

00:00:00	Music	Music	“Switchblade Comb” by Mobius VanChocStraw. A jaunty, jazzy tune reminiscent of the opening theme of a movie. Music continues as April begins speaking, then fades out.
00:00:08	April	Host	<p>Welcome to <i>Switchblade Sisters</i>, where women get together to slice and dice our favorite action and genre films. I'm April Wolfe.</p> <p>Every week, I invite a new female filmmaker on—a writer, director, actor, or producer—and we talk in-depth about one of their fave genre films, you know, maybe one that influenced their own work in some way.</p> <p>And today I'm real excited to have producer Heather Buckley with me. Hi!</p>
00:00:26	Heather	Guest	Hello!
00:00:28	April	Host	<p>Um, for those of you who aren't as familiar with Heather's work, please let me give you an introduction.</p> <p>Heather is a graduate of University of the Arts, with a graphic design degree and an academic focus on film history and criticism.</p> <p>She worked for 13 years in the New York advertising world—slogging it, ughhh!—before bringing her creative and story skills to film.</p> <p>The first feature she produced, Jenn Wexler's <i>The Ranger</i>, for Glass Eye Pix and Hood River Entertainment, premiered at South by Southwest and played numerous film festivals on an international run before it released in New York City and LA.</p> <p>It was then acquired by Shudder, and also streaming now on Amazon Prime. So people can find it on both of those, correct?</p>
00:01:06	Heather	Guest	They can find—they can stream it on Shudder. They can buy the beautiful, physical media on—on Amazon.
00:01:12	April	Host	And can you describe that film real quick?
00:01:14	Heather	Guest	It's a punk rock slasher film.
00:01:16	Crosstalk	Crosstalk	April: Yeah!
			Heather: That—that in the real depth of its soul is about the identity and the, uh, oppression of female identity.
00:01:22	April	Host	<p>Okay! I think our listeners are interested.</p> <p>Heather's work as a film analyst and journalist, however, spans over a decade, with bylines in <i>Vulture</i>, <i>Dread Central</i>, and <i>Fangoria</i>, among others.</p> <p>Her background in SFX work includes <i>Circus of the Dead</i>, <i>Dead Still</i>, and <i>We Are Still Here</i>.</p> <p>She is currently a Blu-ray special features producer creating documentaries for Kino Lorber, uh, Lionsgate, Vestron, Arrow Films, and Shout! Factory releases, including John Carpenter's <i>The Thing</i>,</p>

Barton Fink, *The Long Riders*, *Saw*'s twent—uh, tenth anniversary re-issue, and *Army of Darkness*.

If you look at her IMDb page, it's just endless, endless, uh, featurettes and—and—and documentary video work, and tons of fucking shit, dude!

Uh, Heather's current feature slate includes projects spanning the spectrum of genre film, but she prizes those stories with a unique visual aesthetic and a clear understanding of where genre is heading in the future.

So, Heather!

00:02:16 Heather Guest

Hello!

00:02:18 April Host

Could you tell us a little bit about why you chose a very controversial film, *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*?

00:02:25 Heather Guest

Well, I feel, for me—there was two most important films for me in genre film history and that was *Texas Chainsaw Massacre '74*, which I believe is a turning point in modern cinema, and the other one is *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*.

I love it because it's realistic, and—and fearless, and unsentimental, and it is not there as a film to entertain its audience.

00:02:45 April Host

Mm-hm.

00:02:46 Heather Guest

It's an assault on the audience. So it has a very clear, sort of punk rock counterculture feel to it. And being so brave as to put something out into the world that that's—that's so fierce that when they went to the MPAA for its anniversary, it still got an NC-17 rating.

00:03:01 April Host

[*Laughing*] Yeah. I love—I love that was 16—uh, 2016, I think, when they did that? They did the re-issue 30 years?

For those of you who haven't seen *Henry*, today's episode obviously is going to give you some spoilers. Uh, that shouldn't stop you from listening before you watch.

Obviously, my motto—you should know it by now—is that it's not what happens but how it happens that makes a movie worth watching.

Still, if you would like to pause and watch *Henry* first, this is your chance.

00:03:23 Music Music

"Henry Theme" from *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer Soundtrack* by Robert McNaughton begins to fade in. Eerie, creepy, music with a music-box feel and a drumbeat that mimics a heartbeat.

00:03:25 April Host

And now that you're back, let's introduce *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*.

Written by Richard Fire and John McNaughton, and directed by McNaughton for release in 1986 or 1990, depending on when you got your hands on it, *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* stars Michael Rooker as Henry. A serial killer!

We meet Henry's victims first, in a series of stills of the crime scenes, and then finally Henry, who gets to Chicago and eats at a diner before murdering two of the waitresses.

Then we meet Henry's prison buddy, Otis. Otis picks up his sister Becky at the airport. She's just out of an abusive relationship with her husband, too, so she's not in the best state.

00:04:00 Clip

Clip

Otis: Before you got married, I told you LeRoy was no damn good! That he was trash and he'd always be trash, and you was gonna catch it, and you did, didn't you?

Becky: I don't really wanna talk about him right now.

Otis: Okay by me. We don't have to talk about it now. We don't have to talk about it ever!

00:04:12 April

Host

Later that night, Becky and Henry play cards, and Henry tells the curious Becky that he stabbed his mother because she abused him.

Although later he does change his story, suggesting everything is partly or mostly a lie, but we'll never know.

00:04:26 Clip

Clip

[Intense background music.]

Henry: Yeah... I killed my mama. One night, it—it was my 14th birthday. And she was drunk, and... we had an argument.

She hit me with a whiskey bottle.

[Bottle breaks. Inarticulate shouting.]

And I shot her. I shot her dead.

Becky: I thought you said you stabbed her.

[Background music lets up.]

Henry: ...Oh, yeah. That's right.

00:05:02 April

Host

Becky feels she bonds with him that night, and she tells him that her father used to abuse her. So she's like, "Oh, yeah, me too, me too!"

The next day, Henry kills two prostitutes in front of Otis, who worries the cops might get them. But Henry reassures him that they're fine, if they follow some simple rules.

They go on a killing spree together, following these rules, which include changing their modus operandi for each murder—

00:05:25 Clip

Clip

Henry: If you shoot somebody in the head with a .45 every time you kill somebody, becomes like your fingerprint, see?

But if you strangle one, and stab another, and one you cut up, one you don't, then the police don't know what to do.

[A cry of pain in the background.]

00:05:41	April	Host	<p>They'll think you're four different people.</p> <p>—and keep moving, essentially. They've gotta get out of Chicago after they've done a lot of this.</p> <p>Their most shocking murder comes in a home invasion where they kill an entire family and record it on video. Um, then they watch the tape back later to get—get a kick out of the murders.</p> <p>Becky decides, meanwhile, that she wants to go back home to her daughter.</p>
00:06:07	Clip	Clip	<p>And then Henry and Otis get into a fight—pretty mean fight—in a car, when Otis breaks their expensive camera.</p> <p>Otis: Look at it, it's ruined! Damn, Henry, you oughta look where you're driving!</p> <p>Henry: Who the hell told you to stick your head out the window anyway?!</p> <p>Otis: You coulda killed me!</p> <p>Henry: Oh, that's right! Blame it on me!</p>
00:06:18	April	Host	<p>Henry and Becky go out for a steak dinner later, where Becky flirts with Henry.</p> <p>He's weirded out and scared by her genuine emotion, and he leaves.</p> <p>And when he comes back, he finds Otis raping and strangling Becky. Henry stops Otis by kicking him, and then <u>Becky stabs</u> Otis.</p> <p>Henry says they need to get out of there—um, well, actually, Henry finishes him off. But Henry says they need to get him out of—get out of there, and they can call for Becky's daughter to join them when they're settled.</p> <p>Becky brings her suitcase, and they drive off to dump Otis's body in the river.</p> <p>Becky tells Henry she <u>loves</u> him, and he kinda sorta says that he does, too.</p>
00:06:56	Clip	Clip	<p>Becky: I love you, Henry.</p> <p><i>[Long pause.]</i></p> <p>Henry: Well, I guess I love you, too.</p>
00:07:02	April	Host	<p>They check into a hotel room, and the film ends with Henry checking out by himself the next day, dumping Becky's bloody suitcase in a ditch.</p> <p><i>[Exhaling / exclaiming]</i> Hooo, there are—</p>
00:07:12	Heather	Guest	Mm-hm!
00:07:13	April	Host	— <u>no</u> happy endings in this!

00:07:16 Heather Guest Man, when you read it back, it almost seems a little harder than watching it.

00:07:20 April Host *[Laughing]* Yeah, like, *[wincingly]* "Ohhh."

The performances, I think, kind of blunt some of that. It's just, like, you—you marvel at the artistry of what's happening on screen. The performances are, uh, you know, extremely high caliber for a \$100,000 movie.

Um, but I—I'm—wanna get into the fact that, um, two brothers, Waleed and Malik Ali—they produced this film after working with McNaughton on some, like, industrial things and some—some other stuff, and then—and they were like, "Look, we wanna make a horror film."

And they were like, "Yeah, horror can sell. So it's what we wanna do," and they gave him no restrictions, and then this is what he came back with. *[Laughing.]* And they were a little disappointed at first, because it wasn't something that they thought they could totally sell.

Um... in your experience of horror—horror does sell. Like, that's the idea that we have. But also, does it?

00:08:14 Heather Guest Well, for me, horror is sort of the art form and the, uh, perspective that I that I view the world. I feel very safe and aligned with the, uh, the—with the sort of *Nightmare* iconography, the *Halloween* iconography, the idea of sort of the darkness in the grave talking existential things about—about death.

I think certain sort of horror sells, but not the horror which is the closest to my heart, which is sort of this dreadful, real life, beautiful sort of—this meditative art piece—

00:08:43 Crosstalk Crosstalk **April:** Which—

Heather: —that is *Henry*.

00:08:44 April Host That is *Henry*.

00:08:45 Heather Guest Yeah. Because, uh, if you—if you think about it—and it's also very interesting to me 'cause a lot of the current elevated pieces deal with the upper middle class—

00:08:52 April Host Yes.

00:08:53 Heather Guest —while *Henry* deals with the working class, which I think is very interesting. Because my father comes from a blue-collar family, he was a construction worker, my mother was a teacher.

So I was sort of in—so hanging around with my father's friends in that environment, there were always people who are factory workers, construction workers, so it's very interesting to see someone trying to define this sort of, like, poor—you know, lower middle class people.

00:09:14 April Host Well, I also think that one of the effective things about this is that it doesn't feel exploitative to me. It doesn't feel like someone who is, uh, very wealthy trying to tell the story of a—um—you know, like—poor—poor pornography, you know what I mean? Like, a—

00:09:29 Heather Guest I think 'cause John came from a very hard environment in Chicago—
00:09:33 April Host Mm-hm.
00:09:34 Heather Guest —and these are the folks he hung out with—I believe that the guy who meets his demise by a TV set was sort of like a—a local criminal in the Chicago area.
00:09:43 April Host I think—I wanna get into the writing process, 'cause you're kind of getting into, um—something that is—really struck me when I was going over the production of this.

The fact that they had a really loose script to begin with, right? When they started, and essentially, John McNaughton had pitched the idea that he had gone out of the Alis' office and sat down with his friend Gus, and he was just like, "I don't know what I can make a horror film out of right now. Like, what is even interesting me?"

And Gus was like "Here," and he put in a video tape of a *20/20* episode that had Henry Lee, uh, the actual serial killer, and it was just this interview. This long documentary that was going on about that, and he was like, "Oh, shit! Yeah! This is what I should do! Thanks, Gus!"

And so they only pitched it as the—an idea of that, to where it's just like, "Here's gonna be a character study." And they didn't really have a script when they went in.

So they just got these three actors, they knew what these characters were going to be, but they weren't sure what the story exactly was, or what the dialogue was.

But apparently Richard Fire insisted they all go home and write bios, and this is according to McNaughton.

"Michael doesn't like writing, so he did a tape recording. A certain amount of the words that each of them had written in their bios, we pulled a phrase here and a word there. It got woven into their dialogue.

I love rehearsals with the writer in the film because you get to custom tailor the roles. If you let actors say 'Oh, I don't like that. I don't want to say that, I want to say this,' if you open that door, you're sunk usually.

But if the actor has a genuine problem, like 'I can't get my mouth around this. This isn't the way my character would talk.' Okay, fine. Here's the writer. Let's you, and the writer, and me, work on this until you like it, and the writer likes it, until everyone's happy.

So we did, in each case, for all three of them. Their bios they brought in, bits and pieces found their way back into the written dialogue."

So it was this really collaborative effort that they had, where they just sat down and they had like a couple weeks of rehearsals, and they just fleshed out these characters and the way that they talked.

00:11:45 Heather Guest When I think about films with—that rehearsal, 'cause I covered, uh, *The Thing* for Shout! Factory—

00:11:49 April Host Yeah.

00:11:50 Heather Guest —and they had an incredible, like, two weeks for rehearsal. So this— from somebody who's a producer, the idea of—it's very hard on independent films to get rehearsal time in, but the idea of—

00:12:00 April Host And because—and it's because of actor availability, and because of lower budgets, is that what we're saying?

[April responds several times emphatically as Heather speaks.]

00:12:05 Heather Guest All of that. Actor availabilities, lower budgets, not a lot of, uh—you know, to bring—to bring everyone there.

But the idea of doing an audio recording to sort of tailor it as—as you said, is a very interesting idea, because I—a lot of the stuff that I have in my slate, or what I'm attracted to, are very iconic, actor-driven performances, where they have—because other movies outside of *Henry* that I love are like, *The Ruling Class*, or *Marat/Sade*, or *Naked*, that have like these long, long tracks of dialogue that give a—an actor something amazing to say, a fascinating performance to make them memorable.

'Cause I feel like when I watch movies, I'm actually there to like, hang out with the characters. Like you mentioned at the beginning of it—it's like, "I'm going to give you the summary of—of a movie." Sometimes if someone tells me what the movie is about and the ending, it will actually make me more excited to see it because I wanna see the execution of it.

So it's not always this great, you know, movement towards "What is the plot?" or how the plot is, because you'd say—'cause it would be very interesting to talk about how *Henry* is structured, 'cause I'm trying to find in my own work what I'm interested in.

Because I do like a static character that has events happen to them, like a lot of Paul Schrader's writing. I love *Henry* for—the same way. 'Cause to me it's the meditation on the type of performance and the tone that you're making. It's not sort of the A-to-B plot of the movie.

00:13:25 April Host Yeah! And I think that if I—you know, having said the, uh, the synopsis of so many genre films, [*laughing*] it's not as exciting on the page as it is when you see it on the screen, and I think genre kinda lends itself to those things.

Because you're looking for the surprise, and there's usually quite a bit of experimental, um, imagery that happens. You get to do that type of thing.

But I wanna get into—um, before we, before we take our break—um, I—the idea of establishing a bad guy in a scene.

Now this is something I thought was really interesting, because we—we have, uh, Michael Rooker playing Henry. He's really kind of dry, like, um, monotone, a lot of the time.

Um, and he goes into—he—there's a scene where he goes into a bodega store to buy a pack of cigarettes, and the man behind the counter says "Hey, how about them Bears?"

00:14:17 Sound Effect Sound Effect [Whoosh.]

00:14:18 Clip Clip **Store Clerk:** Hey, how about those Bears?

Henry: Fuck the Bears.

00:14:21 Sound Effect Sound Effect [Whoosh.]

00:14:22 April Host That according to, uh, McNaughton, he said, "Henry sends things flying! To me, in Chicago, you could kill people. You could do a lot of bad things. But if you say 'Fuck the Bears!' then you're a really bad person."

[Heather laughs.]

"That's that famous line. The man who's selling him the cigarettes is actually Waleed Ali, [laughing] who put up the money for the film."

So I like the idea that there's this character that we spend a lot of time with. That I kind of—identity with, sometimes? I'm on his side, and that's something that we'll get into in the next segment. Sometimes I'm on his side, and it's weird. And I don't feel good about that all the time.

But there are certain things that you have to put in where you're just like, "No, this is the bad guy."

A lot of times in movies, people will—will be like, "Oh, this guy raped someone, so that means they're evil."

00:15:06 Crosstalk Crosstalk **April:** You know what I mean? Like, that's the signifier—

Heather: Well, *Happiness* turns that around, because the only, uh, good, uh—

00:15:11 Heather Guest —the only empathetic character in *Happiness* is the—is the father.

00:15:15 April Host [Laughing] Yeah, that's true.

00:15:17 Heather Guest And the idea to do that to the audience is, like, horrifying.

00:15:20 April Host Yeah, and—

00:15:21 Heather Guest But—

00:15:22 April Host —we should say, in *Happiness* the father is also not a very good person at all.

00:15:26 Heather Guest No!

00:15:27 April Host This is Todd Solondz's *Happiness*. Uh, Casey is laughing because [through laughter] he knows—

For anyone who hasn't seen it... Damn. [Laughs].

00:15:35 Heather Guest Yes. So as we were talking about, the glee of having the audience get that your point-of-view character is a serial killer, is a scumbag. The same thing in, like, movies that I love like, uh *Taxi Driver*, *Rolling*

Thunder, or like all of Schrader's work, is that you're not following a hero.

00:15:51 April Host

Yeah.

00:15:52 Heather Guest

You're following the worst character and it's inescapable, and trying to understand how they work through their—their—their point of view.

00:15:57 April Host

Yeah.

00:15:58 Heather Guest

Or giving sympathy to the devil, or my love of Westerns where everyone is bad. Like, I would prefer to watch something like the—*The Wild Bunch*, or, you know un—*Unforgiven*, or [stuttering] *Once Upon a Time in the West*, where—where everything is gray, and then people are more and more gray.

And Henry's character is like that.

00:16:14 Music Music

"Switchblade Comb" begins to play under April's dialogue.

00:16:15 April Host

Alright. Well, speaking of bad guys, we're gonna come back—uh, we're gonna take a quick break and then we're gonna get into that home invasion scene, because this is where start seeing that these are really, really bad guys!

Okay, we'll be right back.

00:16:25 Music Transition

[*Music gets louder, then fades out.*]

00:16:30 Promo Promo

[*Straightforward, thump-y electric bass guitar beat with light drums.*]

Laurie: Hi. I am Laurie Kilmartin.

Jackie: And I'm Jackie Kashian.

Laurie: Together we host a podcast called:

Jackie: *The Jackie and Laurie Show.*

Jackie: Uh, we're both stand-up comics. We recently met each other because women weren't allowed to work together, uh—uh, on the road or in gigs for a long, long time, and so...our friendship has been unfolding on this podcast for a couple years.

Laurie: Jackie constantly works the road; I write for *Conan* and then I work the road in-between.

Jackie: We do a lot of stand-up comedy, and so we celebrate stand-up—

Laurie: Yes.

Jackie: —and we also...bitch about it.

Laurie: We keep it to an hour; we don't have any guests.

Jackie: We somehow find enough to—to talk about every single week. So find us—you can subscribe to the *Jackie and Laurie* show at MaximumFun.org, or wherever you get your podcasts.

Laurie: *[nonplussed]* K, bye.

[Music ends.]

00:17:16	Music	Transition	"Switchblade Comb" begins playing, then fades out.
00:17:22	April	Host	Welcome back to <i>Switchblade Sisters</i> . I'm April Wolfe, and I'm joined today by Heather Buckley. And we're talking about <i>Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer</i> . Okay. Uh, Heather had brought up the home invasion scene, and we need to do it some justice with a—a longer discussion. So, this is something that he—that McNaughton, John McNaughton, had divided into essentially kind of two parts, is the way that—that he sees it. And so I wanted to read some quotes back from some interviews. He said, quote, "In the film there's two scenes that play against each other. The first one is where the big, heavysset guy, Ray, gets the TV over his head." 00:18:00 Sound Effect Sound Effect <i>[Whoosh.]</i> 00:18:01 Clip Clip Ray: Take the \$50 set and get the hell out, I'm a busy man! Henry: Well, we were really counting on a color set. Ray: What's the matter, you got <u>shit</u> in your ears? The black and white is \$50. Take it or leave it! Henry: Sorry we wasted your time. Come on, Otis. <i>[Intense music sting on Ray's next words.]</i> Ray: Don't give me sorry, you dumbass. Did I stutter? Give me the \$50 and <u>get out!</u> <i>[Ray strikes the table on the last two words.]</i> 00:18:21 Sound Effect Sound Effect <i>[Whoosh.]</i> 00:18:22 April Host "As an audience, it's like <i>Rambo</i> . He keeps insulting Henry and Otis, and you're rooting for Rambo to kill him, or at least maim him. Because he's <u>bad</u> . We played it that way. In the Hitchcockian sense, <u>we</u> know—Henry and Otis are, so that makes the tension rise, because Ray doesn't know who they are. He keeps insulting them, and we know it's only a matter of time. By the time he gets to his peak, the audience is basically saying 'Kill him, Henry! Kill him!' And it's played for laughs. And it's sort of like 'Wow, wasn't that fun?' We entertain ourselves with violence. We as filmmakers entertain you with violence, and it's quite successful. People love it." How—how do you—how do you feel about—about that? You know, 'cause there—there <u>is</u> a kind of goading, where like, "Yeah, this guy sucks! Kill him." 00:19:02 Heather Guest Well, the scenes in <i>Henry</i> as I watch them as a—as an audience,

again, it's a sort of like, unrelenting, bleak, realistic tone of violence. It does that, and because you're watching it, and you having gone up to a theater, it also implicates the audience in what they're seeing.

So rather than to have fun—see, I think when John was talking about on *The Last Drive-In*, the Joe Bob Briggs thing on Shudder, it's like—it came out during the time of, like, *Rambo*.

00:19:26 April Host

Mm-hm.

00:19:27 Heather Guest

And everyone's going like, "Yeah, kill him!" Like that kind of exciting violence, but this is sort of around where—sort of a Michael Haneke and *Funny Games*, who's gonna say "Do you want violence? Do you want realism? Do you wanna watch someone get hurt? I'm gonna just play it as realistically as possible."

00:19:41 April Host

But then we get—so he says, "So then 20 minutes later we say 'Okay, so here's what it might really look like. How entertaining is this?' The great trick is you're seeing the home invasion scene, thinking you're watching the camera image as it happens. Michael Rooker actually shot the beginning of that scene while Otis was murdering the woman. But then Michael has to drop the camera to attack the kid, so the DP grabbed the camera and laid it on the ground in a beneficial angle to shoot the rest of the scene.

While you're watching it, you think you're watching it as it happens, but then you realize what you're watching is playback on their television. And indeed, you're sitting with them watching it as entertainment. It's very much implicating the audience. The intent was to implicate we, the filmmakers, as purveyors of violence for a living. The unexpected result was we implicated the audience right along with us."

So that's the earlier scene with like, the TV, the guy, and then the home invasion scene is the—the counterpoint to those, where it's just—I—I love him thinking about those being parts of the same scene, essentially. That the one can't exist without the other because you have to implicate the audience in being—cheering—like, cheering on the violence of the earlier scene.

00:20:56 Heather Guest

I feel that there is a—the television scene for me, I don't cheer for the guy's—guy's death, because I think I'd—I perceive the scene differently.

Because we know who Henry and Otis is, and this—and this guy there is also giving such an interesting, realistic performance, 'cause he is from sort of like the skeevy, actual world of, uh—of Chicago, and the idea that—you could tell—if you're a fan of film, you could tell that the TV scene, though, might be celebratory to some audiences, they are actually going for a higher level of realistic violence.

00:21:29 April Host

Mm-hm.

00:21:30 Heather Guest

Which to me is then they would—they would sort of show their hand going into the home invasion scene.

00:21:35 April Host

Mm-hm.

00:21:36 Heather Guest

'Cause there's just—and a part of it, because it's like—I—the TV on

the head—just a little bit of blood, not like something, like, in *Evil Dead II*. You know, poking in the hands, it's like, I think—I don't think this movie's playing games, from the type of violence that they're—that they're showing.

00:21:53 April Host

Mm-hm.

00:21:54 Heather Guest

Because they're—they're not just showing violence. They're showing brutality.

00:21:56 April Host

One of the things I thought was really interesting is on Siskel and Ebert's TV show, they talked about this at length, and in fact Ebert was a huge proponent of this movie, and helped it get past the film festival circuit into actually, you know, getting some kind of limited theatrical release.

But the thing that I thought was really interesting from their discussion was that Siskel pointed out that in the scene where the guy's kicking—I can't remember who's kicking the TV. It might have been Otis who's kicking the TV at first, or someone's kicking the TV.

And, um, he was like, "He's kicking the TV just as they were kicking a woman earlier." It's the exact same kind of, like, soulless dead thing, where—just like, oh, they're seeing these people as objects in the same way that like, oh, it's just, like, a television.

You know, like, it's the dehumanization of people and the—that—I thought that was a really interesting observation of—of the brutally—brutality that we're talking about.

00:22:54 Heather Guest

Yes, it's a—it's to treat it so mundanely, 'cause think about how action scenes are shot in movies, or scenes of violence, or things like in *John Wick*.

All the cutting, all the angles. Right? The energy, and the—the—they're trying to make it kinetic.

00:23:06 April Host

Mm-hm.

00:23:07 Heather Guest

Here all the cutting of the scenes is like, "Yeah, we're just gonna leave the camera there. Why don't you watch? Why don't you watch? Why don't you watch?"

00:23:13 April Host

I think one of the things that—that I found really fascinating, if you're—if you're talking about, you know, kind of brutality and just realism and, you know, "people must die" and that kind of thing, was the fact that—when we go back to the home invasion scene, the boy, when Michael Rooker has to attack the boy, that is a really guttural, dark moment.

Um, how many takes do you think that it took to—for them to get it?

00:23:44 Heather Guest

Well, in independent film world, we usually get three.

00:23:48 April Host

Two!

00:23:49 Heather Guest

I was close.

00:23:50 April Host

And they used—they used the second one. Um—

00:23:52 Heather Guest

I know that—and I know that the son was a—was a friend of the family, or something.

00:23:56 April Host Yeah.

00:23:57 Heather Guest So they were all buddies. *[Laughs.]*

00:23:58 April Host And Michael Rooker had to tell him, because the first take he wasn't fighting too much, and Rooker slammed him and he was like, a little bit off center—

00:24:05 Heather Guest Mm-hm.

00:24:06 April Host —on the floor. He wasn't quite in line of, um, the—the video, so he wasn't in the eye, and they needed the action to be, like, in the eye of the video camera there.

And, um, so the second take, he said—Rooker told the boy, like, "I need you to fight me. I need you to not let me kill you. I am going to try to kill you. You need to get into that space," and it was just a really beautiful shot, and apparently John McNaughton—um, after that take, he turned to the crew and said "None of us are going to Heaven after shooting this."

00:24:36 Heather Guest And neither, probably, are any of the fans of—fans of the films.

I love that the—both of the actors, Michael and Tom are incredibly funny and warm in real life. But when I've seen them at sort of, like, shows and things like that, and when Tom was still alive, it's like, "You guys are so funny and great, but I cannot shake that performance." Even when I see Michael Rooker in *Guardians of the Galaxy*.

00:24:57 April Host Yep! *[Laughs.]* And he's great in *Guardians of the Galaxy*!

00:25:00 Crosstalk Crosstalk **Heather:** He is—

April: He's—he's the best character, I think.

Heather: Yeah.

April: Or... was. I don't—

00:25:04 Heather Guest I love him, but to me, like, he always will be Henry, because that performance is so strong, and that—and that movie's like a radiation burn on your soul once you watch it.

00:25:12 April Host Mm-hm.

00:25:13 Heather Guest And you cannot clean it off, that you have seen—that you've seen *Henry*, that you've rented *Henry*.

There's always like, a tradition at—uh, for the midnight movies at South by Southwest, that like, when you premiere there, you sort of wear your favorite horror T-shirt.

00:25:23 April Host Yeah.

00:25:24 Heather Guest So I wore my *Henry* T-shirt.

00:25:25 April Host Aw!

00:25:26 Heather Guest I did. I did. When I—when we presented *The Ranger*. I think Jenn wore her *Carrie* one.

00:25:32 April Host Yeah, someone's gotta represent *Henry*, though.

00:25:34 Heather Guest It's true! It's such bravery. I think of myself as a producer, it's like, "Would you—" like, you watch these films, but it's like, could you—could you carry the karma of actually making them? Because it's so strong to put it out—

00:25:45 April Host Yeah.

00:25:46 Heather Guest —in the world, deal with that controversy.

You—especially today, the amount of controversy you would get on all fronts via social media, to try to make art like this, to try to explore this incredibly dark, unsentimental space that has—because there's also no prescribed morality in the film, because you're observing.

00:26:03 April Host Yeah.

00:26:04 Heather Guest You're observing and there's a distance, and what's—and what's dragging you in is the performance and the casting.

00:26:08 April Host And yet, there's something—and I can relate this, too, to, um, a—a recent guest of ours, Jennifer Kent, who made a movie called *The Nightingale*—and she's been getting—you know, a lot of people are like, "Wow! It's hard to watch."

But I think her, along with—when I'm talking about John McNaughton in this movie—what critics, and what people can recognize in—in *Henry*, and in something like *The Nightingale*, is a certain kind of artistry, an intention.

You know? I—I feel like it's not just kinda brutality for brutality's sake. You know, even like Haneke's, you know, *Funny Games*, we can recognize the artistry and the intention, and that's maybe what sets us up to be a little bit more forgiving of those things that don't—that don't hit our morality in exactly the right place.

And with a less intentioned director, or a less intentioned writer, I could see how that would just get out of control. You know?

00:27:06 Music Music "Switchblade Comb" begins playing.

00:27:07 April Host We're gonna take a quick break. When we come back, we'll be talking a little bit more about that; and also something that Heather had brought up earlier, which has to do with the MPAA, and access to movies like this, and—and how this movie actually finally got seen.

We'll be right back.

00:27:21 Music Transition *[Music grows louder, then fades out.]*

00:27:26 Promo Promo *[Jaunty electric music.]*

Aimee: Hello, this is Aimee Mann.

Ted: And I'm Ted Leo.

Aimee: And we have a podcast called *The Art of Process*.

Ted: We've been lucky enough over the past year to talk to some of our friends and acquaintances from across the creative spectrum to find out how they actually work.

Speaker 1: And so I have to write material that makes sense and makes people laugh. I also have to think about what I'm saying to people.

Speaker 2: If I kick your ass, I'll make you famous.

Speaker 3: The fight to get LGBTQ representation in the show—

Speaker 4: We weirdly don't know as many musicians as you would expect.

Speaker 5: I really just became a political speech writer by accident.

Speaker 6: I'm realizing that I have accidentally, uh, pulled my pants down. *[Someone laughs and gets cut off.]*

Ted: Listen and subscribe at MaximumFun.org or wherever you get your podcasts.

Speaker 7: It's like if the guinea pig was complicit in helping the scientist.

00:28:12 Music Transition

"Switchblade Comb" begins playing, then fades out.

00:28:19 April Host

Welcome back to *Switchblade Sisters*. I'm April Wolfe, and I'm joined today by Heather Buckley, and we're talking about *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*.

I wanna say first that John McNaughton said that, even though *Henry* is called a horror film, sometimes a slasher film—he hated that it was called a slasher film—um, *[laughing]* he said, quote, "I don't remember anyone particularly getting slashed." *[Laughs.]*

But he said, "It is a film about horror, not so much a horror film, in my opinion," and I thought that was an interesting thing. Like, what is the line between a film about horror and a horror film? And are they actually synonymous, or—? Like, what is it?

[April responds emphatically several times as Heather speaks.]

00:29:02 Heather Guest

Well, because—because *Henry* is horror, it's not necessarily the tropes of a horror film. They're inter—and the movies that I love the most are sort of in that space, because it's not triggering a fear response, or gore, or sort of, you know, turn—turning away from horrible special effects. It's the—the feeling of... unrelenting dread, and the stamina you have to have for the audience for watching it.

'Cause the other guys like that are like—we mentioned Haneke, in a way Lars von Trier are creating—it's—it's some sort of weird, nihilistic drama that they're creating. Which is adjacent to, and friends with, horror movies, but it's not actually a—a traditional horror movie. I think when I watch *Henry*, I sort of get the drama out of it more, the characters, and the—and the acting.

It just happens to be trying to create a realistic portrayal of a serial killer.

00:29:57 April Host Yeah, and that's something that, you know, McNaughton was actually really attempting to do.

He said, quote, "I was not a horror fanatic. I really liked noir. I liked darkness. Any film shot at night appealed to me. I liked social realism, especially the films that came out of New York in the postwar era where the actors were mostly from the Strasberg Actors Studio. I was always attracted to any movie based on a Tennessee Williams play, because they were always so dark and twisted."

And when I—when I read that—he said that in multiple interviews. Like, he's always talking about Tennessee Williams, and would love to have people ask him today about Tennessee Williams. But—uh—knowing that, I can see that, and that's what you're talking about, too, is the—the drama and the tension between the characters, and it does feel like we're watching a play. You know? It—it's hard to talk about the difference between theatre and movies, and talk about what makes a movie seem so different when people come from the theatre—

00:30:51 Crosstalk Crosstalk **Heather:** It—

April: —when they make it. But I can see that here.

00:30:55 Heather Guest It could be because *Henry* is performance-driven like theatre, and I'm very interested in directors that cast theatre actors. The Coen brothers are like that, and that—that come from a theatrical background, something like Greenaway's *The Cook, The Wife, The Thief & the Lover*, uh, which is actually embracing that, or *Dogville*, of—of just watching it.

Because I like movies that are small. Like, as someone who used to go to, like, punk shows, I like to go to a show; I don't like to go to a stadium.

I like something very focused. I wanna watch the characters. I wanna see—

00:31:22 April Host Yeah.

00:31:23 Heather Guest —how they work. I wanna see their—their—their—their details. I mean, that's why I could bring up, like, *Taxi Driver* again. It's the same thing. It's like, just this morbid fascination and watching these type of characters that we never would wanna meet in real life, and then we sort of, like, think about how they are, how are their lives?

00:31:36 April Host Mm-hm.

00:31:37 Heather Guest Those are things that are desperately, uh, attractive to me, and that quote that you just said, it's like the love of noir, and night, a—and a sort of, like, exploring these darker—these—these darker places.

And how close can we come to it, and how do we learn about—and I would be curious to ask, if it's like by—by working in that space and thinking about these characters, what do you learn about themselves?

00:31:58 April Host Yeah.

00:31:59 Heather Guest Because a lot of the New York City—I mean, though I love a lot of

visionary filmmakers, for me it's all about, like, uh, Martin Scorsese, Abel Ferrara, Brian De Palma, and like—and—and Paul Schrader's work.

00:32:09	April	Host	Mm-hm.
00:32:10	Heather	Guest	Like, out of the—the New—and they're all sort of hovering around this—this space of being artists who also take things from the exploitation world, who do these character studies, but also on characters that are very static.
			Because there's not this huge arc. There's not this hero's journey. It's just a meditation on what they're doing every day.
00:32:28	April	Host	Yeah. And you got the Safdie brothers, who kind of picking up the—the slack, in terms of contemporary New York cinema, I would say, too.
00:32:35	Heather	Guest	Yes! And—and would you also say that like, because these things are character and—uh, character <u>pieces</u> , that it's more akin to theatre? Maybe?
00:32:45	April	Host	I—I think that that's—I think that that's a <u>good thing</u> that you're—that you're—a—an idea that you're—that you're hitting on, yeah.
			The fact that—because so much of theatre—you're not—you don't get to choose what, uh, angle you're—you're shooting people from. You don't get to choose these things. You just have to live with people in a room—
			<i>[Both laughing.]</i>
			—for a long time! And to me, I think theatre has a kind of punk rock quality to it, because that's where very experimental stuff is happening. Like, you—like, all the sudden you create a world in a black box and people are just like—you can throw people on the floor and suddenly start dancing!
			Or—you know, like, it doesn't—there—there are very few <u>rules</u> when it comes to what happens in theatre. And I can <u>see</u> that being a part of movies like this.
00:33:28	Heather	Guest	And the—and the lens is just there, if that's the stage.
00:33:31	April	Host	Yeah.
00:33:32	Heather	Guest	You know, the area of our stage is just there to observe.
			Which is why, also, in a lot of these movies that we're talking about, there is no moral center. Because to do this sort of character study, that belongs to the audience. It does not belong to the—it's not inherent in the art itself and what you're trying to capture.
00:33:48	April	Host	Yeah.
			I wanna—I wanna talk about the premiere of this, because, McNaughton said, quote, "They had a program within the program"—at Chicago International Film Festival—"called Illinois Filmmakers, who to this day are considered to be third-class human beings in this international film festival. And they gave us a 2:30 PM

on a Saturday at the Music Box. Again, we didn't have a film print. We had a 3/4-inch videocassette. Two of them because only—one cassette only ran for an hour.

We had to find a projector, so we went to this equipment rental joint and got a projector. Michael and I took it to the Music Box and it was big. It cost \$175 and I don't know who paid for it, *[laughing]* because I don't think either of us had that money in those days. We weren't techs, but it had to be set up and focused and adjusted, so we did it. We got it all lined up and when the crowd got there, we turned it on and it had to be changed out after one hour. Always in those days, we lost a few audience members at the home invasion scene."

This is a long way. People didn't get a chance to even see this, because the MPAA said that there was no way it could get an R rating.

00:34:52	Heather	Guest	Think that's pretty impressive. It's pretty impressive. I know—it seems like from John's interviews he's very happy that it—there's no way that this movie can get an R rating.
00:35:01	April	Host	But it was a thing where—and I'm sure that, you know, you've talked to him about this—where there was no one scene that could be cut. They said that if you cut all the things to get it to an R rating, it would be a 30-second commercial.
00:35:14	Heather	Guest	That—that was a legend, knowing about it, you know, as a young horror fan, like, reading Fangoria and Gore Zone, and reading about <i>Henry</i> —
00:35:21	April	Host	Mm-hm.
00:35:22	Heather	Guest	—and also, it's very funny, like, reading those magazines as a young girl, like—like being so very anti-Jack Valenti, and knowing about, like, the—I don't know if there's many, like, 13-year-old girls like, "Augh, that MPAA!" <i>[April laughs.]</i> "Cutting all these—cutting—"
00:35:36	April	Host	That was me! That was me. I was like—I was—I was <u>angry</u> at them. Yeah.
00:35:37	Heather	Guest	But I—I always felt like in my—in my adult, producing life, the idea that I could—that I could <u>possibly</u> make an NC-17 movie <u>does</u> make me very excited.
00:35:46	April	Host	And it—it was at this time. This was one of the movies where they were considering, uh, making an A rating for movies, which would have been, um, uh—Adult Content, which is what they have, um, elsewhere. Um, but not in the US. And then of course that became NC-17, I believe. Um—

00:36:04 Heather Guest But wasn't the conversation on *Hen*—oh, uh, it's—it's—it's interesting. So it was around *Henry*, I think it was also around *Henry & June*.

00:36:09 April Host Mm-hm.

00:36:10 Heather Guest During that time period of figuring out how to rate—

00:36:11 April Host Yeah.

00:36:12 Heather Guest —these movies.

00:36:13 April Host There were like, a—a few different movies that they were just like—people were making weird shit in the eighties, and they weren't sure what to do about it!

Um, but they needed to get some kind of exhibition, and they need to have some kind of rating, but no one really understood. And the eighties was a time of just, like, a lot of flux of moral values and what was considered acceptable and what was not, and—and it was—yeah.

[Laughing] It was the eighties, you guys!

But the—the part of this that—that I think that was really interesting is that MPAA rating, is the tone. That was one of the reasons why they couldn't get the R, and it was because what Rooker and what McNaughton had said:

There was no redemption story to this character, and this is something that goes back to—to what we were talking about before, where you asked me did I hope for—uh, a hopeful ending, you know? We want the redemptive ending, where maybe—um—

00:37:07 Heather Guest I—I want someone to hit hard and not give me a redemptive ending.

00:37:09 April Host *[Laughing]* Exactly.

[April says "yeah" emphatically several times as Heather speaks.]

00:37:10 Heather Guest I always wanna go—it's like, can you hold out to the end? Because it's more truthful. So, it's not—so if a happy ending is truthful, that makes sense. But to where this movie's going to—'cause it's—it's also—as we talk about, like, sort of, like, the thematic obsessions of movies that I like—it's the underground man narrative, the Dostoevsky narrative of like, you know from frame one the end of *Henry*.

If it—if it follows that path. So it's watching—it's again, rubbernecking the descent of these characters—

00:37:39 April Host But there's—

00:37:40 Heather Guest —and how bad it could go.

00:37:41 April Host There's also something satisfying to me in that, even if you don't get that kind of, you know, subconscious hopeful ending that you—that you kind of desire just to feel good after you leave the fucking theater.

I think that there's something really satisfying about seeing

something end how it's supposed to end, as opposed to being kind of fit into a Hollywood, kind of cookie cutter of, like, yeah, this guy's redeemed and he's got good in him.

You know? There's something satisfying of being like, "Well, I knew it. It's inevitable... and I'm okay with it." You know, like that kind of... uh, realism.

- 00:38:13 Heather Guest That's another obsession I have with the film and sort of characters like that, is because they're—they're beyond—they can't be redeemed, and they're pretty much doomed, and that sort of, like, level of damage disconnects them from society, where—
- 00:38:26 April Host Mm-hm.
- 00:38:27 Heather Guest —there is no return. The same—the same thing with Travis. Though I think the note about him was that he was—he sort of played like he is doomed. Because he believes he's doomed, he is doomed.
- 00:38:36 Crosstalk Crosstalk **April:** Mm-hm.
- Heather:** I think Schrader said that, or Scorsese, about those—those—those characters.
- 00:38:40 Heather Guest So they're true—someone, you know, from like a counterculture background like myself, they are true doomed characters. They are outsider characters. They are hopelessly outsider, because of their makeup and how they are.
- 00:38:52 April Host Yeah.
- 00:38:53 Heather Guest And there's no—there's no going back. He can never have a happy ending. He can wind up in jail and die.
- 00:38:57 April Host Yeah.
- 00:38:58 Heather Guest Because there's no—there's—there's no other story for people like that.
- 00:39:00 April Host Yeah. Otherwise, it—it would not be realism anymore. Um, I, uh—I think that Rooker, when he was preparing for the role, he was really, really looking at the actual Henry Lee. The guy that they say that they—they based it on, but they can't really—they couldn't really say it in interviews because of legal stuff and all that.
- But yeah, he was studying this guy and where he ended up, and he ended up, in a sense, almost famous, though, is the thing. So he ended up almost famous, which is actually a kind of, quote, "best-case scenario" for a guy who's terrible. You know? Like this, like, psychopath. It's just like, oh, well, he got some fame out of it.
- Whereas, like, Michael Rooker's version is like, nope. This guy's just gonna be, like, under the radar, like, quiet. You know—
- 00:39:51 Heather Guest There's no glamor, it's true.
- 00:39:52 April Host Yeah. There's no glamor. He kind of—he deconstructed the glamor of that real person, and he said that he—he took, specifically, only his physical mannerisms from him.
- And then he kind of recreated the role out of something that he, uh—you know, like, an amalgamation of other people.

00:40:09 Heather Guest There's a blank quality. There's sort of like a—a zombie, ghost-like quality to both of them.

00:40:15 Crosstalk Crosstalk **April:** Mm-hm.

00:40:16 Heather Guest **Heather:** Especially when—
—in—in scenes of violence, there—there's great action, but when there's not violence, there's just sort of, like, a quietness to him.

00:40:22 April Host Mm-hm.

00:40:23 Heather Guest When he's playing cards. When he's hanging out. When he's just describing murder, there's just no... He just—he keeps it very—he keeps it very close.

00:40:31 April Host Yeah. It's a—without—without emotion. And yet I wonder—um, you know—you had mentioned earlier that when the, um, the restoration came about in 2016, that they got yet another NC-17 rating.

00:40:51 Heather Guest Um—*[laughs]*—and that McNaughton was proud of that. Um—
He was—he was very proud of it. And I actually—I worked on the MPI disc for that. I did the Joe Coleman interview.

00:40:59 April Host Oh, wow!

00:41:00 Heather Guest Yes.

00:41:01 Crosstalk Crosstalk **April:** Was that like a life's—
Heather: I—I—
April: —great work for you?
Heather: Yes. Yes.

00:41:06 Heather Guest I, um—I felt that I was waiting my entire life of reading, like, my little transgressive philosophy books and my horror books, that all sort of mounted in me being able to talk to Joe Coleman about serial killers and shamanism for two hours.

00:41:24 April Host And about how he promoted the movie, about how John approached him to do the artwork for the poster, which I think John still has at his house.
Mm-hm.

00:41:25 Heather Guest That John knew about Joe's work is great, because sort of talking to—to John a bit, realizing that he has, like, this existential, nihilist sort of philosophy about him, this old counterculture philosophy that's very well-bred in sort of art space.

00:41:39 April Host Mm-hm.

00:41:40 Heather Guest Which I was wondering, I was like—this—is—does this such—sort of art come out of, as we said, someone that's very erudite and engaged but wants to explore these sort of subject matters?

Because it—how am I describing—what playwright does that sound like? That sounds like Tennessee Williams!

00:41:55 April Host Yeah, it does!

00:41:56 Heather Guest 'Cause Tennessee Williams would write about the people, but he was of course erudite, and very—and I think he was, you know, middle-class, very well-read, what a fascination in that.

00:42:08 April Host Mm-hm.

00:42:09 Heather Guest But looking for authenticity, which is, I feel like, a lot of times when I read a lot of the Beats, is that I feel that there's sort of like a—they—they're—they're sort of creating sort of these—these—these holy underground people.

00:42:19 April Host Mm-hm.

00:42:20 Heather Guest But for me it's someone like Burroughs, which actually spanned both of those time periods, that I feel that he—because he could observe it and be a part of it, there's a—more of an authenticity to his—his writing.

00:42:31 April Host Mm-hm.

00:42:32 Heather Guest But someone like—Tennessee Williams, it just seems that he's able to sort of get into that—to that headspace. I don't know how much exposure he had to the type of characters that he's writing about.

But, you know, John's always talking about that he hung out on the hard streets of Chicago. And so could be observed, these types, in a very sort of real way to share them with us.

'Cause I always felt people doing genre, people doing extreme cinema, it's like we're the boatman going across the River Styx, and we can sort of pick these horrific flowers, like this—like—*Against Nature* Huysmans flowers, and bringing them back and able to show the community, to show them about death and violence and loss, and for us to do it, like, somehow that we're untouched by gathering this material back to show the tribe.

'Cause back—back in the day, I think I was reading a book about the Grand Guignol, they were talking about like, shamanistic blood rites, like the—the—the head of the tribe teaching the—teaching the others about death.

00:43:27 April Host Mm-hm.

00:43:28 Heather Guest So I always felt it was a responsibility for people who could stomach and make films like this. Is that that's their need in society.

00:43:35 April Host Well, Heather, I think that we know your need in society. Um—*[laughs]*. To show us the way across the River Styx to nihilism from a woman's point of view.

Uh, thank you so much for coming in and talking about this movie! Uh, I'm sure people are going to love this discussion because there's so—there's so much more that we could have talked about with this.

Um, but people wanna see *The Ranger*, as we said before, they can go to Amazon Prime or onto Shudder and watch it there, and, um, uh—keep us updated on what else you've got coming up next.

00:44:05 Music Music “Switchblade Comb” begins playing.

00:44:06 Heather Guest I certainly will. Thank you.

00:44:07	April	Host	<p>Thank you for listening to <i>Switchblade Sisters</i>! If you like what you're hearing, please leave us a five-star review on Apple Podcasts. If you do, we'll read it on-air!</p> <p>If you want to let us know what you think of the show, you can Tweet at us @SwitchbladePod, or email us at switchbladesisters@maximumfun.org.</p> <p>Please check out our Facebook group; that's Facebook.com/groups/switchbladesisters.</p> <p>Our producer is Casey O'Brien. Our senior producer is Laura Swisher, and this is a production of MaximumFun.org.</p>
00:44:32	Music	Music	<i>[Music fades out.]</i>
00:44:37	Clip	Clip	Ray: What's the matter, you got <u>shit</u> in your ears?
00:44:38	Music	Transition	A cheerful guitar chord.
00:44:40	Speaker 1	Guest	MaximumFun.org .
00:44:42	Speaker 2	Guest	Comedy and culture.
00:44:43	Speaker 3	Guest	Artist owned—
00:44:44	Speaker 4	Guest	—audience supported.