Killer Personalities: Serial Killers as Celebrities in Contemporary American Culture

by

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When pitching the notion of capping off one’s college career by completing an honor thesis, professors and other academics often stress the independence needed in undertaking such a project. While I find that to be very much the case, I can also state confidently that I would not have been able do this alone. Hence, this acknowledgements page.

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Introduction: An Infatuation with Action

I have been fascinated with crime and crime shows for as long as I can remember. Looking back, I credit my father’s sister Iptisam for fostering my interest in shows like *Law & Order* (as well as each of its spinoffs) and all of the Hannibal movies. I do not see my aunt very often because she lives in Syria, but our annual summer visits were sufficient for a good film education. I was enraptured with the intricate plots, the horrific crimes, and the jaded detective characters who have seen it all. In retrospect, it probably was not a good idea to watch *Silence of the Lambs* at the tender age of eight, but it certainly heightened my interest in crime and subsequently, criminals.

My aunt’s penchant for watching crime shows and psychological thrillers is, to me, certainly understandable. She works as an accountant for a sector of the Syrian government—a career that is defined by structure and routine. Stereotypically, an accountant’s job is mundane, and the task of crunching numbers all day is seen as tedious. So it comes as no surprise to me that my aunt chooses to spend her evenings engaged in an action film or a crime show that ensured an exciting and suspenseful experience. She exemplifies the typical crime show viewer, the person who gets “sucked” into the storyline and become personally invested in the outcome of the story.

What one enjoys watching on television, however, does not necessarily translate into what one wishes to see reflected in real life, particularly in the case of crime shows and psychological thrillers. My aunt’s experiences certainly affirm that statement. Currently, Syria is involved in a civil war, which has left the country in a
state of turmoil. The constant clashing between the government and civilian
protestors has resulted in bursts of violence and murder throughout the cities. My
family’s neighborhood is in ruins; buildings have been burned down and bombed out,
military tanks frequently roll through the streets, and soldiers have seized homes to
reside in during the struggle. With each passing day, the violence escalates.

My father communicates regularly with his relatives in Syria to stay up to date
on the situation. At my request, he keeps me in the loop. After a phone conversation
he recently had with my aunt, I learned that her apartment building was caught in the
crossfire. She was on her balcony hanging laundry when it was sprayed with bullets.
Needless to say, she was terrified by the experience. When my father relayed this to
me, my immediate reaction was concern, followed by the thought, “Cool!” A little
horrified by my feelings of excitement, I began to ponder the reasons behind them.
My aunt had an experience straight out of *Die Hard* or some other action-packed
movie that both of us have enjoyed viewing in the past, but it was not like jumping
into Bruce Willis’s shoes, or those of some other action star. When my aunt and I
watch those movies or crime shows, we often find ourselves identifying with the
hero, fighting alongside him until the end. In reality, instead of being galvanized into
action when confronted with a threatening situation, my aunt was paralyzed with fear.

**The Serial Killer: The Superstar of America’s Wound Culture**

It seems that given the choice, most people would elect to take the spectator’s
role rather than be directly involved in a dangerous situation. But why would one
want to witness such a sight in the first place? There is no question that people do.
Newspapers, news broadcasts, and other media sources are constantly publicizing
violent crimes, keeping the general public informed, and afraid of, the world outside their homes. The convening of the public around violent scenes has come to make up what Mark Seltzer calls a “wound culture,” which he defines as “the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound.”

Given the sheer volume of crime stories in the media, it is safe to say that the public is fascinated. American culture is drawn to trauma (Greek for wound)—it is a culture of “the atrocity exhibition” in which people “wear their damage like badges of identity, or fashion accessories.” In the twentieth century, the superstar of our wound culture emerged: the serial killer.

During the course of the nineteenth century, there was a radical shift in the understanding of crime, a shift in focus from the criminal act to the character of the actor; here emerged the category of the dangerous individual. The modern serial killer began to develop with this shift. By the turn of the century, serial killing had become a life calling, and the serial killer had become classified as a “species of person.” The serial murderer transcended from being “one who kills” to becoming “a killer.”

It is in part because of the media that these individuals receive so much recognition. The media coverage surrounding serial killers and their crimes is overwhelmingly extensive in volume and in scope; initial news stories of the killer were supplemented by biographies and other published accounts depicting the killer’s crimes. As a result, the serial killer was immortalized, and established as a household

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2 Seltzer, 3.
name. Thanks to the media, serial killing has become more than a series of homicides—it has been established as a career.

The media, in essence, has created a market for death. It helped manufacture a serial killer persona, while the trade in “murderabilia” (serial killer memorabilia) alludes to a general fan desire to invest in, know more about, and get closer to the famous killer. Serial killer narratives are a dime a dozen in any bookstore, and numerous documentaries and films portraying the individual are also readily available. In this market for death, the serial killer is able to achieve something highly acclaimed in contemporary American society: celebrity status.

The fascination with the celebrity serial killer haunts the American imagination. Our society has produced a celebrity culture in which individuals are recognized for their bad acts, and in the public’s condemnation of them, a reverence for them emerges. The media, law enforcement, psychologists, and other authorities on serial killers create the environment in which these murderers can operate in the popular sphere. These authorities essentially provide the serial killer with the opportunity to make his criminal activities a profession.

**Looking Ahead**

This thesis will attempt to shed light on the issues surrounding America’s fascination with serial killers, including how the media fuels this frenzy, why these individuals are profiled so thoroughly while nothing is known of their victims, and how America produced a serial killer culture that overshadows other vital crimes and systemic violence in American society. The current literature available on the subject offers a psychological perspective, that is, thorough analysis on how and why these
people kill. My aim is to provide readers with an explanation of how this individual came to be, how he was made a threat to American society, and the consequences of focusing on this kind of person.

My first chapter, “Perp Walk, Murderabilia, and a Culture of Death: A Look into America’s Obsession with Violence,” will address the history of sensationalism surrounding serial murder cases. I will also include the formal definition of the term “serial killer” and recount when it first emerged to characterize this type of crime. In this section, I will also argue that the redefinition of fame and mass reproduction in the twentieth century partially explains how the serial killer came to be.

In Chapter 2, “The Hunters: Serial Killers and the People who Catch Them,” I will delve into specific serial killer cases and analyze the way these individuals were found and brought to justice. The police play an integral part in how these killers’ stories come to light. In their investigations, the police department’s compilation of evidence is referred to as a “murder book,” which sets a storyteller’s tone from the beginning. The police force’s relationship with the media in informing and engaging the public also plays a role in how these killers are portrayed. Also in this chapter I will address how serial killers are scrutinized after they are arrested and convicted. Here I will use transcripts of prison interviews and written personal accounts of psychiatrists, FBI agents, and other investigators who have come into contact with these people and discussed their crimes.

Chapter 3, “The Hunted: The Victims who Have Been Used to Make These Individuals Household Celebrities,” will focus on the role of victims in sensationalized murder cases. Here I will juxtapose the singular, highly publicized
murder of rock star John Lennon with victims of serial killers because I believe it will bring to light some problems with the portrayal of serial killers. Murder cases that are covered extensively by the media have been known to make the victim famous. Feminists and conservatives have also played roles in making victims public figures through lobbying for more protective and harsh legislation. In serial killer cases, however, these victims are overlooked in favor of looking at the killer. I will explore the reason why these people have placed to the side. Here I will also address the notion of the serial killer as an artist, and how his victims constitute his works of art.

In Chapter 4, “Norman Bates, Hannibal Lecter, and Mickey Mallory: How Serial Killers in Fiction Further Make Problems,” I will discuss how making protagonists out of these murderers further presents a problem for American society because these people are now considered heroes by their audiences. Even though we condemn their actions, we are glorifying them by presenting them in a vigilante role. Here I will discuss key figures in the movies and fiction, and assess the possibility that we have culturally produced not just our preoccupation with serial killers but, to some extent, the serial killers themselves.

What is it about our society that makes us want to know these murderers more? This is the pressing question I explore. At stake is a better understanding of what makes our culture of violence tick.

**Disclaimer: Focus on Male Serial Killers**

This thesis is centered on media coverage and the popular perception of serial killers. Specifically, I am taking a look at men who kill. I omitted female serial killers from my study for two reasons: first, female serial killers do not receive nearly as
much media attention as male serial killers; and second, women who kill generally have different, more “practical” motives for murder, such as perceived self-defense (as in the case of the most highly recognized lady serial killer, Aileen Wuornos), or for financial purposes (the “black widows;” women who marry and murder wealthy husbands).
Chapter 1: Perp Walk, Murderabilia, and a Culture of Death: A Look into America’s Obsession with Violence

Online shopping has become a staple in American households, partly due to the expansive nature of goods available to buy on the Internet. Supernaught.com, for instance, offers customers a brick from Jeffrey Dahmer’s building for three hundred dollars. A lock of Charles Manson’s hair goes for $995, and action figures of John Wayne Gacy and Ted Bundy are available. This “murderabilia” industry—business of selling serial killer artifacts—has boomed in recent years. Much like any fandom, this merchandise allows people obsessed with these violent criminals membership into this arena.

The sale of murderabilia is just a small part of the serial killer phenomenon that has become a prominent feature in American popular culture since the 1970s. A constant stream of movies, action figures, T-shirts, trading cards, videos, DVDs, books, Web sites, and television shows have given the figure of the serial murderer an unparalleled degree of visibility in the contemporary American realm. In a culture defined by celebrity, serial killers like Bundy, Dahmer, and Gacy are among the biggest stars of all, recognized by the vast majority of Americans.

Changing the Definition of Fame

The iconic status of serial killers demonstrates the collapse of difference between fame and notoriety. Most authorities on the subject agree that the nature of fame has distinctly changed in the past two hundred years. Progressively, the claim to fame has been overwhelmingly determined by visibility, not based on merited

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behavior. “In 1896 celebrities were leaders,” Cathy Madison writes, “whose qualities we admired and aspired to; today celebrity means only someone whose name and face we know.” An individual now obtains fame not through recognition of achievement, but by being seen. Once merit-based fame ceased to have meaning in society, it was no longer necessary to distinguish between good and bad forms of fame. Thanks to the “morally neutral” nature of contemporary fame, “to be notorious or to be infamous may be no more than shortcuts” to fame, and “more efficient uses of the machinery of fame.” One can see this trend in contemporary times; obsessed fans attack public figures and become famous themselves. For instance, Mark David Chapman became a public figure when he gunned down international rock star John Lennon. The role of the media, therefore, plays an essential part in defining fame and disseminating the traditional connotations of it.

**Media Relations**

Regardless of motivation, individuals who desire fame—or simply become famous through their actions—are dependent on media technologies available to them and the ability of those technologies to create an aura of fame. This trend began with the introduction of printing, when reproduction and mass circulation of books closed the gap between the social elite and lower socioeconomic classes. Initially thought of as a positive change, it can also be seen as the catalyst to the disappearance of understanding of the famous as a “distinguished, meritorious elite, rather than an

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This disappearance of understanding was further accelerated by the emergence of photography and film. The individual achieves celebrity status by becoming more visible, and these tools not only guaranteed that increased exposure, but film and photography also ensure the aura of the celebrity becomes more powerful.

In his iconic essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin argues that art loses its aura when it is mechanically reproduced and widely distributed. The opposite can be said for the celebrity; if great art loses its aura through mass-marketing, the famous individual establishes his aura through mass reproduction. Coupled with the changing nature of fame, the advancement of media technologies has aided in making celebrities out of groups outside of Hollywood, including criminals.

In his address Evangelium Vitae, Pope John Paul II called America at the turn of the new millennium a “culture of death.” He was referring to the mass amount of violent images available to the American public through the media. News channels, movies, and television shows depict acts of violence and murder frequently and often in graphic detail; books and video games also emulate violence. It is this fascination with violence that inspires the American public to learn more about serial killers and their crimes.

Since the development of “yellow journalism” at the turn of the twentieth century, sensationalized crime stories have held a prominent place in American news.

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media. However, since 1985, there has been a striking change in how the news media represents crime. During the late 1980s, newspapers and television news shows lowered their editorial standards in order to compete with tabloid media such as *The Examiner* and the *National Enquirer*. This “tabloidization” of the mainstream media has had a particularly damaging impact on the reporting of crime. Instead of an unbiased account, the American public received sensationalized stories about “the crimes of the century” and the criminals that commit them. Celebrities who have committed crimes are usually at the forefront of the media frenzy; the O.J. Simpson news coverage and subsequent “media circus” exemplifies that.

**Defining the Serial Killer**

In order to pinpoint the progression of fascination with serial killers, it is important to establish a working definition of the term. The FBI’s Behavioral Science Unit defines serial killings as “the unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offender(s), in separate events.” Generally the classification of serial murder is accompanied by the length of time between kills, or the “cooling off period.” The FBI is credited with establishing the term, and by doing so, achieved a position of unquestioned authority in defining serial murder.

Although the official version of the story presents the FBI as impartial defenders of the public good, selflessly protecting the helpless American public from

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the “epidemic” of serial crime, the Bureau’s definition, and as a result, ownership of serial murder were a matter of self-interest. In claiming exclusive ownership of serial murder and in using popular culture to both publicize and reinforce its reputation as the absolute source of expertise on serial crime, the FBI carried out tactics that had characterized the organization since its inception.

For the most part, this strategy has worked extremely well for the FBI, allowing it to rehabilitate its image whenever it was damaged by other Bureau activities. The FBI has utilized popular culture and news media to publicize its self-image as the nation’s leading crime-fighting organization, uniquely equipped to control and bring enemies that it has cultivated to justice, such as the gangster, the communist, and subsequently, the serial killer.\(^\text{10}\) Although the FBI claims to have coined the term “serial murder,” the term predated the Bureau by several decades.

Jack the Ripper, the most famous serial killer of time, and H.H. Holmes, America’s first serial killer, were not known as serial killers among their contemporaries, because the concept of serial murder did not exist. The twentieth century, however, generated the new type of murderer, based on his criminal acts. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault states the significance of the moment when a new type of individual is produced:

> This new persecution of the peripheral sexualities entailed an *incorporation of perversions* and a new *specification of individuals*. As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the judicial subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual

\(^{10}\) Schmid, 68.
became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a
type of life, a life form, and a morphology.\textsuperscript{11}

While homosexuality is not substantially connected to serial killers in any way,
Foucault’s understanding of how an individual can be generated out of what were
previously amorphous acts describes the development of the concept of “serial killer”
over the twentieth century accurately.

**Sensationalizing the Term**

The FBI first sponsored research on serial murderers in 1979 with the
Criminal Personality Research Project\textsuperscript{12}, which led to the Bureau becoming the
preeminent source of expertise on the subject. Its work became public in 1983, when
the Justice Department held a news conference in Washington D.C. “to disclose some
of the findings from…preliminary research into…the problem of ‘serial murders,’
killings by such people as Jack the Ripper or the Boston Strangler.”\textsuperscript{13} By holding this
press conference, the FBI ensured the public’s attention and convinced them that this
was a serious problem. Furthermore, the news conference determined that the
direction of future public policy and mass media discussions of serial murder “would
be favorable to the FBI’s goal by defining the nature and scope of serial murder in
highly specific and partial terms.”\textsuperscript{14} The news article also stated that the Justice

\textsuperscript{11}Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Translated by Robert Hurley, Vol. 1,

\textsuperscript{12}John Douglas, *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit*, (New York:

\textsuperscript{13} AP Desk, (The New York Times); "35 Murderers of Many People Could Be at

\textsuperscript{14} Schmid, 70.
Department classified serial killers as “those who kill for reasons other than greed, a fight, jealousy, or family disputes.”

The release of this definition led to a pattern that developed following the publication of the news article, which was finding a sexual dimension within serial murders. Although the Justice Department did not explicitly link a sexual component to the definition of serial murder, journalists referenced sexual deviations in reporting these crimes, in an endeavor to produce the most sensational stories possible. For instance, a January 1984 New York Times article, titled “Officials Cite a Rise in Killers Who Roam U.S. for Victims,” cited “many officials” who believed the increase in serial murders was “linked somehow to the sweeping changes in attitudes regarding sexuality that have occurred in the past 20 years.” Since 1983, the assumption that serial murder can be equated solely with sexual homicide can be found in explicit form in practically any debate about serial murder, whether in mass media, academic prose, a public policy document, or a psychological study of a serial killer. The publication of the landmark FBI study, titled Sexual Homicide, in 1988 has not helped dissuade public opinion.

Studies have found that many offenders fall into the serial killer category, but they are excluded because they fail to meet law enforcement’s—and the media—image of deranged, bloody-thirsty monsters. “Angels of death,” who work in


hospitals and nursing homes, and “black widow” women who kill their husbands all meet the criteria for being labeled serial killers, but are not acknowledged as such because their crimes do not fulfill the level of violence considered in “serial murder.”

The focus on sexual homicide and the oversight concerning other forms of serial homicide bolster a limited and distorted image of what serial murder is, who is behind it, who is victimized, how they are victimized, and why they are victimized. This distorted image of the serial killer only works to increase the public’s level of fear and their sense that their society is under attack, partly because of the violent nature of these crimes, and because victim selection seems so random.

This level of panic makes the public more responsive to the idea that a massive federal involvement will be the only effective way of catching serial killers. Increased involvement contributes to the total influence the FBI has over the serial murder perspective. The gangster was previous villain that generated this type of fear and vigilance. To strengthen this authority over the serial killer realm, the Justice Department emphasized the mobility of serial killers, which guarantees the FBI validation for the federal government’s involvement in the tracking and apprehension of serial killers.

True-crime writer Anne Rule testified before Congress that the serial murderer was a menace not programmed to remain in one place: “The thing that I have found about the serial murderers that I have researched, is they travel constantly, they are trollers, while most of us might put 15,000 to 20,000 miles a year on our cars, several

18 Jenkins, 135.
19 Schmid, 80.
of the serial killers I have researched have put 200,000 miles a year on their cars. They move constantly. They may drive all night long. They are always looking for the random victim who may cross their path.”

If one were to do the math, one could see that if a serial killer drove 200,000 miles a year, they would have to have driven 550 miles daily. This exaggeration on the part of Rule was still taken to be fact, which exemplifies how receptive the public, and government, was to accepting these perceptions on serial killers.

Apart from using the term serial murder and sexual homicide interchangeably, and stressing the mobility of serial killers, the other significant element in the way the FBI defined serial murder was its estimate of the scale of the crime. In the same news conference in 1983, Robert Depue, the then-director of the FBI’s Behavior Science Unit, said that “his office wanted to study all the open murder cases in the country [because] 28 percent of the nation’s roughly 20,000 homicides went unsolved and…the percentage has been rising in recent years.”

Depue clearly implied that there was an equivalence between the number of serial murders and the number of unsolved murders being committed each year. This suggestion was quickly taken up and disseminated by the mass media, and Depue’s implication was soon transformed into the unambiguous claim that serial killers were responsible for 4,000 murder victims a year. This number, along with the Justice Department estimate that there

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20 Schmid, 45.

were 35 serial killers active in the United States at any given time\textsuperscript{22}, did more than any other piece of information to galvanize public feeling about serial murder, almost to the point of absolute panic.

By popularizing an image of the serial killer as a monstrous, sexually sadistic, highly mobile fiend, the FBI both contributed to and demonstrated the necessity and validity of what scholar Richard Tithecott terms policing discourses. By framing the serial killer as a monster that threatens Americans’ way of life, the FBI seeks to escape public and political criticism by placing itself in the role of the sole defense against these monsters. Such policing discourses, Tithecott argues, “describe a world threatened more by inexplicable horror than by various forms of medically and legally defined insanity.”\textsuperscript{23} Recalling the Bureau’s skepticism toward conventional psychological assessments of such phenomena as serial murder, along with its concerted efforts to create a public image of serial killers as monstrous and terrifying as possible, one can see what a profound contribution the FBI made to the “policing discourses”. The mass media, as we can observe, has helped create an environment for this discourse.

**The Serial Killer Hype**

Stories revolving around celebrities who clash with the law are not the only consequence of tabloidization; this frenzy also resulted in a newly prominent role for serial killers in American mass media. The serial killer became a dominant media


figure “not only because he personified the tabloid sensibility (all scandal, all the
time) but also because he exemplified other important features of how the
contemporary American mass media represent crime.” Schmid cites the
overrepresentation of violent crime as one such feature. As a result, lesser crimes are
minimized while the impact of violent crime is exaggerated enormously. The
formation of these “crime myths” is a direct result of media relations surrounding the
crimes.

Criminal events receive intense media coverage, and it is the intensity of the
coverage that creates an equally intense public reaction among mass media
customers. As a result, a few isolated events can be quickly defined as a social
problem. The range of crime problems is often the most gruesome and bizarre act
the journalist or investigator can uncover; the preference for the gruesome and the
bizarre is then determined by the competitive nature of modern media: “By culling
unique and fascinating issues for public exhibition, the media ensures the
marketability and success (viewers and advertising dollars) of a given media
production.”

The combination of tabloidization, the overrepresentation of violent crime,
and a preference for the grotesque in the construction of crime myths has led to the
rise of a media icon that has been described as the “faceless predator criminal,” a
figure who represents the American public’s attempt to embody the seemingly

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24 Schmid, 14.
25 Victor E. Kappeler and Gary W. Potter, Constructing Crime: Perspectives on
26 Kaeppeler, et. all, 5.
omnipresent and anonymous threat of violent crime ("Predator," Surette). The rise of the serial killer is a product of the media’s attempt to give a face to the faceless predator criminal. If the public’s interest is already piqued by faceless crime myths, the media heightens that interest by giving that myth a specific name, “serial murder,” and then giving that name an identifiable cast of characters, such as John Wayne Gacy, Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, and Ed Gein. It was this trend that evolved into a full-blown “serial killer panic” in America in the mid-1980s, when the media, along with law enforcement and government agencies, through their actions, created a frenzy surrounding these individuals.

The key elements of this panic were that serial murder was a new phenomenon, that it was growing enormously, that there were a large number of serial killers active at any given time, and that the crime had reached epidemic status, “claiming four thousand victims a year.” This panic was well-represented in popular culture, with well known news shows like 60 Minutes producing documentaries about famous serial killers, like Gacy, Bundy, and Dahmer. These documentaries featured interviews with the convicted killers, along with controversial reenactments of the crimes using actors. The panic undoubtedly made celebrities out of serial killers, but their presence in the media is not enough to account for that status. Rather, the sentiment of the twentieth-century celebrity holds true, that an individual is famous for “being himself or playing himself.” Although it sounds counterintuitive, because


serial killers’ actions determine their fame, in the serial killer realm, action and identity are fused. For the American public, it is not enough to have an account of the killer’s crimes; they want to know the person behind the murders. Schmid states:

“The selfhood and murders of the serial killer thus become two sides of same coin.”

The fame that comes with being labeled a serial killer is no secret. One consequence of the fame bestowed upon some serial killers is that such killers are increasingly aware of their status as celebrities, as public figures who have an audience and therefore the opportunity to capitalize on the attention they are receiving. This has been a trend for a long time. In 1929, Carl Panzram, a man who confessed to murdering 21 people, wrote a letter to his prison warden a few days before his execution. The letter suggests a highly developed awareness of the market for murder:

A bunch of these kind of newspaper clippings and my picture would go good to fill in the last part of the book. They would be very good because they would be both authentic and interesting. After all my part of the book to finish it off in proper style you as the author could write my wind up or epitaph with perhaps a picture of [me] after death or the grave or the Electric Chair. You write the Preface, use my writing for the book and your own explanations as the conclusions. This ought to make a hell of a good book. I have never seen or heard of one like it. It ought to have a big sale, with all of the interest that would be aroused by all of the papers publishing so much about me.

Experts on serial killers have commented that their recognition of themselves as celebrities indicates that their desire for fame serves as a spur to would-be serial killers. In particular, critics of the intense media coverage of serial murder have

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29 Schmid, 16.

pointed out that the certainty of media attention sends a dangerous message to potential murderers. Park Dietz, forensic psychiatrist and consultant to the FBI’s Behavioral Science Unit, stated in an interview on The Criminal Mind that “the media help disseminate the message that it’s good to be a serial killer…There are rewards to such violent behavior—loyal fans, marriage proposals, splashy headlines.”

While it is impossible to prove the potential connection that Dietz presents, the behavior of some serial killers is suggestive in this regard. The communications that David Berkowitz had with the New York Post during his year of terror in New York City played a pivotal role in Berkowitz’s public self-evolution and his decision to keep killing. Similarly, Ted Bundy represented himself in his murder trial in Florida even though it would result in more negative feelings from the jury, in an effort to control his story with his own narrative. The best indicator that fame plays a role in these individuals’ actions comes from the serial killer who operated in Wichita Kansas in the 1970s, Dennis Rader. The BTK (stands for Bind, Torture, Kill) Strangler, as he was known, frequently contacted local news media, and in one correspondence, complained “How many times do I have to kill before I get a name in the paper or some national attention?”

Despite the suggestive nature of these examples, the question to ponder is not whether media attention pushes these men to kill, but why are so many Americans

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willing to support the culture industry that has grown up around the celebrity serial killer?

**Idols of Destruction**

In an abstract sense, it seems offensive and ludicrous to claim that American culture is not only repelled but also fascinated by serial killers. But one does not have to look very far to find confirmation of that statement. One should not minimize the difference between admiring the fictional character of Hannibal Lecter and admiring a real serial killer, but the difference is less than one would think. “Characters such as Lecter allow for the free expression of feelings of fascination and admiration concerning serial killers that are more carefully concealed in other instances.”

And that is not true in all cases. Elliot Leyton argues, “No one ever became famous by beating his wife to death in an alley; but virtually all our multiple murderers achieve true and lasting fame…During their trials, they will almost be certainly surrounded by admiring women who impress their affections upon the killer, radiating towards him little but admiration and love.”

Even during the crimes themselves some serial killers have felt and been influenced by the public’s fascinated interest in them. David Berkowitz, the “Son of Sam” killer, stated that “I finally had convinced myself that it was good to do it, necessary to do it, and that the public wanted me to do it. The latter part I believe until this day. I believe that many were rooting for me. This was the point that at

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32 Schmid, 23.

which the papers began to pick up vibes and information that something big was
happening out in the streets. Real big!”\textsuperscript{34} Noting the media attention he received, and
the language used to describe his crimes, Berkowitz could be correct in his
assessment.

Christopher Sharrett attempts to explain America’s fascination with the serial
killer: “Perhaps the fetish status of the criminal psychopath…is about recognizing the
serial killer/mass murderer not as social rebel or folk hero…but as the genuine
representative of American life.”\textsuperscript{35} Given our complicated relationship with
celebrities, affective as well as intellectual, composed of admiration and resentment,
envy and contempt, provides us with a glossary “through which we can manage our
appalled and appalling fascination with the serial killer, contemporary American
culture’s ultimate deviant.”\textsuperscript{36} The next chapter will demonstrate just how fascinated
Americans are with the serial killer, and how appalling it can be.

\textsuperscript{34} David Abrahamsen, \textit{Confessions of Son of Sam}, (New York: Columbia University
Press, 1985), 54.

\textsuperscript{35} Christopher Sharrett, \textit{Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media}, (Detroit, MI:
Wayne State University Press, 1999), 13.

\textsuperscript{36} Schmid, 32.
Chapter 2: The Hunters: Serial Killers and the People who Catch Them

The cases of Ed Gein, Jeffrey Dahmer, Dennis Rader, and David Berkowitz demonstrate the pivotal role of media sensationalism in the arresting and prosecuting of each killer, as well as how the killers were portrayed after their convictions. Ed Gein is an important case study because he is popularly recognized as America’s first serial killer, thanks to the media coverage of his case and subsequent national attention. Gein’s arrest, prosecution, and sentencing were all a matter of public speculation and interest. His relationships, his life, and his home were all put on display after he was arrested.

Jeffrey Dahmer is another household name due to media exposure of his case. Dahmer was convicted of murdering nineteen men, and all accounts of Dahmer’s crimes provide great insight on the killer, but almost no information on his victims. Dennis Rader used the media as a way to both take credit for his crimes and taunt the police who were investigating the murders—Rader established himself with this contact. In the B.T.K. case, it was evident that the killer utilized the media more effectively than the police had, which created an atmosphere of uncertainty with the police’s authority.

The case of David Berkowitz illustrates how other authorities can use the media to push their agendas. David Abrahamsen, Berkowitz’s court-appointed psychiatrist, wrote an account of his interactions with Berkowitz after his sentencing. His report was charged with sensational writing, and did not have the clinical tone one would expect from licensed professional. Rather, Abrahamsen seems to be answering public inquiry on the killer. This public interest stems from the press
coverage of the entire case—from “the Summer of Sam,” to Berkowitz’s arrest, to his sentencing. Abrahemsen drew on that interest with his published book of interviews with the convicted Berkowitz.

In all of these cases, media forms played a large role in how the killer and the case were presented to the public. These individuals became icons through newspaper articles, television reports, and published interviews depicting them as modern-day monsters. In condemning them publicly, however, the media glorifies the murderers by giving them what they crave—recognition. Placing the killer in the spotlight also results in overlooking his victims, individuals who become pawns in the media’s portrayal of the case.

**Ed Gein: Breaking Down the Monster**

The case of Ed Gein was the first serial killer case that garnered celebrity status, and influenced the way public media covered cases like his in the future. On November 17, 1957 police approached the Gein farmstead in Plainsfield, Wisconsin, hoping to interview the owner Ed about a missing woman in town, Bernice Worden. Upon inspection of the house, officers saw a carcass, which they assumed to be a deer left out to drain. When they looked closer, they realized that the body was that of the missing woman, Bernice Worden.

After the initial discovery of human remains, police went through the house more thoroughly and found more evidence of human remains: “…a cereal bowl fashioned from a human skull, lamp shades and wastebaskets formed a stretched
human skin, and even an armchair upholstered in human flesh.” Gein admitted to killing another woman, but claimed that the other body parts were from graves of individuals he exhumed. After his arrest and the details of his crime were leaked, public media forces descended on the small town. Reporters from around America came to cover the story of Ed Gein and his “house of horrors.” Soon Ed Gein was a household name; people everywhere knew about him and his obsession with the female form.

American society also knew his entire history, from his drunk, abusive father to his overbearing, religious mother. The latter was a popular topic, as doctors attributed his obsession to the female form to his relationship with his mother. Augusta Gein was determined to bring her sons up to resist worldly temptations, so she taught Eddie and his brother Henry that all forms of sexual activity were sinful and forbade them from having any interaction with women. When she died, Eddie was “truly alone,” his biographer Harold Schechter stated in Deviant, as his father and brother had died years before. It is this loneliness that led Gein to dig up graves and sit with the corpses of newly deceased women in an effort to fill the void left by his deceased mother. When that was not enough, Gein began to take souvenirs. These souvenirs consisted of various body parts, which decomposed shortly after he removed them from their graves. Gein wanted fresher material, which led him to murder. Although he never admitted to killing more than two women, police suspect


38 Roy, 98.
the number to be greater; his constructed “women’s suit”—a body suit made up of women’s skin, breasts, and genitalia—points to that. Gein’s unnatural attachment to his mother and his manufacturing a “woman’s suit” in order to present himself as a woman earned him a label of sexual psychopath by state psychiatrists. A judge found him not guilty based on the fact that he was not sane at the time he committed the murders.

Gein’s arrest set off a massive public reaction, which was not limited to the local community. Reporters from all over the country descended upon the small town, looking for the story on the “Plainfield Butcher.” “All at once, their quiet little community was the focus of nationwide attention—and for the most dismaying of reasons,” Schechter writes. “Other small towns across the U.S.A. could boast of being the birthplace of politicians, athletes, and movie stars. Plainfield suddenly found itself famous as the home of America’s most demented murderer.”

During the trial, Gein’s house was put up for auction, which spurred the largest flux of people into Plainsfield since the story first broke out. Auctioneers charged fifty cents for admission into the house, and his car was put up for sale, advertised as “Gein’s Ghoul Car.”

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40 Roy, 98.
The Ed Gein “death car” display (*Milwaukee Journal*)

Gein was committed to a state psychiatric hospital where he stayed until he died.

The Ed Gein case was widely publicized at the time it was unfolding and continues to rivet audiences today in the cinema. Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* and Jonathan Demme’s *Silence of the Lambs* both brought the image of Ed Gein into American pop culture. It is important to understand why America holds this fascination with knowing intimate, often graphic details about serial killers and their acts of violence. Mark Seltzer’s “wound culture” certainly applies here: “The crowd gathered around a fallen body, the wrecked machine, and the wound has become a commonplace in our culture: a version of collective experience that centers the pathological public sphere.”\(^{41}\) But on another level, we are able to observe these accounts from a distance, which makes it safe. From that distance, we are not only able to confront our fears, but also reduce their power over us. These men spark a particular fear in us, not only for their heinous acts, but also their ability to hide out in

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the open. Serial killers become serial killers because they successfully elude attention.

“Thus we fear a serial killer may be in our midst at any moment, just as a child fears a monster could be hiding under the bed,” Roy states. When law enforcement officials offer the public an apprehended serial killer, we are able to see that he is only a man, and furthermore, a beaten man. Once arrested, the serial killer becomes a human being that can be locked away forever. Fictionalized serial killers take the process one step further; not only can we see them, but we can control them.

**Jeffrey Dahmer: An Intimate History**

The story of Jeffrey Dahmer’s reign of terror shows how such fixation on serial killers entrenches our obsession with violence. On July 22, 1991, Milwaukee police encountered a terrified young man running in the streets with a pair of handcuffs dangling from his wrist. The police officers followed the scared man, Tracy Edwards, back to the apartment from which he claimed to have escaped a dangerous situation. Jeffrey Dahmer invited officers in, and claimed that he and Edwards were engaged in consensual sex before he took off. Officers inspected the apartment and found Polaroid photographs of deceased corpses, jars with preserved penises submerged in formaldehyde, and fifty-five gallon drums of stewing human body parts in acid. They arrested Dahmer on the spot.

Jeffrey Dahmer became a household name once he was arrested and tried for murdering eighteen young men after luring them to his apartment for sex. The morning after he was arrested, news crews arrived at his apartment, filming evidence collection made by the police. That began a year long, constant media coverage of the case; “If you turned on your television or radio or opened a newspaper, you simply
could not avoid the story.”\textsuperscript{42} According to Roy, it would be very difficult to not be acquainted with the details of the case: “All of us know about the murders. All of us recall seeing the investigators wheel fifty-five-gallon drum down the stairs. All of us know Jeffrey Dahmer.”\textsuperscript{43} Indeed, we know this serial killer. Details of his life are public knowledge: he had a normal, happy childhood, but became withdrawn after having hernia surgery. He did drugs, frequented gay bars, and was discharged from the army because of his alcoholism. People are also familiar with his acts of depravity; the fact that he used his victims’ skulls to masturbate with is common knowledge.\textsuperscript{44}

In contrast, almost nothing is known about his victims. For the most part, not many people know about the people that made these killers famous. In telling the story, the media effectively made Dahmer the protagonist by casting him in the role of active character. As the story goes, the audience follows Dahmer throughout his life leading up his murders: “Dahmer stalks. Dahmer drugs. Dahmer violates. Dahmer dismembers. Dahmer controls the plot. He acts on others—his victims, his family, the police.”\textsuperscript{45} The story did not need to be told that way. The media could have focused on his victims, their histories, and the impact these murders made on their families. Over the years, the one victim to which the media gave the most attention was Konerak Sinthasomphone, a fourteen year-old boy whom Dahmer


\textsuperscript{43} Roy, 107.

\textsuperscript{44} Tithecott, 78.

\textsuperscript{45} Roy, 110.
killed in 1991. Despite this coverage, all we know about him is that he was Laotian, he was the youngest of Dahmer’s victims, and almost escaped. Not one of these facts is pertinent to knowing him; these details make him important to Dahmer’s story. In the end, the victims serve as static characters, their existence made to fulfill roles that will progress the plot, but little else.

In retelling these stories, the media caters to its audience. People call for the condemnation of the killers, and want them to be labeled as “monsters” and “deviants.” The media indulges, but in their efforts to do so, they create a larger-than-life persona for these predators: “While the media normally obliges our preference and appears to condemn the killer, many choices made by the media about how to tell the story of serial killings actually seem to glorify the killers.”46 As a public, we arrest, deplore, punish these individuals, but we also give them what they want; we listen, we learn, and we publicize them.

**Dennis Rader: Media Liaison**

Wichita, Kansas was hit with a series of murders that started in 1974 and lasted until 1991. These murders were linked with a common *modus operandi*, but more important, every murder was self-credited by an individual who contacted both local newspapers and the Wichita police department to claim responsibility for the murder. The killer complained about the lack of publicity he was receiving, asking in

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46 Roy, 113.
one letter, “How many do I have to kill before I get my name in the paper or some national attention?”

The case began to unfold with the arrest of Dennis Rader in 2005. Rader, who spent most of his life working as a consultant for a home security company, was connected to ten murders and captured because of a floppy disk he sent to Wichita police. In many respects, the B.T.K. crimes were symbolically based acts. Rader made phone calls, mailed postcards and letters, and even sent packages containing items stolen from victims. The murders themselves were “special events” or “media events” underlying a diverse communication campaign that lasted four decades.

The first known victims of the B.T.K. were four members of the Otero family, in January 1974. Joseph Otero, 38, was found lying on the floor of his bedroom at the foot of the bed, face-down, tied at the hands and feet with an old Venetian blinds cord. A cord was also wrapped around his neck. Joseph’s wife Julie was lying dead on the bed, similarly tied with a Venetian blinds cord. Joseph Jr., the Oteros’ 9-year-old son, was found in his bedroom, also face-down on the floor at the foot of his bed. He too was tied, and he also had a plastic bag over his head. In the basement, investigators found the Otero’s 11-year-old daughter, Josephine. She had been hung from a pipe, and was dressed only in her socks and a sweatshirt. When police discovered Josephine’s body, they noticed evidence of torture. Investigators said that


48 Gibson, 60.
they believed the knots used to bind the victims “appeared to be tied by an expert.”

The B.T.K. Strangler killed Kathryn Bright in her home two months later; it was after this murder that he first contacted the media. Rader called a newspaper editor at the *Wichita Eagle-Beacon* and informed him where to find a letter in the public library.

It was in this initial letter that the killer established himself in the public eye. The letter described how the writer had murdered the Otero family, and stated “Since sex criminals do not change their M. O. or by nature cannot do so, I will not change mine. The code words for me will be . . . bind them, torture them, kill them, B.T.K.”

His next communication was to the police directly in 1977 to report the murder of Nancy Fox. His dormancy for three years came to a close when he murdered her and led the police to her body. The phone call that directed police to the crime scene was the killer’s way of establishing superiority over law enforcement. The B.T.K. Strangler also sent a poem to the same newspaper titled “Oh Death to Nancy,” crafted after “Oh Death,” a poem studied in an English class at Wichita State University. In a letter mailed after the delivery of the poem, he described the murder of Nancy Fox in graphic detail. “I find the newspaper not writing about the poem on Vian unamusing. A little paragraph would have been enough. I know it (sic) not the news media fault. The Police Chief he keep things quiet,” the letter announced.


51 Gibson, 63.

happened to society. They are the ones who suffer the most. It’s hard for me to control myself. When this monster entered my brain, I will never know. Maybe you can stop him. I can’t. He has already chosen his next victim,” the letter went on to say. He included a photograph of the crime scene with the letter; the police were so shocked that the photograph was “virtually identical” to a police technician’s photo of the scene that they withheld the information.53

There were ten communication episodes between March 19, 2004—when the B.T.K. communication resumed—and Rader’s arrest in early March of the next year. The Wichita Eagle received a B.T.K. letter, postmarked March 17, 2004. It supposedly contained a photocopy of Vicki Wegerle’s driver’s license, and three photographs of her murder scene. KAKE-TV received letters from the criminal in May and July of 2004. Then, between October 2004 and February 2004, B.T.K. left three packages to be found, containing items taken from victims at murder crime scenes.

Rader did not exclusively send messages to the media; he also contacted W.P.D.

53 Gibson, 65.
multiple times, as well as family members of his murder victims.

Rader employed the media in order to advance his crimes to the general public, and because of that, the police had no choice but to include the media in the investigation. During the early stages of the B.T.K. investigation, W.P.D. chose to release as little information as possible. This led to an adversarial, uncooperative relationship with some members of the Wichita and regional media.\(^54\) It was not until April 2004, when B.T.K. messages began to circulate again, that W.P.D. created a website for news releases concerning the killer; this limited information flow led the media to publicly criticize the police’s handling of the investigation. The police in turn criticized the media for placing “unwanted attention” on these crimes. Nola Tedesco Foulston, District Attorney of Wichita, censured the media’s behavior on December 1, 2004: “It is only logical to state that the media interest was singularly dedicated to getting the story first. However when the activities of reporters on December 1st were such that they ended up creating the news instead of reporting the news, this became problematic particularly in a police investigation of this magnitude.”\(^55\) Despite this friction between the news and law enforcement, police tried to use the media in several ways, through news conferences and issuance of media advisories. W.P.D. disclosed the killer’s nickname at a news conference in February of 1978, as well as the fact that there was a serial killer on the loose. They even released a recording of one of B.T.K.’s phone calls to the police in the hope that

\(^{54}\) Gibson, 64.

\(^{55}\) N.T. Foulston, (2004, December). \textit{District Attorney Nola Tedesco Foulston releases the following statement today concerning the on-going “BTK” investigation by the Wichita Police Department.}
someone would recognize the voice and identify him. Nevertheless, news media sources were frustrated with the limited information provided to them.

Drawing on the history of the B.T.K. Strangler investigation, it can be concluded that Dennis Rader was successful in media relations, as he used both the print and broadcast media to advance his agenda. The B.T.K. murders were media events, designed to attract media and public attention. It can be argued that the B.T.K. Strangler was more effective than the W.P.D. in basic media relations. He tried to stimulate and maintain a dialogue with the authorities and media, despite general police lack of interest and sporadic media awareness, in the 1970s and 1980s. W.P.D. media relations, constrained by departmental restrictive release policy, resulted in relatively little release of public information until about 2004, ensuring that B.T.K. had more of a voice in the public domain. This case study exemplifies how large a role the media plays in the pursuit and capture of serial killers.

David Berkowitz: Sexual Deviant?

In 1976, New York City was shocked by a series of unusual murders that drew the attention of the entire country. The killer stalked his victims—typically young women and their dates—after dark and shot them with a .44 caliber gun in parked cars. His crimes became legendary because of the unusual content in the letters that he wrote to the police and the media and his reasons for committing the attacks. With the police feeling the pressure to catch the killer, "Operation Omega"

56 Gibson, 64.

57 Gibson, 65.
was formed, which was comprised of over 200 detectives; all working on finding the Son of Sam—the moniker with which the killer signed his letters—before he killed again. The murders ended with the arrest of David Berkowitz on August 10, 1977. Berkowitz, a Bronx native, declared that he had killed at the command of “voices”; that his neighbor Sam Carr’s dog was haunted by demons that made him commit the murders.

Media coverage of the event was enormous. The New York Times, Daily News, and the New York Post, all whose headquarters are located in the city, devoted an overwhelmingly large amount of headlines to the case. The Post in particular gave the murders a lot of attention. “Son of Sam was just a godsend for the Post,” said James Brady. “You know, a good serial killer. He was targeting people in lovers’ lane, primarily attractive young women of a certain physical description, and he was sending these wacky notes.” Steve Dunleavy, who covered the story for the Post, added that Son of Sam “really changed the city” during the killer’s rampage. The sale of locks and guns soared. “The Son of Sam virtually gave New York City this massive nervous breakdown,” said Dunleavy. And Murdoch’s Post was in the thick of it, whipping up the fear and fervor. “It was half truth, half speculation,” said Thomas Kiernan. Among the headlines the Post ran as the killer increased his range in the city was one on August 1st that declared: “No One Is Safe from Son of Sam.” On August 10, 1977, when the police finally caught Son of Sam – whose name was David Berkowitz — Murdoch’s Post ran the banner headline “CAUGHT!” Inside this edition, the Post ran sixteen related stories along with 36 photographs.
There was also the first in a series of installments from a crime novel “that might have inspired” the Son of Sam killer. The New York Post that day sold more than 1 million copies, nearly twice its average daily circulation.\(^58\)

The writers of the New York Times were also caught up in the frenzy. Every Son of Sam crime was reported on the front page the next day, complete with to-the-minute details of what had transpired the night before. The article about Sam’s twelfth and thirteenth victims was riddled with specifics: “According to witnesses—the police said at least two persons and possibly more saw the attack—the killer this time emerged from the shadows of a nearby park into the faint light of a full moon and walked up behind the couple’s car at Shore Parkway and Bay 14th Street in the Bath Beach section about 2:50 A.M.”\(^59\) The detailed account reads as a reenactment.

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of the events of the night. When Berkowitz was finally caught, the story completely dominated *Times’* front page, and continued to do so for the week following his arrest. Every day, the paper would publish a story related to Berkowitz in some way, keeping the public informed on the proceedings surrounding the case. Headlines include “‘Sam’ Suspect Arraigned, Held for Mental Tests,” “The Suspect Is Quoted on Killings: ‘It Was a Command…I Had a Sign,’” “Suspect Is Emerging as a Study In Extreme and Varied Contrast.” Reporters sought to catch the public’s attention, and they succeeded.

Berkowitz was evaluated by four psychiatrists, all but one stating he was incompetent to stand trial. Two court justices agreed with the dissenting opinion and deemed him mentally fit to proceed to trial. After the decision was made, Berkowitz pleaded guilty and was sentenced to serve consecutive life sentences in Attica Prison. In the course of one year he was found to have murdered six people and seriously wounded a number of others.

David Abrahamsen constructed a profile of convicted serial killer David Berkowitz that lent society a look at the thoughts and motivations of the infamous “Son of Sam”. Abrahamsen’s book, *Confessions of Son of Sam* (1985) gives readers a detailed account of his interviews with Berkowitz before, during, and after his trial. Berkowitz, dubbed the .44 Caliber Killer by the press, shared personal information with Abrahamsen—a forensic psychiatrist who was appointed by the court to provide the jury with a psychological evaluation. Although Abrahamsen is a certified psychoanalyst and an expert as deemed by the court, his book lacks the clinical voice that is expected with a forensic account. Considering his audience, it is not surprising.
Abrahamsen wrote this book with the intent that people fascinated with Berkowitz’s crimes would be the majority of his readers. The melodramatic writing, his incorporations of his own feelings during the interviews, and the way he detailed the courtroom scenes indicate that he aimed to satisfy his audience’s desire to understand Berkowitz and provided intimate details of his interactions with the killer. Knowing this, Abrahamsen’s focus—Berkowitz’s obsession with his mother, his oral fixation, and his sexual impulses—demonstrate that these morbid elements of the killer’s profile are what spark popular interest. The sensationalism of serial killers is in part due to the sexual nature of the crimes, and public response clearly shows that.

Abrahamsen noted in his preface that after a press conference in 1979, Berkowitz wrote to him and requested that they meet. After a series of interviews, Berkowitz stated: “After thinking it over for a long period of time, I am convinced that [Abrahamsen is] the only serious minded person capable of writing a biography of my life.”60 In the same conversation, he also told the psychiatrist that he “may write what [he feels] and [believes] to be causative and motivating factors.”61 Having been given permission to include what he wished into Berkowitz’s biography, Abrahamsen incorporated what he thought were elements of the killer’s manifestation. In doing so, he catered to an audience that paid to read his experiences with the prisoner. Abrahamsen wrote this biography for profit; he mentioned that 25 percent of the proceeds went to families of the victims. He wrote this biography with

60 David Abrahamsen, Confessions of Son of Sam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), ix.
61 Abrahamsen, p. ix.
the notion of answering public questions about the Son of Sam killer. I contend that the information that Abrahamsen provided was what the public wanted to know, because instead of a clinical assessment of the killer, his book reads as “pop” psychological discourse.

Abrahamsen devoted two chapters to Berkowitz’s upbringing, believing that his obsession with his adoptive mother and his resentment towards his birth mother sparked murderous thoughts within him. In his interviews with Berkowitz, Abrahamsen found that David saw his adoptive father, Nat Berkowitz, as a rival for his adoptive mother Pearl’s affections. The psychiatrist wrote that David was interested in his parents’ sex life as a child, and his resentment for his adoptive father increased as Nat kept sending David away when he wanted to be alone with his wife. Berkowitz’s accounts of his mother were decidedly sexual in nature, always fixating on her good physical looks; Abrahamsen stated his beliefs that these feelings inspired shame-induced excessive eating; “David’s anxiety about food was associated with two distinct fears…In his case, guilt about his sexual desires for his mother and his hatred of his father may have helped to maintain and strengthen this fear.”

Furthermore, the psychiatrist noted in later chapters that Berkowitz felt abandoned by Pearl when she died of breast cancer. After her death, David’s relationship with his father disintegrated, especially when Nat took a new wife. Abrahamsen’s assertion that Berkowitz’s obsession with his mother was a significant factor in his development as a serial killer serves to satisfy public need for an explanation in that it plays to the well-accepted notion of dysfunctional relationships with mothers drive

62 Abrahamsen, 55.
men to murder. The psychiatrist believed it to be true, but it should be recognized that it is a belief that would be well received.

The author states explicitly in another chapter that there were five women that Berkowitz “feared and hated” and contributed to his turn to murder, a stereotypical psychological assessment. All women listed—his adoptive mother, his birth mother, his half sister, his stepmother, his stepsister—inspired feelings of inadequacy and jealousy: his adoptive mother and birth mother abandoned him; his half sister was kept while he was given away; his stepmother took his father away; and his stepsister upstaged him in every way. These feelings, the psychiatrist stated, inspired Berkowitz to hunt down women and make them pay for his troubles. In the shootings, it was evident that the women were the real targets; in most cases, it seemed as if the men were shot as an afterthought.

Abrahamsen also focused on Berkowitz’s childhood habits, and used suggestive language when describing and analyzing the killer’s oral fixation. David Berkowitz was an overweight child, and discussed how he ate when he was nervous. As I previously mentioned, Abrahamsen also attributed excessive eating as a way of alleviating guilt. He speculated further and stated that Berkowitz’s need to eat was a way of replacing personal relationships: “For David, uncertain about origin, food provided security, love, and immediate gratification (emphasis added by author). To him, postponement of gratification became synonymous with rejection and pain.”

Berkowitz’s oral fixation became a focus in Abrahamsen’s examination. Abrahamsen steadfast belief that these murders were sexual in nature shows through his emphasis on Berkowitz’s seemingly

63 Abrahamsen, 56.
irrelevant childhood habits. The author took this one step further and stipulated that Berkowitz ate excessively in fear of being consumed himself, which led to thoughts of killing for self-preservation: “All of these [feelings] were instrumental in establishing his emotional readiness for the brutal killing of innocent women. Eat or be eaten. Kill or be killed.”

The violence inflicted on these women was decidedly sexual, according to the author. Abrahamsen took a series of interviews he conducted with Berkowitz and compiled them into a chapter titled “Sex as a Force for Murder”. In it, the psychiatrist argues that while he emphatically denied a sexual impulse when committing these crimes—“These weren’t ‘sex crimes.’ Passion may have been involved but it wasn’t directly sexual”—there are sexual undertones to be detected: the fact that “sexual emotions are practically always involved in homicide, it would be a foregone conclusion that David Berkowitz’s sexual feelings played a significant role in his murderous spree.” It is important to note here that sexual motivation was expected in multiple homicide cases, which shows that the public would not have any difficulty believing the inspiration behind Berkowitz’s crimes. His recount of his first murder had many sexual undertones, especially in his depictions of shooting through the window of the car: “I just started to shoot, at the window. And I just saw the glass come in, my eyes were transfixed to the glass. Thousands of little pieces…”

64 Abrahamsen, 56.
65 Abrahamsen, 173.
66 Abrahamsen, 163.
67 Abrahamsen, 113.
Abrahamsen does not address this imagery outright, the inclusion of the transcript sets a tone for the text. In fact, Abrahamsen frequently supplements his observations of Berkowitz with sensual vocabulary. In describing the Son of Sam killer in the preface, he notes his “sweet, seductive smile” and his “charismatic, enticing personality.” The author seemed to have brought the sexualized aspect of the crimes by invoking sexual language throughout the book.

Abrahamsen not only alluded to sexual undertones in Berowitz’s crimes, he also argued that Berkowitz’s sexual fantasies were a driving force in committing these murders. In the same chapter, the psychiatrist gave his account of interviews he had with Berkowitz in which they discussed his sexual fantasies and masturbation habits, which Abrahamsen linked to his violent acts. He offered an explanation for his reasoning: “Within our sexual fantasies themselves, violence often plays a part. In the disturbed (though not necessarily psychotic) mind, however, these feelings—sex and violence—fuse together.” Berkowitz fantasized about attractive women and he fantasized about violent acts, but he claimed that they occurred separately. Nonetheless, the psychiatrist believed he shot the women out of feelings of inadequacy. As a voyeur, Berkowitz observed couples having sex in their cars and received sexual pleasure secondhand. He ultimately asserted himself in the situation when he shot them, an action that Abrahamsen believed to be his way of participating: “When he too wanted to partake in the act, he shot his victims. He was transfixed, continuing to pull the trigger; he was

68 Abrahamsen, ii.
69 Abrahamsen, 175.
both emotionally and sexually engaged.”

Although Berkowitz emphatically denied that he had no sexual desire towards his victims, the psychiatrist still asserted that it was his sex drive, and lack of sexual maturity, that fueled his murderous rampage. Abrahamsen argued that Berkowitz’s constant competition with his father for his mother’s affection led him to fear retribution. That fear led to stymied sexual urges; “His aggressive, extroverted sexual feelings were blocked by fear of the powerful father, who might, the child fantasized, cut off the boy’s sexual organ.” This resulted in David’s fear of penetration and his failure to establish normal sexual relationships with women, which Abrahmsen believed to be the reason Berkowitz began killing.

When writing his account, David Abrahmsen was intent on connecting the killer’s sexual issues to his murderous actions; this fixation shaped public thought about these murders. From the Ed Gein case, we see how media caters to its audience by presenting the story in a manner that encourages audience reciprocity. In constructing his testimonial account of his interactions with the Son of Sam killer, the author emphasized material he deemed important, material that would also resonate with the public. Similar to Dahmer’s story, we now know intimate details about Berkowitz—his childhood, his fears, his sexual fantasies, the way he killed his victims. We know Berkowitz, but we do not know his victims. It seems ironic that a book written in part to help the victims’ families hardly mentions the victims at all. But, as we have seen, sensational narratives garner more attention than victims’ stories. For Abrahmsen, writing about Berkowitz’s sexual deviancy ensured him a large, enraptured audience.

70 Abrahmsen, 177.

71 Abrahmsen, 173.
because sex sells. Coupling sex with violence undeniably captures America’s attention (as Mark Seltzer would attest), and he used that to his advantage. As previously stated, there are multiple ways to tell a story. David Abrahamsen focused on an aspect of Berkowitz’s personality that would receive a strong public response.

The “Summer of Sam,” as newspapers liked to call the summer of 1977, galvanized the citizens of New York City, and created a charged atmosphere around the case following Berkowitz’s arrest. Berkowitz became an instant celebrity; he appeared on television, held several interviews with news journalists, and created a public profile. Abrahamsen’s account of Berkowitz was received well because he offered insight on this deranged individual—who he was, where he came from, and most important, what made him commit murder. Abrahamsen used his rapport and authority as a psychoanalyst to assert his theories of Berkowitz’s psychological state in a public realm. Strict analytical thinking, however, does not support his theories—rather, his writing has a tone of sensational journalism. Berkowitz might have captured national attention when he murdered six people and established himself in the media, but Abrahamsen certainly put himself in the limelight as well.

**Serial Killers: Media Lightening Rods**

The emergence of the serial killer in American media has transformed the way the public views these crimes. Serial killers have become household names and American icons because of the coverage of their crimes. The media not only focuses on details of these murderers, but also the personal history. Gein’s infatuation with his mother is something of common knowledge; Dahmer’s childhood is a matter of public record; we
know Berkowitz’s feelings towards his adoptive parents and his sexual fantasies. These are personal details that have entered the public realm because of the media’s willingness to accommodate their audience. News media, law enforcement officials, and other authorities have both created a demand for this kind of information, and willingly provided it.

Despite all the media attention, very little is known about a group of individuals closely tied to the crime: the victims of serial killers. These victims make their killers famous, but they fail to grab the public’s attention. Ed Gein, Jeffrey Dahmer, B.T.K., and the Son of Sam have become household names, but even authorities on the subject do not know the names of their victims. The next chapter will focus on these forgotten individuals, and how they have been exploited even after their deaths.
Chapter 3: The Hunted: Victims Who Have Been Used to Make Serial Killers Household Celebrities

Sensational murder and serial killing have two things in common: they both revolve around wrongful death and media coverage. In sensational murder cases, the victim is usually the one placed in the spotlight; however, in the cases of serial murder, it is the killer who captures the public’s attention. In some ways, the serial killer can be considered an artist whose victims are his works of art; whereas cases in which the victims are public figures, the killer can be considered a vandal, destroying a highly visible work of art. In this juxtaposition, it is evident that victims of serial killers are merely props in the killer’s, and subsequently, the media’s agenda.

John Lennon: A Picasso Slashed

On December 8, 1980, ex-Beatle John Lennon was shot and killed as he was entering his apartment building, The Dakota, on the Upper West Side in Manhattan. He was transported to St. Luke’s-Roosevelt Hospital Center, where he was pronounced dead a few minutes after arriving. Soon after local news stations broadcasted his death, crowds of people formed in front of Roosevelt Hospital and the Dakota. Two days later, Lennon was cremated and his ashes were given to his wife, Yoko Ono, who elected not to hold a funeral for him.

Lennon’s killer, Mark David Chapman, was apprehended at the scene of the shooting. He had been waiting for Lennon outside his apartment building—not an uncommon sight, as it was customary to find fans in search of an autograph. Witnesses stated that at 5 PM Chapman approached Lennon, and without speaking,
handed him a copy of *Double Fantasy*, which Lennon autographed. After signing the album, Lennon asked, "Is this all you want?" Chapman smiled and nodded in agreement. Afterwards, Lennon and Ono walked to their limousine to make their way to the studio to record the song “Walking on Thin Ice.”

Lennon and his wife spent hours at the Record Plant Studio, and did not return to their home until approximately 11PM. Lennon wanted to get back in time to wish his five year-old son Sean goodnight. As the singer walked towards his building, Chapman emerged from his hiding place behind the archway of the Dakota, gun in hand. Within seconds, Chapman had taken aim directly at the center of Lennon's back and fired five hollow-point bullets at him from a Charter Arms .38 Special revolver in rapid succession. The *New York Times* reported specific details of the encounter:

“Lieut. John Schick of the 20th Precinct said the gunman let the Lennons pass him and enter the building’s passageway before shooting the singer. Lieutenant Schick said the man called out ‘Mr. Lennon’ and then pulled a gun from under a coat and started firing.” The officer then stated, “the suspect stepped from an alcove and emptied several shots into Mr. Lennon while standing in a combat position. Mr. Lennon then struggled up six stairs and inside the alcove to a guard area where he collapsed.”

Several news accounts of the event used the term “combat stance,” even though court hearings and witness interviews do not include either "Mr. Lennon" or the "combat

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74 Ledbetter, 1980.
Chapman has said he did not remember calling out Lennon's name before he shot him.\textsuperscript{75} The paper's attention to detail and use of militaristic terms to describe the scene provided readers with an in-depth, gripping account of the events of the shooting.

The \textit{New York Times}, along with countless other news sources, covered this assassination extensively. Chapman’s behavior after the murder further fueled media scrutiny. After surrendering his weapon to the doorman who took it away from him, Chapman then removed his coat and hat in preparation for the arrival of police—to show he was not concealing any weapons—and sat down on the sidewalk. He did not attempt to escape, even though witnesses stated that he had ample opportunity to run away: “One witness, Ben Eruchson, a cab driver from Brooklyn, said, ‘He could have gotten away, He had plenty of time.’”\textsuperscript{76} It was clear that Chapman had no intention of escaping, and was fully prepared to take the credit for this crime. His interactions with the witnesses indicate as much; doorman Jose Perdomo shouted at Chapman, "Do you know what you've done?" to which Chapman calmly replied, "Yes, I just shot John Lennon."\textsuperscript{77}

Chapman unveiled another obsession of his at the scene of the crime—J.D. Salinger’s \textit{The Catcher in the Rye}. Police officers responding to the scene reported


\textsuperscript{77} Ledbetter, 1980
that Chapman had been holding a paperback copy of the book.\(^{78}\) He had written a message on the book's inside front cover: "To Holden Caulfield. From Holden Caulfield. This is my statement." He would later claim that his life mirrored that of Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of the book. Chapman’s delusional claims only added more sensationalized coverage of the event.

Lennon’s murder triggered an unprecedented emotional response on an international scale. In the months following his death, The Beatles’ album sales skyrocketed, as well as Lennon’s solo work. Crowds continued to stand vigil outside the Dakota the days following the shooting, singing his songs in tribute. On December 14, 1980, millions of people all over the world held a moment of silence in memory of Lennon. Two Beatles fans committed suicide in response to his death, prompting Ono to make a public appeal to ask mourners not to give in to their grief.

The media attention the case received was outstanding in volume. Newspapers, televised news broadcasts, magazines all covered the event in detail. Allen Ginsberg, the famous beat poet likened killing Lennon to “slashing a Picasso.”\(^{79}\) Chapman became an instant celebrity for his role in the event that had become a media spectacle. From the emergence of Beatlemania in the early 1960s to his murder in 1980, Lennon was seen as a modern day public hero. By killing a public figure—a celebrity and revered superstar—Chapman made a name for himself and established himself in the public sphere.

\(^{78}\) Ledbetter, 1980.

As stated in Chapter 1, the turn of the twentieth century has seen a redefinition of fame, which is partly due to the emergence of new media technologies. “In the last hundred years, “ Leo Braudy writes, “the nature of fame has changed more decisively and more quickly than it has for the previous two thousand. Visual media became the standard-bearers of international recognition, giving art, religion, and politics shapes they never had before.” 80 The materialization of the celebrity figure in the twentieth century attests to the power of visual media. Lennon’s success as an international rock sensation is an appropriate example of how our general culture uses celebrities to “understand and reflexively incorporate, conflicting ideologies that seek to contain, repress, or transform societal configurations of personhood, desire, sexuality, and culture.” 81 In one form or another, most individuals in contemporary society establish intimate connections with non-present or distant others. Actors and actresses, radio personalities, professional athletes, and talk show hosts are, to varying levels, incorporated into people’s daily routines, which allows for the establishment of perceived intimacy. Rolling Stone writer Scott Spencer summarizes the feeling of intimacy and mourning surrounding Lennon’s death:

Because he allowed us to know him, to love him, John Lennon gave us the chance to share his death, to resume the preparations for our own. Because we were so used to the way he thought, the habits, the turns, the surprises of his mind, we can enter him as we remember his last moments, to let it be us in the car, pulling up the curb, opening the door, stepping out, breathing the night. Someone said he was happy that


night, and we somehow know what his happiness felt like, and we can imagine ourselves resurgent, electric with energy. 82

While it is sentimental, this description reflects on the emotional dynamics being played in the time following Lennon’s murder.

These dynamics are amplified in scope due to the increase in communication that technology now affords us. “As visual and verbal communication wraps and rewraps itself around the world,” Braudy writes, “and the rapid dissemination of information implies the creation of an international culture, the ideal of twentieth-century fame has become characterized by an effort to yoke even more firmly than before previously opposed elements of visual, theatrical fame (historically set in civic and political life) with spiritual, intangible fame (with its roots in the Christian conception of the audience not of this world).” 83 In Braudy’s mind, modernity has developed “a democratization of fame.” Fame no longer belongs to the elite; rather it has been redistributed among the masses.

This democratization extends to those individuals who seek to establish themselves in the public sphere. By attaching their existence to the existence of a recognized, revered figure, these individuals become recognizable themselves. Mark David Chapman has become a household name by eliminating John Lennon, which clearly was his intention. Chapman clearly staged Lennon’s murder; he chose the

83 Braudy, 555.
setting, set the scene, and even brought along a prop, his copy of *Catcher in the Rye*.

But he did not erase Lennon; rather he ensured an explosive, and unforgettable, end to a legend. It is clear that the media’s focus is on the slain superstar, but his killer makes his way into the limelight as well.

**Serial Killers: A Role Reversal**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the information available on serial killers as criminals and as individuals is overwhelming in scope and volume. Ed Gein’s relationship with his mother, Jeffrey Dahmer’s likes and dislikes, David Berkowitz’s feelings toward his adoptive father are all a matter of public record. It is their victims that society knows little about. This appears to be strange because—as we have seen in the media coverage surrounding John Lennon’s death—in sensationalized murder cases, emphasis is placed on the victim. Yet, with serial murders, all media attention is reserved for the killer. The media makes celebrity-hood desirable and by extension, confers celebrity-hood on serial killers. The media, like the FBI with its self-rationalizing, becomes the problem.

The media circus that accompanied the Gein case was almost exclusively centered around the killer and macabre collection of human body parts. When the police announced what they had discovered in the Gein house, they set off a media frenzy. Reporters from all over the country came to Plainsfield to cover the story. Locals talked freely to the press about their neighbor and provided insight into the man who once babysat their children and now stood accused of mass murder. Almost no consideration was given to his victims, Bernice Worden and Mary Hogan.
Like Gein’s personal background, Dahmer’s entire life is on display in the public eye. From the moment news crews began congregating outside Dahmer’s apartment building to the time the trial ended more than a year later, the Dahmer story dominated American news media. To date however, the only memorable victim of his has been Konerak Sinthasomphone, the thirteen year-old Laotian boy who had escaped from Dahmer’s apartment, and alerted the police to the killer’s crimes. Yet, little information about the boy is available. The only background that news sources have offered the public is the information that is relevant to Dahmer’s story, such as he was the youngest of Dahmer’s victims, and that he had had a brother who also was connected to the killer. In the public’s demand to hear a story of a killing spree, the media—the storytellers—reduce victims to satellite status and thus diminish them to being nothing more than the prey of their killer. These eighteen men are now forever remembered as “Dahmer’s victims,” simply because the public knows nothing else about them. We do not even know their names.

This lack of regard for the victims of serial killers is not exclusively a result of national news coverage; local media sources also throw victims to the wayside. In covering the BTK murders, The Wichita Eagle Beacon spent little time reporting on the individuals who were bound, tortured, and killed; their headlines focused more on the killer who had contacted them extensively. Dennis Rader’s reign of terror lasted from 1974 to 2005, yet it was not until 2007, years after he was arrested and convicted, that the Beacon published profiles on his victims. The Wikipedia page about Rader’s victims reads like a game of Clue; in lieu of complete sentences, there
is a chart depicting the victim’s name and gender, the manner in which they died, murder weapon, date of death, and where their bodies were found.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Date of Death</th>
<th>Place of Death</th>
<th>Cause of Death</th>
<th>Weapon Used</th>
<th>Date Body Found</th>
<th>Place Body Found</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Joseph Otero</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>January 15, 1974</td>
<td>803 North Edgemoor Street, Wichita</td>
<td>Suffocated</td>
<td>Plastic bags</td>
<td>January 15, 1974</td>
<td>803 North Edgemoor Street, Wichita</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Julie Otero</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>January 15, 1974</td>
<td>803 North Edgemoor Street, Wichita</td>
<td>Strangled</td>
<td>Rope</td>
<td>January 15, 1974</td>
<td>803 North Edgemoor Street, Wichita</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Joseph Otero Jr</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>January 15, 1974</td>
<td>803 North Edgemoor Street, Wichita</td>
<td>Suffocated</td>
<td>A plastic bag</td>
<td>January 15, 1974</td>
<td>803 North Edgemoor Street, Wichita</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Josephine Otero</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>January 15, 1974</td>
<td>803 North Edgemoor Street, Wichita</td>
<td>Hanged from a drainage pipe</td>
<td>Rope</td>
<td>January 15, 1974</td>
<td>803 North Edgemoor Street, Wichita</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Kathryn Bright</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>April 4, 1974</td>
<td>3217 East 13th Street North, Wichita</td>
<td>Stabbed once in the back and once in the lower abdomen</td>
<td>Knife</td>
<td>April 4, 1974</td>
<td>3217 East 13th Street North, Wichita</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Shirley Vian</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>March 17, 1977</td>
<td>1311 South Hydraulic Street, Wichita</td>
<td>Strangled</td>
<td>Rope</td>
<td>March 17, 1977</td>
<td>1311 South Hydraulic Street, Wichita</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Nancy Fox</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>December 8, 1977</td>
<td>843 South Pecos Street, Wichita</td>
<td>Strangled</td>
<td>Belt</td>
<td>December 8, 1977</td>
<td>843 South Pecos Street, Wichita</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Marine Hedge</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>April 27, 1985</td>
<td>6054 North Independence Street, Park City</td>
<td>Strangled</td>
<td>Rader's hand(s)</td>
<td>May 5, 1985</td>
<td>East 50th Street North between North Webb Road and North Greenwich Road, Wichita</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

List of Rader’s Victims (Wikipedia)

This chart clearly indicates that Rader’s victims, like all serial killers’ victims, have been reduced to completely static roles. Yet, it is not to say that increased coverage of victims is the solution—rather, it would prove more detrimental to the victims’ families to have their loved ones—and by extension, themselves—put on display. Unlike individuals like John Lennon (people who have willingly placed themselves in the public eye), victims did not ask for the attention. However, it is evident that an inverse relationship exists: as the serial killer receives more attention, his victims are afforded less consideration. As a result, the media further victimizes the slain individuals by diminishing their identity after their deaths.
The Serial Killer as an Artist

Andy Warhol considered the perpetrators of outrageous crimes as stars, because the rapid increase in media caused an “insatiable hunger” for news and celebrities of any kind. And indeed they have become stars. New York artist Max Frazee stated that it was “inevitable” to make the serial killer the object of serial art, even to reenact the serial killer’s frenzy in his art, which he does so in his Epitaph for Ted (1990) and his Green River Killer Project (1993). Joe Coleman evoked controversy with a devotional picture of Albert Fish (seen below), who had confessed to killing at least one hundred children.


The serial killer in the frame of serial art seems to be outrageous and provocative, yet the history of serial killers is ingrained within a framework of art. In his satirical essay “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts” (1827), Thomas De Quincey, drawing on the serial killer John Williams, argued that although murder is a heinous act, it could also be considered—in terms of art—a strive for aesthetic perfection:
People begin to see that something more goes to the composition of a fine murder than two blockheads to kill and be killed—a knife—a purse—and a dark lane. Design, gentlemen, group, light and shade, poetry, sentiment, are now deemed indispensable to attempts of this nature. Mister Williams has exalted the ideal murder to all of us...Like Aeschylus or Milton in poetry, like Michel Angelo in painting, he has carried his art to a point of colossal sublimity...

Williams, who is mentioned here, was convicted of wiping out two entire families in December 1811. De Quincey sees the aesthetic of the killer’s crimes in the sublime, and goes on to compare murders to paintings and theatrical performances.

The identity of the serial killer emerged in the late twentieth century, an identity that is firmly ingrained in the arts. Special Agent Robert K. Ressler of the FBI coined the term serial killer in the 1970s in order to differentiate that individual from a mass murderer or spree killer. Ressler recalls how he thought up the name:

At that time our movie theaters showed mystery series on Saturdays. Every week they threw out a bait for the spectators to watch the sequel for the film always stopped at the moment of highest suspense. This was very dissatisfactory as the suspense was not released but rather intensified. The same kind of dissatisfaction is felt by serial killers. The act of killing increases their tension because it is never as perfect as they imagine it. When the phantom disappears in the quicksands, the viewer has to come back next week and find out whether the hero still manages to catch it. The serial killer ponders after his murder how he could have done it more perfectly. ‘O God, I have killed her much too fast. I should have taken more time and really tortured her, then it would have been more fun. I should have talked to her differently and should have thought of a new way of raping her.’ Whenever his thoughts take this turn then be is in fact already planning his next murder. This one should be more perfect. It is a process of a continued striving for “perfection.”


Although Ressler’s account of the serial killer’s mindset could be considered conjecture, it is noteworthy that this idea of the criminal was in the public eye. His assessment of the relationship between serial killer and victim can be likened to that of a director and his film and actors. The killer casts his characters when he chooses his victims, directs and stars in their murder, and exhibits his creation with his assembly of the crime scene.

In accordance with Leo Braudy’s redefinition of fame and Walter Benjamin’s theory of art reproduction in the twentieth century, the phenomena surrounding serial killers is highly dependent on visibility and mass reproduction. It is evident that the murderers are visible—their victims are not. Yet their victims are what make these killers famous. Much like professional sports players, serial killers have statistics associated with their criminal career: number of kills, method of killing, location of murders, etc. As a result, he victims are marginalized, their identities reduced to crime statistics.

Ginsberg likened Lennon’s murder to the destruction of a Picasso. In that circumstance, Chapman gained fame, or rather infamy, by annihilating a revered public icon. In contrast, through their destruction, the serial killer achieves fame by using their victims to make a statement. The victims, in essence, are the killer’s works of art. Like an artist’s medium, whether it be oil paintings, sculptures, or charcoal drawings, the serial killer’s modus operandi—the “functional components which are
necessary for an offender to be successful in committing a crime sets the scene of the murder. The killer determines, with a knife, a piece of rope, or a gun, how his victim will die. But it is the killer’s signature that evokes a strong connection to art. A killer’s signature is a behavior that goes beyond what is necessary to commit the crime and fulfill his psychological need. “The killer’s signature is his ‘psychological calling card’,” Robert Keppel writes, “that he leaves at each crime scene across a spectrum of different murders.” Like an artist who signs his painting, the serial killer marks his victim in a way that makes them his possession.

The media corroborates this way of thinking; in using the victims as merely talking points in their accounts of the murder, media sources portray victims as props. They are one-dimensional figures who serve no bigger purpose than to tell a killer’s story. These individuals are forever remembered as victims, people more well-known for how they died, rather than how they lived.

89 Keppel, et. al, 2.
Chapter 4: Norman Bates, Hannibal Lecter, and Mickey Knox: How Serial Killers in Fiction Further Make Problems

The Visibility of the Serial Killer on the Big Screen

In a 1994 episode of the hit sitcom “Friends,” Ross emerges out of the emergency room with a plaster cast on his face, to which Chandler quips, “I loved you in the Silence of the Lambs.” The humor is in the reference to the cannibalistic serial killer Hannibal Lecter, who is famously shown wearing a facemask throughout the blockbuster hit, *The Silence of the Lambs*. The movie, arguably the most famous serial killer film of the twentieth century, was based on the book series featuring “Hannibal the Cannibal,” written by Thomas Harris.

Serial killers have emerged in fiction and found a prominent place among popular culture in the United States. Most people can place references from various movies, for instance Hannibal’s famous assertion that human liver goes well with “fava beans and a nice Chianti,” is recognized in most circles. Since the days of helter
skelter in 1969, Hollywood has served up a slew of movies and television programs featuring serial killings. As discussed in previous chapters, the serial killer has found a niche in the public sphere, through mass media attention and extensive coverage of their crimes and subsequent capture. The figure has also achieved fame in the fictional realm. Classic serial killer fiction and films offer their audiences many sources of pleasure: “control over disorder, the pleasure of pattern discovering, the identification with a strong representative of the law, and of course the enjoyment, from the readers’ secure position of the murders as art or simply as an intellectual game.”

A close relative of the crime film, the psychological thriller, is seen as an alternative for the traditional cops-and-robbers story. But in thrillers, the characters are less emblematic than in crime films, and the viewpoint concerning criminals tends to be esoteric; society, since it is not directly involved, “is absolved from the responsibility of any wrongdoing.” This genre of film is not meant to be a commentary on society; the thriller “deals with violence in the private sphere.” In crime films, the detective’s role cannot be usurped; in thrillers, the lawman’s role can be usurped at any given moment. In serial killer films, the serial killer takes on the role of the usurper.

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90 Mass murderer and cult leader Charles Manson referred to “Helter Skelter” (a Beatles Song) as the apocalyptic race war between blacks and whites. His cult carried out a series of murders in hopes of starting a race riot.


Serial killer fiction is a genre that traces back to both the detective genre and the gothic genre. This fiction “takes the chaotic world of gothic and adapts it to the contemporary world through the figure of the serial killer.”  

Moreover, the serial killer kills continuously, thereby establishing a pattern the detective must uncover. Thus, in serial killer fiction the “world of chaos is recuperated from gothic fiction,” and the underlying figure of the detective is left to fight for the role of protagonist in this sphere.  

The serial killer’s presence in fiction presents a problem because it glorifies these individuals. Furthermore, it adds to the notion that America produces a “serial killer culture,” where violence is not only expected, but welcomed. Looking at films such as *Psycho* (1960), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), and *Natural Born Killers* (1994), we can see that the serial killer becomes a hero in the eyes of the audience.  

**Psycho: Norman Bates**  

Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* tells the story of Norman Bates, a lonely and apparently naïve young man who runs the Bates Motel, a roadside hotel located in a deserted area. The history of the production of the film is notorious: after directing more than 40 films, Hitchcock feared he had become predictable. He also feared he was being outstripped by competitors like the French director Clouzot, whose movie *Les Diaboliques* garnered him the nickname “The French Hitchcock.”  

Hitchcock looked for more extreme material and found it in a novel titled *Psycho*, which was a

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93 Allué, 8.

94 Allué, 8.

little-known book by Robert Bloch that was based on Ed Gein. Despite disapproval from Paramount Pictures, Hitchcock’s studio, he began to produce the movie. His film produced a shockwave through American culture and raised the bar for film violence for generations of American filmmakers.

As stated before, *Psycho* centers around Norman Bates, a motel proprietor. Products of Norman’s hobby, taxidermy, adorn the motel lobby. Although we do not see her face, we know Norman’s mother to be domineering, overbearing, and in complete control of her son. As secondary characters in the film are murdered, we the audience become suspicious of Norman. As the story concludes, we learn that Norman killed his mother long ago and now kills others as “directed” to him by her corpse, his ultimate taxidermy project.

The *New York Times* review of the film cautioned potential viewers that they “had better have a pretty strong stomach and be prepared for a couple of grisly shocks when you go to see Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, which a great many people are sure to do.” And despite the warning of violence, the newspaper was correct in predicting the popularity of the movie. Although *Time* magazine condemned the film as “a spectacle of stomach-churning horror,” audiences flocked to the cinema: “Contemporary audiences were so taken with *Psycho*—screaming, laughing, throwing popcorn—that even Hitchcock himself was surprised, even inquiring with


the Stanford University Psychology Department about the possibility of a study to understand the hysterical reaction to the film."

The jarring shower murder and the “twisted linkage of sex, violence, and the American family” demonstrated a fundamental shift in representations of screen violence. However, the violence seemed to have been received well, judging by audience reactions.

It is noteworthy to state that when the Production Code Administration screened *Psycho*, it only recommended cuts related to sexual elements of the film; it was the Catholic Legion of Decency that suggested violence related-cuts: “[The Legion] insisted that the murder of the detective Arbogast be made less graphic and that Norman not be shown with blood on his hands as he cleans up the scene of his ‘mother’s’ crime” (Phillips 67).

98 Phillips, 67.

99 Corliss, 1980.
Hitchcock certainly portrayed the serial killer America expects: bloodthirsty, sexually charged (given the “phallic-shaped knives” Norman employs), and delusional. Bates is the perfect model to which future filmmakers built their serial killers on, considering the incredible reception he received by the American audience.

**The Silence of the Lambs: Hannibal as a Modern-Day Hero**

Jonathan Demme’s *Silence of the Lambs* took the nation by storm in 1991. The *New York Times* gave it a rave review, stating it “could well be the first big hit of the year.”

The prediction proved true; not only did the film bring in record earnings, but it also generated numerous awards, including the People’s Choice Award for Best Drama film in 1991. The 1998 Film Institute named it one of the “100 Greatest American Movies.”

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Jodie Foster, who portrayed FBI Agent-in-training Clarice Starling, and Anthony Hopkins, who played the infamous serial killer, Hannibal Lecter, had heads turning in Hollywood with their performances. The fame, however, does not end with actors: “So identified has Anthony Hopkins become with the role of Hannibal Lecter that the fulsome praise that has greeted Hopkins’s performances in the role can reasonably be taken as relatively unguarded expressions of fascination with and admiration of
Lecter himself, who was recently voted the top movie villain of all time in an Internet poll.\footnote{David Schmid, \textit{Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture}, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 83.}

At the beginning of "The Silence of the Lambs," Jack Crawford (Scott Glenn), the head of the FBI’s Behavioral Sciences Unit, seeks the assistance of the cadet Starling in capturing a new serial killer, known as Buffalo Bill for his unusual post-mortem ritual. Bill’s signature is to kill and skin his victims after abducting them for three days. Starling’s assignment is to interview the imprisoned Lecter, a brilliant but bent forensic psychiatrist, in the hope that he would provide a psychological profile of the new killer. While the investigation and capture of Buffalo Bill is the central plotline of the movie, a powerful subplot is the burgeoning relationship between Starling and Lecter, set through several prison interviews—conducted through inch-thick bulletproof glass.

The reviewer describes Lecter as “a most seductive psychopath, a fellow who listens to the ‘Goldberg Variations’ and can sketch the Duomo from memory.”\footnote{Canby, 1991.} It's not his elegant tastes that attract Starling, and certainly not his arrogant manner or his good looks. His smile is frosty, and his eyes never change expression. It is his mind that draws her to him. Hannibal is one movie killer who is demonstrably as brilliant and wicked as he is reported to be. In their first encounter, Lecter sizes Starling up, demoralizes her by criticizing her purse, “cheap shoes,” and West Virginian accent.

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\footnote{102}{Canby, 1991.}
(“You look like a rube. A well scrubbed, hustling rube with a little taste”), and eventually scares her off.

But it is worth noting that in the film, Lecter is not treated as a monster in a classical sense. He is white, probably heterosexual, intelligent, and had a liberal profession. In most cases, he would be considered a gentleman of the Renaissance; “Sure, he is also a cannibal but he is extremely polite and tasteful, after all, he used to eat his victims with aromatic herbs.”

When Lecter finally agrees to help Starling, it's with the understanding that for every bit of information he gives her, she will tell him something about herself. Because Hannibal, by nature and by profession, is an expert in prying, the questions he asks, and the answers he receives, both frighten and soothe the young woman; for Lecter, they are a turn-on. Through the bulletproof glass, in dizzy succession, Lecter and Starling “become analyst and analyzed, teacher and pupil, father and daughter, lover and beloved, while always remaining cat and mouse.”

In the conventional detective story, the murder is regarded as “normal” in that they belong to a particular social type with predictable motives, such as love, revenge, money and so on. By contrast, the detective is “extraordinary,” with special qualities that permit a solution where the less brilliant will fail. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s novel detective, Sherlock Holmes, comes to mind. In the case of the serial killer, in the case of this serial killer in particular, the pattern is inverted. Dr. Lecter is

103 Allué, 15.
a brilliant psychiatrist who is serving consecutive life sentences for his cannibalistic serial killing activities, but is called on to help the FBI ensnare another homicidal psychopath. It is this power relationship that establishes Lecter as the unexpected protagonist of the film. His bad acts are somewhat mollified by his assistance, however two-handed it is.

Lecter’s bad acts are to some extent explained away. While some of his victims are undoubtedly innocent people (tourists, a nurse, some police officers), a selected number of his targets can be seen as “bad.” One of his fellow cellmates, “Multiple” Miggs, fell victim to Lecter’s manipulative ways after he behaved in a derogatory way toward Agent Starling. Another casualty, Dr. Chilton—the sadistic head of the psychiatric hospital that imprisons Lecter—is seen as a welcome loss when he falls prey to the cannibal’s homicidal tendencies. In fact, Chilton is presented as the antagonist in many ways—his narcissistic personality, and his petty power plays against his charges are not lost on Lecter, Starling, or the audience. Lecter’s actions against him then, can be seen as a macabre balancing of the scales; “after all, this man had been cruel to Lecter (doesn’t he deserve it a little bit?)”

Unlike many horror movies where the villain escapes custody or punishment, *The Silence of the Lambs* makes sure the serial killer gets his just desserts when Starling kills Buffalo Bill. But this is only half of the story, as Lecter escapes and walks off to keep his “dinner date” with Chilton. The success of the film is that “it gives its audience the best of both worlds: Buffalo Bill’s death allows the audience to disavow any identification it may have formed with serial killer characters, and yet

106 Allué, 15.
that very same identification is adroitly maintained by the prospect that Hannibal Lecter, in every sense the more acceptable serial killer in the movie (because he is more educated, urbane, and witty), is still at large and thus available for an equally successful sequel.”¹⁰⁷ The audience revels in the capture of one bad guy, and therefore is tolerant of the notion that the “less” bad guy has escaped.

**Natural Born Killers: On the Other Side**

Whereas *Silence of the Lambs* invites viewers into the mind of the serial killer as read by FBI agents, *Natural Born Killers* (1994) invites viewers to witness America’s reaction to a killing spree. In 1994, controversy swirled around director Oliver Stone’s film, which some argued was too graphically violent for general release and others argued glamorized serial killing for young viewers. Significantly though, *Natural Born Killers* itself does not glamorize violence; rather, the film centers on how violence is already glamorized in our society. Stone uses *Natural Born Killers* to “attack what he sees as the root of the evil that is serial killer fame: the media.”¹⁰⁸ Stone forces us to really see our own obsession with criminal celebrity when he displays a story of the media’s pursuit of fictional serial killers Mickey and Mallory Knox. In *Natural Born Killers*, the media, and with it the public, stalk Mickey and Mallory like serial killers stalk their victims.

In the first half of the film, Mickey and Mallory Knox (played by Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis) drive down Route 666 (assume the satanic number is intentional) like Bonnie and Clyde, killing everyone in their path and riding on a huge

¹⁰⁷ Schmid, 132.

¹⁰⁸ Schmid, 122.
wave of publicity and adulation from the surrounding community.

Mickey and Mallory are captured and imprisoned halfway through the film. The second half of the movie is centered around a post-Super Bowl interview Mickey does with Wayne Gale (played by Robert Downey Jr.), the host of a tabloid TV called *American Maniacs*. The interview is broadcast to the rest of the prison population who—inspired by Mickey’s defense of murder—tear the prison apart. In the ensuing chaos, Mickey and Mallory escape, along with Wayne Gale, whom they subsequently kill so they can live happily ever after.

*Natural Born Killers* was met with harsh criticism, because in Stone’s attempt to satirize the role of the media in serial killer lore was interpreted as too scandalous. “What makes ’Natural Born Killers’ officially a satire—or, in Stone’s words, a
``Swiftian/Voltairean caricature of our worst nightmare—,'', "New Yorker" movie review asserts, "is that the main characters become folk heroes thanks to tabloid television. The lionization of Mickey and Mallory is presumably meant to demonstrate our culture’s inherent attraction to violence." Did his message come through? Not according to his reviewers. "Satire? In his skill as a manipulator of thoughts and images, in his short-circuiting ordinary narrative, and in his intuitive visual brilliance, Mr. Stone could well turn out to be the most influential American film maker of his generation. But as a satirist, he's an elephant ballerina," The New York Times reported.

His choice of target in tabloid shows was an error in judgment, due to the nature of tabloid shows. It is almost impossible to satirize the tabloid television genre because it is already so over-the-top to begin with. Stone is limited to exaggerating even further the defining features of a genre that is already ridiculously exaggerated.

Stone’s second mistake was his portrayal of his killers. In an interview, Stone claimed that his intention was to make Mickey and Mallory sympathetic to the audience. He stated that the killers are destined to "capture the hearts and minds of Americans looking for a human face" Natural Born Killers does not falter in showing the public’s investment in the killers; in fact, that is where the problem lies. Mickey and Mallory are easily the most sympathetic characters in the film. In his quest to demonize the media, Stone ultimately gives the murderers of fifty people a


pass.

*Natural Born Killers* can be seen as a failed effort in Stone’s attempt to criticize America’s fascination with violence because he employs what Devin McKinney classifies as “weak” violence in film media. “Weak” violence, McKinney writes, is a violence that shields its viewers from having to deal with the consequences of violence by giving them “an escape hatch…[an] assurance that involvement can be avoided.”

In other words, the audience can sit back and enjoy the show without considering the societal implications of such violence. It is violence that is “used only as a device: something a crowd pays for when it goes in [to a movie theater], but not when it comes at you.”

By contrast, “strong” violence denies “glib comfort and immediate resolutions.” *Natural Born Killers* takes on a stance firmly against celebrity serial killers, but ultimately that stance is weakened because it depends “too critically upon the very celebrity culture that they purport to denigrate and repudiate.”

**Serial Killers and Hollywood: Advancing the Problem**

Crime stories, even when they are explicitly and obviously intended to uphold the authority of the law, can appeal to “forbidden desires as political warnings are played out in uneven fields of cultural struggle.” This is certainly the case in serial

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112 Prince, 103.

113 Prince, 100.

114 Schmid, 89.

115 Carrabine, 8.
killer fiction. Although figures like Norman Bates, Hannibal Lecter, and Mickey and Mallory Knox are unequivocally demoralizing and homicidal, they are also shown to be “dark heroes.” Bates’s complex with his mother is used as a mitigating factor for his multiple homicides, and as a result, the audience sympathizes with his plight, and in a way, excuses his actions.

Lecter, easily the most famous serial killer in Hollywood, is both feared for his acts of cannibalism, and admired for the ways he utilizes his murderous skill. Hopkins’s portrayal of the brilliant, psychotic psychiatrist leaves the audience unsettled, dually because of his cobra-like demeanor and his cool, sexy persona that seduces both Agent Starling and the audience. His crimes—which are horrific and immersed in social taboos—are somewhat pardoned through his assistance in capturing Jamie Gumb, the film’s other, more “evil” serial killer. Juxtaposing Dr. Lecter against the self-identified transsexual Buffalo Bill also aids the audience in accepting him as the protagonist of the film. His escape, then, is celebrated, rather than feared. The serial killer genre works to personalize the serial killer, and to mystify them. The killer is then seen as a dark hero, a character that can be admired despite his heinous actions.

Even films that set out to criticize the celebrity serial killer end up revering the figure. Stone’s Natural Born Killers intended to make a statement on the media’s portrayal of serial killers, and ended up reinforcing the stereotype. “’Natural Born Killers’ isn’t likely to make anyone think about violence or American culture in a new way; if anything it confirms the educated audience’s smug belief that the country is being ruined by bloodthirsty yahoos,” the New Yorker states.
In his essay, “Critique of Violence” (1986), Walter Benjamin argues that the violent destructiveness of criminals is not exclusively inherent in the acts they commit but in what their deeds imply about an attack on the principle of law itself. Benjamin supports his claim by emphasizing “how often the figure of the ‘great’ criminal, however repellent his ends may have been, has aroused the secret admiration of the public. This cannot result from his deed, but only from the violence to which it bears witness.” The serial killer both outrages and thrills us by his seeming ability to operate outside the law, to make his own law, “in a gesture whose ambivalent destructiveness and creativity mirror our ambivalent response to the killer, composed of both fear and attraction.”

The serial killer figure has found another niche in Hollywood, and while here he is fictional and thus perceived as harmless, he continues to damage American society. In glamorizing him in fiction, America stands to produce a serial killer culture—one that can spill over into reality.

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117 Prince, 308.
Conclusion: What Are We Doing?

We are a society obsessed with violence. It is undeniable; everywhere we turn we are faced with yet another display of a violent act. The evening news we tune into at the end of the day, the movies we watch, the television shows we follow, the video games we play are all provide us with graphic levels of violence unthinkable a few generations ago.

Pope John Paul II criticized America for endorsing a “culture of death.” Central to our culture is a cult of celebrity. Due to a redemocratization of fame, we no longer distinguish between the famous and the infamous. From the beginning of the twentieth century, simply being known became a critical component of American society. With the advancement of media technologies, more people are visible. The emergence of the celebrity was the result of mass reproduction—we see them everywhere, so they must be famous. The goal, then, is to be seen.

This shift in priorities produced the contemporary American serial killer. Yes, serial murder existed long before the turn of the century, but it was seen as series of acts rather than a calling. The serial killer became an identity thanks to the FBI, who used the serial killer as a means of scaring the American public into trusting the federal government. The serial killer was a “menace” who could only be stopped by them. The media completely played into public fear, and used it to their advantage.

Graphic depictions of crime scenes, detailed accounts of arrests, and intimate histories of the killer are all ways to sell stories. In doing so, they have made serial killing a legitimate profession. Killers operate in, and are recognized for their work in
the public sphere, and the public plays into their fantasies. On the one hand, we publicly deplore serial killers, ostracize them, and in some states, even kill them. On the other hand, we eagerly listen to their stories. We claim to condemn them for their acts of depravity, yet we offer them our most prized cultural commodity: celebrity. In some cases, we literally produce serial killers, in movies and television shows. The problem with the fictional serial killer is that he is too good, too attractive for his deplorable acts. Hannibal Lecter is a charming, handsome, sophisticated man, who happens to be a cannibal. The fictional serial killer becomes a dark knight, operating outside of the law, but working with the protagonist to capture the bigger menace to society.

What message does this send? Looking at history, it is safe to say it is not a good one. The media coverage of Mark David Chapman’s murder of John Lennon basically stated “if you can’t become a rock star, kill one.” The end result is the same, because killing a public figure garners the same level of attention one would receive if he were a public figure himself. Killing a large number of individuals, famous or not, ensures the same result. Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, David Berkowitz are all household names, recognized for killing dozens of people.

This focus on serial killers comes at a high cost. We ignore, or even normalize, other types of violence when we direct our attention to this individual. President Richard Nixon pronounced Charles Manson guilty even before he was put on trial, and the prosecutor for the case called Manson “the evilest man who ever lived.” Meanwhile, bombs—American bombs—were falling over Cambodia. The story of capture of the Son of Sam monopolized the front page of the New York Times
for one week straight, while bylines covering the Arab-Israeli conflict were afforded minimal space on either side of the article. David Berkowitz killed six people over the course of a year; at least twice as many people died in the Middle East within the span of that week. The story that knocked Berkowitz off the front page was that of Elvis Presley’s overdose. We set aside wars because we deem them necessary, yet they are overwhelmingly violent, just like the serial killer. We focus on serial killers because they not only give us a chance to confront our fears, but to emasculate them. We fear the serial killer because he looks like us, acts like us, and lives among us. When the serial killer is caught, we are able to see the monster as a human being, and a beaten one at that. We believe that once the killer is apprehended, the threat is eliminated, and we are safe again. Yet, we are still surrounded by violence. One has a much higher chance getting into a car accident or being held at gunpoint than become the victim of a serial killer.

Victims of serial killers are completely marginalized when serial killers are placed prominently in the spotlight; another fault of the media. They are cast to the side because their stories do not sell papers. The solution is not to increase their visibility, but diminish that of their killers. We must stop playing into these evil men’s delusions, and start focusing on the real problems within society. We can begin by addressing violence in Syria, because the situation over there is definitely not “cool.”
Bibliography


