“This Mad Brute”: Postwar Male Violence and the Pathological Public Sphere

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The act of serial killing, in which a perpetrator—usually a male—murders more than one victim at different times in different places with a “cooling off” period between them, is highly prevalent in popular culture of the twenty-first century. From shows like CSI: and other police procedurals both factual and fictional, to popular fiction novels and true crime books, the character of the serial killer draws audiences and ensnares their attention. Serial killers are often thought of as modern figures, usually American, with a handful of historical examples treated as outliers. An examination of violent activity following World War I, however, indicates that more research is needed to examine causes and instances of serial killing in the interwar period.

The Modern Serial Killer

The term “serial killer” was not coined until the late twentieth century, although credit for the invention is generally disputed. American FBI special agent Robert Ressler is most often given credit, dated to the 1970s (Seltzer 64). Even with a specific term, however, the definition was not static. In general, a serial killer was thought of as someone who killed for personal pleasure or excitement—as opposed to hit men who made money off of murder—with multiple victims in multiple places. This helped to distinguish from other categories of killer, such as “mass” murder in which multiple people were killed in a single location at the same time. A serial killer was so threatening because he was able to engage in normal, everyday life and go unnoticed between the murders.

The FBI and especially its Behavioral Science Unit—now the Behavioral Research and Instruction Unit—positioned itself as expert on the subject of serial killing and thus took control of the serial killer narrative, especially through their testimony to the Attorney General’s Task Force on Violent crime in the early 1980s. Through multiple interviews with various violent offenders, special agents Ressler and John Douglas had compiled a general biography of such types of criminal. Although this was meant to assist agents in arresting violent offenders who had not yet been caught, Mark Seltzer argues that this list of common traits was in fact “something like a job description, a sort of ‘most wanted’ ad” for upcoming offenders (14). Instead of—or perhaps alongside—allowing law enforcement officials to theorize about and therefore identify current offenders, the creation of this category of serial killer allowed newly arrested suspects to craft their own autobiographies around what was already known to those who had arrested them.

The term quickly permeated popular culture as well, likely assisted by what investigative historian Peter Vronsky terms the “golden age” of serial killers (Sons of Cain 314). Famed true crime author Ann Rule published her first book in 1980 documenting her now-infamous coworker Ted Bundy, although the original text does not in fact refer to him as a serial killer. The figure of Bundy—charming, good-looking, well-spoken, and intelligent enough to serve as his own defense lawyer—
introduced the wider public to the idea of the serial killer who did not, in fact, appear to be dangerous. While others who came after him were boring, or plain, or perhaps a bit stupid, Bundy set the bar for serial killers. As Vronsky observed, “All roads in the empire of serial killers lead to Ted Bundy,” although any factual serial killer seems to shrink when compared with this original archetype (Serial Killers 102). Such descriptions of Bundy often, however, overlook the most grisly details of his more than thirty murders, since this would mean acknowledging that such an attractive all-American young man was capable not only of killing women, but of repeated acts of necrophilia.

Where true crime might fail, however, crime fiction has risen to address this gap, further developing public expectations surrounding the serial killer. The Silence of the Lambs, written by Thomas Harris in 1988 and made into an Oscar-winning movie directed by Jonathan Demme in 1991, introduced audiences not only to the job of the criminal profiler, but also to Hannibal Lecter. As an imaginary serial killer who cannibalized his victims—and invited others to dinner parties where they partook of the same meals—Lecter was charming, good-looking, well-spoken, and intelligent: a fictional rival for Ted Bundy who debases the bodies of his victims through cannibalism instead of postmortem rape. In this way Lecter is also able to share the fun, so to speak, and create more living victims in his dinner guests and therefore increase the horror in the revelation of his crimes.

The collapse of the real and the fictional occurs not only in the presentation of characters within the narrative, but in the plot points themselves. In Silence of the Lambs, Lecter has already been imprisoned, but he is still useful to the Behavioral Science Unit. Another slew of murders, perpetrated by someone who has been nicknamed Buffalo Bill, has stumped the agents to the point where Jack Crawford—John Douglas’ fictional counterpart—sends someone to ask for Lecter’s help on the case. In this interaction, Lecter fully becomes Ted Bundy, who willingly gave interviews to Robert Keppel during the search for the Green River Killer. Keppel documented these interviews and the process in his 1995 book The Riverman, which was later given the subtitle Ted Bundy and I Hunt for the Green River Killer. Life and art intertwined until the point where Michael Arntfeld and Marcel Danesi felt compelled to declare that, in their book dedicated to what they call literary criminology, “we find it irrelevant to distinguish between a Ted Bundy (a real serial killer) and a Hannibal Lecter (an imaginary one)” (140). The twenty-first century popular perception of a serial killer, then, is based in both fact and fiction, often without the desire—or even the need—to separate the two.

In the twenty-first century, audiences are accustomed to these intertwined representations of serial killers and, according to Vonsky, “their novelty has worn thin” (Cain 302). The serial killer is more likely to appear on an episode of a crime procedural during sweeps week than he is on the nightly news, and those same television series including CSI, its spinoffs, and those that jumped on the popularity bandwagon have produced viewers who believe that they can not only identify a serial killer at a glance, but also are capable of committing the perfect crime. Armchair profilers who can quote serial killing statistics abound.

The innocent are not the only ones who have inundated themselves with crime narratives both factual and fictional. Seltzer argues that “[s]erial killers read many books about serial killing” and thus the tales they tell after their capture will likely align with what has already been learned and disseminated (114). Criminal justice professor and author Steven A. Egger goes further to argue
that, “when those interviewed have provided information inconsistent with already established theories, the information obtained is dismissed as unimportant or irrelevant”; in other words, the serial killer narrative has not been allowed to change even with the passage of time or the collection of more data (39). The serial killer origin story, as it were, appears to be a modern tale set in stone and requiring a setting of the late twentieth or early twenty-first century.

Labeling Historical Figures

The narrative of the common serial killer profile has even been accepted and used to explain crimes and criminals of a prior century. A series of murders that occurred in London’s Whitechapel district in 1888 and attributed to Jack the Ripper has led to numerous theories about the killer’s true identity with the resulting biographies based largely on twentieth and twenty-first century profiling. Often given the further sobriquet “the world’s first serial killer,” the Ripper made an impact not just on the women he killed, but on the expected interaction of such a murderer with the press. His influence came both through the headlines that reported the discovery of murdered and mutilated women, and also because the killer, or at least various authors pretending to be the killer, sent letters to various newspapers claiming responsibility and making threats of further violence. It is one of these letters that led to the now-infamous nickname of Jack the Ripper.

Although the Ripper’s victims were confined to the lower classes and were all identified at the time as prostitutes, the newspapers meant that the crimes not only “created a state of alarm in the East End but also promoted a kind of moral panic among the upper social classes about the effect of crime reporting on the young and on the working classes” (Tatar 23). The violent acts themselves, especially if reduced to the Canonical Five victims, were restricted to a small geographical area and a specific victimology, but the reporting meant that the panic spread beyond the East End and beyond what was considered to be the lowest class of sex workers. This terror means that, even though he went unidentified, Jack the Ripper has become the subject of over one hundred nonfiction books, many of them focused on uncovering his identity.

Even though such psychology did not exist in the late nineteenth century, authors of the twentieth and twenty-first are more than willing to use the psychological profile of the serial killer in order to explain the Ripper murders and also to make the case for their chosen suspects. All serial killing roads might lead to Ted Bundy, but it is Jack the Ripper, still unidentified more than a century after his crimes, who is “the Mount Everest of serial killers” (Vronsky Cain 223). Reporters of the day simply did not have the language to describe him, nor the psychological tools to understand his actions. This lack of language has played a role in the Ripper’s designation as “world's first.” Since the term was only coined in the last quarter of the twentieth century, earlier criminals could not have been branded as such in contemporary reports. It is thus impossible to identify serial killers by looking for that specific designation prior to Vronsky’s “golden age” of serial killing.

There are multiple theories as to why the Ripper is often pegged as the “world’s first” and why the twentieth century then experienced a veritable explosion of such criminals. As already mentioned, the Ripper murders occurred at a time when mass media had recently expanded and played a large role in the average person’s life. Thanks to the telegraph and the steam engine, both ideas and people could cover distance at a much faster rate than previously. The combination of increased literacy rates and lowering prices for newspapers, especially the penny press, meant that groups of people might convene in order to purchase a single copy that one member read to the rest if they could not afford or read their own. Although Vronsky made his observation about twentieth
century crime, the Ripper murders are a prime example of the fact that “[s]erial murder ‘epidemics’ are as much about reporting as they are about killing” (Serial Killing 31). Newspaper headlines carried tales of the events throughout the world when they might not have reached much beyond Whitechapel if only passed along by word of mouth. Mass media documented the events as they happened and then preserved them for future audiences to examine through new lenses.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries also saw changes in the class system that likely effected how crime, especially serial murder, would have been presented. Within the heavily stratified system of Feudalism, those who were titled were nearly untouchable so long as they did not enact their violent whims on their own class. Even if peasants believed that a lord or lady was murdering servants, it would have been impossible for them to have spoken up in the name of justice. Elizabeth Báthory de Ecsed, also known as the Blood Countess, is rumored to have murdered hundreds of young girls in order to bathe in their blood so that she might keep her youthful beauty. Since her initial victims were servant girls of the lowest class, their disappearance and likely deaths went uncontested. It was only when Báthory was accused of killing daughters of the lesser gentry that she was put on trial (Telfer 12). The dissolution of such class systems meant that it was more difficult for one individual to be at the center of so many disappearances without others taking notice and thereafter taking action, although, as Jack the Ripper’s victim selection demonstrates, there is always a class of victims whose deaths produce less outrage than others.

The changes in population also included a shift in location as many moved to cities. Instead of being located in a town where everyone knew everyone else and was dependent upon each other for survival, many now lived in cities among the masses who had no impact on their daily lives. Not only do “we have little control over these strangers,” but we no longer depend on every person we meet for our livelihood (Egger 41). This works in two directions, assisting serial killers by providing a larger pool from which to choose victims and also ensuring that not every person would be immediately missed. The more time that passes between a person’s disappearance and the discovery of that disappearance, the more likely it is that a serial killer would be able to escape without being identified.

The increase in public transportation also helped in this shift. First, it meant that serial killers would be able to remove themselves from the immediate area after they had committed a murder so that any subsequent crimes would not be connected. This would be a problem that would follow those attempting to track down Ted Bundy since his crimes occurred not only in different police jurisdictions, but also different states. Without cooperation between various law enforcement agencies, the fact of a serial killer might never be discovered since each discrete entity would be confronted with a single crime. Again, this is a change that allowed for a serial killer to operate with less fear of identification and also impacted his possible pool of victims, since a larger transient population meant that others did not take as much notice when people came and went. An absence no longer meant someone was dead or missing, since it could easily mean that someone had simply moved on.

All of these factors lead to an increase in the population that Steven Egger has termed “the less dead,” indicating victims whose “demise is experienced as the elimination of sores or blemishes cleansed by those who dare to wash away these undesirable elements” (80). Egger’s examples include the homeless, hitchhikers, runaways, and sex workers, although the designation of less
dead stretches across race, gender, class, sexuality, and other factors. Historical categories include servants and peasants, such as those Elizabeth Báthory was accused of having murdered. Every time period and culture have categories of less dead that make up groups of people whose absence is not only desired, but also somewhat encouraged. Letters to the editor in 1888, for example, praised the Ripper for helping to clean up the streets.

One final theory as to the rise of serial killing since the end of the nineteenth century is simply a question of time. As Vronsky points out, “[o]ne of the early terms used for serial killers was ‘recreational killers,’” and a recreational activity requires a man to find the hours in which to engage in it (Cain 74). When every waking moment of existence was devoted to tasks that worked toward continuing that existence, one man could not murder another not only because of how much every member of a community depended on each other, but because his days were full and he ended them exhausted. Since “there is no documentary evidence of boredom until the nineteenth century,” it seems that men were not left with too much time on their hands prior to that period (Arntfield and Danesi 47). This is not to say that serial killers engage in murder simply because they are bored, but that changing class structures, population densities, and working conditions allowed serial killers the freedom and conditions in which to enact their murderous urges.

While these theories may in part explain the apparently sudden appearance of murderers such as Whitechapel’s Jack the Ripper in 1888 or “America’s first serial killer” H. H. Holmes, perhaps better known as the Devil in the White City, in the 1890s, they do not clarify why there then seems to be such a lull between the end of the nineteenth century and Bundy’s launching of the “golden era” of serial killers near the end of the twentieth. There seems to be a lengthy gap or lag time between cause and effect, or between the changes that allowed for the birth of the “first” serial killer and the prevalence of such a figure that required specific terminology in order to name him.

*Serienmörder* and the Weimar Republic

It is partially the continued popularity of the Ripper murders and the lack of identification of the murderer himself that has allowed the Whitechapel case to eclipse so many other historical examples. The fact that the FBI has taken on the role of the expert within serial killer narratives also positions serial killers themselves as somehow uniquely American and situates the term firmly within the English language. However, the term “*Serienmörder*”—German for serial killer—was first used in print in the 1930s as a description of Peter Kürten (Cain 13). Kürten himself was more often known as the Vampire or Monster of Düsseldorf, although clearly the fact that he perpetrated a series of crimes had enough of an impact on the Berlin chief of police in order to lead to the use of *Serienmörder* in an official description.

Peter Kürten went on record as having committed more than nine murders and attempted more than thirty. He is said to have drunk his victims’ blood and even to have once decapitated swans in order to drink theirs as well. Like the Ripper a few decades prior, Kürten saw his crimes written up in various newspapers and even wrote to these papers himself in order to continue stirring up fear in the readers. Since a reward was offered for his capture, Kürten confessed to his wife and then told her to go to the police so she might collect it. While he did not deny having committed the various murders and attacks, Kürten also made no attempt to explain his actions. Without the psychological understanding of serial killers that was developed fifty years later, Kürten remained inexplicable and quickly disappeared from the papers once he was captured and executed.
Although he was the cause of the first known printed reference to *Serienmörder*, Kürten was not the only serial killer to emerge in the Weimar Republic. To name but three more, there was Fritz Haarmann in Hanover who assaulted, murdered, and mutilated at least twenty-four boys in a six-year span; Karl Denke, who killed and cannibalized dozens of vagrants and travelers, recording their names in a ledger; and Carl Großman, who sold meat on the black market and had a large number of constantly changing female companions of which he murdered more than twenty. Harrmann was executed, although Denke and Großman both hanged themselves in police custody before they could offer excuses or explanations. They, like Kürten, received large amounts of attention from the press concentrating on their crimes but not, it seemed, on the murderers themselves once they had been identified.

In her investigation into the Weimar Republic and its relationship with *Lustmord*—murder for pleasure, a term that has also been considered to be interchangeable with “serial murder”—Maria Tatar emphasizes the role that the press played in all of these cases. “Again and again,” she writes, “newspapers served up phrases about serial murderers as ‘beasts,’ as victims of the desperate postwar conditions . . ., as persons tainted by their heredity . . .or as ‘mentally and morally defective’” in their attempts to explain not only the series of murders but the fact that these men engaged in vampiric or cannibalistic acts with their victims’ bodies (Tatar 44). Haarmann, Großman, and Denke were also rumored to have processed the corpses and sold human meat on the black market. They apparently found this a successful means of supporting themselves through the economic depression and because the agricultural situation meant that there was little meat to be had.

Although the newspapers across the Republic certainly capitalized on the public’s fear following the murders in Kürten’s case or the discovery of Haarmann, Großman, and Denke’s crimes, they did not in fact demonize the criminals or represent them as monstrous or Other. Instead of fixating on the mental conditions of these men, Tatar argues that the fear was “focused on the pathologies of the general population” as the public responded to the threat within their midst, since this meant that those articles did not have to confront the issues of cannibalism and serial murder (46). Assisted either by suicide or the court systems, the accused murderers were quickly apprehended and no longer a living threat to the already terrorized reading public. The men themselves were dead either through execution or their own hand, and, with the cause of the fear and panic eliminated, the papers could move on without discussing the cases further and prolonging, perhaps, the anxiety that another such a figure might exist among them, unidentified.

This approach was, in fact, unusual. “In nearly all instances the killer is asked why” he committed his crimes especially when elements such as vampirism or cannibalism are involved and, when the man himself is not available to answer, speculation is still the order of the day (Egger 18). All the same, Tatar reveals that she found only two reporters who attempted to address the reason behind these killers’ cannibalistic bent. They focused on the contemporary economic situation that meant so many members of the German population were facing starvation, although they “had evidently never stopped to ponder the fact that numerous other victims of the German inflation had not turned to murder and cannibalism to ensure their physical survival” (Tatar 44). Even though so many were starving, only a handful of men were willing to commit murder in order to fill their stomachs and, possibly, their pockets.
Murder with a Purpose

In their amusingly—or possibly horrifyingly—titled book, *Eat Thy Neighbor*, Mark P. Donnelly and Daniel Diehl discuss practices of cannibalism both historic and contemporary. Although they acknowledge that cannibalism has had a welcome and expected place in many cultures throughout history, of interest here are their observations about the practice of cannibalism within societies that do not allow for the eating of the dead as a respectful and respected occurrence. A bit flippantly, perhaps, they observe that “in times of need, any meat is better than none” (Donnelly and Diehl 11). This may be a comfort to those who unwittingly ate their neighbors through the purchase of black-market sausage, but Denke and Großman, the chosen focus points in Donnelly and Diehl’s chapter on the Weimar Republic, willingly committed murder in order to procure their wares.

Many examples of cannibalism throughout history, when enacted by members of a society who would not normally eat their dead, do not also involve serial murder. In the famous example of the Uruguayan rugby team stranded in the Andes after a plane crash, the resistance to eating their already-dead fellow passengers was so strong that the choice was nearly in favor of starvation. The majority of people, even the majority of those in such dire economic straits as those in the midst of the German depression, resisted knowingly eating other human beings. Although Donnelly and Diehl allow for such desperation to break down the normal morals of a society, Denke and Großman stand in their text as outliers who have refused to offer explanation for their acts.

The pair chosen for the case study seem to be near opposites, since Denke was gregarious and a respected member of the community while Großman “neither cultivated nor wanted friends” (Donnelly and Diehl 86). Denke carefully recorded the names of all of his victims in a ledger, which meant that the police who looked through his house were able to feel confident in their statement that he had murdered thirty people. There were thirty-one names in that ledger, but Denke’s crimes had only been uncovered when his final intended victim escaped. Großman, on the other hand, was discovered to have four victims in various states of “preparation” when he came under suspicion, and the true number of women he managed to entice into his home and then murder is unknown (Donnelly and Diehl 87). Each man, of his own accord, had decided to supplement his income and likely his own diet with the meat he procured from these murdered men and women, in spite of the social and moral taboos against cannibalism.

Like the two reporters Tatar mentions, Donnelly and Diehl attribute Denke and Großman’s acts of murder and cannibalism to the economic and social conditions of the Weimar Republic. Yet, again like the contemporary reporters, they do not address why the number of cannibalistic serial killers that arose within such conditions was in fact so small. If desperation drove Denke, Großman, and some of their contemporaries to both murder and cannibalism, it certainly did not have the same effect on the vast majority of residents in the Weimar Republic. Cannibalism was not normalized, and yet those who chose to treat human beings as livestock were allowed to quietly disappear from the newspaper headlines instead of being subject to further examination.

In her study of sexual politics during the Weimar Republic, Maria Tatar examines the contemporary situation in Germany as she asks why so many paintings, photographs, plays, and even movies represented the murder and mutilation of women. When the murderer is depicted, the figure is represented as male. Although not all of the people murdered by the previously mentioned vampiristic and cannibalistic serial killers were female, those responsible for killing, eating, and
distributing the flesh of the victims were indeed male. Tatar argues that the interwar years were especially trying for the men in the Weimar Republic, whether they were former soldiers or not, due to the “the asymmetrical effect of the war on men and on women” (12). The role of the man during the war was one of protection and sacrifice as he offered himself on the front lines or otherwise worked to preserve the home life of the women and children, but this position collapsed after armistice.

Tatar points out that the German term Opfer is translated into English as both “sacrifice” and “victim” and suggests that, after the end of the war, German men, especially the German soldiers, traded being one form of Opfer for another (67). Those who had been asked to sacrifice limbs and even their lives for their countries during the war now became victims because they had been defeated. They were asked to return home where the visual and physical aftermath of the war was much more clearly inscribed on masculine bodies than on feminine. This imbalance, then, shifted the man from sacrifice to victim and caused a movement during the Weimar Republic in which male artists therefore turned to make women their own victims, either embodying or depicting the soldier who “recovers his full powers by marking the bodies of women with the sign of mutilation” (Tatar 175). The same socioeconomic situation that caused reporters to dismiss cannibalism also made this space for the representative murder and mutilation of the female body in order for men to feel a restoration of power in the social order. Depicting women as segmented, murdered bodies was a tactic used by artists to manage various anxieties about being a man in the period after the war, and thus those who resorted to murder and cannibalism in order to manage their own lives in fact fit into this coping mechanism in real life instead of on canvas.

This Mad Brute

Although there was no English language counterpart to Serienmörder in the postwar period, and although American men were not coping with the same situation of having lost a war fought on their own soil, the United States had its own run of serial killers and at least one infamous cannibal in the 1920s and 1930s. Earle Leonard Nelson, also known as the Gorilla Killer, was a prime example of the argument that mass transportation aided a serial killer in fulfilling his murderous urges, since Nelson took advantage of freighthopping in order to leave one town after he had committed a murder and resurface many miles away. Of his twenty-two known murders committed between February 1926 and June 1927, two were committed in Canada, where he was apprehended and then executed. The fact that he was referred to as a Gorilla references both Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” a short story in which the violent and brutal murders were in fact committed by an orangutan instead of a man, and also the belief that, the less evolved and more apelike a man was, the more violent he would be.

Shortly after Nelson’s execution, Carl Panzram was arrested for burglary and began a confession that started with three murders and ended up encompassing more than twenty murders and over a thousand acts of sodomy against boys and men. Panzram’s alleged murder spree began in 1920 and ended during his imprisonment when he beat the prison laundry foreman to death. Panzram was hanged in 1930, although not until after he had written of his crimes and made it clear that he wished to have no appeals and felt no remorse about any of his actions. A more colorful character than Nelson, Panzram may be best known for taunting the slowness of his executioner.

Along with Panzram and Nelson, Albert Fish generally receives a brief mention in histories of serial killing but, like the others, he is also no Ted Bundy. Fish was, in fact, an older man who
seemed almost grandfatherly to those who had met him, a trait that likely allowed him to get away with the kidnapping and murder of children. He was arrested under suspicion of having murdered ten-year-old Grace Budd and later confessed to also killing two boys. In two of these cases, including that of Grace Budd, Fish also admitted to having cooked and eaten parts of his victims’ bodies. He had even written a letter to Budd’s mother informing her of her daughter’s fate, echoing the taunting letters sent to the newspapers under the name of Jack the Ripper. Fish’s cannibalism, unlike that of the German cannibals, was never attributed to starvation, but rather to Fish’s religious mania (Donnelly and Diehl 89). Again, these are just a handful of examples of the violent crimes enacted by men in the interwar period.

Peter Vronsky labels 1916-1934 as the Serial-Killer “Interlude” (Cain 283). When America was involved in WWI, he argues, the number of sexual killings dropped as young men were given a state-sponsored outlet for their violent urges. This contrasts with his declaration that murders in the United States rose a full 77% from 1920 to 1933 (Vronsky Cain 283). Although not all of these were cases of serial murder, male violence was no longer given a conduit to be directed overseas at the enemy Other. During the war, the enemy had been depicted as inhuman, monstrous, or as animals, such as in the 1918 propaganda poster that orders its audience to “Destroy this mad brute.” Said “brute” is a gorilla, baring its teeth as it wears a German helmet labeled “Militarism” and holding a bloody club inscribed with “Kultur.” Its other arm encircles a swooning, half-naked blonde maiden as the gorilla steps upon the shore labeled “America.” This enemy brute is clearly foreign, and the threat is that it will leave its homeland and invade our own.

When this monster surfaced in America in the form of Earle Leonard Nelson, he was still labeled a gorilla, although his victims were not nearly so young as the woman depicted on the poster. The imagery that had so recently been applied to a supposedly less-developed foreign people in order to create the argument that the Germans were less evolved than Americans—and therefore not to be considered human—was now employed to describe an American citizen. The atavisms attributed to the Germans were recycled and redirected toward Nelson. Just as the “discursive strategies developed from reflecting on killers like Kürten and Haarmann did not need to be invented by the [German] press,” neither did the American reporters need to create a new narrative for its own murderers (Tatar 56). The threat of violence from the under-evolved male figure remained the same, but the origin of the man shifted. It would seem that the socioeconomic situation in the Weimar Republic was not solely responsible for the postwar increase in male violence.

Postwar Serial Killers and the Pathological Public Sphere

Mark Seltzer has theorized serial killing and the reporting of serial killing as having to do with intersections between the public and private sphere. Seltzer sees media representations of violence as evidence of “wound culture: the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons” (1). For Seltzer, wound culture exists within what he calls the pathological public sphere, which complicates the public/private divide and turns private lives and private bodies into the spectacle. Mass media plays a crucial role in identifying and directing this spectacle and, although Selzer was writing at the end of the twentieth century, changes in mass media and reporting during and after the First World War show evidence of this same fascination.

The first recorded instance of murder inviting the public into the private sphere has been named as “A Narrative of the Life of William Beadle,” published in 1783. This pamphlet, which presented
readers with the sermon preached at the funerals of Beadle’s wife and children, whom he had murdered, also introduced the idea of the “body discovery scene” to the crime narrative. Because all members of the Beadle family were found dead inside their home, the retelling of the crime “opened up the Beadle home and its operations for popular inspection,” inviting readers inside (Halttunen 138). The twentieth century, then, did not invent this intersection of the private and the public sphere, but changes in media production and distribution allowed for wider audiences and more intimate access.

The act of serial killing itself, due to the fact that the killer “intentionally chooses a stranger as his victim[,] threatens our very social order” (Egger 4). The mediation of this act is thus able to invite audiences to participate in the spectacle of the pathological public sphere and feeds wound culture with words and images. Seltzer goes so far as to describe the mutilations inflicted by a serial killer as being not only violence against the individual body, but also “an idealized and intact American culture” (6). Once again, the threat against American culture and all that America is meant to stand for has shifted from across the ocean in the form of the German enemy to being locally cultivated in the minds and bodies of American men. Even though the war was over, America had emerged victorious, and the media was no longer full of updates from the front or propaganda about the war effort, the threat of violence still endured.

The media plays no small role in the representation of murder, especially serial killers and their victims, as spectacle. In order to sell more newspapers or ensnare more listeners or viewers, the press capitalizes on “the excitation in the opening of private and bodily and psychic interiors” as murder victims are discovered, the frenzy of the chase is reported, and the serial killer is then identified and studied (Seltzer 253). Even though the United States of the postwar period was not experiencing the same cultural stresses as the Weimar Republic, the pathological public sphere and its presentation of wound culture evolved with changing technologies in order to keep the world’s dangers in the public eye. It was just that those dangers were no longer in uniform and no longer engaged in this battle across the ocean.

Postwar Male Violence

Although serial killing has been marketed as overwhelmingly American and a product of the late twentieth century, the economic, social, and political situations of both the United States and Germany after the end of World War I created a space in which individuals committed a series of stranger murders. This interwar period has not previously been a focus of the history of serial killing, partially because of the lack of contemporary terminology within both the criminal justice and psychological fields, but also because the figure of Ted Bundy and other “golden age” serial killers from fifty years later have eclipsed the crimes of the 1920s and 1930s. With Bundy as the idealized serial killer, the focus has largely been on the ways in which the economic, social, and political climate of the 1960s led to the development of such serial murderers.

Discussions of the apparent rise of the serial killer in the twentieth century have already addressed such possible causes and influences as the rise of mass media; changes in class structure; shifts in population, including moving toward cities and having more access to transportation; and the increase of free time available for recreational activities. These theories are applicable across the twentieth century, although the specific circumstances surrounding a particular decade or historical event should augment them. In this instance, the Great War and its aftermath must be considered, since multiple cases of serial killing emerged on both continents after the declaration of armistice.
Consideration must be given to the war experience for men and boys at home both during and after the war. Although it seems to be a near-universal conclusion that “males may feel impelled to control women sexually and through violence,” this gender-directed attempt at maintaining power seems to have increased after the end of the war (Artnfield and Danesi 256). Men who had previously been allowed and even encouraged to direct their frustrations publicly toward the enemy in times of war were then denied that outlet after its end. Public displays of anger and violence that were previously couched as patriotism no longer existed as channels through which men could vent their personal and private frustrations.

Further, the war effort saw an increased visibility of the gendered struggles that faced men and women of the early twentieth century. “Historically male-dominated society is marked by the male aspiration to somehow tame and control that daunting female sexual power,” and the war years saw an increase of women visibly working within the public sphere (Vronsky Cain 119). Recruitment posters invited women not only to volunteer within traditionally feminine positions such as Red Cross nurses, but also to work alongside men in roles that took them to the front lines. With the threat of such a gendered power shift, the other changes that resulted from the end of the war meant that men who had once occupied firm positions within society found those positions either changed or under threat of change. The Great War did not create this threat, but it did highlight the issues already at hand.

Men in Germany were further affected by the fact that the war ended for them in a loss. The German “notion of the war effort as one great act of martyrdom was so pervasive that it easily effaced the reality of agency, turning the German soldier into a man prepared to sacrifice himself, but also a man who, in defeat, quickly slides into the role of victim” in which he is free to act without guilt (Tatar 182). The effects of armistice in Germany allowed for not only an artistic movement in the Weimar Republic in which male artists constantly repeated the theme of mutilated and segmented female bodies, but also created the space for men to enact that violence on real others. Although the occurrences of serial killing connected with cannibalism—and an income from selling such meat on the black market—were dismissed in contemporary reports as being a response to the economic depression, the fact that these instances were both few and notable demonstrates that even the threat of starvation is not the sole cause of these murders. There was something about these specific men that pushed them to resort to homicide, and something about the culture that allowed these cases to be pushed aside.

In the United States as well as in Germany, men were faced with a great many changes as a result of the First World War. Media had brought violence into their homes whether or not that violence was being enacted on their own soil or far away, and the war effort had once again caused shifts in population and individuals’ roles within society. Maria Tatar argues that, for the German serial killers who arose within the Weimar Republic, “the Lust in Lustmord had more to do with the retaliatory pleasures of an aggressor who perceives himself as victim than with sexual desire,” but it was not only the German man, robbed of his opportunity to be a sacrificial soldier, that responded with violence (Tatar 182). American men, having been exposed to the idea of war through news reports and propaganda events, also found themselves with a sudden change in expectation and a lack of outlet for their aggression. All of these factors must be considered when addressing the Serialmörder that emerged in the aftermath of World War I, long before Ted Bundy ushered in the “golden age” of serial killing.
Works Cited


Vronsky, Peter. *Sons of Cain: A History of Serial Killers from the Stone Age to the Present*. Berkeley, 2018