

CONTENTS

Cast and Crew ... 4

Henry: The Making of a Low-Budget Classic (2021) ... 7
by Shaun Kimber

**Henry Lee Lucas:
Portrait of the Real Serial Killer Henry (2021) ... 17**
by Peter Vronsky

**High Art and Dead Women in Henry:
Portrait of a Serial Killer (2021) ... 27**
by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas

Henry Meets the BBFC (2021) ... 37
by Julian Petley

About the Restoration ... 52



CAST

Michael Rooker Henry
Tom Towles Otis
Tracy Arnold Becky
David Katz Henry's Boss
Eric Young Parole Officer
Kurt Naebig High School Jock
Ray Atherton The Fence
Erzsebet Sziky The Hitchhiker
Denise Sullivan Floating Woman
Monica Anne O'Malley Mall Victim
Rick Paul Shooting Victim

CREW

Directed by **John McNaughton**
Screenplay by **Richard Fire** and **John McNaughton**
Produced by **Lisa Dedmond, Steven A. Jones** and **John McNaughton**
Executive Producers **Malik B. Ali** and **Waleed B. Ali**
Edited by **Elena Maganini**
Director of Photography **Charlie Lieberman**
Music by **Ken Hale, Steven A. Jones** and **Robert McNaughton**
Art Direction by **Rick Paul**





HENRY: THE MAKING OF A LOW-BUDGET CLASSIC

by Shaun Kimber

It's 1978 and John McNaughton returns to Chicago to start a career in film. Whilst working in his cousin's bar, 'Lassons Tap', a man who worked for Maljack (later Maljack Productions Incorporated [MPI]) gave him his business card. MPI was an independent audio-visual business run by Waleed B. Ali (the store clerk in *Henry*) and Malik B. Ali. McNaughton spent some time working for MPI, delivering equipment, but ended up returning to construction work within the Chicago area.

Later, McNaughton re-visited the Ali brothers and met with Ray Atherton (the fence in *Henry*). Atherton was a film collector and an expert on public domain material, and he and McNaughton collaborated on a documentary on American gangsters, using public domain footage. MPI distributed the documentary, *Dealers in Death* (1984), on video. Thanks to its success, McNaughton started working with MPI on a new video documentary using vintage film of professional wrestling from the 1950s. However, when the owners of the wrestling footage increased their asking price, the deal fell through. In August 1985 Waleed B. Ali offered McNaughton the \$100,000 budget for the wrestling video. Waleed wanted a horror film for video distribution, but did not care what the film was about.

McNaughton had a budget and a brief; now all he needed was an idea for the film. He went to speak to an old friend of his who worked for MPI, Gus Kavooras. Gus pulled out a videotape of the television news show *20/20* which had a segment about the US serial killers Henry Lee Lucas and Otis Elwood Toole, and it was this which initiated the idea for *Henry*. McNaughton, whilst conversant with post-production video, had no experience in the film industry. So he took the idea to an old friend and colleague, Steve A. Jones, who was well connected in Chicago's filmmaking community. Jones would become one of the film's producers and its post-production supervisor, as well as directing and helping to compose the original music. Jones put McNaughton in touch with

the Organic Theater Company (OTC), co-founded by Stuart Gordon. Through the group McNaughton met Richard Fire (co-scriptwriter and acting coach on *Henry*). McNaughton had an exploitation film in mind, but Fire felt that more could be done with the concept. Beginning in August 1985, they co-wrote the script for *Henry* over a couple of months.

McNaughton gave Waleed a copy of the screenplay in Autumn 1985 and, whilst he did not read it, he did write a cheque for \$25,000 in order to enable pre-production to start. McNaughton used his loft apartment on Milwaukee Avenue as the production office, which was managed by Lisa Dedmond (co-producer and production manager), who was in charge of the finances. Producer Steve Jones brought Charlie Lieberman (director of photography), Rick Paul (art director), Patricia Hart (wardrobe), Robert McNaughton and Ken Hale (original music) to the project. Frank Coronado was enlisted to storyboard 110 panels which represented key scenes in the film. Coronado also played a cameo as a 'Bum' in *Henry*

Steve Jones provided contacts, through the OTC, to help with casting. Tommy Towles read for Henry but was cast as Otis. Tracy Arnold was cast as Becky. There were some initial issues casting the role of Henry, which attracted little interest from potential actors. Jeffery Segal (special effects make-up artist) recommended Michael Rooker. Rooker turned up in character to meet McNaughton at Jones' apartment, wearing painting and decorating clothes. Rooker, Towles and Arnold received \$2,000 each for their work on *Henry*. Rehearsals took place over a two-to-three-week period. *Henry* drew upon unknown theatre actors, friends, volunteers and crew to make up the rest of the cast.

McNaughton is a great fan of Chicago as a city space. His background growing up in and taking photographs of the city enabled him to build up a repertoire of locations for the film. The small size of the crew and the fact they were working on a flat rate meant they were able to use multiple locations. McNaughton called in a host of favours, taking advantage of free locations that included a friend's apartment block (the 'exterminator' scene) and Waleed B. Ali's newly purchased suburban house (the 'home invasion' scene). Other Chicago locations include Milwaukee Avenue, the Chicago Sky Way and Lower Wacker Drive.

McNaughton got a good deal of support from the City of Chicago, chiefly in terms of being readily granted permits for location shooting. McNaughton's preference for locations over sets is at its most striking in the scenes in the apartment used in the film. Otis' apartment was located in a block in the Wicker Park neighbourhood, not far from McNaughton's own apartment. Because the



apartment was in good repair, Rick Paul had to work hard on the production design, collaborating with Patricia Harper to reduce the space and generally dress it down.

McNaughton envisaged *Henry* being shot in a documentary style with a hand-held camera, but the original cinematographer, Jean de Segonzac, had to leave the project before production started. Ten days before shooting was due to commence, Jones found Charlie Lieberman, who had worked on documentary substance-abuse films in Chicago. The film's distinctive visual style originated from the collaboration between Lieberman and McNaughton. *Henry* was shot in twenty-eight consecutive days between October and November 1985 on 16mm colour negative stock, using Lieberman's own Arriflex 16 SR, and was

eventually blown up to 35mm. The 'home invasion' scene was filmed by Rooker on a borrowed Sony Betamax Home Video Camera until the point at which he puts the camera down, which is when Lieberman took over. Whilst watching the dailies at Lieberman's home, McNaughton realised that *Henry* could be released theatrically and not just on video as MPI had planned.

Henry was made with a small crew of multi-tasking friends made up of Lieberman, Rick Paul and Patricia Hart, two 'all-purpose guys' and, from time to time, Paul Chen (first assistant director). Hart would pick out a selection of costumes from which the actors would then choose, with her assistance. Sound recordist Thomas Yore often had to work in noisy locations whilst simultaneously operating the boom and the Nagra recorder by himself. There was no money for lighting night exterior shots and locations. When filming the shooting of the 'Good Samaritan' in Lower Wacker Drive they supplemented the existing florescent green lighting with extra lighting borrowed from a commercial shoot directed by Paul Chen. Props were often borrowed. The car which Henry drives belonged to a crew member.



Henry employed five tableaux of six murders. The first tableau was Richard Fire's idea and involved the restaging of a crime scene photo of the 'Orange Socks' murder seen on a documentary about Henry Lee Lucas. This featured Mary Demas and was shot in a farmer's field north of Chicago without permission. The second tableau was filmed in McNaughton's cousin's bar using a friend's parents, Elizabeth and Ted Kaden. The third tableau was filmed in a motel and, like the first tableau, featured Mary Demas and was Fire's idea. The fourth tableau, which has actress Denise Sullivan lying in a river, was shot on Lisa Dedmond's land. The fifth tableau, featuring Monica O'Malley, was again based upon a description of a murder carried out by Henry Lee Lucas; the location used was a friend's house in the south suburban area of Chicago.

The special effects work on *Henry* involved a lot of improvisation. Chicago-based Jeffery Segal did most of the work but was assisted by Berndt Rantscheff. There were four main scenes involving SFX make-up work: the third tableau, in which a murdered prostitute is seen with a bottle impaled in her face; the killing of the Fence, which involved stabbing him in the hand and body with a soldering iron and smashing a television on his head; the shooting of the 'Good Samaritan', in which two squibs were employed for the body shots; and the murder of Otis, which involved the use of a \$700 prosthetic head. As there was not enough money for the multiple costumes needed for gore scenes, Rooker removed his jacket, which was his own, before each of the scenes in the film involving blood.

Steve Jones brought Robert McNaughton to *Henry*. They wanted to create a score which was different from most other horror films. Jones played synthesizers and percussion, McNaughton synthesizers and piano, and they wrote the score in collaboration with Ken Hale (synthesizers and piano), who had a small studio and an eight-bit sampler, and Paul Petratis (guitar, and also stills photographer). The integration of manipulated samples of voices and sound effects into the score of *Henry* was, for its time, innovative and experimental. For example, one of Becky's screams was taken off tape, sampled, run backwards and added into the musical score. The samples aurally increase the effectiveness of the film by their stylisation, for example, during the third tableau in which we hear the distorted sounds of murder whilst seeing only the consequences of what is heard. In the scene in which Henry and Otis kill the Fence, the sound of a dentist's drill is layered into the soundtrack, whilst in the run-up to the 'home invasion' scene, manipulated screams and dialogue are woven into the soundscape. Dan Haberkorn was responsible for creating background sound effects which included a neck snapping (crumbling a Styrofoam cup near a microphone) and Otis' body being dismembered (ripping a plastic sack). The score cost \$2,500. Costs were kept down by recording the

score at Time Zone, a new state-of-the-art Chicago-based 24 track studio, which offered the production team a good deal. The studio was run by a born-again rock 'n' roll Christian organisation, which was later reported to be shocked by the film. The filmmakers paid \$50 per song for source music, and used local, unsigned bands for tracks such as 'Fingers On It' by Enough Z'Nuff and 'Psycho' by The Sonics.

Steve Jones also brought editor Elena Maganini (editor, sound editor) to *Henry*. Maganini and McNaughton edited the first cut of *Henry* between November 1985 and June 1986; she was working full-time cutting animated TV commercials during the day and worked on *Henry* in the evenings and at weekends, setting up a 16mm flatbed editing machine in her apartment. Neither of them had cut a full-length feature before. Due to their inexperience, the first cut of *Henry* was two and a half hours long. Late in the editing process a rough cut was presented to MPI, a decision which McNaughton regrets. There was no budget for a video transfer, so he used the Sony video camera employed in the film, to record *Henry* off the 16mm flatbed editing machine. This resulted in a copy with a highly degraded black and white flickering image and a soundtrack minus sound effects. The Ali brothers were appalled and the relationship between them was never the same again. MPI owned the rights to the first two Beatles movies, *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965), produced by Walter Sheenson. Waleed recommended that McNaughton take the rough cut of *Henry* to Sheenson to ask his advice. *Henry* was finished in June 1986 with a running time of 83 minutes – 67 minutes had been removed.

Factoring in post-production costs, MPI felt that they had wasted \$111,000 and shelved *Henry*. As no theatrical release was envisaged by MPI, McNaughton had *Henry* transferred onto a one-inch master, colour-corrected video. This meant he was able to order good quality video cassettes of the film and circulate them to critics, producers and distributors. After finishing *Henry*, McNaughton was to learn that whilst making an independent film was a challenge, finding a distributor and getting the film classified would prove a whole lot trickier.

Shaun Kimber is an independent scholar – with over 20 years' experience, including 13 years at Bournemouth University. His interests include horror cinema, extreme film and film censorship. His publications include the co-edited book Snuff: Real Death and Screen Media (2016) and the book Controversies: Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer (2011). He also works with Dirt in the Gate Movies, a specialist 35mm film exhibitor based in Bournemouth.







HENRY LEE LUCAS: PORTRAIT OF THE REAL SERIAL KILLER HENRY

by Peter Vronsky

John McNaughton's *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* was shot on 16mm in 1985, premiered at the Chicago International Film Festival in September 1986, but was immediately rated "X" by the MPAA. After causing a stir at the 1989 Telluride Film Festival, it would find itself distributed for very limited commercial runs in cinemas only four years later in 1990 in New York. There *Henry* first played in the Angelika Film Center arthouse on Houston Street and then at the West Side Cinema on Seventh Avenue in Times Square from 11 May to 21 June 1990, screening among other X-rated movies.

When *Henry* went into limited release in 1990, the US was two-thirds of the way into its three-decade serial murder surge: the so-called 'golden age of serial murderers' or as the FBI termed it at the time, the "serial killer epidemic." Of 2,604 identified serial killers in the United States during the 20th century, an astonishing 90% (2,331) made their appearance between 1950 and 1999, with 88% of those appearing in just the three decades from 1970 to 1999 – the "epidemic" surge years.

Since the mid-1990s, the number of apprehended serial killers had dramatically dropped, along with 'conventional' homicides, until the slow recent upsurge with the Covid pandemic years – still nowhere near the historical high murder rates in the 1990s. Whether there are inexplicably fewer serial killers, or serial killers are better at eluding police, or police are better at apprehending them, is a question under debate. Certainly, with the development of DNA forensic techniques, the ubiquity of credit cards, cell phones and surveillance video cameras and other trackable technologies and digital footprints we all leave daily, it's likely that the latter explanation is the case – police find it easier to identify and apprehend serial killers and it is harder today to be 'successful' as a serial killer. The number of identified serial killers in the United States has declined from 614 in the 1990s to 337 in the 2000s and about 100 in the 2010s.

Henry is more than loosely based on the real case of Henry Lee Lucas (1936-2001), who was arrested in July 1983 on a minor charge before he began confessing to murders. The movie essentially is as McNaughton knew the case when he began filming it in 1985. The Lucas case was at its peak in the news media, with claims that he was the most prolific serial killer in American history, if not the world.

Like McNaughton's movie characters "Henry", "Otis" and "Becky", the real Henry Lucas had been accompanied on some of his killings by Otis Elwood Toole (1947-1996), and like in the movie, Toole had an adolescent niece, Frieda "Becky" Powell (1967-1982) who, like in the movie, would become Lucas's girlfriend and would be later murdered by him. (But in reality, Becky Powell was much younger than the adult "Becky" in the movie. Too young for even McNaughton to go there in his fictionalized version.) The stories that "Henry" in the movie tells "Becky" about murdering his mother and his childhood were the stories that the real Lucas told, and indeed he had been convicted for killing his mother Viola in 1961 and served nine years in prison before being released due to overcrowding in 1970.



Unlike the movie, however, in real life Henry Lucas never murdered Otis Toole, and unlike the movie, Lucas and Toole apparently had a sexual relationship.

The serial murders portrayed on- and off-screen in *Henry*, while completely fictionalized, accurately reflect the core nature of the random and casual killing that the real Lucas and Toole had claimed to perpetrate. The infamously shocking video scene where "Henry" and "Otis" watch and rewind a murder and rape they videotaped might have been inspired by the case of Charles Ng and Leonard Lake in California – a duo of serial killers who had videotaped their torture-rapes of female victims. That case broke in the summer of 1985 as *Henry* was being filmed. McNaughton was also a former delivery man for a video-equipment-rental business, whose owners had backed his earlier film project *Dealers of Death* (1984), which might have also inspired the "play and rewind" scene. VHS home consumer video camera systems were something new, first appearing in the late 1970s tethered by a cord from the camera to a battery powered recording deck, followed by integrated 'camcorders' in the early 1980s.

As for the real Henry Lucas, after his arrest for the illegal possession of a firearm in 1983 and McNaughton's filming of *Henry* in 1985, Lucas had gone on a spree of sensational confessions to murders across the United States, which escalated by the month from 28 murder confessions, to 250, to 600, and eventually a ridiculous 3,000. Authorities in Texas, where Lucas had been arrested, happily closed 213 cold cases to get them "off the books" and thus the press at first accepted the authenticity of Lucas's confessions. His claim of 600 murders was treated as plausible by the media and he was dubbed the most prolific serial killer in an era where competing rising serial killer body counts were eagerly kept track of and reported by the press like sports scores.

Henry Lee Lucas's childhood history can serve as a manual on how to incubate a serial killer. It includes virtually every factor reported by different serial killers in one single life.

Lucas was born in 1937 in one of America's poorest regions – Blacksburg, Virginia. Viola Lucas, his mother, was a sex worker; his father, Anderson, was an alcoholic who had earlier in a drunken stupor fallen on some railway tracks and had both his legs amputated by a slowly moving train. He supported himself and the family by skinning minks, selling pencils, and distilling illicit alcohol. The father taught Henry how to maintain their illegal distillery while he went off to get drunk. Henry himself was drinking hard liquor by age ten, and of his legless father he only remembers, "He hopped around on his ass all his life."

Viola insisted that both Henry and his father watch her having sex with her customers in a dirt-floor three-room cabin in which they lived. If they refused, she beat them with a club. Henry said, "I don't think any child out there should be brought up in that type of environment. In the past, I've hated it. It's just inside me hate, and I can't get away from it."

One of Lucas's earliest memories is of his mother shooting one of her customers in the leg with a shotgun after having sex and Henry being splashed with the man's blood. From then on, he claimed he was fascinated by blood and its association with sex.

When Henry was thirteen, his father got drunk, crawled out into the snow, and lay there until he caught pneumonia and died. Viola beat Henry with broom handles, sticks, pieces of timber, or anything else she found. She did not allow him to cry when she was beating him, and she constantly told him that he was born evil and would die in prison. Lucas claimed that the only thing he ever loved was a pet mule, but when his mother found out about his affection for it, she forced him to watch as she shot it dead. She then beat him for how much it was going to cost to haul the mule carcass away.

One day when Henry was too slow getting wood for the stove, Viola hit him so hard with a piece of lumber that he remained unconscious for three days until he was finally taken to a hospital. Afterward he recalled frequent incidents of dizziness, blackouts, and weightless sensation. About a year later, while roughhousing with his brother, Henry was accidentally sliced with a knife across his left eye. The eye was left untreated and eventually had to be replaced with a glass eye. Henry admitted to having sex with his half-brother and to the two of them cutting the throats of animals and performing acts of bestiality.

According to Lucas, sex became interchangeable with murder. He explained, "I get sex any way I can get it. If I have to force somebody to do it, I do. If I don't, I don't. I rape them. I've done that. I've killed animals to have sex with them. Dogs, I've killed them to have with them - always killed before I had sex. I've had sex with them while they're still alive only sometimes. Then killing became the same things as having sex."

He later said, "Sex is one of my downfalls."

On his first day of school, Viola sent Henry to class dressed as a girl, with his long hair set in curls and wearing a dress. Coincidentally, Ottis Toole, who would partner with Lucas in the crime spree, was also dressed as a girl in petticoats and lace by his mother. At least seven male serial killers, including



Charles Manson, are known to have been dressed as girls in their childhood. Eddie Cole, who murdered thirteen victims, was dressed as "Mamma's little girl" by his mother and forced to serve drinks to her guests.

Serial killers often exaggerate their childhood backgrounds in attempt to gain sympathy. In the case of Henry Lee Lucas, however, many of the details of his childhood history have been independently corroborated through various sources and witnesses, including his neighbours and former schoolteacher. Lucas was not exaggerating when he said, "They ain't got, I don't think, a human being alive that can say he had the childhood I had."

Lucas claimed committing his first murder when he was fifteen years old. He "confessed" he snatched a seventeen-year-old girl at a bus stop in Virginia,



carried her up an embankment, and attempted to rape her. When she resisted, he strangled her. But there is no current corroboration of any case matching Lucas's description of the victim, however, there was a similar murder in the region in the 1950s of a woman apparently abducted from a bus stop on her way to work that was in the newspapers at the time it happened. This could be the case Lucas was thinking off when he "confessed" to it, having read or heard about it back then when he was an adolescent, when cases like that were rarer than they would become in the 1960s.

Lucas was arrested in the 1950s for numerous property and car theft offences and served short sentences on and off until in 1961 he infamously stabbed his mother Viola in the neck in a rage, killing her. Accounts of that case vary. Some newspapers reported the murder occurred in a bar, others reported in Lucas's half-sister's home in Michigan. In any case, Lucas fled the scene, became a fugitive, was apprehended, tried and convicted and served nine years for Viola's murder before being released in 1970.

According to Lucas, on the eve of his release from prison for killing his mother, he begged authorities not to let him go free because he was overwhelmed with the urge to kill. On the day he was released, he claims, he immediately killed a woman and dumped her body near the prison gates. Again, no corroboration exists of a murder matching that description taking place in 1970 in Michigan.

In the mid-1970s, Lucas was joined in his killing by Ottis Elwood Toole, an allegedly cannibalistic male prostitute. There was no recognizable sense or pattern to their killing. The two claimed that the victims they killed were men, women, and children. They were young and they were old; they were prostitutes, businessmen, homemakers, tramps, and students. They were strangled, shot, stabbed, and battered to death. Some were raped; others were not. Some, according to the two killers, were mutilated and cannibalized while others were carefully buried. Some victims have never been identified to this day. At one point in the confessions, the two claimed to belong to a cult known as the Hands of Death, the existence of which has never been substantiated by any definitive evidence.

By the time *Henry* was playing in theaters in 1990, Henry Lee Lucas's confessions were widely debunked. He became known as the 'False Confession Killer' and the 'Lucas syndrome' – false confessions eagerly accepted by police desperate to take unsolved homicides off their record books – became part of policing vocabulary. Officially Lucas was eventually convicted "only" in eleven of the hundreds of murders he confessed to. Later Lucas and Toole both retracted their confessions, and while some of the eleven convictions remained standing on the record, today it is generally believed that only four murders can be definitively substantiated as having been committed by Lucas. In the 1990s, the then Texas Governor George Bush commuted his death sentence to life in view of the unsubstantiated confessions that Lucas was now retracting.

Henry Lee Lucas – the Confession Killer – died of heart failure in prison on 12 March 2001, while McNaughton's *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killers* lives on forever.

Peter Vronsky is an investigative forensic historian, author and filmmaker. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Toronto in criminal justice history and espionage in international relations. Vronsky is the author of four bestselling criminal histories including, Serial Killers: The Method and Madness of Monsters (2004) and Female Serial Killers: How and Why Women Become Monsters (2007), Sons of Cain: A History of Serial Killers from the Stone Age to the Present (2018) (a New York Times Critics' Choice), and American Serial Killers: The Epidemic Years 1950-2000 (2020) which explores the surge of serial murder in the USA and the rise of the FBI's "Mindhunter" profilers. He is currently consulting to the NYPD Cold Case Homicide Squad and several other agencies in debriefing incarcerated serial killer Richard F. Cottingham, the "Times Square Torso Killer", the subject of his forthcoming new book, American Werewolf: Richard F. Cottingham, the Last Serial Killer on the Left.





HIGH ART AND DEAD WOMEN IN HENRY: PORTRAIT OF A SERIAL KILLER

by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas

"There is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera," Susan Sontag wrote in 1977, and in *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, that aggression famously becomes explicit, as the eponymous Henry (Michael Rooker) and his side-kick Otis (Tom Towles) get their hands on a video camera. With this, they record the increasing series of murders that form the basis of the film's unfolding narrative. Yet for a film so renowned for its gruelling realist sensibility and spirit of raw authenticity, it is striking how overtly stylised the first images of murder in the film are. I say "images of murder" here as opposed to "murder scenes", because in *Henry*, they are very much not the same thing. Indeed, the bodies of five murdered women in particular – four shown in quick succession at the very beginning of the film, and another soon after – are far from the kinetic, vicious scenes of violence which has made this movie so notorious. Instead, the representation of these five murdered women is aligned more closely to the *tableau vivant*, a form that straddles performance traditions and the visual arts. It involves immaculately positioned, unmoving human figures placed in carefully posed compositions, thus rendering the literal translation of the French term *tableaux vivants* as "living pictures" self-explanatory. Except in *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, these are not constructed with figures implied to be living women, but dead women. They are, therefore, dead pictures. *Tableaux morts*.

These five images of murder are privileged by their placement at the beginning of the film, and while we do not see the action that leads up to the frozen, unmoving images of these dead women, we frequently hear it through the film's striking sound design: we hear snippets of audio that we understand are linked to these brutal murders, which we associate automatically with the end result; those shocking images of the still, almost always heavily sexualised crime scenes. The first image of the film is a closeup of a section of a woman's

face. With dark, metallic eyeshadow and rose-tinted lips, if it wasn't for the slight, dark mark at the top of her left cheekbone, based on this image alone we could easily mistake the smudged eye makeup as an aesthetic decision aspiring for the then-popular smoky effect, rather than what we soon recognise, as the camera pans out slowly, to be in fact a naked, murdered woman, beaten and slashed across the torso, left literally for dead in long, tall grass.

The second image of murder pans across its dead woman. Although this time clothed, she too is surveyed by the camera with the same slow, lingering gaze (that a man lies on the floor at the bottom of the frame next to the counter over which she is slumped is almost a footnote here, an afterthought, and certainly not as central a site of focus as the woman at the centre of this composition). Next is the most elaborately framed of this series of crime scenes, as the camera pans in a seedy motel room from an empty bedroom with bloodstained sheets on the bed slowly to the right, where we, at first, see a woman effectively beheaded by the framing of the shot. As the camera moves in closer to her and slowly shifts its look upwards, the emphasis on her half-dressed body – with black lace and red satin lingerie half removed with what appears to be a conscious effort of a kind of artistic sadism, for want of a better term – we see she is tied to the bathroom sink on one side and the toilet roll holder on the other. But the climactic reveal of this image of murder is, of course, the shot of her face. Looking less like a human being than a plastic store mannequin, a broken glass bottle has been shoved in her mouth, providing the answer to the question implicit in the image before this revelation: why is she covered in blood?

Body number four lies face down in a lake, but she is here almost an afterthought; the camera, it seems, is more interested in an empty plastic bottle that floats past her. Again, her clothes have been ripped off with only remnants of her underwear remaining. The fifth body we see at least gets the privilege (if you can call it that) of allowing us to see her alive, if only briefly; an unfortunate woman who happens to be at the wrong place at the wrong time as Henry surveys a shopping mall car park for prospective victims. While he seems to give up on the idea of her as a potential victim after following her home when he sees she is not alone, he returns soon after, using his job as a pest exterminator to gain entry to her home. This leads to what is, again, less a murder scene than an image of murder; another still tableau where the unmoving, lingerie-clad victim lies dead in front of the television, a power cable wrapped around her neck. Shot at first from the back with the television playing in the background, at first we can be forgiven for believing she is still alive. It is only as the camera slowly spins around her that we realise this is very much not the case.



Rather than dismissing these images of murder on their collective terms as violent, misogynistic voyeurism on the filmmaker's part, however, it is crucial to position these powerful moments in contrast to the representation of Becky (Tracy Arnold) or – to be more specific – to situate these earlier images of murder in subjective terms from Henry's perspective and note how the representation of Becky deviates so significantly from this. Whether the first four of those five initial images of murder are flashbacks or – intercut as they are between Henry's more day-to-day life activities (going to a diner, driving his car) – inserted with an implicit, invisible narrative ellipsis that suggests these crimes occurred in between these more banal moments, is almost beside the point. What matters here is the *contrast* between the mostly hyper-glamourised, hypersexualised images of murdered women early in the film on one hand, and the mundane aesthetics and events that are positioned between them.

Becky largely exists in the realm of the latter, and as her and Henry's relationship develops to the point where, perhaps inevitably, he murders her too, what is crucial here is that the subjectivity of the film's representation of images of murder – fundamentally linked to Henry's point of view – never fully allows him to perceive the dead Becky in the same way that he did these other women earlier in the film especially. With a final shot almost mirroring that first opening image of the film of the murdered, unmoving woman left in the long, green grass, there is of course one point of difference: we don't see Becky's murdered body itself, only the suitcase within which we know her murdered body is encased. For Henry, he may be inhumane enough to murder Becky, but despite himself, she has regardless been humanised in his eyes on some level. He is thus incapable of seeing her – remembering her – in the same sexualised, hyper-stylised way as his earlier victims simply because he knew her. He cannot dehumanise someone who he has already seen as human in the same way he has these other women, despite that not being enough to stop him killing her. Thus, Becky must remain in the suitcase because he dares not look. Those other women were, to him, no one, but Becky? She was someone, if only briefly. And so, she remains repressed, hidden in his memory, literally packed away. While still dehumanised, Becky cannot become a sexualised image of death to Henry, so the best he can do is transform her in his mind into another image of death; that of the non-human suitcase. She's dehumanised, yes, *but in a different way*.



For Henry, these other women, unlike Becky, are no ones: they remain objects from his perspective, which allows the intense glamourisation of almost all of these images of death to so vividly stain his consciousness. It is, in contrast, his very human connection with Becky that makes it impossible to recall her as an image of death in the same way, hence it is the suitcase that replaces the fetishized, defiled, sexualised body of the woman murder victim. Culturally, such representations hardly exist in a vacuum, and in the macabre – and, as some have suggested, sadistic and even misogynistic – work of photographers like Helmut Newton and Guy Bourdin, we see in the case of the latter especially a direct ancestor to John McNaughton's images of murder in *Henry's* opening act. We need only think of the explicit intersection of glossy fashion magazine aesthetics of murdered women in films as far back as the Italian *giallo* films, most directly in *Blood and Black Lace* (*Sei donne per l'assassino*, Mario Bava, 1964) and the later *gialli* inspired by it set in the fashion world that followed in its wake. But with its signature realist aesthetics, *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* sits as far away from the baroque excesses of the *giallo* as can be imagined.

When further considering the stylistic paradoxes that govern the depictions of dead women in *Henry*, Bourdin in particular is a crucial point of reference regarding the manner with which the titular character perceives the results of his crimes. Bourdin started working for *Vogue* magazine in 1955 with a notorious photo shoot with actor Audrey Hepburn, positioning the Hollywood superstar in an elegant veiled hat underneath a row of severed cows heads that hung from meat hooks above her head. Renowned for slick fashion photography that often combined sex and death, one doesn't have to look far in his work to see how the legacy of this style of fashion photography manifests in *Henry's* introductory images of death. In a 1982-83 campaign for Roland Pierre, two slim-legged, high-heeled women are seemingly discarded on a sandy mound, the torsos of the implicitly dead women covered in newspaper. In a photograph for the 1982 Pentax calendar, model Nicolle Meyer is carefully positioned on a white background next to a giant splash of red nail polish, the implication being that it is blood pouring from her mouth. An image for a campaign for French shoe designer Charles Jourdan even eschews the need for women altogether, showing a bloodstained crime scene where the chalk outline of a now-absent dead woman is joined only by an expensive looking car and a fancy pair of pink high heeled Jourdan shoes. While the technical quality of Bourdain's work is hard to deny (and indeed, in many circles he is celebrated as a master of contemporary surrealism), in terms of its gender politics it remains deeply troubling for some women critics in particular. For Gaby Wood at *The Guardian* in 2003, "Guy Bourdin influenced a generation of photographers with sadistic images drawn from his own appetite for sexual

perversion”, while Natalia Borecka at *Lone Wolf Magazine* in 2014 likewise held that in Bourdin’s work, “like never before in fashion photography, women’s body parts became things, to be enjoyed separately from the real person that they were attached to”.

The bleak, disturbing realism of *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* might see it more commonly aligned with films such as Leonard Kastle’s 1970 film *The Honeymoon Killers*, but these opening images of death in *Henry* arguably locate it just as much in dialogue with the legacy of cultural artefacts like Bourdin’s morbid, excessively sexualised fashion photography. While certainly the bulk of the film deviates from the kind of ghoulish gloss upon which Bourdin’s reputation still for many largely remains, this is, in many ways, precisely the point. Rather than dismissing the entirety of *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* as a film that maintains the tradition of the representation of women that is so synonymous with Bourdin’s photography, it is in fact the very contrast with how Henry’s supposed ‘real world’ is opposed to his glossy fantasies where the film’s most powerful impact on a gender political front can be found.

At the heart of this distinction lies the representational mechanics which drive the film’s broader gender politics when it comes to violence against women and, indeed, McNaughton’s own assumed ideological position pertaining to gendered violence. In fact, it is through these highly stylised, eroticised images of death at the beginning of the film and how strongly they contrast with the much rawer, nastier depictions of violence against women elsewhere in the film (particularly in terms of the murder of the two sex workers, the killing of a family with a heavily sexualised focus on the mother, and the rape of Becky by Otis) that makes explicit just how dramatically opposed Henry’s ‘fantasy’ of dead women is in a Bourdinian sense with the grim reality depicted elsewhere in the movie. Rather than celebrating those glamourised images of dead women, *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* exposes them for what they are: the deluded, dangerous fantasies of an unhinged sick fuck.

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HENRY MEETS THE BBFC

by Julian Petley

After *Henry*'s public debut at the 1986 Chicago Film Festival, Atlantic Releasing showed an interest in distributing it, but this evaporated when the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) insisted on giving it an 'X' rating. This was effectively a form of economic censorship, as this rating (since superseded by the NC-17) was usually reserved for hardcore pornography and spelled commercial death for any non-porn movie, as the mainstream exhibitors refused to show 'X'-rated products.

However, once *Henry* began to garner an underground reputation on the independent repertory circuit, and in particular after it had been brought by Errol Morris to the Telluride Festival, Colorado, in 1989, where it won the support of Roger Ebert and Arthur Penn, it was resubmitted to the MPAA, who simply re-confirmed their original 'X'. John McNaughton signalled his willingness to make cuts, but the MPAA was adamant. As he explained:

Normally when you get an 'X' they say: Here are the problems, fix these four scenes. With *Henry*, we never had that option. They couldn't reduce the problems to a few scenes. It was an overall problem. "Disturbing moral tone" was what they said.¹

In the event, *Henry* was distributed unrated and uncut by Greycat films, and enjoyed a reasonably profitable, if relatively limited, circulation on the independent exhibition circuit. In 1991 it was released on video by MPI Home Video, with the packaging announcing, "Totally Uncut & Uncensored" and "The Most Controversial Film of the Decade", although the notoriously censorious Mormon-owned Blockbuster chain refused to stock it, as it was unrated.

If *Henry* encountered a form of economic censorship in the United States, in Britain it faced censorship of a much more direct kind. Initially the director of the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), James Ferman, wanted to

1 - Quoted in Shaun Kimber, *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pg. 22.



ban it outright, but lacked sufficient support amongst his staff. The version which its distributor, Electric Pictures, submitted in January 1990, after sitting uneasily on the film for some time, ran at 81 minutes, 54 seconds. The 38 second shot of a dead woman on a lavatory with blood between her exposed breasts and a broken bottle pushed into her face, which occurs near the start of the film as one of what McNaughton calls the “tableaux” of some of Henry’s victims, had been removed by the clearly worried distributor in order to try to avoid the BBFC regarding the film as purely exploitative.

Henry was finally passed for cinema showing on 24 April 1991, after over a year of typically agonized deliberations within the BBFC, with cuts totalling 62 seconds, giving a running time of 81 minutes, 31 seconds. Apart from the above-mentioned scene, ones that suffered cuts were the murder of a TV

warehouse man, and the “home invasion”, in which Henry (Michael Rooker) and his sidekick, Otis (Tom Towles), video themselves murdering a couple and their son, during the course of which Otis sexually abuses the woman.

According to the BBFC website, the three examiners who first saw the film, on 7 January, felt that the last of the above-mentioned scenes posed particular problems. A second screening, involving four examiners, took place on 25 January. Two argued for cuts and two for certification at ‘18’ without cuts. However, Ferman insisted that cuts were required, in particular to reduce the sexualisation of the female victim by removing the shots of the killer’s hand moving to her groin and by reducing to a minimum the exposure and mauling of her breasts, both before and after she is killed. On 12 February, an editor for Electric worked with Ferman to produce a version of this scene which was acceptable to the Board. This was then shown to examiners, who felt that the cuts were insufficient. As a result, two further cuts were made. This version was shown to examiners on 21 February, and they agreed that no further excisions were required. Another screening took place on 27 February, in the presence of the BBFC’s President and Vice President, and Ferman reported:

General agreement that the film was disturbing but not exploitative in this cut form. No firm view that further cuts were needed, but a request that the board seek expert advice from psychiatrists/psychologists familiar with the mindset of serial killers in order to ensure that the film was not likely to influence the vulnerable in dangerous directions.²

Thus the film was screened again on 19 March in the presence of one psychiatrist and two psychologists. The experts agreed that the film was disturbing, but also found it accurate and interesting. It was thus concluded that the cut version of the film could be passed, but that any subsequent release on video, where scenes could be played and replayed out of context, would be a problem.

As stated in the Board’s 1991 *Annual Report*, the home invasion scene and the opening montage were cut because “the Board is always careful to remove the links between sexual availability and violence towards sexually exposed and terrified women”.³ Tom Dewe Mathews also quotes from a BBFC examiner’s report to the effect that in the home invasion scene “the woman is totally depersonalised. The camera gives us no lead-in to the assault from her viewpoint and therefore no feel for her as a person. Otis and Henry we already know, however, and accordingly we see her through their eyes. Conventions from the standard repertoire of filmic sex and violence also operate here, such as the positioning of the woman towards the camera. By these devices viewers

² - <https://www.bbfc.co.uk/education/case-studies/henry-portrait-of-a-serial-killer>

³ - *BBFC Annual Report for 1991*, pg. 13.

are invited to participate, to see the titillatory nature of such cruelty and the film is therefore truly exploitative.”⁴

Ferman himself also noted that:

All the material we cut was violence connected with sexual abuse of a victim. Therefore it could have got past the guard of an audience. Once you're into sexual images you can turn people on because whatever on part of their mind is thinking, another part is telling them something else.⁵

However, there was rather more to the censorship of *Henry* than this, since the Board, like the MPAA, also confessed itself perturbed by the film's neutral moral tone. Thus Ferman typically fretted: “How does one get the audience to take a properly moral view about the violence that's shown on the film?”⁶ As he put it: “*Henry* was always a difficult film because it didn't contain its own moral context; it's totally up to the viewers to bring their own moral viewpoint from the outside. It's been described as a morally blank film”.⁷ On the one hand, Ferman admitted that one of the forensic psychologists whom the BBFC consulted had said that the film was “remarkably accurate” and that it was “a film he would like to send his students to see because it shows the cold, detached personality of the serial killer who can't engage with the world, who has no strong feelings himself and can't see that anyone else's feelings are real”.⁸ On the other hand, Ferman was concerned because the film was “so quiet. My biggest worry was that, because it is so realistic, with no aesthetic distance, you enter into the psychology of the psychopath”.⁹ But it is precisely the film's ability to make us see the world through Henry's eyes (though most certainly not to sympathize with him), allied with its refusal to pass overt moral judgement, offer easy explanations, or reassure by having Henry finally caught and punished, that makes it so remarkable and so intensely disturbing. As McNaughton himself put it: “I hate it when a filmmaker tells me what moral judgements to make, when everything is pre-packaged for me. What we tried to do was to say, ‘What do *you* think the morality of this piece is?’”¹⁰

After *Henry's* cinema release, Ferman made it clear, publicly, that the Board would be highly unlikely ever to pass it on video. According to the BBFC 1992 *Annual Report*: “On video, the forensic advice was to exercise even greater

4 - Quoted in Tom Dewe Mathews, *Censored* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994), pg. 265.

5 - Quoted in *ibid.*, pg. 266.

6 - Quoted in *ibid.*, pg. 268.

7 - Quoted in Nigel Floyd, ‘*Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*’, *Time Out*, 3 February 1993.

8 - Quoted in Julian Petley, ‘John McNaughton’, in Derek Jones (ed.), *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia*, Vol. 3, (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), pg. 1489.

9 - Quoted in *ibid.*

10 - Quoted in Nigel Floyd, ‘Charnel knowledge’, *Time Out*, 3 July 1991, pg. 20.



caution because of the obsessional manner in which disturbed individuals might use the replay facility within the home”¹¹ and because of the possibility that “sick satisfaction could be taken by a few highly disturbed and susceptible individuals whose dangerous fantasies might be stimulated by the repeated playing of such a scene out of context”.¹² Or, as Ferman himself put it:

We were worried about the small proportion of viewers who would use the family murder scene in the way that the forensic experts feared, which was to feed their own fantasies, to play them again and again; because on video you can control the fantasies, just as Henry and Otis are controlling their own fantasies when they re-live their killings on video.¹³

11 - *BBFC Annual Report for 1992*, pg. 12.

12 - *Ibid.*, pg. 14.

13 - Quoted in Floyd (1993).





However, after the film had garnered a largely positive critical response in the UK, Electric decided to submit it for classification on video in June 1992. The distributor stressed that it would be marketed as a “quality” product rather than an exploitation one, and indicated that they would be prepared to make further cuts if required. The cut cinema version was viewed by BBFC examiners in June and July, with some arguing that it should be passed on video without additional cuts and others that further ones should be made to the home invasion scene.

During the summer, the film was seen by the BBFC’s Presidents and by other examiners, and a majority view emerged that the video might have a negative effect on “vulnerable or susceptible adults who may seek it out for morbid or prurient reasons”.¹⁴ Ferman in particular was concerned about the opinions of the experts whom he’d consulted over the film’s theatrical release.

14 - BBFC website.

Nonetheless, after yet more lengthy deliberations, Ferman decided that the film could be released on video, and it was classified on 26 January 1993, but only after a further 51 seconds of cuts, adding up to one minute, 53 seconds of cuts to the original and making for a running time of 77 minutes, 26 seconds. Four seconds of cuts were required to the murder of the tv warehouse man, and the home invasion scene was further trimmed, mostly to remove acts of sexualised violence. According to Ferman: “The principle we followed in cutting the scene was to cut out the masturbatory pleasure. We were worried about the sexual turn-on element for solitary men watching at home”.¹⁵

However, the scene was not only cut but “rearranged” (and without the director’s permission). Still concerned that it might arouse vulnerable viewers but mindful that only so much footage could be removed without damaging or rendering meaningless such a crucial scene, Ferman decided that an alternative would be to “interrupt’ the flow of the scene by inserting a shot of Henry and Otis watching the video into the middle of the sequence”, which altered the meaning of the scene in a crucial way.¹⁶

To gauge the full significance of Ferman’s remarkable intervention, it is crucial to understand how McNaughton actually intended this deeply shocking scene to work. In the original version, the viewer is aware that they are watching a degraded video image of the home invasion, but what they are unaware of is that what they are actually watching is the video being replayed by Henry and Otis as a form of entertainment. Thus when the camera eventually pulls back to reveal them watching from their sofa, the audience is forced to become implicated in what is going on. As McNaughton himself puts it:

You’re now sitting next to them on their sofa and you’re watching the playback of this horror, and you’re watching it as a form of entertainment. And the idea is to cause you to think about it. I mean, how entertaining is violence? It’s one thing to see action pictures and to see the bad guys dispatched in a bloody manner, but it’s another thing to see something this absolutely horrific which may be more like the real thing... To rearrange that scene is to relieve the audience of the responsibility that is intended to be built into that scene.¹⁷

This remarkable (and surreptitious) piece of re-editing, which the BBFC describes as “one of the most controversial decisions”¹⁸ of Ferman’s tenure, was unearthed by the *Time Out* film critic Nigel Floyd, who aptly concluded that “this radically alters the structure of the scene: by pre-empting the crucial

15 - Quoted in Matthews (1994), pg. 268.

16 - BBFC website.

17 - McNaughton interviewed by Nigel Floyd on the Optimum Blu-ray release of the film.

18 - BBFC website.

moment at which our guilty complicity is exposed, Ferman's version subverts this moment of subversion".¹⁹ Or as Mark Kermode put it:

Once again, Ferman was striving with a vengeance to take the horror out of this purest of horror films. The result, as ever, was to deface and defile a radical work of art, to make it "palatable" in a way which utterly negated its entire *raison d'être*.²⁰

After Robin Duval took over as BBFC Director in 1999, a number of films which Ferman had either cut or effectively banned on video were reconsidered, and *Henry* was among them. It was resubmitted, this time by Universal and on DVD, in 2000, with a running time of 79 minutes, 15 seconds²¹, and those examiners who saw it were divided between those who thought it should be passed uncut at '18' and those who thought that certain cuts should be maintained – although not Ferman's re-editing. Duval and the BBFC Presidents agreed with the more cautious among the examiners. The four-second cut to the stabbing of the tv warehouse man was waived, but the scene with the murdered prostitute on the lavatory which had been pre-cut by Electric for both the cinema and video release was only partially reinstated, a cut being made at the point at which the camera begins to zoom in slowly on her bloody breasts and face, which was considered to be "unacceptably eroticised and gratuitous".²² However, Universal felt the cut to be clumsy, and may have also feared that it rendered the censoring of the scene unnecessarily obvious, and so they decided to keep it as originally pre-censored by Electric. The BBFC felt that the mauling of the woman's breasts in the home invasion scene "was still unacceptably eroticised and comparable to material that had recently been cut from other video works",²³ and ten seconds of this activity were removed. All in all, the BBFC restored 63 seconds of cuts. With 38 seconds cut by Universal and ten by the Board, the film was released on DVD at 78 minutes, 27 seconds. The packaging proclaimed: "Includes Footage Previously Unseen in the UK" and "The Most Complete Version Released to Date in the UK".

In 2003, Optimum Releasing submitted *Henry* for theatrical re-release, with a running time of 82 minutes, 31 seconds. Given that the DVD release had been cut only two years earlier, it might have been supposed that the cinema release would suffer a similar fate. However, cinema films are not subject to the Video Recordings Act 1984, which requires the BBFC to consider that films passed on

19 - Floyd (1993).

20 - Mark Kermode, 'The British censors and horror cinema', in Steve Chibnall and Julian Petley (eds), *British Horror Cinema* (London: Routledge 2002), pg. 19.

21 - Because of PAL speed-up, the running time of a film on DVD will obviously be slightly different from that of its theatrical version.

22 - BBFC website.

23 - Ibid.



video can be viewed in the home (something which, as we have seen, greatly preoccupied Ferman), which may result in certain films on video being subject to stricter classification standards than their theatrical versions. However, the Board's sexual violence policy applies equally to films and videos, and this had not changed. But, on the other hand, as the BBFC itself admitted:

What had changed was that the BBFC had classified a handful of far more brutal, graphic and shocking scenes of sexual violence since it had last considered *Henry*, notably those in *Baise-moi* [2000], *Irreversible* [2002], and the belated DVD release of *Straw Dogs* [1971]. Given what had been permitted in those films, as well as the evidence the BBFC had gleaned from a recent survey of public attitudes into sexual violence, it

seemed increasingly inconsistent to require cuts to *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*. The predominant effect of the scenes in question seemed to be to horrify rather than to arouse, any erotic elements were minimal and almost incidental, and the scenes served an important narrative and thematic significance within what a carefully constructed and acclaimed feature was. Examiners also noted that the cuts made in 2001 seemed relatively arbitrary in that it could easily be argued that some of the material the Board had reinstated was stronger than the material that had been cut. With regard to the initial concerns that the film might have a negative effect on disturbed individuals, it was conceded that the Board cannot base its decisions at the adult level on the possible reactions of the most disturbed and unpredictable viewers, as this was a disproportionate form of intervention under the Human Rights Act.²⁴

Thus the film was passed uncut for both cinema and DVD release, the latter with a host of extras and bearing the legend: "The Full Uncut Version".

Henry's various encounters with the BBFC clearly demonstrate just how much the Board's attitudes to censorship changed over this 13-year period. Obviously the departure of James Ferman played an important role in this process, but the gradual disappearance of "video nasty" stories from the press, which had last reared their heads following the murder of James Bulger in 1993, almost certainly aided the Board in adopting a far more enlightened attitude to the process of censorship and classification.

Julian Petley is the author of Film and Video Censorship in Modern Britain (Edinburgh University Press, 2011) and Censorship: A Beginner's Guide (Oneworld, 2009). He is currently co-editing the Routledge Companion to Censorship and Freedom of Expression and is principal editor of Journal of British Cinema and Television.



²⁴ - BBFC website.



ABOUT THE RESTORATION

Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.33:1 with stereo and 5.1 audio.

The film was scanned and restored in 4K resolution. The original 16mm camera negative was scanned on a Arriscan. Dirt, debris, scratches and warping were manually removed using PFClean, and SDR colour grading was performed using Baselight.

The original stereo mix was transferred from the 35mm magnetic reels at 96k using a Magna-Tech. Digital restoration was performed using ProTools HD and Cedar DNS software. The 5.1 mix was created from the ST composite track.

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Colourist **Mike Matusek**

Restoration Artist **Boris Seagraves**

Audio Restoration and Mixing Facility **Post Haste Digital, Los Angeles, CA**

Mixer **Justin Valenzuela**

Project Supervisors **John McNaughton, Steven A. Jones, Todd Wieneke**

HDR grading **R3Store Studios, London**

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Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**

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