film; "People who go to this movie will walk out stunned, numb and eager to discuss this film." This difference is defined in terms of genre or subject matter, style and production values. To summarise, the dominant tropes of the press release are *Sins*, *Darkness*, *Serial killer*, *Fincher*, *Pitt* and *Freeman*. I have suggested that genre is primarily constructed in relation to the serial killer trope, incorporating a direct comparison with *The Silence of the Lambs*. Genre is thus partially equated with subject matter. The conflation of the visual and metaphorical senses of darkness is utilised to combine subject matter and style, contributing nuance to this generic identity. Further, the privileged attention to style distinguishes the film in these terms. The sins trope is also used for generic differentiation. Subordinate tropes within the complex semantic cluster around darkness are used to position the film in relation to realism. The production values are figured in the commodified auteur Fincher, used to personify the distinctive aesthetic of the film, its quality and unorthodoxy. Pitt and Freeman are also used to define the genre by refusing a 'buddy-cop' genre classification and displacing the contrast between the two character/star units onto their star aspects.

The definitive tropes that construct the persona are those around the aspects of the character/stars, style and subject matter/genre. Across the body of reviews particular tropes featured within the press release recur to dominate the persona. Positive evaluative connotations of interesting characters and realistic acting are associated with the stars, particularly Freeman. Subject matter and genre are defined in terms of the serial killer trope and *The Silence of the Lambs*. Reviewers use these to position the film in terms of similarity and difference, aligned with positive connotations. Style is described by a grouping of tropes, primarily in terms of difference associated with the darkness trope as well as Fincher. The darkness trope also combines with the rain, urban and dirt/decay tropes to vividly define the quality of realism. Secondary aspects of the persona that are still influential in moviegoers' decisions to see the film are logical story line, production status and production values. These are each invoked in respect of the production personnel with the production status and values being related to the stars and director and both Walker and Fincher being associated with the merits of the narrative, particularly elements of surprise and suspense. Furthermore, evaluative considerations also relate to the affective aspect of the narrative and the U.K. reviews predominantly commended this in connection with the storyline and serial killer subject and in puns on the sins in headlines that recommend seeing *Se7en*. This affective

aspect might be of prime importance to word of mouth in that the related tropes prepare the audience but it is "the extent to which [the movie] meets or exceeds the expectations of the film the viewer carries into the theatre" that determines word of mouth (Earnest, 1983: 14). The persona informs audience expectations for the film and whether these are met or exceeded by the film is fundamental to the film's reception.

The notion of film persona, then, provides a model for considering how films are discursively characterised and the relationship between these characterisations, the film's marketing and the film itself. Whilst individual characterisations might differ, the multiple and various characterisations will mobilise shared tropes and areas of interest. The film will be characterised with subjective emphasis upon genre, stars, auteur or style, for example, with these factors associated or connected in different ways in each review. Yet, across the body of discourses particular aspects will be recurrently privileged due to their salience to both the film and its potential audience and likewise their vividness. These aspects will not necessarily correspond directly to conventional approaches to film and their respective classificatory practices, such as genre, stars or auteurism. However, as I have developed in this case study of *Se7en*, they will constitute an extrinsic yet specific means to conceive the film as well as informing a pragmatic approach to the consumption of the individual film.

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