

# MURDERABILIA: TRANSGRESSIVE IMAGINATIONS

## Abstract

As human beings, we are very different from each other. Each individual has their own needs, demands, priorities, compromises, sacrifices, and a way of living. There is not a particular way of 'right' living unless we are talking about norms that need to be followed. Norms designate us to follow certain rules to become 'acceptable' and 'respected' while living in a society. Even when one is following the laws, the rules, and the norms, they still go beyond that and engage in gaining enjoyment from things or situations that gives them an adrenaline rush; that gives them an identity; that gives them a scope of imagination; that gives them a sense of revolt; that gives them a sense of belongingness; that gives them a sense of meaning. One of the concepts that go beyond such normative culture is 'murderabilia'.

**Keywords:** Moral code, murderabilia, norms, transgression.

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We call the heroes of the past heroes of production. We feel entitled to call the present day magazine heroes ‘idols of consumption’. Indeed, almost every one of them is directly, or indirectly, related to the sphere of leisure time.

-Leo Lowenthal (1961)

Do you enjoy watching documentaries on serial killers? Do you enjoy watching movies and series portraying violent crimes? Have you ever tried on or owned merchandise that portrays a violent killer or their belongings? Do you have merchandise that depicts movie characters like Joker? Would you like to visit a historical place which marks the incidents of violent catastrophes like Arbeitmachtfrei? What character or role do you take up for Halloween costume? Has it ever been a popular offender or a person who violates law?

If you have answered ‘yes’ to any of the above questions, then you will be interested to learn about what makes you enjoy or feel interested in such scenarios.

As human beings, we are very different from each other. Each individual has their own needs, demands, priorities, compromises, sacrifices, and a way of living. There is not a particular way of ‘right’ living unless we are talking about norms that need to be followed. Norms designate us to follow certain rules to become ‘acceptable’ and ‘respected’ while living in a society. Norms influence the morality principle followed by an individual. Any act that violates the norm or is away from the norm is subjected to scrutiny. Why? One of the basic reasons underlying this can be the notion of ‘safety’.

In accordance to Maslow’s pyramid of ‘Hierarchy of Needs’, fulfilling physiological needs gives an individual a chance to follow norms of the society. Once that is fulfilled, ‘safety needs’ come into play. Laws of the country help to be safeguarded from people who violate rules. But still, there remains the ‘fear of unknown’.



**Figure 1:** Maslow’s Pyramid of Hierarchy of Needs

Even when one is following the laws, the rules, and the norms, they still go beyond that and engage in gaining enjoyment from things or situations that gives them an adrenaline rush; that gives them an identity; that gives them a scope of imagination; that gives them a sense of revolt; that gives them a sense of belongingness; that gives them a sense of meaning. One of the concepts that goes beyond such normative culture is termed as, “murderabilia.”

## I. INTRODUCTION

The term ‘murderabilia’ was coined by Andy Kahan, who was working with Houston Crime Victims Assistance Service (Hylton, 2007). Andy Kahan, an advocate for crime victims, did his Bachelors in Criminal Justice from the University of Houston, in 1983. His work has been commended with many honors and awards. He has been a part of various departments and organizations for enacting legislation in regards to victims of crime. Presently, he is the Director of Victim Services, Crime Stoppers Houston.

Murderabilia is derived from two words- murder and memorabilia; together meaning collection of items associated with famous violent crimes. Collection of such items can range from art to merchandises (Jarvis, 2007):

- Art (paintings, drawings, sculptures, letters, etc.)
- Body parts (lock of hair, nail clippings)
- Crime scene materials
- Merchandise (t-shirt, cap, Halloween masks, action figures of ‘superstars’ like Ted Bundy, Dahmer, etc.)

Why do people buy such materials? There are many theories and assumptions behind this. One of the notions is that buyers of such materials may be interested to buy them because of their (items) association with fear or death, thereby providing a sense of *power and control* (Foucault, 1977).

One of the personalities from the entertainment world (showcased in crime documentaries), named Eric Holler, started on his journey of selling artwork done by criminals through eBay and later on from his website called serialkillersink.net. Initially, he had reached out to one of the serial killers, Richard Ramirez, out of fascination. Ramirez took his number and sent him a package containing his artwork. Holler sold them on eBay and earned well from it. Then, he started reaching out to more such people and collected articles made by them. Through his website, he sold ‘true crime collectibles’. eBay does not permit the sale of such articles anymore but there are many players in the market who sell crime collectibles through websites and auctions. Holler believes that murderabilia is not limited to art collectibles but rather includes lock of hair, letters, personal possessions, etc. He considers murderabilia as a “macabre hobby”, sourcing from dark history. According to him, how murderabilia is understood and explained depends on the person being asked. Holler stated,

“There are people who are proud to hang a John Wayne Gacy painting up on their wall and they’re not psychos, and the dealers are not psychos. It’s just a culture that interests people.”



**Figure 2:** Artwork by Richard Ramirez (The Night Stalker) from serialkillersink.net

Michael Channels, another personality from the entertainment world, considers murderabilia as a distinct concept from true crime collection. He sees the latter as ‘memorabilia’, which is about collecting true crime materials like books, newspapers, artwork, etc. Murderabilia, on the other hand is a scene that is not pretty. He had mentioned,

“I have observed from a distance, [and] some of these collectors become actual killers themselves. Several collectors I knew have killed themselves, so it can be a dark hobby for some — but they came to this hobby with their own set of problems that this hobby didn’t create.”

A lot of money was being made by selling articles belonging to true crime collectibles. For instance, one of the paintings by a serial killer, John Wayne Gracy, was sold out for \$7000. A lock of hair, belonging to another criminal, Charles Manson, was on auction on a website called ‘True Crime Auction House’ for \$2,400. Articles belonging to criminals, who are not popular, do not yield the price as others but it still has a good margin.



**Figure 3:** Lock of hair of Charles Manson

Andy Kahan came across such selling processes in the year 1999 and approached eBay to look into the matter. In 2001, eBay stopped the sale of murderabilia on grounds of

them being ‘offensive materials’. Since there was no official word to label the selling of such materials then, Kahan came out with coining the term for the industry.

As a rise took place in buying items related to violent crimes, it became a concern of integrity and privacy for the offenders as well as the victims and victim’s family. The offenders saw it as a way of monetizing their journey by selling their stories for books and movie rights. Some directly sold their art work and earned from its exhibition. A ‘sense of celebrity’ started forming around the offenders and it seemed futile to the purpose of incarceration. On the other hand, for the victims and their families, it led to re-victimization of the horrible past and led to more suffering; contrary to the essence of justice.

Keeping this in mind, Son of Sam Law (1977) was introduced. The law came out of the case of *Simon & Schuster v. Members of New York State Crime Victims Board*. In 1977, David Berkowitz had caused terror and profound grief to the families in New York through a murder spree under the name of ‘Son of Sam’. The legislature then took quick action to prevent David Berkowitz from profiting through his crimes. Initially, this law was not supported by the US Supreme Court but Kahan did not give up. He focused on bringing the aspect of how selling true crime collectibles is becoming a source of profit for the criminals. He mentioned,

“Basically, in layman’s terms: paint, scratch, snip, doodle all you want — just don’t make money from it. People have been collecting true crime memorabilia since, more than likely, the first caveman bopped somebody. So collect all you want. Where we draw the line is when you’re actually listing items to be sold for personal profit. ”

Son of Sam Law means to keep the offenders from profiting through publicity of their committed crimes. Further, a bill, *Protect the Dignity of Crime Victims Act (2010)* was passed to stop the sale of murderabilia and prevent any form of profit sourcing from such sales. This also helped to avoid re-victimization and is a step towards integrity and dignity for the victims and their families.

## II. TOWARDS TRANSGRESSION

Over the last 30 years, the entertainment industry has been filled with documentaries, biographies, books, magazines, etc. related to serial killers or violent offenders. There has been a developing fascination with film violence (Aron, 2015), crime fiction (Knight, 2010), seductive qualities of death, the dead, and corpses (Foltyn, 2008). There has been a rising interest in transgression (Penfold-Mounce, 2010).

By definition, transgression refers to an act that is against a law. Transgression is going away from moral principles or duty. Can murderabilia be seen as an approach towards transgression?

From the point of view of *consumer capitalism*, it can be seen that consumers are associating and getting attracted to figures that represent extremity (Jarvis, 2007); for example, dark tourism, documentaries on serial killers, crime fiction (Knight, 2010). Dark tourism entails visiting places that are associated with tragedy in the past; for example, visiting concentration camps or gas chambers from the Nazi times.

Consumers, in general, are keen to collect any object, a thing, a book, or a stone that holds a personal meaning for them or if it is coming from a memorable place- as a way of preservation of those memories or the meaning attached to them. Similarly, certain consumers also collect things associated with a crime owing to their interest in transgression, seductive qualities associated with violence, death, and the dead (Penfold-Mounce, 2010; Miller, 2008; Miller, 2009). This collection provides the consumers with a gateway to their life story and acts as a ‘vessel of identity’ (Benjamin, 2008).

“Some collectors search for clues to the murderer's psyche or motivation while others just want to own a piece of history, even if that history is gruesome.” (Massey)

“...uses her journalism as a platform for the biggest collectors to defend their dark pastime, whilst maintaining the overtone that the murderabilia collection is a curious abnormality.” (Chan, 2015)

As stated by Bacon (2015), violence is ‘as much a part of art and entertainment as it is of life- if not even more so’. Other than the aspect of consumer capitalism, collection of things associated with violent crimes also signifies the *essence of authenticity and historical discourse* (Miller, 2008; Miller, 2009).

Murderabilia is the result of these two aspects- consumer capitalism and authenticity & historical discourse. Looking into the link between these two aspects can help to understand ‘transgressive imaginations’ (O’Neill & Seal, 2012; Och, 2015). As consumers, the emphasis is not on the suffering of human beings but rather on the ‘voyeuristic pathology’ of watching the suffering (Aaron, 2015); to understand and cope with violence (Bacon, 2015).

### III. TRANSGRESSION TYPES

Transgressions can be broadly divided into three forms, namely, displaying, auratic, and symbolic transgressions.

*Displaying transgressions* mark the ‘narrative’ of the incident that took place. It may preserve the objects associated with those violent incidents. For example, Jack the Ripper museum, Holocaust Museum, dark tourism.



**Figure 4:** Displaying Transgression- Jack the Ripper Museum, ArbeitMachtFrei (Dark Tourism)

People often visit such museums and sites as a part of historical relevance. It also comes from a point of curiosity and interest to see the true crime materials and vision/ imagine the situation that could have been set up in the history. Museums and places of dark tourism are often resorted to for educational purposes by the students- to learn from the history. By visiting the Nazi gas chambers, for example, individuals can learn about the incident, about the victims, about the steps taken to annihilate the victims, and the takeaway lessons from its history.

Auratic transgressions include the collectibles to mark the ‘authenticity’. For example, handwritten letters, original artwork by offenders, address book, online websites, etc. It is often debated as to whether associate auratic transgression with psychopathology as the creators of such artwork (for example) have a ‘twisted psyche’. The artworks by serial killers can often be seen as

“It’s flat, it’s boring, in many cases ridiculous and it reveals how much he was trying to mask from the world what he was really about.”(Las Vegas Review Journal)

In one of the studies conducted by Loyola Marymount University (2017), it was found that the paintings by some of the offenders depict significant markers of trauma and its diagnosis. It also showed how the themes of sexual and religious nature.



**Figure 5:** Auratic Transgression- Pogo the Clown by John Wayne Gracy, Embroidery by Wayne Lo, Self-portrait by Henry Lee Lucas

*Symbolic transgressions* include the merchandises depicting the violent crimes or related aspects. It is to ‘cultivate authenticity’. For example, t-shirts, toys, replicas, etc. related to murders or violent crimes. Here the objects are neither authentic nor are true crime collectibles. They are rather items depicting the true crime collectibles, hence, considered as to be ‘cultivating authenticity’. Having a Halloween costume of famous serial killers like Ted Bundy, buying toys that portray offenders, buying replicas of furniture that belong to violent killers, etc. are some ways of symbolic transgressions.





**Figure 6:** Symbolic Transgression- Ed Kemper Toy, Replica of Birth Certificate of Ted Bundy, T-shirts

“My own view is that murderabilia is just one more attempt, albeit circuitous, to demoner our world. We live in a consumer culture, and consumption not only fulfils desires but also is a means of imposing order and control. Co modifying a horror is one way of objectifying and managing it. [...] [I]f monsters churn the stomach, horrify the heart and boggle the mind, we respond with whatever powers we possess. Buying a monster memento brings the unintelligible creepiness into the light of a quotidian transaction.” (Aama, 2009)

#### IV. THEORIES AND EXPLANATIONS

- 1. Idols of Production:** “Murderabilia is a key way in which violence and death are re-imagined, revived, and played with.” (Denham, 2017)

Lowenthal posited the theory of ‘idols of production’ (1961) where he mentioned that rate and nature of consumption by the consumers shadows light on who is portrayed as a hero. Subsequently, that entity is pushed towards more production owing to surge in demand- consumer capitalism (Beer & Burrows, 2010). Fame is thereby disseminated towards entitlement through consumer’s way of passing leisure time.

“Meaning of crime is created, consumed, and re-created.” (Phillips & Strobl, 2006)

Movies like *Silence of the Lambs*, *American Psycho*, *Serial Killers*, *Se7en*, *Maniac*, etc. depict the story of serial killers and their way of luring the victims. Documentaries on serial killers like Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, or web series on the people who show psychopathic traits, is another source of consumer capitalism fueling spark among the viewers. This phenomenon is not limited to a particular culture but is widespread- encompassing a wide range of language choice.

“Prisoners have been creating literature and artwork since the beginning of the United States penal system.” (Hammit, 2010)

- 2. Structure, Identity, and Power:** Kooistra worked towards transgression through the explanation of three parameters of a criminal hero’- structure, identity, and power (1989).



The three explanations entail psychological, cultural and sociological nature. Certain criminals are celebrated and they become ‘criminal heroes’ in the eyes of the public, while others do not. Kooistra did not ascertain the reason behind this but tried to put forward explanations which can be used as emerging points to answer the question.

- **Psychological explanation:** Consumers of murderabilia celebrate (the offenders) in order to release their feelings of aggression, anger, as a means of rebellion. Instead of it being more about the offender, it is about the consumers. It is an outlet for them to express their underlying psychological emotions.
  - **Cultural explanation:** This is a debatable explanation. This goes back to the old times where Robin Hood kind of personality has been entertained. In the present, characters like *Joker* have a fan-base. In the movie, *Joker*, it has been portrayed with detail that he was subjected to cruelty and suffering right from the start. The environment around him was not conducive. He had to resort to turn into the persona of *Joker* (his prime occupation earlier) in order to evade the suffering and injustice. Now the consumers who have been victims of such scenarios will be inclined to relate to the character of *Joker* as a means of similar suffering and adversities. Such offenders/ personasthen tend to be seen as ‘heroes’ instead of criminals, with appealing traits of justice.
  - **Sociological explanation:** Among the three, sociological explanation is the dominant one. It highlights on the cause of emergence of hero criminals. The society structure and political world is responsible for the creation of hero criminals; rising from eras of depression and disenfranchisement. The web series, *The Man in the High Castle*’ can be considered as an example. Here, the victims of the World War II fight back to gain their rights and create a new livelihood for themselves which will be safe, secure and just. Another persona, *Batman*, depicts a character, who goes against the law and fight back to save the people in danger. He sees the endangerment his city is facing- poverty, unsafe neighborhood, monopoly, corruption. He takes it upon himself to avenge his father’s death, overcome his own fears, and save the city. Even when *Batman* is going against the law, he is celebrated and followed on as a ‘hero’ who is saving the world from socio-cultural pressures.
3. **A Moral Code:** There have been theories and explanations pertaining to murderabilia and transgression in lines with banditry. Here, banditry is seen as a moral code.

Social Bandits Theory was proposed by Hobsbawm (2001). He showed that banditry is an entity rising from disenfranchisement, setting of unrest in society, and the people residing in it. Banditry is a way of seeking justice for those who have been wronged. It is a way for people who belong to poor and socially backward classes; not having an opportunity to fight against the unrest. Small scale rebellion helps to tie the community together and fight for their rights. Since it is about a community, banditry is considered as an intimate phenomenon representing a particular community. Though the law will consider bandits as criminals, the people of the community will celebrate them. “Banditry is freedom, but in a peasant society few can be free. Most are shackled by the double chain of lordship and labour, the one reinforcing the other. For what makes peasants the victims of authority and coercion is not so much their economic vulnerability

- they are indeed as often as not virtually self sufficient -as their immobility.” (Hobsbawm, 2001)

Following Hobsbawm, Buckley proposed that banditry is to disrupt the traditional structures of large number of people belonging to working class community.

Curott& Finkreflected on the aspect of *cost-benefit analysis*(2012). The analysis focused on creating and drawing sympathy from the society with their own rules (benefit for those who help and punishment for those who do not) in response to the injustice done by the governing body. Bandits break the unjust rules made by the governing body and fight for the justice. They create an informal set of rules/ codes to follow in order to maintain peace and safety in the society. The rules/ codes are made in a way that they benefit the people residing in the society; to come out of the state of suffering. In the web series, *Arrow*, the protagonist takes it upon him to save his city from corruption and to bring back safety for people residing in it. He becomes a vigilante and sets out a clear instruction for people residing in the city to not take any action that hampers the safety of the city or that disrupts the society. He threatens that the one who goes against this rule will be punished by him and hence, it is better to follow the rule. Within a period of him being a vigilante, the crime rate in the city falls down; because of the fear of Arrow. Though the police force did not incline to support this approach, Arrow continued to perform his duty.

Seal posited the *Robin Hood principle* (2009) where the emphasis is on the point that led to the creation of such a person (a bandit) - complex social frictions.

“[The bandits are] celebrated in folklore, romanticised in the mass media and commodified in the tourism and heritage industries.” (Seal, 2009)

#### 4. Other Explanations

- **Charismatic Authority (Weber & Seal, 2009):** Specific personality characteristics like being charismatic makes an individual stand out among the crowd. Many of the serial killers portray charismatic personality which is appealing to the consumers and hence this becomes a point of attraction. The attraction makes the narrative compelling which goes beyond the offender and transcends after their death too; celebrated criminal in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Having an authority portraying charismatic personality is a ‘revolutionary force’.

“The ‘natural’ leaders in moments of distress – whether psychic, physical, economic, ethical, or political – were neither appointed officeholders or “professionals” in the present-day sense [...] but rather, the bearers of specific gifts of body and mind that were considered ‘supernatural’.” (Weber, 1968)

The charismatic personality was the point for Ted Bundy which acted as one of the strengths for him during his court trials. People were refusing to believe that he could be someone behind violent crimes.



**Figure 7:** Ted Bundy during his Trial in Court

- **Positive Deviance (Wilkins, 1964; Dyer, 1999):** Deviance itself holds a special recognition. Whether the deviance is positive or negative (in terms of accepted social norms) in nature does not matter much when it comes to transgression. In some cases, victims are perceived as innocent beings and hence them getting killed or being exposed to suffering is considered as justifiable. For example, in the series Dexter, the main character (serial killer) kills individuals who have done something wrong like breaking certain rules. Here, the fan-base is on the side of the main character and supports him in his journey of bringing justice to the scene, irrespective of the deviance- creating sympathy.



**Figure 8:** Web-series posters of ‘Dexter’ and ‘You’

- **Wound Culture (Seltzer, 1998; Presdee, 2000):** The wound culture is a junction for ‘private desire’ and ‘public fantasy’. With every passing day, consumers are grasping more and more heightened emotional experiences. Merchandises associated with transgression are being used as a means to relate to the wound in the modern culture. There is a growing fascination for ‘open/ torn bodies’!

“Death is a theatre for living.” (Seltzer, 1998)

“We suffer not only from the living, but the dead.” (Marx, 1990:91)

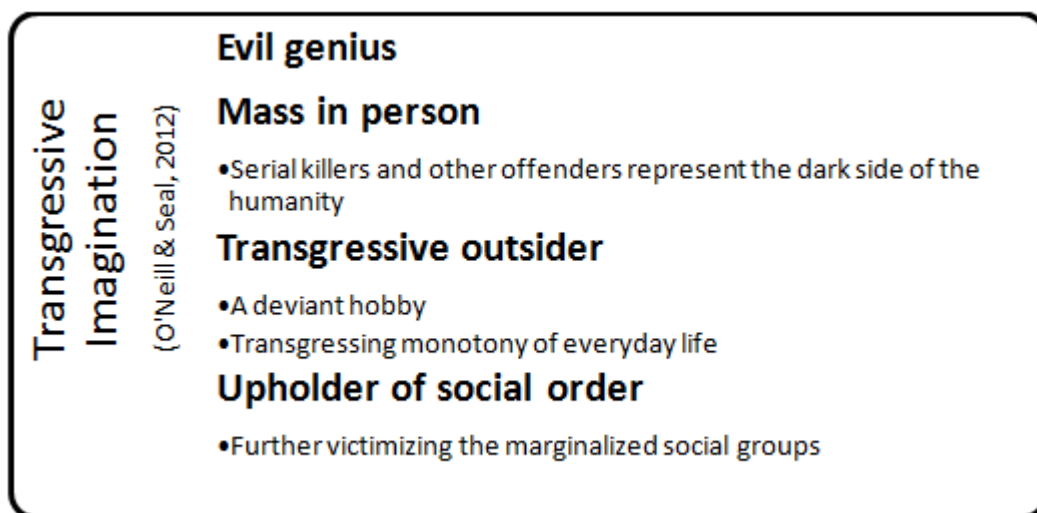
“Enthralment with the criminal dead manifests as the consumption of souvenirs as well as actual body parts in some instances which, for varying ailments, have been believed to have mystical healing powers and of varying superstitious benefits until as late as the 1940s.” (Studart, 1999; Penfold-Mounce, 2010)

- **Werewolf Complex (Duclos, 1998):** The werewolf complex points toward the catch and run chase of the predator and the prey. The chase itself holds a lot of excitement to look at. The catch and kill run depicts the predator as being powerful and attacking the prey depicts dominance and success. This phenomenon can be markedly observed in the modern day crime fiction and movies, for example, in the web-series ‘You’.

## V. IMPLICATIONS

As stated by Young (2010), “crime compels us as well as repels”. There is an oscillation between norms and desires. While the transgression itself is beyond the norm, the consumer capitalism and authenticity makes us to engage in the historical discourse of murderabilia. It brings in the heightened emotions, excitement, psychological association, structural identity, power and dominance, and a scope to move beyond the monotony of everyday modern life.

“...we inevitably create myths about them (killers) – works of fiction that may superficially portray the serial killer as the ultimate alien outsider or enemy of society but which simultaneously reflect back upon society its own perversions.” (Simpson, 2000)



**Figure 9:** Transgressive Imagination(O'Neill & Seal, 2012)

“People construct things out of materials, and in turn are constructed by the things that they have chosen to own. Consumption of murderabilia is reflective of a broader societal will to transgress banality and sameness in the 21st century Western consumer capitalist marketplaces, and not as an embracement or glorification of criminal transgression itself.”(Denham, 2017)

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Opening up research space into the field of murderabilia gives a scope to the scholars from various fields (criminologists, forensic psychologists, legal advisors, clinical psychologists, etc.) to engage in multidisciplinary work and understand ‘transgressive imagination’. The outcome will help to understand and safeguard against potential repercussions. It will also help to initiate a new line of inquiry- a new perspective.

New line of inquiry in this field can encompass the situation of the victims or the family members of the victims. While the consumers can get a way out of their everyday life’s monotony, those who were affected by the crime/ offence in reality will have a hard time to adjust to the situation. It can lead to re-victimization for them at the cost of consumer capitalism.

Though there are laws that prohibit the criminals/ offenders from profiting from their story, it is still out there and is a reminder for the victims and their family about the incident. So, a new perspective to deal with this situation will be advisable; a perspective that respects the suffering of the victims as well as the consumer’s intake. The latter is owed to the aspect that exposure to movies, books, and documentaries can help to spread awareness among the individuals regarding the happenings in the society and to adopt protocols to harness their own safety.

## VII. CONCLUSION

In the modern era, an article’s ability to be reproduced holds a major implication for consumer capitalism. Post the regulations of ‘Son of Sam Law’, there is a decline in original artwork and pieces from violent offenders and a rise in artificial replica of the same. One of the marked essences of the concept of murderabilia is the originality factor having an impact on the collector’s psyche. With respect to this originality, in the modern age, reproducibility option is bringing down the factors of authenticity, uniqueness, authorship, and real presence in time and space of the work (Benjamin, 2013).

“Authenticity is a tricky concept because of the way the term can be manipulated and used to convince people they are getting something profound and substantial when they are just getting merchandise [...] authenticity is the currency at play in the marketplace of cultural difference.” (Root, 1996)

Still, there is an inclination towards murderabilia, why? The answer lies in the observation that it is a gateway for individuals to get away from the banality of everyday life and experience something that is not monotonous. The films, documentaries, web series, books, artwork, etc. are able to supply a context that connects the raw and authentic experience to consumer industry. The aspect that the incident (crime/ offence) happened in reality adds on to the ‘context’ part for the individual. Since the incident is not happening in real time, it provides a scope for the individual to engage in imagination, a transgressive one.

“Effectuating, materialising, realising, producing – it seems to be the ideal destination of everything to pass from the stage of possibility to that of reality in a movement of simultaneous progress and internal necessity. All need, all desires, all potentialities, tend towards this objective sanction.” (Baudrillard, 2005).

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