

## ***Serial Murderers' Signature and Modus Operandi as Instances of Trauma Narrative***

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In *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) the star performance of Jodie Foster and Sir Anthony Hopkins help turn the bleak world of serial murder<sup>1</sup> into a fascinating subject of study, and the hallucinatory dreamscape of an individual mind into a multi-level intellectual labyrinth all of whose mazes must be solved before another victim is killed. The film's main villain "Buffalo Bill"<sup>2</sup> is caught with the help of the imprisoned Dr. Hannibal Lecter,<sup>3</sup> an ex-psychiatrist and a man of genius, whose most serious character flaw is in his penchant for conducting culinary symphonies featuring organs of the people who had been extremely rude to him or inconvenienced the world otherwise. Hannibal knows that the rudeness he targets in his murders is connected with the traumatic loss of his sister Mischa eaten by the looters during the WWII. He sets out to find Buffalo Bill's deepest motive and real identity through the narrative analysis of his 'texts.' Dr. Lecter deduces from the skill with which different parts of victims' skin is removed that the murderer is a tailor by occupation, and from the larva found in the mouth of his last victim that he covets transformation, a new gender identity, 'another skin.' Stitched together, parts of the other become, in the form of this other skin, his accepting gaze as if in its entirety, for like the new skin, the new gaze is meant to envelop the new body, symbolizing a new gender identity that has been publicly recognized. But because this new skin is as much an articulation of Buffalo Bill's fragmented identity as it is of the watching eye and the manifold body of the other, he has to look in the mirror to see himself as a particular other who recognizes the validation of his new identity by the other whose body he is now wearing. Buffalo Bill's performative engaging his dead victims in a way that involves this kind of change in perspective suggests a strong communicative dimension in serial murder.

This paper presents a theoretical account of serial murderers' signature and modus operandi (M.O.) as a trauma narrative, a scripted reenactment of the traumatic experience that had led to one's loss of trust in the world and to no longer perceiving it as a space of meaning and significance. After considering some of the ways in which serial murder is constructed socially, I consider the MacDonal Triad—the maladaptive cluster of childhood behaviors featuring animal cruelty, enuresis, and firesetting. A concept widely disputed even from a purely behaviorist point, in so far as it elucidates the onset and *internalization* of the

worldview in which there is virtually no meaning and significance ascribed to world and one's place in it, the MacDonald Triad will function as an important access point to the world of serial murder the method of whose investigation will employ philosophical concepts.

I first look at the supplement of violence [*overkill*] and its structuration in the murderer's signature and modus operandi. So doing allows me to connect murder as a series of communicative acts to the articulation and diffusion by the perpetrator of traumatic experience within a system of differential signification. I argue that the mutilated body of the victim is a communicative medium in which the murderer captures the defacing indeterminacy of life with others he most fears, the very anxiety over having to live in a world irrevocably fragmented into an assembly of meaningless objects, and the inadequacy of existent symbolized terms and relations to express the subject of the traumatic experience. The dehumanized body of the victim communicates the nullity of the murdering self, the utter fragmentation of whose meaning and identity the murderer escapes only while embodying a lethal predatory blow directed against a human being.

I then proceed to show that while establishing a murdering routine creates an illusory sense of a stable identity, the immediate certainty of one's total sovereignty over the other becomes for the murderer a proof of mastery over the indeterminacy of one's being in the world, a symbol of his eradication of the radical dependency on the other as constitutive to the human. The pleasure the murderer experiences in the imminent destruction of the other's world and in the violation of all boundaries of his personality lies in feeling overwhelmed by his victory over the social, by his having successfully contained the entity whose every individual site he sees as capable of delivering a lethal blow to him at any time. While the logic of the inverted sublime discernible here seems to suggest that the perpetrator is a person who has declared a war against publicness, the latter *is* his ultimate addressee, since publicness is what restores his sense of being a person through a new identity established by the discursive dimension of the narrative (re)construction of the crimes during the investigation and trial.

I conclude by suggesting some of the ways in which the (re)construction of the murderer's self takes place via the negotiation of meaning communicated in his 'works' that publicness construes as narratives of traumatic experience told in a *private language* that Ludwig Wittgenstein defines in his *Philosophical Investigations* as a language whose "words[...]are to refer to what can be known only to the speaker; to his immediate, private, sensations. So another cannot understand the language" (§243). The meaning communicated by the serial murderers foregrounds the wish for expressive insulation in relation to others. But because interactions with others presuppose the use of a shared language, the serial murderer's signature and M.O. employ *private language* which, as a "fantasy[...]underlying the wish to deny the publicness of language, turns out[...]to be a fantasy, or fear, either of inexpressiveness, one in which I am not merely unknown, but in which I am powerless to make myself known; or one in which what I express is beyond my control" (Cavell 351).

A quick word on trauma, and serial murderers' signature and M.O. is in order before tackling the communicative aspect in their crimes. Theorists have struggled to define trauma. Cathy Caruth (1996) rightly points out that "there is no firm definition for trauma,

which has been given various descriptions at various times and under different names” (117). Judith Herman (1997) describes traumatic events as those that

produce profound and lasting changes in physiological arousal, emotion, cognition, and memory. Moreover, traumatic events may sever these normally integrated functions from one another. The traumatized person may experience intense emotion but without clear memory of the event, or may be remembering everything in detail but without emotion. She may find herself in a constant state of vigilance and irritability without knowing why. Traumatic symptoms have a tendency to become disconnected from their source and to take on a life of their own (34).

While a single event outside the range of human experience is capable of engendering what might be called a pathological disordering of the subject, I approach trauma as a state of crisis accompanied by a wide range of symptoms and sometimes involving a development of beliefs and emotions in the absence of a single or multiple events of the physical violation of the subject’s bodily integrity or of being exposed to such experience vicariously. I agree with Caruth (1995) that

the pathology cannot be defined either by the event itself – which may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatize everyone equally – nor can it be defined in terms of a distortion of the event. [...] The pathology consists, rather, solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it (4).

Traumatic events thus appear as extraordinary not because of their infrequency but because of their violation of bodily integrity, exposure to helplessness and terror, confrontation with violence and death. It is exactly this experience of confronting the terror whose intensity is unbearable and immediacy mute, as we will see, that seeks to articulate itself in the act of murdering as well as in how the murderer gets to his victim, that is, in his M.O. and what he does to it in excess of actions necessary to terminate human life, that is, in his signature.

Eric Hickey (2010) suggests that while “signature, or personal marking of the offender [that] includes verbal and physical acts [and are] patterns of murder customized to fit the special needs and fantasies of each killer, the method of operating (M.O.) is separate from motive and signature [in that] it includes techniques to commit the crimes that may evolve as the offender becomes more skillful and confident in his crimes” (164-165). By viewing signature akin to a kind of stylistic excess not instrumental to completing the murder, Hickey applies the internal-external classification to all acts performed by the offender on the victim. Yet using instrumental efficiency as a sole criterion begs the question, for Hickey thus presupposes the primacy of the alleged default tendency on the part of the killer to optimize the efficiency of his actions over his striving to recreate certain aspects of his traumatic experience in the past.

The example of Luis Garavito, world’s most prolific child killer, reveals numerous difficulties with this approach. Garavito’s M.O. involved first approaching children and then,

after offering them a small gift to gain their trust, taking them for a long, tiring walk allegedly to make his sudden attack easier. Even though the murderer's own reconstruction of the act of tiring out his victims may emphasize the purely instrumental character of it, to establish it as falling exclusively within the domain of M.O. and not his signature would be tantamount to a claim that Garavito's history of traumatization had nothing to do with a sudden betrayal of trust, or violation of bodily integrity associated in his memory with episodes involving his getting tired.

But suppose Garavito was as a child repeatedly attacked by his father because he had been made to work very hard, quickly got tired, and could not work as much as his father wanted. In this case, there is as much reason to suppose that the act of tiring out his victims was for the sheer ease of the operation (hence its belonging to Garavito's M.O.) as there is to say that equally important to it was the reenactment of particular details anchoring the memory of the originary trauma event (signature). This staging is perhaps aimed at reenacting some episodes from Garavito's life when he, a tired child, experienced a devastating blow when his world came crushing down and his own father, someone he may have known as nurturing and caring, destroyed his very capability of exposing his vulnerability to others. A series of unexpected predatory blows that could be directed at a single site of the social fabrics as a way to temporarily regain a sense of cohesiveness of his subjectivity through pleasure in violence could have been the only thing remaining in the arsenal of the tools Garavito used to gain a sense of self-continuity.

In his search for what makes a serial murderer Hickey considers a variety of theories stressing the significance of social component. In so far as they foreground socio-economic and environmental factors, social structure theories suggested such factors as the impersonalization and frequent encounters with strangers as affecting the probability of victimization in high-density populations (Sampson 1987). The discrepancy between the states with highest frequencies of serial killing and those with highest rates per capita reported by Rossmo (1995) clearly shows that while large and high-density population makes finding victims easier, a number of other factors are clearly involved. Proponents of social class theory often suppose that the alienation-revenge scenario has explanatory power. Yet they reduce the complex network of motivations to the questions of blocked social mobility when they say that the murderer is "most often on the margins of the upper-working or lower middle classes who comes to feel excluded from the class he so devotedly wishes to join. In an extended campaign of vengeance, he murders people unknown to him, but who represent to him (in their behavior, appearance and their location) the class that has rejected him" (Leyton 23). And while Gunn (2000) may be right in pointing out that serial killers have a working class background which fact determines their choice of victims of same or even more underprivileged class, to have explanatory power, her analysis of instrumental correlations she has observed must suggest mechanisms connecting class membership with issues like victimization, traumatization, and alienation.

Social process theories, central to which, is a study of how exposure to abnormal environment during early socialization across various social institutions like family and school, tend to emphasize the damaging effects of aggression, neglect, violence, physical abuse, and parental cruelty (Bandura 1973, Brown 1984, Webster-Stratton 1985). Yet the retrospective design these studies have in common diminishes their explanatory power.

Whereas it is doubtless that the majority of serial killers suffered from various form of abuse across a wide spectrum of sites of social interaction, the majority of people who went through a similar emotional experience do not become serial killers and are able to live a fulfilling life with others.

Yet other theories zeroing in on the social construction aspect of serial murders question how the erosion of personal values takes place. Some suggest the importance of possible neutralization of personal values and attitudes in early adulthood (Matza 1964), while others do the legitimating of the inhuman behavior by denying the victim (Bandura 1974), or dehumanizing another person into a selfless thing (Charny 1980). These theories, in so far as they focus on the “how” of the formative periods of naturalization-desensitization, suggests the murderer a victim of defeating cognitive strategies that allow to nurture the self-perceived perfection of an Ego-ideal, while continuing to harbor a grudge against ‘this despicable world’, do little as to suggest how the perpetrators finds themselves in a position that makes desirable a refuge in activities denying the world and everything in it any value.

Equally problematic are theories of social control trying to weigh how the fear of punishment compares to individual commitments to society, family, and education in its ability to deter crime (Briar and Piliavin 1965). Some like Reckless (1967) suggest the importance of involvement in meaningful activities as well as a sense of belonging to various micro communities as factors positively affecting self-esteem, ego strength, and resilience of character, while others like Hirschi (1969) emphasize the importance of one’s bonds to society through attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief. In accurately describing a very important aspect of the deformation of some of the ways in which individuals are embedded within the social so that the momentum for a solipsistic inertia becomes sufficient for an individual to believe that the world does not deserve her presence, these theories, just like those dealing with neutralization of values, do not suggest how the people now willing to ‘sign off’ to their multiple commitments involving others, find themselves seeking to sever their connections with the ‘undeserving world’. Unless the temptation to deny the world meaning and significance, while willing to only love oneself unconditionally is a meta-structure of human self-consciousness, something that sets oneself against the world, disrupting the habitual unity of one’s identity must take place. And Hickey rightly identifies this something as experience of traumatization.

Traumatization brings about a feeling of dissociation as well as of low self-esteem and worthlessness that in turn begets violent fantasies culminating in homicidal behavior that reinforces trauma. This is why

a common characteristic of most if not all, serial offenders is feeling of inadequacy, self-doubt, and worthlessness. They do not cope constructively with the early trauma(s) and subsequently perceive themselves and their surroundings in distorted manner. It is during this time of childhood development that a process of dissociation may occur. In an effort to regain the psychological equilibrium taken from them by people in authority serial offenders appear to construct masks, facades, or a veneer of self-confidence and self-control[...]The offender may suppress traumatic event(s) to the point where he or she cannot consciously recall the experience. To defend oneself against a psychologically painful experience a person may block it from recall

or, instead, not consciously suppress the fact the trauma occurred but suppress the hurt, fear, anger, and other feelings caused by the events. However, the pain of a traumatic event will eventually resurface (Hickey 108-109).

While the excess of traumatic experience may very well be the reason behind the compulsive return to the scene of primary trauma – if only an imagined space featuring scenes of violence involving bodily mutilation, inhibiting one's control over impulses, and spawning dreams of revenge – it is not at all clear how and why “a never-ending pursuit of control over one's own life through the total domination and destruction of others' lives” (ibid.) has to become for the serial murderer a way to be in the world, let alone to reveal itself in the form of *overkill*. And it is not clear because the victim's mutilated body is not merely a canvass on which he violently expresses his wish to dominate; rather, the very act of depriving the other of her humanity becomes an expressive act of dual signification.

In this act, the particular other is signified as someone in possession of a stable identity the murderer covets [while the victim is still alive] and also as the murderer's own dead body [when the victim is dead], his being reduced to his body through the loss of his identity that once happened through the actions of some particular other [the sudden death of the world the murderer experienced when his humanity was denied by the other in the past]. In the frenzy of *overkill* the self fragmenting the body of another self communicates its own utter fragmentation to itself, recognizing in the terror of the rapidly extinguishing life of this another particular other the intensity and immediacy of the originary traumatic experience. The act of communicating this experience is what allows the murderer's identity temporary stability.

Self could be understood not as self-awareness facilitated by the smooth synthesis of the myriad stimuli impinging at any time on human nervous system,<sup>4</sup> or as some narrative self-interpretation possible through telling stories,<sup>5</sup> but as a structure necessarily involves a pre-reflective sense of the self that corresponds to one's being absorbed in the world. When the stability of this kind of self-understanding is undermined by traumatic experience, it suffers a fundamental disturbance in its relational architectonics to the world, sometimes losing the world entirely as a space of meaning and significance. Remaining is a cold space where random algorithms embody people and things only to sustain themselves. The world can appear as a space where: the other is *never* to be trusted; the other *never* understands; the other is *always* undeserving; appearances *always* belie how things really are; *nothing* lasts, so no serious commitments either can or should be formed; and where *nothing* is worth dying for. The person who has once lost the world is likely to see the possibility of another lethal blow originating from *any of the individual sites* comprising the social not as unlikely and arising in view of the indeterminacy necessary for self-determination that makes individuation possible, but as likely and unmotivated.

While studying the etiology of serial killing, researchers, whether they turn for explanations to psychogenetics or social construction theories, in thinking crime scenes a series of psychological snapshots revealing some of the qualities the killer consciously or unconsciously ascribes to himself (e.g. masculinity, power), overlook the communicative aspect of the murder almost entirely. What is being communicated to *the other as a totality of particular others* is that the murderer has no self because his world was once destroyed

*by a particular other* and because in what's left of that world there now can be no place for *the other as any particular other*, for the latter is viewed as capable of repeating the actions of *the particular other who had once destroyed the murderer's world*.

This is why Hickey, in his discussion of various factors correlative with the psychopathology of violent adult offenders, correctly points out that the The MacDonald Triad provides a line of evidence that hurt begets hurt and "the victim becomes a victimizer," (103) but cannot account for the mechanism by which this transformation takes place. How do the paternal neglect and abuse affect the formation of maladaptive behaviors in childhood? How does the logic presupposing a possibility of living in the world without having to expose one's vulnerability to others while counting on their trust first appear, leading one to seek pleasure in feeling alive by virtue of being *the only person aware of the direction of one's next destructive impulse*? What do animal cruelty, chronic enuresis, and firesetting have in common so that they are empirically linked to the development of a personality of a future serial murderer?

Control through domination of others as a compensatory or retaliatory strategy has been suggested as an explanation, but it misses the fundamental importance of one's having to show trust to others as a condition for having a world. It is so because one's sense of stability and permanence of the structures in which the unity of one's world is grounded depends on the internalized belief in the necessity of one's permanent display of one's vulnerability before the other so that there can be a space of meaning and significance. Let's consider the MacDonald Triad in more detail.

To explain animal cruelty by one's aberrant psychology, individual 'depravity,' 'sadistic inclination,' 'pathological worldview,' 'faulty neural wiring,' 'perverted sexuality' and the like is very easy. But doing so ignores the significance of the child's *turning to a nonhuman audience* to act out his insecurities as well as the fact that his position of the addressing this audience as *nonhuman* will only be validated in the act of torture itself, through the violent reduction of the fullness of one's being, if only a living thing. In the future, this will lead the child-torturer to deny his radical dependency on the other not by simply denying the other's humanity through the performance of gestures that violate his bodily integrity, but by turning him into *an impossible recipient of the torturer's display of vulnerability*. The torturer's vulnerability is insulated not because he gains invincibility through control—and thus is 'high and above the victim'—but because the torturee is reduced to *some-thing* subhuman that cannot *in principle* see anything human, let alone be the audience acknowledging the torturer's vulnerability. But the very intention to pass on one's attempt to deny his radical dependence on the other *as* one's justification for choosing not to expose one's vulnerability to that party should not itself be seen an instance of trying to assume control through manipulation. Rather, it should be seen as an expressive act, one that has an addressee and articulates the anxiety over the possibility of harm one is always exposed to in his interaction with the other as a condition of possibility for there being a self and a discursive community.

Another important aspect of torture that brings the child-torturer much relief is false and a short-lived pleasure of feeling secure because busy torturing somebody, the offender as if finds immunity from torture *any particular other* could be inflicting on him now. And

yet, this relief, too, is quick to turn into the anxiety of a constant anticipation of an attack similar to the one just delivered. For what has just come from within must be possible in the world as a course of action initiated by *any particular other*. Internalized, the logic of one's relating to the world that presupposes an ever present danger of yet another betrayal on the part of the any element of this world becomes integral to one's worldview. But to be always looking to be the first to take the world by surprise presupposes insecurity and suspicion as a *default mode* of one's being in the world. Scarcely surprising is that this pattern of self-defeating strategies destabilizes the child's stable perception of the self even more when coupled with *enuresis*—another MacDonald Triad behavior which is an *unconscious, involuntary, and nonviolent* act—for the latter easily becomes a disproportionately powerful marker of self-competence which together with self-liking form a sense of global self-esteem (Tafarodi and Swann 2001).

While the helplessness and guilt one might feel over the lack of control over one's bodily functions seem to transfer to or aggravate one's lack of stable identity, another danger to permanence is a penchant for firesetting. The child whose trust in the world has been betrayed finds consolation in watching the devouring flames in which he sees a silent confirmation that 'it has all really been *nothing*' and 'it will always be *nothing*'. What once happened to the child she sees as happening in the world all around: things like people can become nothing. And in the intensity of the transformation of the objects that were once part of the world into ashes, she revisits the experience of losing her world, one that was shattered perhaps the second when some *particular other* she had known as a loving presence violated the boundaries of what she had known as herself.

Firesetting, then, belongs together with the two other traits from the MacDonald Triad —animal cruelty and bedwetting—as a behavior revealing a relation to the very idea of a stable identity. The primary function of repeatedly seeking an opportunity to set things on fire at will is to cast out the idea that a stable sense of identity is only possible because there is always a great risk of losing. The denial of this risk happens in one's proving to oneself, in the act of destruction, that the world cannot and does not exist as a meaningful space comprising multiple other selves and possible largely in view of these multiple and dynamic fields of possibilities. The ashes become a symbol of the world's betrayal, of the cold remoteness of things appearing and disappearing, people living and dying, interpersonal bonds making and breaking. But this trying to eliminate every possibility of losing the world by denying the fragility of every identity in it as what makes this identity possible in the first place is exactly what turns the world of meaning and significance into a physical space enclosing a totality of physical objects with properties, into a kind of violent, indifferent nature. The entities one encounters in this space, while still intelligible, have now lost their significance: in the world in which a human person ceases to be its own embodied potentiality, an entity whose essence lies in its relating itself to itself, the human gets relegated to the realm of thing, a human being is now seen merely as a bundle of limbs. The only world one now knows is a world that was lost. The world becomes dead.

The world is dead because to have a world means to be living with others and having to trust them,<sup>6</sup> for the ethical substance of everyday living is trust, a relation too often invisible in our approaching one another close enough as to be able to harm without ever doing it which fact is supposedly recognized by all of the parties involved. Yet this



recognition of each other's vulnerability is unreflective but primary and practical; practical trust precedes moral reason; and trust relations are of paramount importance because they bear a sense of personal worth and vulnerability by virtue of being connected to parental love developmentally (Bernstein 395). Talking about her experience of rape, Susan Brison foregrounds the changed relation to her body that she now perceives as "an enemy, having betrayed my new-found trust and interest in it, and as a site of increased vulnerability" (44). In so far as traumatic experience "violates the autonomy of the person at the level of basic bodily integrity, [while] the body is invaded, injured, defiled" (ibid. 52-53), lost is the very line separating life from death, leading to a life in a space devoid of meaning and significance, and of things worthy to die for, a condition Orlando Patterson calls in his work a "soul/spiritual death."

The trust we must have to have a world, to recognize one another as persons is the invisible web of ethical relations without which our everyday life would be impossible. The traumatic experience, an event "in which a person feels utterly helpless in the face of a force that is perceived as life-threatening" (Brison 39), undermines to the point of extinction the default mode of trust in which we allow others to appear close to us. The life-threatening force now becomes *any* human other, becomes the world populated by others, becomes the force of sociality itself.<sup>7</sup> But whether as a world of objects or a network of *others*, the world now becomes a space where one's self is perceived as absolutely vulnerable, capable at any time to receive another disfiguring blow from anyone or from anything.

In slasher films such as *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (1980) or *Halloween* (1978), the killer, usually in an act of revenge, often kills without a particular method. Perfect strangers die *away from home*,<sup>8</sup> die *suddenly* while performing a wide range of activities. They die all possible deaths and with the help of all possible instruments. Before dying these strangers are often *made* to discover the corpses of other victims that unbeknownst to them are concealed in their proximity. The killer's expressive acts [multiple murders], in which he seeks to signify the unmediated sensory experience [the originary traumatic experience] and whose addressee is the Other as discursive community, show the world as a *destroyed home*, a place where the other is always dead because the opaqueness of his acts and words harbors a lethal threat, for in being with others there is always space for misunderstanding, trespass, and transgression.

In view of Caruth's observation that "trauma is not locatable in a single violent or original event in an individual's past but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on" (1995: 4), it appears that one of the deep structures in the slasher narrative is centered around the return of the repressed. The devastating intrusion of the villain is then nothing other than the 'infiltration,' 'leaking' of the traumatic event from the past into the present possible through the temporal unity of the human subject. The protagonist of the horror movie is fleeing from the anxiety over his own opaqueness to himself: in part, this happens because of the general way the past is always affecting the present in a variety of ways about which the subject will never get clear; in part, this happens because of the protagonist's intentional exclusion of a particular element in the past can be only be effective for some time before it intrudes into the world of his present in a way he could not anticipate. The destruction of the numerous physical boundaries partitioning the space

where the monster from the past seeks to become one with the fleeing present is a symbol of defeat of not only the vision of time that posits past, present, and now as discrete, but also of that kind of knowing that presupposes a subject that is distinct from it and is independently determined. This is why regardless of whether the 'reconciliatory scene' features the monster's actual destruction or only a temporary state of immobility when its body is only thought to be destroyed but lies hidden in plain view under the 'ruins of the past', it always involves the past making itself known to the present, *inscribing* itself into it. In many respects the only world the serial murders have is the world of a *destroyed home*.

The only reality of this world is the groundlessness of all that is and the nothingness hiding behind the multiple masks of the social order. And since *the other as all particular others* is only a mask and no meaningful relation can be established with the emptiness that he is, what one says and does—by way of using language and engaging in cultural practices that define the operant cultural style—now acquires a purely performative character<sup>9</sup>. Choosing to restrict the extent of the influence of his bond with others to the practice of engaging with the world at the level of intelligibility but not meaning or significance,<sup>10</sup> one's ironic distance becomes a first step in the direction of placing oneself outside the social as a sphere of mutually exposed vulnerabilities. It is as if the inscrutability of one's real intention, thoughts, and emotions to the other now gives him immunity from a transgression or trespass on the part of the other, of which the latter always capable by virtue of also being in the world.

As a site of traumatic experience that once led to the loss of the world, the other is perceived as a threat, so that in his relations to the other, the murderer displays a kind of logic that the introspective reflection below attempts to reconstruct. The other is a threat and to protect myself against this threat I disengage myself from what I say or do. I thus reduce the total vulnerability involved in our interaction to that contributed by the other, who most likely believes that, unless there is a social algorithm at play of which we're both aware, I mean what I say or do. But because I have no world and because I've disengaged myself from what I say or do, there is no way I can now know that the other hasn't done the same. And so I must strike and in this striking expose the nothingness of the other to himself and protect myself from a possible strike like the one I'm delivering right now.

Because there are many others, killing one allows only a temporary relief of knowing that I'm safe, that my vulnerability is not going to be exposed again. But the other is a source of threat as much as he is constitutive to my being a person, for the exposure of my vulnerability to him is necessary for there to be trust and there to be a world. And so I am drawn to violence because the hopelessness and powerlessness with which the other too is associated have to be overcome in a way so that my proximity to the death of the other paradoxically makes me feel alive in relation to him. But the other whose proximity I am seeking has to be the other that had already killed me in the past by taking my world away from me. The experiencing of my proximity to death via this other, then, takes the form of remembering how I once 'died'.

The act of murder, then, structures this act of remembering so that *the other* [my victim as a particular other] is turned into the *me once killed by the other* [me as victim/as a particular other/as a subject of traumatic experience], while the *murdering me* [a particular

other who is killing another particular other] becomes *the Other* as the very social fabric from which I feel to have been torn out by the incommunicability of my traumatic experience [the other as all particular others the recognition in whose vigilant eyes I seek]. This shifting of the points of view that the structure of this remembering involves *is* what makes my *looking-as-the-Other* at my *dead self-in-the-other* an attempt to signify the traumatic experience within the linguistic boundaries of the discursive community of which I am part<sup>11</sup>. The substitution of me for *the Other looking at the dead me* that takes place in the act of murder proceeds by means of metaphoric substitution and so is a communicative act involving indexicals and demonstratives. The Other has now *as if* been told about the other who had once killed me. I communicated my death to this Other via my assuming His point of view while looking at Himself as his dead other within Himself. But the Other *is not* some universal consciousness that subsumes the point of view of every individual consciousness, but rather is my understanding of my ability to transcend the contingent nature of my empirical selfhood through my recognition of social norms as universal. In trying to tell the Other of the tragedy that had once befallen me, in the way that involves showing myself as once an other within this Other, I am thus trying *as if* to convey to Him that within Him any other can die at any time, like I once did, but in so doing I mistake who my addressee is. Instead of realizing that I am addressing my own double situatedness the in the universal (laws that I know other people follow too and understand as such) and individual (my applying those laws to particular situations and knowing when and how to apply them), I think that I am speaking out to society and its laws as one unified entity. Relating one's traumatic experiences to the Other either takes the form of a narrative that tells Him how once my individual world was destroyed, or one from which the Other is supposed to 'learn' that the comfort of any of its existing practices always conceals a possibility of sudden death.

On July 30, 1977, Iantha Buchanan, the first victim in the Frampton series that had shocked most experienced of Seattle detectives was found dead at the construction site. Keppel and Birnes (2009) noted in their description of the overkill signature that

the killer was not only been out to kill her [Iantha], but to destroy her. She died from multiple blunt impact injuries to the head, with fractures of the vault and base of the skull, extensive cerebral cortical contusions, and extensive fractures of the facial bones. She also received blunt-impact injuries to the neck and trunk and sustained a fracture to her right clavicle. Marks in blood on the newly dried concrete surface showed that the killer had dragged the victim from the front of the building to the back. She was graphically posed in the corner of the building, lying on her back with her pubic region fully and deliberately exposed. One leg was propped up against the rear wall and the other propped up against the side or intersecting wall. Her feet were 23 inches from the floor, a position that seemed to indicate that the killer was degrading the very essence of her womanhood. She was partially nude with her panty hose on her left leg and removed from the right leg. Intertwined in the nylons was her underwear. Her red skirt was pulled up and covered her face (28-29).

While the extreme cruelty of this murder is beyond doubt, to suggest that prostitutes are attractive victims *because* they can easily "be picked up and, ultimately, controlled," (31) or that the overkill signature killer "is hardwired so perversely in the neural circuitry of his

primal brain that sex becomes violence and violence becomes sex in such a way that the killer never reaches climax at all," (32) or that "sexual acts of violent disrobing, ripping of clothing, and foreign object insertion were derived from the killer's need to cause pain and terror and to humiliate each victim by leaving her in a state of utter defilement" (32) is to overlook the complexity of what is signified in serial murder.

Much more is to be gained from the signature analysis if we attend to the significance of the fact that the victim's body was dragged from the *front* of the building to the *back*. Still *alive* at the *front* lantha is *dead* at the *back*. But she is dragged to the *back* by the same *force* that disrupts the integrity of her human *façade* through the act of violent disrobing, and ripping of clothing. At the back she is "*cornered*," both legs propped up against two intersecting walls, pubic region fully *disclosed*. But because lantha's face is covered with her skirt in the act of reducing the complexity of her personality to the social role she plays, what is "really disclosed" is her "true face" (lantha was a prostitute). The *force* capable of violently terminating people's lives and of exposing the transience and fragility of the *façade* of social entities is no longer at the scene of the crime in a way other than the significance of the arrangement of the elements of the crime-composition. In making the now breathless body touch the surface of a stable structure [the building], this force signifies itself as a possibility of a sudden and violent cessation of an individual life that inheres in the social structure in view of an unexpected and incalculable individual action whose potential site every member of a society is. Choosing to avoid the risk inherent in mutual exposition of vulnerability required in daily interactions between individuals, the murderer articulates his selflessness as someone whose trust in stability of things or security of human relations was disrupted so thoroughly that his only "true self" is a temporary respite while embodying the possibility of harm directed at another.

Always at stake, then, is the perpetrator's intense fear of being undone, either as a memory of personal 'world collapse' or of realizing one's total vulnerability to the world in fate's 'final intrusion' into the life of others, that blocks most ways of being able to meaningfully relate to the world. To understand how this expressive act is tied to the murderer's feeling overwhelmed, to see how the pleasure of violence figures into the subjectivity of the one who is killing and how it is related to the feeling of this subjectivity being bound to itself, we will consider the phenomenon of the sublime. While the sublime is a complicated concept that had been taken to stand for "the border of the Unpresentable, the limit of the Representation, the abyss of Imagination, the triumph of Reason, the end of Art and a path to Freedom" (Gero 1), it illuminates, in ways I show below, the experience of what could be described as 'feeling secure through remaining alive in proximity to the other's who is being undone.' The murderer seeks to again experience the feeling of being overwhelmed through a violent exposure of vulnerability.

For Kant, who distinguishes the mathematical<sup>12</sup> and dynamic<sup>13</sup> forms of the sublime, its negative pleasure,<sup>14</sup> that is, our sense of pleasure in the terror occasioned by it, "involves a momentary inhibition of vital forces, followed immediately by an outpouring of them all the stronger" (245/98).<sup>15</sup> Finding itself surpassing all standards of sense, reason brings us to realize that we belong to both phenomenal and noumenal domains, and that in the indeterminate experience of transcending of our sensibility comes to view our vocation as beings that are rational and free.

In his discussion of the perceptual sublime Howard Caygill emphasizes the violent birth of subjectivity of which we are reminded via our contemplation of some natural scenes capable of occasioning the feeling of the sublime:

The proportion of normal experience originates in the abnormal experience of the sublime. The regularity of proportion has its ground in the irregular violence of the sublime, and the life-enhancing form of beauty is traced back to the violent outrage which the imagination visited upon itself. The disposition of activity and passivity and resistance is the same formula as the violence of the mathematical sublime. When encountering objects in time, we are subject to their might, but we bring them under our dominion when we arrest them in space and determine them according to our proportions (345-346).

The way we inhabit the world, then, is not in finding order in it but in imposing it from without to subdue the terrifying chaos of nature, to temporarily escape the feeling of being overwhelmed by the violent, inhospitable, disenchanting nature. Through the cracks of our orderly existence we see the formless realm of nature of a source of all change, a power in whose face and by whose mercy we still enjoy the feeling of perceptual unity and being alive. But in terms of the radical indeterminacy of the events transpiring in it, our world as existential space, a forum for action where things always already have meaning and significance, has always been subject to the force whose laws we have been trying to tame by a web of the instrumental correlations that science keeps weaving.

Yet the response to formlessness and unboundedness inherent in the sublime could also be occasioned by the very act of our contemplative separation from the event revealing culture and its accomplishments as fragile veneer over the violent forces of nature acting inside and outside us (e.g. war, fatal accidents).<sup>16</sup> We see as threatening the very idea of a possibility of arriving at a space of a sudden closure of our being in the world by the blind force of fate, which in today's world almost always involves another human being.

One aspect of the violence of the modern sublime lies in our very embeddedness in the social, whose structure makes the stitching of one's interpersonal interactions an extended zone of vulnerability, for in the actions of the other always resides a possibility of cosmos unhinged. Constitutive to human identity, as long as it involves the embodiment of the radical indeterminacy of being in the world, is a temptation of reason, an illusion of not being subject to an unexpected and a devastating blow of fate through becoming its agent and embodying its violent and chaotic nature. Having once been undone, in this transient triumph of the stable form of identity that this way of existing promises, the offender finds peace.

The immediate certainty of being *the other*, in the sense of the radical indeterminacy that governs the social and imposes on humans a limit of finitude, arises when the offender delivers the preempting blow at what he sees as the chaotic and violent nature of the social. But in so doing a single liquidated source of threat splits into infinite other *possibly existing* sites whose totality the social is. Now it is the (inter)subjectivity of human life itself that presses down on the murderer that he sees only as an overwhelming force that is always

acting, always capable of destroying him. An exhilarating cry of someone who has through taking another's life subdued the radical indeterminacy of being in the world instantly is a cry of despair. It belongs to someone who has understood that the murdering of the other has been an attempt to animate what could only exist in one's imagination, make one's own a person infinitely independent from the one just like herself. This person through her being one of the multiples others within the Other is now too associated with death and danger, for in the past one of the others just like her brought death to the world of another one. The silent, mutilated body of the victim becomes an unresisting and unrejecting partner incapable of trespass or unavoidable injury through action, the only other to be trusted. The other is now communicated as a concept to which a possibility of bringing death and suffering to all others like him through interaction belongs analytically.<sup>17</sup>

The body is silent because being able to speak means being able to hurt. But it is also silent because what the murderer articulates to publicness by strangling the particular other is his inability to express what once had happened, making the victim embody himself grasping for language to convey the traumatic experience. The body is mutilated because one's inability to be *the other* [any particular other] yields to the signifying frenzy, repetitive contact with what is seen as the border to the other's individuality. And though physical proximity to another's body promises access, change, continuity, it delivers none, pointing at the victim's absolute independence, suggesting through the deafening silence that the distance the murderer trying to traverse is unsurpassable, and that anything with which he might choose to do it, be it a knife or a hand, by virtue of being absolutely foreign, emphasizes this distance at the conceptual level. Equally foreign remains the identity of the murderer to himself, for the only publicly revealed and validated identity he has is the "serial killer," the empty universal with which the public designates the totality of his expressive acts, whose content is the admission of the inexpressibility of one's traumatic experience to the other.

The performative reenactment of trauma proceeds by signifying *the other* as oneself and oneself as *the other* who can now see the loss of the world that took place and thus as if extract the content corresponding to the personal experience the murderer's communicative acts sought to express. But as a pattern of signification revealing traumatic experience in one's past, the "serial killer" is bound to remain an empty universal despite the growing collection of his works until the "who," the "why," the "where" and the "when" of his crimes gets worked out during the investigation and trial and he thus gains particularity. This means that a permanent identity of a serial murderer is only established in the negotiation of the meaning—within the public domain and by the use of language, as something that is essentially shared— of what can be called utterances in his *private language*. The meaning of these utterances up until their public discovery and acknowledgement can be said to have been limited *only* to one's *willingness* to subsume personal traumatic experience under the categories of language shared with others so that the other as a community could see how the other as one of its individuals had once deprived another one of its individuals [the perpetrator] of his world.

The double inexpressive inertia that murders as instances of trauma narrative contain as a means of conveying to public the intensity and immediacy of the murderer's individual experience as if secures the inviolability of the murderer's interiority. He feels that it might

be easily broken, in light of the difficulty of approximating his traumatic experience to others through language as a shared system of signification. But in signifying *only* his *willingness* to convey his experience the murderer only signifies the *intensity* and *immediacy* of his traumatic experience. Revealing more than the magnitude of the intensity of the traumatic experience and its immediacy requires a world of trust that had been irrevocably lost. In so far as traumatic experience is communicated to others by means of a *private language* it allows oneself to inhabit the world without a possible trespass or transgression coming from the other, as

a fantasy of necessary inexpressiveness [it] would relieve me of responsibility for making myself known to others – as though if I were expressive that would mean continuously betraying my experiences, incessantly giving myself away; it would suggest that my responsibility for self-knowledge takes care of itself – as though the fact that others cannot know my (inner) life means that I cannot fail to (Cavell 351).

Most importantly, then, as aspects of trauma narratives, serial murderers' signature and modus operandi suggest that the feeling of helplessness and desperation over the realization of one's having to signify his immediate sensory experience within the community, while remaining within the confines of human language, always puts the speaker in a position of vulnerability, one of having to trusting the other that what one says can and will be understood.

While in the case of serial murderers no public negotiation of the meaning that private language expressions meant to convey can lead to either the cleansing of any of their acts or to the undoing of what was done, this negotiation creates a possibility of establishing a stable sense of identity in the perpetrator. By separating the murderer from his punishment, either death or life imprisonment, by the entire duration of a process of the collective (re)construction of murders as instances of (re)cognitive acts—through which the self of the agent who committed them will be arrived at collectively in the end—publicness (re)inserts the perpetrator into the fabrics of the social. The murderer as if regains the (inter)subjectivity of his self through the symbolic surrender of his life to the law as a symbol of recognizing the radical dependency on the other as a prerequisite for individuality. The signature and modus operandi of serial murderers not only suggest the intricate way in which memory engages both (re)enactment and (re)cognition in relation to a stable sense of identity, but also highlights the dual potential of individual expressive acts as a variety of trauma texts. Growth and healing through a creative estrangement of traumatic experience possible across a wide range of human actions can, nevertheless, in case the traumatic event remains the sole source of meaning in one's life, easily deteriorate into a perpetuation of the solipsistic paradise in which the other is denied his place in the world again and again.

One of the most important implications of this dual potential of trauma text is in discovering the healing potential concealed in the practice of legal procedure whose primary function appears to be the accuracy with which the punishment made fit the crime. What we constantly overlook is that in most severe cases the introspection the defendant goes through to provide what seems to us merely technical information is sufficient to restore his faith that meaning does exist and that one is capable of releasing oneself from the past even

if to shortly experience the vengeance of the living, whose world is capable of both being collapsed by the force of death and saved by the power of love.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In this article I follow the broad definition of serial murder by the FBI as “the unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offender in separate events” (2008: 12). The categories of anger, criminal enterprise, financial gain, ideology, power thrill, sexual gratification, psychosis-driven (Ibid., 24) refer to the primary motivations of the murderers. I look at the hedonistic and power/control-oriented type murderers from the Holmes and DeBurger’s typology of the offenders (1988). For more on serial murder typology see Danto (1982), Guttmacher (1973), Lee (1988), Levin and Fox (1985), Lunde (1976), and Wille (1974). While the theory of serial murderers I offer in this paper widely departs, in terms of methodology used, from the self-feeding models of trauma reinforcement like the trauma-control model for serial murder proposed by Hickey (2010), I use the existing taxonomy and classification of serial murder and its aspects for compatibility with other works on the subject.

<sup>2</sup> Buffalo Bill is a composite character inspired by six real-life serial murderers: Jerry Brudos, Ed Gein, Ted Bundy, Gary M. Heidnik, Edmund Kemper, Gary Ridgway.

<sup>3</sup> The character of Dr. Hannibal Lecter has been said to be inspired by Albert Fish, William Coyne, and the story of his traumatization by that of Andrey Chikatilo.

<sup>4</sup> In Dan Zahavi (2005) lists three perspectives on the self: Kantian, phenomenological, narrative. The Kantian self is “understood as the pure subject, or ego-pole, that any episode of experiencing necessarily refers back to” (104). A formal “principle of identity that stands apart from and above the stream of changing experience and which, for that very reason, is able to structure it and give it unity and coherence” (ibid.), this kind of self is not given in experience because it [the transcendental unity of apperception] is one of the formal condition of experience. Unlike, the Kantian self, the phenomenological one is a “feature of its givenness”. This kind of self refers to the totality of experiences one pre-reflectively experience as his, this awareness being “experiential”, “minimal”, or “core” selfhood.

<sup>5</sup> Zahavi’s perspective on the narrative self views narrative self-interpretation as fundamentally distinct from but dependent on what he calls a “minimal selfhood,” that is, the basic first-personal, pre-reflective givenness of our experience. Yet in bringing the narrative selfhood to the fore and letting it account for an individual’s personal identity, Zahavi sidesteps the question of pre-reflective self-understanding, the question at the heart of my theoretical account of authorship and narrative grammar.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the loss of trust in the world and on the death-like experience associated with the violation of the bodily self see also Jean Amery, *At the Mind’s Limit: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980; Brison; and Patterson.

<sup>7</sup> Herman astutely points out that “when the victim is already devalued (a woman, a child), she may find that the most traumatic events of her life take place outside *the realm of socially validated reality*. Her experience becomes unspeakable” (8).

<sup>8</sup> I owe this point to Zach Smith.

<sup>9</sup> Consider John Wane Gacy, a.k.a. the Killer Clown, whose involvement in the life of the local community like fundraising, hosting summer parties for children and entertaining the hospitalized young apparently had little significance for him. It seems that most terrifying to



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him was the realization that nothing he did for other people was inherently significant or satisfying. His was the terror of existing merely as Pogo the Clown, a lifeless universal with no interiority.

<sup>10</sup> For this very reason the murderer's retrospective insights that seek to present what happened as a coherent narrative with plausible motivations should never be taken at face value. To be human is to be always interpreting things, seeking causes and motivation. One's realization that he did it to get sexual gratification, to feel domination, to be in control, etc. only shows that the perpetrator is familiar with discursive practices operant in serial murder cases and is capable of modeling his confession after one of the prevalent models, e.g. "I killed because I felt angry. I felt angry because I was wronged. When I was wronged I felt helpless, so killing and torturing others made me feel in control and helped alleviate anger." Equally suspicious should be treated statements of taking full responsibility and rejecting the possibility of temporary mental eclipse like in the case of Ted Bundy who would unflinchingly say that he had a perfect memory of what went on the date preceding the act. This very insisting on one's being sure why he did it and offering numerous often unverifiable details as if to prove that the story offered does contain a description of the murderer's real motivation should itself primarily be seen as an occasion to assert self-will and feel in control. At most any "Now, that I am looking back..." kind of narrative that features introspection and one's analysis of motivations and inner states should be only treated as one of the narratives that seeks to provide a glimpse into the incredibly complex tangle of motivations and beliefs motoring the murders, the body of the victim remaining the principle narrative and crime scene an interpretative context.

<sup>11</sup> Consider Yan Xinhai, the most prolific serial murderer China has ever seen. It would seem that his varying the weapon of murder such as axes, hammers, shovels and wearing new clothes and large shoes was a means to conceal his identity and send the police down the false trail. And it would seem especially true when offered as an explanation by Yan Xinhai himself. Much more important however is to remember the emotional burden of feeling socially excluded within Chinese culture whose emphasis on individuality is incommensurably smaller than in the United States. Thus his appearing during his murders as the multiplicity of tools and clothes and shoes was his appearing of the multiplicity of the watching eyes of the other, who had to see him die on the day his girlfriend's decision to break up with him felt like the loss of his world.

<sup>12</sup> The mathematical sublime is roughly the necessity of thinking the infinite when imagination fails to provide "comprehension in one intuition, and exhibition of all the members of a progressively increasing numerical series" (Kant 254) when trying for instance to not lose a single house opening up to view as the plane on which you are aboard lowers its flying altitude.

<sup>13</sup> The dynamic sublime is reason's superiority over nature that finds itself here in our response to threatening rocks, volcanoes and the like that allows us to feel awe without feeling afraid through aesthetic perception that is possible because we are safely removed from a potentially dangerous site by the distance of reason itself.

<sup>14</sup> "Hence it is an emotion, and so it seems to be seriousness, rather than play, in the imagination's activity. Hence, too, this liking is incompatible with charms, and since the mind is not just attracted by this object but is alternatively repelled as well, the liking for the sublime contains not so much a positive pleasure as rather admiration and respect, and so should be called a negative pleasure" (245).

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<sup>15</sup> The first page number in the Kant reference refers to the page number in the German now standard Academie edition, the second to the Pluhar translation.

<sup>16</sup> In the case of Jeffrey Dahmer, his fascination with dissecting the road kill he collected may have brought about a traumatic realization of the silent side of animal and human life. And it could have been this realization that finitude means always being able to lose life as an identity and being reduced to the silence of the physical substratum that was most traumatic, not the fact that Dahmer's sexuality was developing together with his experiments that sought to discover what various forms of life looked like on the inside. It looks that the impact of discovering of the vision of the world as a physical space populated with brute facts outweighed all attempts by Lionel Dahmer, his father, to engage Jeff in a variety of activities that would strengthen a sense of how important social relations are in human life.

Andrei Chikatilo, a.k.a. the "Russian Ripper", a world-wide known Russian serial murderer, witnessed, as a child growing up in Ukraine, some of the horrors of the WWII, including "blown-apart children" and "gathering the corpses...in pieces" (Krivich and Ol'gin 113). His mother's story that his older brother Stepan was kidnapped and eaten during the famine and the fact that his sister suffered from the muscular condition causing "her rectum to fall out of her anus" so that Chikatilo "spent his prepubescent years haunted by the sight of her and their mother stuffing it back in" (ibid., 143) may have led, combined with his systematically being punished by his mother for bedwetting, to the development of an obsession of being undone, of being devoured by inhabiting a fragmented, dysfunctional body.

Anatoly Slivko, a founder of *Chergid*, a boyscout-like organization for Soviet pioneers, had witnessed a car accident that put an end to the life of a boy who, dressed in a new uniform, was riding a motorcycle together with his father. The fact that Slivko, who was an avid photographer and a video operator, asked many of his pioneers to participate in what he called 'secret experiments' in which, dressed in the pioneer uniform, they were often suspended by the neck until they lost consciousness should not be explained by the fact that he was simply trying to recall the spasms of pleasure he first experienced after he came home on the day of the accident. While the behavioral version of Slivko's M.O. and signature foregrounds the "incorrect" pairing of the stimulus (death) and physiological response (excitement), it overlooks a much more important fact, namely that excitement or sexual arousal could themselves be pointing to the feeling of being overwhelmed by the radical indeterminacy of events transpiring in the world. The growing complexity of Slivko's 'experimental design,' his taking accurate 'scientific' measurement of what went on before his eyes and his filming it, suggest that in his experiments apart from trying to relive the originary traumatic episode, he also was trying to exclude himself from a list of potential victims who belonged to the world of the Soviet discursive subjects. And he did that by coming to temporarily embody the unpredicable nature itself, the same nature that made him feel finite despite all discursive powers.

<sup>17</sup> This point is reflected in many visual texts serial murderers have created. In these texts intact structures [e.g. an anime character] often appear as if at the same time fragmented [the body of an anime character as if assembled together from individual components with the help of some grid-like structure made out of glass]. Another common feature of these texts is enclosing the concept of death in within the symbols not tied to it analytically, e.g. choosing to depict a severed clown head as opposed to just a clown head as if posits

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death and destruction an inextricable part of role playing that social interactions require, stressing one's susceptibility to harm in view of our daily engagement in the mutual exposition of vulnerability that trust requires.

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