Fatal Attraction: The Serial Killer in American Popular Culture

If a single figure can be said to exemplify American popular culture's apparent fascination with violence, it is the enigmatic serial murderer. The mythos that has sprung up around the serial killer is both potent and ubiquitous; representations occur in various forms of media, including fiction, true crime, film and television, music, and graphic novels. So iconic is this figure, that one can even purchase serial killer action figures, trading cards and murderabilia.[1] Notably, this is not an entirely niche market; CDs of Charles Manson's music can be purchased from Barnes & Noble and, in 2010, *Dexter* action figures were available to purchase in Toys R Us. Indeed, the polysemic serial killer holds such a unique place in the cultural imaginary that he or she has in some ways come to be seen as emblematic of America itself. David Schmid argues that 'the serial killer is as quintessentially American a figure as the cowboy'[2] and the comparison with this feted, roaming outlaw is a just one. Both figures capture the spirit of American individualism and the pushing of boundaries; both have transcended their lived reality to achieve near-mythical status. Yet when one considers the actuality of serial murder – the suffering and degradation of victims, the devastated families left behind, the assault on law and order – the allure of the serial killer is hard to understand. The serial killer is not a noble renegade fighting back against a corrupt administration, but a disturbed and dangerous individual preying on society's most vulnerable members. So how do we account for the serial killer's enduring appeal? And how has this figure become so central to American popular culture?

Exemplar of Modernity

Serial murder, which the FBI defines as the 'unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offender(s), in separate events,'[3] is generally considered to be a modern phenomenon.

The term 'serial killer' has its origins in the mid-1960s, although it did not come into general usage until the 1980s; however, the concept has existed since 1888, when Jack the Ripper slaughtered five prostitutes in the Whitechapel area of London. Media coverage of the case was frenzied, in Europe and America as well as in the UK, and reporters on both sides of the Atlantic were united in their disapprobation of the unknown perpetrator, who was often described as 'inhuman' and a 'monster.' Theories as to 'Jack's' identity abounded but the popular conception of him as a middle-class white male preying on socially marginal women conforms with the profile of the prototypical serial killer that would be established a century later. It's interesting to note that a popular British rumor which suggested that the Ripper may have been American was accepted by many American commentators, who 'took a perverse pride in the idea…perhaps feeling that the United States should lead the world in all things, including crime.'[4] Regardless of national identity, the Whitechapel murderer came to exemplify modernity itself; the anonymity of the teeming, industrialized city enabled the killer to evade capture whilst the growth in mass media allowed news of his exploits to be transmitted around the world. Representations abounded (and continue unabated today) across a variety of media, including newspapers, periodicals, broadsides, ballads, and the stage and, as the Ripper reached mythical proportions, '[h]e set the stage for crime literature where the serial killer takes the leading role in an almost heroic capacity.'[5]

Fascination with notorious criminals was not created by the Ripper case, however. In his study of the antiheroes of the penny dreadfuls and the later boys' adventure comics, E. S. Turner notes that '[w]age slaves…wanted to read about fiery individualists, men of spirit who defied harsh laws and oppressive officialdom, even though they finished at the end of a hempen rope.'[6] The eighteenth-century English thief, Jack Sheppard (1702-1724), became a folk hero following his four daring escapes from prison and he was immortalized via various narratives and dramatic treatments of his story by such luminaries as Daniel Defoe, John Gay,

and William Ainsworth. Similarly, the French double murderer Pierre François Lacenaire (1803-1836), who had the added distinction of being a poet, achieved celebrity status due to his melodramatic performances in court. Lacenaire's virtues were still being extolled twenty-five years after his death, a fact that demonstrates not just his lasting impact on popular culture, but also how he was romanticized and rendered attractive to generations of readers.[7] (It's interesting to note the similarities between the courtroom exploits and escapes from custody of Sheppard and Lacenaire and the poster boy for modern 'celebrity' serial killing, Ted Bundy – clearly the points of appeal are universal and not time-bound.) The first known American serial killer was H. H. Holmes, who in the 1880s killed an undetermined number of victims (estimates range from 20-200) in a horrifying gothic hotel which he built and operated himself and which would later be known as the 'Murder Castle.' His arrest in 1894 and the details of his crimes, which emerged throughout 1895, were widely publicized, as was his confession for which Hearst newspapers paid Holmes $10,000[8] (the National Bureau of Economic Research puts the annual average salary in 1890 at $485, so this was a significant sum).[9] Each of these cases lays bare the interplay between fact and fiction, myth-making and media, which secures the legacies of celebrated criminals and feeds the public appetite for thrilling stories of transgression.

Narrative M.O.

Narrative treatments of such tales, both in the nineteenth century and today, demonstrate the multiplicity of tropes at play within serial killer culture, including folklore, horror, carnivalesque, and the gothic. Each of these genres is concerned with boundary-breaking and taboo; perhaps most significantly, they also offer audiences a titillating glimpse of the mysterious malefactor. Responses range from a thrill of terror to a brief and joyous vicarious

contravention of societal norms, yet in exposing the threats to society such narratives ultimately serve to reinforce the very boundaries that are being transgressed. As Joseph Grixti explains, popular cultural representations of serial murder reassure audiences 'about the rightness of the current state of civilized society, since the monsters repeatedly emerge as the exceptions that make the rule, the chinks and cracks in the social fabric that (though they may cause momentary concern and discomfort) are actually made to remind us of the structural soundness of the fabric itself.'[10] Furthermore, the mythologization of killers such as Jack the Ripper offers a means of reducing the figure's threat, as the focus shifts from the heinous reality of the crime to the carnivalesque nature of the crime narrative; from atrocity to attraction. We see this process at play in the recontextualization of figures such as Vlad the Impaler, whose story formed the basis of the enduring Dracula myth, Gilles de Rais, who inspired the Bluebeard legend, and Elizabeth Bathory, who Hammer Films reimagined as 'Countess Dracula;'[11] the reality of their many hundreds of collective victims gets lost in the process of fictionalization.

As Schmid observes, journalistic coverage of crime came relatively late to America as newspapers had tended to eschew crime reporting on the grounds of taste and decency.[12] This changed in the 1830s with the rise of the penny press, which favoured a more relaxed reporting style, and over the course of the nineteenth century crime reporting rapidly became more salacious. Attempts to reintroduce a degree of respectability to murder narration would not be felt until the 1920s, when Edmund Pearson published a series of successful true crime books and articles in quality magazines such as *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker*. Pearson's strict selection criteria, aestheticism, and restrained poetics opened true crime to a more educated and reputable audience; conservative politics and a moralizing tone were also introduced.[13] However, as the true crime genre gained in popularity, the veneer of respectability fell away and gory, sensationalistic narratives once more became the norm.

Publications such as *True Detective*, which during the 1930s and 1940s 'was reportedly selling two million copies per month'[14] established the lightly fictionalized, journalistic style of true crime narration that persists today and the genre dropped the pretense of offering moral instruction to its readers.

Fictional Representations

As the twentieth century progressed, depictions of crime and criminality moved away from the cultural borders and became progressively central to the popular imaginary. Against a backdrop of two World Wars, economic crisis, gangsterism, and the rise of the political far right, narratives depicting humankind's base nature were increasingly in demand. Depictions of serial killers and psychopaths abounded in fiction and film, particularly following the introduction of the paperback format. America's Pocket Book imprint, which launched in 1939, was modeled on the success of England's Penguin Books and it quickly established itself as the leading provider of hardboiled and noir fiction. Other publishers, including Lion and Gold Medal followed, providing what Geoffrey O'Brien has termed 'a microcosm of American fantasies about the real world'[15] and a 'vision of the lurid underside of life.'[16] Perhaps the most famous of the pulp writers, and the one most heavily invested in representations of serial killers, is Jim Thompson. His 1952 masterpiece, *The Killer Inside Me*, which Mark Seltzer has described as a 'remarkable prototype novel of compulsive killing'[17] offers one of popular culture's most enduring – and engaging – fictional serial killers. Lou Ford is a 'hyper-typical deputy sheriff living in the hyper-typical American place, Central City';[18] his very ordinariness makes his aberrance all the more terrifying. The novel is narrated by Ford himself, a narrative technique that gives the reader unparalleled access to the killer's interior and encourages an empathetic response to Thompson's protagonist. The

novel represents a high-water mark in the representation of serial killing in popular fiction and in the years since its release it has lost none of its allure or intensity. [19]

Indeed, first-person empathetic depictions of the serial killer would become a feature of the twentieth century, a phenomenon that contributed greatly to the valorization and ultimate celebrification[20] of this figure. Characters such as Patricia Highsmith's Tom Ripley[21] enjoyed similar support and, like Lou Ford, he has remained central to the cultural imaginary thanks both to the power of the original novel and its 1999 film adaptation.[22] Audience acceptance of such characters was relatively untroubled due to their fictional status; however, Truman Capote's sympathetic rendering of killers Perry Smith and Dick Hickock in his 1965 'non-fiction novel' *In Cold Blood* was met with a storm of criticism. In 1959, Smith and Hickock slaughtered four members of the Clutter family in Kansas; the crime and the killers' subsequent apprehension, trial, and execution are unflinchingly depicted in the book. The brutality of the killers is explored in detail but so too is their humanity, a surprising narrative development that forces the reader to address his or her own moral equivalency. Furthermore, in its depiction of senseless viciousness, the book also spoke to contemporary cultural concerns about the breakdown of society, as Hollowell explains: '*In Cold Blood* exemplifies the seemingly random, meaningless crime that became symptomatic of America in the sixties. For implicit in the story of the Kansas killings are larger questions about the social dislocations of the sixties and the failure of conventional morality to explain away the senseless violence we read about daily in the newspaper.'[23]

Moral Panic and Political Rhetoric

These fears moved to the cultural foreground in the latter part of the twentieth century, thanks to a significant increase in the incidence of serial murder in America. According to Peter

Vronsky, '[b]etween 1960 and 1990, confirmed serial homicides increased by 940 percent. By early 1980, the rapid rise in serial murder was causing a panic that seized the nation.'[24] The 1970s saw an extraordinary concentration of extreme serial murder cases[25] and a concomitant increase not only in the news reporting of these crimes, but also in true crime treatments and fictional representations of serial murder. The rising tide of serial murder can be attributed to events such as population increase, technological advances in the mass media, and an increasing 'tabloidization' of news reporting; it also reflects what Philip Jenkins calls 'prevailing social and political currents, which in the United States at that time tended to be strongly conservative.'[26] Following a number of high profile cases in the late 1970s – including the 'Vampire of Sacramento', Richard Chase, who was arrested in 1978 after claiming 6 victims, John Wayne Gacy, the 'Killer Clown',[27] who was also apprehended in 1978 (33 known victims), and Ted Bundy who was initially incarcerated in 1975 but escaped twice in 1977 and 1978 before being recaptured (Bundy eventually admitted to 30 killings but was suspected of up to 100) – serial murder was seized upon and used for rhetorical purposes by the New Right movement.

As the capitalistic excesses of the late-twentieth century accelerated, American society placed increasing importance on individualism and there developed a set of social circumstances which Kevin Haggerty has implicated in the rise of serial murder as a modern phenomenon:

1. The mass media and the attendant rise of a celebrity culture.

2. A society of strangers.

3. A means/ends rationality that is largely divorced from value considerations.

4. Cultural frameworks of denigration which tend to implicitly single out some groups for greater predation.

5. Particular opportunity structures for victimization; and finally,

6. The notion that society can be engineered.[28]

The impact of urbanism on community values and personal identity challenged earlier conceptions of safety as a seemingly chaotic, uncaring modernity fostered a sense of vulnerability which was heightened by media coverage of the growing problem of serial murder. Anxieties about the roaming serial killer and 'murder without apparent motive' (as introduced by Capote's use of Joseph Satten and Karl Menninger's influential 1960 article[29] in *In Cold Blood*) captured the public imagination and news of the dramatic spike in violence in cities such as New York made global headlines. The neoliberal Reagan administration and other moral conservatives interpreted the increase in serial murder as the inevitable consequence of the social changes of the 1960s and, as a potent domestic threat, the serial killer offered a neat counterpoint to the dangers posed by international enemies such as Middle Eastern terrorists and the Soviet Union.

Significantly, the increased focus on serial killers during this period can also be linked to the FBI, as Murley observes:

> As the Communist threat eased and the most heated part of the Cold War drew to a close during the 1970s and into the 1980s, the FBI began an era of belt tightening and penuriousness that coincided with a drop in public confidence in government institutions and a decline in the FBI's reputation and popularity. The threat posed by serial killers was used by the agency to resuscitate its creaky and ailing image and restore its federal funding, as the term "serial killer" and all it implied leaked into public consciousness.[30]

Many of the (at times wildly inaccurate)[31] crime statistics that were in circulation at this time originated from the Behavioral Sciences Unit (BSU) of the Justice Department, which was

headquartered at the FBI National Academy in Quantico, which would later be immortalized by Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988). As the Unit lobbied for federal funding for programs which would address the 'linkage blindness' which had prevented the early apprehension of Ted Bundy, the 'serial killer panic' so prevalent in this era was exacerbated. The BSU, established in the early 1970s specifically to address the growing problem of serial murder, developed 'profiling' techniques that agents claimed helped them to better understand and therefore apprehend violent offenders. So-called 'mindhunters' such as John Douglas and Robert Ressler (both of whom provided the inspiration for Thomas Harris's Special Agent Jack Crawford) became celebrities in their own right and there began a curiously symbiotic relationship between 'three apparently independent forces: the law enforcement bureaucracy, the news media, and popular culture.'[32]

Thomas Harris and the Rise of Serial Killer Culture

The American author and screenwriter, Thomas Harris, cemented the relationship between serial killing, law enforcement, and popular culture. Harris, who Leonard Cassuto has described as 'perhaps the most influential American crime writer since Dashiell Hammett,'[33] established the template for serial killer fiction and brought serial killers, and the profilers who sought them, into the mainstream. His enigmatic and enduring character, Hannibal Lecter, would transcend his literary base to occupy a unique place in American popular culture and Harris himself would be credited as 'perhaps the man most directly responsible for the 1980s and 1990s explosion of interest in serial killers, the current cycle of fictional narratives of serial murder, and the future shape of the mythos itself.'[34] Harris's commitment to research is legendary and his portrayal of the mindhunters in his first two Lecter novels (*Red Dragon,* 1981 and *The Silence of the Lambs,* 1989) was so successful that 'at the FBI

training academy in Quantico – which Harris, researching his novel, briefly attended – the case of Ed Gein, on whom Buffalo Bill is based, is taught alongside Harris's book.'[35]

Harris's work spawned a raft of imitators within popular fiction and his influence could also be felt on true crime literature, with offenders such as Randy Kraft and Charlie Hatcher described as 'real-life' Hannibal Lecters.[36] The news reporting of serial murder was similarly impacted, with sensationalistic coverage of sequential killings, always a guarantee of large sales or viewing figures, increasingly focusing on 'crimes that most resembled available public stereotypes: sex killers like Bundy, cannibals like Hannibal. In turn, reporting of those specific cases reinforced awareness of these stereotypes.'[37] Furthermore, Harris's flattering depiction of the mindhunters Will Graham in *Red Dragon* and Clarice Starling in *The Silence of the Lambs* bolstered the discourses placed into the media by the Justice Department and cemented public conceptions of the FBI and the BSU as society's only defense against the terrifying serial killer. However, it's interesting to note that the symbiotic relationship between fact and fiction relates not just to representations of serial murder but also to modern detection techniques. In his 1995 book, *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI's Serial Crime Unit*, John Douglas asserts that modern detection techniques actually have a basis in literature: 'though most of the books that dramatize and glorify what we do, such as Tom Harris's memorable *The Silence of the Lambs*, are somewhat fanciful and prone to dramatic license, our antecedents actually do go back to crime fiction more than crime fact. C. August [sic] Dupin, the amateur detective hero of Edgar Allan Poe's 1841 classic "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," may have been history's first behavioral profiler.'[38] Douglas's description of *The Silence of the Lambs* as 'memorable' ratified Harris's depiction of the BSU and the endorsement assured the popularity of Harris's novels with a public keen to glimpse the inner workings of the FBI.[39]

Harris's earliest Lecter novels are police procedurals, a type of crime thriller that offers reassuring closure to the reader as justice prevails and law and order are restored by the narrative's end. The locus of empathy in such novels is typically the detective yet, for all of the popularity of characters such as Graham and Starling, in Harris's novels it was the cannibalistic serial killer, Hannibal Lecter, who really captured the public's imagination. Within Harris's narrative worlds, Lecter enjoys a unique celebrity; consulted by the Justice Department and feted by the press and academics alike, his remarkable intellect and beguiling, if chilling, charisma are foregrounded over his gruesome murders. Lecter's choice of victims and his particular way of making their deaths fit their 'crimes,' foreshadows Jeff Lindsay/Showtime's *Dexter* and, in reducing cognitive dissonance, creates further points of identification for audiences. This effect was heightened by Harris's decision to depict Lecter as a '"good" serial killer'[40] in the novels 'by contrasting him with a "bad" serial killer'[41] such as Francis Dolarhyde or Buffalo Bill.

The extraordinary popularity of Jonathan Demme's 1991 film adaptation of *The Silence of the Lambs* launched Lecter into the cultural stratosphere, leading Linda Mizejewski to describe him as 'the most prominent celebrity serial killer of the twentieth century.'[42] Lecter's fame was both a catalyst for and expression of the bizarre celebrification of serial killers that became increasingly prominent during this period and it is interesting to note that the valorization of the serial killer was not confined to fiction, but extended also to actual serial killers such as Ted Bundy and John Wayne Gacy.

The 'Celebrity' Serial Killer

Bundy occupies a unique place in the cultural imaginary as perhaps the most celebrated real-life serial killer of all time. His abject crimes, which took place between 1974 and 1979 and

included murder, rape, and necrophilia, are overshadowed by his handsome, articulate, and charming media image that contradicts the gothic monstrosity that attended earlier representations of prolific murderers. Indeed, this witty, likeable psychopath has more in common with the charismatic fictional creations of Thompson and Highsmith than the slavering beasts depicted in Ripper-era coverage of sequential murder. Bundy's two daring escapes from custody recall that other feted jail-breaker and folk-hero, Jack Sheppard, and even though Bundy's final escape culminated in an horrific explosion of violence which claimed the lives of three more victims (one a 12-year-old girl) one cannot help but marvel at the fortitude and ingenuity that facilitated his escape and kept him one step ahead of the authorities during his time on the run.[43] Bundy's flamboyant court appearances, which saw him acting as his own counsel and even, incredibly, getting married in court during his trial, captivated contemporary audiences and the courtroom was consistently packed with young and attractive 'Ted groupies.' Even the judge who presided over Bundy's 1979 trial, which a contemporary report described as having 'the makings of a Perry Mason trial,'[44] appeared to have been won over when he told the killer 'I want you to know I have no animosity for you.'[45] The carnivalesque tale did not end with Ted's incarceration; he reputedly fathered a daughter whilst on Death Row, despite a ban on conjugal visits. In later years, Bundy gave media interviews on the pernicious effects of violent pornography and helped the FBI to profile the Green River Killer in much the same way that the fictional Lecter would later be consulted during the search for Buffalo Bill. The carnival atmosphere that surrounded Bundy's 1989 execution was reminiscent of the public executions that took place in the 18th and 19th centuries at England's famous Newgate Prison, with a crowd of 500 people gathering outside the prison to chant 'Fry, Bundy, fry!',[46] whilst others staged celebratory barbeques or sold branded t-shirts at various locations throughout Florida.

Mark Seltzer tells us that '[t]he serial killer…aspires – like everyone else? – to celebrity under the conditions of an anonymous mass society'[47] and this phenomenon, fueled by media interest in serial murder, was particularly prevalent in the late 1970s. Ted Bundy courted attention from the press and on one occasion even went so far as to perform a backward somersault for cameramen waiting outside an Orlando courthouse.[48] Yet he also attacked the media, castigating them for 'metamorphosing him into a "symbol"'[49] for their interest in serial murder: 'It is sad but true that the media thrives on sensation and they thrive on evil.'[50] Despite his protestations about the media, Bundy was reportedly envious of the coverage given to Gary Gilmore, a double murderer who was held at Utah State Prison at the same time that Bundy was there in 1976. Having been sentenced to death for the murders of Max Jensen and Bennie Bushnell, Gilmore demanded that the execution be carried out quickly so that he could avoid the prolonged limbo of life on Death Row. The ensuing legal battle, played out under the gaze of the media, saw Gilmore transformed into a reluctant celebrity who even graced the cover of *Newsweek*, with the words 'DEATH WISH' printed on his chest.[51] Although Gilmore claimed that 'he didn't want news coverage, TV, radio interviews, nothing,'[52] he couldn't deny his growing fame – particularly when he began to receive 30-40 pieces of fan mail per day[53] and prison guards were asking for his autograph.[54] His story was told by Norman Mailer in *The Executioner's Song* (1979), a book which would earn Mailer the 1980 Pulitzer Prize and that Murley has described as being 'as much an exploration of the marketing of murder as it is of murder itself.'[55] *The Executioner's Song* also foregrounds the nascent murder merchandising industry;[56] everyone involved in Gilmore's story seemed set to gain financially from his death and there was even talk of him wearing a branded 'GILMORE – DEATH WISH' t-shirt for the execution, 'so they could auction it off, bullet holes and all.'[57]

The rise of celebrity culture and the commodification of murder continued unabated in the latter years of the twentieth century and matters of taste and decency increasingly took second place to sensationalism. Mass media obsession with serial murder during this period is starkly rendered by Robert Conrath's observation that 'when Jeffrey Dahmer's house of carnage was discovered in Milwaukee in 1991, television rights to his story were being negotiated within the hour.'[58] Furthermore, the shaky public personas of notorious serial killers were increasingly replaced with gothic media images.[59] When asked to explain his crimes in a telephone interview with the Knight-Tribune shortly before his execution in 1994, John Wayne Gacy replied: 'There's been 11 hardback books on me, 31 paperbacks, two screenplays, one movie, one off-Broadway play, five songs, and over 5,000 articles. What can I say about it?'[60] Killers became increasingly aware of the power of their brands, as demonstrated by the fact that, at the height of his 'fame,' Ramirez signed his artworks 'Richard Ramirez Night Stalker.' Tellingly, his pieces were in such high demand within the murderabilia market that he even had his own art dealer.[61]

Reorientation and Rationalization

The first wave of panic about serial murder which typified the years 1983-1985 was diluted as the decade progressed, due in part to the impact of mass media representations of serial murder. True crime, popular fiction, splatter films, television treatments, and graphic novels helped to reduce the serial killer to a selection of manageable tropes that separated public perception of the figure from lived reality. However, fears were reignited in the period 1990-1992 following a burst of fictional and actual serial murder events. These included the 1990 campus murders of five students in one weekend by 'Gainesville Ripper,' Danny Rolling; the troubled publication of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* in 1991;[62] the release of

Jonathan Demme's adaptation of *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991); the apprehension of the cannibalistic Jeffrey Dahmer; and the arrest of Aileen Wuornos, who is often described as America's first female serial killer. The crimes of both Dahmer and Wuornos came to light in 1991 and acted as an interesting factual counterpoint to the fictional offerings of Demme/Harris and Ellis. The extraordinary concentration of factional and fictional serial murder narratives during this period meant that sequential killing was almost constantly in the news and anxieties about personal safety and moral collapse heightened significantly.

Brian Jarvis has linked the commercialization of violence to 'consumer pathology'[63] and these issues are memorably explored by Bret Easton Ellis in *American Psycho* (1991). This controversial text constitutes a pivotal moment in American pop culture's representation of the serial killer and its effect was compounded by Mary Harron's 2000 film of the same title. *American Psycho* combines virtuosic poetics with a wide variety of cultural influences – including the slasher film/gross-out movie, the celebrification of the serial killer, consumer culture and Reaganite politics, and the witty, likeable psychopaths of Jim Thompson, Patricia Highsmith, and Thomas Harris – to create a paradigm-changing, landmark exploration of what Haggerty describes as 'the elective affinities between serial murder and contemporary civilization.'[64] The novel's unflinching focus on the brutal and gratuitous murders (possibly) committed by its antagonist, Patrick Bateman, would change forever the treatment of violence and the serial killer in American pop culture. Due to its likeable antagonist and casual attitude to representations of extreme violence, *American Psycho* is perhaps the key text responsible for the normalisation of serial murder that took place in the late twentieth century. Bateman made possible characters such as Jeff Lindsay's Dexter and also led to an increased focus on the aestheticization of violence that can be felt in contemporary cultural output.

Media representations of serial murder have traditionally tended to focus on the killer's monstrosity and how his acceptable public façade hides unimaginable horrors.[65] However, as the twentieth century drew to a close, the idea that the serial killer might *look* like 'one of us' expanded to include the suggestion that there is a little bit of the serial killer or psychopath in everyone. For instance, the 1997 graphic novel, *JTHM: Director's Cut*, by Jhonen Vasquez,[66] details the exploits of Johnny the Homicidal Maniac (the JTHM of the title). The work includes a preface by Rob Schrab who explains that '[t]here's a little monster inside all of us, a little wolf-faced monkey that needs to be satiated. As people, we mustn't ignore that monster. If we do, we cheat ourselves. We deny an emotion, a feeling.'[67] Schrab argues that engagement with characters such as Johnny the Homicidal Maniac allows readers to 'commit murder in [the] dream world,'[68] thereby engaging in wish-fulfilment and releasing psychic tension in a safe and risk-free manner. Vasquez himself prefaces the book with a cartoon character who advises readers to '[r]emember, it's all just questionably tasteful fun.'[69] Derf Backderf is similarly compelled to add disclaimers to his graphic novel, *My Friend Dahmer* (2012).[70] Backderf's treatment of the Dahmer story, and the reader's consumption of it as entertainment, should be troubling; instead the graphic novel sensitively renders the 'tragic tale'[71] of the young 'Jeff''s troubled upbringing and passes judgment on those adults who failed to nurture and support him and thereby prevent his murderous expressions of loneliness and despair.

Backderf's sympathetic treatment of the killer reflects not just his personal history with Dahmer but also changing public attitudes to serial killers in the twenty-first century. However, Backderf is at pains to distance himself from Dahmer's crimes: 'Once Dahmer kills…– and I can't stress this enough – my sympathy for him ends…Dahmer was a twisted wretch whose depravity was almost beyond comprehension. Pity him, but don't empathize with him.'[72] Significantly, Backderf's narrative does not focus on Dahmer's crimes. There is

a disconnect between the struggling youth of Backderf's graphic novel and the demonic murderer depicted elsewhere. In part, this reflects the inability of 'normal' citizens such as Backderf to understand how a classmate and friend could become a cannibalistic serial murderer. It could also be seen as the compound effect of the myriad retellings of the story; the overlay of fictional representations and news reporting of real-life cases sees the horror of the crimes mitigated by the popular conception and media image of the serial killer. In a sense, the process allows pop culture serial killers to be 'declawed;' reduced to gothic spectacle, they become acceptable subjects for cultural scrutiny and the process allows the reader to disavow any troubling feelings of moral complicity.

Disavowal and *Dexter*, the heroic serial killer

As we have seen, in the twentieth century it became increasingly acceptable for writers, filmmakers, and graphic novelists (amongst others) to offer engaging portraits of serial killers to a public eager for exciting and challenging tales of transgression. Although still subject to gothic narrative devices, the serial killer was increasingly humanized and an empathetic response to the figure was often encouraged. However, whilst moral dubiousness increased during this period, due to the narrative reorientation of the serial killer, the boundaries between acceptable (law abiding) and unacceptable (murderous) behaviours remained clearly delineated.

The relentless collapsing of categories such as good and evil in popular culture led to a renegotiation of fictional morality that is best expressed by Dexter, the heroic serial killer. Dexter Morgan, blood spatter analyst by day and vigilante serial killer by night, is the hero of a series of seven novels by Jeff Lindsay (2004-2013) and eight seasons of an award-winning television series (2006-2013) by US premium cable channel, Showtime. *Dexter* draws on the

revenge narratives that have been a mainstay of American popular culture in genres as disparate as the classic Western, the 1970s cycle of vigilante films, and graphic novels such as *Punisher* (1986).[73] The character's reorientation from evil to righteousness is achieved by his commitment to only killing other killers and, as the embodiment of Julia Kristeva's notion of the 'criminal with good conscience [...] the killer who claims he's a saviour,'[74] his characterization marks a further milestone in serial killer culture.

Dexter offers a potent and satisfying antidote to the fears about rising violence and the breakdown of society that typified the second wave of serial killer panic in the 1990s. In *Dearly Devoted Dexter* (2005), the second novel in Lindsay's series, Dexter muses that

>…I could have been much worse. I could have been a vicious raving monster who killed and killed and left towers of rotting flesh in my wake. Instead, here I was on the side of truth, justice, and the American way. Still a monster, of course, but I cleaned up nicely afterward, and I was OUR monster, dressed in red, white, and blue 100 percent synthetic virtue. [75]

The juxtaposition of Dexter and his victims is an important identificatory tool for an American public inundated with around thirty years' worth of stories about the untrammeled murderous appetites of killers like Bundy, Gacy, and Dahmer. Dexter stands for reason, order, and decency. He steps in to protect society when traditional structures of law, order, and justice fail. His kills are not fueled by a pathological urge to destroy or possess; they are governed by a strict moral code and ultimately benefit society. This code is the key to audience acceptance of Dexter and what Schmid has described as 'the willingness of Americans to embrace the serial killer as one of their own, as the personification of essentially American values.'[76]

Lindsay's novels and the Showtime series dedicate a significant amount of narrative space to the code, which was devised by Dexter's late stepfather, Harry Morgan. Harry was a highly respected detective with Miami-Dade PD who became increasingly frustrated with the inability of conventional justice to deal adequately with extreme offenders. Upon realizing that his son's murderous urges could not be eradicated, Harry trained Dexter to channel his impulses into only killing those deserving of their fate. Cognitive dissonance is reduced when the reader or viewer accepts that leaving Code-less killers and predatory pedophiles free to prey on the vulnerable is far worse than condoning their dispatch by Dexter. Acceptance of Dexter's actions is also facilitated by the bifurcation between his '[q]uirky, funny, happy-go-lucky'[77] persona and his Dark Passenger. The separation of these two aspects of his personality facilitates an empathetic response to Dexter by reducing the culpability of his most appealing and socially acceptable 'self' and attributing his crimes to a shadowy, almost supernatural other.[78] Lindsay's sardonic narrative style and Showtime's casting of Michael C. Hall in the title role also help; the use of a handsome, charming, and famous actor taps into the Hollywood star system, which Schmid imbricates in the rise of the celebrity serial killer.[79] Despite the multiple disavowal techniques embedded in the narratives, audiences embrace Dexter not in spite of but *because of* his nefarious deeds. He answers a common need to fight back against social threats whilst also supplying the opportunity for thrilling, vicarious transgression.

The empathetic reorientation of the serial killer, which grew steadily throughout the twentieth century, finds its fullest expression in *Dexter*. Martin McDonagh's film, *Seven Psychopaths* (2012), suggests that the trope of the 'killer who only kills other killers' is becoming hackneyed and boring, yet it shows no sign of abating. Ambiguous figures of identification have become a mainstay of contemporary television series such as *Hannibal*[80] and *Bates Motel*,[81] both of which reimagine and develop foundational characters from the

serial killer mythos. The serial killer has been transformed from a liminal, unknowable fiend into a locus of empathy and exemplar of modernity, whilst violent spectacle is now an acceptable form of entertainment. Regardless of narrative orientation, the serial killer offers great dramatic potential and invites a plurality of intriguing responses. The extraordinarily diverse and numerous representations of this figure both reflect his or her cultural resonance and assure the serial killer of iconic status within American popular culture.

Notes

[1] Worryingly, at www.serialkillers.com one can even buy stun guns, pepper spray and voice changers – everything the fledgling serial killer might need! This suggests an aspirational level to the mythos and posits serial killing as a vocation, rather than a compulsive manifestation of mental illness or personality disorder.
[2] Schmid, *Natural* 24.
[3] Morton, np.
[4] Schmid, *Natural* 32.
[5] Vronsky, 62.
[6] Turner, 52.
[7] 'Lacenaire,' 417.
[8] Schmid, *Natural* 55.
[9] Long, 40.
[10] Grixti, 95.
[11] Ibid., 88.
[12] Schmid, *Natural* 182.
[13] For more on Pearson, see Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities*, pp184-190.
[14] Murley, 13.
[15] O'Brien, 2.
[16] Ibid., 11.
[17] Seltzer, 159.
[18] Ibid., 160.
[19] Film versions of the novel appeared in 1976 (Devi, dir. Burt Kennedy) and 2010 (Hero Entertainment, dir. Michael Winterbottom), providing further evidence of Lou Ford's enduring appeal.
[20] For more on the celebrification of the serial killer, see Schmid's definitive book on the subject, *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
[21] *The Talented Mr Ripley*. 1955. London: Vintage, 1999.
[22] Miramax, dir. Anthony Minghella.
[23] Vronsky, 19
[24] Ibid.
[25] These include, but are not restricted to: Juan Corona, active 1960s-1971; Herbert Mullin, active 1972-1973; Edmund Kemper, active 1964 and 1972-1973; Dean Corll, active 1970-1973; John Wayne Gacy, active 1972-1978; Ted Bundy, active 1974-1979; David Berkowitz, active 1976-1977; Kenneth Bianchi and Angelo Buono, active 1977-1978; William Bonin, active 1979-1980; Wayne Williams, active 1979-1981.
[26] Jenkins, 8.
[27] Note the gothic nicknames given to these and other serial killers.
[28] Haggerty, 173.
[29] Satten, Joseph, Karl Menninger, Irwin Rosen, and Martin Mayman. "Murder without apparent motive: A study in personality disorganization." American Journal of Psychiatry 117.1 (1960): 48-53.
[30] Murley, 156.
[31] Jenkins challenges the widely quoted figures of 4,000-5,000 annual serial murder victims, arguing that discrepancies in the reporting of crime distorted the data. For more information see Jenkins pp. 49-80.
[32] Jenkins, 223.

[33] Cassuto, 242.

[34] Simpson, 83.

[35] Haut, 215.

[36] Jenkins, 89-90.

[37] Ibid., 98.

[38] Douglas and Olshaker, 32.

[39] However, the accuracy of Harris's depiction of the FBI has also been challenged, as Jenkins observes. See *Using Murder*, p74.

[40] Schmid, 'Devil' 140.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Mizejewski, 159.

[43] Given the ferocity of Bundy's final attacks, it is extraordinary that one is still able to admire aspects of his escape. The feat is achieved via a complex process of disavowal that can also help to explain audience engagement with serial killers more generally. Readers of narrative descriptions of Bundy's exploits, such as Ann Rule's *The Stranger Beside Me* (1980. New York: Norton, 2000), are able to reconcile the dissonance between their enjoyment of the text and the bloody reality of the crimes being depicted by focusing instead on less troubling facets of the tale. Rule foregrounds the carnivalesque elements of the Bundy story, thereby shifting attention away from the crimes and the victims and allowing the reader to gloss over the more disturbing material and his or her consumption of it as entertainment.

[44] Smith, np.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Bearak, np.

[47] Seltzer, 135.

[48] Rule, 423.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid., 356.

[51] Mailer, 657.

[52] Ibid., 490.

[53] Ibid., 661.

[54] Ibid., 921.

[55] Murley, 70.

[56] When asked for his last words before the execution was carried out, Gilmore simply said 'Let's do it.' These words were immortalised on t-shirts that appeared soon after his death (see http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/ hi/dates/stories/january/17/newsid_2530000/2530413.stm accessed 30/06/14 22.53h) and, incredibly, were also the inspiration for Nike's enduring 'Just Do It' slogan (see http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/20/business/ media/20adco.html accessed 30/06/14 22.53h).

[57] Mailer, 851. There is some suggestion in the text that the comments regarding the sale of the t-shirt were made in jest; either way, it highlights the ruthlessness of the murder industry.

[58] Conrath, 156.

[59] Jean Murley describes Charles Manson's transformation into a 'cultural signifier of mayhem and subversion' (93). Murley argues convincingly that '[t]he Manson phenomenon has truly been one of the most bizarre collisions of media and murder in American history, and the cultural products that have resulted from that collision magnify issues of celebrity and crime, of violence and entertainment, and misapprehension of the line separating the two' (ibid., 91).

[60] Berry-Dee, 70.

[61] See http://serialkillersink.net/skistore/index.php?_a=viewProd&productId=2686, accessed 30/06/14 23.23h.

[62] Ellis's novel was dropped by its original publisher, Simon & Schuster, days before its scheduled release in 1990, after leaked excerpts from galley proofs printed in *Time* and *Spy* magazines were uniformly condemned. Just two days later, Ellis signed a new contract with Random House, a more prestigious publisher, who released the book under its Vintage imprint the following year. Early criticism of *American Psycho* was almost exclusively negative, with Tammy Bruce, President of the Los Angeles Chapter of the National Organization of Women, describing it as 'a how-to novel on the torture and dismemberment of women' (New York Times, December 6th 1990).

[63] Jarvis, 326-344.

[64] Haggerty, 184.

[65] This discourse does seem to be specific to male killers. Female serial killers such as Wuornos tend to be depicted as more outwardly 'other' and liminal; in Wuornos's case, this was heightened by her status as a sex worker, which instantly set her beyond 'respectable' society.

[66] San Jose: Slave Labor Graphics, 1997.

[67] Ibid., np.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.
[70] New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2012.
[71] Backderf, 11.
[72] Ibid., 11.
[73] Garth Ennis and Lewis La Rosa. *The Punisher: In the Beginning*. New York: Marvel, 2006.
[74] Kristeva, 4.
[75] Lindsay, 4.
[76] Schmid, 'Devil' 132-133.
[77] Lindsay, 130.
[78] However, it's not all about disavowal. According to Jung, the shadow is one of the universal archetypes which make up human consciousness. Acceptance of Dexter may therefore also be based on the reader or viewer's acknowledgement of his or her own shadow.
[79] Schmid, *Natural* 105-137.
[80] Dino De Laurentiis, 2013-present.
[81] American Genre Film Archive, 2013-present.

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