Paradise Lost: Documenting a Southern Tragedy

KING ADKINS

On 5 May 1993, three eight-year-old boys—Chris Byers, Michael Moore, and Stevie Branch—were murdered in the woods outside of West Memphis, Arkansas. The murders themselves were enough to unsettle the small, southern community; but passions climbed even higher when, within the month, police arrested three local teenagers for the crime. Those passions reached a fever pitch after prosecutors developed a theory that the murders had been committed as part of a satanic ritual.

One always hesitates to begin deconstructing such an event, for fear that the very real fact that three innocent children lost their lives might be overshadowed by what can seem in comparison to be trivial questions of theory. In this case, however, the “reality” of events seems already to have been irretrievably lost. If the murders were real, what followed appears much less so, and in this instance some measure of dissection may almost be necessary if we are truly to understand what took place. Viewed analytically, it becomes clear that nothing in the case is as it seems. The arrests, the ensuing trials, the debate over the guilt or innocence of the “West Memphis Three” (as the three teenagers have come to be known)—a debate that has only grown more intense in the ten years since they were convicted—all has come to operate as a kind of “simulation” of reality. Events, reactions to those events, all occurred and continue to occur at the level of appearances only, with little or no real substance beneath those appearances. Everyone involved behaves as they are expected to behave, their actions, even their emotions dictated by the constant presence of the camera. My goal is to explore how this simulacrum developed, particularly how the media helped to substitute the artificial for the real. To a certain extent, substitutions such as these are predicted in the work of a number of postmodern thinkers, especially that of Jean Baudrillard. I focus, however, on two important documentaries about the West Memphis events, Paradise Lost (1996) and a follow-up filmed five years later, Revelations (2001). Together, these films probe media effects, but they also participate in them. Indeed, they blur the lines between the “real” and the filmic in ways that not even Baudrillard could have anticipated.

In Simulacra and Simulation, Baudrillard argues that we have arrived at the age of the “hyperreal,” where what was previously real has been replaced by “models of a real without origin or reality” (1). The world around us is now nothing more than an elaborate “simulation.” At root, Baudrillard’s work draws on a common idea of the postmodern. Fredric Jameson, for example, explains that we live in a world where “the contents [of our images] are just more images” (ix). There is no depth, no foundation, no bedrock referent left; all that remain are the signs themselves. Baudrillard details how we reached this state, suggesting that images build upon another, eventually masking the fact that the real that was once represented by the sign has ceased to exist. He defines four “suc-
cessive phases of the image": the image first reflects reality, then masks and denatures that reality, then hides the fact that the reality no longer exists, and finally becomes its own reality. He points, for example, to the caves at Lascaux, France, which the public is no longer allowed to view. Instead, an exact replica of the caves sits beside them, a replica so precise as to be realer than real. Thus the replica has replaced the real caves in all essential ways. We respond to it emotionally with awe and wonder, as if it were the real thing. As a result, the original is now no more "real" than its copy: "the duplication suffices to render both artificial" (9).1

It is not only the objects around us that have been replaced: our behaviors, too, have been modified. We spend the bulk of our time sitting behind desks, so we substitute jogging for what once would have been the natural exercise of our day-to-day lives. Yet this "sign" of exercise—jogging—no longer even references that natural exercise. Rather it refers only to itself, only to the artificial act we have now come to regard as exercise: "People no longer look at each other, but there are institutes for that. They no longer touch each other, but there is contactotherapy. They no longer walk, but they go jogging, etc." (13).

In the case of West Memphis, it is difficult to say whether any "truth" ever existed to be "reflected." Indeed, Baudrillard's work implies that we have reached a historical moment where nothing can any longer be regarded as truth, where the sign refers only to itself. What is certain is that the hyperreal world that grew out of the media coverage of these murders very quickly replaced the actual town, and that the artificially generated actions of the townspeople seemed designed only to hide the fact that their real emotions had ceased to exist. Ultimately, the murders themselves no longer exist, at least in terms of their impact on our lives, or even on the lives of those actually involved in the case. The image created by the media became the reality, and without any underlying foundation to supply it with referent, it became nothing more than a free-floating sign.

As might be expected, the murders, arrests, and trials had a polarizing effect on the town and state and later, as the teenagers became a cause célèbre, on the entire nation. On the one side are those who vilify the three teenagers for the heinous acts they are alleged to have committed; on the other are those who believe steadfastly in the teenagers' innocence and attack instead the justice system, the "provincial" community, and the parents of the victims. Conflict is to be expected, of course, given the crime and the accusations. Yet at a minimum, media coverage of these events has both prolonged and exacerbated the conflict.

In fact, the effect has been much more profound. Media has so thoroughly shaped every aspect of the West Memphis events that little that has occurred in relation to those events can be regarded as anything other than artificial.

The media played an important role in creating the conflict in the first place. In his essay on The China Syndrome (1979), Baudrillard maintains that it is the fictional world, the world portrayed by our films and television shows, that now drives our real-world events. As he points out, the film, which addresses the potential dangers of a nuclear reactor meltdown, actually predated the nuclear reactor incident at Three Mile Island. Much like the Lascaux Caves, neither of these events, for Baudrillard, can any longer be considered "real"; rather, they are only images driving more images. But Baudrillard's argument is at root even more radical. If we bracket off for a moment the "cinematic" world from the "real" world, he is suggesting that it is the fictional universe of the film that generates "reality": "What else do the media dream of besides creating the event simply by their presence?" (55). While this seems to run counter to our day-to-day notions of reality, there is a good deal to support this theory in the West Memphis case.

Damien Echols and Jason Baldwin, two of the accused, were viewed with suspicion in the town long before the murders took place, largely because of their penchant for heavy metal music and horror novels, interests that apparently violated community norms. Such
suspicions eventually helped lead to their arrests and became a key component of their trials. With virtually no physical evidence linking the teenagers to the crime, the prosecution questioned Echols on the stand about his interest in books by Stephen King, Dean Koontz, and Anne Rice. The cover of a Metallica tape, *Master of Puppets*—a tape owned by Baldwin—was introduced into evidence. These were, of course, meant to imply a connection to behaviors psychologically outside the norm and morally and spiritually transgressive. In essence, though, by linking the suspects to the media in this way, the prosecution acknowledged the media as a motivating factor in the crime.

Yet community fears about mass media intrusions turn out to have been generated by the media itself. As Mara Leveritt writes in *Devil’s Knot*, her journalistic investigation of the case, By the late 1980s, interest in the suspected prevalence of satanic ritual abuse, or SRA, as it became known, had grown so intense in the United States that the subject was discussed in settings as diverse as psychological conferences, religious tent revivals, police training seminars, *Ms.* Magazine, and television talk shows, where the words “satanic,” “occult,” “ritualistic,” and “paganism” were often ill defined or used interchangeably. Fantasy role-playing games, such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, as well as certain kinds of rock and roll music—especially heavy metal—were described as gateways to a dark world that could lead to ritual abuse. (44)

In other words, the media generated attention for itself by playing on fears of Satanism, fears directed, ultimately, toward other “Satanic” manifestations of the same media. What appears on the surface to be a conflict within the community over the guilt or innocence of three young men turns out to be an instance of mass media’s self-generated conflict with itself. The signs play themselves out, but without any real substance, only reference to other signs. One might suspect what would eventually result from such an enclosed system: not content with its own eventual death, the system must continually raise the stakes, always attempting to feed its own desire for power. For Baudrillard, this raising of stakes simply masks the fact that the event itself no longer exists, that only the system of signs remains: “Today, when danger comes at it from simulation (that of being dissolved in the play of signs), power plays at the real, plays at crisis, plays at remanufacturing artificial, social, economic, and political stakes” (22). In this instance, with no real power to uncover scandal—indeed, with no “real” scandals left—the media is forced to create its own scandals, which it can then uncover, thus justifying its own importance.

But while the media’s role in generating the murders is somewhat difficult to document, resting on generally pervasive ideas presented on daytime talk shows, the events that followed from the murders offer a much more direct illustration of how dramatically media intrusion can distort and ultimately replace reality. The ages of both the alleged perpetrators and the victims, coupled with the suggestion of the occult, garnered national attention for the case, and the press descended almost immediately on West Memphis. As a result, perceptions of the events by the world outside of Arkansas came to be shaped by how those events were portrayed in the papers and on the nightly news. So too, those directly involved with the case began to modify their behaviors in an effort to influence how they would be portrayed. Many, such as Leveritt, have suggested that even the charges of Satanism were an attempt to play to the media by the prosecutor and lead detective. Detective Gitchell, tellingly, is never without his sunglasses when talking to reporters. Asked to assess the strength of his case, at a press conference following the arrests, he replies that on a scale of one to ten, it is “an eleven;” years later, however, he admits there was scant evidence of the boys’ guilt (Leveritt 326). Looking to play a “role” or act a part, Gitchell and others involved in the prosecution created a scenario designed to play well before the cameras.

Into this developing system of signs stepped two filmmakers, Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinof-
sky, who together produced two films about the events for HBO: *Paradise Lost*, and, five years later, *Revelations*. The purpose of the films, and their effects—purposeful or otherwise—are many-layered and occasionally conflicting. Berlinger and Sinofsky claim they were drawn to the case because of the odd subject matter, but that they quickly became convinced of the teenagers' innocence, and—particularly in the second film—set out to prove that an injustice was being done. In large measure they target the Arkansas court system as the center of this injustice, but additionally they highlight the ways the media helped to exacerbate existing fears and prejudices by distorting reality and feeding on itself.

Yet this point is complicated by the fact that Berlinger and Sinofsky too are shaping events, crafting a storyline in service of their own agenda. This is true, in a general way, of all documentary film. John Grierson, formulating the “First Principles of Documentary” as early as 1934, wrote that the documentary only pretends to objectivity: “You photograph the natural life, but you also, by your juxtaposition of detail, create an interpretation of it” (23). Berlinger and Sinofsky take pains in interviews to distance themselves from “the media”: “What we do is very different from what the media does. We absolutely hate voice-over, which goes back to the v?rité tradition of not telling people what to think. By not using voice-over, we hope to engage the audience more directly with the visual material and force them to come up with their own conclusions” (qtd. in Williams 73). Yet as Grierson noted, because all films choose what to include and what to discard, because they all reorder experience, no film can claim to be absolute truth. And beyond this general principle, Berlinger and Sinofsky maintain a somewhat ambiguous stance as to their own subjectivity. On the one hand, Berlinger criticizes the local news for slanting its interpretation: “We started realizing that things were not the way the local press was reporting them. In our films we like to blow the lid off of stories that are being reported in a very superficial, one-sided way” (qtd. in West and West 21). Yet only a sentence later, he offers his own interpretation, noting the “major holes in the prosecution’s case” (21). Further, the two filmmakers have become strong public advocates for the West Memphis Three, helping to push public opinion in favor of the three teenagers and eliciting celebrity endorsements for their cause. Thus even as they seem to indict the media for meddling in events, they participate in many of the same behaviors.

Finally, however, the filmmakers helped to shape events even more directly. In a startling twist, they uncovered a key piece of evidence, a bloody knife belonging to the parents of Chris Byers, one of the slain boys. Thus in a literal way the media not only covered the event but also participated in it. Taken together, these various levels of involvement illustrate the many ways in which the media shaped the way the case developed.

The films explore the media’s influence primarily by demonstrating how the presence of cameras affects the principle figures in the case. Berlinger and Sinofsky illustrate on several occasions the way people modify their behavior in an attempt to project one image or another. In one scene, Echols carefully styles his hair during a court recess. In another, Jessie Misskelley, the third defendant, talks with his family about how the news has reported his courtroom demeanor. Both scenes suggest that the young men are not merely aware of the camera but hyperaware of it, aware that their
appearance and actions before it are being interpreted by millions of viewers, that to some extent their guilt or innocence will be based on the image they project.

At other times, the influence of the camera is more obvious. A number of scenes show family members of the victims being interviewed by the press, and these offer especially dramatic proof of the camera’s effect. Pam Hobbs, for example, changes almost instantaneously, from making jokes to portraying a serious, traumatized mother, in the moments just before being interviewed by a local news station. She is shown laughing with the reporter and saying “On TV!” revealing her excitement at having achieved some measure of fame as a result of her son’s death. In only four seconds, however, as the cameras begin to roll, her face becomes serious, the corners of her mouth turned down, as she responds to a question about whether or not she has considered suicide in the days since her son’s death. Berlinger and Sinofsky are clear in their message, making sure to include the cameraman and interviewer in their shot: emotions, both positive and negative, are being manipulated by the presence of the media.

Nowhere is the camera’s effect more in evidence, however, than in interviews with John Mark and Melissa Byers, parents of another of the slain boys. The two seem always to be aware of the camera’s presence. On several occasions, both use interviews to send pointed messages to the accused. Following Jessie Misskelly’s guilty verdict, for example, Melissa Byers turns directly to the camera and says, “Prison’s not a safe place, Jessie, sweetie.” Byers is attempting to use the camera as a tool here. Her relationship to it, then, and her actions before it, certainly cannot be considered “natural.”

Her remarks are greatly overshadowed, however, by those of her husband. The relationship of John Mark Byers to the media coverage of these events deserves special attention. There are, first, his speeches to the camera during the filming of Paradise Lost. They seem obviously staged (a fact that has led many to believe that Byers might have been the actual murderer). They are consistently melodramatic, so much so that at times they become disturbing. At one point we see him taking target practice, referring to his targets as “Damien,” “Jason,” and “Jessie,” and remarking after he has hit a water bottle, “Oh, Jessie, I done blew you half in two, son.” These are not the words and actions of a man trying to overcome his grief; like his cowboy hat and boots, his emotions are worn rather than felt. He has chosen a role to play at this moment, but it is only one of many.

In Revelations, such scenes are even more exaggerated. For example, we see Byers dressed in an American flag print shirt, another attempt to costume himself. He stands before his small home and gestures dramatically towards the overcast sky, using it as a metaphor for how he felt on that “fateful day” in 1993: “This half was a bright sunshiny day. This half became gloom and doom. And as the death and destruction rolled in to West Memphis, Arkansas, and consumed three babies’ life
Photo 4: Melissa Byers, in Paradise Lost, sends Jessie Misskelley a message: "Prison's not a safe place, Jessie, sweetie."

Photo 5: John Mark Byers takes target practice in Paradise Lost: "Hey Jason, I want you to smile and blow me a kiss for this one."

Photo 6: John Mark Byers gestures to the stormy sky as he describes his emotions. From Revelations.

[sic], and killed 'em, it's kind of like this cloud front is rolling in, and cooling off the day, and consuming me, as I stand here in the wind and midst the storm." His overblown description seems obviously rehearsed; the metaphor of the approaching storm, complete with dramatic hand gestures, turns what should be his natural grief into a kind of grotesque.

In later scenes, what was merely grotesque turns much more aggressive. We see him, for example, at the creek bank where the boys' bodies were discovered, dressed in overalls and sporting black shades, placing pikes with pictures of the three teenagers and delivering another well-rehearsed rant about his grief and anger, his voice rising with each sentence: "This crime scene tape, it comes off what they stretched in front of me when they found my babies out here. I thought it was just fitting to bring it back to your memorial fund. Jessie, you got your flowers. And Damien. Jason, them's yours. You want to worship the Devil, see him, I'm gonna give you a farewell party. Now we're gonna have some fun. What do you think, you ready to die?" After dousing the area with lighter fluid, he uses his cigar with deliberate, studied movement, to light the bonfire and then stomps angrily about through the flames. This scene is literally staged, as Byers's props demonstrate, and this only makes his emotions seem that much more rehearsed.

In fact, Revelations leaves no doubt as to the artificiality of Byers's actions and statements. Especially interesting are those scenes in which he shifts radically between on-camera and off-camera personas. In one scene, for example, he speaks jocularly with Burk Sauls, a key supporter of the West Memphis Three. The two discuss Byers's impending brain surgery, and Byers is obviously, in this candid moment, quite friendly with Sauls, despite their opposition to one another regarding the case. Then a news cameraman moves closer, and Berlinger and Sinofsky once again make sure to include him in their own shot. When Byers realizes he is being filmed, his attitude immediately becomes far more confrontational. Sauls is so startled by this turnabout that he questions Byers directly about it: "Why are you being so mean to us all of a sudden, now that the cameras are rolling?"

It is clear at such moments that the camera, by its mere presence, shapes the participants and their reactions to the murders. The camera evokes particular responses, responses that are
artificially generated and that, while they seem real, must ultimately be regarded as hyperreal. People on both sides play their roles, and the emotions they feel while playing these roles are exaggerated versions of what they might naturally feel. In the end, each side develops a more intense persona of rage toward the other. The real emotions left in the wake of the murders, if indeed any ever really existed, have long ago been replaced by the simulation of emotions, simulations driven by what those involved believe they are meant to feel, what the media tells them they must feel. Like good actors, they play the part they are compelled to play to satisfy those on the other side of the camera.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of both films, however, is that Berlinger and Sinofsky are keenly aware that their own presence can also be considered an intrusion into the community. There are moments in both documentaries when the scrutiny they have been directing at the press is turned back upon themselves. This is especially true of Revelations. Returning to the case after five years allows the filmmakers to gauge their own effect. The technique is similar to that of filming the press conducting interviews, and it achieves similar results. It allows them to step outside of their films and see how their own cameras helped to shape events. Their analysis, however, tends to center more on their editing process than on the direct effect of their camera itself.

During the opening credits of Revelations, for example, they acknowledge the controversy that Paradise Lost sparked when it was first shown on HBO. While the vast majority of those who saw the film believed the boys to be innocent, many inside the state felt that the documentary had distorted the truth. Mike Allen, one of the lead investigators in the case, offers a typical assessment: “If I lived in California and saw that movie and didn’t know the facts . . . I can understand getting fired up after listening to all this garbage . . . If HBO would run the entire trial without editing it, and then ask viewers if [they’re] guilty, I bet there’d be a different response” (qtd. in Leveritt 319). In other words, for many who lived through the events, the film felt artificial, and though Berlinger and Sinofsky offer no apologies for their work, in recognizing the controversy it generated they seem to accept the notion that Paradise Lost offers a particular reading of the events, one that might be at odds with other readings.

While the three accused express less animosity toward Paradise Lost than do their accusers, they too are given the opportunity to correct impressions created by the film. Echols, for instance, was featured at the end of the first film noting that he is in some ways proud of the recognition he has gained, proud of the fact that years from now he will still be remembered as a kind of West Memphis “bogeyman.” In Revelations, he is given a chance to place what he said into context, explaining that the remark was intended as a joke, and that he had never truly taken the case seriously because he had known he was innocent and it had never occurred to him to worry that he might be convicted. Later, he explains the scene from the first film in which he was shown styling his hair in the midst of his trial; he reveals that he had been given the haircut literally moments before court began and argues that the image is less about his vanity than about his curiosity at seeing this new haircut for the first time. These and similar scenes from Revelations demonstrate that the filmmakers recognize how their own cameras, just like those of the press, ultimately—one might say inevitably—create an artificial
portrait of the community and the events that took place in that community. If they are trying to use this recognition to better the impression of the three teens with whom they sympathize, however, in the end they cannot escape the fact that artificiality now pervades all aspects of the case. In Jameson's terms, the case is all the image of an image. Indeed, in this second film, Berlinger and Sinofsky rely a great deal on footage from the earlier film, allowing participants to comment on these previous images, as though they might somehow replace one with another. It seems unlikely, though, that there might ever be a definitive explanation of events or behaviors; rather, the images simply pile one on the other.²

Berlinger and Sinofsky are perhaps uniquely qualified to comment on the ways the media have distorted this case. In a moment that not even Baudrillard could have foreseen, the two became directly involved in the trials they were filming. During the first trial, that of Jessie Misskelly, John Mark Byers presented one member of the HBO film crew with a knife as a Christmas present. Berlinger and Sinofsky discovered on closer inspection that the knife contained traces of blood. They turned it over to the police, and it subsequently became a key piece of evidence. The defense devoted a good deal of effort to offering an alternative theory of the crime, one implicating Byers as the murderer. As a result, the media was suddenly not merely a spectator, but a participant in events. For just a moment, in fact, the camera almost seems to take the stand, when Detective Gitchell, testifying about the knife, points to the camera and tells the prosecutor that it was "the crew with HBO" who turned over the knife. Baudrillard writes of the disappearance of the poles of object and subject—of an implosion in which the viewer and the viewed become one:

There are no more media in the literal sense of the word . . . that is, of a mediating power between one reality and another, between one state of the real and another. . . . Strictly, this is what implosion signifies. The absorption of one pole into another, the short-circuiting between poles of every differential system of meaning, the erasure of distinct terms and oppositions, including that of the medium and of the real—thus the impossibility of any dialectical intervention between the two or from one to the other. (83)

Baudrillard here argues McLuhan's famous formulation—"the medium is the message"—though in somewhat different terms. He suggests that there is no distinction between the real and the represented; only the represented remains. What the camera creates, then, is finally all that exists. In Paradise Lost, we are offered the ultimate illustration of such a principle: for in a literal sense, Berlinger and Sinofsky were not only covering the case—they became the case.³

The case did not end with the trials, or with the very public viewing of the two films on HBO. Celebrities of all sorts have come out in support of Echols, Baldwin, and Misskelly, with Henry Rollins holding benefit concerts and Margaret Cho paying regular visits to Echols on death
row, in an attempt to raise public awareness about what they perceive as a miscarriage of justice. WM3.org posts regular updates on the cases, the benefits, and the current conditions of the three. Arm wristlets and sweatshirts are available for those who wish to show their support for the cause. Leaving aside the question of whether or not these actions are warranted or well-meaning, such involvement only adds further layers of unreality to this enclosed system. Celebrities lend the sign of power to the cause, but they lack the underlying power that might actually change the situation. Once again the system attempts to prove its own relevance by generating its own concern over its self-generated situation.

A number of postmodern thinkers have played with the notion that the camera is capable of changing our existence through its mere presence, that when it is trained on our activities our activities change, that we all become actors in a pseudoreality. Postmodern theory is one thing; the town of West Memphis before these murders was quite another. Even the judge in the case admits that he was naïve to allow cameras into his courtroom, a mistake he does not repeat in the second film. This small-town southern community was unprepared for the events that took place there, but they were equally unprepared for what occurred when the media turned its spotlight on them. It might be taking things too far to assert that the coverage of the case turned West Memphis into a simulacrum of a town. Yet clearly this coverage imposed a measure of artificiality on the community, both by changing the attitudes of those involved in the case and by crafting a portrait of the community that influenced how others would view that community. Between the "signs" of emotional trauma and the "signs" of uncovering the "signs" of emotional trauma, one begins to wonder whether the entire case has become simply a simulation of a simulation. In the end, perhaps the real proof of Baudrillard’s theories is to be found in the sad fact that the three boys who were murdered have essentially faded from public consciousness, while the ensuing events continue to command our attention more than ten years later.

NOTES

1. Umberto Eco has suggested not only that this process renders the real and the sign equivalent, but that, given the choice, we prefer the copy: describing a waxwork version of DaVinci’s Last Supper, Eco writes, “It is far away, in Milan, which is a place, like Florence, all Renaissance; you may never get there, but the voice has warned you that the original fresco is by now ruined, almost invisible, unable to give you the emotion you have received from the three-dimen-
sional wax, which is more real, and there is more of it” (18).

2. Nevertheless, Berlinger and Sinofsky are planning a third film, one they have called the “definitive” reading of events.

3. During the appeals process, the filmmakers once again became an important aspect of the case. Appeals lawyers for Damien Echols and Jason Baldwin argued, unsuccessfully, that their clients had received inadequate representation because their original lawyers had allowed the HBO crew to film key strategy meetings.

REFERENCES


