

Murderabilia: Transgressive Imaginations

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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

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 Arbeit macht frei?

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.

INTRODUCTION

The term 'murderabilia' was coined by Andy Kahan, who was working with Houston Crime Victims Assistance Service (Hylton, 2007). 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).

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 (1978) 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. 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.

TOWARDS TRANSGRESSION

There has been a developing fascination with film violence (Aaron, 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). 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).

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 lifeforce 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).

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.
- *Auratic transgressions* include the collectibles to mark the ‘authenticity’. For example, handwritten letters, original artwork by offenders, address book, online websites, etc.
- *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.

Figure 1: Displaying Transgression- Jack the Ripper Museum, Arbeit Macht Frei (Dark Tourism)



Figure 2: Auratic Transgression- Pogo the Clown by John Wayne Gracy, Embroidery by Wayne Lo, Self-portrait by Henry Lee Lucas



Figure 3: Symbolic Transgression- Ed Kemper Toy, Replica of Birth Certificate of Ted Bundy, T-shirts



THEORIES AND EXPLANATIONS

Idols of Production

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).

Murderabilia is a key way in which violence and death are re-imagined, revived, and played with (Denham, 2017).

Structure, Identity, and Power

Kooistra worked towards transgression through the explanation of three parameters of a 'criminal hero'-structure, identity, and power (1989).

- *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 their outlet of 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

owing to his suffering that consumers can relate to and hence looking out for justice. Such offenders are 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.

A Moral Code

There have been theories and explanations pertaining to murderabilia and transgression in lines with banditry- a moral code.

- Hobsbawm (2001): He proposed the Social Bandits Theory showing that banditry is an entity rising from disenfranchisement and setting of unrest in society and the people residing in it. Banditry is a way of seeking justice for those who have been wronged and 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.
- Buckley: He proposed that banditry is to disrupt the traditional structures of large number of people belonging to working class community.
- Curott & Fink (2012): They focus on the aspect of 'cost-benefit analysis'. The analysis focuses to create and draw 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.
- Seal (2009): He posits the Robin Hood principle where the emphasis is on the point which led to the creation of such person; the point being complex social frictions.

Other Explanations

A. Charismatic Authority (Weber & Seal, 2009)

Figure 4: Ted Bundy during his Trial in Court



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 21st century.

B. Positive Deviance (Wilkins, 1964; Dyer, 1999)

Figure 5: Web-series posters of 'Dexter' and 'You'



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 they 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.

C. 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.

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

“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” (Stuart, 1999; Penfold-Mounce, 2010).

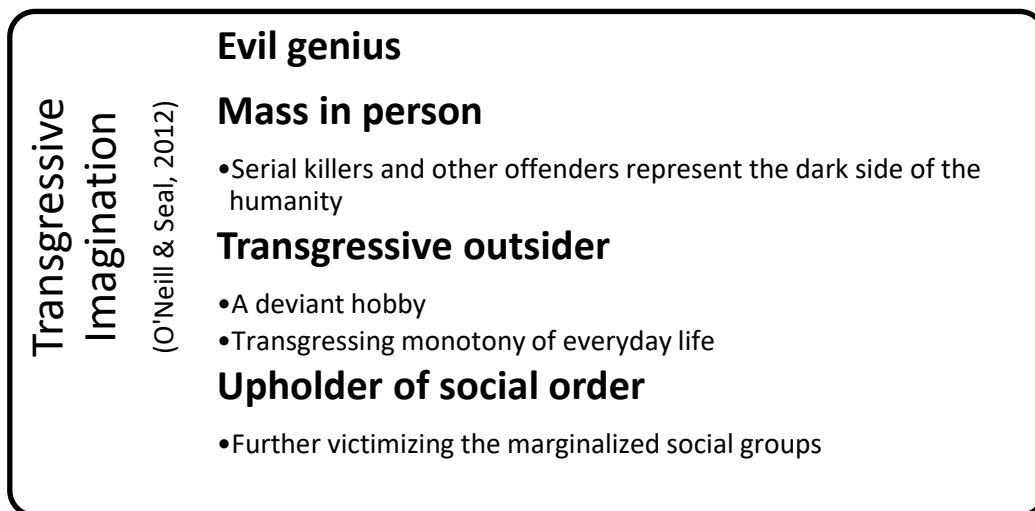
D. Werewolf Complex (Duclos, 1998)

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'.

CONCLUSION

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.

Figure 6: 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)

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