

# *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer:* Narrative, Violence & Controversy

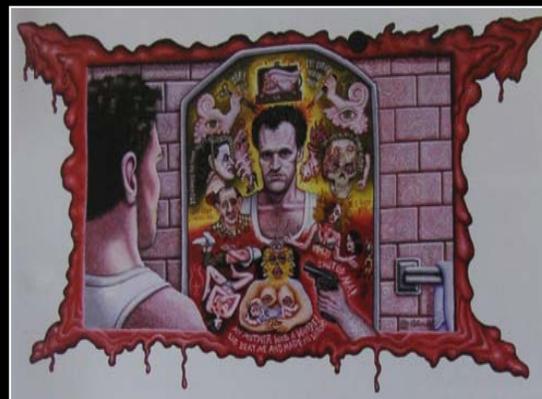
Narrative Research Group (NRG)

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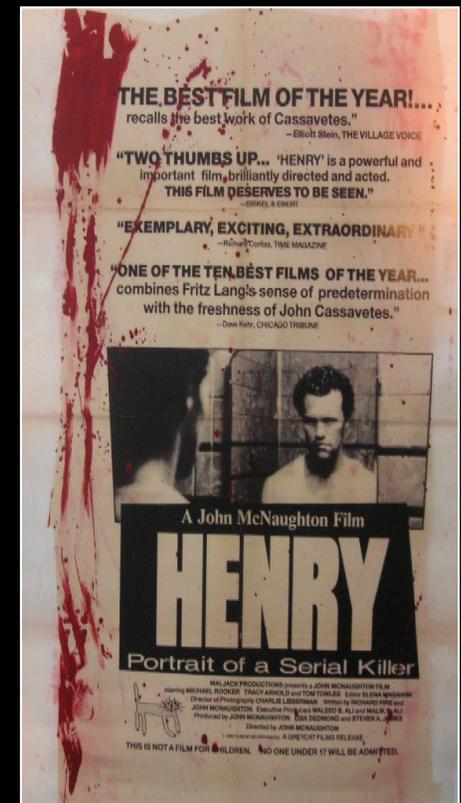
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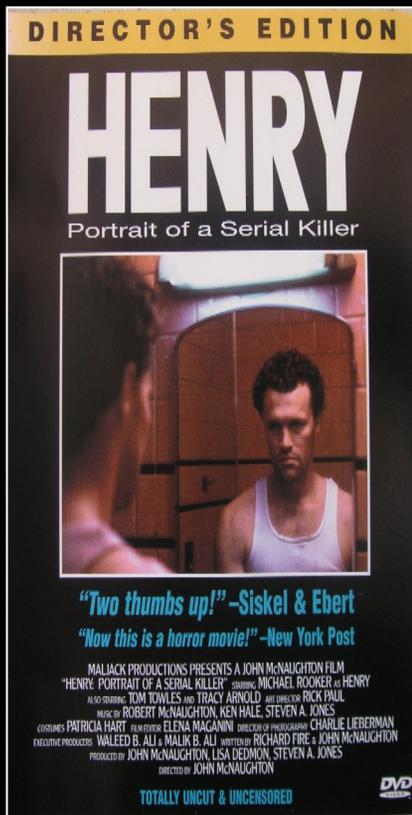
# Context

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- Paper developed out of a book project
- Book part of a series 'controversies'
- Paper's focus = narrative & controversy
- Narrative 'new arena for my research'



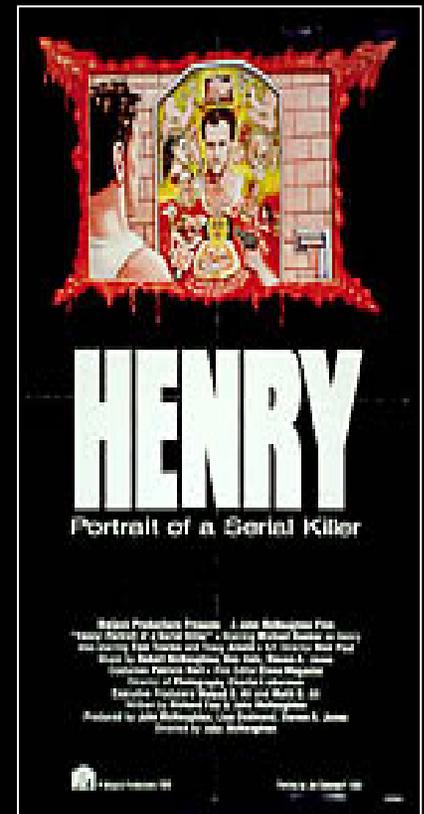
# Structure



1. Background on *Henry*

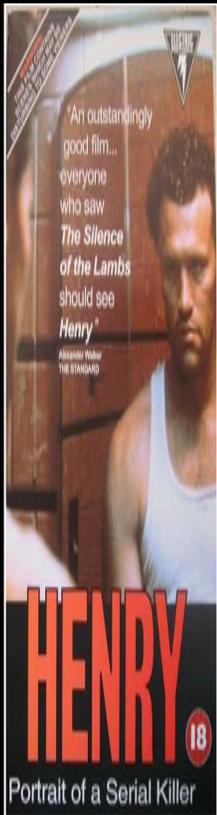
2. *Henry* & Narrative

3. *Henry* & 'NOVA'



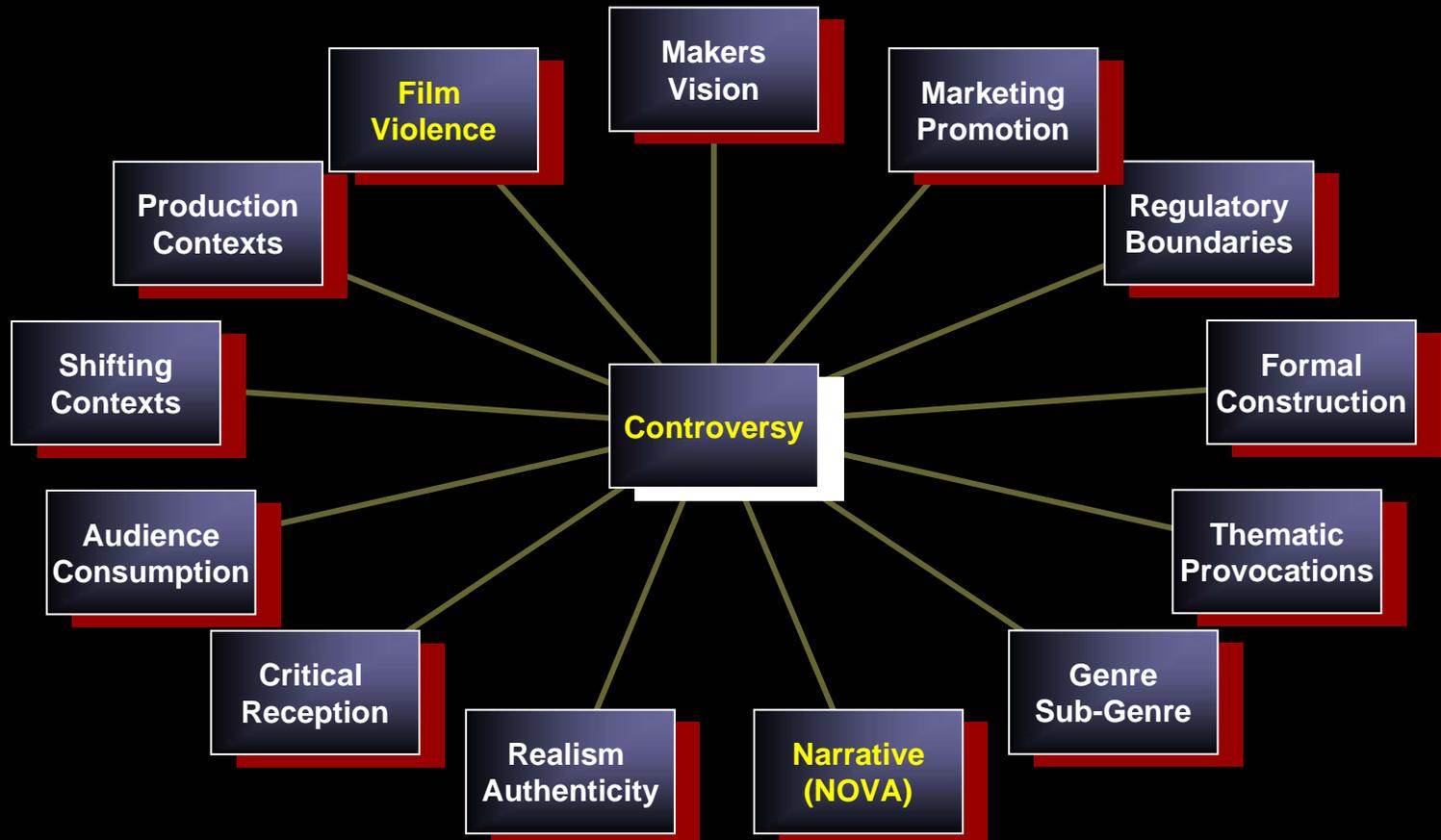
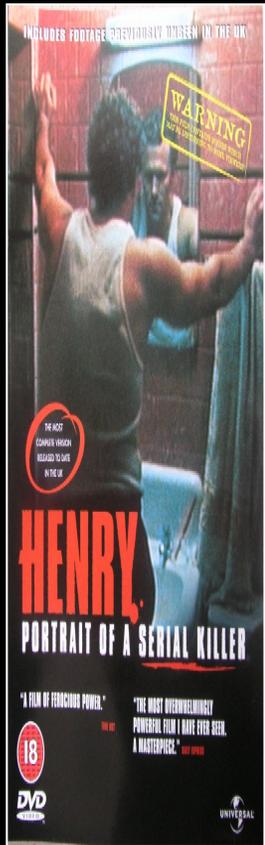
# Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer

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- 1<sup>st</sup> independent feature film by John McNaughton
- Produced by MPI in Chicago 1985 (\$111,000)
- Boom of US Video Market mid 80-s
- Fictional character study (based on Henry Lee Lucas)
- 'X' & Crash of 97 = struggled US distribution
- 18, Cut and re-edited in the UK by BFFC
- Did well at festivals & positive critical reception
- One of the most controversial films of all time

# Controversy (Overlapping Factors – Temporal & Spatial Outcomes)



# Henry & Narrative

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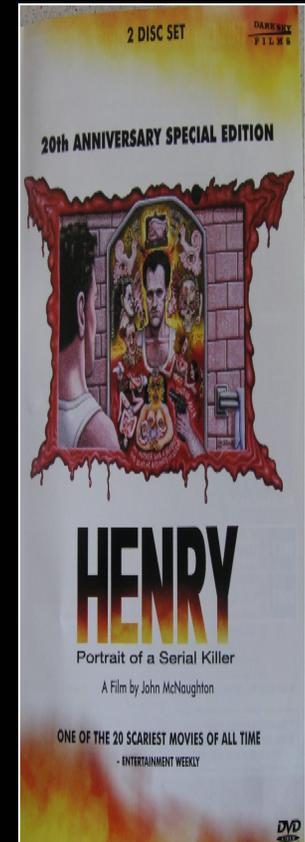
- **Narrative** = important factor contributing to controversy  
*(Intersection other formal, thematic, generic, cultural, political factors)*
- **Narrative devices** (present subject, position audience + position text)
- Works within / against '**classical Hollywood narrative**'  
*( Normative modes of storytelling - codes / conventions / themes )*
- 'Exercise in purposeful confusion & instability' (Rubin 1992)

# Classical Hollywood Narrative: Links

(Classical Hollywood Narrative = ↑range of tendencies ↓ absolutes)

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- *Henry* = commercial & mainstream film
- *Henry* = contained within C.H.N.
- Narrative form = recognisable to audiences

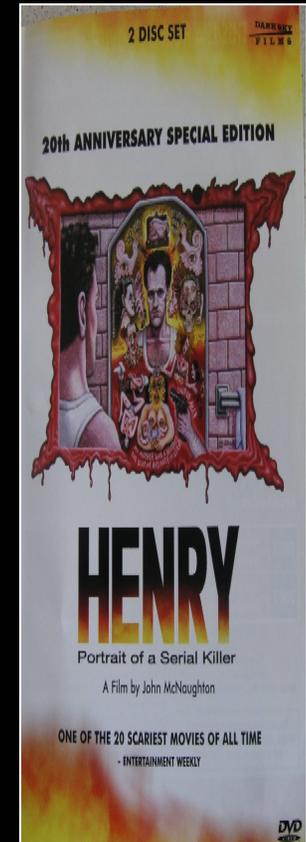


# Classical Hollywood Narrative: Links

(Classical Hollywood Narrative = ↑range of tendencies ↓ absolutes)

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1. Narrative length & Narrative linearity
2. Focus on a central male character
3. Relationship between 3 main characters
4. Characters move the narrative forward
5. Beginning/End – reveal thematic concerns
6. Focus on effects over causes = ↑N. mystery

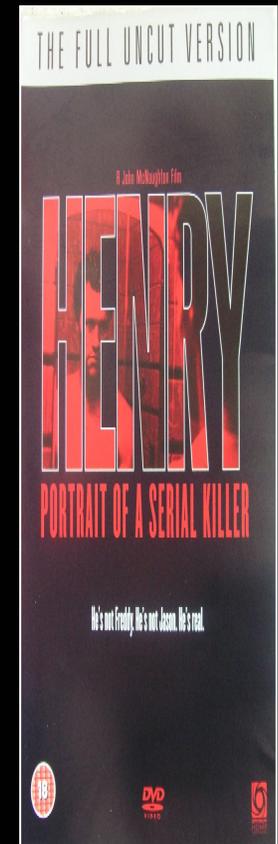


# Classical Hollywood Narrative: Deviations

(Classical Hollywood Narrative = ↑range of tendencies ↓ absolutes)

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- *Henry* also thwarts C.H.N. conventions
- Deviations thematically motivated
- *Henry* confounds audience expectations

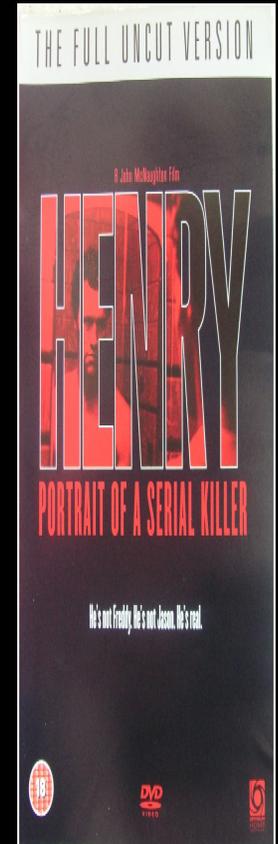


# Classical Hollywood Narrative: Deviations

(Classical Hollywood Narrative = ↑range of tendencies ↓ absolutes)

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1. ↓ overarching narrative situation / enigma
2. ↓ forward moving narrative drive / quest
3. Loose links between cause & effect
4. ↑ focus arbitrary / mundane over spectacle
5. ↑ complex / ambiguous central characters
6. ↑ focus milieu & performance over plot
7. ↑ Moral blankness (↓answers/resolution/judgment)

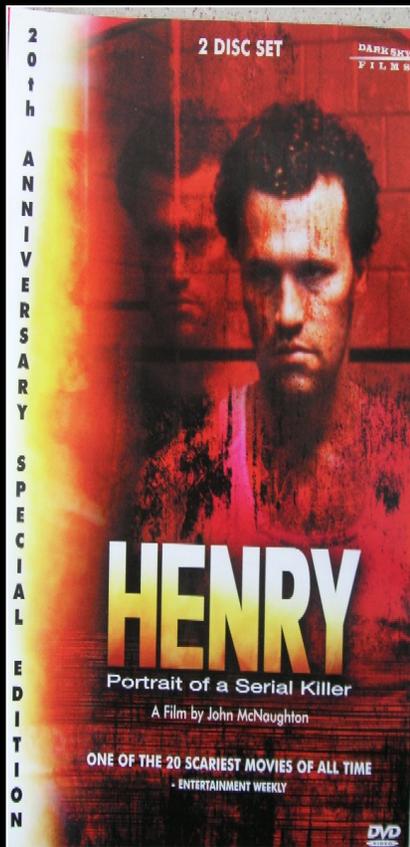


# Narrative: Motivation, Reflexivity & Narration

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- Strong **links** to dominant paradigms of storytelling  
...coupled with major deviations from that paradigm.....
- Compounded by the films **self conscious narration** and  
careful **construction of an impression of realism....**  
(Actuality Status / Performative Realism / Representational codes of Realism / Realist Film Making)
- Generated a wide range of responses → controversy

## King (2005) 'Independent American Cinema'



“In general independent features are more likely to employ devices designed to deny, block, delay or complicate the anticipated development of narrative, to reduce clarity or resolution and in some cases to increase narrative self-consciousness” (2005: 63)

# **Henry & 'NOVA'**

(Narrative Orchestration of Violent Attractions – Kinder 2001)

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- **Tension film violence debate: Narrative & Spectacle**
  1. *Henry* 'exploits' violence to structure the films narrative  
(NOVA - *Narratively arrange spectators emotional responses to the film violence*)
  2. Journey = ↑ ↓ intensifying violent spectacles (Freeland 1995)
  3. Juxtaposition of categories & modalities of violence
  4. '*Distanciation devices*' used to denormalise narrative
- **Meta-fictional questions re: violence as entertainment**

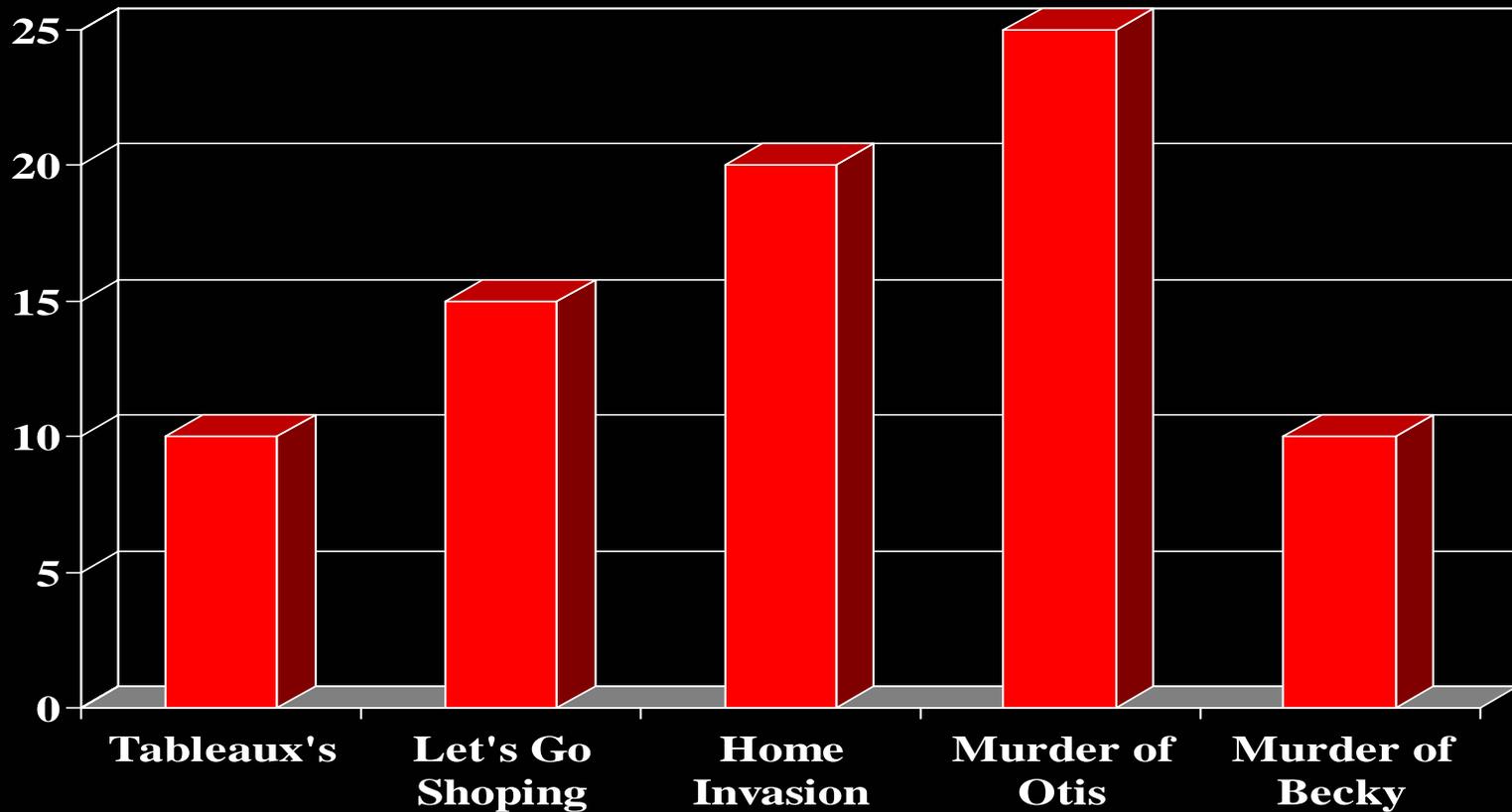
## **Henry & Realist Horror** (Freeland 1995)

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- **Henry's Narrative Orchestration of Violent Attractions**
  1. Tableaux's (5) (Aftermath of murder - withhold spectacle of death)
  2. **'Lets go Shopping'** (Slow reveal of violence spectacle)
  3. **'Home Invasion'** (Crescendo of films violent spectacle)
  4. Murder of Otis (Climax "intense, brutal & sexualised murder")
  5. Off-screen murder of Becky (Anti-climax – withhold spectacle)
- **The structuring symmetry of NOVA restored - end of film**

# Narrative Orchestration of Violent Attractions

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## 'Let's Go Shopping' (NOVA - Slow reveal of violent spectacle)

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1. Conventional narrative suspense build up
2. Non-serious Modality (violence as entertainment)  
(spectacle/aesthticisation, Generic Repertoire, Comedy)
3. Dramatic Tension (soundtrack / editing / performance)
4. Legitimate / justified / acceptable violence
5. 'Turn On' / 'Weak' / 'Depicted' Violence



## McNaughton on 'Let's Go Shopping'

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“One of the big themes in *Henry* is violence as entertainment. Normally, the way you develop the theme is to set up a character to be a bad guy...and then turn up the heat where you dislike him enough that you are happy to see one of the heroes slaughter him. And you get a cathartic release. That's sort of what we did. In the scene with the television set, here's this big, fat, ugly guy...We did everything we could to make him distasteful and repulsive...“Here's violence for entertainment the way you like it folks!”” (cited in Falsetto 2000:328)

## **'Home Invasion'** (Nova - Crescendo of films violent spectacle)

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1. Limited narrative contextualisation & build up
2. Serious Modality (violence = unpleasant / shocking)  
(formal process linked to realism, play down aestheticisation)
3. illegitimate / unjustified / unacceptable violence
4. 'Turn off' / 'Strong' / 'Authentic' Violence
5. Estrangement devices (i.e. complicity / positioning)



## McNaughton on 'Home Invasion'

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“Now, we’re going to show you what it might look like to move in on an innocent family and just slaughter them randomly.”

It’s about as ugly a thing as you’re ever likely to see. “Now how much fun was that?” To take the audience one way, and then show them what it might really be like. And then we pulled a double trick of going in the house and seeing that they’ve got a camera... You think you are still in the room with them but, indeed, you’re seeing the playback later on a TV screen, and they’re now entertaining themselves with the record of their own mayhem. And you’re sitting right next to them in a kind of complicity”. (cited in Falsetto 2000:328)

# NOVA - 'Let's Go Shopping' & 'Home Invasion'

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## 'Let's Go Shopping'

Non-Serious Modality  
Conventional Set Up  
Dramatic Tension  
Legitimate Violence  
Justified Violence  
Acceptable Violence  
Turn off Violence  
Weak violence  
Depicted Violence

Tensions  
Relations

## 'Home Invasion'

Serious Modality  
Minimal Set Up  
Realist Conventions  
illegitimate Violence  
unjustified Violence  
Unacceptable Violence  
Turn off Violence  
Strong violence  
Authentic Violence

## Henry & 'NOVA'

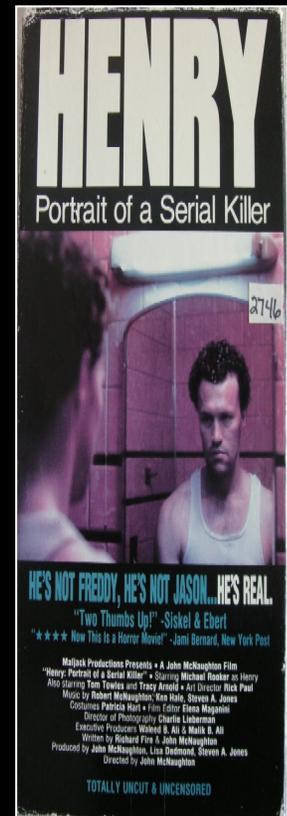
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- Audiences invited to read scenes relationally within NOVA
  1. Scenes key to gradually increasing V. spectacle (Otis climax)
  2. Central meta-fictional Q's (serial killer & everyday life + V. & entertainment)
- Proximity of scenes in NOVA = ↑potential to ↑affect of H.I.
- Film establish expectations & deliberately breaches them
- 'Home Invasion' ↑controversial (cut & re-edited in UK 1991-2003)

# Narrative, Film Violence & Disequilibrium....



“A balance is usually found between the intense orchestration of violence and legitimating frameworks that make it palatable for both audiences and regulatory authorities” (King 2004: 129)



## Main Points...

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- Narrative issues central to the controversy over *Henry*
  1. *Henry* worked in/out-side 'Classic Hollywood Narrative'
  2. Film violence is exploited to structure the films narrative
  3. Narrative strategies pose meta-fictional questions
  4. These devices have provoked sustained controversy