SERIAL KILLING AND THE POSTMODERN SELF

Abstract:

Mark Seltzer has claimed that the serial killer is a 'flashpoint' in contemporary society, signifying a new kind of self. In contrast to the modern self, established through institutionalised routines, serial killer asserts their identity through ecstatic interpenetration. Although Seltzer's description of the serial killer is compelling, Seltzer fails to consider the institutional context in which this new self is possible. This article seeks to address the lacuna in Seltzer's account. Drawing on Jameson's famous account of postmodernism, this article claims that commodity consumption constitutes the critical medium which facilitates the serial killer's ecstatic interpenetrations. In this way, the serial killer represents a self which is consistent with the colonisation of interpersonal relations by multinational capital. The serial killer signifies the appearance of a postmodern self.

Key Words: Serial killing, postmodernity, self, identity, consumption

Introduction

Since the late twentieth century the serial killer has become a potent public symbol in western culture.[1] As Mark Seltzer has emphasised in his influential work, the serial killer is a 'flashpoint in contemporary society' (Seltzer 1998: 2).

> Serial murder and its representations, for example, have by now largely replaced the Western as the most popular genre-fiction of the body and of bodily violence in our culture. (Seltzer 1998:1)

Affirming Seltzer's argument, the serial killer has now become a major motif in novels, biographies, the media, television, film and art.[2] Indeed, many commentators have suggested serial killing may not have simply become more cultural prominent but that as a practice serial killing may have become more common. Eric Hickey, for instance, has argued that there has been a dramatic increase in the number of serial killers since the 1960s and in his now canonical work on the subject, Leyton has similarly proposed that there was an explosion in the 'rate of production of these most modern killers' in the late 1960s (Leyton 1989: 363). In fact, It is possible that the crime statistics on serial killing are false and that, in fact, there has been no actual increase in the number

of active serial killers. As, Jenkins has demonstrated some glaring exaggerations in the figures on serial killing where the same murder is counted more than once in the statistical record (Jenkins 1994: 22-31). Nevertheless, even if there has been no rise in the number of serial killers, the increased recorded incidence of serial killing points to an incontrovertible fact. The serial killer has become a more prominent figure in criminal investigation and public imagination; 'the *idea* of the serial killer' has become more prevalent (Stratton 1994: 14-5, emphasis added). Since the 1960s, as Seltzer suggests, the serial killer has attained a new cultural status and has become established as the focus of public attention and understanding in a way which was not the case in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century.

In the light of the rise of this public symbol – the serial killer - the question which confronts the social sciences is not primarily to explain why serial killers murder. That is the domain of psychology and it is questionable whether that discipline has proffered an accurate account of motivations of certain killers. The social sciences must answer the question of why the figure of the serial killer has become a dominant cultural symbol in western society from the 1960s. Seltzer has plausibly claimed that the serial killer has become a dominant symbol in contemporary culture because it communicates new understandings of the self in a transformed social context; 'the emergence of the kind of individual called the serial killer is bound up, it will be seen, with a basic shift in our understanding of the individuality of the individual' (Seltzer 1998: 2). The serial killer has emerged as a powerful social symbol because it signifies a new account of the self. The serial killer viscerally embodies new understandings about what it is to be a subject in late twentieth century society. Consequently, although serial killers remain very few in number, the extreme activities of these individuals has become a common public reference point denoting a transformation of self-identity.

Seltzer's claim that the serial killer represents a new kind of self in

contemporary society is taken as a starting point here. Seltzer's analysis of the serial killer as a new kind of self is sustained. However, Seltzer's does not consider the sociology of this new self sufficiently. He does not recognise the institutional and social context in which this self has emerged to become meaningful. This article attempts to expand upon Seltzer's work by highlighting precisely this institutional context which Seltzer neglects. The serial killer has become a potent contemporary symbol because it represents a form of selfhood consonant with wider social and institutional developments and in particular, with the rise of multinational capitalism. In this way, the serial killer represents a postmodern self. In postmodern culture, the self represented by the serial killer, although apparently corrosive, constitutes a coherent basis of identity and, indeed, social agency.

The Serial Killer

As many social scientists have noted, the modern self emerged in parallel with the state. As the modern state monopolised violence and colonised lifeworlds, individuals simultaneously developed internal mechanisms of self-control and discipline which repressed those forms of practices which threatened the state and the normative order it enforced (Elias 1982; 1987; Foucault 1995,1990a; Weber 1958; Taylor 1989; Freud 1961; 1949; 2001; Thomas 1971; Theweleit 1987; 1989). Through its internationalisation of norms and routines which produced a stable ego and superego, the modern self was constituted as a unified, centred and rational entity. Sexuality, violence and other primordial drives wererepressed and controlled. Elias traced the origin of this modern self back to the rise of the state at the end of the middle ages in the late fifteenth century. It is not certain that a fully developed modern self can be traced back this far but that the unified, internally disciplined modern self became prominent during the Enlightenment, crystallizing in the nineteenth century. The

problem is that this self is now in crisis and, it is this crisis, according to Seltzer, which has promoted the serial killer as an important cultural symbol.

Drawing on Theweleit's famous study of the Freikorps (Theweleit 1987, 1989), Seltzer notes how the soldier male – as the avatar of the modern self - was able to create an ektoskeleton for himself through institutionalised routine (Seltzer 1998: 51). This carapace protected him from the threat of self-dissolution. For the serial killer, routinised institutionalisation is a critical part of their character formation. It explains the frequent claim that serial killers are extraordinarily normal. Precisely because they have adopted certain routinised practices, they seem typical. However, this routinisation, which constitutes the selfhood of modern individuals like the soldier male, is precisely what threatens the serial killer. By following routinised practices, which are intended to create a centred self-identity through the formation of superego, institutionalisation threatens the very existence of the would-be serial killer. Serial killers have no personal identity precisely because they adhere to shared, institutionalised routines. Consequently, serial killers are constantly threatened by 'the mass in the [their own] person' (Seltzer 1998:281). The mass threatens to consume them, sweeping away their individuality as they become part of the anonymous, routinised crowd. The very processes which constituted the modern (soldier male) self, now threaten the serial killer. Consequently, the serial killer's self is in crisis must be asserted through alternative practices.

Thus, instead of engaging in the routine, insitutionalised activities of a rationalised society, the killer murders. By eliminating others, serial killers eliminate the mass in their own person (Seltzer 1998: 281). They demonstrate their autonomy from routine, their difference from others and, in the moment of violence, realise themselves as autonomous agents. In the act of murder, the serial killer becomes a self. However, the act of murder takes on a very a distinctive and now highly recognisable

form which is critical to the kind of selfhood which the serial killer signifies. Despite the extreme and often apparently deranged activities of serial killers, the category of serial killing itself does not refer to random and diverse violence. Contemporary representations of the serial killer are highly circumscribed, focusing on a limited number of defining practices. It is important to recognise this categorical specificity since it relates directly to the kind of self which the serial killer is imagined to represent. Theoretically, it would be possible for a large number of individuals to be counted as serial killers. Terrorists, assassins, mercy killers, soldiers, bomber pilots, ethnic cleansers and gangsters all kill often unknown victims sequentially. These agents all formally qualify as serial killers on the standard definition of serial killing as the sequential murder of (mostly) strangers. Yet, they are not understood as such in contemporary culture. On the contrary, only a limited repertoire of actions are categorised as serial killing in public consciousness; repeated killing alone is not enough. Confirming the point, it notable that certain individuals who are actually defined as serial killers do not actually conform to the ideal type and, although they inspire revulsion, they are unsatisfactory as sublime symbols of contemporary agency. The obvious example here is Harold Shipman, a doctor working in Greater Manchester, who is believed to have killed over 200 of his mainly elderly patients between the 1970s and his arrest in 1998. Although Shipman is undoubtedly Britain's most prolific convicted serial murderer, he lacks certain important characteristics which have become emblematic of serial killing. By amending the wills of some of his victims, he gained some extrinsic material reward from his activities. More particularly, although Shipman seems to have gained some gratification from the power of life and death which he exercised over his victims, he engaged in no violence and there was never any sexual dimension to his activities. Shipman never engaged in the ecstatic penetration which has become a critical motif for serial killers. In this way, Shipman falls short of the

serial killing ideal in stark contrast to other, far less numerically successful killers such as Peter Sutcliffe (the Yorkshire Ripper) or Denis Nilssen. In public consciousness, serial killing does not simply involve sequential murder but, paradigmatically, the violent, sexual mutilation of the victim's body. Ecstatic interpenetration is the defining feature of serial killing.

It is interesting that the criminal investigation services have implicitly categorised serial killing in the same way. During his investigations, Robert Ressler, the head of the FBI's 'Behavioural Science Unit' in the 1970s and 1980s, interviewed many of the most prominent American serial killers. In his discussions, Ressler explicitly prioritised the 'sexual content' as the sole 'factual basis' of serial killing (Ressler and Schachtman 1992: 81), rejecting all the other interpretations which his informant provided. Thus, David Berkowitz's claims that he was ordered to murder by a dog (Ressler and Schachtman 1992: 81), Ted Bundy's discussion of how he had entrapped his victims (Ressler and Shachtman 1992: 77-9), Mullin's environmental concerns (Ressler and Schachtman 1992: 160) and Richard Speck's instrumental rationale for killing eight nurses so that they would not testify against him (Ressler and Shachtman 1992: 76) were all dismissed. For Ressler, serial killing was defined solely as ecstatic interpenetration. The canon of serial killing is circumscribed. It does not include all multiple killers but actually prioritises a very specific type of violence; the murder, mutilation and sexual defilement of strangers. The serial killer ideally merges with others in an ecstatic moment of corporal interpenetration.[3]

Through the analysis of diverse examples, Seltzers illustrates precisely this motif of ecstatic mutilation and interpenetration as fundamental to the act of serial killing. Violent, corporal interpenetration is the defining practice of serial killers. It is the founding act of their selfhood. Thus, Seltzer cites Edward Kemper's description of killing:

> More or less making a doll out of a human being…and carrying out my fantasies with a doll, a living human doll…Whipping off heads, their body sitting there. That'd get me off… (Seltzer 1998: 141)

Significantly, Kemper penetrated his victims' bodies sexually after he had de-capitated them. Other accounts of serial killing affirm Seltzer's analyse. For instance, Henry Lee Lucas, the notorious American murderer, stated: 'In most of my cases, I think you'll find that I had sex with them after death, uh the other way I'm not satisfied' (Egger 1992: 152). In each case, the act of violence is intimately connected to a moment of sexual interpenetration. Perhaps, the most explicit example of this practice is the case of Duane Samples. Samples confessed that his assault on his partner and her friend were inspired by a desire to kill and be killed in the sexual act so that 'semen, blood and other bodily fluids would all intermingle in orgasm and death' (Ressler and Shachtman 1992: 214-5).

In his work Seltzer mobilises both autobiographical (putatively factual) accounts of serial killing and fictional representations. His point, of course, is that the two are indivisible; 'the serial killer internalizes popular and journalistic and expert (criminological and psychological) definitions of this kind of person' (Seltzer 1998: 107). There is an accepted cultural conception of serial killing which informs both killers' and the public's understandings alike. It is noticeable that ecstatic interpenetration is similarly identifiable in many of the most important contemporary representations of the serial killer. Indeed, precisely because they are imaginary, these fictional accounts of serial killing are able to distil the practice of serial killing into its essential act. The self-constituting act of interpenetration is crystallised. Robert Harris' novel, *The Silence of the Lambs*, has attained a position of prominence in this context (Fuss 1993; Stratton 1994). This work usefully condenses public understandings of serial killing into a single signifier: Hannibal Lecter, the serial killing psychoanalyst who constitutes the central character in this novel. Significantly, Lecter's escape from

incarceration (when he kills his two guards) constitutes the critical symbolic moment in the text (Fuss 1993: 195). In that moment, the defining characteristic of the contemporary serial killer become manifest as Harris' description of the scene in his cell after Lecter's escape reveals.

> Boyle [one of Lecter's guards], partly eviscerated, his face hacked to pieces, seemed to have exploded blood in the cell, the walls and the stripped cot covered with gouts and splashes. (Harris, 1997: 231)

The 'stripped cot' in this sentence refers to Lecter's bed in the special holding cell from which Lecter has removed the sheets to cover and move one of the guard's body. The stripped cot assists Lecter's escape practically. However, the cot also signifies Lecter's liberation symbolically. Although 'cot' refers at one level the collapsible bed on which Lecter slept, Harris use of the word is also allegorical. The word 'cot' has connotations of infancy and childhood when the deepest levels of identity are established. Since the 'cot' was the only minimally private space which Lecter was afforded during his incarceration, it stands as an objective correlative of his self-identity. Significantly, now laid bare, the cot is covered in 'gouts and splashes'; it is intermingled with the viscera and blood of Lecter's victims. Once liberated from institutional shackles, Lecter's identity is realised in the violent interpenetration of bodies. Affirming the point, while Lecter eviscerates the first guard, he skins the face from the other, which he then places over his own, so that he is mistaken for the second, injured guard and transported from his incarceration by an ambulance. To liberate himself, Lecter has to immerse himself symbolically and physically in the corpses of his guards. Lecter's true identity is realised in these moments of corporal interpenetration. Lecter's self is not the product of a unifying superego and ego whereby the external controls of the state are internalised. On the contrary, Lecter struggles against the institutionalisation which threatens him with anonymity, with a mass in his own person. His self is formed through ecstatic moments of violence in which he penetrates the bodies of others. Only then is he able to assert his autonomous selfhood, constantly denied and repressed by the disciplinary institutions of the state. It is precisely in this moments of immersion, which corrode the modern self, that he is constituted.[4]

A similar representation of the self can be detected in Bret Easton Ellis's notorious novel, *American Psycho*. *American Psycho* is intended as a critical commentary on multinational consumer capitalism through the autobiography of a

'yuppie' serial killer, Patrick Bateman. In the event, it is uncertain whether Easton Ellis's satire of the commodified self is successful since the texts descends into misogynist and pornographic fantasies, but the extreme descriptions of sexual violence which punctuate the novel do highlight a distinctive self. This self is re-iterated in a series of unpleasant montages. For instance:

> Elizabeth, naked, running from the bedroom, blood already on her, is moving with difficulty and she screams out something garbled. My orgasm has been prolonged and its release was intense and my knees are weak... She tries to run forward but I've cut her jugular and it's spraying everywhere, blinding both of us momentarily. (Easton Ellis, 1991:289-90)

Elisabeth and Bateman lose control of their own bodies during the act of violent and ultimately murderous intercourse; both go lame. Finally, Elizabeth's blood incapacities them both simultaneously; they are both blinded by it. Bateman's explosion of desire leads to an ecstatic co-mingling of bodies. He immerses himself in the bodies and fluids of those whom he murders at which point he loses control of himself. He is no longer a centred person but has submitted himself to his drives which flood out to mix with others. Paradoxically, however, only in these moments of intense bodily interpenetration and personal dissolution, is he able to express his self-identity properly. It is notable that away from these moments of ecstasy, Easton Ellis stresses the stultification of Bateman's shallow existence; in normal life, the mass threatens Bateman with boredom and anonymity.

As Seltzer recognises, the serial killing self is in stark contrast to the modern self centred through institutional routine. With the serial killer, the mass in the self is ironically extirpated only by interpenetration when the individual transcends institutional controls. The serial killer, unlike the modern self, can no longer be sustained by modern institutions and the super-ego. Unlike the soldier males, the serial killer's self cannot be sustained by repressing their internal drives. On the contrary, institutional identification, psychic repression threaten the very individuality of the

killer. The serial killer must perform seemingly gratuitous acts of violence by which they are able to demonstrate their individuality. Their acts of violence take an interesting form. The killer must penetrate the other, mingling with the blood and body parts of the other. Killers evacuate their unmediated drives as their body parts and fluids coagulate with others in a moment of ecstasy. Paradoxically, in this moment of ecstatic interpenetration when the boundaries of between the self and the other are blurred, when drives flood out, serial killers assert their autonomy. They become selves precisely insofar as they submit themselves to the drives which were dangerous for the modern self. The unity of the self is no longer threatened by the unmediated drives. On the contrary, in the release of the primordial drives which lead to interpenetration, this self momentarily constitutes itself.

The Serial Killer and Consumption

Seltzer now provides the standard framework for the analysis of the serial killer. However, there are ellipses in Seltzer's work. Above all, although Seltzer emphasises that the serial killer is a flashpoint in contemporary society, Seltzer never seriously considers the historical context in which this self is possible. Although he briefly recognises the new salience of informational technology, as opposed to modern, machine technology, he fails to appreciate the social and institutional context which has facilitated its development (Seltzer 1998: 17). Consequently, although Seltzer provides a convincing account of the inter-penetrating self, he does not recognise the institutional context in which such a self becomes so meaningful. Through his analysis of the serial killer, he records the transformation of the self, but he is unable to explain why a new account of the self has appeared in the last four decades. He is, therefore, ultimately unable to explain why the serial killer, in particular, has emerged as an entrancing public symbol in contemporary culture. Other social scientists have attempted to make

this connection.

Jon Stratton, for instance, has connected the rise of the serial killer with wider social conditions and particularly with the transition from modernity to postmodernity (Stratton 1996: 77). Stratton argues that postmodern society is increasingly Hobbesian; bourgeois norms and institutions (such as the state and the family) have been subverted in a struggle of all against all (Stratton 1994: 22; 1996: 91). The killer is a spectacular, mediatized representation of an increasingly amoral and anomic society. Serial killers fascinates because they accurately signify the collapse of sociality which humans experience around them. Although it is understandable why Stratton believes that society is now Hobbesian, he overstates the point. A truly normless society would be totally anarchic. It is more sustainable to argue, therefore, that postmodern society is not normless but that it constitutes a new moral and institutional order. If this is the case and postmodernity cannot merely be described as Hobbesian, Stratton's argument itself requires elaboration. It is necessary to describe the institutional and normative basis of postmodern culture more concretely. In this connection, Frederic Jameson's work on postmodernism is particularly useful for it provides a rich insight into both the institutional and normative order of postmodernity. Jameson's discussions of postmodernism can, consequently, be used to illustrate the historic context in which the serial killer, as an interpenetrating self, could attain a position of cultural dominance.

Following, Mandel, Jameson has argued that capitalism has passed through three distinct political economic eras. The first, running from the end of the eighteenth century until the 1930s has been described as free market capitalism. This was followed by monopoly capitalism (Fordism) which dominated from the 1930s until the 1970s. The current period is characterised by the dominance of multinational capitalism. According to Jameson, each period involves not merely a particular kind of economic base but also a cultural superstructure. A new postmodern culture has developed which

is compatible with emergent economic imperatives.

> It is my sense that both levels in question, infrastructure and superstructure – economic system and cultural 'structure of feeling' – crystallized in the crises of 1973 which now that the dust clouds have rolled away, disclose the existence, already in place of a strange new landscape. (Jameson 1991: xx-xxi)

Significantly, in this strange new landscape, a new kind of self has emerged. Jameson elucidates this self by comparing Van Gogh's 'peasant shoes' with Andy Warhol's postmodern *Diamond Dust Shoes*. For Jameson, Van Gogh's work assumes a subject who has interpretive depth with whom the painting communicates. It points to an alienated Freudian self, living in a bleak industrialised world, for whom the shoes represent an alternative and more meaningful existence. The worn shoes represent the expression of individuality against the standardizing pressures of mass manufacture and state bureaucracy. The problem for Van Gogh is that the superego threatens to anonymise the individual and Van Gogh attempts to find a space in which a personalised ego can be rediscovered. The peasant shoes represent an idealised social existence in which the ego is able to express its distinctive personality in material forms. Warhol's shoes presume a quite different subject. It effaces the 'authentic' modern ego in favour of flattened and depthless self. Alienation, the central existential problem facing the modern subject, is no longer the issue because the new self has no unified, private selfhood from which to be alienated. This subject is the product of 'sheer commodification' (Jameson 1991: x). This self is realised as unmediated drives are momentarily externalised and fulfilled in the act of consumption. Drives are not mediated by the ego or the superego to maintain a centred unity. The self is established temporarily in effervescent fusions with commodities, which become the vehicle of externalisation. Jameson describes the emergence of this flattened commodified self as the 'waning effect'; the self has thinned, expressing itself through immediate acts of consumption. As the self is flattened through acts of consumption, new emotions are stimulated.

> Liberation from anxiety…a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well… since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling. Feelings are now free-floating and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria. (Jameson 1991: 15-16)

The commodification of the self liberates the modern ego from existential angst, allowing the now flattened subject to experience the euphoria of consumption. This postmodern self does not sustain itself by incorporating itself into state institution through regular disciplinary exercises, which solidify as a superego, but, rather, by submerging itself repeatedly into the act of consumption. The emergence of multinational capitalism (and the decline of the state) denotes a new institutional complex in which the act of consumption and the feeling of euphoria occur. This is the social context which provides the basis for a new kind of selfhood which contrasts markedly with the modern self. This new social order facilitates the development of a new kind of self; no longer the citizen, but the consumer.

Although he does not discuss violence, Jameson's postmodern self is closely connected with the self which the serial killer represents. Like the serial killer, Jameson's postmodern self does not repress drives but cathects them externally and without mediation. In the act of consumption, the postmodern self fuses with the commodity to induce a sense of euphoria. For Jameson, commodity consumption (rather than violence) is the means of ecstatic interpenetration. Significantly, however, in public understandings, the ecstatic penetrations of serial killers are themselves closely linked to commodity consumption. Thus, throughout *American Psycho*, acts of bodily interpenetration are also moments of commodity consumption. Bateman describes how he puts a 'camel-hair coat from Ralph Lauren over her [a victim's] head' and emphasises the fact that he is wearing a Giorgio Armani suit during one murder (Easton Ellis 1991: 245, 247). Bateman employs commodities as accessories to his violence. Commodities are not simply the passive background in these moments of interpenetration, however. They become the very medium of interpenetration. For,

instance, in describing the eventual murder of Elizabeth, Bateman notes that the blood which moments before had sprayed into his eyes is now 'splattering against the tempered glass and the laminated oak panels in the kitchen' (Easton Ellis 1991: 289-90). The image of these the shiny, reflective surfaces resonates with Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* to communicate a new concept of identity. In the act of violent interpenetration, the commodities in Bateman's apartment, symbols of Batesman's own shallow, flattened identity, are fused with this victim's fluids. These glassy screens are now splashed with blood as his eyes were moments before. In the moment of violence, killer, victim and commodities all merge into one orgasmic coupling. In Ellis' novel, the serial killer expresses his self-identity as he fuses ecstatically with commodities and with others. When this fusion is total, a new self is realised. It is interesting that although Robert Harris' character, Hannibal Lecter, is incarcerated throughout most of *The Silence of the Lambs* and is specifically denied access to the consumer market, the same connection between violence and consumption is drawn in that work. In a line, the slightly amended film version of which has now become famous, Lecter describes his treatment of one of his victims, a census-taker; 'I ate his liver with some fava beans and a big Amarone [an expensive red wine]' (Harris 1997: 22-3).[4] Lecter's acts of violence and his acts of consumption are unitary. Lecter consumes his victims as he consumes other commodities; the act of corporal interpenetration is an act of commodity consumption. As with Ellis' character, Bateman, commodity consumption becomes the unmediated means of articulating his self-identity. Commodification corrodes the boundaries between individuals producing a euphoric moment of inter-coupling. It is notable that Lecter primarily murders the institutional representatives of the state - prison nurses, policemen and census-takers - and these liberating moments of violence are facilitated by the use of commodities provided multinational capital. Lecter and Bateman symbolise the emergence of a self increasingly freed from the institutional

constraints of the state and engaged in new practices facilitated by the networks of multinational capital. In this new institutional context, a rational and disciplined self, constituted through internalised mechanisms of self-control, is replaced by an individual whose identity emerges in acts of consumption. Through the medium of commodities, the killer interpenetrates with others to the point of ecstasy when a fusion takes place between individuals and the commodity.

This connection between interpenetration and commodity consumption is apparent in some of the accounts provided by actual serial killers. Sometimes, killers themselves recognise the rolewhich commodities play in their identity formation. Holmes' description of the activities of Douglas Clark is particularly relevant in this connection.

> On one occasion, according to an interview with Doug Clark and his wife, Kelly, in the secured visiting room on death row in San Quentin, Doug said that he went to Hollywood and Vine searching for a victim. He picked up one young woman and drove her to the foothills outside of Los Angeles. Doug stated that he got into the back seat with the victim and paid her to perform oral sex upon him. The young woman was then shot in the head as she performed fellatio on him. He said that the death spasms, the warm blood, and the gurgling made for a very sexual scene, and he experienced a powerful orgasm. (Holmes and Holmes 1998: 141)

Clark's description is deliberately offensive. It is also manifestly false. If Clark had, in fact, shot his victim as she fellated him, he would have been in serious danger of wounding himself or being injured by the victim herself as she died; he was in a physically compromising position. As Foucault noted, public executions in early modern period provided a platform in which the condemned could inveigh against the state, the monarch and the laws (Foucault 1995: 67). Although subversive, the calumnies of the condemned cannot be taken as accurate commentaries on the political system, however. Similarly, Clark's account is the last cry of a condemned man whose final act is to outrage the society that condemns him. Clark's description is not then a truthful representation of his activities but a fantasy which signifies how he understands

- and how he would like the public to understand - his actions. Nevertheless, although a fantasy, the account stands as an objective contribution to the public representations of serial killing. Significantly, it connects violent interpenetration with commodity consumption. Clark claims that he paid this woman to fellate him. She had become a commodity for him and, in the act of murder, Clark interpenetrated with this commodified individual in a moment of ecstatic interpenetration. Clark, woman and commodity were all momentarily inter-fused in a 'very sexual scene'.

Interestingly, Clark's fantasy closely corresponds with J.G.Ballard's novel, *Crash* , in which Vaughan, the novel's 'hero', fantasies about head-on collision with Elizabeth Taylor.

> In his vision of a car-crash with the actress, Vaughan was obsessed by many wounds and impacts – by the dying chromium and collapsing bulkheads of their two cars meeting head-on in complex collisions endlessly repeated in slow-motion films, by the identical wounds inflicted on their bodies. (Ballard 1995: 8)

The climax of Vaughan's existence comes at the very moment when his body coalesces with other human and automobile body-parts. As Ballard's writing illustrates, the body itself has becomes a commodity of pleasure, absolutely equivalent to technology; each element of the car, windscreen, handbrake and engine fluid is paired with parts of the human body, the face, the thigh and semen. In *Crash*, the car becomes a commodified vehicle of ecstatic consumption. Bodies fuse with this commodity to experience an ecstatic moment of inter-penetration when identity is realised. Similarly, in Clark's fantasy, he specifically situates the murder in the back-seat of his car. The car becomes a commodified vehicle for his ecstatic activities. There, he is able to evacuate his unmediated desires in a commodified coupling. The commodified products of multinational capitalism become the medium of social intercourse in which the self is formed. It is notable that Clark claims to have picked up his victim from Hollywood. Like Vaughan in Ballard's novel, Clark implies that his activities transcend normality to

become sublime and mythic. His commodified interpenetrations are worthy cinematic representation and public fascination.

The self which the serial killer represents emerges in a distinctive institutional complex. The state is no longer the dominant institution in moulding self-identity through the creation of a superego. In the serial killer, drives are not mediated by institutionalised ego and superego; a quite different personality complex emerges. Multinational capitalism becomes the critical institutional context. The serial killer experiences euphoric interpenetration through the medium of commodity consumption. The consumption of commodities, the product of globalised multinational capital, becomes the vehicle by which these drives are cathected. On this account of the self, social relations between individuals once legislated by the state are now colonised by transnational capital. These relations are conducted through the mediation of commodities which allows partners to interact ecstatically with one another, promoting new forms of intimacy.[6] The serial killer has become a dominant symbol since the 1960s because the act of serial murder, specifically involving bodily interpenetration, stands as a sublime signifier of idealised and commodified social intercourse. The serial killer symbolises the sublime possibilities of agency in an era of multinational capital. Here social interaction is not stiffly constrained by the institutionalised governmentality which produces limited and controlled interactions between egos, whose drives remain repressed. In this social order, through the medium of informational commodities, humans expose themselves to each other in ecstatic moments of intense intercourse. The rise of the serial killer denotes a novel notion of the self and a new basis of social interaction between selves.

Conclusion

For Mark Seltzer, the serial killer represents a 'basic shift in our understanding of the

individuality of the individual' and he does much to illustrate this postmodern self which the serial killer signifies through the analysis of a rich and diverse archive. The postmodern self is constituted by its intense interpenetrations with others. However, Seltzer neglects the institutional complex in which this self appears. He recognises only inadequately why this kind of self has become meaningful in contemporary society. By drawing on Jameson, it is possible to address the gaps in Seltzer's work and, by situating the serial killer in a broader social context, to recognise why this distinctive symbol has emerged in the late twentieth century. Just as the modern self cohered with the rise of state bureaucracy, the serial killer is consonant with the emergent institutional reality of multinational capitalism. The serial killer signifies ecstatic, commodified interpenetration through which the self in postmodern society is constituted. The serial killer is analogous with Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*. Like the sleek and shiny shoes ranked in that picture, the serial killers' represents a flattened self constituted in repeated acts of euphoric and commodified consumption. The serial killer has become a compelling symbol for this new kind of society where individuals are not defined by their rationality and discipline, by an institutionalised superego, but through intense interactions by means of the global consumer market.

Notes

1 Serial killers are usually defined as murderers who repeatedly kill strangers for no ostensible ulterior motive. Eric Hickey defines a serial killer as an offender 'who through premeditation killed three or more individuals over a period of days, weeks, months or years' (Hickey 1999:56). See below for a longer discussion of the definition of serial killers.

2 E.g. Feldman, 1997; Schecter, 1998a, 1998b; Burn, 1998; Dunning 1998; Dahmer, 1995; Davis, 1992; Harris, 1993; Masters, 1993; Marriner, 1992; 1995; Wilson, Colin and Seaman, D, 1998; media reports include Bennett 1993; films include *Seven*, *Kalifornia*, *Natural Born Killers*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *Red Dragon*, *Hannibal*, *America Psycho*, *Monster*, *Henry Portrait of a Serial Killer*, *Man bites Dog*.

3 There is a gender dimension to the serial killer category. As Cameron and Frazer have emphasised (1987), up until the 1990s, serial killers were male. Female serial killers were understood quite differently; their interpenetrations were regarded as abominations. However, in the last decade, there has been a notable shift in the understanding of female serial killers and, although still sometimes, excluded from the category, they are beginning to be similarly understood as engaged in a form of ecstatic interpenetration.

4Although Hannibal Lecter does not engage in sexual interpenetration, Harris emphasises the extreme rational pleasure which his violence affords him (Harris, 1997: 191, 11, 229).

5 In the film, Lecter drinks Chianti rather than Amarone.

6 Richard Sennett's work (1977) describes a similar transformation ofthe self and social interaction in contemporaryculture from an admittedly different perspective.

References

Ballard, J.G. (1995) *Crash*. London: Verso.

Bennett, C. (1993) 'Journey into Iniquity', *The Guardian, tabloid*, 26 January: 2-3.

Burn. G. (1998) *Happy Like Murderers*. London: Faber and Faber.

Cameron, D and Frazer, E. (1987) *The Lust to Kill: a feminist investigation of sexual murder*. Cambridge: Polity.

Davis, D. (1992) *The Milwaukee Murders: Nightmare in Apartment 213, the true story of the 'real-life Hannibal Lecter'*. London: Virgin.

Dahmer, L. (1995) *A Father's Story*. London: Warner.

Dunning, J. (1998) *Carnal Crimes*. London: Arrow.

Easton Ellis, B. (1991) *American Psycho*. London: Picador.

Egger, S. (1999) 'Serial Murder: A Synthesis of Literature and Research' in Steven Egger (ed.) *Serial Murder: the elusive phenomenon*. New York: Praeger.

Elias, N. (1987b) *The Civilising Process. Vol. 1: the history of manners*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Elias, N (1982) *The Civilising Process. Vol 2 State Formation and Civilisation*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Feldman, P. (1997) *Jack the Ripper*. London: Virgin.

Foucault, M. (1990a) *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1*, trans. R Hurley, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Foucault, M. (1995) *Discipline and Punish*, trans. A Sheridan, New York: Vintage.

Freud, S. 1961. *Civilisation and its Discontents*. New York: Norton.

Freud, S. 1949. *The Ego and the Id*. London: Hogarth.

Freud, S. 2001. *Totem and Taboo*. London: Routledge.

Fuss, D. (1993) 'Monsters of Perversion: Jeffrey Dahmer and the Silence of the Lambs' in Garber , M, Matlock, J and Walkowitz, R (eds.) *Media Spectacles*. London: Routledge.

Jameson. F. (1991) *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London:

Verso.

Jenkins, P. (1994) *Using Murder: the social construction of serial homicide.* (New York: Aldine de Guyter.

Harris, T. (1993) *The Red Dragon*. London: Arrow.

Harris, T. (1997) *The Silence of the Lambs*. London: Mandarin.

Harris, T. (1999) *Hannibal*. London: Heinemann.

Holmes, R and Holmes, S. (1998) *Serial Murder*. London: Sage.

Leyton, E. (1989) *Hunting Humans: the rise of the multiple murderer.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

MacIntyre, A. (1981) *After Virtue*. London: Duckworth.

Marriner, B. (1992) *Cannibalism: the last taboo*. London: Arrow.

Masters, B. (1995) *Killing for Company*. London: Cape

Masters, B. (1993) *The Milwaukee Cannibal*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Ressler, R and Shachtman, T. (1992) *Whoever Fights Monsters*. London: Simon and Schuster.

Schecter, H. (1998) *Depraved: the shocking true story of America's first serial killer*. London: Pocket Books.

Schecter, H. (1998) *Deviant: the shocking true story of Ed Gein, the Original Psycho.* London: Pocket Books.

Seltzer, M. (1998) *Serial Killers: death and life in America's Wound Culture*. London: Routledge.

Sennett, R. 1977. *The Fall of Public Man*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stratton, J. (1996) 'Serial Killing and the Transformation of the Social', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 13(1): 77-98.

Stratton, J. (1994) '(S)Talking in the City: Serial Killing and Modern Life', *Southern Review* 27 (March): 6-27.

Taylor, C. (1989) *The Sources of the Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Theweleit, K. (1987) *Male Fantasies, Vol. 1: Floods, Bodies, History.* Cambridge: Polity.

Theweleit, K. 1989. *Male Fantasies*, *Vol 2.: Psychanalyzing the White Terror.* Cambridge: Polity.

Thomas, K. (1971) *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholas.

Wilson, Colin and Seaman, D. (1998) *Encyclopedia of Modern Murder*. London: Pan.