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**How to Cite:** Jones, K. 2020. Returning to the Scene: Seriality and the Serial Killer. *Open Screens*, 3(1): 5, pp. 1–25. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/os.27>

**Published:** 09 December 2020

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## RESEARCH

# Returning to the Scene: Seriality and the Serial Killer

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This article reads the perennial popularity of true crime products as symptomatic of repression and cultural trauma. Providing a close-reading of gender representation in the popular Netflix series *Mindhunter*, the author meditates on the postmodern characteristics of the series, which also signal the “forgotten” or repressed content to which the viewer returns. Utilising a feminist psychoanalytic approach to the popular Netflix series *Mindhunter*, the author considers representation in relation to seriality in order to speculate that seriality might formalise the traumatic return, and be used as material through which to unearth the repressed content inherent to the true crime genre, namely: the victim’s perspective.

**Keywords:** *Mindhunter*; representation; seriality; gender; serial killers; true crime; trauma; psychoanalysis

## Introduction

Monstrous yet seductive, popular representations of the serial killer fascinate and disgust consumers of this genre of cultural product. Mark Seltzer implies the extent of our interest in this particular configuration of masculinity when he writes that depictions of the serial killer and serial murder ‘have by now largely replaced the Western as the most popular genre-fiction of the body and of bodily violence in our culture’ (Seltzer 1998:1). The serial killer’s relationship to consumption has been explored by Christina Lee, who observes that the fictional exploits of *American Psycho*’s (1991) investment banker and compulsive murderer, Patrick Bateman, present ‘a limit case of commodity fetishism that no longer recognizes the process of production, merely the act of consumption. He can only conceptualise things in their finished form, that is, the money form of a commodity’ (Lee 2000: 111).

In the Netflix series *Mindhunter* (2017-), the relationship between serial killing, commodity culture, and consumerism is more subtle, but nonetheless manifests itself at times – such as when convicted murderer Monte Rissell (Sam Strike) requests a can of Big Red soda in exchange for his interview (*Mindhunter* 2017: 1.4). The series adapts the non-fiction crime book of the same title by John Douglas and Mark Olshaker, which in turn is based on research conducted by a group of FBI agents and psychologists (led by John Douglas, Robert Ressler, and Ann Wolbert Burgess) in the 1970s. However, in Ressler and Tom Shachtman's *Whoever Fights Monsters* (1992), the link between serial consumption and the term serial killer is made explicit: Ressler reveals that the term “serial killer” is partly inspired by his own viewership of *The Phantom*. Just as a cliff-hanger works to attract the viewer's return, the act of murder ‘leaves the murderer hanging, because it isn't as perfect as his fantasy’ (Ressler and Schachtman 1992: 33). The return of the spectator and the murderer, then, is linked to a fantasy of a more fulfilling “consumer” experience. In the *Mindhunter* series, which will be my focus here, FBI agents Holden Ford (Jonathan Groff) and Bill Tench (Holt McCannely), and psychologist Dr. Wendy Carr (Anna Torv) interview some of America's most notorious serial killers: Edmund Kemper/“the co-ed killer” (Cameron Britton), David Berkowitz/“Son of Sam” (Oliver Cooper), and Charles Manson (Damon Herriman), among others. The fictionalisation of these murderers return to the known details of the “real life” crimes, as the viewer also returns to these events, which are simultaneously rooted in reality and fiction/fantasy.

The perennial popularity of films, mini-dramas, and documentary-style TV shows depicting the above-named figures – and others, such as Ted Bundy, Fred West, and Peter Sutcliffe – reflects the symbiotic relationship between the popular media, which helps produce the sensationalism surrounding these types of crimes, and our collective fascinated consumption of them. As a culture, it seems we compulsively return to the scenes of these crimes. This article utilises a feminist psychoanalytic model to consider the phenomenon of this repetitious cultural return in relation to theoretical approaches to seriality, which is already related to the idea of repetitious consumption. Indeed, seriality's relationship to capitalist modes of production

and consumption is well-theorized, as are the ways in which our changing forms of spectatorship serve to heighten this relationship. As Veronica Innocenti and Guglielmo Prescatore (2014) point out, the release of an episode is no longer a weekly viewing event, instead our consumption is more likely to be dislocated from a specific time and day as entire series are available for *binge watching* upon first release on platforms such as Netflix or Amazon Prime. This article meditates on what our binge consumption and spectatorship of programmes about serial killers might reflect – first, by exploring the ways in which *Mindhunter* consciously underlines, critiques and contributes to the mythology of the serial killer, gender, and the serial killer genre. Next, it considers aesthetics and problems of representation; lastly, I put this into dialogue with the notion of seriality and speculate on what our cultural return(s) to these traumas, and the nature of our remembrance, might reveal. With particular reference to psychoanalytic approaches to mourning, ultimately this paper argues that the postmodern characteristics of our return signal repression, and the victim's experience constitutes the latent content of the true crime filmic or televised products, while our collective return to these scenes implies our own societal wounds.

### **Mythos and Masculinity**

The serial killer mythology makes a celebrity of the criminal, indicating 'the roles fame and violence play in American culture' (Schmid 2005: 2). *Mindhunter* draws attention to the peculiar Americanization of the serial killer through its billboard-like on-screen titles announcing the town and state as the detectives travel to meet their interviewees or investigate a crime. While a transgressive figure, the serial killer can nonetheless be viewed as serving conservative ends. Joseph Gixti argues that the cultural construction of serial killers reinforces a reactionary sentiment, positioning these criminals as monsters who 'repeatedly emerge as the exceptions that make the rule'; they are 'the chinks and cracks in the fabric' that 'remind us of the structural soundness of the fabric itself' (Gixti 1995: 95). Further, due to depictions of serial killers as predominantly white and male, they 'uphold the dominant order of male

supremacy and [are] not an aberration but rather an extreme form of the social control of women through fear and terror' (O'Neil and Seal 2012: 107). Indeed, despite the relatively low levels of this type of crime (particularly when compared with seemingly random violent outbursts/attacks between men, for example), the disproportionate sensationalism surrounding the murder of women by strangers constitutes a form of discipline exerted over the female subject, reproducing the effects of the crime itself on a larger scale. The extent to which serial murder captures our imagination as a culture, both in the "real life" present (as a news story, for example), and as a true crime or fictional film suggests an attempt towards the fulfilment of an unmet need. The last section of this article addresses this point with reference to a wounded culture that fails to mourn; the serial killer genre as it is reflects a society alienated from mourning practices. This is not to condemn the genre, which contends with serious problems for which it is not in and of itself to blame. As Darian Leader writes in his a discussion of Freud's essay *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), 'we tend to repeat things when we remain trapped in them' (2009: 30). Indeed, for Annalee Newitz,

stories about serial killers come to us as commodities, safely framed as entertainment. Even as audiences learn about the profound violence to which alienated labor can lead, they are alienated from their own discovery. All that's left for us to do is consume these stories—again and again and again' (Newitz 2006: 51).

The repetition of the true crime stories suggests our confinement in something that they represent – though what they represent may shift and transform.

The disproportionate sensationalism around serial murder constitutes a form of discipline over the female subject, who is most regularly depicted as victim. Like most depictions of serial killers (fictional and "real"), in *Mindhunter* the victims appear somewhat liminal, and they are mostly women, marginal people (single mothers, gay men, homeless people), or children, although Dennis Rader's/the BTK's (Sonny Valicenti) crimes do subvert this trope somewhat. However, *Mindhunter* does not visually revel in the violence of the crimes committed; rather, they are orally described

in a gratuitous manner – such as when Ed Kemper describes raping the severed neck of his beheaded victims. The verbal, rather than visual, representation of murder may be seen to evade the frenzied sensationalism and gore of the genre, which regularly revels in visual representations of brutality against women. On the other hand, the descriptions of such events may also have a somewhat sanitising effect, prioritising the perspective and voice of the murderer and repressing the violence to a certain extent. *Mindhunter's* shift away from explicit violence and gore constitutes a distinct variance on earlier kinds of serial killer films, which have their roots in realism and naturalism, as opposed to gothic genres (Newitz 2006: 15).

While transgressive, the serial killer may also be viewed as belonging to a spectrum of masculinity, displaying extreme versions of traits shared with “normative” masculine styles. (For reflections on depictions of the female serial killer, see the variously authored essays collected in Helen Birch's *Moving Targets*.) *Mindhunter* explores this by blurring the boundaries between the investigator and the serial killer, a common trope of the genre – and one gestured toward in the title, which implies that the FBI agents are also “hunters” of sorts. The first season of *Mindhunter* focusses on the insights elicited from interviews with several infamous murderers, two distinct “live” sexually-motivated murder cases, Holden's burgeoning interest in the psychological motivations behind the acts committed by serial murderers, and his romantic relationship with sociology grad-student Debbie (Hannah Gross). Throughout season one, Holden's interview techniques are questionable; he poses as an ally to the murderers he interviews. For example, he asks Richard Speck ‘what gives you the right to take eight ripe cunts out of the world? Some of them looked pretty good. Ever think you were depriving the rest of us?’ (*Mindhunter* 2017: 1.9). Holden's misogynist posturing jars with his character in scenes of his and Debbie's conversations and lovemaking, in which he is depicted as a lover interested in mutual pleasure. However, he also expresses anxieties regarding the authenticity of her pleasure and her fidelity, which in turn mirror the anxieties of his interviewees, whose statements imply the myriad ways in which women threaten them. For example, when Tench and Ford interview Monte Rissell, he tells the detectives that his girlfriend's infidelity prompted him to attack his first victim. However, he also

reveals that he initially intended to rape his first victim, but when her response to his assault was to perform pleasure, thereby taking away his power as aggressor, he spontaneously reacted with rage and murdered her.

Bracketing the resemblance (or lack thereof) this statement may have to the actual murder of Aura Marina Gabor on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1976, in *Mindhunter* such revelations from the serial killers' mouths mirror Holden's personal anxieties. Angelica Bastián argues that the series exposes the 'horror of misogyny' (Bastián 2017) by underlining the parallels between investigator (signalling normative masculinity) and killer. The vital difference, though, is that when Holden sees Debbie flirting with Patrick, her fellow student, his obvious anger does not become sinister; he leaves the venue. Similarly, when their relationship ends (*Mindhunter* 2017: 1.10), he does not react violently toward her or anyone else, thereby demonstrating his difference from the criminals with whom he may share similar (stereotypically heterosexual male) anxieties. In other words, while the relationship between normative and brutal masculinities is explored, the connections are complicated.

Contrastingly, in his compelling comparison of the representation of serial killers and gay men in American culture in the mid and late twentieth century, Edward Ingebretsen suggests that the conflation between serial murder and homosexuality serves to inscribe traditional gender roles. In Ingebretsen's view, cultural constructions of the serial killer, like those of the gay man, signal a failed masculinity: 'by exhibiting a *demonstrable* social failure, these persons are understood to oppose the public manhood of heteronormativity' (Ingebretsen 2001: 76, original italics). The serial killers is seen to be a threat to the domestic sphere because he fails to conform to typified masculine behaviours. In *Mindhunter* this trope manifests itself through the various meditations on the sexual practices of the murderers – for example, depictions of Jerry Brudos' penchant for women's shoes (*Mindhunter* 2017: 1.7) and Dennis Rader's proclivity for cross-dressing (*Mindhunter* 2019: 2.1). As men who are married to women, their perceived gender transgressions signal a threat to American "family values".

Alongside the typified masculine figures of the detectives and serial murderers, women in *Mindhunter* occupy several typical roles, namely that of victim,

wife/girlfriend, and professional woman, though the series complicates these roles. For example, Nancy, Tench's wife, adopted their son Brian, so she is not the "typical" or archetypal mother in this respect; similarly, Debbie's intellect and independence set her apart from one-dimensional representations of girlfriends in male-centric programmes. Alongside the more extreme misogyny of the interviewees, *Mindhunter* addresses the subtle victimisation of women through Wendy, who is subject to repeated unwanted sexual advances at a work party (*Mindhunter* 2019: 2.5), and excluded from field work by her male boss (*Mindhunter* 2019: 2.7). Her independence is likewise problematized. For example, when she takes to feeding a stray cat by leaving food next to the open window of the laundry room in her apartment building: Across several episodes, the viewer watches her as she walks down to the laundry room, on one occasion wearing only her nightwear, and there is a sense of dread as she approaches the window in the dark. Her state of dress conveys vulnerability, and – due to the nature of the genre – the viewer is aware of what may befall women who live alone and risk leaving windows open. This subplot culminates in Wendy finding the food rotten and uneaten (*Mindhunter* 2017: 1.9). In an interview, Torv (who plays Wendy) states that David Fincher (one of the show's creators) revealed to her that the subplot was included to suggest that a budding serial murderer may live nearby and be practicing the well-known precursor to violence against people: the torture and killing of animals (Ausiello 2017). What this suggests is that the register of the genre cannot fail but to problematise Wendy's independence as it codes femininity or female-ness in terms of victimhood, rendering her always a potential woman in peril.

Just as female independence is simultaneously represented and unsettled, the characterisation of domesticity is similarly disconcerting. When investigating the murder of a young woman named Beverly Jean Shaw, found raped, murdered, and mutilated post-mortem, Tench and Ford consider a married suspect named Alvin Moran. Tench remarks that if a married man had committed the murder, he would have tortured Beverly first:

When you're married, it's a contract. There's children, a mortgage, a house to keep up, almost like a business. Only you can't quit. She can't fire you. Stock



goes up, stock goes down doesn't matter, you're trapped. Unless you want to bring on the lawyers and open Pandora's box. Resentment builds on both sides. A thousand tiny cuts. If Alvin Moran had a married man's anger, he'd have tortured, then killed her (*Mindhunter* 2017: 1.4).

A startling admission from Tench, a "family man" who loves his wife; it gestures toward a frustration with the status quo ordinarily suppressed in favour of bourgeois family values. The "stock" implies its connection to late-capitalist modes of conceptualising relationships, and while marriage as contractual obligation confers a Kantian approach to marriage, it predominantly refers to the organisation of society around work and family life ('she can't fire you'). Notably, if this particular rage were to be enacted on the body of the young woman, her fate would have been worse than her rape and murder.

The fictionalisation of the married BTK killer directs his rage squarely at the home and family unit: he murders families in their homes. In one of the vignettes depicting his life, his wife returns home and we see her in slow motion approaching a door that seems to be straining and rattling at the weight of something; when she opens the door she finds her husband dressed in lingerie and engaging in autoerotic-asphyxiation. Roxy Music's 'In Every Dream Home a Heartache' provides the soundtrack to this scene, with lyrics that underline the tedium of bourgeois capitalist concerns, and renders such conservative values ridiculous: 'Open plan living/Bungalow ranch style/All of its comforts/Seem so essential/I bought you mail order/My plain wrapper baby/Your skin is like vinyl/The perfect companion/[...] Inflatable doll/My role is to serve you/Disposable darling/Can't throw you away now' (Ferry et al 1974). The alienated position of the song's voice mirrors that of Dennis Rader, whose sexual proclivities constitute a source of shame. In this sense, the serial killer becomes a symbol of alienated masculinity and the repressed sexuality of the male subject within this context. Of course, this position appears to attribute blame onto women as they constitute the target of this rage. Just as feminist commentary highlights the home as a space of the historical exploitation and containment of women, the male characters in *Mindhunter* sketch a picture in

which they are contained and repressed within the institutions of marriage and the family in a post-1950s context.

### **Aesthetics and the Anxiety of Representation**

In many of the best known depictions of serial murder in fiction and film, the crimes are highly aestheticized; there is a perverse genius lurking behind the criminal acts (cf. Thomas Harris's *Red Dragon*, 1981; Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs*, 1991; David Fincher's *Se7en*, 1995; *Dexter*, 2006–2013). Equations are drawn between the serial killer and the artist, à la Thomas de Quincey's 'On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts' (1827). For instance, Harris draws associations between the fictional murderer Dolarhyde and William Blake in *Red Dragon*. The notion of the serial killer as an artist of sorts comes through in the final episode of the first season: when Edmund Kemper threatens Holden he claims 'I could kill you now, pretty easily. Do some interesting things before anyone showed up' (*Mindhunter* 2017: 1.10). Depictions of the BTK/Dennis Rader's activities may also conform to this stereotype, as he maintains a double life, remains undetected, and is extremely methodical – we see him practising tying knots, for instance. This said, we also witness him in various awkward situations, which render him somewhat pathetic, laughable even (were it not for the gravity of his crimes) – for instance, when preparing a note intended to taunt the police, his papers get jammed in the public library's photocopier. The generic trope/norm of aestheticized murder is somewhat subverted in *Mindhunter*, in which the viewer witnesses one bloody suicide in action (1.1), but all other depictions of death are doubly mediated as bodies are shown in photographs or described by characters.

The double life of the BTK killer constitutes one manifestation of the series' main themes: that of masks and the unknowability of the other. Wendy Carr, the academic working with Tench and Holden, lived openly as a lesbian woman while working at a University, but when she transitions to Quantico and the FBI she keeps her colleagues in the dark with regard to her sexuality. *Mindhunter* presents audiences with a series of conceits alluding to social guises and sociological theory regarding the ways in which we consciously or unconsciously adapt our behaviour to adhere to social

norms. For example, Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) is referred to at several points, and Debbie also invites Holden to an experiment in which people gather in a dark room, with the intention to monitor changes in behaviour and interaction styles when one cannot see, or be seen by, the other. Crucially, it is when Holden turns up to this experiment that – when an open door allows a moment of light – he sees Debbie flirting with her project partner, Patrick. The scene conveys the sense that one cannot know the other, that the other is always shrouded in darkness, apart from glimpses caught in moments of illumination.

Holden's characterisation also draws attention to the idea of social guises. He always wears his suit in a way that conflates his work persona with his private self, or implies the absence of a distinction. This recalls Nicola Rehling's contention that investigations into representations of the serial killer 'resulted in concerns that white, heterosexual masculinity, as the universal, dominant, unmarked norm, is an anxiously empty identity that lacks specific content, apart from its assigned role as oppressor' (Rehling 2007). While this void-like absence is conveyed through various means – for instance, images of hyper-consumerism, to use Lee's example in relation to *American Psycho* – this is simultaneously challenged by the physical presence and gravity of the acts the murderer (fictional or not) has committed. Rehling's commentary chimes with Seltzer's influential work that ties the serial killer and his popularity to the modern self, in particular a kind of person arising from institutionalized society. Anthony King summarises Seltzer's view as follows: 'because they [serial killers] have adopted certain routinised practices, they seem typical. However, this routinisation, which constitutes the selfhood of modern individuals like the soldier male, is precisely what threatens the serial killer' (King 2009). This perspective aligns with depictions of serial murderers as "transgressive outsiders", who are used to develop 'themes of anonymity in mass society' (O'Neil & Seal 2012: 106). In other words, the experience of feeling anonymous, which is a condition of a globalized, capitalist and consumer-driven modernity, threatens any romantic individualist notion of selfhood, and the serial killer reacts to this through the annihilation of the threatening other. The trope of the "signature" left by the murderer implies a need to be recognised as singular and unique.

There is a tension here, between the depiction of the serial killer – as powerful, enigmatic, artistic, innately monstrous, and a possessor of knowledge that we are hungry for – and the kinds of socio-cultural theories attached to him. For example, Seltzer argues that the question of serial murder ‘is inseparable from the problem of the body in machine culture’ (Seltzer 1998: 33). Christopher Bollas’s psychoanalytic perspective contends that the act of murder reverses the power dynamic of the killer’s own historical victimisation: ‘the person who has been “killed” in his childhood is in unwilling identification with his own premature mortality, and by finding a victim [...] he transcends his own killing’ (Bollas 2011: 162). It is likely that the socio-cultural considerations of the serial killer as traumatised person, monster, and artist will all be familiar to us; they are common tropes of the genre, and indeed operate in *Mindhunter*, as described. It is not only the serial murderer and his crimes that we return to, we also return to these theories.

In addition to the relationship between the detective and the serial killer, *Mindhunter* also makes comparisons between Holden/the detective and a film director (*Mindhunter* 2017: 1.10). Such metafictional commentary gestures toward the symbiosis between serial killers and the producers of the slasher/detective movies, which in turn points towards and problematises the pleasure (excitement, outrage, masochistic) experienced by the viewer. Meditations on the complicity of the viewer in fuelling the sensationalism driving the murderer’s narcissism are fairly common in more sophisticated thrillers, and even in true crime documentaries (cf. Netflix’s 2019 documentary *Don’t F\*\*k with Cats*). However, while such meditations may force us to question our fascination with serial killer films/documentaries/series, they seem to propel a swing of the pendulum toward a cultural turning of the head (or changing of the channel), and away from a near-continual sensationalism, voyeurism or, in more generous approximations, “bearing witness”. Indeed, reactions to the serial killer genre regularly problematize the gaze of the viewer, which often unites with that of the killer – the sadistic-voyeuristic gaze (Mulvey 1975, 1999) or the ‘assaultive gaze’ (Clover 1992, 2015: 182). However, it is not sufficient to suggest that silence or a cultural “turn of the head” would engender healing or mourning either. Rather, the generic constraints of “true crime” products should be transgressed to unearth

the victim's experience – but not just the experience of victimisation. Whereas many know the biography of murderers, have speculated on their relationships to their mothers or fathers, few narratives (perhaps with the exception of Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*, 2002; adapted by Peter Jackson in 2010) explore the subjectivity of the person before they become entrapped in the perpetrator's narrative.

While Carol Clover (1992) argues that exploitation horror films frequently encourage empathic identification with the female victim, in *Mindhunter* – and indeed many true crime fictionalisations and documentaries – the audience rarely sees the visceral horror or hears the victims' screams. In season one's last episode, Wendy and Holden travel to Georgia to meet with District Attorney Esther Mayweather in an attempt to persuade her not to enforce the death penalty for a man who confessed to murder after Holden interviewed him using the FBI's newly developed profiling techniques. Wendy is concerned that should their interview subjects learn that the insights gained are being used to put people like them to death, they will no longer cooperate. DA Mayweather replies as follows:

When I talk to a jury, I always ask, "Do you watch TV?" Most of them do. I say, "Who watches the cop shows?" Right there you know whether you've got a smart jury or a stupid one. So I say, "Forget TV, cause it'll never show you the experience of the victim. You will never hear the cries of a woman being raped on *The Rockford Files*. You won't smell burning flesh from the cigarettes being put to her body on *Hawaii Five-O*" (*Mindhunter* 2017: 1.10).

While not explicitly stated, the DA's comments stereotype consumers of the crime genre as possessing potentially lower abilities to discern the gravity of the acts they are required to consider; she also conflates the position of juror with viewer, gesturing toward the court of public opinion and its role in defining and repudiating society's "monsters". A metafictional reflection on the true crime genre and the series itself, her remarks underline the failure of representation inherent to the true crime genre, which cannot adequately piece together the event because the only remaining witness is unreliable: the murderer. DA Mayweather positions herself as speaker for the victim, whose experiences she attempts to identify with. However, her description

of burning flesh and screaming signal scenes familiar to exploitation horror, usually seen as “lowbrow” – precisely the popular styles she seems to critique in her speech, cited above. Significantly, her position as a prosecutor whose strategies put criminals to death (often by electric chair, where *their* flesh will burn and *they* will feel pain and scream) complicates her position, as she is complicit with the violence of the state. In turn, the symbiosis between FBI agent (an agent of the state) and killer implicate her, problematizing her position in the good/evil dichotomy she constructs as she seeks justice for the dead.

The above commentary suggests an anxiety or crisis of representation, which hovers over the question of *if* and/or *how* we should (re)present true crime. If silence is equal to complicity, but disgust, anger, and outrage belong to the “unthinking mob” with their proverbial pitchforks, how do we contain traumatic events as a culture? The metafictional reflections within representations of trauma go some way to addressing this problem, which is not only inherent to the serial killer genre. However, while the metafictional elements may add a layer of sophistication, such self-referentiality also points toward the crisis of representation characteristic of postmodernity, recalling postmodern and poststructural meditations on writing, representation, and language: ‘the crisis of representation has emerged with the loss of the referent in modern painting and literature and with the ever-increasing distance from the reality of the referential world in the digital and the mass media’ (Nöth 2003: 9). In ‘literature and the arts, novels and films are more and more reflecting the modes and conditions of writing and filming. Novels become metanovels and films metafilms’ (Nöth 2003: 12). Harold Bloom reflects upon what he calls the anxiety of representation in relation to Robert Browning’s ‘Andrea del Sarto’: the anxiety of representation constitutes a ‘fear of forbidden meanings, or in Freudian language precisely a fear of the return of the repressed’ (Bloom 2009: 69). In other words, the anxieties implied by the above-described features imply repressed content, which I speculate on in the following section.

### **Returning to the Scene**

As mentioned, Holden Ford and Bill Tench’s travels around the United States to conduct interviews with serial killers constitute the principal narrative conceit, and

produce a teleological quality to each episode; while it isn't exactly the case that an interview takes place in *every* episode, most do include an interview. Additionally, most of the episodes of both seasons start with a cold open depicting the activities of an unnamed figure, who the viewer – depending on their knowledge of serial killers – may or may not know to be Dennis Rader/"the BTK killer". In this sense, there are two concurrent narratives: that of the FBI's special unit, to which Holden, Bill, and Wendy belong; and the activities of the as yet unnamed Dennis Rader, which includes depictions of his marriage, autoerotic-asphyxiation activities, and work life as a punitive ADT employee. In season two, he never appears in the post-credits episode in person, though Kevin Bright, a surviving victim of one of his crimes does speak to Tench. Bright occupies a rare position in the serial killer genre as he is both victim *and* speaker; the title of Hugh Aynesworth and Stephen G. Michaud's book on Ted Bundy, *The Only Living Witness*, suggests the extent to which we confer a special status on the knowledge possessed by the murderer. When creating fictionalisations of true crimes, often the only accounts available are those of interviews with the killer in question and/or police reports. Similarly, in *Mindhunter*, the various murders cited tend to be described by the murderers or the FBI Behavioural Science Unit's team members.

In season two of *Mindhunter*, Tench travels to Witcheta, Kansas, to meet a detective named Bernie and discuss an unsolved murder committed five years prior by Rader/the BTK killer, who has since tauntingly written to the police. When Bernie introduces Tench to Kevin Bright, the surviving victim of Dennis Rader, he is clearly still traumatised. Before Kevin arrives, Bernie explains to Tench that he should remain facing forward; Kevin sits in the back seat and asks the detectives to reposition the mirror so that they cannot see him and the camera never shows his face to the audience. Prior to this scene, Bernie describes the injuries Kevin sustained when Dennis Rader shot him in the face three times, so it may be presumed that he feels shame at his possible disfigurement. However, given the above discussion of representation, this scene also implies the challenges of depicting victim experience. In addition to Kevin's fragmented testimony, the viewer is occasionally shown photographic evidence. For example, when Tench and Ford are asked to comment

on the murder of a woman named Ada and her son, there is a shot of a photo of the crime scene, in which the victim is dead and bloodily penetrated with a broom. The photograph is something of an anomaly, as, while the murderers describe their crimes in gruesome detail, the frenzy of the crime is not visually recreated. Notably, the crime represented in the photograph is likely an instance of fictionalisation, as there are no reports of this case as based on a true event. The shot of the photograph distances the viewer from the crime, referring to the camera as a framing device, which in turn alludes to representation and gestures towards the process of (re)creating and (re)presenting trauma to an audience.

While in Wichita, Bernie also shows Tench the crime scene, in which Kevin's family were bound and murdered by strangulation and suffocation. After surveying the scene themselves (by now just an empty house), the two detectives discuss the case at a bar, and Bernie reveals that, after the crime, he and other detectives slept in the house in case the murderer returned: they were 'hoping the killer came back [...] is that true that these guys return to the scene of the crime? We were just going on what we'd always heard from old detective stories'; Tench replies: 'Ed Kemper, the co-ed killer – he told us he went back [...] he considered these places sacred' (*Mindhunter* 2019: 2.2). I interpret this as a metafictional allusion that implicates the viewer – of *Mindhunter*, but just as easily other representations of "true crime" or trauma narratives. While commentators may diverge on what our cultural obsession with serial killers means (i.e. whether they are an extreme representation of a continuum of masculine violence, a reaction to the anonymity of mass culture, or a commentary on the state, with whom he exists in symbiosis), it is beyond doubt that these crimes constitute cultural wounds. While the serial killer figure may be a shifting form, whose meaning changes depending on temporal and geographical context, our return to these scenes may nonetheless be conceptualised through the psychoanalytic model of trauma, which posits that repetition may be a form of "acting out" or "working through".

The intensity of a traumatic experience prevents the subject from experiencing the affect as it happens; unconscious repetition compulsion allows the subject to experience the event: 'the patient does not remember anything of what he



has forgotten and repressed, but *acts* it out. [...]he patient does not say that he remembers that he used to be defiant and critical towards his parents' authority; instead, he behaves in that way to the doctor' (Freud 1914, 1958: 150). While this unconscious *acting out* may aid the individual in *working through* trauma, it may also constitute a destructive pattern of behaviour (for the self or others). This is an individualised response to trauma, but it can be used to form an understanding of collective response and consumption, too. Annalee Newitz discusses depictions of serial murder as explorations of social contexts and trauma. She tracks the change in real life and fictional serial killers alongside society's increasingly confusing and diffuse nature: serial killing, characterised as a pathological individual who murders a series of individuals at different times, has been replaced by the mass murderer or terrorist (Newitz 2006: 48). As a nostalgic series, *Mindhunter* seems to fulfil a wish for a time in which murder could be explained and contained: the repetitive return to the theories (whether or not one subscribes to them) which "explain" the acts in terms of childhood experience, sexual repression, or monstrous mothers imply an epistemological fantasy of understanding – of "knowing why" or attaining closure. However, the theories, while comforting in their delivery and implementation, are also thwarted when cases remain unsolved, killers fail to fit the type, or indeed the profile constructed also fits people who do not act violently towards others.

As an historical fiction, *Mindhunter* appears first as a refusal to look directly at the "now", yet it also speaks of this refusal to look, as in the scene in which the detectives are forbidden from turning to face Kevin Bright. Indeed, its concern with the past does not foreclose its relevance to the present. The primary storyline of the second season concerns the Atlanta child murders (1979–1981), in which at least twenty-eight children predominantly belonging to a working class African American community were murdered. *Mindhunter* shows how these murders were ignored by the police, and contrasts this with the reaction to the murder of a white child in a middle class community (2.5–2.7). The silencing of the black community and the dismissal of the loss experienced is prescient in light of the Black Lives Matter Movement (active since 2013), but also relevant beyond this particular strand of anti-racism and activism. In episode seven of season two, Holden contacts the creator of

the Committee to Stop Child Murder, Camille Bell (a fictionalisation of an historical figure), the mother of Yusef Bell, who was nine years old when he was murdered. He asks Camille if she can adapt the route of a vigil/protest march so that it travels past some of the sites at which victims were found; the intention is to lure the murderer out into the open by appealing to his desire to remember. There are many strange details to the vigil scene: the grainy footage; the discordant music; the spectacle of Holden, a white man, assembling a cross and running across town to join the march of predominantly black activists – and this in an episode and series that references the Ku Klux Klan several times. The focus here, though, is the idea of mourning and return.

As mentioned, the vigil has been perverted to entice the murderer out, though the event already signals a broader social failure to recognise and mourn the losses of these children: many of the activists wear masking tape over their mouths to signify their silencing. Holden arrives late to the vigil, and so there is something untimely and out of sync about his presence, which is emphasised by the discordant music. The cross he carries is cumbersome, but there is no sense that this is his “cross to bear”. Rather, the scene gives the impression that he and his burden are ill-fitting additions or intrusions upon the ceremony, and he replaces an arrangement of white flowers with his religious object/prop, which is self-assembled, cheap, and meaningless, except for as a loaded symbol to appeal to the killer. The cross is, of course, a site of mourning for the archetypal mother, and the mothers of victims are the primary organisers of the vigil in this scene. The activists and mourners hold photographs of the victims and the sign above the church to which they march reads “Remember Our Children”. However, the cross is also a highly ironic symbol, as implied by the various ways in which its significance is cheapened, distorted, and associated more with the state and/or racial violence (particularly the Ku Klux Klan), than with salvation from sin, numinosity, or communal bonds.

The scene operates on multiple levels, but I want to tease out its relationship to mourning *and* melancholia. In Freud's ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, he distinguishes between the two states in ways that have since been criticised (cf. Klein 1939). While later theorists have noted that these states are interconnected, it is nonetheless

useful to consider mourning as a process in which the loss is conscious, and melancholia as a state occurring from an unconscious loss: the melancholic may know that the loss is related to the departure of a lover, but not understand what it is about this person (or what they represented) that has disappeared (Freud 2005: 205). I suggest that, while the mothers and activists who march in this scene (*Mindhunter* 2.7) appear to mourn the murdered children and protest the way in which this suffering is dismissed due to racial and class prejudices, the process and presentation thereof is troubled. The image of slow-moving activists and mourners gives the impression of contemporary, “authentic” footage: it is grainy, unstable, and sepia toned at times. These points are emphasised as they are contrasted with the high resolution shots of Holden running to catch up with the procession. In his writing on mourning and melancholia, Darian Leader discusses the important role of framing or “making artificial” in mourning processes: a frame ‘will remind us that what we’re looking at is an image, a representation’, a frame ‘draws attention to the artificial nature of what we see’ (Leader 2009: 101). The scene I am describing, with its contrasting elements, functions in a similar way. However, for Leader, the shift from a repetitious compulsion to act out or repeat traumas and towards more explicitly artificial representations of the experience suggests a more hopeful, productive form of mourning. While the work of mourning is never finished, the ability to represent it in ways that are notable for its artifice suggests that the individual has incorporated the loss into her or his experience; grief becomes an occasional companion, as opposed to an unpredictable persecutor. Beyond the personal, one could suggest that the same could be said for cultural trauma: nothing can undo past injustices, but when a society can tolerate its representation in distanced, ironic or artificial ways it could imply that the community is moving through a process of mourning. The shift between documentary-style realist footage and the better quality shots may reflect this. On the other hand, though, the recourse to realism (documentary-style shots) to present a protest against historical systemic racism implies an unhealed cultural wound.

Given Newitz’s convincing discussion of a shifting and wounded cultural context, *Mindhunter*’s nostalgic tone suggests something like a yearning for the pathological

mind of the serial killer, whose manias are contained by the theories common to the genre: the traumatised person who inflicts trauma. The confusing and diffuse globalised and technological present stands in contrast to the conservative fantasy of stable knowledge and knowable – though fascinating – individual monsters. Reading Newitz alongside *Mindhunter*, we may consider the above-described scene in terms of loss. The eerie discordant music, editing and use of highly symbolic props and costume (the cross and the masking tape on the mouths of activists) lends a dreamlike quality to the scene. The dream or fantasy projected belongs, of course, to the audience. *Mindhunter* uses serial murder as a way to explore failures to mourn and the gap that haunts the bereaved present, which can be considered in terms of individual loss (the murdered children), cultural trauma (the realities of racism and gendered violence), or the loss of an idea(l) America, which never existed except as an idea or myth that always depended on the repression and/or exploitation of others.

Photography is something of a trope in trauma literature and film, used variously to connote representation and perspective (as referred to briefly above), as symbolic of acts of remembering, or to signal ‘the limitations of traumatic memory’ (Botez 2014: 112). Photographs (like film, literature, and memory) constitute ‘unreliable, precarious media’ which produce an alienating affect (Botez 2014: 112). The photograph begs the question of what is out of focus or beyond the frame, beyond recall/memory. In *Mindhunter* photographs appear or are discussed at various points: a detective in Iowa shows Tench and Holden gruesome photographs of Ada Jeffries and her son, both of whom had been penetrated using a broom (*Mindhunter* 2017: 1.1); a detective in Sacramento shows a photograph of a beaten elderly woman Rosemary Gonzales and her dog who has had his throat slit; a detective in Pennsylvania shows the FBI agents photos of the mutilated body of Beverley Jean Shaw (*Mindhunter* 2017: 1.4); Jerry Brudos photographed his victims and Tench and Holden raise this point in the interview, in which they present him (and the audience) with one such photo (*Mindhunter* 2017: 1.7), and in the same episode, Tench’s babysitter finds the photograph of Ada Jeffries. In a murder case, the victim’s body becomes a source of evidence, and rituals of mourning are violated as the body is once again objectified by juridical processes and institutions.

It is noteworthy that both the FBI/other legal institutions *and* the murderer Jerry Brudos are associated with photography, as it serves to further blur the boundaries between state institutions (which sanction forms of violence), the “normative” masculinities of the FBI agents, and the deviant identities performed by the murderers. When Tench and Holden interview a man accused of raping and murdering Lisa, a twelve year old majorette in Atlanta, Holden poses as an ally to the accused. The detective presents the murderer with a photograph of Lisa in her majorette’s uniform and suggests that she looks older than twelve, and ‘looks pretty tasty in that outfit’ (*Mindhunter* 2017: 1.10). The photograph of the beaming and clearly very young girl with braces on her teeth jars with such commentary; the affect is that of dissociation or dislocation. Later, when describing the interview to Debbie, she remarks on his use of props (Lisa’s majorette’s hat, and the rock used to kill her) and states that he set the scene like a ‘director’ (*Mindhunter* 2017: 1. 10). The point I am trying to make through these examples is that the mode and style of representation are depicted as under the control of the serial killers and/or men of the law and science, i.e. the FBI agents, psychologists and researchers, and regional detectives. Bortez’s contention that photography in trauma literature alludes to gaps in memory and limited perspectives is pertinent when considering these points: the perspective of the photographed victim is never incorporated as it is never available. Photographs both represent the victim and imply their repression/entrapment in the genre shaped by the voices of others – including their murderer.

This point recalls interpretations of cultural trauma, particularly the Holocaust, an event which cannot be known because those who experienced the full extent of it were murdered; while survivors and witnesses may testify, the full experience of this crime does not – cannot – be communicated. In this way, the Holocaust is an event ‘which cannot be lost because it has not yet been found. The speech of testimony is, in fact, unburied, and the events which cannot be assimilated are those experienced by the dead witness’ (Reichman 2001: 38). Ravit Reichman continues: the ‘unexperienced realities yield a language marked by silence, an uncanny cryptogrammatology which creates in the listener and the viewer “(a) dead (gap)” – an absent/present memory which we incorporate’ (Reichman 2001: 39). While the crimes against victims of the state-sanctioned holocaust and those against victims of individual serial killers differ,

both types of crime have captured the public's imagination in similar, sensationalised ways and are continually (re)turned to, (re)processed and (re)presented through film, literature, documentary, etc. I propose that the photographs of the victims in *Mindhunter* allude to their silence, gesturing to an anxiety or gap which is beyond communication. The crimes, therefore, constitute traumatic memories or, rather, gaps in memory in which the unknown/unspeakable horrors of the event can only manifest as fantasy or shadow. The event and the inability to effectively incorporate it constitutes a trauma which effects a cyclical return. The repetitious nature of the show imbues a sense of circularity to these criminals who engage in compulsive acts of repetition, which in turn is mimicked first diegetically when the interviewees are interviewed on multiple occasions across episodes; second, the similarities between crimes; third, on a broader scale, the return to these historical traumas through historical fictional representation; and finally by the form: the serial.

### **Conclusions: Serial Circularity**

The serial killer 'satisfies the audience's desires for both the culturally forbidden and the socially conservative' (O'Neil and Seal 2012: 107). He murders those who are perceived as vulnerable or risky, and therefore crystallises stereotypes regarding the vulnerability of certain groups (especially young women, children, gay men, and the elderly). However, our cultural return to these figures, as argued above, may gesture towards the coalescing of capitalist exploitation (sensationalised cinematic renderings or gratuitous documentaries) and the repetitious revisiting of wounds that fail to heal; popularity drives the production of these stories and therefore we are complicit with these re-renderings, raising questions about what captivates us and makes us want to return. The televised serial formalises this compulsion. While the television/Netflix/HBO series is noted for its quality and greater originality or depth (when compared to contemporary Hollywood cinema and the rise of the sequel, for instance), it is also true that (despite some notable exceptions) this form often repeats the same gendered forms of representation and sexualisation (cf. *Game of Thrones*; *The Sopranos*; *Sons of Anarchy*). *Mindhunter* underlines issues of representation through the repeated use of photography, in which women and vulnerable people are the objects of violence – Ada Jeffries and her son, for example,

whose attacker used the very symbol of her working status (the broom she uses to clean). In a broader sense, once Debbie and Holden break up, we – as an audience – do not see her again, her character is somewhat revealed as disposable: the male-centred serial kills off or disposes of its female characters.

What I am trying to suggest is that the serial killer genre brings the audience into an accentuated world of circularity and repetition, which in turn is mirrored or formalised by the serial form. In *Mindhunter* the misogyny depicted may shock the viewer and produce an affect conducive to a feminist reevaluation. It may just as easily reinforce the objectification of women and conservative positions that view women as in need of protection. However, the photographs of the victims refer to the lost voices or testimonies of the vulnerable, and gesture towards the incompleteness of representation of these traumas, which are filtered through men or by masculinist institutions. On a broad level, our compulsion to return to these scenes may be borne from this gap and silence.

The above-described features raise questions about the serial objectification of women and minorities in film and television. While seriality on the one hand implies a connection to capitalist modes of consumption, it may also be conducive to working through and revaluations of past trauma (such as the crimes depicted) and contemporary states of injustice (racism and the perennial objectification and disposability of women, the economically disadvantaged, the elderly, and minorities). *Mindhunter* raises questions regarding the way in which entrenched ideas and inequalities manifest in new forms and employs postmodern techniques familiar to the genre, yet its serial form underlines or brings into consciousness the notion of repetition inherent to the true crime genre. Despite its status as historical fiction, *Mindhunter* presents its viewer with a wholly recognisable world of inequality and misogyny, but unsettles the status quo by linking it to serial murder. Our repetitious return to these stories gestures on the one hand towards a fantasy of a knowable world. Yet our return to these scenes also gestures towards their unknowability, a crisis or anxiety of representation, and the absence at their heart: the voice of the repressed.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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**How to cite this article:** Jones, K. 2020. Returning to the Scene: Seriality and the Serial Killer. *Open Screens*, 3(1): 5, pp.1–25. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/os.27>

**Submitted:** 31 December 2019 **Accepted:** 21 September 2020 **Published:** 09 December 2020

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