ISSN 1070-8286

Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture, 8(1) (2001) 61-65

Review of *Psycho Paths: Tracking the Serial Killer through Contemporary American Film and Fiction*[*]

by

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Book: *Psycho Paths: Tracking the Serial Killer through Contemporary American Film and Fiction*
Author: Philip L. Simpson
Publisher: Southern Illinois University Press
Year: 2000

What makes an American psycho? Or rather, Philip L. Simpson's *Psycho Paths* makes us wonder, what makes a "psycho" specifically American? Why has American culture been preoccupied with the figure of the serial killer for the last three decades, and what does this preoccupation reveal about the society that produces this figure in the first place? To what extent is the serial killer nothing but a natural extension of the idea of American individualism? Do serial killer narratives generally represent radical critiques of American society, or are they inherently conservative? These, and other important questions, constitute the springboard for Simpson's thorough investigation of the genre of the serial killer narrative in contemporary American culture, which will be of interest not only to those working within the fields of film and literature specifically addressed in the book, but also to anyone who cares about the disturbing relationship between fictional "horror" and the horrors of "reality." In the course of Simpson's study, the line between fiction and reality becomes thoroughly confused: the media frames "real" criminals as horror-movie nightmares, police profiling resembles nothing so much as fiction writing. Real policemen take their investigative clues from detective fiction, just as serial killer novelists take their cues from FBI files.

Of course, as Simpson makes abundantly clear in his careful and thoughtful analysis of the gothic heritage of the serial killer genre, this kind of confusion of boundaries is absolutely symptomatic of the social problems the killer himself embodies. In his introduction, Simpson describes the serial killer's violence as a type of "affirmative postmodernism" (p. 17), claiming that "post-modernity as a cultural force evokes a crisis-as-spectacle atmosphere . . . in which literal violence as well as increasingly sensational narrative representations of it can easily flourish, simply because the postmodern transgression of all boundary is inherently a 'violent' act of cognition." Undoubtedly, as Mark Selzer's (1998) *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* demonstrates, the problem of the serial killer cannot be addressed without

simultaneously thinking about the question of postmodernism. Given this, though, it might be important to distinguish a little more carefully between acts of cognition and acts of murder. The serial killer may indeed be a product of postmodern culture, yet the two cannot be conflated as easily as Simpson at times suggests. **[End page 61]**

The first and strongest chapter focuses on the question of genre, tracing the serial killer narrative back to its gothic roots through detailed comparative readings of Gary Fleder's 1997 film, *Kiss the Girls*, and Paul West's 1991 novel, *The Women of Whitechapel and Jack the Ripper*. Both of these texts illustrate Simpson's claim that the doppelgänger plays a key role in the serial killer genre. In Fleder's film, the killer turns out to be two killers, Casanova and The Gentleman Caller, and in West's novel, the idea of the Ripper splits into "infinite replications" of himself. No single killer exists, only a series of related men who commit murders attributed to one non-existent figure, a fact which again raises the question of postmodernism's concern with the original and the copy in interesting ways.

For Simpson, Jack the Ripper constitutes the first serial killer, "simply because the Ripper's advent on the stage of media happened to coincide with the serial format as popularized in the Victorian press" (p. 36). This statement sets up the very idea of seriality as a media phenomenon. Simpson quotes Richard Dyer to support his claim that the media itself is founded upon seriality: "it is only under capitalism that seriality became a reigning principle of cultural production, starting with the serialization of novels and cartoons, then spreading to news and movie programming. Its value as a selling device for papers and broadcasts is obvious" (p. 22). By relating the serial killer's murders to the pleasures of seriality and repetition, Simpson begins to break into the difficult question, posed in his introductory chapter, of how American society produces such murders in the first place, and makes such crimes possible. Having raised the question, however, Simpson does not pursue it thoroughly. The reader is left with many unanswered questions not only about the responsibility of the media industry, the financial success of which relies so heavily upon the appeal of seriality, but also about other issues related to the question of repetition. What, we wonder, is the relationship between (male) serial killing and (female) serial sex, as practiced by the prostitute who is so often the victim of the killer's brutal torture? How are we as viewers implicated in the horror of serial killing through our desire to watch, or read about not one murder, but many? And how is the critic, forced to cite or describe the most gruesome representations of murder again, implicated in the violence of the murders themselves?

These questions raise complicated issues about the relationship between violence and representation, a question that Simpson might well have spent more time on in the course of his inquiry. We need to know whether seriality is itself the problem. Is seriality always related to violence in some way? And if so, why? Simpson opens up one possible line of inquiry on this subject when he notes that many of the killers are previous victims of someone else's violence or sexual abuse, usually in childhood. Although some of the killers, like Early Grayce in *Kalifornia*, are keen to stress that they are not simply acting out earlier childhood traumas, one cannot help but think that recent discussions of repetition and representation in the field of trauma theory would provide a useful paradigm for analyzing this bequeathal of violence from one generation to the next more closely.

Chapters two and three develop the emergence of the doppelgänger in serial killer fiction

through readings of *Thomas Harris's Manhunter* and *The Silence of the Lambs* (chapter two) **[End page 62]** and *From Potter's Field*, *Citizen X*, and *The Alienist* (chapter 3). In both of these chapters, Simpson argues convincingly that the psycho-profiler (chapter two) and the detective (chapter three) emerge as uncanny doubles of the killer himself. In order to catch the serial killer, Simpson rightly notes, the detective has to be able to think like him, and this ethical paradox lies at the heart of the genre. In these carefully researched chapters, Simpson not only expands his theories about violence and representation through an analysis of detection as an act of reading, making the murdered body a "text" to be read, but also addresses important ideological issues. He notes that the serial killer/detective drama is analogous to an earlier American genre of Indian and Indian fighters, with the detective upholding the "American" values of the lone individual in a bleak landscape, charged with the protection of the traditional family unit. *Citizen X*, a cable-television movie set in the1980s Soviet Union province Rostov, stands up less well to close analysis than many of the more substantial texts Simpson selects, but does give him the opportunity to explore how the serial killer narratives of the 1980s and early 1990s need to be read in the context of the cold war.

The question of the death penalty arises on a couple of occasions in suggestive ways. In Patricia Cornwell's novel, *From Potter's Field* (1995), the New York City police department wants the serial killer Temple Gault to be tried in Virginia, Simpson informs us, where he can be executed. Actor Scott Glen, who portrays Thomas Harris's chief FBI profiler, Crawford, a character based on Jack Douglas, real FBI profiler and co-author of two books on "mindhunting," claims that he was "traumatized into renouncing his long-held opposition to the death penalty after hearing Douglas play confiscated tape recordings of two serial killers torturing teenaged girls" (p. 71). And finally, one reviewer of *Kalifornia* claims that the "gruesome cross-country ride argues for capital punishment" (p. 185). Aside from the question of why an FBI agent should be re-staging the spectacle of real torture for a Hollywood actor, these references to the death penalty, not developed by Simpson, do raise the issue of how state-imposed death fits into a study of serial killing as a particularly American trait? In many ways, Simpson's description of serial killing fits nothing so well as the state's own imposition of death. As the idea of "death row" implies, the victims are multiple, reduced to a serial line up. Those executed by the state, and by the serial killer, are most frequently the members of society who are least valued by, least visible to, the white majority. And, as with the serial killer, the state's method of killing is precise, a meticulous repetition of the preceding execution, a grim prefiguration of the next. The parallels are too striking to ignore in this type of study.

Simpson argues convincingly that the serial killer constitutes a mythical, almost supernatural, embodiment of American society's deepest darkest fears. We are compelled by the representation of this figure because he allows us to project our fears onto a clearly delineated villain. "The marauding serial killers of the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s encode, deliberately or otherwise, many of our cultural phobias in their polysemous narrative representation in fiction and film" (p. 2), writes Simpson. On numerous occasions, the killer is either marked as homosexual or androgynous, and this is clearly one of the "cultural phobias" to which Simpson refers, yet he pays this issue remarkably little attention, a fact that is reflected in the bibliographic omission of **[End page 63]** Diana Fuss's (1993) important essay on serial killers and homophobia, "Monsters of Perversion: Jeffrey Dahmer and *The Silence of the Lambs*." Several references to the killer as a "virus" point to the troubling relationship between the rise of the serial killer narrative and the

AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, but this connection is not developed by Simpson. When AIDS is mentioned explicitly in a quotation from Joyce Carol Oates's *Zombie* (p. 168), Simpson does not comment on its presence or relevance.

Similarly, given the book's ostensible commitment to pursuing the cultural anxieties reflected in these narratives, I felt that the author's treatment of race was problematically marginalized. Simpson notes that the American Gothic transforms the Gothic image of the haunted castle into "plausibly American settings such as abandoned farm houses, dark cellars, antebellum plantations . . .," and stresses the frequent recurrence of the American South in serial killer narratives, but he does not connect these sites of racial conflict to the issue of race in the narratives themselves. Why, we wonder, does Ruskin, one of two serial killers in *Kiss the Girls*, build his dungeon for imprisoning female victims in the tunnels beneath an old slave plantation? What role does slavery play here, and how is it connected to the murder of women? Similarly, in his analysis of Joyce Carol Oates's *Zombie* in chapter four, Simpson notes that the killer, Quentin, preys on "those who will not be missed by mainstream America, such as black and Asian homosexuals." He fails, however, to extrapolate from this local observation any more developed theories about how the serial killer narrative as a genre deals with the problem of race in America.

Simpson is better when dealing with the treatment of women in this genre, and some of his most interesting discussions focus on what happens when a female writer enters the serial killer genre. In particular, his readings of Joyce Carol Oates' *Zombie* and Patricia Cornwell's *From Potter's Field* address the difficult and complex problem of "how to elevate the female voice to a position of power within the male dominated text" (p. 114). Cornwell's female forensic pathologist, Dr. Kay Scarpetta, not only offers us a strong female character in a genre where such women are hard to come by, but also allows the reader, through Scarpetta, the opportunity to identify with the victims, rather than the killer. Is this a good thing? Simpson is ambivalent, but then ambivalence is what this genre is all about. Perhaps Simpson might have addressed the misogyny seemingly inherent to this genre more fully by paying closer attention to issues of spectatorship throughout the book. Why does our society long to look at the bodies of dead women? How are we, as viewers and readers, implicated when we watch or read repeated scenes of female torture? Why do serial killer movies generally not show the murder of women, focusing instead on the dead bodies left at crime scenes? These questions seem crucial to any analysis of the genre in a socio-political context.

Psycho Paths is an ambitious work, not only in the amount of material it addresses, but also in the nature of that material. Without doubt, serial killing is at least as hard to write about as it is to read about, and Simpson's work provides a thoughtful and provocative response to very difficult material. Though Simpson raises more questions than he can answer in the scope of the book, the questions he asks are important ones, and are worth pursuing further. **[End page 64]**

REFERENCE LIST

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ENDNOTE

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