

Catch Me Before I Kill More: Seriality as Modern Monstrosity

Philip Jenkins

*Pennsylvania State University
USA*

A colleague of mine, lamenting the disasters of her personal life, which included several broken engagements over the previous decade, said despairingly that she seemed destined to be nothing more than a “serial fiancée.” This phrase evocatively suggests the power of the word “serial” in contemporary culture. Though “serial” can mean no more than simple repetition, it has in recent years come to carry a far richer significance, suggesting behavior that is pathological, compulsive, and irresistible. These rhetorical layers were implicit in the title of John Waters’s 1994 film *Serial Mom*, a story which self-evidently dealt with topics far more threatening than just repeated parenthood. In speaking of herself as a “serial fiancée,” my friend intended to convey all these senses, though in a self-mocking way. More commonly, discussion of “serial” activities carries not the slightest hint of humor or irony, and different types of serial crime (particularly murder) are generally regarded as the absolute worst forms of depravity that a society must confront.

My goal is to describe how and why the seemingly harmless mathematical term “serial” so vastly (and suddenly) expanded its rhetorical significance, to imply monstrous violence with a near-spiritual dimension. How, in short, did serial crime come to represent an ultimate evil? What is so dreadful about the mere act of repetition? I will place the development of the “serial” concept within a historical context, specifically during the period of intense ideological conflict and political redefinition that occurred in the United States during the 1980s. I stress this chronology since the whole idea of serial violence has now become so integral a part of social ideology that it seems unthinkable that it was ever absent. To the contrary, the idea is relatively new.

In elucidating the term itself, in explaining its raw power, I argue that “serial” murder enjoyed such an impact because of its mythological connotations. To over-simplify, it was rhetorically and politically necessary during the early 1980s to posit the existence of uniquely dangerous predatory villains, against whom no counter-measures were too

extreme. By then our concepts of science and the supernatural no longer accommodated a literal belief in archaic beings like vampires and werewolves, however often the media metaphorically compared actual criminals to these traditional monsters. But the newly re-imagined serial killer could be cited quite freely, as an undoubtedly authentic being whose existence was vouchsafed by social and behavioral science, yet who fulfilled all the mythical roles of the supernatural night-prowlers of old. It was above all the fact of uncontrollable repetition, the absolute lack of self-control, that made serial killers less than human and denoted them as monsters.

Panic

The origins of “serial” terminology as applied to crime and violence are much debated, but the concept probably emerged in criminological writing during the 1960s. Whoever first coined the phrase, it was until the early 1980s largely confined to a handful of criminologists and psychologists who studied multiple homicide. As recently as 1982, a book on Jack the Ripper or Ted Bundy was advertised as a case study of “mass murder.” Matters changed very rapidly over the next two years, as the concept of serial murder entered popular thought. One pivotal event was the hearings before a US Senate committee in the summer of 1983, “on patterns of murders committed by one person in large numbers with no apparent rhyme, reason or motivation” (US Senate 1984). Between 1983 and 1985, serial murder became one of the most intensely debated issues in the media, both in serious news outlets

and popular culture, to the extent that the nation experienced what I have described elsewhere as a general panic (Jenkins 1994; US House of Representatives 1996).

A whole new taxonomy of violence now emerged. Multiple homicide was reclassified, depending on whether the acts occurred more or less in one time and place or were spread over a lengthy period, of months or years. The first type of crime, designated as mass murder, can be exemplified by the recent high school shootings at Columbine. Crimes committed over time and in many places, like the killings attributed to Ted Bundy or John Wayne Gacy or (later) to Jeffrey Dahmer, were classified as “serial” murder. The essence of serial crime was that the offender had a “cooling-off period” between acts, a chance to stop and think, and yet returned to commit evil once again.

Fundamental to the new concept was the singular evil of seriality itself. If one commits the same act two or three times, we speak in terms of doubling or trebling the credit or blame that should accrue. In the case of serial murder, though, one plus one equals a great deal more than two. Augmenting the horror of the individual crimes are the attributes of delay, repeated premeditation, and compulsivity. Though the killer “cools down” between crimes, he never really has the option of desisting. I use the pronoun “he” intentionally because in addition to the fact of repetition, the “serial” concept also contained a whole demographic profile of both offenders and victims, a package of ideas that could ultimately be traced to the FBI’s Behav-

ioral Science Unit, the BSU. As conceived in the white-hot enthusiasm of the early 1980s, the serial killer was not just an individual of indiscriminate age and gender, killing in more or less any fashion. The term referred above all to “sex killers” or “rippers,” that is, specifically to men, virtually all white, who kill repeatedly for obviously sexual motives. Moreover, they often engage in extreme acts of sexual violence and mutilation. The segregation of mass murder into a different category of multiple homicide reinforced these images, by removing cases which lacked an obvious element of sexualized victimization, of savage men hunting down defenseless women.

In this newer model, serial killers are viewed as predators, metaphorically as wolves, preying on weaker human beings who are represented in the historically familiar imagery of victims. These are the “silent lambs” commemorated in Thomas Harris’ celebrated book, and the even more influential 1991 film. Hunting metaphors abounded in the congressional hearings and news stories that proliferated through the 1980s. Hart Fisher, the creator of a comic book devoted to the deeds of Jeffrey Dahmer, justified his project by claiming that “Serial killers are the werewolves of the modern age. By day they walk around unassuming, then boom! By night they turn into monsters. People want to know why.” By 1994, *Time Magazine* was drawing attention to the national fascination with serial killers, with an article memorably entitled “Dances with werewolves” (Toufexis 1994).

Like wolves, serial killers roamed, or perhaps prowled. They wandered across

the country, striking now in Arizona, now in Maryland, now in Oregon, and the totals of their “kills” ran into the hundreds. Each year, perhaps a quarter of all homicides in the United States were the work of such serial offenders. The grim concept is epitomized by a 1983 article in *Psychology Today*, which like virtually all the apparently objective “expert” analyses in these years, relied exclusively on FBI-supplied publicity materials. The magazine asserted that “In an increasingly large number of stranger homicides, the killer seems driven to murder not by some ‘rational’ reason but by a serious psychological disorder. The FBI estimates that as many as 25 percent of killings may now fall into this category ... overwhelmingly, the victims of bizarre murder are women and children; the killers are almost invariably men” (Porter 1983, 2).

Another point of the new officially-inspired mythology of serial murder was that the monstrous behavior was distinctive to the time and place, that it had never really occurred before the late 1970s, and was extremely rare outside the United States. The American “murder wave” was both qualitatively and quantitatively different from anything recorded in previous history, with vastly more victims, and much greater occurrence of savage torture and mutilation. And serial murder was not the only aspect of the new problem: the FBI hoped to expand its efforts against other “serial” crimes, like rape, bombing, arson and child molestation.

In retrospect, the most amazing point about these claims was that they achieved such instant credibility, though

they required such a complete rewriting of criminological theory, not to mention history. The falsehoods involved in this package can easily be enumerated, and I have discussed them at length in my 1994 book *Using Murder*. To take an obvious point, serial murder was neither new nor distinctively American. Multiple homicide is the prerogative of no particular society; serial murder has always existed in the United States, and has often been the subject of extensive writing and debate. Even so, it is a highly infrequent phenomenon, accounting for at most one or two percent of all homicides—nothing like a quarter.

Offenders, too, are very diverse in terms of gender, race and age. Some are indeed white men in their 40s, but others are black men in their teens, white women in their fifties, and so on. At least a quarter of serial killers are women. And perhaps the most prolific killers of all never emerge in the traditional picture of “rippers,” because they are medical murderers who claim dozens or hundreds of victims over a period of many years, killing discreetly in circumstances that are difficult to investigate or prove. One recent example is the notorious British doctor Harold Shipman, who might have claimed two hundred lives. The stereotype that emerged during the 1980s was nothing more than that, a stereotype, which owed everything to social ideology and bureaucratic necessity. (For the realities of multiple homicide, see for instance Fisher 1997; Egger 1998; Holmes and Holmes 1998; and esp. Hickey 2001).

Though the claims made in the serial murder panic were demonstrably false, they were virtually never challenged

during the 1980s, even in the most reputable and supposedly sober media outlets. “Quality” newspapers like the *New York Times* became primary channels for developing and promulgating the emerging mythology. To understand this lack of criticism, we must appreciate the origins of the claims, and the reasons why they fitted so precisely with the political and cultural mood of the times.

There is no doubt that the whole serial murder idea derived exclusively from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and specifically from the BSU that operated from the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia, with the goal of investigating violent crime – the same unit celebrated in *Silence of the Lambs*. Understanding the FBI role goes far towards elucidating the particular image of the “serial killer,” notably the claims about vast numbers, and the “roaming” quality of the offense. The FBI was in effect making a power grab, claiming jurisdiction over crimes which were beyond its legal scope, and this could only be achieved by presenting the offenders as itinerant, and therefore violating state boundaries. The vast majority of serial killers are in fact homebodies, tending to kill within one city or region, or even within a few city blocks, but all the attention during the panic was devoted to a few highly atypical cases of wandering killers. The gap between myth and observed reality may explain why, despite its global fame, the BSU and its successors have never yet caught an actual serial killer, nor have its much vaunted methods of “profiling” been particularly effective in criminal investigation.

The FBI had to make the menace suf-

ficiently frightening to demand public attention, and the best way to do this was to present awe-inspiring statistics. This was achieved by highlighting a few cases in which offenders boasted of two or three hundred killings. As we have seen, such a total is theoretically possible—witness the recent Shipman case—but such intense activity is very rare for sex killers or “rippers,” and it is now generally believed that most of the highly prolific cases adduced by the FBI were exaggerated, or indeed fictitious. The most publicized case was that of Henry Lee Lucas, who claimed to be guilty of three or four hundred murders, but who may in reality have killed at most three or four victims. This case suggests that the quantitative basis of the national panic was supported by the delusional claims of psychotics such as Lucas, a serial confessor rather than a serial killer.

American media are notorious for their credulous, if not obsequious, attitude towards federal criminal justice agencies, especially the FBI, and it is not surprising that FBI pronouncements about the new serial murder menace should have been published respectfully. What is more curious is why the general public would have believed them so immediately, and should within a few months have erected a whole subset of popular culture upon this very tenuous foundation. This response can only be understood in connection with the politics of the time, and the reaction against perceived national decay that was the centerpiece of the new Republican administration elected in 1980.

Through the early 1980s, conservative political rhetoric was permeated by

themes of external threat, national vulnerability, subversion, and internal decadence. These concerns focused on a number of “dangerous outsiders,” most obviously the Soviet Union, which Reagan famously characterized as “The Evil Empire.” There were a number of other panics or waves of concern about these various external forces which appeared to represent grave threats to the American people. These included not only serial killers but also drug dealers and drug kingpins, terrorists both foreign and domestic, and of course the child molesters and pornographers believed to pose such a danger to American children (Jenkins 1998). In the political context of these years, all these apparently diverse groups served essentially similar social and rhetorical functions, by personifying the immorality and outright evil that had arisen in consequence of the moral and political decadence of recent administrations. These outsiders were readily portrayed as the product of the family breakdown and sexual hedonism of the previous fifteen years. It was common to personify these dangers by focusing on a particularly notorious or unpopular individual, like Libya’s Muammar Qaddafi or Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega in international affairs, Gacy and Bundy in domestic politics. Like the drug war and the child abuse panic of these same years, the movement against serial killers can be seen as part of a generalized moral reconstruction, a kind of revenge against the demonized era of the 1960s and 1970s.

The moral and political reaction of these years goes far towards explaining the “predatory” notion of serial violence,

and especially the choice of targets. During the 1960s and 1970s, libertarian rhetoric had enjoyed enormous success, so that it was difficult to win public support with a traditionalist argument about the need to regulate moral behavior. Large sections of the public had accepted the libertarian argument that consenting adults should be permitted to pursue their own individual paths, even if that involved hitherto illegal behavior involving drugs, pornography or homosexuality. The libertarian view could, however, be challenged by emphasizing the threat to innocent parties, especially to children, who could not give consent to deviant activities. Thus morality activists of the late 1970s campaigned not against sexual vice in general, but specifically against child pornography and prostitution, and not against homosexuality, but against child molestation. A movement against drugs in general would be futile at a time of pervasive middle class usage of cocaine and marijuana, but a vigorous assault could be mounted against the drug PCP, which found its chief market among young teenagers. In the religious area, similarly, the argument against cults and fringe religions was that their young adherents lacked real freedom either to join or remain within the movements; contrary to appearances, recruits were not consenting adults. Also, the alleged danger to children from homicidal Satanic gangs and ritual abuse rings began to be formulated in the early 1980s, exactly at the time of the serial murder nightmare. From the late 1970s, therefore, moralist campaigns emphasized threats to children and women, who were presented

as the victims of lascivious hedonistic males who pursued “anything goes” hedonism to an unacceptable logical conclusion. And serial murder pushed this logic to the point of violent death. Hedonistic America had become a society of wolves and lambs.

By about 1984, American media and popular culture were more dominated by scare stories about lethal dangerous outsiders than perhaps at any time in the nation’s history, and serial killers joined druglords, molesters and Satanists in the popular demonology. In keeping with the political circumstances of the time, it was critical to stress not just outsiders’ harmfulness, but their special danger to children and women. In the Congressional hearings of these years (and the media reports that drew uncritically upon them) serial murder becomes purely a matter of male violence, to the extent that experts denied even the theoretical existence of women serial killers. Since serial killers supposedly preyed on the young, the chief vehicle for the serial murder mythology was the Senate Committee chaired by Arlen Specter on “juvenile justice” (US Senate 1982, 1984). People believed the serial murder idea because it fitted so exactly with so many other contemporary images about the nature of violence and social danger.

The Evil of Seriality

Once the serial murderer was invented—as he was, suddenly and completely—the concept developed its own momentum, since it possessed a kind of internal logic. As presented during the 1980s, the image of the serial killer involved sev-

eral critical elements, which more or less built upon each other.

i. Compulsive

The serial killer is compulsive, not only in the sense of killing repeatedly, but of being unable to prevent himself from committing further crimes. A similar inability characterizes the serial rapist or molester. Logically, therefore, crimes will recur *ad infinitum*, and a common theme in criminological writings is that the rate of offenses accelerates over time. This idea makes it easier to accept claims about the very high numbers of victims claimed by fantasists like Henry Lee Lucas.

Although it was freshly applied to the serial killer, the notion of “compulsive” violence has deep roots in American thought. For much of the twentieth century, a common demon figure in popular culture was the psychopath or sexual psychopath who wrought untold harm in response to internal mental conflicts. As imagined during the 1940s and 1950s, the main characteristic of the psychopath was his inability to stop, to desist from serial offending. The most famous illustration of this theory was William Heirens, arrested in 1946 for a number of sex crimes and murders. He left at one murder scene a note reading “For Heaven’s sake catch me before I kill more. I cannot control myself,” a phrase which entered the language, and which was subject to endless parody.

Perhaps the best-known medical authority on sexual psychopathy was Benjamin Karpman, whose classic definition stressed the idea of “compulsive and ir-

resistible” behavior. He wrote that the condition was characterized by “socially prohibited aggressiveness, by lack of regard for the unwilling participant; by being compulsive and irresistible in character; and by being committed under the influence of an exceptionally strong overwhelming urge, the tension of which is released by the particular behavior” (Karpman 1954, 490). This language was echoed in legislation and official inquiries into the “psychopath problem.” New Hampshire’s 1949 investigation declared that “The sexual psychopath is interested only in the immediate satisfaction of his instinctive drive, irrespective of the manner of attainment or of consequences. His action is usually directed toward the innocent and the unsuspecting or helpless members of the opposite sex” (Guttmacher 1951, 11-12). Though such ideas had fallen out of favor in psychiatric circles by the 1970s and 1980s, they were still widely accepted in popular thought, and were easily revived during the serial killer scare.

Helping to sustain the “compulsive” notion of deviancy from the mid-twentieth century onwards was the closely related idea of addiction. Its Latin root implies slavery, but the English word “addiction” means the inability to resist some kind of behavior. From the nineteenth century onwards, the word was chiefly applied to substance abuse, and in this context, it expanded its meaning substantially. As used by politicians and law enforcement agencies today, a drug “addict” often becomes synonymous with a user, or even with a person who has had only one or two contacts with the substance in question, and is not ad-

dicted by any medical criterion. As in the case of multiple homicide, “serial” deviant behavior is attributed to slavish compulsion, despite a good deal of evidence indicating that both types of offenders are well able to exercise restraint when they choose. The emphasis on drug addiction as a social problem through the 1970s and 1980s helped prepare the way for the new serial violence panic, which in turn erupted just as the Reagan administration was launching its notorious “War on Drugs.” Though the individual enemies to be confronted might be diverse—drugs, molestation, murder—all were united by the central theme of compulsion. Serial killers were, in a sense, addicted to murder.

ii. Obsession and Repetition

The core idea of seriality is repetition, and the inability to avoid repetition. By definition, serial killers repeat their acts, perhaps not exactly, but in essence. They kill and kill again, and have no power to stop. This is what makes serial killing so much more terrifying than mass murder. To some extent, we can understand how people might lose all restraint on a single occasion, might “snap” and destroy those around them; but serial killing requires much more consistent behavior.

The idea of uncontrollable repetition has proven deeply frightening to many cultures because it denies the ability to choose that is essential to free will, and thus to full human-ness. It is also a common feature of insanity and psychiatric disease, and “obsessive-compulsive disorder” has been recognized for centuries. The behavior appears in myth and legend, for instance in concepts of the pen-

alties of the damned. In Greek myth, Sisyphus was doomed to the eternal repetition of pushing a rock to the top of a mountain, only to have it roll down again day after day. As a folk motif too, we might think of the story of the Sorcerer’s Apprentice, featured in Goethe’s *Der Zauberlehrling* and Disney’s film *Fantasia*, in which an over-ambitious but unskilled magician mobilizes brooms and buckets to wash the house, but loses control, so that the household implements begin endlessly repeating their assigned tasks, until he is threatened with apocalyptic catastrophe.

Similar ideas about the evil of repetition recur in Christian traditions. Throughout Dante’s *Inferno*, sinners are condemned to suffer eternal repetition, often of the wrongs that brought them under judgment. Protestant Christians emphasize Jesus’ words “Use not vain repetitions,” which they take as a condemnation of the rote prayers supposedly used by Catholics, like the Hail Mary. Protestants traditionally claimed that vain repetition was a denial of the God-given reason, a subjection to slavish and futile self-discipline.

There are many modern secular treatments of the same idea. One of the most frightening of modern films is Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining*, based on the book by Stephen King, in which Jack Torrance demands seclusion in order to write a novel. In a climactic scene, his wife plucks up the courage to see what Jack has been producing over the previous weeks, and she is terrified to find that he has filled many reams of paper with nothing more than the same banal phrase, typed countless thousands of

times: "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." The scene is so frightening because such futile repetition suggests a total abandonment of reason. Jack has let his mind become subject to automatic forces, abandoning any form of self-control. The discovery is all the worse because of Jack's self-delusion that he has been writing a major and important work, so the repetition has also been concealing his failure of rational thought. In *The Shining*, the discovery scene leads immediately to a ferocious outbreak of violence by Jack, who tries to massacre his family. Repetition is not only futile, "vain," it is in itself obsessive, sub- or anti-rational, and perhaps symptomatic of extreme violence.

iii. Rootless

Serial killers lack the restraints that save "normal" individuals from succumbing to compulsive repetition. Bureaucratic self-interest demanded that the FBI stress the wandering and rootless character of serial offenders, their tendency to stray between jurisdictions, but this idea also meshed well with other key features of the myth. Rootless killers lack any ties that could keep them in one place, any conventional sense of home or family. Their lives are defined by routes, not roots, and they thus symbolize the failure of traditional ideals of community in modern America (Hume 2000). As itinerant killers, their threat potential is vastly magnified because they can strike anywhere at any time. This is one type of danger that cannot be avoided by staying away from "bad areas." Itinerancy makes the serial killer a ubiquitous threat.

iv. Irrational

Serial killers cannot prevent their actions, and lack normal standards and restraints. Nor do they even respond to the same stimuli that drive conventional offenders.

The deliberations of the various Congressional committees of the 1980s are fascinating for their almost theological quest for precision, and their handling of marginal cases. For instance, could a woman be a serial killer if she seemed to match the definition in every regard? Probably not. Could a man enjoy this status, if he killed for financial motives, for instance as part of an insurance racket? What about a professional contract killer? Again, definitely not. A serial killer was not just a repeat killer; he was a man who killed for *no known motive*. The problem concerned "patterns of murders committed by one person in large numbers with no apparent rhyme, reason or motivation." The contract killer and insurance ring did not count because however perverse or sinister, these acts had rational and comprehensible motives. The essence of serial murder was that it was irrational, "motiveless" at least in the sense of lacking any motive that could be understood by the normal run of humans. As a television documentary stated at the height of the 1984 panic, the United States suffered "Four thousand a year—dead. Killed by total strangers. It's an epidemic of murder in America—murder with no motive" (Horvath 1984). The act denied, defied reason.

v. Lustful

Insofar as serial killers act for motives,

these are purely individual, pathological, and above all, sexual. Offenders are engaged in “lust-murder,” an eloquent phrase suggesting the overwhelming sexual urge that drives them to kill, to torture and mutilate. In fact, the term lust-murder and its variants, like “lust-killer” are based on a simple mistranslation of the German phrase *lustmörd*, murder for pleasure, or as it sometimes translated, “recreational homicide.” Nevertheless, the sexually oriented phrase “lust-murder” proved invaluable in offering an explanation of the otherwise inexplicable. Serial killers followed the compulsion of lust, and specifically male lust, which explains why no woman could ever be a true serial killer. The first publicly admitted exception was Florida multiple killer Aileen Wuornos, who was identified in 1991 as “America’s first female serial killer,” even though cases of such multiply homicidal women had been appearing in the American media for over a century. Perhaps helping explain why she was now admitted to the select club of newly reimagined serial killers, Wuornos was a publicly identified lesbian, who (according to the mythology) might be expected to succumb to distinctively male behavior patterns.

The “lustful” interpretation contributed mightily to the political implications of the new formulation of serial murder. If the offense was so closely identified with uncontrollable lust, this further linked this apparently new and heinous crime to the hedonism of the previous two decades, as the nation now agreed to subject itself to a new regimen of self-control, of social and sexual purity.

vi. Violent

By forfeiting the ability to choose, serial killers have abandoned their full humanity. This dehumanization, this reversion to a subhuman or bestial state, is confirmed by the extremely bloody nature of their crimes. Again, the Congressional investigations debated the modes of killing that characterized a true serial killer, and expressed skepticism that the genuine article might employ less obviously violent methods like poisoning. Once again, this tended to exclude the bulk of female candidates for the rank. The true serial killer was a bloody creature, who most often claimed victims with knives or cutting instruments, and inflicted extreme mutilations.

Monsters and Dark Dreams

According to the myth, then, serial killers are compulsive, irrational, rootless, driven by lust, obsessive, and ultra-violent. If we take these elements together, then serial offenders are so fundamentally different from “normal” people—even from most brutal criminals—that it is scarcely adequate to describe them as a new personality type. They seem instead to constitute a different and utterly aberrant race. It is scarcely surprising, then, that their acts so often involve behaviors that violate every known social taboo, especially the infliction of sexual violence upon the very young. Nor should we be surprised that accounts of serial murder have used this model to explain the legendary figures of the vampire and werewolf: those were just terms that an unscientific age used to describe the depredations of what we

today know to be serial killers.

Serial killers were monsters, animals, predators. This last word has an interesting and rather contorted history. During the 1980s, the word was used in a sexual sense in the literature of serial murder, both crime fiction and true crime, where it appeared in book titles and blurbs, alongside phrases implying primitivism, animal savagery, stalking and hunting. Particularly influential in this regard were popular crime writers like Andrew Vachss who regularly used the word in his novels and newspaper columns, often in the context of revealing pseudo-scientific language. In a typical passage, he argued that:

Chronic sexual predators have crossed an osmotic membrane. They can't step back to the other side—our side. And they don't want to. If we don't kill them or release them, we have but one choice. Call them monsters and isolate them.... I've spoken to many predators over the years. They always exhibit amazement that we do not hunt them. And that when we capture them, we eventually let them go. Our attitude is a deliberate interference with Darwinism—an endangerment of our species. (Vachss 1993)

The word “predator” is of course a metaphor. A predatory animal is one which survives by hunting and eating other animals, and only by analogy is this compared with the pursuit and sexual exploitation by humans of less powerful strangers. Since about 1990, though, it has entered serious debate as something like a technical term. In the early 1990s, the identification of serial sex offenders

with “predators” became so widely accepted that states began passing especially punitive laws against “sexual predators” or “sexually violent predators.” While no state has a law against monsters or werewolves, most now have laws that use the closely related term “predators.”

Serial offenders are also, explicitly, “monsters,” a word freely used in popular culture accounts of the phenomenon. Former FBI investigator Robert Ressler has written memoirs entitled *Whoever Fights Monsters* and *I Have Lived in the Monster*, and in 1993, CNN ran a major documentary on serial murder under the title *Monsters Like Us*. Some recent popular culture treatments have included titles like *Monstrum*, *Monster*, *Eye of the Beast*, and *Shadows of Evil* (James 1997; Jackson 1998; Adams et al. 1999; Smith 2001; Ressler and Schachtman 1992, 1997). Developing the notion of predatory wolves, the 1996 film *Freeway* overtly used the fairy tale “Little Red Riding Hood” as its plot framework, with its itinerant killer named “Bob Wolverton.” Equally folkloric in its structure is the whole sequence of Thomas Harris novels and films, in which the relationship between FBI agent Clarice Starling and serial killer Hannibal Lecter is roughly that of Beauty to the Beast (Warner 1994, 1999).

In these treatments, the word “monster” sometimes ceases to be a metaphor, as serial killers acquire supernatural and demonic traits. This is apparent in films like the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series, in which the demon killer materializes in dreams, or *Candyman*, where the homicidal ghost is summoned into the world

of the living through a mirror. Long-running franchises like *Halloween* and *Friday the Thirteenth* likewise exist on the assumption that the killer who dies at the end of each episode can be resurrected for the next installment. At the end of the first *Halloween* movie, it is the psychiatrist who explains that the killer Michael Myers was in fact the bogeyman. In the 1995 film *Seven*, the killer is a Mephistophelean figure whose violent deeds are shaped by the traditional concept of the Seven Deadly Sins. The young heroes of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) seem to fall victim to an undead killer who survives through pagan and supernatural rituals.

Such predatory beings must be “hunted down,” and we read of investigators being engaged in “mind-hunting.” One leading exponent of this idea is former FBI agent, John Douglas, whose books include such potent titles as *Mind Hunter*, *Journey into Darkness* and *Obsession* (Douglas and Olshaker 1995, 1997, 1998). With few exceptions, “serial murder” books or films describe the tracking and capture or destruction of monsters on their home territory, in their lairs, as reason and courage triumph over chaos and evil. The conflict, this “journey into darkness,” fits naturally into a Freudian interpretation, with serial killers being portrayed in terms of the unchecked, lustful, and destructive qualities of the id, while the heroes who challenge and suppress them epitomize the controlled and rational forces of the superego. BSU “mind-hunter” Roy Hazelwood describes the sinister region that he explores as one of *Dark Dreams* (Michaud and Hazelwood 1998;

Hazelwood and Michaud 2001).

This Freudian analogy also makes sense in terms of the concept of seriality, which is so often viewed as a feature of childish behavior. Small children love ceaseless repetition, and frequently act in ways that in an adult would be regarded as obsessive and compulsive, patterns that normally fade with growing maturity. Especially in the Freudian tradition, seriality and repetition are signs of immaturity that require suppression. Detectives and mind-hunters perform this function by ending what would otherwise be an infinite sequence of crimes—by writing a conclusion to seriality.

The triumph of rationality and the discourse of science is at its clearest in the case of Thomas Harris’ “mind-hunters,” who perform tasks that fit well into the roles traditionally assigned to heroes and shamans. They are agents of justice and science, but they gain wisdom by venturing into the prison cells of multiple killers, the hostile domain dominated by the rival forces of irrational violence and savagery. They do this in order to gain critical knowledge that will permit them to comprehend and defeat the forces of chaos still at large. They confront seriality with rationality.

In Harris’ books and the related films, the boundaries between rationality and savagery are given literal form through the glass walls or metal cages used to restrain Hannibal Lecter, to prevent him attacking prison guards or hospital staff. In television news reports on serial murder, one of the most frequently employed visual images is the scene from *Silence of the Lambs* in which the caged Lecter talks

with Clarice Starling, the two being divided by the impenetrable glass wall. Even so, Clarice succeeds in forming a bond with Lecter, a link symbolized by the single physical contact of their hands. Conversely, the two guards who venture into Lecter's cell without the appropriate skill and preparation are killed and mutilated. Mind-hunters can cross the boundaries dividing the worlds of good and evil, of right and wrong. To quote the dustjacket of a book on the experts of the BSU: "They think like a serial killer. They know his habits and his twisted fantasies. They walk the edge between good and evil, sanity and insanity" (Jeffers 1992).

Yet the voyage into the land of monsters is fraught with dangers. In the familiar mythical model, detectives and mind-hunters undertake real personal risk by undertaking such interviews, in terms of physical violence, but more subtly in the contamination they might acquire from the values and characters of such alien beings. A strikingly common theme in serial murder fiction is that of the detective who somehow goes over to the enemy, who faces the temptation to become a serial killer him- or herself. In Harris' novel *Hannibal*, Clarice accepts her destiny by becoming Lecter's lover and partner, a betrayal of the principle of order that proved unacceptable for the 2001 film version. Such morally ambiguous depictions emphasize the extremely dangerous quality of the "enemy realm" inhabited by the killers, and the iron reality of the frontier dividing the two worlds. Though dressed in the language of behavioral science, the stories ultimately tell of a fear as ancient perhaps

as any in the shamanic tradition: that sometimes the shaman will not be able to return home. Both in its subject matter and its appeal, serial murder fiction is a deeply atavistic genre.

The Opposite of Serial Murder

The deeper we delve into it, the more the social ideology represented by the serial murder panic looks like a reversion to the most primeval instincts, ideas that would have required little explanation in the barbaric Europe of a thousand years ago. But these ancient ideas were so influential in the 1980s because they resonated precisely with social and political conflicts of the modern age.

To understand this appeal, we might ask a question that sounds like an impossible riddle, a word game: what is the opposite of serial murder? If in fact the crime just involved killing more than once, then the "opposite" might be not killing at all, but as we have seen, the concept of serial murder is far more ideologically complex than this. If we imagine the "opposite" of serial murder, then we can see the values and mores that are being held up for emulation, and which the serial killers are so conspicuously flouting, or actively inverting (Warner 1995). And these approved ideological patterns are deeply conservative and traditionalist, exactly in keeping with the reaction against the decadence attributed to the 1960s and 1970s.

According to the mythology, serial killers have certain prime characteristics or markers. Approved, regular citizens, therefore—those not subjected to the curse of seriality—have exactly opposite

features. If serial killers are compulsive and addictive, normal people exercise choice and free will. They reject and condemn substances and behaviors that can entrap them by leading them into slavish repetition. They are drug-free, and support the war on drugs. If they ever experimented with these substances, then they reformed, broke with abuse or addiction, perhaps through one of the twelve-step groups that became so immensely popular during these years: as a result, proper Americans are clean and sober. They exercise rational calculation; they exemplify *homo economicus*. They have roots; they value home, family and community. Crucially, they possess the control that serial killers so egregiously lack. They have self-control, and they acknowledge the need for control by the state and by other social institutions. If that control flags, they know what horrors wait to be unchained: the uncontrollable lusts, passions, and destructive urges that stand on the other side of the boundary. If control weakens again—as it did in the decade after 1965—then the serial killers offer fair warning of the fate that awaits us. The wolves are out there, waiting.

The opposite of serial murder, therefore, is control, in self and society. The more luridly and improbably we portray serial murder (or rape, or molestation), the more we are exalting the need for control, restraint, and authority. The package of ideas with which we are presented is hence deeply conservative. To put the contrast in terms of official national ideologies, the United States is indeed founded on life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but the conserva-

tism of the 1980s also extolled the ideas stated in Canada's founding document, namely "peace, order and good government."

A serial killer is a monster, a word that in its origins suggested not just something threatening, but also a figure that was a warning or sign, a *monstrum*. To take a cognate word, a "monstrance" in Catholic liturgy is a richly ornamented object in which the sacred Host is displayed, to be "shown" to the adoring faithful. A "monster" is just as much an object for display, though in this case, observers are meant to draw negative messages—that the times are evil, that we are suffering the wrath of supernatural forces, or (in secular terms) that something has gone very wrong with our society. A monster is a warning that we must set things right, and the exact nature of the monstrosity is a lesson in how we must rectify our behavior. We must be what the monster is not. If the monster exemplifies seriality, we must exercise choice and control, and respect those forces when they are imposed upon us.

Making Seriality

Public panic over serial homicide peaked between about 1983 and 1994, and since that date, scholars have paid less attention to the phenomenon itself and more to the culture that it has provoked, the question of why serial killing should be so endlessly interesting. This means above all studying the reactions of the mass media to this uniquely perverse culture of celebrity. For all the scholarly work devoted to this issue, some of the shrewdest comments are to be found in

Oliver Stone's 1994 film *Natural Born Killers*, in which serial murder becomes a symbol of moral pollution. For Stone, public fascination with his fictional pair of killers Micky and Mallory indicates the extent to which vulgar popular culture has saturated American life, at once shaping the deeds of the violent and perverted, while simultaneously preventing the masses from viewing these acts as anything other than entertainment. The vision of media irresponsibility produces some memorable images, like the crowd greeting the captured pair with placards reading "Murder me, Micky!," or the talking head shots of young aficionados comparing the current "superstars" with past demigods. Only Charles Manson, it seems, had anything approaching the same charisma, but Micky and Mallory are "way cooler."

In this context, we recall the claim made by investigator Robert Ressler who argued that he coined the term "serial murder" about 1976 on the analogy of the movie "serials" he had enjoyed as a child, dramatic stories of crime and pursuit. I believe his claim is incorrect, since the term does appear before his time, but his idea is fascinating because it explicitly locates the origin of the serial murder concept in popular culture. Scholars like Philip Simpson, Richard Tithecott, and Christopher Sharrett have shown how the concept of serial killing is formed by an elaborate process of interaction between the ostensibly "real" world of criminal justice and the "fictional" realm of popular culture (Jenkins 1994, 1998; Tithecott 1997; Sharrett 1999; Simpson 2000). Ideas and images travel freely between the two in a highly

postmodern way, so that some books and media accounts present Hannibal Lecter as an authentic criminal mastermind, who is listed alongside Bundy and Dahmer. The makers of *Natural Born Killers* were sued by the family of a murder victim, who felt that the fictional portrayal had directly incited the crime (Bischof 2001). It sometimes requires genuine mental effort to recall which are the "real-life" killers: Lecter or Dahmer, Micky and Mallory or Bianchi and Buono.

The irony of all this is that the popular construction of serial murder has involved some of the characteristics that I identified earlier as key building blocks of the mythology of seriality itself. As we see the constant creation and recycling of media accounts, the proliferation of texts and images, and above all the endless repetition of claims, it is difficult not to describe this process as compulsive, irresistible, obsessive, lacking any natural ending. It is stereotypically "serial" in its worst sense. And no matter how parlous the offenses described, they are always presented in terms of prurient sexuality, of the vulnerability of "lovely victims," "beautiful victims." Descriptions of serial murder, like the behavior itself, are primarily motivated by lust. Seriality, it seems, is the product of seriality.

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