

‘THE GREAT GOOD PLACE’ NO MORE?
INTEGRATING AND DISMANTLING OPPOSITIONAL DISCOURSE
IN SOME RECENT EXAMPLES OF SERIAL KILLER FICTION

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Serial killer narratives delight in portraying a gothic social landscape of pervasive and endemic crime, violence and evil in a postmodern context of apathy, indifference and institutional incompetence. In this paper I analyse the extent of the critique of contemporary society in this popular genre. Using some recent examples of serial killer narratives – both novels and films – as case studies, I argue that, even though they accommodate a discourse that jeopardises the comfortable imagining in detective fictions of an innocent society threatened by occasional crime, serial killer narratives ultimately endorse the status quo and the state apparatuses that regulate it and guarantee its preservation.

Key words: popular narratives, genre narratives, detective fiction, gothic, serial killer narratives, discourse

The progress of detective fiction in general is one that goes from order disrupted to order re-established; from the smell of corruption pervading all to the identification and removal of the party that caused this corruption. Progressively, the comforting imagining in detective narratives of an innocent society – the Great Good Place as W.H. Auden called it in his seminal essay ‘The Guilty Vicarage’ (1980:19) – threatened by a single criminal individual who is no longer in a state of moral grace has given way to apocalyptic depictions of wastelandish cityscapes rife with violence and corruption, morally irredeemable modern worlds “slouching toward the much-needed clarity of Armageddon” (Simpson 2000: 200). Situated in these metaphoric hells, the “idler” – using Peter Messent’s terminology – has become the *flaneur* (1997:5): the almost super-human amateur detective whose unempathetic intervention guaranteed community health has developed into a doomed searcher, a fated crusader whose involvement in corruption either hardens his soul to the point of nihilistic detachment or ultimately plunges him in a pool of despair from which there is no escape.

These postmodern reconfigurations, however, have done little to dismantle the conservative ideological trappings that have characterised the genre ever since its origins in the narratives of Edgar Allan Poe featuring Auguste Dupin, or Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes short stories and novellas. Detectives, both amateur and professional, still strive to preserve the maintenance of the status quo. No matter how high the price they pay in emotional investment, it is still the function of detectives to restore a sense

of coherence to a community ruptured by crime and, through their apt performance, to sanction the necessity of the law-enforcement institutions that protect the stability of the system. Increasingly responsive to an audience or readership assailed by paranoid fears of destabilisation by a threatening, alien Other in a society characterised by global fundamentalism, detective narratives disclose the endemic problems in the social fabric while, simultaneously, positioning the law-enforcement agents as the last line of defence, whose methods, even when expedient and ruthless, serve to maintain a semblance of harmony and peace after the forces of chaos have been destroyed. As Peter Messent phrases the idea:

There has traditionally been an ambiguity at the heart of the private-eye form that renders it (in the majority of cases) inevitably conservative, in the genre's endorsement of the status quo whatever the failures in the fabric of ... economic and political life it reveals. . . . [Detective narratives] both endorse the status quo and, in addition, consign crime to the realm of the morally monstrous. . . . [S]uch a tactic may be symptomatic of a deep-rooted need for social reassurance on the part of the contemporary audience for which such texts are written. (1997: 3)

The serial killer subgenre is no exception. This relatively recent variation came into being in the 1970s with the coinage, and subsequent popularisation, of the term *serial murder* by Robert K. Ressler, an FBI Behavioural Unit agent working in the investigation of what was previously known as *stranger murders*. The media notoriety of multiples such as Ed Gein, John Wayne Gacy, Ted Bundy, Kenneth Bianchi and Angelo Buono, Dennis Nilsen, Peter Southcliffe, Andrei Chikatilo or Jeffrey Dahmer turned the figure of the serial killer into “one of the superstars of our wound culture” (Seltzer 1998: 2), and the lives and atrocities committed by serial killers inspired the creation of fictional villainous murderers such as Thomas Harris' Hannibal Lecter and Jame Gumb – both based on Ed Gein – or Poppy Z. Brite's Andrew Compton and Jay Byrne in *Exquisite Corpse* (1998) – based on Dennis Nilsen and Jeffrey Dahmer respectively. Simultaneously, a horde of fictional profilers and other law-enforcement agents and professionals such as Patricia Cornwell's Kay Scarpetta, James Patterson's Alex Cross, Jeffery Deaver's Lincoln Rhyme, Val McDermid's Tony Hill, Kathy Reichs' Temperance Brennan, Jonathan Kellerman's Alex Delaware, or Samantha Waters in the television series *Profiler*, to mention just a few, have been engaged in various narratives to stop the trail of murder and mayhem left by serials. The serial killer subgenre – which, as Seltzer explains, has “by now largely replaced the Western as the most popular genre-fiction of the body and bodily violence in our culture” (1998: 1) – focuses on the investigation of the (often ritual) murders committed by serial killers, where the role of the detective figure is to literally read the bodies of the victims and the scenes of crime in order to find clues that can lead to the apprehension of the criminal.

Profiling as a method is often questioned in these narratives. Inspector John Rebus, for instance, has to face the reprimand of his opposite number in Scotland Yard, George Flight, when he suggests profiling may help advance the ongoing serial killer investigation in Ian Rankin's *Tooth & Nail*: “Don't think there's anything in all this psychology stuff. It's too much like guesswork and not enough like science. I like something tangible” (2000: 77). Clinical psychologist Tony Hill's intervention in Val

McDermid's *The Mermaids Singing*, to mention another example, is dismissed by Detective Superintendent Tom Cross in the following terms:

You can remove yourself from my crime scene right now. The last thing we need is bleeding-heart liberals telling us we are looking for some poor sod who wasn't allowed to have a teddy bear when he were a lad. It's not mumbo jumbo that catches villains, it's police work. (1999: 36-37)

This critique, when it occurs, turns out to be anecdotal, a narrative device that keeps the story going and helps maintain the hard-boiled notion of the detective figure as the lonesome hero fighting corruption single-handedly in the face of institutional incompetence. Profiling is ultimately enthroned as an effective tool to stop the crimes committed by serial killers, and law-enforcement agents – armed with science, technology and/or the security of being morally right – single out and capture the subversive agent and re-establish a sense of order. Without their intervention, these narratives imply, society would be submerged in chaos and the existence of law-enforcement agents, quite simply, turns out to be essential. This idea is epitomised in the following quotation from Kathy Reichs' *Déjà Dead*:

Dr Brennan, you are right. No one should die in anonymity. Thanks to you, these women did not. Thanks to you, Leo Fortier's killing days are over. We are the last line of defence against them: the pimps, the rapists, the cold-blooded killers. I would be honoured to work with you again. (1999: 509)

This is not to imply that serial killer narratives cannot and do not accommodate an oppositional discourse that cuts through the conservative closure that characterises the genre. In fact, as Philip L. Simpson argues, "very real possibilities of subversion and reform of established order do coexist, side by side, with the counter-subversive voice of . . . serial killer fiction" (2000: 19). The integration of subversive voices in the interstices of the predominantly conservative generic edifice is in fact propitiated by the genre itself. Positioned as Other, marginal or liminal, the fictional detective hero has traditionally been "antipathetic to state bureaucracy and authoritarianism" (Munt 1994: 198). As Sandra Tomc explains, detectives, by definition, "opt for an all-out rejection of structures of oppression" (1995: 50). The marginality of the detective is systematically established in recent examples of serial killer fiction. Sex, sexuality, race, profession, professional approach, academic stature, authority, familial disruption, personal trauma, or a combination of those are used to distance the detective figure from sanctioned state apparatuses and patriarchal institutions. Thus, and to mention just a few, the profession of Val McDermid's Tony Hill (he is a clinical psychologist whose expertise the police dismiss as guesswork) and his sexuality (he has an addictive relationship with a telephonic transsexual whore) position him as Other, not 'one of the gang'; James Patterson's Alex Cross, Patricia Cornwell's Kay Scarpetta, Jeffery Deaver's Lincoln Rhyme, William Somerset and David Mills in the film *Se7en* (1995) or John Prudhomme in *Resurrection* (1999) have all experienced loss and/or physical and psychological trauma as a direct result of their involvement with criminal investigations and remain distanced from the policemen around them who approach crime with cold-

hearted detachment; profession, authority, academic background and sex position Patricia Cornwell's Kay Scarpetta and Kathy Reichs' Temperance Brennan as victims of a misogynist backlash; the race and ruthless methods of James Patterson's Alex Cross, together with his academic background and authority, marginalise him from both the ghettoised background he was born in and the upper-middle-class sphere he has 'invaded'. This liminality, as I have pointed out before, helps maintain the ideal of the lonesome white knight in the mean streets that so characterises detective narratives. At the same time, it allows detectives to observe society and its institutions from a distance and gives them space to articulate a critique of the iniquities of modern life.

As the detectives move about the streets in the pursuit of the serial killer, they take in the devastating panorama of dirt, pollution, poverty and evil the city has to offer and rub our noses in it, making us aware of the ills in our social environment. In *Tooth & Nail* (2000), for example, John Rebus turns our attention to London pollution when he describes the Thames as "dark and poisonous, chilled and most probably the consistency of soup" (2000: 11). Eco-deterioration is also highlighted in Jonathan Kellerman's *Monster* (2000) in which Alex Delaware describes an industrial area on the outskirts of the city as a "wasteland" with "[m]ounds of rotting machinery, slag heaps, muddy trenches, planes of greasy dirt"; something that "under a gray sky . . . could have passed for hell" and on that particular day "looked like something you kept from the voting public" (2000: 58). The pervasiveness of crime and evil is highlighted again in Rankin's *Tooth & Nail* where London looks "nothing very different from any other city . . . breathing with envy and excitement . . . [a]nd with evil" (2000: 274) in the form of "child molesters, beggars, blank faces, punks and pimps" (2000: 260). Cruel immigration policies are brought to the surface in Philip Kerr's *A Philosophical Investigation* where Chief Inspector 'Jake' Jakowicz observes the "many Russians and East Europeans waiting patiently in the lobby for whichever jobsworth Home Office clerk would interrogate them about their status" and realises some of them "would have been waiting there for several days" without any one caring "much for their comfort or their convenience" (1993: 278). The problems surrounding orphanhood generated by poverty in ex-communist countries come to the forefront in Donald James' *The Fortune Teller*, where the detective, Vadim, describes Russia as a "land adrift with [orphaned and abandoned children] undersized, swaddled figures who live among the ruined areas of our cities or hang around the bus stations and airports, begging, stealing, renting themselves out for a living" (2000: 5-6). In James Patterson's *Along Came a Spider* poverty materialises in the form of "men with dirty rags who [wash] your windshield at every corner" (1994: 18-19).

Above all these examples of decay, evil and deterioration lurks the ghost of the indifference of citizens who only "want to feel better right away" (Patterson 1994: 226), develop "a thick skin and temporary blindness" and "shut it all out because to acknowledge what they [are] going through [is] to realise the monotony, the claustrophobia, and the sheer agony of it all" (Rankin: 2000: 65). This indifference is particularly dramatised in the film *Se7en* (David Fincher 1995). When his partner, David Mills (Brad Pitt), proclaims his ultimate belief in justice, William Somerset (Morgan Freeman) highlights that the only thing people want is to "eat cheeseburgers, play the lotto and watch television" (*Se7en*, screenplay). Apathy emerges as both cause and effect of crime, since it is "easier to lose yourself in drugs than to cope with life. It's

easier to steal what you want than it is to earn it. It's easier to beat a child than to raise it" (*Seven*, screenplay). All in all, society is trapped in a vicious circle. The institutions that should guarantee social reform remain apathetic and people have no choice but to close their minds to the ills around them if they are to carry on with their lives without going insane, thus contributing to maintaining a moral vacuum that irredeemably precludes a demand for social reform. This idea can be appreciated in the following quotation:

A tramp actually entered his carriage at one stop and as the doors closed and the train pulled away again he began to rave, but his audience were deaf and dumb as well as blind and they successfully ignored his existence until the next stop where, daunted, he slouched from the carriage onto the platform. . . . They had closed off their minds, refusing involvement. Would they do the same if they saw a fight taking place? Saw a thick-set man stealing a tourist's wallet? Yes, they probably would. This wasn't an environment of good and evil: it was a moral vacuum and that frightened Rebus more than anything else. (Rankin 2000: 66)

When not indifferent, sanctioned state apparatuses are often revealed as downright obtrusive, hindering rather than helping advance criminal investigations and, incidentally, guaranteeing the maintenance of the chaos they ultimately need in order to justify their existence as social regulators. In serial killer narratives with female investigators as protagonists, for example, the masculinist and patriarchal premises that still regulate women's exchanges with men in the public world systematically jeopardise the investigations, as women have to contend with institutional misogyny as well as with crime. Instead of propitiating female integration, men consistently fight female encroachment into the traditional male arenas of power. Men objectify women and turn them into sexual objects; question their proficiency – forensic pathologist Kay Scarpetta, for instance, has to face up to comments such as, "Maybe you ought to forget cutting up dead bodies and open up a restaurant" (Cornwell 1995: 167); deny them cooperation – in Cornwell's *All That Remains*, Scarpetta complains, "I was not given copies of the confidential sections of the police reports, scene photographs, or inventories of evidence" (1995: 22-23); or do not allow them promotion even when they single-mindedly devote their lives to their career:

Starling had succeeded in FBI training because she had nothing to fall back on. She survived most of her life in institutions by respecting them and playing hard and well by the rules. She had always advanced, won the scholarship, made the team. Her failure to advance in the FBI after a brilliant start was a new and awful experience for her. She battled against the glass-ceiling like a bee in a bottle. (Harris 2000: 32)

Institutional misogyny is not the only aspect that is criticised in serial killer fiction. The law and the mass media are also put under critical scrutiny and are pictured as entities that propitiate, rather than prevent, crime. Lawyers are often presented as self-seeking individuals who, under the pretence of serving justice, are ready to argue any case for a fee. In *Seven*, for example, serial killer John Doe engages the help of a lawyer, a Mr Swarr, who claims he can clear Doe of charges by "plead[ing] insanity across the

board” (*Seven*, screenplay). He is even in the position of blackmailing the police into accepting Doe’s terms by threatening to inform the press about Doe’s two other undetected murders. Swarr says, “My client would like to remind you that two more are dead. The press would have a field day if they were to find out the police didn’t seem too concerned about finding them, giving them a proper burial” (*Seven*, screenplay). Even when lawyers are ultimately honest, they are not infallible and fall easy prey to the mental games of serial killers. In the film *Just Cause* (Arne Glimcher 1995), for example, lawyer Paul Armstrong (Sean Connery) is manipulated by multiple murderer Bobby Earle (Blair Underwood) into believing in his innocence and ‘purchasing’ his freedom. Consequently, the law is presented as intrinsically flawed and lawyers as either money-minded or as too naive to cope with crime. The mass media, on the other hand, is pictured as far from the objective information network it ideally should be, but instead as an entertainment industry that thrives on sensationalist crime and as a playground for criminals who turn newspapers, television and the Internet into stages from which to dramatise their megalomaniac endeavours and achieve notoriety. In Patterson’s *Along Came a Spider*, to mention one example, the mass media grant serial killer Gary Soneji the attention he ultimately pursues in committing his crimes:

News bulletins were flashing on the television screen every fifteen minutes or so. Gary Soneji was right there on the high and mighty tube. . . . So this was fame! This was how fame felt. He liked it a lot. This was what he’d been practising for all these years. ‘Hi, Mom! Look who’s on TV. It’s the Bad Boy! . . . I’m the only star here’. (1994: 51)

In serial killer fiction, therefore, inwrought social ills in an ethos of institutional apathy and incompetence challenge the comforting notion that the community is essentially benevolent and crime exceptional. Unease about the nature of humanity and the world we have created is further generated through the figure of the serial killer. Presented as a threatening monster whose aberrant crimes destabilise social order, his function is that of precipitating the intervention of the law-enforcement machinery. As a monster, the serial killer also functions as a showcase gallery of the individual and social evils that he epitomises and reflects back to us, a function that is contained in the etymology of the word ‘monster’ itself. As Ken Gelder explains:

[T]he word *monster* is linked to the word *demonstrate*: to show, to reveal. This link reminds us that monsters signify, that they function as meaningful signs. In this respect, their role may not have changed much since the Renaissance, where monstrosity often served as a portent, a warning. Monsters were seen as a peculiar, even ‘accidental’ kind of abnormality, but they also carried a message that was central to the culture that gazed upon it. Their function was, and still is, critical: they always brought bad tidings. (2000: 81)

This role of the serial killer as monster or ‘discloser’ is derived from the neo-gothic tradition which, as Philip L. Simpson argues, serial killer fiction incorporates as part of its generic trappings, especially neo-gothic iconography – the dark ‘bad place’ or the monster’s lair, nocturnal rainy cityscapes, or exuberant gloomy woods – and pattern of action – which includes victim girls chased by a villainous monster and a “limited,

naive, but intellectually curious protagonist [placed] into a claustrophobic environment” and “faced with a mysterious potentially fatal set of circumstances that, while threatening, also educate the innocent seeker . . . into the destabilising grayness of worldly experience” (Simpson 2000: 32). Like other monsters in gothic narratives, serial killers signify “something about culture” (Gelder 2000: 81) and, therefore, culture can be read through serial killers who become, in Richard Davenport-Hines’ words, “emblems of the evil duality supposedly haunting every modern individual: they are the external embodiment of all the inner anxieties, interdictions and guilt of the age” (1999: 314).

In serial killer narratives, the revelatory potential of the monster is exploited in three different ways. In some cases, the serial killer erects himself as moral agent and directly voices the many ills he detects, thus revealing a society so ridden with perversity and degeneration that it provides serial killers with a *raison d'être* and a moral justification they can adhere to in order to indulge their blood-lust. This is the case, for example, of John Doe (Kevin Spacey) in *Se7en*, who sees himself as a scourge against the sins people, with their indifference, tolerate. He says, “I’m setting the example” (*Se7en* screenplay). His atrocious murders, he elaborates, are basically intended as a nasty but salutary shock to awake people from their lethargy and apathy and to make them aware of the evil undercurrents that run through our defective social framework. Wittgenstein, the serial killer in Kerr’s *A Philosophical Investigation*, to mention another example, has a similar ‘moral’ purpose. In a futuristic society in which gynocidal murder, as a reflection of patriarchy-gone-nastily-awry, has become epidemic and in which the potential for serial killing can be predicted on a scientific basis, he becomes a murderer of possible serials and, like Doe, sees himself as a cleansing agent whose ‘executions’, as he calls them, should be rewarded instead of punished:

You know, instead of trying to hunt me down, you should be grateful to me, Policewoman. Just consider how many of my brothers might have turned into killers of women. Tomorrow’s gynocidal maniacs. . . . Anyway, you just ask yourself how many more lives may have been saved as a result of the few that have been sacrificed? (1993: 165)

In other examples of serial killer fiction, the monster is presented as a product of social institutions theoretically charged with protecting individuals from external aggression and/or responsible for character formation and for preventing malfunctioning social interactions. Social institutions thus become actual focuses of infection whose deficiencies and inadequacies materialise in the form of psycho- and socio-pathologies. The family – even when apparently stable – is particularly presented as a site of emotional hazard, psychic scarring and physical violence. In many serial killer narratives, childhood trauma and subsequent pathological development originate in defective family environments, which suggests that the ideal family unit based on love and mutual respect is an aspirational imagining rather than a fact. It is further highlighted that society itself generates family dysfunction by both ignoring, and thus not legislating against, domestic violence and by failing to redress the social conditions – poverty, insufficient benefits for single parents, prostitution – that underlie defective family formations. This is the case, for instance, in novels such as Caleb Carr’s *The*

Alienist, Donald James' *The Fortune Teller*, Ian Rankin's *Tooth & Nail* or Val McDermid's *The Mermaids Singing* (1999). In *The Alienist*, for instance, Joseph Beecham's pathology is the product of traumatic "formative childhood experience" (1998: 165), which society generates and tolerates:

[John Beecham] was – perversely, perhaps, but utterly – tied to . . . society. He was its offspring, its sick conscience – a living reminder of all the hidden crimes we commit when we close ranks to live among each other. He craved human society, craved the chance to show people what their 'society' had done to him. . . . We revel in men like Beecham, Moore – they are the easy repositories of all that is dark in our very *social* world. But the things that helped Beecham what he was? Those, we tolerate. (1998: 607-608)

Other forms of institutional anomaly are presented as contributing to the formation of criminal pathologies. In Jeffery Deaver's *The Bone Collector* (1997), for example, an ineffective system of justice gives rise to the serial killer and the vengeance he wreaks upon those he regards as the cause of the situation in which he lived as a child. At the age of ten, the serial killer, James Schneider, "saw his father dragged away by constables only to die in prison for a robbery which, it was later ascertained, he did not commit". Following this unfortunate arrest, "the boy's mother fell into a life on the street and abandoned her son, who grew up a ward of the state". In order to bring to the fore "the ineffectualness of the protectors of the citizenry", Schneider committed his crimes "to fling derision into the face of the constabulary which had . . . destroyed his family" (1997: 635). In *Hannibal*, to mention another example, Thomas Harris presents the machinery of war and the chaos and atrocities inexorably linked with it as directly responsible for the formation of Hannibal Lecter's pathology. At age six, during World War II, Hannibal and his sister, Mischa, "managed to survive the artillery and machine gun fire in the fighting that left [their] parents dead and the vast forest on their estate scarred and blasted". He and Mischa then fell prey to a "mixed bag of deserters who used the remote hunting lodge and ate what they could find". When game became unavailable in winter, the deserters consumed the only thing alive that was available: children like Mischa and Hannibal whom they held captive in a barn. Eventually they took Mischa, a few of whose milk teeth Hannibal later saw "in the reeking stool pit his captors used between the lodge where they slept and the barn where they kept the . . . children who were their sustenance in 1944 after the Eastern Front collapsed" (2000: 299-300).

Finally, even in the cases in which the serial killer is not presented as an outspoken moral agent or as a product of the social order, the monster turns out to be revelatory nonetheless. In narratives such as Patricia Cornwell's *Postmortem* (1993), Kathy Reichs' *Déjà Dead* (1999), Jonathan Kellerman's *Monster* or Poppy Z. Brite's *Exquisite Corpse* or films such as *Just Cause* (1995) or *Se7en*, serial killers are variously referred to as "predators that feed on those around them . . . not the species [but] mutations of the species" (Reichs 1999:508); "right nutter[s]" (Kerr 1993: 163); "crazy ... Choo choo goddamn bang bang" (Kellerman 2000: 215); or "flawed human being[s]" (Kellerman 2000: 486). There is even an open dismissal of the idea of the monster as social product. Blair Sullivan (Ed Harris), one of the two serial killers in the film *Just Cause*, for

example, says, "There ain't no formula for people like me. What we are dealing with here is just a predisposition for an appetite. You know, good parents, bad parents. Ain't no cause and effect. It's just an appetite" (*Just Cause*, screenplay). In a similar fashion, forensic pathologist Kay Scarpetta explains:

There are some people who are evil . . . Like dogs . . . Some dogs bite people for no reason. There is something wrong with them. They are bad and will always be bad. . . . Sometimes there isn't a reason. In a way, it doesn't matter. People make choices. Some people would rather be bad, would rather be cruel. It's just an ugly, unfortunate part of life. (Cornwell 1993: 34)

Even when society is not pictured as inherently evil and when aberrant appetites are presented as anomalies, serial killers are still human and, as such, through the heinousness of their acts, they confirm our fears about human nature, the fact that "horror is not merely among us, but rather part of us, caused by us" (Simpson 2000: 11). Serial killers dramatise Stevenson's influential dictum in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* that "man is not truly one, but truly two" (1979: 82), and demonstrate human potential for depravity. When faced with the serial killer, detectives ultimately find, "A man – it always [comes] down to just a man" (Kellerman 2000: 486), for "the real monster . . . is Man himself – a savage, selfish, murderous brute" (Kerr 1993: 235). Indeed, serial killers act as mirror images of our darkest selves, frightening reminders of the human monster that lies latent in Everyman. Ultimately, these fictions suggest, anyone, everyone, could be – in fact, in theory, we all are – John Doe. As Michael Marshall expresses in his novel *The Straw Men*: "It's not monsters we're afraid of. Monsters were only a comforting fantasy. We know what our own kind is capable of. What we are frightened of is ourselves" (2002: 140).

In spite of the grim intimations about human nature and our social formations in serial killer fiction, the genre does not contemplate a disruption of the status quo or, for that matter, the possibility of social reform. The selfsame generic parameters that propitiate the inclusion of a subversive voice that belies the perception of our society as the Great Good Place, occasionally threatened by external and anomalous criminal agents, work together to negotiate a conservative closure that overrides and ultimately prevents a destabilisation of the social order. There is no denying that the genre cultivates what David Punter, making reference to gothic fiction, terms a "dialectic of disturbance" (1980: 423). Indeed, serial killer fiction promotes a strong sense of unease by destabilising the reliability we place on the idea that our society is not yet beyond redemption. Not unlike what Michael Holquist calls "metaphysical detective narratives", serial killer fiction:

. . . does not have the narcotising effect of its progenitor; instead of familiarity, it gives strangeness, a strangeness which more often than not is the result of jumbling the well-known patterns of classical detective stories. Instead of reassuring, they disturb. They are not an escape, but an attack. (1983: 173)

Yet, this sense of unease is minimised by the coexistence in serial killer narratives of what could be referred to as a 'poetics (and politics) of terror', the generation of a, so to

speak, “gothic state of mind . . . a paroxysm of horror, fear and fascinated disgust” (Davenport-Hines 1999: 313), which dulls our senses and, consequently, ultimately precludes challenge and subversion. Even though, as Schmid explains, “[t]here is . . . ample evidence to suggest that . . . interest in serial murder is not exclusively condemnatory” (2005: 112), the serial killer in these narratives is presented as a bogeyman, ultimately designed to terrorise his audiences. The characterisation of the serial killer turns this figure into a very real, frighteningly unpredictable, threat, exaggerates his destructive potential and promotes abhorrence and disgust. Serial killers, we are told, proliferate. Not only is the serial killer presented as “a one-man plague”, but there is also “a psycho army out there” (Kellerman 2000: 125) of “spree murderers, blood drinkers, cannibals, sodomisers, child-rapers, chanting zombies” (Kellerman 2000: 149). When a serial killer goes rampant, a copycat follows in his tracks (*Tooth & Nail* 149; *The Mermaids Singing* 284-287). Serial killers also form macabre working alliances (*Copycat*, *Just Cause*, *Kiss the Girls*) or sinister underworld organisations (*The Straw Men*). Indeed, in serial killer narratives there is an epidemic of serial killers invading cities and they come “in all shapes and sizes, all races and creeds and genders” (Patterson 1994: 435); “[f]rightening, isn’t it?” (Rankin 2000: 105)

Serial killers are not only an epidemic, but also invisible, which is offered “as an explanation of the difficulty in singling out and apprehending these killers” (Seltzer 1998: 128). Chameleon-like, they pose as “one of the lads”, “regular sort of chap[s]” (Dunant 1998: 261). Apparently “well-adjusted . . . courteous and well-mannered” (Kerr 1993: 36); often “popular at work” (Kerr 1993: 350), “kindly neighbour[s] whose advice [is] sought after, whose presence is reassuring” (James 2000: 206), or “the all-American Father[s]” (Patterson 1994: 173); they “live what [are] outwardly quite ordinary lives” for “[r]eal evil . . . [does] not always adorn its home with velvet curtains and human skulls for ashtrays” (Kerr 1993: 343). Their sheer ordinariness and anonymity multiplies their power to terrorise since they can be “anywhere . . . [can] be *anyone*, anyone at all in this city of ten million faces, ten million secret lairs” (Rankin 2000: 46). They also kill apparently at random for their motives are “not the kind the public can relate to” (Kellerman 2000: 34) and are difficult, when not impossible, to catch. They are not “disorganised asocial[s]”, but “cunning, methodical, calculating” (Kerr 1993: 119), “control freaks” (Patterson 1994: 93), “playing with [detectives] like [they] were clockwork” (Rankin 2000: 141). They are even presented as “smarter than the police” (McDermid 1999: 237) that do not always manage to apprehend them since “there are major unsolved crimes that go back . . . far” (Patterson 1994: 353). Many, indeed, outmanoeuvre the police. Some, like Hannibal Lecter in Thomas Harris’s novels, escape apprehension. Some others, like John Doe in *Seven*, give themselves in but finally win by causing pain and destruction that outlives their media notoriety and even their own lives. Some others, like Daryll Lee Cullum (Harry Connick Jr) in the film *Copycat* (John Amiel 1995), manipulate a network of serial killers from the prison where they have been secluded.

Invisible and almost omniscient, serial killers lead outwardly ordinary lives and look like ordinary individuals. Yet, they are repulsive nonetheless, a repulsiveness that manifests itself or is brought to our attention in various ways. They have some sort of physical flaw, “gnomic features” (Kerr 1993: 80) or “strangely contoured craniums” (Kellerman 2000: 122). They are animal-like, referred to as sharks (Harris 2000: 265),

foxes (Harris 2000: 354) or snakes (Kellerman 2000: 357). They are even likened to the devil itself, “fiend[s] of unbelievable satan-like proportion[s]” (Kellerman 2000: 249). Emotionally detached and uninvolved, serial killers have no connection with human beings and kill “in cold blood” (Kerr 1993: 139) with no sense of “sadness or . . . remorse” (Kerr 2000: 217), craving only for “degradation . . . suffering and . . . death” (Harris 2000: 324). Their only *raison d’être* is their urge to kill, which “nobody can . . . stop” (Rankin 2000: 114) and which “[l]ike a roller-coaster” grows stronger for “each high needs to be bigger to compensate for the inevitable low that has preceded it” (McDermid 1999: 212-213). They kill because they enjoy it, so they are “fun-killer[s]” (Kellerman 2000: 384) addicted to their urge like junkies needing “a fix” (Patterson 1994: 49). Even though they kill in cold blood, their murders are far from clinical or aseptic; instead, they are horrific dramatisations of their fantasies, shocking bloodbaths, acts of bizarre perversity intended to reflect the destructiveness of their instincts. An example will suffice to illustrate the point:

Milo exposed the face. What was left of it. Deep slashes crisscrossed the flesh, shearing skin, exposing bone and muscle and gristle. What had been the eyes were two oversized raspberries. The hair, thick and light brown where the blood hadn’t crusted, fanned out on the steel table. Slender neck. Blood-splashed but undamaged; only the face had been brutalised. The eyes ... the slash wounds created a crimson grid, like a barbecue grilling taken to the extreme. I saw freckles amid the gore, and my stomach lurched. (Kellerman 2000: 425)

Generic parameters not only regulate text, but also subtext. The manner in which serial killers are constructed, according to critics such as Philip L. Simpson (2000:19-20), turns them into figures of transgression that allow us to vicariously trespass the boundaries that separate a civilised from an uncivilised instinctual existence unfettered by law, precepts or custom, and in which morality ceases to operate as a controlling factor. Human nature is revealed as dual, polarised into saintly and sinful, and goodness as fragile and constructed, operative only if policed by authoritative external agents in a nonetheless defective society. Gothic and detective elements converge to offer an altogether pessimistic message. However, they do not allow the subversion of the social order. Serial killer narratives magnify the destructive potential of the serial killer, who is presented as a more real and frightening social phenomenon than poverty, drugs, inner city decay and related violent crime. The serial killer as bogeyman guarantees a response of fear and activates the intervention of the sanctioned agents of the law and order. In turn, their effective handling of the investigations works to guarantee a semblance of order and, therefore, justifies the existence of and the methods used by law-enforcement institutions. Even when these institutions are not completely effective, the status quo, no matter how diseased, is still presented as something worth preserving, an idea that is epitomised in Somerset’s last words in the film *Seven*: “Hemingway once wrote: ‘The world is a fine place and worth fighting for’. I agree with the second part” (*Seven*, screenplay). The figure of the serial killer, therefore, functions as an agent of fear whose existence is guaranteed in paperback after paperback, film after film, where there will always be a nutter ready to destabilise order. The heinousness of the serial killer’s

crimes and the pervasiveness of the threat he poses advocate for more stringent law-enforcement methods. In serial killer fiction, all in all, fear regulates order.

In *Along Came a Spider*, and to conclude, James Patterson writes, “[Serial killers] keep shit interesting. Imagine life without the really bad guys. Very boring” (1994: 332). Boring, indeed, for those who delight in serial killer fiction. Also inconvenient. Maggie Kilgour, writing about gothic fiction, explains that the genre, like the carnivalesque, “delights in rebellion, while finally punishing it, often with death and damnation, and the reaffirmation of a system of moral and social order” (1995: 8). Likewise, serial killer fiction – through the manipulation of fear and a closure that involves a restabilisation of the social order or a defence of the need to fight for its preservation – ultimately articulates a socially conservative discourse.

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