

**“I am not a fascist, since I do not like shit. I am not a sadist, since I do not like kitsch”:  
Sadism, Serial Killing, and Kitsch  
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“The attitude of commonsense... is the one to have when one discusses de Sade. I am addressing the anxious man whose first reaction is to de Sade as his daughter’s potential murderer” (178-179). This writes Georges Bataille on the quintessential modern interpretation of sadism; to confuse the apparently transcendent sadist with the banal motions of the murderer is endemic to the evolution of the Sadean universe from a purely philosophical imperative to an integrated social phenomenon. While Pierre Klossowski’s deconstruction of the Marquis de Sade’s works identified the concept of sadism and the practice of linguistics as complementary, later studies by Roland Barthes extracted from Klossowski’s analysis the theoretical polemic that the Sadean universe resists representation. Since sadism is essentially rooted in its discursive expression, in its process of *telling*, then the active and physical components of the sadistic process remain secondary to the language which dually prefigures and generates the sadistic act or crime. The consequence of such analyses which privilege Sadean discourse over any given elucidated referent, is the reader’s comprehension that, “Sadean crime exists only in proportion to the quality of language invested in it, in no way because it is dreamt or even narrated, but because only language can construct it” (Barthes 1976 33). However, as a constituent of the vocabulary of popular culture, the term ‘sadism’ has experienced an extreme involution; far from its original conception within the works of the Marquis de Sade or the subsequent theoretical analyses imposed by Barthes and Klossowski, sadism has simply become synonymous with cruelty. It is therefore perhaps somewhat distressing to Sadean purists, as disparagingly noted by Andre Frassard, that the “dear old Marquis de Sade’s dear old manias inspire two out of three filmmakers” (Sciascia 104). Exemplified by the modern prevalence of the serial killer film, the current colloquial understanding of sadism inverts the linguistic polemic by identifying the Sadean universe as both a mimetic and an aesthetic *possibility*.

A central quandary which demands address is whether or not the viewer of a serial killer film agrees with Roland Barthes’ *doxa* that Sade resists representation, that “there is no possible image of Sade’s universe” (1982 101). While this analysis presupposes sadism as both a philosophical imperative and as a coercive object, one must be cautious to avoid dismissing filmic attempts at representing Sade as naïve exercises in futility; for while sadism fascinates as a demonstration wherein the authority of *écriture* obscures merely referential acts of physical atrocity, the apparently impossible task of illuminating sadism (of literally *making it visible*) nevertheless remains a captivating challenge. Without wishing to demote Barthes, we instead pose the following provocation: accepting that “Sadeans (the readers delighted with Sade’s text) will never recognize Sade in...

film[s, since] Sade can in no way be represented” (*Ibid*), what process of evolution (or devolution) does the Sadean figure endure when a system of representation is imposed upon him?

To adopt the stringent theoretical precept that representational failure is inevitable simply because Sade *himself* “always chooses the discourse over the referent” (Barthes 1976 37), obfuscates the complexities inherent to an image of sadism, whether questionable or authentic. Sadism may be significant only in its discourse and theory, yet remains contentious in its status as an image. The purpose here is not to negate the image simply because it is characterized as such, but to trace its development in a system of physical confrontation; ultimately, the resultant image or representation may indeed be contra-Sadean, but it is certainly imbued with a particular identity worthy of exploration. To facilitate an understanding of this inquiry, I should like to examine a succession of serial killer films as exemplary of the tendency to ‘translate’ sadism into popular culture; it is precisely because these films cannot be distinguished as proper Sadean objects that they are of interest, engaging instead a radically new discourse which favours interpolation over demonstration, affirmation over negation, and ultimately aestheticizes the crimes of its murderous subject such that aesthetic consciousness itself becomes parodic.

### I) SADISM

#### **SADISTS, SADISTS EVERYWHERE: THE SADIST IN SADOMASOCHISTIC CULTURE**

Critically, there exists a certain overenthusiasm in diagnosing as a sadist any serial killer who does not dispose of his victims with anything less than merciful expedience. We may enumerate a host of recent serial killer films wherein the term ‘sadist’ is gleefully (and almost always untenably) attributed to the killer *himself*,<sup>1</sup> either within the diegesis of the film or in retroactive critical and academic accounts. John Doe of *Se7en* (1995) is a particularly ironic killer who preys upon the sinful imperfections of seven victims as a matter of spiritual polemics (he forces an obese man to eat until he explodes, compels a vain woman to decide between the mutilation of her face or suicide, and so on). Needless to say, his affinity for metaphor and torture critically mark him as a sadist. Conversely, serial killers who unconsciously eschew metaphor, opting rather for impulsively gruesome pyrotechnics – such as *Kalifornia*’s (1993) Early Grayce or *Natural Born Killers*’ (1994) Mickey Knox – are sadists despite their moral imbecility. Remorseless killers who are

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<sup>1</sup> This poses a significant distinction in terms of identification, since certain methods of torture and murder involved in serial *killing* may indeed be discerned as ‘sadistic.’

simply 'born evil' (Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer) (1986), and killers who suffer from momentary ethical lapses (Manhunter) (1986), are evaluated as sadists precisely because they are either remorseless or ethical. In The Silence of the Lambs (1991), Buffalo Bill imprisons his rotund victims in a neo-gothic dungeon and utilizes their flesh to questionably fashionable ends; he, too, is therefore a sadist. Apparently, and under the somewhat misguided assumption of those who evaluate serial killer films, the image of the serial killer may unilaterally identify as Sadean if only because such films address cruelty and death not as a matter of tragedy, but as a practice of transgression. What is lacking, of course, in such haphazard applications of a loaded term, is the comprehension of what sadism or the character 'sadist' legitimately signifies.

To become hypercritical over the semantic definition of sadism initially seems patronizing, as if sadism were an esoteric theorem accessible only to those willing to peruse the works of Barthes, Klossowski, Bataille, Deleuze, Paulhan, and a succession of others who maintain that Sade-the-author's prerogative was "to think of and describe an act instead of committing it" (Klossowski 1991 13). Yet such a semantic approach generates immediate conflict – how beneficial is the classification of sadism as a coercive object when its current accessibility is firmly rooted in its status as a sensational phenomenon? Can we claim that the difficulties imposed by sadism originate in its development from a *philosophical* to a *social* imperative? Certainly, media culture is fascinated with sadism, and a flux of somewhat frivolous evidence suggests that sadism – along with its equally misunderstood erotic counterparts masochism and sadomasochism – has become culturally viable. New York Magazine, which is undoubtedly such a frivolous source but nonetheless a popular one, heralds sadomasochism as the sexual mode of the '90s (Blau 40), and the widespread vogue of BD/SM culture has elevated the interpolation of eroticism and physical pain from its former stratum as a "dirty idiosyncratic pathology" (Zizek 1999 109) to an expression of sexual liberation.<sup>2</sup> Yet would Sade necessarily delight in the knowledge that the term, derived from his name, now appears on garish floats in leather-pride parades?

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<sup>2</sup> In his interesting but problematic chapter entitled "S&M Culture", Mark Edmundson provides several literal and recognizable examples of sadomasochistic popular culture: "... Madonna's pornocopia, Sex, with its photos of the material madame in potent and submissive postures, and the notorious 'Express Yourself' video that shook up Ted Koppel so. Gianni Versace dressed Cindy Crawford in heavy leather and sent her down the runway, setting a trend soon followed by Betsey Johnson and Thierry Mugler. There's the vogue for piercing and tattoos ('Did it hurt getting that?' has become young America's pick-up line). In Pulp Fiction Bruce Willis and Ving Rhames find themselves in the hands of some good old boys who're deep into hard-core S&M; it's an updated, urban reprise of Deliverance's most memorable scene. Robert Mapplethorpe has become, in the eyes of many, a consequential artist" (Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism, and the Culture of the Gothic, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 132).

It is significant that popular culture expounds the practice of *sadomasochism* as a sexual amalgam rather than sadism or masochism 'proper' as isolated perversions. One needs only to recall Gilles Deleuze's statement that,

It may seem obvious that the sadist and the masochist are destined to meet... A popular joke tells of the meeting between a sadist and a masochist; the masochist says: 'Hurt me.' The sadist replies: 'No.' This is a particularly stupid joke, not only because it is unrealistic but because it foolishly claims competence to pass judgement on the world of perversions. It is unrealistic because a genuine sadist could never tolerate a masochistic victim... Neither would the masochist tolerate a truly sadistic torturer (40-41),

to realize that our 'culture of sadomasochism' is always-already flawed. The fault exists not merely in sadomasochism's incongruity, or in the imposition that, "there is a masochism specific to the sadist and equally a sadism specific to the masochist, the one never combining with the other" (*Ibid* 134), but in the realization that sadomasochistic culture is essentially *consensual*. Replacing Sadean absence and negation or the complex masochistic contract is an interpersonal sadomasochism wherein "all the drama, or play, takes place in the hidden bedroom or the mock dungeon; there is the sadist, the top; and the masochist, the bottom. It's Castle Udolpho, Montoni, and Emily, all together, without inhibition, evasion, or elaboration..." (Edmundson 130). Here, the words which should appear as most illuminating are 'play' and 'mock'; it remains interesting that particular sadistic practices, reduced to their bland component functions, have gained a certain subversive stature on the level of 'kink.' However, since these functions are merely *simulated* and both the (unauthentic) sadist and the (unauthentic) masochist escape from their mock dungeon unharmed, the question seems inevitable: where is the legitimate trauma inherent in sadism? the legitimate humiliation inherent in masochism?

Far from the "idea of that which is not, the idea of the No or of negation which is not given and cannot be given in experience [but] must necessarily be the object of a demonstration" (Deleuze 28), this purported 'sadomasochistic culture' has reduced sadism to the level of entertainment simply because, socially, it can safely occupy *no other space outside of the referent*. It therefore follows that the possible critical identification of any and every filmed serial killer as a 'sadist' does not signify critical ignorance so much as the cultural desire for self-deception. Writes Adorno:

People want to have fun. A fully concentrated and conscious experience of art is possible only to those whose lives do not put such strain on them that in their spare time they want relief from both boredom and effort simultaneously. The whole sphere of cheap commercial entertainment reflects this dual desire. It induces relaxation because it is patterned and pre-digested (289-290).

As such, the popular permutation of sadism, masochism, and sadomasochism constitutes little more than exaggerated play-acting which allows the masses (viewers, participants) to 'have fun' with transgression in focussing

on metonymous arrangements; pure destruction, as posited by Sade, is evidently neither pro-social, consensual, nor relaxing, and therefore remains a matter of cultural censure. Substituting for the absence of any philosophical imperative whatsoever, involves the exploitation of countless insubstantial signifiers as phantasmatic 'stand-ins' (leather, whips, chains, and even pain itself) for that which is not socially acceptable but definitively Sadean (pure negation). We may therefore make the preliminary conclusion that sadism has achieved an impossible status as both its own cultural object, and as a referential veneration of *the object itself*; within popular 'sodomasochistic culture', whether represented on screen or practised at home, sadism retains none of its traumatic purity in annihilation, but instead appears as the obverse of its self-conception – that is, as a *phantasmatic answer*.

### SADISM AND ITS VICISSITUDES

The temptation fostered by the claim that sadism has become a cultural phantasm, is to combine Barthes' Sadean dogmatism with Adorno's social cynicism to state the following: sadism resists representation because, beyond its essentially novelistic qualities, the culture which produces such representations ultimately does not understand sadism. However, it is precisely this manner of flippant reasoning which places sadism and serial killing at opposing poles without accounting for the space between them. Here, this space or gap is the concern which endeavours to chart the traditional philosopher-villain's necessary transformation into the modern serial killer; or, the gap is the site wherein the image motivates a calculable, wholly aesthetic evolution which cannot be, as Barthes would have it, dismissed as an error. Instead, we shall claim that any attempt to represent sadism creates a series of fissures which must be addressed individually before one can approach the vast divide between the Sadean universe and its opposite (which we shall tentatively identify as its image).

Firstly, the dilemma demands a deconstruction beginning with the comprehension that the phantasmatic conception of sadism as a transgressive *desire* works within what Zizek calls "the paradoxical structure of the forced choice" (1997 30). To aid in the consideration of this structure, let us assume that a film director ventures to illuminate the Sadean universe. On the one hand, the director may conceive of the Sadean representation *to the letter* and *spare the spectator nothing* – dismembered corpses, screaming victims, decaying flesh, and so on (Barthes 1982 100); alternately, sadism as an image may exist on the abstract level of the symbol, wherein metaphor and interpretation compensate (often poetically, but never successfully) for the Sadean demonstration.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately,

<sup>3</sup> While such representations are often too abstract to warrant exploration in feature-length films, attempts at symbolic Sadean representation abound in the popular transmutation of the short film, the music-video. States critic Scott Macaulay on Floria Sigismondi's visual interpretation of Marilyn Manson's *The Beautiful People*: "It tries to be really sadistic and poetic or hard to watch [a demonstrative quality]... but ends as a mishmash of silly

both the approaches, the referent-centric (the letter) and the demonstration-centric (the symbolic), lack an essential quality of violence, whether textual or explicit. Neither method satisfies Sade's admirers. The former method (best evoked by Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1975 film *Salò: The 120 Days of Sodom*) is too literal and omits the textual Sadean demonstration, while the latter is disproportionately lofty and subjective, often neglecting sadistic (explicit) activity in favour of lyricism or purposeful commentary.

We may note how sadism's representational bond corresponds with the gap between the explicit symbolic texture which guarantees the choice and the phantasmatic obscene supplement which precludes it – that is, of the gap which separates the public symbolic space in which the subject dwells from the phantasmatic kernel of his/her being (Zizek 1997 30).

By definition, Sade's erotic/quantitative combinations defy realism, since "what happens in a novel by Sade is strictly fabulous, i.e., impossible..." (Barthes 1976 36). Therefore, any image of such combinations or crimes can do little more than make sadism *believable* as a crude example of oleography – essentially, "show[ing] off (*démontrer*) how it happens not to show (*montrer*) what it resembles" (*Ibid* 1982 101). This initial consideration which divides representational sadism into images confined to the referent-centric or the demonstration-centric induces the emergence of a fissure which we shall term the fissure of *mimetic trauma*.

### II) SERIAL KILLERS AND SERIAL KILLING

#### WHY IS THE IMAGE OF TRAUMA ALWAYS VULGAR?

If, within the popular culture of sodomasochism, sadism has indeed reverted to the level of a metonymic phantasm, then the question posed earlier situating sadistic trauma becomes rhetorical; trauma is nowhere if not in the image. Addressing trauma in terms of both sadism and any of its modern permutations, we shall accept David Selzter's hypothesis that trauma "is inseparable from the breakdown between psychic and social registers – the breakdown between inner and outer and 'subject' and 'world' – that defines the pathological public sphere" (260). To elaborate: since sadism has effectively become a cultural object (however perverted), then its inherent trauma may no longer remain confined to the demonstrative imperative. For, while in Sade's writing, the trauma is wholly discursive such that, "the acts of violence inflicted on the victims are a mere reflection of a higher form of violence to which the demonstration testifies" (Deleuze 19), sadism *beyond* Sade demands the necessary *exposure* of such trauma. Certainly, exposed or visually exploited trauma is far from Sadean, but it is nonetheless its derivation; trauma, on the level of mimesis, is the first instance in which we may note the emergence of the serial killer.

pretentious dead-end images best confined to bad photography" ("Thirty Frames Per Second: The Visionary Art of the Music Video." Review. *Filmmaker: The Magazine of Independent Film*. Spring 2000, 42 – square brackets my addition).

In Irvin Kershner's 1978 film, Eyes of Laura Mars, fashion photographer Laura Mars is psychically linked with a serial killer, causing her to experience hallucinations wherein she literally 'sees through the killer's eyes.' It is, of course, in keeping with Hollywood convention that Laura is not privileged to share the killer's banal morning routine (this would be far too monotonous, ironically perhaps too Sadean!), yet it remains psychoanalytically significant that the murders *alone* stimulate the psychic bond. The murder sequences, filmed entirely in single-take point-of-view shots which facilitate a collapsed tripling of perspectives (killer, Laura, spectator), indicate that the film's most traumatic moments are also the instances of greatest material construction. The stylistic trope of the 'killer-cam' (most famously utilized in the opening sequence of Halloween, which was also released in 1978 and directed by John Carpenter who co-wrote the screenplay for Eyes of Laura Mars), invokes a heightened self-reference which displaces the point-of-view shot within the narrative. Trauma is therefore less the implication of murder (which is somewhat debased by the gimmick of direct address – victims deliver protests candidly to the camera, arms reach out from behind the lens and make stabbing motions), than the suggestion that it is the gaze *itself* which kills. The 'killing gaze' as a theoretical deconstruction of the point-of-view shot is hardly a novel concept, and is explored at length in Elisabeth Bronfen's essay "Killing Gazes, Killing in the Gaze: on Michael Powell's Peeping Tom"; however, what we should like to extract from the formal application of the gaze in Eyes of Laura Mars is how the *image* of mimetic trauma evolves as the representational variant of Sadean language.

Writing on the incongruity between representation and death, Michel Foucault calls for the emergence of 'another language' to postpone or at least compensate for death:

Before the imminence of death, language rushes forth, but it also starts again, tells of itself... headed toward death, language turns back upon itself; it encounters something like a mirror; and to stop this death which would stop *it*, it possesses but a single power: that of giving birth to its own image in a play of mirrors that has no limits. From the depths of the mirror where it sets out to arrive anew at the point where it started (at death) but so as finally to escape death, another language can be heard – the image of actual language, but as a miniscule, interior, and virtual model (54).

If we translate Foucault's terms to involve a specifically Sadean discourse, is it not possible to state that serial killing occupies this space as 'the other language' – the virtual reflection of sadism, which, although miniscule, constitutes the only possible *image-realization* of sadism? And is not the inevitability of mimetic trauma the expository development which facilitates the emergence of serial killing as a new discourse? To invoke a concrete analogy: when confined to the demonstrative imperative, a Sadean libertine's reiterations of cruelty are accomplished towards an aim of pure negation, and "he finds excitement not in 'what is here,' but in 'what is not here,' the absent Object, 'the idea of evil'" (Deleuze 28). When this figure occupies a

screen-space, however, his repetition is specifically staged for our gaze, and it is depicted as a massive *presence*; the repetition becomes a function of the representation, or to rephrase, the trauma must become mimetic.

One detects here what might be described as a binding of trauma to representation or scene: in order for this return to the scene of the crime to take place, time must be converted to place, act into scene; cause and effect, act and fantasy, perception and representation must change places (Seltzer 261).

In Eyes of Laura Mars, mimetic trauma is made literal; however, in equating its formal exploitation of point-of-view with the traumatic act of murder, it likewise contradicts the assumption that perception and representation are separate experiences by designating them as one and the same.

A contention with the direct mimetic approach, as in Eyes of Laura Mars, is that its resultant image of trauma is essentially non-signifying – everything that one could possibly say about the image is already there as a matter of depiction. This designates the fundamental *vulgarity* of the traumatic representation as a "scrupulous, insistent, displayed, over-polished... primitive painting" (we return again to the crudeness of the oleograph) (Barthes 1982 100). From a Lacanian perspective, the attempt to represent trauma betrays the familiar precept that trauma is "the 'hard'... reality which resists symbolization" (Zizek 1997 175); it therefore follows that mimetic trauma, when inevitably exposed as an image, is a self-identified referent. The trilateral image-identification in Eyes of Laura Mars amounts to little more than its own mimetic engagement: a killer creeps up dark stairwells and stabs out the eyes of his victims with an ice-pick. Traumatic indeed – especially considering that the spectator shares this experience as a rhetorical device – but ultimately too vulgar, too direct, and too ensconced in its own visual illustration to facilitate anything beyond referential denotation. One need only consider the banal flatness of Albert De Salvo and David Berkowitz's crime-scene photographs to discern this 'mimetic fix.' We may imagine a kind of law: trauma demands an image-counterpart which will "'assault' or 'bombard' the subject [with] the burgeoning materialities of communication, reproduction, and representation" (Seltzer 261). Nonetheless, the ensuing image is inevitably an enthusiastic exercise in a kind of vulgar superficiality (an ice-pick pierces an eyeball), since "the traumatic [image] (fires, shipwrecks, catastrophes, violent deaths) is the one about which *there is nothing to say*" (Barthes 1985 19: my italics). The Sadean trauma will embed itself in a sentence, hence the well-known *apathy* of the sadist ("I've not many scruples over a girl's death") (Sade 619). Conversely, mimetic trauma knows nothing of legitimate Sadean apathy, but rather invokes a boundless zeal for depiction; however, since such depiction is superficial and effectively "blocks signification" (Barthes 1985 19), we may identify mimetic trauma as the precursor of a primitive aestheticism. This signals yet another representational fissure – one of false aesthetic consciousness, or kitsch.

### III) KITSCH

#### THE KITSCH ACTIVITY

Gilles Deleuze presents a mollifying alternative to Barthes' outright condemnation of Sadean representation when he posits that "sadism is *hostile* to the aesthetic attitude" (134: my italics). We shall take comfort in the knowledge that hostility does not necessarily imply impossibility and that, short of discovering a rationalization of trauma's 'mimetic fix', we may at least suggest a compensation for it. When the attempt to represent sadism as a transcendent philosophy of negation ascends to the sublimated level of 'the unrepresentable', it acquires an ideologically aesthetic status not unlike the Holocaust. I do not intend to suggest that James Landis' grossly misinformed 1963 film The Sadist is at all comparable to genocide, but rather I seek to align the essentially 'lacking' violence of referent or demonstration-centric representation with the failure of 'tragic' depictions. Since, within the context of both the Holocaust film and the filmed Sadean universe, one encounters difficulties imposed by a representational 'hostility', then the vulgarity of the mimetic fix becomes a matter of logistics; in both instances, the incomprehensible simply resists illumination. Here we may modify this polemic and state that the Sadean universe (like the Holocaust), although "elevat[ed] into the properly sublime Evil, the untouchable Exception beyond the reach of 'normal'... discourse" (Zizek 2001 67), resists only necessarily *earnest* depictions. At a certain level of absolute sublimation, any given discourse, event, or practice may only be represented by its obverse – that is, by its "unexpected reversal into comedy" (*Ibid* 68). What we are essentially suggesting is that the onscreen Sadean universe will visually sustain itself by means of a *lie*, as a parody of aesthetic consciousness.

Given that the vulgarity of mimetic trauma signifies the Sadean necessity for an aesthetic counterpart, the identification of serial killing as a *kitsch activity* arises not because serial killing and kitsch are analogously debased facsimiles of sublime models (sadism and art, respectively), but because both transmutations are imbued with *awareness*. Generally, in its status as a comedic representation, the kitsch aesthetic is imbued with the power to lie without necessarily offending its audience. As Zizek states,

If no direct realistic staging can be adequate to the horror of [the unspeakable Evil, the untouchable Exception], then the only way out of the predicament is to turn to comedy which, at least, accepts its failure to express the horror... in advance (*Ibid*).

Kitsch, aside from its generic definition as 'art which is simply in bad taste', is a concept which "clearly centres around such questions as imitation, forgery, counterfeit, and what we may call the aesthetics of deception or self-deception" (Calinescu 229). Consequently, it would not be surprising that a 'sado-masochistic culture' intent on consuming sadism as a phantasmatic answer, should conceive of serial killing as a kitsch activity.

In equating serial killing with kitsch, we postulate that sadism may only achieve the representational status so condemned by Barthes through an engagement with comedy. The conjecture is not that the discourse of serial killing assumes a false identity and masquerades as sadism, but that the emergence of the serial killer is inevitable, that the comedic kitsch solution for Sadean representation is the *only* solution. The available alternatives to kitsch are the image-as-letter (which lacks a demonstration, as in Salò: The 120 Days of Sodom), and the image-as-symbol (which neglects the referent and results in pretension); neither the wholly demonstrative nor the wholly referential impetus is aware of the necessary violence negated in identifying as a one-sided representation. Kitsch, as a component of the serial killing discourse which replaces the demonstrative imperative with a frantically catalogued "iconography of death" (Russell 181), is entirely parodic and therefore fully aware of its vulgar aesthetic operations.

#### INTERPASSIVITY, KITSCH, AND KILLING

The collective understanding of kitsch as an artistic expression vacillating between postmodern consciousness and that which is simply visually appalling, is fairly convoluted. Some conceive of kitsch as a practice of collecting, others reason that kitsch applies to an "aesthetically inadequate" subject or situation (Calinescu 236), and, to most, kitsch designates anything which is 'in bad taste.' This analysis interprets kitsch as the aesthetic modifier which permits the emergence of a serial killing discourse from its stubborn Sadean counterpart; however, I should like to examine all three popular definitions of kitsch as a function of the serial killer film.

The principle of quantity is linked with Adorno's deconstruction of kitsch as a "parody of catharsis" (1984 355), wherein the subject is compelled to endlessly accumulate objects as if "to escape from the abstract sameness of things by a kind of self-made and futile *promesse du bonheur*" (*Ibid* 1941 401). It is essential to emphasize that the compulsion to collect is designated as *parodic* catharsis, since catharsis implies a release or purgation (of tension, anxiety, and so forth). Kitsch, as a symptomatic activity of hoarding objects, is parodic precisely for this reason. The very antithesis of catharsis is to engage in behaviour wherein accumulation *alone* – rather than any particular accumulated object – appropriates a fetishistic significance, since it invokes a perpetual repetition of the same motion without the assurance of a 'final release.' Indeed, catharsis is duplicitous; it validates the obsessive collection of items towards a certain end (an abundant library, for example), yet simultaneously summons a traumatic termination of the pleasure in collecting *itself*. In reference to Zizek's essay, "Is it Possible to Traverse the Fantasy in Cyberspace?", we may clearly align catharsis with *jouissance*, and the subject fixated on metonymic arrangements with the obsessional neurotic, noting that,

the key problem of the obsessional neurotic is how to postpone the encounter with *jouissance* (and thus maintain the belief in its

possibility). If, instead of viewing films, I just endlessly record them on video, this postponing maintains the belief that, if or when I finally do it, this will really be 'it' (1999 108).

The quantitative understanding of kitsch is therefore an example of what Žižek calls interpassivity, the “delegat[ion] of our innermost feelings (ultimately, our *jouissance*) to another” (*Ibid*); the kitsch collector delegates or projects his desire onto the belief that ‘completion’ is imminent, and thereby continues to obsessively accumulate such that the belief itself is sustained.

One may clearly predict the placement of the serial killer into this system of obsessional neurosis, since, as criminal psychologist Helen Hudson informs us in Copycat (1995), “The [serial] murder is like a ritual – the method itself is part of the pleasure” (Amiel). Both the serial killer in Copycat (Peter Foley), and Buffalo Bill in The Silence of the Lambs, conceive of each isolated murderous act as a progression towards a definite - invariably exultant – end. (Peter aspires to be remembered as ‘the world’s most famous serial killer’, and Buffalo Bill assumes that donning the completed ‘flesh-dress’ will facilitate his transformation into a desirable woman). However, since cathartic *jouissance* and finitude are inevitably synchronized, only the serial killer’s obsessional economy of “postponing the final event... of limiting [him]self to merely laying the ground for... the ‘magic moment’” (Žižek 1999 105), can prolong his fantasy (of fame, femininity, etc).

Beyond the physical act of killing, we may note how excessively exaggerated interpassivity and its convolutions degenerate into *literal* kitsch. In such instances, obsessional neurosis is amplified until the act of accumulating objects - with no purpose beyond their accumulation – results in base, degrading humour. Such flagrantly interpassive or neurotic behaviour confirms why serial killer Ed Gein’s living room,<sup>4</sup> with its perversion of domestic objects, is not merely absurd but morbidly comic. Essentially, the ideology is identical to the obsessional economy of doddering old women who glut their sitting rooms with hundreds of superfluous, repulsive objects. When director Tobe Hooper recreated Ed Gein’s macabre living room in The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974), the dual hilarity and horror induced by an image of Leatherface ‘coming home from work’ (‘work’, of course, involves gutting teenage girls with meat-hooks) and sitting in an armchair upholstered with human flesh, is a function of *exaggerated* kitsch. Exaggeration, as posited by Henri Bergson, “is always comic when prolonged, and especially when systematic” (21). The living room in The Texas Chainsaw Massacre therefore presents a change in degree, but not

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<sup>4</sup> “The funny-looking bowl was a top of a human skull. The lampshades and wastebasket were made from human skin... an armchair made of human skin, female genitalia kept preserved in a shoebox, a belt made of nipples, a human head, four noses and a heart... Finally, a suit made entirely of human skin” (Rachael Bell. “Eddie Gein.” Crime Library: Criminal Minds and Methods: p a r s 6 - 7 . [http://www.crimelibrary.com/serial\\_killers/notorious/gein/bill\\_1.html](http://www.crimelibrary.com/serial_killers/notorious/gein/bill_1.html) ).

necessarily in kind, from the spectator’s conception of a ‘reasonable’ obsessional neurotic’s living room; Ed Gein and Leatherface’s domestic objects merely constitute bodily variations on “the horrendous old ‘curiosities’... which many people enjoy as poetic relics from the better world of our grandfathers” (Calinescu 236-237).

### **“ANYONE CAN STRANGLE SOMEONE IN A BATHTUB, RIGHT?”: SIMULACRA, BODY AESTHETIC, AND KITSCH**

The aesthetic coupling of kitsch and murder in serial killer films such as David Fincher’s Se7en or The Silence of the Lambs presents a temporary support for the base vulgarity of non-signifying mimetic trauma. We must concede that, no matter how we classify the contexts of its manipulation, kitsch “always implies the notion of aesthetic inadequacy” (*Ibid*). However, it is the exploitation of such inadequacy to conscious objectives which permits kitsch to function as a lie; the lie that it ‘tells’, of course, is that the serial killer’s neurotic histrionics constitute an adequate compensation for the sadist’s transcendental negation. The spectator ultimately witnesses murder as a *simulacra* which normalizes the dislocation and extravagance of the extrinsic trauma of death – as such, “attention shifts... from the horror and the pain... to voluptuous anguish and ravishing images, images one would like to see going on forever” (Friedlander 21). This is particularly exemplified by the opening sequence of Mathieu Kassovitz’s The Crimson Rivers (2000), wherein a series of dissolves reveal what initially appears as a beautifully-lit landscape to be the decaying flesh of a corpse. If such a shot-series of extreme-close-ups purports to document the gradual deterioration of the phantasmatic frame (abstract curves and lines) to disclose the ‘legitimate’ identity of the image as a traumatic reality (a maggot-ridden carcass), then the trauma of death and decay is both ubiquitous and easily fabricated. Essentially, death needs only to aesthetically venerate its gruesome effects to achieve a “spurious beauty” (Calinescu 229), such that death itself is bereft of context and subordinated to its infinitely reproduceable *effects*.

Other such examples of death’s subjection to aesthetic effect may be noted in The Silence of the Lambs. As previously mentioned, most examples of kitsch in Demme’s film are relegated to characterization - a glutted conglomerate of typage. This is addressed by Martin Rubin in his essay, “The Grayness of Darkness: The Honeymoon Killers and its Impact on Psychokiller Cinema”:

Lecter and Gumb [Buffalo Bill] are loaded with gimmicks, gothicisms, and colourful psychological quirks. Gumb is not only a cross dresser but

also a dungeon master, skinner, seamster, rhymester, breeder of exotic Asian moths, and headline-grabbing serial killer with a *modus operandi* almost as cluttered as the décor of his hillbilly-gothic domicile.<sup>5</sup> Lecter is a Nietzschean anthropophagus, psychiatrist, and psychopath, as well as a talented amateur

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<sup>5</sup> To this extensive list, we may add that Gumb is also a Nazi, as evinced by (of all things) his swastika-patterned *bedsheets*.

painter, virtual telepathist, Mabuse-like manipulator, and Houdini-class escape artist (58).

Although The Silence of the Lambs exercises a certain ironic visual restraint (i.e., barring the spectator from seeing a photograph of a mutilated face invokes the Zizekian concept of trauma confined entirely to the phantasmatic frame), Lecter's climactic murderous rampage constitutes a veritable orgasm of aesthetic kitsch excess. "Anyone can strangle someone in a bathtub, right?", observes Helen Hudson in Copycat, and Lecter is certainly not immune from visually hyperbolizing his status as a legendary psychopath. Lecter not only beats a policeman to death with a baton (in a single long-take from the policeman's point-of-view), but Lecter also removes the policeman's face, disembowels him, and suspends him from the ceiling with an American flag. Similarly, Copycat expounds the postmodern conception of universalized simulacra in asserting that even and especially ritualized murder functions as a parody of aesthetic consciousness. If Peter Foley's "posed... deliberately staged" (Amiel) killings identify as the simulated and ultimately *purposeless* doubles of historical serial murders, then Copycat as a filmic text is the ultimate kitsch object – a fictional stage for a serial killer's reenactments of past murders. Assuredly, such multiple involutions displace the context of "real death in its everyday horror and tragic banality" in favour of "a ritualized, stylized, and aestheticized death, a death that wills itself the carrier of horror, decrepitude, and monstrosity, but which ultimately and definitely appears as a poisonous apotheosis" (Friedlander 43). Although we will investigate apotheosis as a *social* utility momentarily, I should like to briefly explore the inherent and ironic *virtue* of aestheticization.

Recalling that "a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself" (Bergson 6), then it is the serial killer's *unconscious* engagement with the parodic aesthetic *consciousness* of kitsch which provokes the "uneasy" humour (Friedlander 21) distinctive to serial killing discourse. The sadist, by all accounts, is neither a murderer nor a collector yet the serial killer is both; it is simply a matter of 'bad reading' since,

The murderer believes he is destroying; he thinks that he is absorbing. This is sometimes the starting point of his remorse. Let us bring him complete tranquility on that score; and if the system which I have just developed is not yet within his grasp, let us prove to him by facts visible to his eye that he has not even the honour of destroying, that the annihilation of which he boasts when he is healthy and which causes him to tremble when he is ill, is thoroughly null, and that it is impossible to achieve any success in his enterprise (Sade quoted in Klossowski 1966 78).

In Se7en, serial killer John Doe imagines himself to be a "Christ-like antichrist" whose project is to "punish ritually and gruesomely a given practitioner of one of the seven deadly Christian sins" (Simpson 134). However, Doe's reliance on heavy-handed religious symbolism renders him most vulnerable to aesthetic hyperbole (surrendering at the precinct, he spreads his bloodied palms outward in a gesture of Christ-like supplication; the garish neon cross

which hangs above his bed might have been purchased from Baz Luhrmann's garage sale).

In Se7en, focalization is confined entirely to the investigation conducted by detectives Somerset and Mills, yet such restricted narration facilitates the representation of John Doe as a virtuous or prophetic figure. Since the film's narrative structure prevents any identification with John Doe (Se7en is the only film discussed in this analysis which refrains from depicting the killer actively engaged in a murderous act), but rather focuses on the forensic activity of *discovering bodies*, the film never departs from kitsch. 'The crime' is always synonymous with *what is seen*, since both the spectator and detectives Somerset and Mills (as spectatorial surrogates) may only experience John Doe's crimes as a matter of aesthetics (the arrangement of the bodies, their lyrical implications, the clues Doe embeds into his elaborately constructed *mise-en-scene*, and so on). Despite Philip L. Simpson's deification of Se7en as a film which "definitively restores a prophetic, revelatory, and reformist voice to the 1990s cinema of serial murder" (140), the narrative is involved less with restoration or reform and more with its own exploitation of post-mortem aesthetics. The bruised ankles of the obese man chained to his chair, the enormous portrait hung strategically over the vain woman's bed, the tracking shot which follows a SWAT team as they navigate a symbolic 'forest' of tree-shaped air-fresheners. Even Doe's Biblical killings equate to mere soundbytes or 'sloganeering' when compared to valid spiritual apocalypticism. The film's foundation lies in John Doe's imaginative arrangement of each tableau; Se7en thereby exploits Doe's *virtue* not only as a delusional Angel of Death (he believes that he is socially and spiritually progressive), but his moral excellence as an artist who delights in cheap irony.

#### **"THE 'I' THAT WOULD OPPOSE SOCIETY ALREADY IS SOCIETY RIGHT TO ITS CORE"<sup>6</sup>**

We have already addressed the reality that popular sadomasochistic culture retains only the least socially damaging aspects of sadism, for to do otherwise would only induce blood-drenched anarchy. I would, therefore, like to pause in my analysis of demonstrations and representations to elucidate an obvious argument as to why the serial killer discourse emerges as the modern Sadean variation. The sadist, consistent with his atheistic desire to renounce all subjects and objects, including his own self-condition, can present no feasible argument to validate his crimes. Indeed, to do so would be contra-Sadean, since Sade's narratives are "unsympathetic to people moved by need and by fear" (Bataille 178). Sade's aim was *always* anti-social, and this indicates the practical necessity for sadism's evolution into a new discourse; simply stated, sadism (or its closest approximation), must be rendered culturally and socially accessible, since "Sade's ideas are... incompatible with the ideas of

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Edmundson. "S&M Culture." Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism, and the Culture of Gothic. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997. 127.

reasonable beings" (*Ibid* 179). We may partially attribute such incompatibility to the hermetic nature of the Sadean libertine, who may only thrive in a closed, isolated space such as the Chateau Silling in The 120 Days of Sodom; within these confines, the society becomes one composed entirely of the oppressors and the oppressed.

Since "those who know themselves to be accomplices in aberration need no argument to understand one another" (Klossowski 1991 27), the intrusion of judgemental third parties from 'reasonable' society is prohibited; we may take this statement and interpret it differently, claiming that sadism in no way endorses exhibitionism. A legitimate sadist does not require the presence of a spectator to excite his fantasy. Given that sadism is (at the very least) "hostile to the aesthetic attitude" (Deleuze 134), then the presence of a judgemental Other would have negative implications; since the provocation of any reaction in the Other (even outrage or disgust) would incur a certain justification of the sadist's crimes (accepting the axiom that what is seen must be justified).

As the culturally 'neutralized' incarnation of the sadist, the serial killer always invokes the argument or justification which the sadist negates. Since the serial killer is the embodiment of a cultural perception of sadism, it is therefore essential that his motives reflect some compatibility with the 'reasonable' norms of the culture poised to consume him. This may explain why conscious attempts to humanize the serial killer often appear contrived to the point of parody - while the murderous act is staged for our pleasure, the rational argument *for* murder is staged for our comfort. The isolated serial killer is an anti-social individual, yet his murders result in a social affirmation which ultimately redeem him. G.K. Chesterton accurately observes that,

we have probed, as if it were some monstrous new disease, what is, in fact, nothing but the foolish and valiant heart of man. Ordinary men will always be sentimentalists: for a sentimentalist is simply a man who has feelings and does not trouble to invent a new way of expressing them. These common and current [works] have nothing essentially evil about them. They express the sanguine and heroic truisms on which civilization is built; for it is clear that unless civilization is built on truisms, it is not built at all. Clearly, there could be no safety for a society in which the remark by the Chief Justice that murder was wrong was regarded as an original and dazzling epigram (par. 8).

John Doe is disillusioned with society's moral decay and "willing to be the vanguard of the fundamentalist backlash" (Simpson 135); The Cell's (2000) otherwise monstrous adult killer Carl Stargher conjures a psychic representation of himself as a young boy to illustrate the origins of his psychosis (child abuse); the killer in Eyes of Laura Mars delivers a patronizing monologue explaining his ritual ice-pick murders as the necessary moral solution to Laura Mars' sensationally violent photography. One may enumerate a host of such quasi-logical attempts to absolve or humanize the serial killer, since "even the most rebellious of us contain the principle of oppression – the principle that we most detest – as a major element in our self-identities" (Edmundson 127). It therefore stands to

reason that the serial killer, unlike the legitimate sadist, identifies as an exhibitionist as a matter of social responsibility.

One somehow doubts that Roland Barthes' declaration, "Sade can in no way be represented" (1982 101), was intended as a provocation, yet it nonetheless negates the complexities of image-production regardless of their authenticity. The essential quandary with Barthes' analysis is that it presupposes the failure of Sadean representation as *inevitable* rather than accounting for the vicissitudes inherent in such 'failure'; sadism may be significant only in its theoretical discourse, yet remains controversial as an image. The purpose of this analysis has been to examine the image within its social context and monitor its discursive evolution from sadism to serial killing. Representational sadism is composed of a series of binary oppositions which far exceed the superficial divide between demonstration and referent, yet the Sadean purist must be prepared to navigate the liminal space between death and the parody of aesthetic consciousness as the space of the serial killer. ☺

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