

2010


## Se7en: Medieval Justice, Modern Justice

Valerie Allen

*CUNY John Jay College of Criminal Justice*

### How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/jj\\_pubs](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/jj_pubs)

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Allen, V. (2010), Se7en: Medieval Justice, Modern Justice. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 43(6): 1150–1172.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu).

# *Se7en*: Medieval Justice, Modern Justice

VALERIE ALLEN

## The World's Iniquity

**A**NDREW KEVIN WALKER WROTE THE SCRIPT FOR *SE7EN* AS A “CYNICAL ‘love letter’” to New York, the dirty, noisy metropolis in which he spent five years being miserable (Salisbury 86). On its streets, he watched the seven deadly sins performed daily, and they inspired the plot of a series of killings—each victim him or herself the perpetrator of a sin. Detective William Somerset, about to retire, teams up to solve the case with his young, idealistic replacement, David Mills. On the run after the detectives’ lucky strike on his apartment, John Doe, the serial killer, turns himself in after only the fifth murder (gluttony, greed, sloth, lust, and pride). Luring the detectives with the promise of the last two bodies (envy and anger), Doe presents Mills with the head of the young detective’s wife, claiming envy as his besetting sin. Disregarding Somerset’s pleas for restraint, Mills shoots Doe, incarnating himself as wrath, and completing Doe’s bloody plan. Like Walker, his authorial creator, John Doe watched the deadly sins performed daily:

DAVID MILLS: I thought all you did was kill innocent people.

JOHN DOE: Innocent? Is that supposed to be funny? An obese man, a disgusting man, who could barely stand up. . . . A lawyer . . . who dedicated his life to . . . keeping murderers and rapists on the street. . . . A drug-dealer, a drug-dealing pederast actually, and let’s not forget the disease-spreading whore. Only in a world this shitty could you even try to say these were innocent people and keep a straight face.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever the shady activities of the greed, sloth, and lust victims, Fat Boy (the gluttony victim) committed no crime in overeating, and the

---

*The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 43, No. 6, 2010  
© 2010, Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

model none in being proud of her beauty. Secular and ostensibly objective, modern justice no longer purports to interest itself in the regulation of private morality. Unlike late medieval justice, which had jurisdiction over the misdeeds of both body and soul by means of the twin institutions of secular and ecclesiastical law, modern justice takes care of crime and leaves sin alone.<sup>2</sup> But John Doe conflates the two, and in doing so brings two fundamentally different systems of justice into unhappy coexistence. He refigures the modern juridical subject by transforming individual victims into depersonalized types. His relentless offensive against sin exposes “the world’s iniquity” (Dyer, *Seven* 9) and questions the tolerance of it by liberal society. In this article, I consider the vision of the medieval that drives *Se7en*, namely, its apocalyptic, rationalist, religious, and retributive sense of justice. The distinction between this “medievalist” vision and medieval reality, whether documentary or literary, is important. What makes *Se7en*’s treatment of the medieval exceptional is the way it subverts not only the “modern” genre of the thriller but also the victim’s subjective identity, the category of individual that underpins both crime fiction and criminal psychopathology.

Fincher’s movie has an eschatological force figured in its very title—*Se7en*. Seven is the mystical number invoked on every page of the book of Revelation, the book of end things and of the destruction of time, measured as human history. Like Umberto Eco’s modern detective mystery set in the Middle Ages, *The Name of the Rose*, and made for the screen (Dir. Jacques Annaud, 1986), *Se7en* ironically deploys the numerological trope to achieve its apocalyptic finale (Bignell 61–85; Johnston 1–32). Whereas in the *Name of the Rose*, the central preoccupation with the self-referentiality of the sign ultimately liberates meaning, in *Se7en*, Detective William Somerset is engulfed by “too much evidence” for any meaning to emerge (Thompson 122), trapped in a despairing hermeneutic circle of clues that lead only to more clues. As the detectives wait on Wednesday night for the results of the fingerprint match, Somerset muses on the pointlessness of his job. Despair of making the world a better place has led him to give up and retire.

All we do is pick up the pieces. We take all the evidence, and all the pictures and samples. We write everything down, and note what time things happened . . . We make a nice neat pile, and file it on

the slim chance it's ever needed in a courtroom. . . . Even the most promising clues usually lead only to other clues.  
(Walker 60–61)

## Teleological Design

The dénouement of the *Name of the Rose* exposes as naïve all faith in any sure correspondence between the worlds of signs and of things. In contrast, John Doe's grand scheme in *Seven* triumphantly subordinates the sign or clue to the controlling design of his grisly *oeuvre*. Even the unforeseen snags that occur as the design unfolds itself in reality—the biggest snag being the detectives' lucky if illicit strike against Doe's apartment (Burt 44–45)—can be worked into the ideal exemplar. In fact, it can even become a *felix culpa*, a happy fault that renders the outcome better than the killer's original intention. The effete “post-modern” world encapsulated in Somerset's world-weary cynicism, which generates its own twinned contrary in the naïve optimism of Detective David Mills, is trumped by the revenge of the medieval, by a world in which there is a grand plan, all signs point to it, and neither detective can derail its fulfillment. The repeated motif of the number seven in minor details (Somerset's dinner date with Mills and his wife Tracy and Doe's delivery of the head-in-the-box are both scheduled for seven o'clock) persistently reminds the viewer of a pattern larger than any individual that draws to completion. Seven represents one revolution of the cycle of history, one turn of the wheel of fortune. There are seven intervals in a chord, seven days of the week, Seven Wonders of the World. Seven is the number of completion; if it represents the end of something, it also represents a beginning. In medieval numerology, seven is the number that governs the entire span of human life (Macrobius 99–117, especially 112), and, in being the sum of odd and even (three and four), it is a number that represents all numbers (Augustine 11.31 [552–57]), just as the city in which the action takes place represents every city, just as John Doe represents the medieval morality figure Everyman, and just as the seven deadly sins subsume within them all other possible sins, which is a commonplace of medieval devotional treatises (*Ancrene Wisse* IV.392–95 [232]). The revelation toward which the plot progresses turns this “perfectly good” thriller into a horror movie (Swallow 69) with a presence as malignant as that

portrayed in *Alien*<sup>3</sup> (Dir. David Fincher, 1992). Despite this turn to horror as the malice of Doe's intentions become clear, the movie's universe of intelligent cause is, as Richard Dyer observes, strangely "reassuring," even "old fashioned" in comparison with, for example, *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer* (Dir. John McNaughton, 1986), which offers no explanations for what the killer does, no behavioral deviance, no woman blaming; or to *Kalifornia* (Dir. Dominic Sena, 1993), the basic premise of which is that "serial killing is just a lot of killing done for different, practical reasons by the same person" (Dyer, "Kill and Kill Again" 16). It is ultimately *Se7en*'s ideal form that makes this movie "medieval," that is, according to a modern popularist vision of the medieval: monolithically rationalist, intolerantly religious, and retributive.

The question is not whether the movie offers a historically accurate picture of the Middle Ages, for it patently does not: western medieval law distinguished carefully between ecclesiastical and secular wrongdoing, and between natural and human law; medieval legal codes may have included elements of retribution but not to the exclusion of any other means of amendment (e.g., monetary compensation); judicial torture was reserved for special cases; and a providential order was as much or little in evidence then as it is today. The question is rather why and how these images, translated into modern cinematic parlance, sum up the ethos of what it is to "get medieval," or "get medieval on your ass"—a phrase *Pulp Fiction* immortalized (Dinshaw 116–17). If it is true that "the medieval represents things that can't be eradicated" (Dinshaw 122–23), then we must think hard about the contradiction that religion, sin, retribution, and torture appear to have formally disappeared from the modern legal and penal system, that *Se7en*'s depiction of "medieval" justice is more accurately a dark fantasy about what present justice is not.

### Good Cop, Bad Cop: Virgil, Dante

Fincher admits to an initial uninterest in *Se7en* because the first few pages of the script seemed to promise "just another buddy movie" (Dyer, *Seven* 24). The subsequent pages, however, defy that expectation, despite the deepening relationship between the two men. The movie's extensive allusion to the famous poem of the Middle Ages, Dante's

*Commedia*, in particular, its *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, includes a certain similitude between the relationship between the two detectives and that between Virgil and Dante. Permitted to be Dante's guide through *Inferno* and as far as the Earthly Paradise in *Purgatorio*, Virgil represents human reason in all its profound wisdom *sans* the illumination of grace (*Purgatorio* xviii.46–48). Dante plays passion to Virgil's reason, and, especially at the beginning of the poem, undergoes Virgil's chastisement as he slowly learns to master his emotions. Somerset's *gravitas* well captures the famous sadness Virgil wears (*Inferno* iv), and the detective's intelligence is highlighted throughout.

The detectives' reembodyment of rational Virgil and passionate Dante becomes most pointed on Thursday. Frustrated by the realization that Victor is not the murderer but the sloth victim, Mills curses outside Victor's apartment. Somerset stresses the need to "divorce ourselves from emotions" (Walker 70), but Mills waves him off, claiming that he feeds off those emotions. He then gets involved in a fight with a journalist, who we later learn is the killer. Watching the ugly display that will prove to be Mills's downfall, Somerset coldly observes: "It's always impressive to see a man feeding off his emotions" (Walker 72). This is just one of many Virgilian rebukes in the movie, yet just as the bond between Virgil and Dante deepens (*Inferno* xxiii.25–27), so does the friendship between Somerset and Mills. Staring through the precinct's two-way mirror at John Doe in the interrogation room, Mills observes that the killer is merely playing with them. "You and I," replies Somerset, "are for the first time ever, in total agreement" (Walker 119).

Dante's theme is redemption, a quality Fincher's movie noticeably lacks. If Mills mimics Dante, and Somerset Virgil, it is ironic that it is Mills who is lost, and Somerset who is, in a way, saved, although that "salvation"—indicated by Somerset's decision to stay in the force and his closing quote from Ernest Hemingway—was a reluctant afterthought ("The Story" audio commentary on DVD; Swallow 78). Had Fincher had his druthers, he would have kept to the original test ending, recorded as an alternate ending in Disk 2 of the DVD, in which after Mills kills Doe with a single shot, the screen fades to black. Yet the Hemingway quote does not alleviate the despair of the ending; unlike Dante's *Commedia*, the movie lacks a salvific plan.

Somerset and Mills are carefully differentiated from each other by a wealth of contrastive background detail: one is older and about to retire, the other a rookie on his way up. Somerset's spectacles indicate

learning and wisdom as well as his advanced years; he carries a good-quality pen, Mills uses one with a nude girl painted on the side. Dining at Tracy and Mills's apartment, Somerset drinks wine, Mills beer (Burt 40). Somerset carries an old-fashioned gun that rarely leaves its holster, while Mills is always happy to whip out his more powerful and modern piece. The precredit opening sequence of the movie deftly draws Somerset within seconds: he is meticulously neat, solitary, and intellectual (a chessboard sits in the foreground as he washes the dishes). Monday's dawn draws a pen portrait of Mills as Somerset's contrary in a counterpoint scene that plays with reversed mirror images (Scannwald 134–36): he is noisy, his shirt ruffled, he sticks his head through a preknotted tie selected from a hanger-full of them, he drinks soda from a can opened the night before, the place is a mess.

But Mills awakes with a beautiful woman in his arms, who knew from their first date in high school that she would marry him. Somerset's sometime relationship did not work out, and at nights he sleeps in a single bed as solitary as John Doe's. Tracy is pregnant, Somerset boasts only a sometime abortion. Even the guns have phallic symbolism: something of a limp dick, Somerset has never fired his old-fashioned weapon, while trigger-happy Mills empties his clip into Doe.<sup>3</sup> As Somerset, the thinker, sits overwhelmed amidst piles of Doe's journals, Mills, the man of action, takes charge when the phone rings. Somerset's powerlessness is most apparent at the close of the movie, in which he understands but cannot intervene, leaving no obstacle to Mills's anger. In an alternate ending, never shot, but mocked up on pasteboards, the fatal shot that kills Doe comes from the gun of Somerset, who announces to the astonished Mills, "I'm retiring." This alternative shows Somerset in a proactive role, but it was not Fincher's final choice. Instead, all the futile understanding Somerset carries in that "big brain" of his results in no action, and is not powerful enough to detract Mills from revenge (Arnold 46). Like Dante's Virgil, he understands, but too late to do anything about it.

The analogy with the Virgil/Dante relationship is only one facet of a relationship between figures that cannot be restricted to personification. Other important differences between the two men—for example, their color—give complexity and resonance to their growing friendship, and many critics argue that Somerset demonstrates a morally authentic black identity (Dyer, *Seven* 39–40; Gormley 155–71; Tambling 300). But in the context of justice, the allusion to Dante's

poem is striking, for this is a work preeminent among its peers for its sustained consideration of *giustizia* (justice), not only at the level of divine law, punishment, and reward, but also as a cosmic law of motion. The contrariety between the two detectives in a curious way reduces rather than exaggerates the difference between the two, just as the spendthrifts and misers in circle four of *Inferno* receive punishments so symmetrically aligned that they seem mirror images of each other. It is this principle of symmetry and counterpoint that brings us closest to the spirit of Dantesque poetic justice.

### *Contrapasso*

The seven deadly sins, as Dante explains them in *Purgatorio*, are schematized as instances of love abused in some way: lust, gluttony, and avarice represent excessive love; sloth represents deficient love; and pride, envy, and anger represent love misdirected. A diagram of *Purgatorio*'s plan is even included as an inset in the actual script (Walker 36), and photocopied by Somerset in the library. This image, along with shots of Gustave Doré's nineteenth-century illustrations of the *Commedia*, is placed as a sign that reveals a rigorously planned taxonomy and rationalization of sin. In Dante's moral landscape, all human actions are accountable to reason, leaving no excluded domain for gratification of private vices; every act bears global repercussions. Most of all, justice asserts itself as a cosmic or divine principle, transcending the distinction between acts injurious to the public welfare (crime) and those injurious to God (sin), demanding virtue in every corner of life, and holding the sinner accountable for the flouting of any law, human or divine.

Mercy, however, lies at the center of that medieval cosmic law. Dante's penal schema distinguishes between punishment that perpetuates the sin (in *Inferno*) and penitence that expunges it (in *Purgatorio*). Although the sinners of *Purgatorio*, like those of *Inferno*, in some measure have to reenact their sin, it is only in *Purgatorio* that their sin is purged by its true Other, virtue: gluttony by temperance, lust by chastity, pride by humility, envy by kindness, anger by gentleness, sloth by zeal, avarice by generosity. But in hell, justice decrees that the sinners—who rejected the chance to repent—should reenact their sin for eternity.

*Seven*'s shots of Doré's illustrations cluster around one particular canto, xxviii, in which the schismatics are punished for sundering the natural bonds within human society. This canto is key in *Inferno* in spelling out one



aspect of the poem's retributive method. Mahomet—sunderer of the Christian church—is disemboweled, with his trunk rent from chin to crotch, and Bertran de Born speaks from a head severed from the trunk and held in his hand. Bertran is guilty of fomenting the revolt of Prince Henry against his royal father Henry II of England. Having turned son against father, the “head” of the family, and prince against king, the “head” of the realm, Bertran loses his own head in punishment, and holds it up as the perfect example of *contrapasso* (xxviii.142). This is the only use of the word in the *Commedia* yet for many critics it encapsulates the essence of *Inferno's* method of poetic justice, and has even been applied to the punishments of *Purgatorio* (Armour 1–3). In Italian, *contrapasso* is a nonce word, and its exact meaning continues to be debated, although few would disagree with describing it as “the state of having experienced, felt, or suffered in return, in exchange.”<sup>4</sup> *Inferno's* retributive principle can be understood broadly as a countermotion that in some way mirrors the sin. *Contrapasso* sums up the principle of retaliation, emphasizing that all “seminators” (xxviii.35) of sin will reap what they sow (Galatians 6.8). Cast in terms of punishment theory, *contrapasso* fulfils the requirement that “the action which constitutes punishment for an offense should possess some or all of the characteristics that made the offense wrong” (Waldron 35).

In the judicial schema of *Se7en*, bereft of all mercy, John Doe, scourge of God, merely took the sins to “logical conclusions” (Walker 160). Retribution replaces mercy in this malignant providence. Doe similarly punishes the sinners by making them reenact their sin, dying as they lived (the glutton by eating, the sluggard by inactivity, the lecher by having sex, the angry man by killing) or by making them the receiver rather than doer of the action (the avaricious man is bled dry), or by contrariety (the proud woman is disfigured). Doe might equally have starved the glutton or worked the sluggard to death. It barely matters whether punishment is meted out by more of the same or the contrary of the sin, which is simply the same sin in negated form. Doe's punishments compound the evil, aggravating sin with crime; they do not restore balance, as do the penances of *Purgatorio*.

Most of *Inferno's* punishments are the product of fantasy, but some punishments in canto xxviii are reminiscent of historical methods of public execution—dismemberment, disembowelment, and decapitation (Olson 63). Mahomet's disembowelment and Bertran de Born's decapitation are the frequent price for high treason. Consider the execution in 1305 of Scottish rebel William Wallace, condemned as

outlaw and traitor: his internal organs, “whence his perverted thoughts proceeded” [a quibus tam perversae cogitationes processerunt] were ripped out and burnt in front of him. And, in view of the fact that he had plotted “not only against the lord king himself but also the entire people of England and Scotland,” he was quartered, his head being displayed in (the “capital” city of) London, and his four quarters in the far corners of the realm—Newcastle upon Tyne, Berwick, Stryvelyn (Stirling), and St. Johnstone (Perth) (Stevenson 192–93; also Olson 70–71). For once, Dante did not need to embroider legal imaginations that waxed poetic for such capital offenses.

Contemporary cinematic culture is fascinated with the retributive energy of “getting medieval”: like *Se7en*, *Pulp Fiction* (Dir. Quentin Tarantino, 1994), and *Hannibal* (Dir. Ridley Scott, 2001) employ a Gothic trope to depict a rough justice that is, in *Hannibal*'s case, arguably more just than what we have now. Hannibal Lecter, a serial killer on the loose, delivers a lecture at the Capponi Library in Florence on the link of avarice between two suicides by hanging: Pier delle Vigne in Dante's seventh circle of hell and Judas Iscariot, betrayer of Christ. Placing his hand on the shoulder of Inspector Pazzi (a play on “patsy”), a Judas figure who has just “sold” Hannibal for US\$100,000, Lecter announces the man's execution sentence even as he lectures. The act of touching registers how law leaves its mark on the body (Hibbitts 927–34), for “torture . . . must mark the victim” (Foucault, *Discipline* 34). Pazzi is summarily hanged outside the walls of the library, exactly where his forefather Francesco Pazzi was hanged in Renaissance Florence five centuries earlier, and with his giblets dangling, just like Judas Iscariot. In this and his subsequent sentence enacted on Paul Krendler of the Justice department, Lecter the serial killer, aesthete, epicure, and scholar of the medieval shows a sharper sense of poetic justice than do the administrators of the law. Lacking Lecter's exquisite manners, Fincher's John Doe presents a more chilling embodiment of retribution in casting the shadow of accountability on every sinner, every spectator (Burt 46).

## Darkness Visible

Dante's ratiocinative scheme brings illumination, enlightenment, but what has been called the “colour *noir*” (Darke 19–20) aesthetic of the movie becomes a metaphysical darkness that stands for loss of

enlightenment and for hell itself. “Oh, very moody,” says the coroner on flicking the light switch to no effect in Gluttony’s apartment. The movie’s absence of light is informed as much by developing technology as it is by metaphysics. By a process called resilvering or silver retention, whereby the silver that is ordinarily taken out of film is retained, an “oligochromatic” spectrum of closely related colors results: textured, varied blacks, dirty greens, brown, beige, ochre, slate, gray, cream, white (“The Picture” audio commentary on DVD; Dyer, *Seven* 62). No natural light enters the apartments of Gluttony, Sloth, or Doe, and the continuous storm clouds and pelting rain create the sense that “there wasn’t any escape,” for the darkness is as bad outside as it is within (Dyer, *Seven* 63; Scannwald 132–34). Only harsh fluorescence or the red neon of the brothel cuts through the gloaming; they take away the blindness but enable no insight. This is the lighting of hell, where, in the words of a poet quoted by John Doe,

... From those flames  
 No light, but rather darkness visible  
 Serv’d onely to discover sights of woe.  
 (Milton, *Paradise Lost* I.62–64 [356])

Darkness operates as the metaphysical privation of light just as evil is the privation of the good, at least according to orthodox Christian theology. Darkness visible is the world in which all these characters move, excepting perhaps the warm lighting of Mills’s and Tracy’s apartment where there is some love and happiness. It also stands for ignorance and lack of understanding, again broken in one scene where Somerset seeks enlightenment in the library. Striving toward an entirely black screen, the movie “could never be dark enough,” observes production designer Arthur Max (Swallow 71); or as Fincher asks, “How do we make black *black*?” (“The Picture” audio commentary on DVD).

Beyond the technology of film noir, the movie takes the idea of not being able to see to a radical extreme. It makes some concessions to Hollywood’s love of gore, showing the corpses of most of the victims, and the living skeleton of Sloth (Victor) is a grisly achievement of make-up art applied to a real actor. But the shots of Gluttony (“Fat Boy”) are taken at a distance, and we never do get to have a really good look, at least in the film itself. In the supplemental material on Disk 2

of the DVD, one does get the opportunity to feast the eyes on the still photographs designed to be John Doe's album of the killing of Gluttony and Greed—after the raid on Doe's apartment, of course, the photos cease. The deaths are recorded in graphic detail. Looking at their distress, we begin to relate to Gluttony and Greed as real men. The only shots, however, that figure in the actual movie are of the progressive wasting of Sloth. The film decorously turns a blind eye to all the horror recorded in its photographed subconscious. Most of all, we are cheated out of the suspense sequences with their delicious threat of torture. The lens that mimics the eye of the killer stalking his victims is a threadbare cliché of suspense, but the genre demands it and we enjoy it nonetheless. However, we never follow Doe stalking his victims; none of the deaths is foreshadowed (Arnold 43). We arrive along with the detectives at the crime scene with the murder already a *fait accompli*. The movie's refusal to enact suspense also explains the chance detection of the killer (quite unacceptable in a thriller), who gives himself up (even more unacceptable) and does so unseasonably early, in the third act—a surprise move that wrenched a “Holy shit!” out of Fincher when he first read the script (Salisbury 81).

*Se7en's* resistance to voyeurism induces what Kirsten Thompson calls “scopic dread,” a fascination with and repulsion at scenes “too terrible for sight” (124–25), and in doing so it puts us in touch with an aesthetic much older than the thriller. Consider Greek tragedy, whose bloody acts—Medea's murder of her sons, Jocasta's and Antigone's suicides by hanging, Oedipus's self-blinding, Haemon's suicide—all happen offstage, being related as events already having taken place. A certain static quality and inevitability are intrinsic to both Greek tragedy and the near-plotless medieval morality play, such as *Everyman*. Without any formal grasp of classical allusion, Fincher intuited the radical aesthetic shift at work:

From the time he opens the box . . . it's like you realize that the end of the movie's been written in stone and it's been there for like eight or nine hours and you don't have any choice. The big sequence in the third act of most movies, . . . the window being opened in the back and the woman drawing the bath . . . this script doesn't even care about that, because it's already happened ten hours ago . . . All of a sudden it becomes . . . a morality play, it becomes about confronting evil.

(Swallow 68–69)

*Se7en* sets that antispense into the heart of a thriller. As the movie approaches its climactic final temptation of Mills, we hope that something will rescue us from the growing despair, that somehow he will overcome the rage and thwart Doe's plan, but the hope is vain. Mills has many strengths, but nothing in his behavior suggests he has the moral resources to pass this test. Fincher experimented with a number of different versions for the final scene—Somerset shooting Doe, Somerset shooting Mills to stop him shooting Doe—but actor Brad Pitt, who went out on a limb by refusing to take the role unless they stuck to the original ending of the head-in-the-box, understood that Mills had to be the one to kill Doe. The scene, he said, was "everything it's been leading up to" (Swallow 68, 80–81). The ideal form that is central to the movie's conception of the medieval demands teleological closure.

### Wax Sculptures

The victims die variously and painfully: force feeding, exsanguination, muscular atrophy, rape by a serrated steel dildo. Their crimes are written in the byproduct of their own sins: avarice in blood, gluttony in grease, sloth in shit. With the first murder (gluttony), Somerset immediately understands that this is no ordinary killing, for it took some twelve hours: "you don't risk the time it takes to do this unless the act itself has meaning" (Walker 23). Somerset follows up clues that others ignore, and understands that these murders are about sin. Both he and the murderer understand "the world's iniquity"; but to Mills, the murderer is simply insane, for it is incomprehensible to him that one could plan so methodically, kill so slowly and sadistically, yet have no personal grudge, no feelings other than contempt and a certain aesthetic gratification.

SOMERSET: It's dismissive to call him a lunatic. Don't make that mistake.

MILLS: Oh blah, blah, blah. This guy's insane; right now he's probably dancing around in his room in a pair of his mommy's panties, singing show tunes and rubbing himself with peanut butter.

SOMERSET: He's methodical, exacting, and worst of all, he's patient.

MILLS: He's a nutbag.<sup>5</sup>

The rest of the force agrees with Mills. Doe has given himself to them on a plate, yet none of the forces of crime prevention and detection can learn anything from either his person or home (Arnold 45). His given name is John Doe: he has no known history, no bank accounts, no friends, no fingerprints, no perceivable motive, no witnesses to his crimes, in short, no criminal etiology. As the Captain helplessly concludes, “the only thing we know about that guy right now is he’s independently wealthy, well educated, and totally insane” (*Seven* ch. 29). Even the vocabulary of psychopathy used by the police force is impoverished: “lunatic,” “nutbag,” “insane,” “mentally ill,” “fucking crazy,” “freak.”

“Victim” is a term we use reluctantly to describe some of the sleazier decedents, such as Victor and particularly Doe, who also is a victim, yet modern criminal parlance has no way to distinguish the deserving from the undeserving “victim,” for, in contrast to the medieval outlaw, the modern felon is “in” the law, and therefore protected by it, even when incarcerated. The first five objects of Doe’s crusade are not individuated but presented as moral types, pure exemplars of single sins. Sloth (Victor) best illustrates this principle. The Captain, thinking him the killer, gives his biographical profile, and the sequence, from the fingerprint match to the moment when the sheet is pulled off to reveal Victor, occupies a full five minutes of viewing time. With a build-up like that, it is all the more striking that on unveiling him, California the cop should exclaim, “he’s some kind of friggin’ wax sculpture or something” (Walker 68). Fincher claims his inspiration for Victor from Goth videos of the band Nine Inch Nails, and he told the “awesome fucking genius” Rob Bottin, special effects artist, to “go mad” (Swallow 71). What strikes the medievalist’s eye is the similarity between Victor and the sculptured figures we see, for example, on cadaver or transi-tombs, such as the one of Archbishop Chichele in Canterbury Cathedral (Figure 1). Note the same wasted face and sharply contoured bone structure (Figures 2 and 3).

The point of a double-decker tomb such as Chichele’s is to depict the dead man in all his pomp on the top tier, as he looked in life, and underneath as a decaying cadaver. The double image teaches us to mind not the individuated flesh on the surface but the generic skeleton lying beneath. Victor is a nice touch of designer Goth, but the “friggin’ wax sculpture” also deflects attention away from Victor as this individual man, some mother’s son. When Bertran de Born holds up his head and



FIGURE 1. The Chichele Tomb. Circa 1425. Used with permission of the Dean and Chapter, Canterbury Cathedral, England.

closes canto xxviii with the resonant words—“In me the *contrapasso* is observed” (Così s’osserva in me lo *contrapasso*) (*Inferno* xxviii.142)—the use of the impersonal construction arrests us. The grammatical subject of the sentence is not Bertran but *contrapasso*, retribution, retaliation. Bertran becomes the “patient” (from L. *pati*, to suffer) upon which impersonal justice enacts itself. Agency belongs to abstract justice



FIGURE 2. The Chichele Tomb. Circa 1425. Used with permission of the Dean and Chapter, Canterbury Cathedral, England. (Detail reversed for comparison.)



FIGURE 3. © New Line Productions.

rather than to criminal or executioner, penitent or priest. As the camera lens closes in on Victor, the victim, individual and possessor-of-rights, as we know him, is erased.

And so is the killer as individual. Doe “plays” envy for the *dénoûement*, but no one is fooled for the simple reason that Doe has shown himself entirely in control throughout, and it makes little sense that he should be in the grip of jealousy for Mills’s “life of the simple man.” The plot makes provision for this, because what we are watching is Doe’s improvised, makeshift ending; we never do get to see the master plan in its original production—another way in which the movie teases us with what we may not see. Therefore, we accept Doe’s acting a part in his own drama, although it only further renders us incapable of understanding any “real” self beneath the extempore charade of envy. Doe remains psychologically unfathomable.

### Alien Justice

For Kevin Spacey, acting Doe, his character is a “bad, bad man, truly evil” (Swallow 75), and this is as far as we get in terms of what the movie allows us to understand of him. Somerset possesses the deepest understanding of Doe’s nature by virtue of a shared misanthropy and intellectualism. In the car ride to the final scene, he shakes Doe’s composure momentarily by uncovering the killer’s baser motive of pleasure.

See, if you were chosen as if by some higher power, and your hand was forced . . . well . . . then, it’s strange you took so much pleasure



in it. You enjoyed torturing your victims. That's not really in keeping with martyrdom, is it?

(Walker 129)

That is the nearest we get to any psychological truth about Doe, leaving us stuck with “evil,” a word that, as Benedict Carey observes, has been excised from medical science because it confuses clinical diagnosis with moral, even religious, value judgment (1). Yet for some forensic psychiatric professionals, the term effectively registers the kind of sadism that goes off the Richter scale of “normal” psychopathy, rendering the criminal “too far gone” for treatment or rehabilitation (Stone 304). The debate exposes a blind spot in medico-juridical science, which, in accordance with its positivist methodology, only defines behaviors it can measure. Evil, not subject to measurement, has no scientific standing. It is a common enough trope in serial killer movies that the serial killer is both product and critic of modern society (Dyer, *Seven* 37). Doe fits the formula here as God's scourge who punishes what “a world this shitty” countenances as private life choice. But in his complete lack of individuating circumstance—he literally becomes John Doe, the North American term for an unidentified male corpse—and in the transmutation of victim into depersonalized exemplar, the movie takes social critique further to reveal the alien within modern justice. In *Alien*,<sup>3</sup> science fiction allows Fincher the context to explore difference *in extremis*, difference that destroys us the minute we meet it. In *Se7en*, we encounter an alienness that—if it seems more mundane—more profoundly disturbs because it lives next door.

It is disturbing indeed to acknowledge the irrelevance of motive, and even more so to unthink Doe's targets as “innocent people” or “victims.” We intuitively resist the reduction of a human individual to an exemplar, of moral temperament to any single passion or sin. Jeremy Tambling takes issue with both Dante's and Doe's ability “to provide a reading of people in terms of the seven deadly sins” (299); while for Elisabeth Bronfen (1–18), Somerset is the moral touchstone of the movie because he refuses allegorical reductions, and insists on the need for “the difficult task of understanding another human being” (15). Different again is the concept of persona, a discursive construction of marketing strategies and actor cachet that exist alongside conventional characterizations internal to the story (Scott). Such reduction to abstraction disturbs because it compromises some hard won liberal beliefs

in human nature, confronting us with Michel Foucault's claim that "man" is an ideological construction of individualism, "only a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old" who "will disappear again as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form" (*Order* xxiii). Foucault's "recent invention" of man coincides with the shift he tracks in *Discipline and Punish* from "a real body capable of feeling pain" to a more abstract selfhood, the "juridical subject," whose punishment occurs at one remove from physical trauma (*Discipline* 13). Far from being juridical subjects, Doe's first five victims lack individuating personality to the exact degree that they possess real bodies capable of feeling pain. As they sinned in the flesh so they must pay in the flesh: Fat Boy's (Gluttony's) death-by-eating takes some twelve hours, Victor's (Sloth's) inertia a year, and the chair of Eli Gould (Greed) is soaked through with sweat as he decides which pound of his flesh is expendable.

At issue in this "alien" penalty of retribution exacted on the body is a different technology of the self, standard of evidence, and form of justice—one founded on a general probability of truth rather than specific empirical data. That probability is well illustrated in Aristotle's handbook of forensic persuasion, *Rhetoric*, where he anatomizes human behavior by means of familiar character types: the young man, old man, man in his prime, his appropriate virtues, his appropriate vices, whether he is well born, rich, powerful, or not (II.12–17, 1388b–91b [246–63]). At first, maybe these types seem to differ little in principle from criminal and psychopathic profiles used by forensic analysts every day, but there is only a superficial likeness of generality. Aristotle's types are fixed exemplars of human nature drawn from a common stock of local experience, whom the Athenian citizens would recognize as personalities who live next door, as self-evidently true, without need of demonstrative proof. Contemporary criminal and psychopathic profiles, on the other hand, appeal not to common intuitions but are built painstakingly from professional research, the summation of thousands of case studies, taken as provisionally "true," but not self-evident, and ever open to revision in light of new data, for "cases are always hypotheses" (Walton 122).

Aristotle's forensic typology is analogous to the ideal form of disease Foucault identifies in preclinical medicine, in which the disease rather than the patient is the object of study and treatment, and in which the patient is almost incidental to the disease (Foucault, *Birth* 8–9).

Although, like medicine, forensic rhetoric applies to this or that individual, it nonetheless yields general rather than specific knowledge: “rhetoric will not consider what seems probable in each individual case, . . . but that which seems probable to this or that *class* of persons” (Aristotle I.2, 1356b [22–23], my italics). Contrast this disregard of individual circumstance with the preeminent role of the psychiatric case study, a research method in which (in clinical research) one particular individual is studied closely and all observations recorded meticulously. The individual case is selected precisely for its simultaneous particularity and generalizability, for the extent to which it can be analogized with other cases of the same theoretical model. From such paradigmatic case studies, hypotheses are drawn, and previous assumptions affirmed, falsified, or modified by working from stable specifics repeated across a range of comparable cases. Once we have identified certain patterns of behavior that remain consistent, we build the profiles of psychopathic types. General characteristics of such personality profiles—however situated they are within individual narratives—ultimately require the accumulated weight of traits duly observed and tallied into statistical probability. In contrast, the types drawn from Aristotle’s underlying theory of probability are not statistically derived but appeal to a general notion of human nature, commonsensical, reasonable in itself, not subject to the ordeal of statistical proof. If such characterizations, upon which legal judgments are based, seem open to dispute, remember that rhetorical proof is not the deductive proof of a geometric theorem but rather offers probable rather than necessary truth.<sup>6</sup>

In an Aristotelian universe filled with the sunshine of reason, deviance does not possess independent ontological status. There is little interest in understanding mental disorder and criminal mentality for its own sake, in seeking “medico-juridical treatment” (Foucault, *Discipline* 22) for the likes of John Doe. For modern psychiatry, however,

[t]he question is no longer simply: “Has the act been established and is it punishable?” But also: “What *is* this act, what *is* this act of violence or this murder? . . . Is it a phantasy, a psychotic reaction, a delusional episode, a perverse action?” It is no longer simply: “Who committed it?” But: . . . Where did it originate in the author himself? Instinct, unconscious, environment, heredity?

(Foucault, *Discipline* 19)

The Enlightenment view of human nature as “essentially free, reasonable, and inclined to virtue” (Halttunen 43) conceives of crime as moral deviance, and calls for its explanation in terms of environmental influence and personal motive. In a subsequent, “vanilla” version of *Seven*, which usefully tracks concessions to Hollywood that neither Walker’s original script nor the film version made, Doe is given some shadow of motive through hints at an abusive childhood in a Catholic orphanage where he received vicious punishment for sin (Swallow 77). This is not to imply that motive was never sought to explain crime in the Middle Ages, but the mechanism for such interrogation of private thoughts lay more in penitential than judicial discourse, the therapeutic management of wrongdoing occurring for the most part in a religious context. This premodern construction of the felon as “common sinner” rather than “moral alien” (Halttunen 35) opens a space for forgiveness, explaining the reaction—unthinkable today—of the large crowd that wept and prayed for the soul of Gilles de Rais, who was executed in 1440 for the abduction, rape, sodomization, torture, and murder of dozens if not hundreds of children (Bataille 278–79).

Scrutiny of the criminal killer as moral alien requires that “his” childhood and unspoken desires be probed relentlessly to explain his deviant behavior. In line with Foucault’s depiction of nineteenth-century reorganization of sexual knowledge (Foucault, *History* 45), subjectivity is conflicted by a double drive: desire for self-knowledge, for spying out dark truths buried within individual experience; and the mind’s endless resistance to detection. One can thus never be vigilant enough in reading the clues. The detective genre itself exists in a universe in which truth stands in its own shadow, meaning is never transparent, and signs are always double. Detective fiction is the literary expression par excellence of the psychoanalytic subject. However much detective thrillers offer narratives of closure, the true hermeneutic work of detection is never finished, and other possibilities always glimmer beyond the last one—hence the Hollywood motif of the after-the-verdict discovery of the real murderer, as in, for example, *Jagged Edge* (Dir. Richard Marquand, 1985) or *Presumed Innocent* (Dir. Alan J. Pakula, 1990). By disallowing all hermeneutic and psychoanalytic insight into his own personality, and by transforming his first five targets from “victims” into moral types, John Doe presents an alienness of a different order that refuses the very premise of detection. In a skillful yoking of genre with cinematography, the movie disallows mystery

even as it obstructs us from seeing. Suspense is itself suspended in this thriller, because the outcome is already decided. It is little surprise that producer Arnold Kopelson, on first viewing *Se7en*, complained that Fincher had taken “a perfectly good genre movie and turned it into a foreign film” (Swallow 83; also Blair 18). The detective impulse requires shadows and darkness (Halttunen 120–26), which, at the end of the movie and in reversal of Dante’s infernal imagery, are thrown aside to reveal hell’s bottom as a wide open, flat desert full of blinding sunshine. The shadows at least allowed some hope, but disappear in the apocalyptic landscape of this final scene.

After the fungal greens, filthy browns and inky blacks that dominate the film, the wasteland light of the brilliantly handled conclusion—where the *mise en scène*’s combination of distance and proximity, of space and enclosure, emphasises an overriding helplessness—is not that of clarity and redemption but that of blinding, disorientating bleakness.

(Darke 20)

The grim “medievalism” operative in *Se7en* relates to present reality not as discrete historical era but as an unspeakable presence within, as the presence of a retaliatory justice that modern justice no longer allows itself officially to enjoy, as contempt for moral squalor denied by the *laissez faire* belief in personal choice. The satisfaction retribution affords can only be admitted by “the more paranoid part of our super ego” “in some dark corner of our psyche” (Bottiroli 26), and does not offer itself within the movie as a solution to the systemic problems it exposes. John Doe, an alien inhabiting a liberal democracy, uncovers the bleak realization that the best its laws can do is to protect us from one another; they only proscribe, they do not transform human nature, and they do not make us good.

## Notes

1. *Se7en* chapter 33. I quote from Walker’s published script unless the phrasing of the screen version makes the same point more emphatically, as it does here. With thanks to departmental colleagues including psychologist Sondra Leftoff, to the Saturday Medieval Group (Jennifer Brown, Glenn Burger, Matthew Goldie, Steven Kruger, Michael Sargent, Sylvia Tomasch), and particularly to Bettina Bildhauer for their comments; also to Gary Zaragovitch for help with image editing. I have updated the bibliography for the essay, originally accepted in 2007, to reflect recent publications, although revision of the argument is sparing.

2. The distinction between crime and sin does not map precisely onto the complex and evolving distinction between medieval secular and spiritual courts. The latter had jurisdiction over its own personnel, even if a cleric had committed a felony. Some sins, of course, were amendable by penance, and others punishable by church law.
3. For a queer subtext in the movie, most especially a queer desire between Mills and Doe, see Flannery.
4. Armour (6–11). See also Singleton (2:522–25). Armour (15) understands *contrapasso* to apply only to infernal punishments in which the sinners have done to them in return what they did in life; not to antithetical punishments in which sinners undergo the reversal of their sin. Morrison, however, understands the term loosely to mean punishment that “either resembles the sin or contrasts with it” (6).
5. Walker 74–75. “He’s a nutbag” comes from *Seven* chapter 20.
6. In contrast to the more logically rigorous syllogism, the “rhetorical proof” of forensic oratory is the enthymeme, which is only probably not necessarily true. Aristotle I.9, 1368a (104–05).

## Works Cited

- Ancrene Wisse*. Ed. Robert Hasenfratz. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000.
- Aristotle. *The “Art” of Rhetoric*, ed. and trans. John Henry Freese. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1926. Rpt. 1994.
- Armour, Peter. “Dante’s *Contrapasso*: Contexts and Texts.” *Italian Studies* 55 (2000): 1–20.
- Arnold, John. “Nasty Histories: Medievalism and Horror.” *History and Heritage: Consuming the Past in Contemporary Culture*. Eds. John Arnold, Kate Davies, and Simon Ditchfield. Shaftesbury, UK: Donhead, 1998. 39–50.
- Augustine Saint of Hippo. *The City of God Against the Pagans*. Vol. 3. Trans. David S. Wiesen. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1968. Rpt. 1988.
- Bataille, Georges., ed. *The Trial of Gilles de Rais*. Trans. Richard Robinson. Los Angeles: Amok, 1991.
- Bignell, Jonathan. *Postmodern Media Culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000.
- Blair, Iain. “David Fincher.” (Interview.) *Film & Video* 14.10 (October 1997): 15–18.
- Bottiroli, Giovanni. “Fitzgerald’s Nickel: Stories of Stimulus and Simulation from Greenaway to Fincher.” *Textual Practice* 16 (2002): 13–29.
- Bronfen, Elisabeth. *Home in Hollywood: The Imaginary Geography of Cinema*. New York: Columbia UP, 2004.
- Burt, Richard. *Medieval and Early Modern Film and Media*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

- Carey, Benedict. "For the Worst of Us, the Diagnosis May Be 'Evil.'" *New York Times*, 8 Feb. 2005, sec. F: 1.
- Darke, Chris. "Inside the LightDarke (1996)." *Sight and Sound* 6.4 (April 1996): 18–20.
- Dinshaw, Carolyn. "Getting Medieval: *Pulp Fiction*, Gawain, Foucault." *The Book and the Body*. Eds. Dolores Warwick Frese and Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1997. 116–63.
- Dyer, Richard. "Kill and Kill Again." *Sight and Sound* 7.9 (September 1997): 14–17.
- . *Seven*. London: British Film Institute, 1999.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Name of the Rose*. Trans. William Weaver. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.
- Flannery, Denis. "Seven's Sexuality." *Irish Journal of American Studies* 9 (2000): 129–60.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Trans. from the French. London: Tavistock, 1970.
- . *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin, 1977.
- . *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. London: Penguin, 1978.
- . *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception*. Trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Vintage, 1994.
- Gormley, Paul. "Trashing Whiteness: *Pulp Fiction*, *Se7en*, *Strange Days*, and Articulating Affect." *Angelaki* 6 (2001): 155–171.
- Halttunen, Karen. *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998.
- Hibbitts, Bernard J. "Coming to our Senses: Communication and Legal Expression in Performance Cultures." *Emory Law Journal* 41 (1992): 873–960.
- Johnston, Andrew James. "Filming the Seven Deadly Sins: Chaucer, Hollywood and the Postmodern Middle Ages." *Riddles, Knights and Cross-Dressing Saints: Essays on Medieval English Language and Literature*. Ed. Thomas Honegger. Bern: Peter Lang, 2004. 1–32.
- Macrobius. *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*. Trans. William Harris Stahl. 2nd edn. New York: Columbia UP, 1990.
- Milton, John. *The Riverside Milton*. Ed. Roy Flannagan. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998. 296–710.
- Morrison, Molly. "Dante According to John Doe: Using *Seven* to Teach Dante's Notion of Contrapasso." *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching* 9.1 (2002): 5–19.

- Olson, Trisha. "The Medieval Blood Sanction and the Divine Beneficence of Pain: 1100–1450." *Journal of Law and Religion* 22.1 (2006/2007): 63–129.
- Salisbury, Mark. "Seventh Hell." *Empire* 80 (February 1996): 78–87.
- Scannwald, Daniela. "Im Herzen der Finsternis [Into the Heart of Darkness]: *Se7en* (1995)." *David Fincher*. Ed. Frank Schnelle. Berlin: Bertz, 2002. 131–50.
- Scott, Jason. "The Persona of *Se7en*." *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies*. 1 Feb. 2005. 20 July 2010 (<http://www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/index.php>).
- Se7en*. Dir. David Fincher. Perf. Morgan Freeman, Brad Pitt, Gwyneth Paltrow and Kevin Spacey. 1995. DVD. New Line Productions, New Line Home Entertainment, 2001.
- Singleton, Charles S., ed. and trans. *Dante Alighieri: "Inferno."* 2 vols. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970.
- Stevenson, Joseph., ed. *Documents Illustrative of Sir William Wallace, his Life and Times*. Edinburgh: The Maitland Club, 1841.
- Stone, Michael H. *Abnormalities of Personality: Within and Beyond the Realm of Treatment*. New York: Norton, 1993.
- Swallow, James. *Dark Eye: The Films of David Fincher*. London: Reynolds & Hearn, 2003.
- Tambling, Jeremy. "We are Seven: Dante and the Serial Killer." *Paragraph* 22 (1999): 293–309.
- Thompson, Kirsten Moana. *Apocalyptic Dread: American Film at the Turn of the Millennium*. Albany: State U of New York P, 2007.
- Waldron, Jeremy. "Lex Talionis." *Arizona Law Review* 34 (1992): 25–51.
- Walker, Andrew Kevin. *Seven & 8mm*. London: Faber & Faber, 1999.
- Walton, John. "Making the Theoretical Case." *What is a Case? Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry*. Eds. Charles C. Ragin and Howard S. Becker. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992. 121–37.

Valerie Allen is a professor in the English department at John Jay College, CUNY, specializing in medieval literature and continental philosophy. She received her BA and PhD from Trinity College, Dublin, and taught at the universities of Stirling, Scotland, UK and of South Florida before joining John Jay in 1999. Publications include *L'Art d'enseigner de Martin Heidegger*, trans. Xavier Blandin (Paris: Klincksieck, 2007) (coauthored with Ares Axiotis); *On Farting: Language and Laughter in the Middle Ages* (Palgrave, 2010, pbk edn), and *New Casebooks: Chaucer* (Macmillan, 1997) (coauthored with Ares Axiotis).



Copyright of Journal of Popular Culture is the property of Wiley-Blackwell and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.