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The Allure of the Serial Killer

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*The only sensible way to live
in this world is without rules.*

The Joker

Abstract

What is it about serial killers that grips our imaginations? They populate some of our most important literature and art, and to this day, Jack the Ripper intrigues us. In this paper, we examine this phenomenon, exploring the idea that serial killers in part represent something in us that, if not good, is at least admirable. To get at this, we have to peel off layers of other causes of our attraction, for our attraction to serial killing is complex (it mixes with repulsion, too). For example, part of the attraction is curiosity associated with the pragmatic desire to understand serial killers. Another part is the allure of safe violence, the very same allure that causes us to slow down to look at traffic accidents and that makes movies like *Saw* box office gold. Once we are through the initial layers of attraction, we expose the one we are interested in. Humans are not really *Homo sapiens* (the wise human), but rather *Homo oboediens* (the rule-following human), and these rules can become oppressive. Serial killers, properly sanitized, show us something, albeit in a twisted way, that we long for – a life unfettered by rules, a life where we can do exactly what we want. We close by noting the paradox that an actual serial killer is not free at all.

1. The Allure of Monsters

Question: Dante's *Divine Comedy* is made up of three books (or canticles), the first of which is called the *Inferno*. What are the names of the other two books?

Dante's *Divine Comedy* is considered one of the greatest works in world literature. Yet few can name all three of its books, and fewer still have read the whole thing. Most people who read it read only the *Inferno*, and in fact, the structure of the *Inferno*, with its ever-deepening circles of Hell, is a mainstay of common culture. Why do the other two books, the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*, receive far less attention? It's because with their respective images of waiting interminably and of peace and plenty, they aren't vivid and exciting; they're boring. But gruesome horror is vivid and exciting. This is what the *Inferno* contains, indeed, mostly consists of. So now the question becomes: why is gruesome horror exciting? As mysterious as this question is, there's a bigger, more disturbing mystery: what is it in our nature that finds the monsters responsible for such horror alluring? The particular monster we are interested in is the serial killer.

That monsters are alluring is not in doubt. Nothing else explains their appearance throughout human verbal and written art. There is Humbaba, the monstrous giant in the Gilgamesh epic, dating from before 2000 BCE. Homer's *Odyssey* (written perhaps as early as 1100 BCE) is abundantly supplied with monsters, from Polyphemus the Cyclops, through the Laestrygonians, a tribe of giant cannibals, and finally to Scylla and Charybdis. The Old English epic poem *Beowulf* recounts one of the most interesting monsters, the mighty and terrifying Grendel. Over a period of many years, he attacked and ate dozens of the Danes of Heorot Hall, only to be finally bested by Beowulf, the hero the Geats. All of these monsters systematically hunted and killed humans over a stretch of time – they were all serial killers.

The allure is just as powerful in real life. The Roman emperor Nero was an extravagant tyrant, ordering the executions and torture of perhaps hundreds of people, including his own mother. He was also fond of viciously persecuting

Christians. He remains a source of inquiry and curiosity. Jack the Ripper, circa 1888, London, is still an important subject of movies, books, and historical detective work. This work continues because the Ripper's identity remains unknown. In fact, "Jack the Ripper" is an alias given to the serial killer by a letter sent to the London Central News Agency.² The Son of Sam, Ted Bundy, and all the other modern serial killers grip our modern imaginations. We are horrified by their killing, but cannot look away.

Plausibly, serial killing monsters show up in our art because they show up in real life. And they are alluring in our art - when they are, which is often - for one reason: the artists make them alluring (Hannibal the Cannibal, from the movie *Silence of the Lambs* is the Platonic ideal of such an alluring monster, he is urbane, intelligent, charming, and eats his victims). Other alluring serial killers include Sylar, Jigsaw, Jason, Dexter, and Ghostface from, respectively, the television shows/movies *Heroes*, *Saw*, *Friday the Thirteenth*, *Dexter*, and *Scream*, as well as Aaron Stampler, from William Diehl's books *Primal Fear* and *Reign in Hell*. But these artistic constructs we enjoy watching and reading about are just that, *constructs*. Why would artists render serial killers alluring? Are any actual serial killers alluring? How do we square our horror of them and our revulsion at their killing with any allure?

The answers to these questions, which we explain below, reveals how complex humans' thoughts and emotions about serial killers are. There is more than one answer at work, and, as one digs deeper, a surprising answer emerges: that what is actually alluring is the *idea* of the serial killer, but only when that idea is contemplated from a certain, specific, safe reference frame that allows *both* the positive and negative emotions associated with serial killers to be experienced at the same time. There is nothing more stimulating than surviving a brush with death, that threat to the one thing we all hold most dear: our lives. The feeling of being threatened when someone dangerous has power over us makes our hearts pound in

our chest from fear. It is only when that feeling is coupled with the *safe* boundaries of the silver screen, or written word, that it becomes irresistible.

2. Explaining the Allure – First look

Serial killers in real life may not be as alluring as fictional ones, but they are at least fascinating in a terrifying way. A significant part of this fascination comes from the *mystery* serial killers represent and our deep human need to minimize mysteries. We all ask, "Why would anyone stalk and kill one human after another?" This behavior is bizarre, senseless. So to assuage our terrified fascination, we seek reasons.

Humans require reasons, or explanations, for everything, from why the sun comes up and goes down to why the stars appear in recognizable patterns in the night sky to why people get sick and die. It is easy to see why such explanations are needed: they provide control, prediction, and, emotionally, they reduce fear. In fact, one crucial function for human religions, from the beginning, was (and is) making a dangerous, mysterious world seem *humanly* rational. Gods, who were a lot like people only stronger and magical, controlled everything. Gods controlled the seas and rivers, the weather, the sun and moon, the stars and planets, and even the afterlife. A well-known example is one western explanation of why spring returned every year (it was caused by Persephone's return from the underworld, where she was the consort of Hades). Therefore, explaining what happens in the world is important, especially so if what happens negatively affects us. But to this day, we cannot explain serial killers' behavior. And lacking this explanation matters a great deal, for serial killers are responsible for a significant proportion of murders in the United States. According to Kenna Quinet, the number of victims of serial killers ranges anywhere from around 350 to almost 2000 a year (there are roughly 16,000 murders in the U.S. in a typical year). See her paper: "The Missing Missing: Toward a Quantification of Serial Murder Victimization in the United States" in the journal *Homicide Studies*.

Wanting to explain deadly events is clearly a rational want. In seeking explanations of deadly events, including serial killers, humans feel a certain amount of curiosity. One cannot seek explanations for things without somehow being drawn to the thing to be explained, even if that thing is extremely dangerous or repugnant, such as why prison rape occurs. Curiosity always has a positive emotive component; it is the sort of thing that feels good, at least somewhat, when satisfied, like discovering the reasons for the bright pastel colors of a sunset. Hence, we are drawn to serial killers in order to explain them, which we must do if we are to avoid them, or remove them from society, or prevent them from occurring. Our being drawn to them is innate, it is funded by our curiosity. This explains part of the allure of serial killers: we are just curious about them for perfectly rational reasons: we'd like to reduce the danger and horror they impose. This curiosity-driven allure is such a rational course of action that it is common throughout the animal kingdom. Even animals with quite small brains engage in such behavior. For example, some species of fish do what's called "predator inspection." The fish, while eating, notice that something dark looms up ahead of them. It might be a large predator fish or the legs of a fish-eating bird, or it might be some floating moss or a log. Swimming away from food every time something dark looms up ahead is a good way to starve to death because it happens often. The fish have to stay and eat. This is clearly a situation where more information would be very helpful, yet the only way to get more information is to swim a bit closer to the looming dark thing and inspect it for the telltale signs of being a predator (which the fish apparently know). The fish's strategy is: If it appears to be a predator, then quickly swim off, otherwise, keep eating. Of course, the risk to gathering this extra information is that the dark looming thing might in fact be a predator, in which case the fish have just swum closer to it. Risky behavior for the sake of a good meal: it was ever thus.

3. Stalking the Deeper Reasons

But there's more to be explained here than just our need to understand and cope with serial killers. We still have to explain why serial killers are often central

characters in our most horrifying movies, some of which are as deservedly famous as any movie can be (e.g., Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*). We begin explaining this by noting that humans engage in some quite peculiar behavior relative to other animals: we egregiously violate what is called the *hedonistic assumption*. This assumption says that for the most part animals will approach what is good and avoid what is bad. Of course, all curious animals violate this assumption to some small degree (see above). But humans are strange in the extent to which we violate it. Humans go far out of their way to find and engage in activities that are obviously aversive, things that from a purely rational perspective, should be avoided. Examples include horror movies, fear-inducing rides like roller coasters, and dangerous, extreme sports, like parachuting, bungee jumping and mountain climbing. Dangling from half inch hand- and footholds on the edge of a sheer rock wall with only a thin rope to prevent a climber from a fall of four thousand feet is exhilarating precisely because death is so close. No other animal engages in such reckless thrill-seeking.

The key to this odd behavior seems to be that humans experience both positive and negative feelings *at the same time* when exposed to aversive things.³ Such *co-activation* (as it is called) means that just because we are frightened doesn't mean we aren't also enjoying ourselves. Indeed, some of the most enjoyable moments of an event may be the most frightening, such as the moment a parachuter jumps from a plane out into air. Co-activation provides a positive correlation between opposite feelings, e.g., fear and pleasure. Andrade and Cohen, the authors of the psychological study that revealed the surprising fact that humans experience negative and positive emotions at the same time (see footnote 3), use co-activation to *partially* explain why people go to horror movies. The idea is that our feelings of excitement and pleasure so closely co-occur with being frightened that we view the latter as causing the former. Hence, we seek out aversive actions.

4. Closing in for the Kill

However, we say "partially explain" because there is one other crucial ingredient that is needed: a *protective frame*. That is, moviegoers and other thrill-seekers usually won't experience any positive emotions together with their negative emotions unless there is some sort of mind-set they can enter where the danger to them is seen to be not real, or greatly minimized, or something they are confident they can deal with (see, Andrade and Cohen, 2007). Hearing the Joker ask "Why so serious?" on the screen is riveting and exciting. Hearing him whisper it to us in the dark of our bedroom just as we are falling asleep would be utterly terrifying.

Serial killers in the real world obviously don't allow for a protective frame. So it looks like an explanation of their allure based on co-activation founders here. But in movies, books, and other media, a protective frame does exist. The serial killer on the screen is up there on the screen. He can't get to us; we are perfectly safe. So we feel safe to be scared to death.

5. Removing Empathy

Andrade and Cohen's full explanation of the allure of celluloid serial killers seems to work. Within a protective frame, we are free to enjoy being afraid. But the protective frame does something else, too, something disturbing. It removes any *empathy* with the victims (to further help remove such empathy, serial killer movies, and slasher movies in general, almost always portray victims as thoughtless risk takers, selfish hedonists, . . . in short as someone not deserving our empathy). Andrade and Cohen point out: ". . . high levels of cognitive empathy (i.e., perspective taking) can significantly reduce people's ability to experience positive affect when facing negative stimuli. . ." This is the key. When a protective frame removes empathy, it removes the grounding of a sense of morality and ethics. Abstraction sets in. Victims become just prey, and the monsters become more than monsters. This loss of a moral sense opens up a path to a deeper, more satisfying explanation of the allure of the celluloid serial killer, and, ultimately, of the real one.

To sum up what we have so far, the only allure of real (non-celluloid) serial killers we've uncovered is the one associated with our curiosity about them, which in turn arises from our rational need to explain and cope with them. The allure of celluloid serial killers is due to the fact that, inside a protective frame, our empathic sense and hence our morality towards the killer's victims vanishes, and we are left with our feelings of pleasure caused by excitement and fear, i.e., negative emotions co-activating positive ones.

6. The Prison of Rules

Feeling empathy for others is the basis for morality and ethics. Morality is usually defined as *other-regarding behavior*, behavior based on empathy. That is, morality's essence lies in taking another living being's welfare seriously. Often, such a morality flows freely and naturally from each of us to those we interact with. But many philosophers have noted that this natural tendency isn't enough. Relying only on it is not a good way to infuse enough of the needed morality into the world. Such philosophers have suggested that morality manifests itself as a *requirement* on each of us who seeks to be a moral person. Thus morality must be taken further, to the point where we are *required* to take another's welfare as seriously as our own. However, once we are inside the protective frame, this requirement vanishes because others' welfare becomes nonexistent. Indeed, we can say that within the protective frame there are no *others*, there are just ourselves and *objects*. The question emerges, then, is it moral to enter a protective frame? This question takes on an edge because with loss of a moral anchor within a frame, other aspects of the serial killer can come to fore. And some of these other aspects are alluring in perhaps much more dangerous ways.

To get at this, we start from a new direction.

Human beings are immersed in rules – it would be hard to overstate how immersed. Our species really should be called *Homo oboediens* – the rule-following

human. Rules form the girders of all our highly structured groups, communities, societies, and cultures. Actually, cultures *are* just collections of rules, which those of us within a culture learn and internalize. Languages, essential to being human, are intricate rule-following productions of sounds. All of our religions are repositories of rules controlling the most intimate aspects of our lives: who we can marry, who we can have sex with and when, what we can eat and when, who we must kill, when we should kill ourselves. Games, ubiquitous in human cultures, are impossible without rules. Art, poetry, music, dance . . . are all based on rules, and meaningless shapes and noise without them. Even the great rule-breaking art requires rules to break. Cubism and Dadaism in painting and the visual arts, the poetry of e. e. cummings, the later writings of James Joyce, 12-tone music, or any "music" by John Cage (his famous composition 4'3" is three movements of noteless music – the audience is meant to hear the sounds of the surrounding environment while it is being performed) . . . all of these wouldn't even exist if it weren't for rules. Finally, science is not only profoundly rule-based, but exists solely to unearth the rules that govern the universe and all things in it, none of which could exist without rules.

The vast majority of these rules are *implicit*. Stopping at stop signs and red lights is due to following explicit rules. But most other rules operate implicitly, controlling us without our conscious involvement. We effortlessly learn these implicit rules, and they effortlessly control us. Very often, this control makes life on planet Earth better than it would be otherwise.

Yet, in spite of the role in our lives of this vast matrix of rules, humans are also individual *selves*. And herein lies the problem. Rules, by definition, require everyone to obey them. Indeed, rules' reason for being is this very obedience: rules are about both *control* and *homogenization*. Under such conditions, it is hard to be a self, for one's self tends to merge completely with the rule-governed masses. Selves wind up struggling to exist as selves. To win this struggle, or to even not lose it, requires *public self-assertion*, usually in the form of rule-breaking. Why *public* self-assertion? Because selves derive their selfhood in large measure by defining

themselves relative to others. This is true throughout much of the animal kingdom. For example, it is not possible to be the dominant alpha male or female in some group without also asserting one's independent self-hood. Back to humans, great athletes can't win Olympic medals or break world records unless they first distinguish themselves from the crowd. New music, art, trends, or inventions can't come into being unless the creator breaks out on his own in new direction.

This means that the crucial commodity for the self is *freedom*; the self requires freedom for its existence. Rule-breaking is asserting or grasping freedom by breaking out of the chains imposed by all the rules we have to follow. The self's search for this freedom is epic . . . and costly, a fact noted by many throughout the ages. From the story of Icarus to *Catcher in the Rye*, the struggle to be a self figures prominently in great literature and other art, where it is revealed as a struggle of ultimate importance. We quote e. e. cummings: "To be nobody-but-yourself-in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else — means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting."⁴

Humans struggle to be both selves and rule-followers. We all both seek and eschew freedom, and suffer the consequences of this struggle. The importance of this can be seen by noting that the sum of all human rules still leaves room for assertion of one's self. Even military organizations leave room for some self-assertion. Personalities shine through in the form of speech patterns, stated beliefs and goals. But it's not enough.⁵ So, rules, while good in many ways, are also bad because they make it hard to be a self. Very often, therefore, we break the rules. Usually, we just dip our toes in the sea of rule-breaking: we drive a little over the speed limit, we lie, we dress inappropriately, we use unsuitable language, we buy a Harley. Every so often, a few of us step up to our ankles in that sea. And sometimes, a tiny number of us, swim far out into it . . . with deadly results.

In this battle between asserting one's self and merging one's self with the rule-following collective, serial killers stand as an avatar of ultimate freedom. They appear so unbound by the rules of civilized society that they wantonly commit one of the few acts regarded as wrong in all human cultures: they murder. And as a final declaration, they murder for their own personal reasons.

This view of serial killers as alluring individuals arises in those of us who are not serial killers and who are not in any immediate danger from one; in other words, in those of us who are in a protective frame – a frame of physical and psychological distance. Moreover, we think that this view of serial killers as ultimate avatars of freedom is not explicitly conscious in most people. It works behind the scenes, generating allure and causing people to be drawn not to serial killers *per se*, but to the *idea* of serial killers (and then, only certain ones).

There is one other aspect of this cause of the allure: all of us who follow the rules and struggle to be moral want to know if the rules have any substantiality, any genuineness. Many of us fear that the rules are just a thin veneer of modern civilization. But part of us also hopes for this. We want to know how thin the veneer is and how much force it would take to break through. To quote another alluring killer, the Joker, as he refers to all of us: “You see, their morals, their code, it's a bad joke. Dropped at the first sign of trouble. They're only as good as the world allows them to be. I'll show you. When the chips are down, these civilized people, they'll eat each other. See, I'm not a monster...I'm just ahead of the curve.”⁶ So, we sit down with our favorite serial killers from fiction -- the Joker, Grendel, Jigsaw, Hannibal, etc., -- and we try to figure out if they really are monsters or not. Our rule-following part believes that their ultimate freedom is purchased at a great and terrible price, proving that such freedom is false and worthless. But our deeper, inner selves long for their freedom, if only to stay ahead of the curve.

4. Conclusion

In our usually unacknowledged desire to break free from society's rules, we not only condone the celluloid serial killer's actions, we champion them. We have taken real killers and transformed them into sympathetic heroes and put them in our stories. A moral question arises: Should we be making art celebrating serial killers?

A deep irony exists here, of course. Real serial killers are not free at all. They kill for pathological reasons that push them along like a raging torrent pushes along whole trees and gigantic boulders. Moreover, real serial killers kill real people, not just those who "deserve" to die, as in the stories. They are not the heroes we idealize them as; they don't kill to escape boundaries, they kill to maintain their own perverse boundaries.

For most of us, sitting down with a real serial killer would not be an artistic, philosophical experience, but rather a terrifying, repulsive one. Yet, within a protective frame, safe and secure, we transform the serial killer, already an object of deep curiosity because of his or her fearsomeness, into an icon, an avatar. We revel in this transformation, exploring our darker side that longs to know what it feels like to be the one giving the orders instead of taking them, doing everything we want to, impervious to the consequences.

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² Philip Sugden (2002). *The Complete History of Jack the Ripper*.

³ That we humans simultaneously experience conflicting emotions when violating the hedonistic assumption was unexpected, but we do. See Eduardo Andrade and Joel Cohen's paper: "On the Consumption of Negative Feelings".

⁴ "A poet's advice to students," in *E. E. Cummings: A Miscellany*.

⁵ At least it's not enough in Western cultures. Some Asian cultures differ, notably Japanese culture. In general, different cultures vary considerably in the importance they ascribe to the self. However, in cultures that ascribe less importance to the self, it is not clear whether selves exist in any lesser degree in individual humans or if, rather, the selves are repressed by obedience to the rules. See, e.g., *The Conceptual*

Self in Context, by Ulric Neisser, David A. Jopling. Published by Cambridge University Press, 1997.

⁶ Quoted from the movie, *The Dark Knight*, 2008.