Serial Killers and Popular Media: Exploitation and Exploration

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In 1888, five women were brutally murdered and mutilated in the Whitechapel district of London. A crime spree of this severity was unprecedented. The killer is considered the first of what we now call serial killers. Their crimes captured the public's collective attention and imagination. This killer was dubbed Jack the Ripper, and their identity is still unknown to this day, and any new information garners international headlines even 137 years later. Serial killers, such as Jack the Ripper, have sparked curiosity among the general public for generations. As a result, popular media has exploited and perpetuated the legends of serial killers, fictional and non-fictional, as both convenient tools to frame a narrative and a means to explore the darker aspects of the human psyche.

From newspapers to novels, television shows to movies, popular media is a commodity that is sold to society at large. To be successful to that end, popular media must provide society with something that it wants. One of these desires is death. Modern society has a morbid curiosity surrounding death and trauma. In his book *Natural Born Celebrities*, Daid Schmid (2005) cites author Mark Seltzer in describing this desire as a "wound culture" that centers around "the convening of the public around scenes of violence-the rushing to the scene of the accident, the milling around the point of impact-has come to make up a wound culture: the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound" (p.5, as cited in Seltzer, 1998). People have a fascination with violence and often the more traumatic it is, the more interest it draws. This appears to be especially true in post Industrial Revolution society. In his treatise *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*, famed psychologist Sigmund Freud (1957) addresses this morbid curiosity. He hypothesizes that primeval man was surround by death and the finality of existence on a daily basis and that as society has become civilized, death has moved farther away from the public consciousness (Freud, 1957). As a result, society has moved toward literature and fiction to satisfy the relationship with death and human existence. In serial killers such as Jack the Ripper, popular media found a convenient tool that could both satiate the publics curiosity about violence and death while selling a product that the public was eager to consume.

Dime novels or penny dreadfuls, as they were known in the United Kingdom, were early forms of literature that combined serial killers with stories that people were eager to read. These short books were cheap, simple

in narrative and graphic in detail (Thompson, 2018). Easily available to the working classes, these dime novels were incredibly popular, and newspapers of the time even blamed them for an increase in crime rates, although without evidence (Thompson, 2018). In Jack the Ripper, the authors of dime novels found a perfect figure to sell their stories. The graphic and horrifying murders and the mystery surrounding the killer allowed the media to sell blood and gore while crafting any story they wanted, shroud in loose facts. Of the media sensationalism of the time Erin Thompson (2018) writes, "It became quite clear during this time that murder was lucrative, and almost every newspaper, novelist, and penny dreadful wanted a share of the profit" (p.59). It was the Jack the Ripper case where the marriage between serial killers and media sensationalism was firmly established. Little was known then, and still today the identity and motives of Jack the Ripper are unknown. Everything we think we know about the Ripper is a legend created by popular media. Jack the Ripper movies and Jack the Ripper tours of London are as popular today as they have ever been (Fisher, 2018). The media quickly discovered that serial killers and their exploits were ideal for selling and telling any story they wanted. Beth Fisher (2018) writes of the Jack the Ripper murders in Whitechapel, saying, "Part of the reason newspaper sales rocketed was because the press used the Whitechapel cases to stoke the public's fear of 'outcast London'. Whitechapel had come to symbolize London's criminal underworld, providing a ready backdrop for any sensational newspaper report." The strategy for using serial killers to frame a story that sells may have started with Jack the Ripper, but it continues to this day and doesn't apply only to real serial killers. Dexter Morgan, the protagonist of author Jeff Lindsay's (2006) popular book *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, is a fictional serial killer who does elaborately planned and graphically detailed murders much like Jack the Ripper, only cleaner. Like many authors, writers, reporters and filmmakers before him, Lindsay (2006) found success by tapping into society's morbid curiosity about violence and death by telling a story about a serial killer. Whether the killer is real or fictional isn't relevant in order to exploit their crimes to tell a good story.

However, selling a story isn't the only application the exploits of serial killers is good for. Popular media found that serial killers made it easier to explore the darker sides of human and societal nature while also entertaining the audience. Going back to Jack the Ripper, newspapers at the time, in the absence of fact, found the case to be a convenient tool to discuss immigration and cultural identity. It was asserted that the crimes had to be committed by a foreigner because no Victorian Englishman could be capable of such depravity (Schmid, 2005). The film *From Hell* is one of the many film adaptations of Jack the Ripper's exploits. In the film, inspector Frederick Aberline investigates the Ripper murders and discovers a conspiracy that is

traced to Queen Victoria. Sir William Gull, personal physician to the Queen, is discovered to be Jack the Ripper; a plot to silence witnesses to a secret marriage of Prince Albert is laid bare as it is discovered that the victims were all at the wedding (Hughes & Hughes, 2001). The plot also involves a coverup by the Freemasons organization. None of the plot elements in the film, other than the murders themselves, had any evidentiary basis. The film used the Whitechapel murders as a framework to explore conspiracy theories and societal mistrust of government.

Fictional character, Dexter Morgan, is a blood spatter expert with the Miami Metro Police Department who has a darker side; Dexter is a serial killer. Beyond simply satisfying the audience's innate desire for death and gore, in his book Jeff Lindsay (2006) explores moral relativism and asks the audience to consider if bad things are acceptable if done for good reasons. Most would conclude that murder is wrong. However, central to the moral complexity is Harry's code. The code is a set of rules developed by Dexter's adoptive father, Harry, which is designed to allow Dexter to satisfy his urge to kill while not getting caught and performing a social service. According to Harry, "killing must serve a purpose, otherwise, it's just plain murder" (Lindsay, 2006). The code is an attempt to give Dexter a moral standing by only killing people who are guilty of a crime and slip through the justice system; Dexter must vet the victims to ensure that they meet the standards of Harry's code. Dexter's victims are undeniably bad people, such as the priest in chapter one, Father Donovan. He killed at least seven innocent orphan children, whom Dexter took the time to find in his burying ground and dig up the bodies to ensure that the priest was guilty (Lindsay, 2006). Dexter's killing of Father Donovan seems justifiable in the context of saving more children, even while Dexter is committing murder himself. This is the kind of moral relativism that a fictional serial killer like Dexter Morgan allows audiences to explore. According to Steven Granelli and Jason Zenor (2016), both professors in Communications studies,

> Audiences may love these morally ambiguous characters because they exist in a fantasy world and break the social and legal rules that we ourselves wish we could break in our real worlds. Thus, in some ways, shows with morally ambiguous characters may be cathartic for the audience. (Granelli, S., & Zenor, J., 2016)

Serial killers, both real and fictional, are convenient vessels to allow audiences to explore darker questions about human nature and society. Why do people kill? Is murder ever justifiable? Can governments be trusted? These are questions that only serial killers, with their darker natures, allow us to explore deeply.

While this essay only examined two serial killers, one real and one fictional, the principles applied by popular media in the use of serial killers as tools applies to the scores of serial killers since Jack the Ripper. Society has demonstrated an inherent psychological predilection to death and violence. When media began reporting the details of serial murders, the public couldn't get enough. Popular media sources found that serial killers could be exploited to both provide information to the public and satiate innate fascination with death. While doing so, the media could tell any story as long as it was built around the framework of a serial killer, and it would sell. At the same time, those narratives would build the mythic legend of the subject until fact and fiction were difficult to separate. Fast forward to today, where fictional serial killers, not based upon any factual figure, are quite popular. Killers such as Dexter Morgan. While telling stories that exploit the deeds of fictional and non-fictional killers, popular media has allowed the audience to delve into the darker recesses of the human psyche. Jack the Ripper begs the audience to ask what could make a person commit savage acts upon another that are far more brutal than simple murder. Dexter Morgan asks us to answer the question of right and wrong. Is it acceptable to commit murder if society benefits? In both instances the journey of discovery is more important than arriving at an answer in itself. By exploiting the murders of serial killers, popular media has allowed us to satisfy a primeval craving to feel close to death and open a door to the darker side of human nature where we can explore the motivation behind human depravity.

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