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Man Bites Dog (1992)

I wanted to explore a much more controversial and obscure cult film and so I decided to do *Man Bites Dog*, a 1992 black comedy which was written and directed by Remy Belvaux, Andre Bonzel and Benoit Poelvoorde. It's hard to specifically classify *Man Bites Dog* because the film is an odd-ball hybrid of several different genres: Serial killer movie, black comedy, crime farce and mockumentary. What makes *Man Bites Dog* such a highly adored cult film is its disturbing satirical commentary on the exploitation, voyeurism, and glorification of on-screen violence sensationally portrayed within the movies, mass media and our consumer culture. I wanted to focus primarily on various concepts that will help define why exactly *Man Bites Dog* would be classified as an immediate cult film.

The first concept is the sub-genre of the serial killer movie. *Man Bites Dog* was released at a time where various other serial killer themed movies were being released and creating their own controversy in the media. What makes *Man Bites Dog* stand out among the others and much more than simply another typical serial killer movie are various elements of its aesthetics which go beyond the atypical horror or serial killer genre. Another element is the gritty and unique mockumentary aesthetic which helps create the uncomfortable feeling that the spectators are

watching a real-life snuff film. Its gritty style presents a voyeuristic entryway into a disturbing but fascinating world of reality TV. Spectators are shamefully drawn into a depraved world of violence and murder and are eventually tricked into sticking around; ultimately wishing they would have stopped watching much earlier. Finally I want to explore the satirical portrayal of glamorized violence that is presented throughout the film, as the film purposely starts off light and highly comedic and later gets much more explicit and grotesquely unwatchable.

Man Bites Dog is a satirical mockumentary that explores the daily life of a serial killer. The main serial killer's name and star of this mockumentary is Ben, and he is a very charming, articulate and charismatic murderer. At first glance Ben seems overly normal, an enthusiastic, witty individual who enjoys being in front of the camera so he can share the craft and joy of committing murder. "He is highly educated, well dressed, clever and otherwise charming young man who finds it fun and sporting to kill" (Main 123). At the same time he also enjoys sharing to us strategically and graphically the details on how to take an innocent person's life.

He's an extremely entertaining personality, as he is never dull or boring to listen to, and it's always a pleasure in hearing him share his deep love and passion for poetry, architecture, philosophy and classical music. And at the same time Ben is also an arrogant sexist, racist sociopath, a superficial narcissist who has a complete lack of empathy for the well-being of others. "Ben discusses politics, feminine beauty, the mechanics of a hit, reveals innate racism. Yet rarely, if ever, does the documentary director reign in his philosophizing, self-deluded subject" (Coleman 41).

There are moments where he spouts nonsensical racial bigotry like: "Once I buried two Arabs in a wall over there...facing Mecca, of course." There are other times where he will allude

to white supremacy or make relentless denials about the holocaust. Ben even shoots and kills a black watchman who was standing in the dark and immediately suggests that the black man purposely stood in the dark, knowing he'd blend in with his surroundings. In one of many shocking moments in the film Ben makes a stereotypical remark about a black man's penis size and has Remy the cameraman pull the black man's pants down to see if the legends are true. After disrobing the corpse Ben looks up at the camera and says to the audience, "Good lord! He's really hung! It's disgusting. The kid's barely 18 and already hung like a polar bear."

For the making of this mockumentary Ben has a film crew constantly following him around on his many sadistic adventures, and will join him when he makes his numerous visits to his loving family and friends. Ben has all the common traits of a sociopath, as his charming and entertaining demeanor immediately reminds me of the neurotic character of Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* (2000), another recent film which seems to be reaching its own form of cult status as well. "Ben is a rueful psycho. He's also an amateur philosopher and fancies himself a sophisticate...he plays chamber music with his girlfriend, he composes poetry, he complains about the ugliness of public housing. There's a bit of Dostoevsky's loquacious ax murderer Raskolnikov in this bright, strange young man (Seitz 14).

Most cult films seem to be difficult to label or define, mostly because they are a hybrid of several different genres. *Man Bites Dog* also seems to be the case. It's extremely difficult to classify *Man Bites Dog* as it feels to be a mesh of the Serial killer movie, black comedy, crime farce and mockumentary. Many people I talk to who have seen the movie seem to label it as a serial killer movie, and the one reason I can think of is probably because of the timing of the film's release. *Man Bites Dog* was released near a time where two other serial killer films were also being released. Earlier in 1990 director John McNaughton released the controversial and

riveting *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*. And a few years later director Oliver Stone released his serial killer road movie *Natural Born Killers* (1994). What I find interesting is that *Man Bites Dog* was released right in the middle of this period of early 90's controversial films which explored the nature of violence.

“On the margins of these developments, a number of independent filmmakers have produced dystopian responses to the excess of social and media violence. Ostensible critiques of the culture of violence, these films challenge the spectator to participate in sadomasochistic exploitation with which they flirt” (Russell 218).

Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer was originally filmed in 1986 but was unfortunately trapped within the studio rating system because of its realistic and unflinching exploration of a real-life mass murder. Unlike *Man Bites Dog*, Henry was a flat and unflashy portrayal of a psychopath and its unflinching gritty realism in its violence horrified viewers. Unlike the character of Ben, Henry had no charm, wit or likeable value, as the film was intended not to entertain but to explore the pathology of a very sick man.

When Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* was released in 1994, its aesthetics were the polar opposite of Henry, as the romantic killers of Mickey and Mallory were extremely charming, witty and at times even likable. Stone is known for his use of extreme unsubtly and he completely goes for broke with *Natural Born Killers*. He presents to the audience a flashy satirical world of over the top violence, along with gleefully adding flashy hyperactive black and white and color cinematography, exuberant crosscutting newsreel footage and animated cartoons; making its use of zany editing the feel of a drug induced music video.

The aesthetics of *Man Bites Dog* seemed to have a perfect blend of both of those films giving it a brilliant balance between the horror and the comedy; which is why the film probably feels so effective. It had the perfect amount of restraint, subtly and gritty independent realism that Henry encompassed and yet at the same time it had just the right amount of zany satirical absurdity to make the film effectively come off as a comedic farce. “The reality of the film’s presentation of reality is based around the subversion of documentary traditions and cliché’s, but the world it depicts relies heavily on a fantastic, mordantly witty ethnographical version of Belgian society” (Coleman 45).

Unfortunately *Man Bites Dog* seemed to come out during a firestorm of various other audacious and violent movies, as this was the sudden artistic spurt of gritty, independent early 90’s Hollywood. Movies such as Scorsese’s *Goodfellas* (1990), Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and Abel Ferrara’s *Bad Lieutenant* (1992) which all seemed to explore the violent themes of primal, regressive masculinity seemed to steal all the press; and so at the time a small independent Belgium film like *Man Bites Dog* simply fell under the radar. “In the 1990’s, the body counts of contemporary cinema seem to be on the rise, on a number of different fronts (Russell 217).

Even though *Man Bites Dog* explores various serial killer elements, what I found even more fascinating about the film was the visual aesthetics that were applied to give the film the authentic look and feel of a low-budget documentary. They call these false documentaries ‘Mockumentary’s’ which is a odd style of movie making where fictional events are presented in a documentary style to create some form of comedic parody. Immediately when one thinks of a mockumentary one thinks of Rob Reiner’s rock and roll classic *This is Spinal Tap* from 1984 or Larry Charles *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America Make Benefit Glorious Nation of*

Kazakhstan from 2006. “The mockumentary form...allows a filmmaker to make fun of a character’s quirks without appearing to because the form implies that the character is presenting his or her views” (Miller 138).

Man Bites Dog’s gritty and unique mockumentary style helps create the uncomfortable feeling that the spectators are watching a real-life snuff film. Its found-footage style presented a fascinating voyeuristic perception into a provocative and shocking world of violence, exploitation and media. Similar to what the filmmakers tried to achieve with the exploitation film *Cannibal Holocaust* in 1980, *Man Bites Dog* was shot by four student filmmakers, shooting it in grainy black and white and producing it on a shoe-string budget. These attributes gave *Man Bites Dog* the gritty, authentic exploitative feel of a real-life underground snuff film.

Blurring the lines between the real and the fake is what makes *Man Bites Dog* such a disturbing and harrowing experience. It explored the moral decay in the interworking of media and television and of the voyeuristic integrity, ethics and purity within the world of journalism and of its spectators. “Mockumentary allows a filmmaker to present ludicrous views and tear down a figure while appearing to stand objectively on the sideline, claiming only to have caught the ludicrousness on film” (Miller 138). Even though much of *Man Bites Dog* is greatly exaggerated for satirical and comical effect, its commentary on exploitative violence and the inevitable rise of cheap sensational journalism is equally as prophetic as *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Peeping Tom* (1960) and *Network* (1976).

Man Bites Dog can easily be generalized as an extremely violent, despicable, exploitative piece of work, and yet when looking at the film closer you come to realize it is much smarter than that. “Narrative morality emerges here as a surrealist discourse of shock, disruption and

violent transgression that has the capacity of emptying cinematic representation of its pretensions of realism and closure” (Russell 219). It’s completely self-aware on what it set out to do which is basically to create visceral shocks and reactions out of its spectator. “Usually I start my month with a postman,” Ben states as he coldly executes a postman, but is thoughtful enough to finish the postman’s mail route gleefully wearing his uniform.

Man Bites Dog deviously begins on a lighter and slightly more comedic note, as audiences go along with Ben as he ventures into various apartment buildings and we watch the disposing of bodies into a quarry. In the beginning of the film, watching Ben go through his daily antics is basically a guilty pleasure, as we find ourselves immediately entertained with Ben’s numerous educational stories of how cost-effective it is to kill old couples or how midgets are heavier than children so you have to double their weight to successfully sink their corpses underwater.

In what I believe to be one of the funniest moments in the film, Ben purposely frightens an elderly lady in her apartment causing her to have a heart attack. He then explains to the audience that he immediately noticed her heart meds on the table when entering and how this kind type of method just saved him a bullet. These early sequences are extremely satirical and very, very funny. So when the violence and depravity begin to escalate throughout the second half of the film audiences chuckles and smiles slowly begin to dim and the uncomfortableness and an overwhelming awkwardness begin to set in. Once the smothering of a child occurs and Ben coldly explains to the audience while sitting next to the dead child on how abducting children for ransom is clearly not a good business, audiences are no longer laughing.

When the film escalates even more and the camera crew begins to take an active part in the violence, most disturbingly a gang rape sequence, audiences are at a point in the film where they have already invested too much time with the characters. Because of either being emotionally invested in its characters, story or simply out of pure morbid curiosity, spectators at this point cannot look away from the heinous acts and grotesque images they are now witnessing on the screen.

Audiences can come away from the film hypocritically accusing *Man Bites Dog* of being exploitative, offensive and pure adulterated trash, but they chose to stay and watch the geek show all the way to its bitter end, which in a way makes them just as guilty as the perpetrators who created the film. “Presumably their goal is to gain insight into evil, but what they’re really doing is blurring the line between spectator and participant. That line dissolves entirely when the crew runs out of money and accepts Ben as a patron” (Seitz).

We seem to be as a species very intrigued by the suffering and misery of others who are more fortunate than us and are comedically entertained by people whose lives are more underprivileged than ours. In many ways *Man Bites Dog* was very prophetic on the rise of Reality TV, because unlikable people like Ben who live an extremely questionable and unsavory lifestyle seem to be who the public are most interested about. Think of the popular programs currently on television or the sudden unhealthy obsession in reality TV; like for instance Paris Hilton, Jerry Springer, Kim Kardashian, Charlie Sheen, Justin Bieber and Honey Boo Boo.

Many of these untalented and narcissistic so-called celebrities, who millions constantly follow on twitter and Facebook, are simply side-show puppets who are idolized and at the same time repulsed by the very public who continue to tune in to them every week. Even I am guilty of

occasionally going on YouTube and viewing specific reality show fist fights that I heard about from friends. Embarrassingly enough, either out of pure boredom or morbid curiosity I even at one time viewed a tragic beheading a few years back online. Even though I immediately regretted ever watching such a heinous and despicable video, I will be the first to admit that we all have some form of instinctual and primal curiosity to the macabre and the taboo. We want to look away, and yet at the same time we cannot.

The controversial debate on glamorized violence that many critics originally stated was portrayed in *Man Bites Dog* is very interesting. Violent films don't necessarily make violent people but if a person cannot distinguish the difference between real life and fantasy than something is clearly not right with their thought process and moral compass. At the time *Man Bites Dog*, *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* and *Natural Born Killers* were released there was much controversial talk on each title getting an NC-17 rating and yet other films that were considerably more violent than those three were getting ignored and being swiftly released in regular theaters. "In the 1990s, the body counts of contemporary cinema seem to be on the rise, on a number of different fronts" (Russell 217). The reason why these three particular films were taken much of the heat was because the violence that was being portrayed psychologically tapped into audiences repressed subconscious and explored such areas most people didn't necessarily want to reflect on.

For instance when showing the scene in *Man Bites Dog* of the postman getting shot to a friend of mine who has never seen the film before, he chuckled because of how strange the character of Ben was dismissing this violent act and instead treating it like a normal everyday act. But when we arrived at the house invasion sequence which involved Ben and his film crew breaking into a family home, snapping the father's neck (the crack of his neck being specifically

placed on a sound mike) and the slow suffocation of a small child; my friend's laughter that was heard earlier in the movie was now non-existent. When we got to the disturbing gang rape sequence of a corpse, my friend was at this time completely repulsed by the film and seemed to feel even more ashamed that he was originally sucked into thinking the film was even remotely entertaining or funny.

“The need for juicy character material on the part of documentarians is satirized by their being co-opted for his crimes, finally becoming his accomplice, with a stationary camera, a sole witness” (Coleman 42). After the film finished my friend stated how he hated the movie and believed it was morally reprehensible. I believe my friend reacted so strongly to the material because the film got him to think, feel and react in a morbid way that questioned and confused his own moral and ethical compass. He got so caught up with the film, that when the appalling images were placed up on the screen, he chose to specifically not look away, which in some way made him an active participant; making him feel just as shamefully guilty as the murderer.

This is why ‘Genre’ is such an important key factor for audiences as it can be a helpful indicator and safety net on how a movie is probably going to be. Genre is a word that already is informing the audience what they should expect when going in and seeing a specific film and it is comfortably letting them know how they should think, feel and react. A mindless torture-porn film like *Saw* (2006) can be as violent, disgusting and gory as it wants to be but since it's labeled in the ‘horror’ genre; audiences aren't offended or shocked because they are expecting to see what a horror film usually delivers. When going into an ‘action’ genre audience already knows what they are going to see, so seeing 10 to 20 guys getting coldly mowed down by automatic machine guns isn't going to bother them. Most cult films don't really classify themselves in a specific genre which is why almost most of them are never immediate commercial successes.

In a cult film like *Man Bites Dog* most spectator's who go into it not having an idea what the film is trying to achieve will in the end probably feel either extremely infuriated, disturbed or underwhelmed simply because they weren't really sure how to exactly feel or react while watching various questionable material. And yet when looking closely at *Man Bites Dog* it is obviously a satirical black comedy, a film that is designed to shock, disturb and have the spectator form some type of polarizing reaction. I believe the film to be a brilliantly effective experiment on human responses.

In the beginning of the film I originally thought the character of Ben was a charming and slightly enjoyable character, and there were many moments I was hysterically laughing non-stop. And yet when I got near the end of the picture and watched a highly intoxicated and drunken Ben shout out to his film crew "Dead baby boy!" he at that moment in the film had lost all his comedic charm, and I personally loathed Ben as a character and a human being. To have a film be able to effectively create an instant transition from pure enjoyment to pure disgust really says something about that film.

The reason why *Man Bites Dog* is looked at as such a highly adored cult film is because it has the raw power to provoke a strong reaction from its audience and create an immediate moment of self-reflection. Because of such elements like the serial killer genre, its mockumentary aesthetics and its fascinating commentary on glamorized violence, these key elements helped establish the film as the iconic cult film that it now is. *Man Bites Dog's* brilliantly disturbing satirical commentary on the media, its portrayal of shameful voyeurism, and its glorification of sensational on-screen violence are themes that continue to be a much debated and highly controversial subject matter. Which is why we are still talking about it today.

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