

‘Perhaps this is the purpose of all art, all writing, on [serial] murders, fiction and non-fiction: simply to participate’. Explore the appeal of the contemporary serial killer narrative.

Contemporary western culture is hypnotized by the serial killer, and this crime-dazed, macabre culture bares a rich history. Foucault notes that, ‘throughout the whole second half of the [nineteenth] century, there developed a "literature of criminality", [...] including miscellaneous news items [...] detective novels and all the romanticized writings which developed around crime"¹. Accordingly, the typecast of the serial killer emerged in this era. However, the idea of the monstrous, blood-thirsty human ‘other’ dates back a lot further, to the folklore of vampires and werewolves. From this dense narrative history, the contemporary serial killer has been constructed and the “literature of criminality” has expanded. A plethora of tributes to this figure envelope modern culture - documentaries, films, novels, podcasts, ‘murderabilia’ even. I will argue that the appeal of the contemporary serial killer narrative revolves around the uncovering of the extremity of human nature and the crisis of self and society that it provokes.

Walter Benjamin writes, ‘if great art loses its aura in the marketplace of mass impression, the individual life of the celebrity achieves an aura through mass reproduction’². Correspondingly, it is

¹ Michel Foucault, ‘About the Concept of the “Dangerous Individual” in 19th-Century Legal Psychiatry’, *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 1.1 (1978), 1-18 (p. 12), < [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-2527\(78\)90020-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-2527(78)90020-1) > accessed 2/04/21.

² Walter Benjamin quoted by David Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities*, (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 12.

through the celebrity-killer-cult, a form of ‘mass reproduction’, that the serial killer’s aura is created, elevating them to art-like status. Through repetitive and obsessive combings of killers’ lives, fragments of their being are collected, examined, exaggerated, re-interpreted, mythologised and sustained. As such, killers become fetishized, sensationalised, aestheticized and overdetermined. Popular culture has thus created, privileged and perpetuated the serial killer celebrity. But not only is the killer constructed through such cultural narratives, so too is the position of their audience as voyeurs to their dark tales and dramatic spectacles of violence. Serial killer and audience are symbiotic in sustaining the former’s aura.

For what perverse reason is this grotesque narrative so enticing? There is perhaps an appealing echo of Bakhtinian carnivalesque in the serial killer’s violent behaviour, elevating them to the status of ‘idols of destruction’³. While I acknowledge the notable disparities between serial killing and Bakhtin’s theorization of folk humour, the territories they respectively enter bare similarities. Bakhtin notes that the carnival is ‘a second world and a second life outside officialdom’⁴. The crossing of boundaries of law, order, morality and the entering of a boundless space in the ‘second world’, rings true to the serial killer’s unlawful, immoral actions. The most deplorable of behaviours is welcomed in the carnival sense of the world; what can be more objectionable than serial murder? Furthermore, the grotesqueness of the acts committed in heinous serial crimes conforms to the grotesque realism of carnivalesque profanation, albeit in a negative, destructive sense rather than the positive, renewing sense that Bakhtin describes. The carnal, id-like quality of the crimes of serial killers can only take place in this space.

³ Ibid., p. 22.

⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans by. Helene Iswolsky (Indiana University Press, 1984) p. 6.

This 'second world' is beyond the physical reach of voyeurs, but it is glimpsed via the consumption of serial killer culture. The seduction, thrill and horror of the transgression of all boundaries of humanity is experienced, if only for a split second. Our carnal natures are beckoned and curiosity gets the better of us. A bite of forbidden fruit is taken, and a mouthful of knowledge of anti-establishment violence is absorbed. Downing expands on this insight, arguing that for the viewer, 'The acte gratuit, [...] is "just" an idea, but an idea that is particularly exciting to the modern imagination [...] because it hints at a (masculine) subject acting out a form of radical freedom that is antibourgeois, antipositivistic, and that elevates the aesthetic above the ethical.'⁵ While Downing notes that this is a masculine subject killing (as is typical), when a woman acts out such a form of 'radical freedom', hers is more extreme. She crosses further into a non-hegemonic liminal space, casting off gender expectations of care, nurture and motherliness via her murderous acts. But the safe distance created between viewer and killer allows for a contained experience of this taboo 'second world'. The thrill is experienced without the act.

The 'two-world condition'⁶ of Bakhtin's theorization of medieval culture, the coexistence of the world of officialdom and carnival and the transition from one world to another, strikes a parallel with the serial killer's uncanniness. At once they appear to belong to our world but also to another. As the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit commented 'they are not monsters and may not appear strange. Serial murderers often have families and homes, are gainfully employed, and appear to be normal members of the community.'⁷ Or as Ted Bundy remarked, "'I'm not an animal and I'm not crazy... I'm just a normal individual.'"⁸ Carnal animalism and civility, monstrosity and humanity,

⁵ Lisa Downing, *The Subject of Murder: Gender, Exceptionality, and the Modern Killer* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 15.

⁶ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 6.

⁷ 'Serial Murder', ed. Robert J. Morton <<https://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/serial-murder>>, posted 2/09/2005, accessed 03/04/21.

⁸ Joe Berlinger, dir., *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* (Netflix, 2019).

grotesqueness and charm all combine in this celebrity. The serial killer is the embodiment of the duality of human nature at its most extreme. They are of a metamorphic nature, breaching boundaries in their very existence. It is their ability to conceal such internal dualisms, to 'hide in plain sight', that makes them appear ever more mysterious and enticing.

As we gaze upon their normality, the notorious celebrity is inevitably examined in relation to ourselves. As Tithecott writes, 'when he is caught, we cannot look at him for long. [...] His image says everything and nothing, for it is "normality" which stares back at us. [...] It is ourselves we see.'⁹ Sufjan Stevens song 'John Wayne Gacy, Jr.'¹⁰ (about the American serial killer of the same name), muses on such ideas with a profound tone of lament and empathy for the killer's resonant humanity. The music video shows vintage original footage of children, presumably both John as a child and also his child victims. The nostalgic atmosphere of the mise-en-scene insinuates regretful melancholy that a child could turn out this way. As such, the narrative is poignant in its simplicity: John kills children yet John was also once a child and therefore John is just a human. The shots of men and boys in the music video are presented with a romanticized intimacy while there is a sense of ardor to the lyrics:

He took off all their clothes for them
He put a cloth on their lips, quiet hands, quiet kiss on the mouth

Stevens' serial killer narrative is a tragically sad one, depicting 'love affairs' that are brutal and wrong in a collision of intimacy and violence. The uncomfortable proximity he creates between killer and self, pedophilia and romance, draws attention to John's uncanny human nature. Stevens' final verse,

⁹ Richard Tithecott, *Of Men and Monsters* (Wisconsin: the University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p. 6.

¹⁰ Sufjan Stevens, 'John Wayne Gacy, Jr.', Illinois (New York: Rough Trade Records, 2005)

And in my best behaviour
I am really just like him
Look beneath the floor boards
For the secrets I have hid

insinuates that while our natures may not be as extreme as those of killers, we all have our ‘secrets’ and repressed dark natures. We are human just like John, and thus in us lies the potential for such atrocity.

But ‘John Wayne Gacy’ is a rare example of empathy expressed for the killer. In the typical serial killer narrative, the relationality between killer and self is not openly sustained, as most are unwilling to confront the sinister capabilities of their own human natures. It is too taboo to admit we too could be a killer. Subsequently, the killer creates a crisis of differentiation between self and other, order and instability, which must be resolved in our cultural narratives. Julia Kristeva’s abject theory can be applied to such a predicament; she theorizes that the abject has to do with ‘what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules’¹¹. The audience must purify the abject and cleanse itself of the taboo the serial killer represents; this is the real appeal and essentiality of witnessing the serial killer narrative. This celebrity must be firmly rejected in order to define societal boundaries and curb disorder as well as for self-assurance and self-validation of one’s own identity, morality and humanity. As Butler writes, ‘the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside’¹². The pull many feel towards the serial killer has to be inhibited for the constitution of one’s subjectivity.

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 5.

¹² Judith Butler quoted by Thomas Ugelvik, ‘The Rapist and the Proper Criminal’, in *Narrative Criminology Understanding Stories of Crime*, ed. Lois Presser and Sveinung Sandburg (New York: New York University Press, 2015), pp. 23-41 (p. 27).

Cultural representations of the serial killer as a cast-out, isolated, individualized enigma reveal such an attempt to distance them from ourselves. They are stereotyped as ‘a type of person [...] an alien life form’¹³. Accordingly, documentary culture attempts to strip back the killer’s mask of normality, to get to the truth and uncover the ‘monster’ that lies underneath. Meanwhile, the media naming process of serial killers privileges them with an unhuman mythic status – ‘Jack the Ripper’, ‘Son of Sam’ (David Berkowitz), ‘the Co-Ed Killer’ (Edmund Kemper), ‘the Milwaukee Cannibal’ (Jeffrey Dahmer), ‘the Killer Clown’ (John Wayne Gacy), to name just a few examples. The presented uniqueness of their characters equally strips them of a relatable human nature. For example, the fictional serial killer Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*, is presented as a uniquely brilliant mind. Additionally, terms such as ‘evil’ and ‘psychopath’ are thrown around to asocialize murderous acts. For Bundy there was a voice in his head urging him to commit his terrible deeds, for the ‘night stalker’ it was a haunting Satanic presence. Such presentations omit societal values, those that can be linked to the self, as contributing to the creation of such killers. As Downing writes, we ‘isolate those individuals from the rest of their culture and [...] maintain them as (sometimes glamorous) monsters, but never as mirrors’¹⁴. In doing so, we can separate ourselves from these ‘monsters’.

In conclusion, the appeal of the serial killer narrative certainly lies in the desire ‘simply to participate’, but the attraction is much more complex than that. The uncanny dissonance of the serial killer calls into crisis our individual and collective subjectivity, seducing audiences ‘to participate’ in those parts of ourself we repress. The frequent cultural attempts to deny this fascination, to abject the killer, are ultimately unsuccessful. As Kristeva writes, ‘abjection is above all ambiguity. Because,

¹³ Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1998) p. 4.

¹⁴ Downing, *The Subject of Murder*, p. 32.

while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it - on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger.¹⁵ By defining the killer as 'not us', it reveals that self-definition is in danger. This creates a repetitive cycle, only perpetuating our fascination in the serial killer and reinstating our desire to expel them. In turn, this engrains them in our subjectivities.

¹⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 9.

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