Killing for the Camera? An Investigation into the Relationship Between Serial Killers and the Media.

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Summary

This study focuses on the role of media portrayal and coverage in serial killing. The first objective of the study is to develop a conceptual structure that aids in the understanding of the cyclical relationship between media, serial killer, and audience. The media acts as a catalyst in this relationship, providing the stage on which serial killer and audience form a fatal relationship in which celebrity status forms the ultimate motivation. Media sensationalism of serial killing and the extreme glamorization in fictional representations has obviously negative consequences. In developing such a structure I hope to demonstrate that there is an alternative to the sensationalizing and glamorizing of serial killers in the media. This alternative will take the form education and a more documentary-style approach to films about serial murder.

The study focuses mainly on developing a theoretical framework that emphasizes each of the three elements of the cyclical relationship mentioned above separately. The second chapter is devoted to the media and its role. The third chapter focuses on serial killers and the motivations involved. The fourth chapter deals with the audience attracted to serial killing as a source of identification. A number of thinkers’ work is used in coming to grips with this relationship, including both American and South African authors. The fifth and final chapter takes into consideration the moment of application by addressing the South African situation. I conclude by discussing the repercussions of media glamorization and possible documentary-style alternatives.

Key Words: media portrayal, serial killing, cyclical relationship, sensationalism, glamorization, celebrity killers, copycat phenomenon, image obsession.
Killing for the Camera? An Investigation into the Relationship between Serial Killers and the Media.

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Chapter 1
Introduction

In this study I propose to investigate the role of media representation and coverage in the phenomenon of serial killing. The purpose of my research would be to provide a conceptual structure for understanding the role of the media in serial murder. Through such a structure I hope to contribute firstly to a more responsible approach to news coverage in South Africa, moving away from the sensationalizing media frenzy that is associated with serial killers in America. Secondly, I would like to draw attention to the negative effect of extreme glamorization in fictional representations of such murderers in film and television. It is through research and then education that I believe progress could be made to discourage the fascination with the infamy of serial killers in the general public, which thus arguably feeds their celebrity dreams. Thirdly, I hope to suggest a more responsible alternative to sensationalist and glamorized representations of serial killers, such as the more ‘true-to-life’ documentary style.

The theoretical framework within which I will be working is a hybrid version of what Johann Mouton (2001: 175-180) refers to as non-empirical. It is hybrid because it includes literature review, conceptual and philosophical analysis, and hermeneutics, for the sake of building a theory. Since my approach will be primarily hermeneutic, my research will be qualitative in nature. In order to collect data on the relevant issues covered in my study I will be mainly reviewing and analyzing an array of different texts that have delved into this topic. Overall I could call my approach “philosophical hermeneutics” (167). I use hermeneutics here in a more specialized sense than Mouton’s generic definition, in that I do not define it merely as the exegesis of texts, but in a
Gadamerian sense as the interpretation of any phenomenon in the “lifeworld.” Gadamer’s definition of hermeneutics includes more than just understanding, it also incorporates a moment of application. In his words, “[m]ore profound than all knowledge of hermeneutical rules is the application to oneself” (Gadamer 1998: 29 – 30).

Since my research is designed to address both aspects of the hermeneutic task, it will be divided into two parts. In the first, I will carry out a critical and interpretative study of texts that deal with serial killers in America, in order to develop and outline a conceptual structure for understanding the role of media representation and coverage in the phenomenon of serial killing from which I will draw my conclusions. I use the study of American serial killers as a model because it is instructive to examine a more media-saturated and westernized culture than South Africa.

Studying America’s serial killers should allow us to gain a better understanding of what I believe could become a significant problem in South Africa. In other words, such a study may give warning of dangerous waters ahead. In the second part of my study, then, I turn to the question of application, firstly investigating whether South Africa is facing the problematic phenomenon of an age of celebrity-driven serial killers, and secondly, asking what South African policy-makers, educators, and audiences can learn from the American situation.

My preliminary reading of both American and South African theorists such as Mark Seltzer, David Schmid, and Micki Pistorius, suggests that there is a strong link between the way in which serial killers are represented in the media, particularly film, and the way in which they perceive themselves and are perceived by their audience. As the title of my treatise suggests, my study primarily focuses on the motivational aspect of the relationship between serial killers and media attention. However, the first factor to consider would be the way in which the media works to represent serial killers. More specifically, I focus on three aspects of this representation. I initially discuss the glamorization of serial killers through fiction film, as well as the sensationalization of both their crimes and their persona in news coverage. The discussion of the ‘true-to-life’
alternative of the documentary style will be deferred to my conclusion. I concentrate on visual media but will also include examples of the print media. I will, however, privilege the visual media because I believe that global culture has been moving more and more into an age of the image, which therefore makes film and television the more influential and powerful tool with regards to influencing the public – the advertising industry being an example of this influence at work.

There is mounting evidence that ‘killing for the camera’ plays an increasingly significant role in the motivation behind the actions of many serial murderers at large today. As their infamy and newfound celebrity escalates, so do their crimes, which become more frequent and more gruesome. This is not to suggest that the media is necessarily the initial causal factor in the development of a serial killer. In fact, I agree with Micki Pistorius that the origin of serial homicide is most likely to be socio-cultural, involving “a cruel and violent childhood and rejection by parents” (Pistorius 2002: 16). Once a serial killer has been formed, then, I will argue that media ‘packaging’ (glamorization and sensationalization) potentially plays a role in exacerbating the problem. Pistorius also notes that

Ressler (in Jeffers, 1993: 94) identifies social, environmental, psychological, cultural and economic factors, as well as stress, as elements in the American culture that contribute to the increase in serial homicide. He singles out the media as an exacerbatory factor. Monty Rissell, who murdered five women in 1978, admitted that he was inspired by the news coverage on David Berkowitz. Ressler regards the media as a catalyst in the sense that the organised serial killer craves acknowledgement and likes to see his name in print” (29).

As is the case with any celebrity or product, serial killers are nothing without ‘their’ audience. I refer to it as ‘their’ audience because this specific audience is one created and fueled by both the glamorization of serial killers in film and the sensationalization of their acts in news coverage. At this point in my argument I will discuss the type of audience that responds to such packaging by the media. I will deal with the process of audience
identification, highlighting the copycat phenomenon and a more generalized hunger for violence. The media serves as the ‘middleman’, packaging and delivering a glamorized killer to a bloodthirsty audience. The mediated relationship between killer and audience can be understood to be circular. The media relies on the promise of an audience characterized by an appetite for violence. Once this audience has been attracted, it subsequently presses the media to pump up the celebrity status of serial murderers, who then pick up the pace of their heinous sprees, once again adding fuel to the fire of an insatiable hunger for increasingly extreme violence in film and media.

Having developed a conceptual structure for understanding this circular relationship, I will turn to the moment of application that Gadamer suggests is necessary for any hermeneutic project. I will here address the question of a correlation between the type of serial killers active in South Africa and the strengthening of a westernized and media-saturated culture. This brings me to the specific research question I propose: if a link and circular relationship between media representation and serial killing is present in American society, does one exist in South Africa? If such a relationship does not exist yet, is South Africa headed in the same direction as more media-saturated societies which create the celebrity monsters that feed the morbid fascination of millions? Is our media sugarcoating their lives to the same extent, and therefore encouraging the identification process on the part of this specific audience?

To conclude I will discuss the implications for both media policy and education in South Africa and discuss the value of the documentary-style alternative in the media representation of serial killers.
Chapter Outline

In the following chapter (chapter 2) entitled ‘Media Representation of Serial Killers’, I begin by arguing that due to the fact that we live in a mediated world, and because what is depicted in the media has a great effect on shaping our perceptions, the content of the media becomes of significant concern. Of particular concern is the depiction of violence and serial killing in the media. I go on to argue that although the ideal would be for media portrayal of violence to be objective and informative, it is not usually the case. Instead, media depiction of violence is sensationalized. There are two factors that contribute to this sensationalization, namely the hidden agendas on the part of media professionals, such as profit and personal fame, which encourages the sensationalization of violence, and the normalization of violence. Further, I give examples of how such sensationalization applies in the case of serial killing, added to which I address the issue of glamorization and celebrity as factors in serial killing

In chapter 3, entitled ‘The Serial Killer: Developmental and Socio-Cultural factors and Media Influence’, I firstly set about defining a serial killer and the primary motivational factors behind their actions. Although motivation seems superficially hard to understand, I argue that Micki Pistorius gives an appropriate psychoanalytic analysis of motivation. I don’t discuss all primary psychoanalytic motivations and instead focus on what I refer to as ‘category four type’ motivation, the desire for power and control, which correlates with the theme of media influence and motivation. I amplify my discussion of this with reference to Hegel’s master/slave dialectic. Finally, I discuss the two secondary motivations that can be associated with the media, namely the pull of celebrity and the copycat phenomenon.

In chapter 4, entitled ‘The Audience: Consumer Culture and Image Obsession’, I address the third component of the vicious cyclical relationship between serial killer, media, and audience. I turn to the question of how such an audience, defined by an obsession with images in a double sense, is formed and characterized. I argue that image saturation
contributes to a passive reception of media messages on the part of the viewers, leading
to two dangerous consequences, namely a hunger for violence and a desire for celebrity.
The desire for celebrity is associated with image in the sense that it represents the way in
which members of the audience desire to be recognized as transgressive (standing out
from the crowd), which in turn manifests itself as an uncritical identification with serial
killers as transgressors of the norm. This encourages an audience to give serial killers an
idealizing recognition that motivates them to increase the severity of their crimes.

Chapter 5, entitled ‘Research Question: What About South Africa?’ deals with the
question of the possible existence or development of celebrity killers in South Africa.
Firstly the presence of violent crime and serial killers in South Africa is established using
both statistics and examples. This is necessary because of evidence pointing to the
incidence of serial killing being higher in a more violent and unstable environment.
Having established the element of violent crime and serial killing in South Africa, the
situation in America with regards to serial killers is used as a useful basis for comparison
throughout because it represents the kind of globalized consumer society that South
Africa is heading towards. I then give examples that South Africa is indeed in danger of
heading towards cultivating a culture of celebrity killers.
Chapter 2
Media Representation of Serial Killers: Sensationalism in News Coverage and Glamorization in Film

1. Media Saturation

Survivor: ‘Outwit, Outplay, and Outlast’; it is difficult to forget the pioneer reality television series that gave birth to a new generation of entertainment. Exemplifying the mediated society that has developed around us, the series consists of a ‘grueling’ test of endurance played out in front of millions around the world to witness, in this form of entertainment the overlap of media and reality is clearly impossible to ignore, because although they are faced with real life situations they are still aware that they are being filmed. Even though this overlap in reality television is obvious, there are more subtle ways in which the media works to influence everyday life. There are many scientific and theoretical studies that confirm that the media has an effect on the reality of those with the means to be exposed to different forms of media vehicles and products; for example clinical psychologist Sally Davies discusses an article in *The British Medical Journal* that warns of the dangerous influence of TV portrayals of suicidal activity. The research, which she notes, was inspired “by a popular TV medical drama – the BBC’s ‘Casualty’”, came to some enlightening conclusions in this respect:

An episode of Casualty featured a … pilot in his 30s who had previously been involved in a crash that killed a colleague and was plagued by guilt … He is shown collapsing, dramatically vomiting blood, and on being taken to Accident and Emergency, paracetamol is present in his blood. Eventually, he admits to the nurses that he took about 50 tablets of paracetamol in a suicide gesture more that two days before (Davies 2001: [http://health.iafrica.com/psychonline/articles/casualty.htm](http://health.iafrica.com/psychonline/articles/casualty.htm)).

According to Davies the researchers found that this media portrayal of a suicide, which was watched by over ten million people, had a dangerous impact on actual real life suicidal behavior. Firstly, in the first week alone after the episode of ‘Casualty’ was shown there was a significant increase in the number of people who required emergency
treatment for self-poisoning when compared with the preceding three weeks. Secondly, when interviewed, a number of those patients who had seen the episode of ‘Casualty’ in question, admitted that it had influenced them – although, as she notes “some specifically said that after seeing Casualty, they made a point of NOT taking paracetamol, choosing some other drug instead … The researchers concluded that media portrayals of suicidal activity are dangerous, at least in the short term”.

Another example of media influence, coming this time from South Africa, is the well-known television series *Yizo Yizo* which was “regarded as something of a phenomenon in the history of South African television, drawing the highest viewership numbers recorded for any television programme in the history of television in this country. While the series was intended to be primarily educational, it was the use of dramatic genre that really captured the viewers’ attention” (Ballot 2005: 248). Once again the media influence on everyday life became apparent through the public’s behavior. The show was “severely criticized, primarily for its depictions of violence. For example, particular criticisms were leveled at the apparent copycat behaviour of members of the targeted communities who modeled themselves on the antagonists in the series” (248).

As the above examples indicate, what is depicted in the media, whether it is in the form of film, television, or even true-crime narratives, has the power to influence and shape our perceptions. This is not only true of fictional portrayals but also of the real events depicted in TV news coverage. In fact it could be argued that “[t]elevision is one of the most important socializing agents in Western culture. It remains the most dominant source of news and public affairs coverage, influencing which issues we as citizens discuss and sometimes act upon” (Butler; Klein 2005: 1). Even more radically, Leonard Shlain argues that it is not only what is represented in media that shapes our perceptions but that the actual form the media takes is capable of shaping our psyche. For example, in Shlain’s book *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess*, his main hypothesis is that the advent of alphabet literacy had a significant formative effect on the human psyche, making left-brain thinking more predominant. Before the widespread use of the alphabet, Shlain claims that thinking in images (right-brain thinking) predominated. Image type thinking
was forever altered by the widespread use of the alphabet. Today the invention of television and other visual media, according to Shlain, sharply reversed left hemisphere dominance and increased the use of the right brain. In his words

Television was so startlingly original that many other adjustments in perception were necessary for the brain to make sense of it. The electroencephalogram (EEG) brain wave patterns of someone reading a book are very different from those of the same person watching television. So fundamentally different, in fact, that there is little deviation in those patterns even when the content of the book or television program is varied (Shlain 1998: 408).

Although Shlain argues that it is the form of media that has the greatest effect on brain wave patterns rather than the content, it is at an emotional level that the content plays a significant role. The question of media impact, when considering the content of what is being portrayed, becomes troubling when acknowledging that violence in the media is prevalent in the 21st century, with serial killers featuring significantly. It is therefore partly due to the self-serving activities of media professionals that there is an obsessive focus on violent criminals in the media, from visual portrayals in TV and film to the pages of both news articles and true-crime books. It is this obsessive interest that gives the perpetrators of such violent crimes a celebrity status that is larger than life in the eyes of the public. I found it interesting that the definition for media in the Collins South African New School Dictionary is: “You can refer to the television, radio, and newspapers as the media … Although media is a plural noun, it is becoming more common for it to be used as a singular: the media is obsessed with violence” (Collins 1999: 449) because from all the possible sentences that could have been chosen as an example, the one used is a strong indicator of the connection between the media and violence. If it is true that the choices that members of the media industry make when it comes to the portrayal of violence in media, from films to the content of news, directly affect the way in which the public perceives and experiences ‘its world’, this raises serious problems of the way in which forms of violence such as serial murder are portrayed to the public.
2. Media Portrayal of Violence

The ideal would be that the information presented to the public in the different forms of media is presented in an objective and unbiased manner. For example, in the case of the D.C. sniper, the “around-the-clock media saturation … was not without justification” (Fox; Levin 2004: 40), and

> even though the print and electronic media may have been criticized for their excessive coverage, news journalists still performed a vital function, at least for those who lived in the area that for weeks was enveloped by fear … while a killer is on the loose, poised to strike at any moment, it is not only the right but also the responsibility of the mass media to inform a terrified public about a clear and present danger in their midst – about the latest details concerning the killer’s movement and the progress of the investigation” (40)

Certainly, if communication vehicles such as the news media were solely concerned with objectively portraying to the public the facts and recent developments, there should be little reason for alarm, but as is the case with recording history, it is near to impossible to remain objective; it is not only that the different perspectives of the media professionals are bound to find their way into the decision making, but there are underlying factors that motivate the sensationalization of violence in the media.

2.1 Hidden Agendas

Firstly, many of the choices made by the media industry when it comes to what is put in or left out of such things as local or world news are to a large extent motivated by hidden agendas. For example it is no secret that news gatherers and reporters receive recognition and profit from focusing on the lives and times of violent criminals and giving them celebrity status, as Schmid notes, “[a] part of the reason celebrity criminals have become so common in recent decades is that the groups who come into contact with those criminals – lawyers, law enforcement officers, FBI agents, and true-crime writers – can now become famous in their own right” (Schmid 2005: 194). Although true-crime books
are not newspaper articles, they can form part of the bigger eventuality of media’s sensationalism of violent crime, since they are the next logical step in the progression from news coverage that is almost solely aimed these days at titillating an audience, into ‘factual’ full-length best-selling books. This, according to Schmid, is exactly the way in which Ann Rule became a leading name in true-crime narratives: “Rule wrote literally hundreds of true-crime articles, soon breaking out of the true-crime magazine ghetto and publishing with magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *Redbook*, and *Good Housekeeping*” (196). This is not to say that all true-crime writers have adopted a sensationalist style, there are writers who believe in sticking to the facts and presenting readers with an informed account of the background and life story of some of the most gruesome murderers in human history.

### 2.2 Normalization of Violence

The second of the underlying factors that motivate the sensationalization of violence in the media is a vicious circle of desensitization in the relationship between the media and its audience. In brief outline, we as an audience want to be shocked because we are bored in a consumerist culture and shock itself has become a source of value. Responding to this the media intentionally tries to present us with increasingly shocking material. In the paper entitled “Our Desire to Flinch: News Television and its Portrayal of Shocking Phenomena”, Sylvia Butler and Joanne Klein cite Sontag’s argument that the precise point of the images of war and death is to shock an audience: “Those who present them to the public intend for them to arrest attention, startle, shock, and surprise” (Butler; Klein 2005: 2). This phenomenon Sontag argues is “part of the normality of a culture in which shock has become a leading stimulus of consumptions and a source of value” (cited in Butler; Klein 2005: 2). Butler and Klein agree with Sontag that the desire to be shocked by viewing bodies in pain (which she notes, “is very similar to the desire to see naked bodies”, p.2) is an effect of boredom in a consumer culture. The cycle of desensitization thus occurs because of the incessant repetition of violence that leads to the shock value wearing thin and so we, the audience, require more and more extreme material. Sontag therefore criticizes the way in which the media portrays violence, insisting that “the agonies of war, thanks to television, have ‘dissolved into a nightly banality’” (2).
According to Butler and Klein Sontag also argues that continuous “exposure to the media’s sensationalizing of war leads to a lack of compassion on the part of the audience, who no longer feel as though war is a momentous, earth-shattering experience, negative or positive” (2). They add that “Durbin (2003) emphasizes this point when he states that it is not only ‘what you hear from the media, it’s how many times you hear it’ as an explanation for why audiences appear to be desensitized to the daily violence depicted in the news” (2).

3. Sensationalization of Serial Killing

Turning to the specific phenomenon of serial murder, it is easy to observe the above-mentioned factors that motivate the sensationalization of violence in the media. Firstly the hidden agenda of recognition and profit for media professionals is clearly a factor. One of the reasons that criminals such as serial killers become so awe-inspiring is because there is “a vested interest in exaggerating the scale of the serial murder problem and maximizing public panic over the issue” (Schmid 2005: 197). In other words there is a cynical profit motive involved in focusing mainly on these crimes as the headlines and front pages that will sail off the shelves. Schmid points out that Anne Rule, for example, had established herself as a recognizable figure in the true crime arena, but “the publication of her first book, The Stranger Beside Me, in 1980 took her career and the genre of true crime to a new level … [i]t established the fact that books about serial killers could be bestsellers” (Schmid 2005: 196). Even more cynically in addition, adding a little zest to the facts is far from frowned upon when sales are concerned, encouraging certain true-crime novelists to exploit the market; “writer[s] such as Ann Rule [have] an enormous amount of leeway in how [they] present [their] facts … she is able to enhance those facts with passages that read as if they come from popular fictional genres, such as the romance novel” (193). In most of her books Anne Rule takes ‘creative license’ when she includes passages about what either the killer or victim is thinking or feeling at a specific time, expressing what she could not possibly know as fact. By adding her own personal touch through emotive language readers are ensured while the problematic consequence is that a distorted view of the truth is packaged and delivered instead.
The subject of *The Stranger Beside Me* was a figure who would become, for many, the personification of serial murder: Ted Bundy. The success of Stranger was a watershed for the genre of true crime in several ways. It established the fact that books about serial killers could be best-sellers. Although the market quickly became flooded by a tidal wave of books about famous and would-be-famous serial killers of the past and present, Rule’s book maintained its place at the head of the pack, having gone through thirty printings by 1994. In the process, Stranger was instrumental in turning Ted Bundy into the world’s best-known serial killer, ensuring Bundy a definitional status in the pantheon of serial killers only rivaled by that of Jack the Ripper. Moreover, the success of *Stranger* established that true-crime writers themselves could become celebrities, albeit second-order celebrities whose fame in some sense depended upon the fame of their criminal subjects (197).

Secondly, although Sontag’s focus is on war, her insights concerning the vicious cycle of desensitization can easily be related to the public’s continuous exposure to serial killers and their crimes. By being constantly exposed to such heinous and gruesome acts, a process of desensitization, or normalization of violence occurs and an expectation on the part of the viewer for more extreme images (of violence and destruction) is created.

4. Glamourization and Celebrity as Factors in Serial Killing

Finally, with the phenomenon of serial murder a third factor takes on major significance, namely a factor that links violence and celebrity. Given such extensive media hype, it is not difficult to understand why these criminals are enveloped by such awe and admiration but “[b]y granting celebrity status to villains, not only do we add insult to injury by further denigrating the memory of the victims, but we may be inadvertently providing people with a dangerous model for gaining national prominence and fame” (Fox; Levin 2004: 39-40). Pistorius confirms this by noting that
American television programmes such as ‘Unsolved Mysteries’ and ‘America’s Most Wanted’ often screen material about serial homicide. Although these programmes render an important service by generating public awareness, they also serve as a source of inspiration to potential serial killers (Pistorius 2002: 29).

Fox and Levin go on to point out that “[w]e may also be giving to the worst among us exactly what they hope to achieve – celebrity status” in fact “it may even inspire him to take more lives, to enlarge his body count, so that he can maintain and enhance his stature as a national superstar” (Fox; Levin 2004: 40).

This link between violence and celebrity is widespread across all forms of media. In relation to news coverage, Jack Levin (Director of the Brudnick Center on Violence and Conflict in Boston) and James Alan Fox (Lipman Family Professor of Criminal Justice) wrote:

[i]n America’s recent preoccupation with celebrity … the most villainous figures – those who have committed particularly repulsive and despicable crimes – are being granted the same sort of celebrity status traditionally accorded to heroes. A recent example occurred in October 2001 when, over a period of three weeks, two snipers shot to death ten innocent people in the Washington, D.C., area. Even before 42-year-old John Mohammed and his 17-year-old partner John Lee Malvo had been identified and apprehended, the were already dubbed “the Tarot card killer” on the cover of Newsweek magazine. Moreover, not to be “scooped” by its competition, U.S. News and World Report similarly reserved its cover story for the “I am God” message found scrawled on a Tarot card at one of the snipers’ crime scenes. Leading newspapers further defied the D.C. snipers by using their arrogant statement as their “quote of the week.” Given such a memorable and glamorized depiction, the D.C. snipers Mohammed and Malvo are sure now to take their place among many other serial killers who have become household names – the Son of Sam, the Green River Killer, the Hillside Strangler, and the Unabomber, to name only a few. (39-40).

This type of news coverage delivers a ‘bloated’ picture of the serial killer to the public, distorting the image and thus creating hype and eventual fascination that was generally
reserved for the heroic icons and legends that saved lives, not violently took them away. A similar preoccupation with the celebrity of serial killers is evident in popular examples of print media.

Along with sociologist Jason Mazaik, [Fox and Levin] recently studied the 1,300 covers of People magazine published over its first 25 years. During the 1970’s, only one killer was featured on its cover. In the 1990’s, by contrast, People printed more than two dozen different cover stories about vicious killers. Its readership of 36 million weekly makes People magazine an especially influential form of American popular culture. Yet to single out this magazine for criticism would be unfair and inaccurate. To an increasing extent, violent criminals are gratuitously being featured in places where we used to place our heroes (42).

As is the case in sensationalist news coverage, the way in which serial killers are represented in film is the main factor in how they are received and consequently perceived by the audience, not only within the fantasy realm of film but in every day life as well. The film industry has a ‘bad habit’ of glamorizing the very serial stalkers and killers who, in reality, violently took the lives of innocent people. The world has become fascinated with bloody accounts of murderers, their crimes, and the intricacies of their personal lives. “The existence of famous serial killers in contemporary … culture brings together two defining features of … modernity: stardom and violence. Not surprisingly, therefore, film is unique among popular cultural media in its potential to shed light on the reasons why we have celebrity serial killers because it is a medium defined by the representations of acts of violence and by the presence of stars” (Schmid 2005: 105). It is as if the process of becoming accustomed to violence is not stagnant and in fact grows into expectation, wanting, and eventually an identification with murderers that breeds an admiration that could most likely lead to copycat behavior.

One of the most influential movies of the 21st century is undeniably Pulp Fiction, a film that quickly became a cult classic and motion picture phenomenon that catapulted Quentin Tarantino to stardom. However, many of the affects of this movie were not
positive; in addition to viewers being negatively influenced because they are exposed to violence being represented as “all-in-a-days-work”, they are also being influenced by the glamorous gangsters that live exciting lives at the same time as being “ultra cool” and unbelievably lucky in the tightest of scrapes. To be ‘somebody’ within the monotonous capitalist machine is one of the main drives behind peoples’ actions, and this drive is spoken to when films glamorize the lives of criminals such as serial killers and in the above case—gangsters. Another film Tarantino was involved with (he wrote the script) was *Natural Born Killers*, a film by Oliver Stone that caused controversy and was blamed for certain copycat killings in America. Although Stone’s attempt was to create critical cinema, he unfortunately falls slightly short:

*Natural Born Killers* leaves one in no doubt that Oliver Stone is, technically speaking, a master filmmaker … But what about the supposed satirical character of the film? Stone himself has indicated that it was meant to show how today’s media transform criminals into heroes, and the juxtaposition of photographic images of mass murderers like Charles Manson and Ted Bundy with the gruesome image-sequences of Mallory and Mickey’s indiscriminate slaughter does lend credibility to a satirical understanding of the film. And yet, something is lacking … Despite the fact … that it may be understood as a satire regarding the central role of the media in our society, *Natural Born Killers* does not, in the final analysis, succeed as such. Intra-cinematically, one witnesses the irony of two unscrupulous mass murderers being transformed into cult figures by the media, regardless of the reasons for their sudden prominence. They virtually become public figures in the process. But precisely this accurately perceived functioning of the media in postmodern culture is such that any critical effect which the ironic-satirical moment in the film could possibly have had, is undermined … But in addition to this we should not forget that Stone’s film itself shares, as important media component, this mediating function with the rest of the media. In other words it contributes significantly to the shaping or construction of viewers’ subjectivity … the movie simply allows the incoherent, disruptive image-sequences to perform their shaping function unchecked and unmodified in relation to a predominantly uncritical audience (Olivier 2002: 174-175).
The above films and the responses that they elicited from the audiences point to a certain type of audience, a desensitized audience always in the pursuit of entertainment, a fascination with stardom and violence that leads to an isatiable demand for violence, resulting in an admiration or awe surrounding the untouchable criminals of the silver screen.

In essence, then, it is not the actual inclusion of reports on violent criminals such as serial killers and their actions that is the problem, since it is in fact a service that his owed to the public by their ‘watchdogs’ – journalists and media professionals – but instead, it is the way in which the information is presented and treated that needs to change. The news has become yet another source of entertainment and is being treated as such by the professionals who collect and deliver it – a package filled with intrigue, violence, suspense, and sex; “it [has] become more acceptable to think of crime narratives as a form of entertainment” (Schmid 2005: 183). It is due to this attitude that articles and clips about serial killers make front-page news and drum fear into society while more positive news items are just about ignored. It is no wonder that a culture of living in constant fear is being shaped in the 21st century. If the public’s link to the world around them, namely newspapers, magazines, and television news programs, is focused on murder and mayhem it is bound to have an effect on the attitudes the public adopt and portray.

I am not for one moment denying my own interest and draw to psychological thrillers that deal with serial murder, but I believe it necessary to critically engage with the aspects I believe to have a negative effect on the perceptions of an audience who are perhaps not correctly educated in the language of film. Take for example one of the most famous feature films about serial killers – *The Silence of the Lambs* - no doubt a thriller classic that will be remembered for decades just as Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* has been; as the first installment in a film trio focusing on the charming Dr. Hannibal Lecter, it meant different things to different people. To me, it meant that villains could be disguised as gentlemen. As the world watched the relationship – a trust that builds between teacher and star pupil – of Dr. Lecter and Clarice Starling develop, no one could help liking the imprisoned doctor, even if it was just a little bit. After all, he had manners, he spoke well,
and he treated Starling with a certain amount of respect and admiration, not forgetting that he even helped catch the pseudo-transvestite serial killer “Buffalo Bill”. I too admit that a smile crossed my face at the end of the film knowing that the pompous Dr. Frederick Chilton would end up as warm dinner. It was at this point that warning bells went off for me: I had grown a liking for a man who killed and ate people. “Hannibal the Cannibal” had ripped out the tongue of a nurse with his teeth and eaten it, and yet at the end of approximately 1 hour and 54 minutes, most of the audience would probably have agreed to have him over for tea.

In the pursuit of objectivity one must consider thoughts such as those of Bert Olivier when he comments that “[n]owhere in [Silence of the Lambs] is the audience ever left in any doubt as to the moral or psychological status of the killers whose paths cross that of FBI-agent Clarisse Starling (Jody Foster). Neither the imprisoned psychopath-cannibal Dr Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins), nor the human skin-collecting psychopath-murderer, “Buffalo Bill”, whom she traces with Lecter’s help gives the viewer any reason to doubt their pathological condition as being precisely that – with the corollary that the distinction between the abnormal and the normal, the civil/lawful and the criminal is maintained, at least normatively speaking” (Olivier 2002: 160). Although I agree, I am focusing more on the glamorizing aspect of the film; what I mean by this is the underlying tone of how a celebrity villain such as Dr Lecter is portrayed to the audience. Here again we run into problematic waters because it is indeed true that many serial killers are extremely charming, hence their ability to interact with and in fact mislead victims, and therefore a representation of them as such is accurate. This is problematic because it is also the case that many members of an audience engrossed in films such as The Silence of the Lambs are perhaps not able to separate the charm from the cold hard fact that these criminals are still at the end of the day cold-blooded killers.

In the same chapter that deals with The Silence of the Lambs, Olivier discusses the cult classic mentioned earlier, a movie influential in the process of “the normalization of violence” – Pulp Fiction; “Quentin Tarantino’s Pulp Fiction (1994) marks a phase in the development of postmodern popular film culture which could be variously described as
the aestheticization, the domestication or the normalization of violence” (160). He goes on to discuss the possible effects that this process has on society:

I am more interested in the question of the implications and possible effects of *Pulp Fiction’s* “normalization” of violence regarding the actual and potential behaviour of people in contemporary “postmodern” society. After all, one of the most pervasive features of this society, over and above its pluralism of cultural forms, is the presence of the media, including cinema. John Thompson goes as far as characterizing our culture as “mediated” (1990), meaning by this nothing less than the claim that the actions of individuals and groups of people are in an ascertainable sense the result of specific receptions or interpretations of media information. Our actions, in other words, are mediated. If this is indeed the case. Then *Pulp Fiction* is no exception. It is bound to affect the behaviour of social actors in specific ways, by knitting together the “ordinary” and the violent in a seamless manner, with the concomitant suggestion (however tacit) that, if social actors (criminals) who act violently as a matter of course also behave in ordinary ways for the rest of the time, it may be okay for “ordinary” people to indulge in a bit of murder and mayhem from time to time (164-165).

This impact takes place due to the two different levels on which a viewer ‘interacts’ with a medium such as film, namely what Freud referred to as the “primary and secondary processes”; “[h]e associates the unconscious with what he calls the “primary process,” and the preconscious with what he calls the “secondary process.” The former strives for an immediate evacuation of tension, whereas the [latter] attempts to block that evacuation, and to store up the energy for other purposes, i.e. those of thought” (Silverman 1983: 66-67). *The Silence of the Lambs* is a good example of how this processing works; on the level of the primary process, which is a more gut level emotional and amoral response, the viewer will be unaware of the unconscious response they are having to subtle techniques that are incorporated into film in order to promote feelings such as identification. The secondary response is at an intellectual level and is both a more moral and logical response to a medium such as film since it is language-based and can ‘learn’ from experience whereas the “primary process is incapable of
“learning” from experience” (68). In *The Silence of the Lambs* the audience responds on the level of the secondary process by feeling fear and disgust at the serial killers, neither of whose murderous urges are kept secret, but at the level of the primary process the audience will develop a liking towards Dr. Lecter, a subtle warming due to his elegance and charm.

Although film is an excellent example as to how these processes work, it also refers to the way in which the public responds to the news media and true-crime literature. It is due to the dangerous effects of unconscious responses that media portrayal of violence - specifically serial killers in this case - should be critically analyzed.
Chapter 3
The Serial Killer: Developmental and Socio-Cultural factors and Media Influence.

1. Defining a Serial Killer

In order to analyze the dynamics involved in the ‘relationship’ between media and serial killers I believe it is important to first understand the motivation and complexities behind the formation of such murderers. Micki Pistorius - who spent six years as head of the investigative unit of the South African Police Service and whose doctoral thesis proposed a theory for the origin of serial homicide – is in a good position to offer an enlightening, albeit frightening, introduction to these extremely complex criminals (Pistorius 2002). In her words, a serial killer

is a person (or persons) who murder several victims, usually strangers, at different times and not necessarily at the same location, with a cooling-off period in between. The motive is intrinsic; an irresistible compulsion, fuelled by fantasy which may lead to torture and/or sexual abuse, mutilation and necrophilia (6)

However, she adds that

‘irresistible compulsion’ is a psychological explanation and not a judicial term. It does not mean that the serial killer cannot prevent himself from killing. Rather, it means that he does not want to stop killing. It is his choice. The fact that he goes into a cooling-off period confirms that he can control his urge to kill – he just does not want to (6)

2. Understanding the Motivation behind Serial Killing

On the surface it seems difficult to understand what motivates a person to commit serial murder since it is often the case that serial killers embody the external traits of what we consider to be normal members of society;
Serial killers generally present themselves as normal people to the rest of the community. They go to church, they take their children to school, visit restaurants and buy groceries just like everyone else. They are someone’s son, someone’s brother, someone’s neighbour. I sometimes think of them as nice people who have this nasty habit of killing others (Pistorius 2000: 24).

Further, while standard motivations for murder and violent crime include emotions such as rage, jealousy, envy, and greed, to name but a few, in the case of serial killers you are faced with an apparent lack of motive. Many thinkers confirm that “There is a standard sense of serial killing as “senseless,” as “murder with no apparent motive” ...” (Seltzer 1998: 17). This seeming lack of motive is what makes it very difficult to apprehend a serial murderer. According to Pistorius, for example, “[s]erial killers are surely the ultimate ‘bad men’ for they torture, rape, mutilate and kill completely innocent strangers, with no apparent motive. There are certainly no rational motives – greed, revenge, financial gain – that we might be able to attribute to other murderers” (Pistorius 2002: 1). Seltzer goes on to note that “[s]erial killing is also called stranger-killing” (Seltzer 1998: 10). For serial killers, even though they might have started by killing someone they knew or were close with, their victims are not necessarily connected to them personally;

[a]s a recent criminological study of serial murder summarizes it: ‘One of the most brutal facts of serial murder is that it usually involves the killing of one person by another who is a stranger. There need be no motives of hatred, rage, fear, jealousy, or greed at work; the victim need not have taunted, threatened, or abused the killer’(42).

A symptom of the fact that at the level of everyday experience it is difficult to understand what motivates serial killers is that they are usually simply labeled as mad monsters, a foreign evil with nothing in common with the ‘average’ citizen.

it makes us feel good that we are not like them. Yet their badness resounds in us and makes us uncomfortable. We manage this uncomfortable feeling by trying to find reasons for their deviant behaviour. The easiest way to
reassure ourselves is to say: ‘They must be mad. Only a mad person would commit such terrible acts on another human being.’ (Pistorius 2002: 1)

Although it might be easiest to label serial killers as mad, it is not the most fitting explanation for their motivation: “There is more to it than simply labelling bad people as ‘mad.’” (1). What Pistorius offers instead, is a psychoanalytic approach to understanding their motivation. It is most likely a satisfying of a deep need or desire, created and nurtured from childhood, which drives them to keep killing. Their victims are a representation of their motive, of the very thing that they are trying to destroy or expel from their memories. One of South Africa’s most infamous serial killers, Avzal Norman Simons (a.k.a. the Station Strangler), revealed to the detectives that his elder brother had sodomised him between the ages of eight and fourteen years – the same ages as his victims … During his confession Simons said that the spirit of his deceased brother had entered him and that it was this spirit which had forced him to kill. His brother had died mysteriously in 1991. This illustrated how he identified with the aggressor and took on the active role while the boys represented himself and became the passive victims … Simons committed suicide on a psychological level every time he killed one of those boys (Pistorius 2000: 44).

It is more often than not the case that a person committing serial murder was abused as a child, for example, the serial killer Stewart Wilken, also known as ‘Boetie Boer’. In her book Strangers on the Street, Micki Pistorius dedicates a chapter to Wilken, explaining right from the beginning that Stewart Wilken had a raw deal as a child … [s]ix months after his birth he and his older sister, only a toddler herself, were discovered by a domestic worker in a telephone booth in Boksburg … [t]he domestic worker took both children to her employer, known to Stewart only as ‘Doep’. While in the care of Doep, Stewart was severely abused. He alleged that his private parts were
burnt with cigarettes … he often had to watch while Doep committed bestiality with the dogs and … he had to lick Doep’s penis after these incidents (Pistorius 2002: 155).

Such abuse can lead to a feeling of disempowerment (a sense of emasculation in the case of men), which is one of the major causal factors in the making of a potential killer – disempowerment leading to the need for power and control, a need seeming to be satisfied by harnessing power over life and death.

Various, and often different, definitions have been put forth over time of what a serial killer is. As part of one of these definitions Holmes and De Burger propose “four category typologies regarding motive”. Pistorius cites them as follows:

- Visionary type – murder on the orders of someone; for example, the voice of God.
- Mission – orientated – murder according to a mission; for example, to kill all prostitutes.
- Hedonistic type – including three types namely lust, sensation and comfort.
- Power/control type – murder to satisfy a need for control over life and death (9)

3. Category Four Type Motivation: Power and Control

It is clear from the above typology that the question of motivation is complex, in fact too complex for me to address adequately. Therefore I am going to concentrate instead only on the fourth category, the “power/control type”. The reason for this is that the media plays the most significant role in this type of motivation. To elaborate on “category four type motivation”, it is informative to refer to Hegel’s famous discussion of the master/slave dialectic (Melchert 1991: 409-412). According to Melchert, Hegel argues that desire is “the most basic form of self-consciousness” (409). In other words, for people to be aware of themselves as separate beings, as being ‘somebody’, they would have to define themselves in opposition to everything that they are not, or do not have. It is ironic then that a person is defined as an individual by what he/she does not have, but therefore most profoundly desires.
Think about what it is like to desire something. You say, ‘I want a million dollars.’ In the very expression of your desire, there is consciousness of self, of the I – and also of the fact that your self is not all there is. To be conscious of your self, you need to have a contrast. Desire provides that contrast in abundance. It is what you do not have, but want, that defines for you what you are! (409)

In the case of a category four type serial killer, one could argue that their defining feature is an extreme lack of power and control that divides them off from the outside world, including other people. Certainly, in a society characterized by advanced consumer capitalism, where moneymaking is of course the driving force that has infiltrated most of the world and is only growing stronger, everybody is to some extent disempowered. An aspect of capitalism that is very well brought across in the novel American Psycho by Bret Easton Ellis is the loss of individuality and uniqueness that has become the signature of consumer culture. The only truly worshipped qualities in the age of technology and mass production are material wealth and celebrity status; the “world of half meat and half machinery is one of the lethal places that make up our wound culture, in which death is theater for the living” (Seltzer 1998: 22). In a world that promotes endless mass production, it is easy to feel like just another cog in the machine. In the following passage, Ellis illustrates the inner workings and consequences of capitalism brilliantly; no individual is important anymore, brand names are far more noteworthy and essential to remember. At one of the many VIP clubs that the main character Patrick Bateman frequents in the course of the book, this comes across clearly:

I shout out to him, “Hey, there’s Teddy,” and this breaks his gaze and he shakes his head as if to clear it, refocuses his gaze on Madison and shouts decisively, “No, that’s not Madison for Christ sakes, that’s Turnbull,” and the guy who I thought was Madison … Ebersol wraps an arm around Timothy’s neck … then Price pushes the arm away, shakes Ebersol’s hand and says “Hey Madison”. Madison, who I thought was Ebersol, is wearing a splendid double-breasted white linen jacket by Hackett of London from Bergdorf Goodman. He has a cigar that hasn’t been lit in one hand and a champagne glass, half full, in the other … A guy standing behind Madison who looks a lot like Ted Dreyer (Easton Ellis 1991: 53).
Even though Bateman has no problem remembering the names of famous brands and designers as well as minor details like how much champagne is left in a person’s glass, remembering the names of people he is supposedly acquainted with is near to impossible. Taking into account the primary causal factor of trauma, the category four type serial killer experiences a more extreme sense of disempowerment than that experienced by the rest of society. The feeling of disempowerment that comes from a history of abuse would engender an obsessive desire for power. In other words, because power and control is what they feel they lack the most, it is ultimately the restoration of what they feel they have lost that they most compulsively desire. As perverse as it may seem, the power that comes from being an infamous serial killer is very real and will appeal to many of those in society who feel disempowered and ignored. In the book entitled *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America’s Wound Culture*, Mark Seltzer writes that “[s]erial killing has its place in a public culture in which addictive violence has become not merely a collective spectacle but one of the crucial sites where private desire and public fantasy cross” (Seltzer 1998: 1).

Hegel adds that the earliest form of desire (self-awareness) occurs when we come to realize as infants that there are other people whose behavior is not under our control. According to Freud, this realization occurs at the time of weaning. In relation to other people this early form of desire, or self-awareness, translates into a desire to have complete control over other people and their actions. For Hegel, the only way to know that you have complete control over other people is to put them in a position where they have to recognize and acknowledge your power, without you having to reciprocate (Melchert 1991: 409-410). Demanding recognition from others, which would therefore end up in the individual self being acknowledged as a ‘somebody’, consequently relegates the others to the status of ‘nobodies’.

Of course, every other harbors the same desire for power and control. According to Hegel, the only failsafe way to solve this problem, in other words for an individual to prove his/her power, would be to enter into a conflict that would end up in a “fight to the
death” (411). Hegel argues that this solution is not viable because it is self-defeating and also discusses the different ways in which we renegotiate our desire for power in order to avoid the life and death struggle. However, in the case of category four type serial killers, it does not seem that they are able to renegotiate their desire for power and control. They do in fact engage in such life and death struggles and on top of this they try to ensure their victory through choosing weaker victims or taking them by surprise.

One could argue that the act of murder, intentionally taking control over the life and death of another human being, is in itself the strongest expression of power. By pretending to what is ‘essentially’ God’s power, the serial murderer is claiming an exaggerated power that they have not harnessed in the realm of their every day lives. But serial killers eventually find out that the act of murder is indeed, as Hegel claimed, self-defeating, since power is not power unless or until it is recognized by others, which is quite impossible for murdered victims to do. In order to hold onto the power derived from murder, a murderer would have to repeat the experience, and once again be faced with the disappointment of unsatisfied desire for recognition. To fill the gap of this unsatisfied desire for recognition an audience is required, and there is no greater audience than that offered by mass media.

4. Media Attention as a Secondary Causal Factor

The issue of media attention and involvement has to do with the “Post-crime phase – getting involved in the investigation or contacting the families of the victim” (Pistorius 2002: 15). Another way in which serial killers seek attention is by using a specific modus operandi and placing bodies in specific areas, drawing awareness to their ‘work’, which in turn signifies that they are wanting, if not demanding, attention from first the police (authorities) and inevitably the media and public.

Before I discuss how media plays a role in the motivation for serial killing it is important to acknowledge that media alone does not create serial killers. In fact, serial killing has been present for many, even hundreds of, years before the advent of film and television,
and therefore before the extreme presence and influence of mass media, which is a fairly recent development. In addition, even today there are certain communities that are untouched by mass media, but not by serial killing. In other words serial killing is not restricted to the media-saturated urban areas. Especially in the South African context, one must take into account that there are serial killers in many rural settlements, for example the Donnybrook killer in Kwazulu Natal (Pistorius 2000). With this in mind the definition and different forms of media should be taken into consideration, focus being on the origins and first steps of and towards media and communication. Media, being a form of communication, allows certain people, places, events or products to gain recognition. In the context of a rural setting in which forms of multimedia are not present, there are still forms of communication – such as word of mouth and gossip. Oral communication in rural communities could very well create, on a local level, the same feelings of fascination and awe, not forgetting fear, which widespread media coverage stirs. While at the same time receiving recognition within his/her rural community the killer would easily be able to feel recognized by taking part in the hype and investigation surrounding the murders, or by merely enjoying the excitement from the sidelines.

The statement is not being made that in South Africa the media creates serial killers, it is rather a question of whether or not the growing media, film, and television industry in our country will affect these repetitively murderous individuals in the same frightening manner, as is the case in America. South Africa is noticeably becoming more westernized (evident in fashion trends, the growth of the entertainment industry – music and film – as well as the rise of capitalism), pointing to the fact that society is in no way stagnant, as is the case with any person living in such an ever-changing environment - they too will go through certain evolutions and developments. I believe that this is also true for serial killers, and thus it is not enough to merely think of them as ‘evil’ and ‘insane’ monsters that are beyond being understood. Although I am in agreement that most serial murderers are unable to be rehabilitated, it is not the case that they cannot, to some degree, be understood and therefore apprehended in such time that their victim count is decreased (the profiler of course fulfilling a crucial role in this area).
The fact that there is serial killing in the absence of mass media does not prove, however, that the media and therefore representations of serial killers do not or could not have an effect on serial killers in both rural and urban areas. To reiterate, the media alone does not create serial killers and the primary causal factors discussed earlier, such as traumatic and disempowering life experiences in childhood development, play a more major role in their genesis. This gives one reason to think that the self-definition of “Peter Kürten, the Dusseldorf killer of thirty-five people (women and children, primarily)” (Seltzer 1998: 137), which blames the media entirely for making him what he is, is too simple. Kürten, according to Seltzer,

represented the mass coverage of his crimes as their cause (“I have already observed that the sensational reports in certain scandal sheets turned me into the man who stands before you today”). He registered this radical experience of formation from the outside in (his ambition to become “the most celebrated criminal of all time”) (137).

Arguably, the media provides additional secondary kinds of motivation that add to the primary causal factors linked to trauma. However, with the presence of media adoration and the lucrative moneymaking possibilities of serial killing – these murderers have even greater and more profound, although secondary, motivations for their crimes. “There is a tendency for these criminals to gain a measure of ‘fame’ through their deeds and it is unfortunate that in many cases they seem to spark interest and even admiration that they would not have achieved other than through their ghastly behaviour” (Pistorius 2002: 2). Image is everything in today’s world, and the serial killer is likely to be even more motivated to seek attention on a massive scale, especially since they are now becoming more and more aware of the fame and celebrity that is ‘awarded’ them on a silver platter. Along with the deeply imbedded motivation associated with the desire for power and control that has grown and developed with a serial killer throughout his or her life (coming to a head when a stressful occurrence pushes them over the edge and into the new realm of murder), I believe that the media provides two other motivational factors, namely the pull of celebrity and the emulation effect of identification through the act of ‘copycatting’, whose influence is only mounting as the age of the image and celebrity worship in capitalist society intensifies.
4.1 The Pull of Celebrity

Turning first to the question of celebrity, Seltzer’s discussion of the double logic of identity and identification is a good place to start.

precisely in terms of the double logic of identity and identification we have been tracing: a sheer identification with the mass and a murderous disidentification. On the one side, there is a location of identity in mass celebrity (the sheer sociality of the most-wanted man), and on the other, self-defense against the traumatic failure of self-distinction in the mass (the survivor’s murderous asociality) … This empty circuit of identity in celebrity – a self-identity bound to the mass witnessing from which it suffers – makes up one face of the serial killer-profile (Seltzer 1998: 137).

What Seltzer is highlighting here is the dependence that category 4 type serial killers have on the very masses that they fear. They are dependent on the recognition given by an audience but at the same time they fear being just another one of the masses, in other words they fear a lack of recognition.

Schmid confirms that in a world where fame is everything, people will resort to almost anything to be noticed, to stand out from the crowd.

celebrity embodies the superficiality that has come to dominate the public sphere … The celebrity’s visibility stands in for, Boorstin believes, a chilling lack of substance in contemporary public figures, a lack of substance symptomatic of a culture that has come to prize image over reality (Schmid 2005: 11)

To be, in the 21st century, is to be on TV; to be in the public eye; to be ‘somebody’, as is so often the wish of the young and aspiring of today.

The serial killer … aspires – like everyone else? – to celebrity under the conditions of an anonymous mass society. The serial killer, in some therefore prominent cases, exhibits the desire “to be somebody” by achieving
the celebrity status of the ‘natural born killer.’ … A range of recent sociological studies of serial violence thus make the case that the killer’s panic about the failure of self-distinction in the mass is in effect countered in the media spectacle of public violence: hence his autograph or ‘signature’ crimes (Seltzer 1998: 135).

An example of a serial killer feeding on the recognition he believes he is receiving are the words of David Berkowitz, the “Son of Sam”, cited by Schmid. Once arrested he commented that ‘I finally had convinced myself that it was good to do it, necessary to do it, and that the public wanted me to do it. The latter part I believe until this day. I believe that many were rooting for me. This was the point at which the papers began to pick up vibes and information that something big was happening out in the streets. Real big!’” (Schmid 2005: 23).

As Schmid writes after this quote, “[i]t would be easy to dismiss such remarks as the product of a diseased mind, but as Leyton says, ‘Son of Sam was not so very wrong when he thought the public was urging him on during his killing spree, for the media chronicled his every deed in a state of mounting excitement’” (23 – 24); “[t]he communications of David Berkowitz (aka “Son of Sam”) with the New York Post during his yearlong murder spree in 1967 – 77 played a pivotal role both in Berkowitz’s evolving self-definition and in his decision to keep killing” (16).

One consequence of the fame bestowed upon some serial killers is that such killers are increasingly aware of their status as celebrities, as public figures who have an audience and therefore the potential to capitalize upon their fame. Carl Panzram, a self-confessed murderer of twenty-one people, wrote a letter days before his execution to Henry Lesser, a prison warder to whom Panzram had entrusted his papers and miscellaneous writings. The letter suggests a highly developed awareness of the market for murder-related products (Schmid 2005: 16).

The letter from Panzram goes on to advise the warder on the steps to be taken to create a book by the convicted murderer, one that he believes will “… have a big sale …” (pg.
16). These are not the only examples of both the awareness and enjoyment that serial killers find in their growing celebrity status. There are many facets of this star-struck manifestation of our image saturated and driven “global village”. From the murderabilia industry to the many women that practically line up to marry serial murderers such as Richard Ramirez – the “Night Stalker” who raped and killed women. In the words of the copycat killer in the 1995 film *Copycat*: ‘ … It’s a sick world, isn’t it …?’” (122).

By discussing the different ways in which media ‘interacts’ with potential killers, I am suggesting that the influence of media and film could be the ‘stresser’ that pushes someone to commit the first fledgling murder that leads to serial killings.

Serial killers appear quite aware of their media impact as well as their celebrity. Lawrence Bittaker and accomplice Roy Norris tortured and murdered a string of teenage girls in 1979 in Southern California, dumping one mutilated body on a suburban lawn to encourage media coverage. After Bittaker was caught, he signed autographs from his prison cell, “Pliers Bittaker.” … Becoming a popular-culture celebrity is an important part of the motivation that inspires serial killers to continue committing murder … Los Angeles’ 1984-85 Night Stalker, Richard Ramirez, reportedly said to one of his victims as he assaulted her, “You know who I am, don’t you? I’m the one they’re writing about in the newspapers and on TV.”… (Fox; Levin 2004: 39-40).

I believe that the above observation is tremendously important in the gaining of understanding into the behavior of serial killers because, as I have brought to light earlier, most of these murderers are people who have been humiliated as children, rejected and abused and made to feel unimportant. It is exactly for this reason that they would be the most likely to respond to the pull of celebrity and the promise of attention on a larger scale than they could ever have hoped for, a certain recognition that they feel, on a certain level, they deserve.

On the other side of celebrity comes the fear of being ‘ordinary’, of not being recognized in the eyes of the public. It has become so enticing to follow in the footsteps of killers such as Bundy and Dahmer that people often confess to crimes they haven’t committed,
even fabricating situations to allow themselves to feel powerful and important. “Here …
is something approaching a personal confession, part of an anonymous letter received by
the Ohio newspaper the Martin’s Ferry Times Leader in November 1991:

I’ve killed people … Technically I meet the definition of
a serial killer (three or more victims with a cooling-off
period in between) but I’m an average-looking person with
a family, job, and home just like yourself …

There is, we have seen, nothing extraordinary about such communications to the mass
media. Interactions between the serial killer and public media … have formed part of the
profile of serial murder, from the inaugural Jack the Ripper case on” (Seltzer 1998: 105 –
106). There is a specific word from this quote from Mark Seltzer that I would like to
address; the word is “average”. Whether the author of this letter is telling the truth or
lying for attention (which would also be very telling), it is evident that they consider
everyone with such attributes as having a family, a job and a home, to be ‘average’,
‘ordinary’. What sets this person apart is that they define themselves as being a serial
killer. Even if the letter was fabricated, it nonetheless points to people believing that
certain fame can be gained from being a serial murderer.

This type of fabrication is of course not at all new, 1880 London saw countless examples
of this. “What motivated Maria Coroner and thousands of other letter writers to declare
themselves publicly to be Jack the Ripper? Clearly, there was something about the Ripper
(and the type of murderer he quickly came to represent) that appealed to thousands of
otherwise ordinary people” (Schmid 2005: 37). Once again we are presented with the
word ‘ordinary’

Christopher Lasch … concentrates … on this … impact
on the American public: “The media give substance to
and thus intensify narcissistic dreams of fame and glory,
encourage the common man to identify himself with the
stars and to hat the ‘herd’, and make it more and more
difficult for him to accept the banality of everyday
existence (Schmid 2005: 11).
4.2 The Copycat Phenomenon

The second secondary motivation stemming from media attention, as mentioned above, is ‘copycatting’. Basking in the glow of being a celebrity and being worshipped by millions is many people’s dream come true. To become a famous actor or actress is not as easy for the men and women who are not drop dead gorgeous with bodies of gods and goddesses; could it not seem plausible, although it is disturbing and would be incredibly twisted (which seems the most apt word), that certain members of this fame-hungry audience could go to the lengths of murder, or serial murder, to be noticed? Of course, this seems preposterous, but with copycat killings popping up all over the world, is it really that absurd? “[T]he contemporary cultural context of postmodernity is such that some cases of the appropriation of media messages … may … result in violent or destructive behaviour of the ‘copycat’ variety” (Olivier 2000: 165).

Two important minds on the subject of serial killers and what motivates them to kill are Jack Levin and James Alan Fox, who also agree that “the damage done by granting celebrity status to serial killers goes beyond motivating their evil deeds” (Fox; Levin 2004: 39-40). They add a warning about the connection between serial killer celebrity and the copycatting phenomenon. They argue that celebrity helps to inspire other ignored and alienated Americans to become copycat killers in order to achieve their own degree of infamy. Making monsters into celebrities teaches our youngsters – especially alienated and marginalized teenagers - a lesson about how to get attention. ‘Want to be noticed? Want to feel important? Simple. Shoot lots of your classmates. Then, you’ll be on the cover of People Magazine, you’ll be interviewed by CNN, you’ll make the headlines all over the nation, if not the world!’ (39-40).

The examples of copycat behavior abound:

On February 2, 1996 … in the obscure town of Moses Lake, Washington, Barry Loukaitis, a 14-year-old student at
Frontier Junior High who had long been teased, shot to death two classmates and his math teacher. The fact that a 14-year-old boy could commit multiple homicide at school was so abhorrent that it sparked a national orgy of media coverage, inspiring a string of copycat multiple murders, which included tragic episodes in such unlikely places as West Paducah, Kentucky, Pearl, Mississippi, Jonesboro, Arkansas, Springfield, Oregon, Littleton, Colorado, and Santee, California. The copycat effect may be particularly strong for those teenagers … who have suffered humiliation, if not physical abuse, at the hands of their insensitive classmates. Some alienated youngsters come to view school snipers – like Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris who shot and killed more than a dozen classmates at Columbine High in Littleton, Colorado – as their heroes … They were given the model for achieving a sense of power and importance through the barrel of a semiautomatic … By granting celebrity status to villains, not only do we add insult to injury by further denigrating the memory of the victims, but we may be inadvertently providing our young people with a dangerous model for gaining national prominence and fame. We may also be giving to the worst among us exactly what they hope to achieve – celebrity status. One serial killer made this intention and his frustration known when he asked in a letter to the local police, “How many times do I have to kill before I get a name in the paper or some national attention?” (41-43).

These dreams of fame and being a star, shedding the skin of boring normality, has dangerous consequences, an example of this being when a serial killer identifies with a famous on-screen representation of a murderer:

Clifford Olson, who raped and murdered 11 children in British Columbia in the early 1980’s, begged to be referred to as “Hannibal Lecter.” In order to justify his desired position as the “grand champion” of serial murder, Olson actually confessed to slayings he could not possibly have committed. Once they are identified with a superstar moniker, their frequency of murder increases. No longer satisfied with obscurity, they seek to prove that they deserve the superstar status to which they have been assigned (40).

On the subject of copycat crimes, it is difficult to forget “John Grisham’s charge that,
indirectly, film director Oliver Stone is responsible for the killing of one person and the crippling of another by two teenagers in ‘copycat’ fashion, after watching Stone’s Natural Born Killers (1994) for the umpteenth time” (Olivier 2000: 163 – 164). While watching a movie such as Natural Born Killers, one gets to know Mickey and Mallory (the Bonnie and Clyde type main characters played by Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis), being drawn into their world and experiencing their murderous spree alongside them. Of course, Oliver Stone did not put together a completely realistic narrative and set of images, “[i]t is left to the audience to glue the loose, apparently arbitrary sequence of images and image-plashes together into a narrative of sorts” (Olivier 2002: 174), which could be taken to be a jarring effect for the audience, making it more difficult for the process of identification to take place. While taking this into account, I believe that a certain amount of sympathizing with Mickey and Mallory does occur, due to the overriding love story that gives the film a lot of its power. “Stone has argued, quite persuasively, that in contemporary American society, figures such as Mickey and Mallory are bound to ‘capture the hearts and minds of Americans looking for a human face’ … Despite the fact that they murder over fifty people, Mickey and Mallory are easily the most sympathetic characters in the film … Mickey and Mallory, the star-crossed and misunderstood young lovers on the run from Mallory’s abusive family, represent the power of love, a love so powerful, indeed, that it survives the end of the film” (Schmid 2005: 125).

This line of discussion is however not only relevant when it comes to serial killers but also when I discuss the way in which different forms of media represent such criminals as well as the audience factor. I believe it relevant in this chapter because it ties into the need that serial killers have for recognition and attention. The countless number of copycat murders that come after exposure to certain films and media productions serves as strong evidence that film and the representation of violent criminals in film has an effect on members of the viewing public. Of course, there is not concrete proof that these films are the direct cause for these murders, but there is strong evidence that they are a major factor. Before I go further I would like to make it clear that I am in no way putting blame onto the film industry or suggesting that certain films should no longer be allowed
to be made or shown to the public, instead I am pointing out that they do have a profound
effect on a dangerous sect of our community and it is only through education and
understanding that this phenomenon can be counteracted.
Chapter 4
The Audience: Consumer Culture and Image Obsession

Of the three components of the vicious cyclical relationship between media, serial killer, and audience, I have already discussed the role of media representation in the sensationalizing and glamorizing of serial murder, as well as the primary and secondary motivations behind serial killers susceptible to media influence. The third component, namely the audience, will now be addressed. Given the worrying instances of copycat killings discussed in the previous chapter, it is obvious that certain potential serial killers come from this group. However, and perhaps more importantly, it is the adoring fans who give the famous or infamous the recognition that they desire, that form an important part of this crucial assembly. Without an audience there is no star, and without a specific kind of audience there would be no fascinated worship to elevate serial killers to celebrity status. My question now, then, is how such an audience is formed and characterized. What are the circumstances and influences that lead to an audience having an insatiable hunger for violence and being in such awe of serial killers that the process of identification takes place? How do we understand the fact that, as Seltzer puts it, “[t]he convening of the public around scenes of violence has come to make up a wound culture: the public fascination with torn and opened private bodies and torn and opened psyches, a public gathering around the wound and the trauma” (109)?

In answer to this question Bret Easton Ellis’s 1991 novel American Psycho, at the heart of which is image worship and consumer emptiness, holds an important insight. Many find the beginning of the novel, which was both highly praised and criticized for its graphic imagery and in-your-face style, to be monotonous and tiresome, until Ellis shocks the reader out of boredom with one of the many violent descriptions of one of the murders that his main character commits, or only imagines committing - the ending is much more vague than in the movie version. The monotony of the beginning is exactly what I believe to be brilliant in its representation of the consumerist society that characterizes the type of audience in question. Their obsession with brand names, the endless meaningless parties solely attended to be seen in the right place at the right time,
and the lack of substance capture the mindless boredom of consumer culture and sets the stage for the formation of a serial killer very convincingly. *American Psycho* therefore offers a realistic, although fictional, representation of the type of audience under discussion, an audience obsessed with image in a double sense; image being used as representing firstly the images that an audience views, and secondly, image as the way in which the audience wishes to be viewed, as an indication of social status. In the discussion to follow image obsession in this double sense will be addressed as the main factor that predisposes an audience to elevate serial killers to celebrity status and to identify with them.

1. Image Reception in Consumer Culture

The consumer culture from which this specific type of audience emerges is defined by its image saturation. Freud has pointed out that language and image processing are situated with different states of the mind. As mentioned in chapter 2, he differentiates with image based primary processing and language based secondary processing. In his view mental processing is triggered by an instinctual urge or desire. Processing occurs when we have to figure out what our desire is and how to satisfy it. In primary processing we uncritically and unrealistically bring remembered images together to form a picture of what we want. According to Freud this fantasy is so powerful that it brings us instant gratification (or pleasure). The problem being that the pleasure does not last very long because the fantasy does not match reality and the original urge reasserts itself and is replaced by displeasure. Thus, the primary process “seeks immediate gratification through hallucination, but the end result is always disillusionment and unpleasure” (Silverman 1983: 67).

According to Freud we have to resort in the end to a more realistic and reliable kind of processing where we use logical and language based skills to figure out what we desire and how to satisfy it. This secondary processing offers less gratification less quickly but in the long run it is more reliable because it incorporates a moment of critical engagement with and assessment of reality (Freud calls this process “reality-testing” (cf. Olivier 2006: 21) (Wollheim 1991: 59-61). Notably, consumerist capitalism relies on the need or desire
for instant gratification since any reflection on the part of consumer could very well lead to reevaluation about whether or not a certain product is actually needed or if an identification with a certain product or movie character is indeed beneficial, therefore the secondary process in identification is not encouraged.

Shlain confirms Freud’s insight into the different kinds of processing that occur by arguing that viewing images such as those on television generates “slow alpha and theta waves. These EEG patterns denote a passive, receptive, contemplative state of mind. Reading a book, in contrast, generates beta waves; the kind that appear whenever a person is concentrating on a task” (Shlain 1998: 408). According to Freud once we’ve learnt to speak a secondary processing takes over from primary processing, but primary processing continues unconsciously (for example in dreams). As already mentioned, this is an explanation for the conflicting messages in the reception of visual media. At the active, intellectual level of logical verbal processing we can acknowledge the difference between good and evil yet at the level of the image, evil characters often remain appealing. The effects of this type of passive reception without reflection, present in an audience that is overexposed to images, is cause for concern since it leads to precisely the unreflective receptive state of mind that results in mindless superficial boredom. This boredom has dangerous consequences in that it leads to the hunger for violence and desire for celebrity that encourages the idealization of serial killers.

2. Consumer Culture and the Hunger for Violence

Boredom leads to desire for excitement in the form of shocks, an example being the shock of violence. As television shows and films continue to include more graphic violence, audiences only want more, so “[w]ith the omnipresent reduction of reality to images in the media, is it at all surprising that viewers’ sensitivity to the true nature of violence is anaesthetized?” (Olivier 2002: 176). This brings me to another aspect which factors into the type of audience that helps to create, inspire, or encourage serial killers – the desensitization of the public towards violence, specifically in the media. A part of this desensitization is a process of dehumanization, in other words, a process in which people
come to be viewed as objects, or in terms of stereotypical images: Patrick Bateman, Easton Ellis’s main character, communicates via his thoughts with the reader and at one point in the narrative shares one of his dreams: “Last night I had dreams that were lit like pornography and in them I fucked girls made of cardboard” (Ellis 1991: 192).

Chapter 2 dealt with media representation and the sensationalisation and glamorization of serial killers, processes that play a big part in the cultivation of the ‘serial killer audience’; this representation, as mentioned earlier, disguises reality and paints a prettier picture for viewers to consume. The way in which film is structured “affects the way in which audiences experience the glut of violence in … film, namely in equally unrealistic terms” (Olivier 2002: 176), in the case of Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers*,

[i]t may be argued that, for this very reason, the film is innocuous regarding viewer-reception – after all, if its presentation of violence is one of de-realisation, surely no harmful effects could follow. Such a position would overlook an important consideration, however. Audiences may indeed find that the violence strikes them as being unreal, but at the same time they tend to associate the context within which it occurs with the social reality of television journalism (i.e. of the media) and of regular occurrences of murder, assault or rape. The result is that the true character of such acts of violence is systematically obscured by means of a kind of anaesthetizing effect accompanying the diaphanous layer of deralization imposed on them by … film-techniques … In other words, instead of presenting violence in all its horror … *Natural Born Killers* presents it in disguised, bearable form, but simultaneously makes of it the very fabric which holds the film’s fragmentary elements together. It is not difficult to understand that all of this, which has the effect of eroding the distinction between real violence and its representations by means of hyperreal images, must unavoidably affect people’s behaviour. This is because of the weakening of their ability to distinguish these images … from those that populate daily television newsbroadcasts, supposedly representing real events (176).

Media, therefore, contributes to the process of normalization, dehumanization, and derealization of violence which engenders in consequence a collapse in the distinction between good and evil transgression of the norm; it becomes irrelevant whether the
transgressive individuals are movie stars or infamous serial killers. As Schmid confirms when he writes that “the iconic status of serial killers in contemporary American culture is compelling evidence of the collapse of the difference between fame and notoriety. In particular, the decline of merit as a defining factor in fame means that nowadays to be famous and to be notorious are frequently the same thing” (Schmid 2005: 9). A consequence of this collapse is a process of normalization that makes the term “serial killer” into a job title instead of a label given to extremely violent and dangerous criminals. “By the turn of the century, serial killing has become something to do (a lifestyle, or career, or calling) and the serial killer has become something to be” (Seltzer 1998: 4). Olivier adds that it is because of films like *Pulp Fiction*, which glamorizes the world of crime, that criminals are seen as “‘just ordinary people’” (Olivier 2002: 170).

Another consequence of this collapse is that public fascination with violence and serial killers together with the capitalist consumer drive are combined in an industry known as the “murderabilia industry” (Schmid 2005), this industry “which specializes in selling serial killer artifacts, is booming. At Spectre Studios, sculptor David Johnson sells flexible plastic action figures of Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, Ed Gein, and John Wayne Gacy and plans to produce a figure of Jack the Ripper in the future” (1). This trend points to the fact that people buying these products have not critically understood what exactly it is that they are buying into. This is not to say that they do not understand that they are buying action figures representing serial killers who in reality committed murder, they would be aware of this, but of the implications and consequences of buying into such a market I do not believe they give a second thought. Even more frightening than the sale of products about serial murderers is the sale of products by serial murderers, “Serial Killer Central offers a range of items made by serial killers themselves, including paintings and drawings by Angelo Buono (one of the “Hillside Stranglers”) and Henry Lee Lucas. For the More discerning consumer, Supernaught.com charges a mere $300 for a brick from Jeffrey Dahmer’s apartment building, while a lock of Charles Manson’s hair is a real bargain at $995, shipping and handling not included”(1). What would be interesting to find out, however, is whether the same consumers who support the “murderabilia” industry would be as enthusiastic about meeting their serial killer icons in
Finally, it is not only that there is an acceptance of violence in consumer culture, but that it has developed into an enjoyment of violence, an enjoyment that welcomes and idolizes both the on-screen actors playing violent characters and the real life perpetrators of violent crime, specifically serial killers in this case. Hence, it becomes clearer how an audience with “media-engendered identities in globalized culture” (Olivier 2006: 7) could come to idealize serial killers who have become the center of media frenzy and the basis for feature films and television spots.

3. Image as Status and Audience Identification

Along with the passive reception associated with the processing of visual images, this kind of audience is also obsessed with another type of image. Image is used here to denote a type of self-image that reflects ones status in the eyes of others. The state of boredom and superficiality that characterizes a consumer culture lends itself to a process of homogenization. The ‘advances’ of globalization have had great homogenizing effects on society and “one just cannot escape from the effects of the media and communications … technology – wherever you go, they seem to infiltrate your personality” (Olivier 2006: 10), which Olivier notes is not far-fetched when considering “the way in which teenagers’ behaviour has been affected by the use of cell-phones: it is nothing unusual to see them ‘acting’ for the benefit of being cell-phone photographed by their friends, and similarly ‘recording’ (that is, simultaneously structuring) the behaviour of others” (10). In other words people begin to behave uniformly and lose their identity as a consequence of the false representations that the media promotes, which inevitably form part of the “kind of identities contemporary subjects tend to have, especially as far as glamorized images are concerned” (10). According to political theorist Benjamin Barber (Olivier 2006) a loss of individuality and unique identity would not be expected from a postmodern world that consists of so many different cultures, races, and beliefs, but nonetheless “postmodern identities are becoming more homogeneous” (3) and “the media, with their global communicational reach, are the means for spreading these homogenizing sites of
identification in the shape of images (like those on MTV, which millions of ‘teeny-boppers’ model their bland soulless, ever-shifting identities on)” (3).

The force opposing homogenization is a strong desire to be seen as standing out from the crowd. The irony lies in that at the same time being the vehicle for spreading the images that lead to “homogenizing sites of identification”, the media also represents, for the public, the means to differentiating themselves as ‘special’ or ‘important’. With this in mind, “‘[p]ostmodern’ society could therefore be characterized as one of culturally mediated ‘hallucinatory wish-fulfillments’, which nevertheless have real, and sometimes destructive, social effects” (Olivier 2000: 163). The cardboard people that make up consumerist culture are convinced that money and fame are among the only ways that a large portion can elevate their status and ‘rank’ in the eyes of society. This ‘need’ or desire to reach a goal of being noticed and standing out from the crowd, I believe, is fueled by the consumer obsession with image, in both senses, which leads audiences to be swept away by the glamour of media representation,

\[w\]hether it is an advertisement for a new model cellular telephone, or the famous branded image of Absolut vodka in yet another innovative reconfiguration … or the image of film star Isabella Rossellini advertising a new, bewitching, perfume, these images present themselves as sites for consumer identification – not with the product as such, but primarily with the lifestyle or social context projected by the situation in which the product in question is seen … as being used by certain individuals. This is all that is required for the product to be perceived as desirable, by association with the lifestyle or privileged activities depicted in the advertisements or commercials concerned(Olivier 2006: 16-17).

However, because of the collapse between fame and notoriety, the path to fame whether it be by good transgression or evil transgression of the norm is not important, as long as the goal of admiring recognition is reached. It could very well be the lifestyle, the fame, which the serial killer –real or fictional – has, that is glamorous and appealing to certain members of the viewing public, not the actual crimes they commit.
The façade that is built up by media derealization creates a distance that allows consumers and viewers to feel safe within their fantasies, believing that they are a part of the dangerous and glamorous world of the serial killer yet at the same time not bringing them face to face with the real murderers. It is this sensationalized façade of glamour and the ‘high life’ that viewers believe in and follow, thus creating an often cult-like obsession with serial killers. Charles Manson, although not a serial murderer by definition, inspired a very impressive following – women congregating at the court house throughout his trial, even shaving their heads after he arrived in court with his own hair sheered off. Richard Ramirez, the infamous “Night Stalker” who was convicted of 13 murders in 1989, had throngs of women visiting him on death row and was eventually married; “virtually all our multiple murderers achieve true and lasting fame … During their trials, they will almost certainly be surrounded by admiring women who impress their affections upon the killer, radiating towards him little but admiration and love” (Schmid 2005: 23)

However, the process of identification is more complex than just feelings of admiration and love. As is the case with the identification that takes place with a movie star, which promotes feelings of both love and hate in the audience, the same process occurs with serial killers who have become both infamous murderers and film stars:

“the serial killer makes a particularly appropriate (even emblematic) celebrity because both figures inspire feelings of attraction and repulsion, admiration and condemnation. Even though the “normal” celebrity (for example, the film star) seems to be a wholly loved and admired figure, in fact the public’s reaction to the celebrity is also characterized by resentment, even violent hatred. Similarly (although it is the similarity of a mirror image: identical but inverted) the serial killer seems to inspire only condemnation and hatred. As we will see … however, the public’s reaction to the serial killer is also complicated by feelings of fascination, even admiration” (Schmid 2005: 6).
Lacan gives a psychoanalytic explanation for the origin of the rivalry, or love/hate relationship, between the audience and celebrity:

Lacan’s (1977) well-known concept of the *mirror stage*, in the course of which the child enters the register of the so-called imaginary’, is related to these images as far as their structuring function in the development of the subject is concerned. Briefly, the child’s assumption of the specular image as its own – in fact, as *itself* – has two sides: first, it constitutes the *founding* act of narcissistic identification for the infant, without which it could not develop a sense of being or of having a *self*. Second, however, this originary act of identification is also alienating for the subject, in so far as the image is *not* itself … Lacan detects an ambivalence in the child about its own iconic counterpart: it loves it, even as it enters into rivalry with it … when one identifies with someone – especially beyond the mirror stage when the originary act of identification is transferred to the social sphere of interaction with others such as siblings and friends – it implies the desired assumption of all the attributes on the part of the person with whom one identifies: her or his desires, too, become one’s own, hence the ensuing rivalry (Olivier 2006: 21).

The power of the media certainly comes across clearly in the process and symptoms of identification, which include such reactions as the rivalry noted in the above quote, and its role “in promoting such rivalry, and concomitantly, consumer spending, in relation to the ubiquitous iconic representations of celebrities (with which consumers identify in ‘wannabe’-fashion), should be obvious” (Olivier 2006: 9).

Overall, it would seem that due to the normalization of violence that stems from the constant exposure of audiences to graphic and sensationalized depictions of violent acts such as serial murder, a large portion of the viewers do not ultimately differentiate between serial killers in reality and the glamorized versions of serial killers that are portrayed through the media. One should of course not generalize and include all viewers into this scenario, but through the strong evidence of global emulation of media icons and the sale of brand name products seen to be used by the celebrities and promoted by the media, it is clear that this impact is widely spread. Each member of the viewing public would no doubt like to claim innocence in the cycle of promoting a heinous act such as
serial killing, but not “only does our presence in the movie theater or our rental of [a] film identify us as being interested in serial murder (whatever that means, and here we touch again on the thorny issue of identification), but if we recognize the names of the serial killer role models … we may feel even more implicated in the star system that has developed around serial killers” (Schmid 2005: 122), it also implicates each and every one of us in the cycle of response. It is for all these reasons that the audience makes up such an important part of the circular relationship that occurs between serial killer, media, and viewers because so many of each group is formed directly from the spectators, the audience.
Chapter 5
Research Question: What About South Africa?

Having dealt with media representation, serial killer motivation, and audience response, in previous chapters, the question of whether or not South Africa is heading in the direction of a culture of celebrity killers will now be addressed. As mentioned before, it has to be taken into account that there is not a strong mass media presence in many rural areas such as those still very common in South Africa, meaning that in these areas the influence of the media is not as strong as in urban communities. However, as the reach of advanced consumer capitalism widens, the possibility of mass media spreading into these regions is very real and should therefore also be taken into consideration. Firstly, however, the presence of violent crime and serial killing in South Africa should be established.

It is blatantly clear to anyone living in South Africa, having come through the tumultuous transition from 1994 and the years of struggle before and after, that there is a violent history that has led to a violent present condition. An article published in *Nedbank ISS Crime Index* (Vol. 5, 2001) has reported the results for the 1998 Interpol (International Criminal Police Organisation) statistics, which serves as a “way of evaluating South Africa’s crime levels” ([www.iss.co.za/Pubs/CRIMEINDEX/01VOL5NO1/World.html](http://www.iss.co.za/Pubs/CRIMEINDEX/01VOL5NO1/World.html)). These results, “with crime data released by the Crime Information Analysis Centre (CIAC) of the South African Police Service”, include a comparison of South Africa’s crime level statistics with that of other countries in varied parts of the world. Under the heading “Violent crime” South Africa, in 1998¹, “had the highest recorded per capita murder rate of the countries selected” with “59 recorded murders in South Africa per 100000 of the population”. Although it might be expected for South Africa to compare negatively with countries such as those in Europe or North America - due to the recent socially disruptive transition from a state of violent suppression, namely apartheid, to a state of ‘democratic’ uncertainty that South Africa has undergone - it is interesting to

discover that in 1998 “the murder rate in Swaziland was approximately a third of South Africa’s and Zimbabwe’s less than one-sixth”.

The reason that the rate of violent crime is important, and indeed relevant, in the study of serial killers and their motivations is because, according Pistorius’s citation of Holmes and De Burger (Pistorius 2000: 16), a major factor involved in the potential genesis of serial homicide is precisely the social circumstances which South Africans experience today; namely “the continuous culture of violence coupled with a continuous change in the relationship between the individual and his environment” (16). In Pistorius’s words, these “characteristics … exist within our South African culture, especially within the so-called townships and in the rural communities” (16).

According to Pistorius, “South Africa has the second highest rate of serial homicides” (11) in the world, serial homicides being part of what falls under the category of ‘violent crime’. She also notes, in her 2000 book *Catch Me a Killer* in which she writes about the many serial murder cases she worked on with the South African Police, that “at that stage [they] were handling fifteen active serial killers” (222). Pistorius states that “South Africa holds the record for apprehending serial killers within three to six months of a special investigation team being established” (Pistorius 2000: 11), although as soon as one serial killer has been caught, “the very next day a new serial killer filled the place that [that] one had vacated” (223). In another passage Pistorius lists only a few South African serial killers, serial killers who “attacked couples” (233), a list that proves frightening to anyone not aware that serial killers are a very real threat in South Africa:


There is also the chance that many serial killers in South Africa go unnoticed: if they operate in rural areas, for example, or because of the high crime rate that is already present. For all these reasons the “South African Police Service regards serial homicide as a serious issue” (228).
Having established that there is indeed an element of violent crime as well as serial killing in South Africa, the issue of media influence, firstly in South Africa and subsequently on serial killers, will be focused on. One of the ways used to gain understanding into the South African serial killer phenomenon is to investigate examples of serial killers from other countries. To use the examples of infamous, or famous, serial killers in America is useful because, not only does “South Africa [show] a similar pattern to the USA in terms of the proportion of murders accounted for by serial murder” (http://upetd.up.ac.za/thesis/available/etd-11222006-141729/unrestricted/01chapter1.pdf), America is also an example of a more developed consumerist driven capitalist society, with a media saturation that can be seen to be developing in South Africa at a rapid rate. South African television shows, together with the many good films that are now being produced, Tsotsi having in fact won Best Foreign Language Film of the Year for 2006, are a clear sign that the entertainment industry in the country is starting to boom not only in an African context but in the international arena as well. Tumisho Masha, the former Isidingo star, for example, has featured in international movies such as Beyond Borders (2003), which also starred Angelina Jolie and Clive Owen, and Hijack Stories (2000).

Watching the growth of the entertainment industry as a source of worldwide economy for South Africa – including music, print, and visual media – the consequences of the power Hollywood and other media giants have in America should be taken into consideration. Schmid accurately states that

> [a]s the variety and scale of media technologies evolved … the opportunities for publicizing criminals expanded enormously, so that today, ‘the exploits of a criminal may be sung on records that will be broadcast by thousands of radio stations, dramatized in movies that will be viewed by millions, reported by a news service that will ensure a worldwide audience’ (Schmid 2005: 13).

He further notes that it is due to these developments that “representations of criminality now play a central role in the American mass media” (13). There have been hundreds of movies made featuring serial killers and their crimes, “during the 1990’s there were 150
films upwards with the theme of serial murder” (http://upetd.up.ac.za/thesis/available/etd-11222006-141729/unrestricted/01chapter1.pdf) in the USA, according to Del Fabbro’s citation of Hickey. As modernization (the development of industry) and postmodernization (the development of information and media technology) strengthens in South Africa I believe that the same trends will be seen. This is not to ignore the fact that they are already present in certain forms today. The media attention that is mostly given to serial killers in South Africa is “in the form of newspapers, television programmes, non-fiction crime literature and fictional works”, signalling that movies with this theme are not as common as in the USA, yet. There have been documentaries on the lives of South African criminals, such as the 2003 Criminal Minds, and many television shows that either do a profile of a serial killer or host an expert on serial murder. An example of such a television show is the widely viewed Carte Blanche, which “aired episodes on … serial murder cases in South Africa, as well as episodes on forensic entymologist Mervyn Mansell and the serial murder case of Samuel Sidyno, the Capital Park serial murderer (‘Crawling with evidence’, April, 13, 2003)” (http://upetd.up.ac.za/thesis/available/etd-11222006-141729/unrestricted/01chapter1.pdf).

Turning now to the question of the cyclical relationship between serial killers and the media, the first step in this relationship is the communication that occurs between the criminal and certain media vehicles. Such communication includes direct communication as well as the interaction the criminal has with the media coverage of his/her crimes, where, for example, the criminal might follow the investigation in the media, and even take part in it, or allow the coverage to affect him/her in other ways (for example in the ‘signature’ details of the crime scenes). While other examples of communication with the media from other countries have been included in previous chapters, the following instances of media influence or interaction with a serial killer are all examples of South African serial killers, suggesting therefore that media in South Africa is not uninvolved in the phenomenon of serial murder.

In 1940 “one of South Africa’s first known serial killers” (Pistorius 2002) began his spree of murders in Cape Town. By the time that the head of the detective unit in Pretoria,
Colonel J Coetzee, had made his way to Cape Town to take over the investigation (Pistorius 2002) the “only description the police had of the suspect was that he was a man about five feet ten inches tall with a copper complexion, and that he rode a bicycle with a red tyre” (68). It was at this point that the police employed an interesting and ingenious method in hope of beating the killer at his own game. They had found fingerprints at the scene of the crime but had not been able to match them to anyone. However, they had a plan: “The police announced to the media that they had the left thumb print of the suspect. This was intentionally misleading: the police actually had the right thumb print” (68). On eventually capturing the murderer, after a would-be victim recognised the man near her house, it was obvious that he had been following his ‘progress’ in the press because he, a 20-year-old man by the name of Salie Lingevelt, “had chopped off the tip of his left thumb” (69), allowing the police to successfully match his right thumb print to the print found at the crime scene. This example not only serves as an instance in which the media served as a helping hand to the police, but more importantly in this case, serves as an early example of a serial killer following the investigation into his crimes in the media. To reiterate a sentiment from chapter 2 (media representation), but in the South African context, Pistorius states that although the “police used the press to their advantage in this case … [s]ensationalism might sell newspapers, but it does not save lives” (70). During his court appearances Lingevelt, the self-confessed serial killer, “showed no remorse … [i]n fact, he revelled in the attention he attracted during his trial” (69).

More than 50 years after the case of Salie Lingevelt another serial killer was tormenting the Cape: a serial killer “active in Mitchell’s Plain [who] had been killing little boys since 1986” (14), according to Pistorius (who worked on the case). Although the serial killer, known as the “Station Strangler”, had been active since 1986 “the bodies of eleven boys had [only] been found in the dunes during December 1993 and January 1994, bringing the total to twenty-one” (14). It was because of a note placed by the killer in the pocket of one of the victims in the post-crime phase that it becomes apparent that the killer was aware of what was being printed in the newspapers about him:
The note that had been found in a victim’s pocket read: ‘Station Wrangler. Number 14, many more to score.’ When this victim was killed, the case had not yet broken in the media and Station Strangler could not have been aware that the police were investigating the case as a series. He therefore had no reason to communicate with the detectives by leaving a note on the victim. When the first names were printed in the newspapers another boy’s name appeared next to number fourteen indicating that this was the fourteenth victim to be found. It seemed that this must have irritated the Strangler … he must have returned to the fourteenth victim and placed the note in his pocket, indicating the right order (26).

It is not only important to recognise that the murderer was following the investigation in the media and was therefore aware of the attention he was the cause of, but also that the killer was irritated by the misrepresentation of his crimes. This irritation was indicative of the fact that the Station Strangler cared about how he was being represented both by the media and to the public, he was aware of his public persona. The case of Jack the Ripper has been mentioned earlier with regard to the communication of some of the public with the newspapers, a phenomenon that occurred in this case as well. In one instance someone wrote a letter to the newspaper that Pistorius “recognised … as extracts from letters that … ‘Son of Sam’ had written” (Pistorius 2000: 27); letters which had been included in a book about the infamous American serial killer. Pistorius later writes about Avzal Norman Simons, the real name of the Station Strangler, who worked as a teacher in his community, knocking on the door of locked classrooms “jokingly [crying] out: ‘Open up, it’s the Strangler’” (39). It is clear that Simons was quite aware of how he was being represented in the media and was taking at least some kind of interest in it.

In 1998 Pistorius was part of the investigation into a serial murderer known as the “Saloon Killer”, a particularly brutal killer that had, by April 1998, killed sixteen people and wounded ten (197). At one point Pistorius comments that the killer was furious after the wrongful arrest of a suspect (brought to light because of further killings). “He was not angry at being arrested, he was angry because someone else had been arrested and was getting the attention he deserved … he knew about the arrest and he was furious” (219). This example highlights the killer’s desire and need for recognition in order to make up
for what he feels he is lacking, in the case of a category four type serial killer this is, as mentioned, power and control.

Only one year earlier a man named Stewart Wilken, also known as “Boetie Boer”, was arrested in Port Elizabeth and, on 23 February 1998, was sentenced to seven life sentences for murder and rape (Pistorius 2000). Wilken could be described, according to Pistorius, as “the most notorious of all South African serial killers to date” (186) and “one of the worst sadists” (186) that Pistorius had ever met. Boetie’s crimes included the rape and murder of prostitutes and street children, as well as the act of necrophilia (188 – 189), which can be defined as the sexual attraction to or sexual intercourse with a dead body. However, it is the murder of his daughter Wuane that is truly shocking. Pistorius writes that on 29 September 1995 Wilken, who initially planned to take Wuane to Happy Valley - “a park filled with fantasy fairy-tale figures which are illuminated at night” (190) – instead

Led her to his hide-out in the dense bush. He said he inspected her vagina and found that she was no longer a virgin, whereupon he strangled her in order to save her from the same kind of life that he had … He often returned to the spot and spread her clothing out on the ground and talked to her as if she were still wearing the clothes. He would sleep next to her decomposing body at night (190).

The reason that the case of Stewart Wilken becomes relevant in relation to the media/killer/audience relationship is because he not only became directly involved in the investigation into his crimes, but also took part in communication with the media after being arrested, indicating an awareness of the power of the media and the attention that his crimes already had and still could attract. As Pistorius notes, Wilken had told Sergeant Derick Norsworthy of the Port Elizabeth Murder and Robbery Unit, “that he had been a bystander on two occasions when the bodies of the prostitutes were discovered in the parks. He watched the policemen processing the scene and learned from the experience” (192). After being arrested and standing trial Wilken “sold his story to a magazine” (194) and gave the money to his wife and their children. It had been during his trial that Wilken was reunited with his wife, who had “attended court every day” (194).
After being found guilty for murder Stewart Wilken was finally able to make a substantial amount of money, enough money to set his wife and children, the children he had not murdered that is, up in an apartment. It is ironic to say the least.

This instance, along with the other examples, gives evidence of the serial killer being either influenced by the media coverage of the crimes or of enjoying the attention and therefore taking part in a type of interaction with the media and audience. This interaction is one of the components of the cyclical relationship mentioned in previous chapters – between media, serial killer, and the specific audience – while another component is the actions on the part of the media. During the Station Strangler case Pistorius comments that as the interest in the case on the part of the public grew, so did that of the press, “[t]hey followed [them] everywhere” (30). This was not to be the only experience Pistorius would have with the invasiveness of the media. A particularly negative experience occurred during the investigation into a serial killer “attacking tailors in central Johannesburg” (179) in 1997. A stake-out had been organised for a particular Saturday morning and the local press had been requested to refrain from running with the story at that time. However, and actually quite predictably, the local newspapers blasted the story … on their front pages that particular Saturday morning and foiled the whole operation. Journalists interviewed surviving victims and published the locations as well as the exact modus operandi used during the attacks … This meant that a confession, as well as pointings out of the crimes scenes, could be challenged in court since the accused could protest that he had confessed under duress and that he pointed out the crime scene of which he had read in the newspapers (180).

These were not the only negative consequences of the choices that those particular journalists made, as Pistorius points out:

The journalists and their editors were totally ruthless and had no respect for the lives of the surviving victims. Publishing their names and addresses meant that the killer could have found them and killed them, because they could identify him. In addition, the journalists were interfering with and
obstructing a police investigation, instead of assisting … and playing a responsible role in community policing (180).

Although the South African film industry has not yet jumped on the bandwagon of using serial killers as movie stars, the evidence points to it only being a matter of time until they do. It is evident that the news and television media has already started to cash in on the attraction of serial murder as a topic that pulls an extensive audience. At the same time it has become clear that many South African killers take an interest in the media coverage they receive, enjoying the attention and resenting the silence when it is taken away. In sum, it does not seem extreme to conclude that the social conditions in South Africa are such that it clearly has the potential for developing a culture of celebrity killers; a brutal culture that will only promote the emergence of copycats in the audience that worships these criminals.
Conclusion
Implications and Alternatives

In the foregoing chapters of this study I dealt with the cyclical relationship that exists between the media, serial killers, and their audience as well as the consequences and implications this relationship has, for South Africa specifically. In chapter 2 I outlined the role of the media in this relationship, addressing the often sensationalist approach taken to the representation of serial killers as well as the glamorisation that occurs in film. In chapter 3 I focused on the motivations behind the formation of a serial killer, taking into account both primary motivations and the secondary motivations I believe to come from the media and media attention. This chapter gave examples of serial killers characterized by the desire for celebrity status, and pointed out incidences of copycat behaviour. In chapter 4 I dealt with the third component of the above mentioned cyclical relationship; namely the audience. When it comes to making serial killers famous a specific type of audience can be identified; an audience which I described in this chapter as being strongly influenced by the consumer culture of the 21st century, making image – in both its senses – the ultimate obsession. I argued that this obsession leads ultimately to a hunger for violence that is given attention and even encouraged and therefore exacerbated by the media, thus completing the cycle, only to fuel it once again.

It has been difficult to keep the different chapters from overlapping with one another in content, since complete separation of media, killers and audience would be impossible and each has an influence on and power over the others. This is due to the relationship between them being cyclical and not stagnant; the interconnectedness coming from the fact that each component is necessary in order for the others to exist. Without the media the creation of a celebrity would not be possible but without the predisposing traumas in an already violent culture, that motivate a hunger for power, the media loses its capacity to inspire a celebrity obsession in certain kinds of serial killers; and finally, without an audience there is no star. While overlap, then, is impossible to avoid, I nevertheless treated each element of the cycle separately in the different chapters, in the hope that special focus on each in turn would provide a deeper understanding of their interconnection.
Addressing, finally, the question of South Africa and the possibility of the development of a culture of celebrity serial killers, I concluded that due to the rise of consumer capitalism in South Africa and the fact that existing serial killers are a real threat, it is possible that this development will occur if left unchecked. The implications being that, as is the case in America, the copycat phenomenon will only intensify, leading to incidents such as school shootings, referred to earlier, and spree killings modelled on movies like *Natural Born Killers*. Copycatting is not the only worry; the strengthening of fame awareness and the desire for recognition on the part of South African killers is also a great concern. The secondary motivations stemming from media attention would only escalate the already present serial murder situation in this country.

Thus, after having found that South Africa does indeed have elements within its society with the potential to develop a culture of celebrity killers, I now turn to the moment of application referred to in chapter 1. To return to what was said in my introduction with regard to the hermeneutic approach in my research, Gadamer states that “[m]ore profound than all knowledge of hermeneutical rules is the application to oneself” (Gadamer 1998: 29 – 30). The moments of application that I will be focusing on are the possible solutions to the potential celebrity serial killer problem in South Africa. The suggested solutions will address both the sensationalist news media coverage and the glamorization of serial murder in films, as well as the question of public education on the subject of serial killers, their motives, and their crimes.

The question of rehabilitation is a contentious subject at best, even when referring to the rehabilitation of less violent criminals. In the case of serial killers it becomes more complicated because of the primary motivations that are present in the life of a serial murderer, motivations that develop over a long period of time. According Micki Pistorius, “[m]ost incarcerated serial killers have admitted that as soon as they are released they will murder again, and many have done so” (Pistorius 2000: 249). For this reason it is essential for steps to be taken to counteract the threat that serial killers pose, not only to communities, but to the country as a whole.
Firstly, a more responsible approach to media coverage of serial murder is necessary. Media professionals need to be aware of the consequences of their actions, both short and long term. This awareness must extend to the producers of fiction films and television programs. Awareness can be built through education, an education that should start with influential members of society such as journalists, media professionals, teachers, and parents. I agree with Pistorius that “[i]t is crucial that a proactive approach be followed by educating the general public, particularly teachers and others who work with the young” (Pistorius 2002: 60) for two reasons, namely because it is important for the public and members of the media industry to be conscious of the consequences of building celebrity around a serial killer, and, as Pistorius states, “to be able to identify possible traits and psychological problems in children” (60). The latter would be a preemptive step in order to prevent the development of a child, experiencing the primary motivational aspects referred to in chapter 3 such as an abusive childhood, into a potential serial killer. It is important, according to Pistorius, “to educate the public on this phenomenon through the press” (Pistorius 2000: 228). The need for awareness, in order to educate the public about the ramifications of celebrity worship of serial murderers, is intended to diminish the fascination that feeds the desire of fame and recognition that many of these violent criminals harbor, in the hope that it would serve as a discouragement to murder for the promise of attention.

Turning now to the question of fiction films based on the lives of serial killers, both authentic and fictitious, an alternative will be addressed. Pistorius notes that in her opinion films such as ‘Silence of the Lambs’, ‘Seven’, ‘Copycat’ and ‘Natural Born Killers’ glorify serial killers and spree killers as supernatural beings, adding to the myth that they are either raving lunatics or super-intelligent human beings. These films provide negative role models. Several films have been made about the lives of Ted Bundy, David Berkowitz, John Wayne Gacy, Wayne Williams and John Reginald Christie. These films may serve a documentary purpose and in [her] view are not as harmful as fictional material (Pistorius 2002: 29).
I agree with Pistorius and am in favor of the documentary style approach to visual portrayals of the lives of serial murderers and their crimes. The reason being that it would be in stark contrast to the glamorization in film that gives a false impression of the life and character of a serial killer. This contrast is important because it is due to the glamorous façade of Hollywood villains that the process of identification takes place, and without the glamour the desire to emulate a certain character would not be as strong. This is because a true depiction of a serial killer’s life is not glamorous at all. A documentary representation would include the brutal truth about the crimes, including facts about how the victims died and how many people were negatively affected. It would also be clear that the end result for a serial killer is not all glitz and glam or money and fame – it is actually more likely to be one of three things: life in prison, death inside a prison, or the death penalty. An example of a more realistic portrayal of the crimes and capture of a serial killer is the film *Citizen X*, based on the Russian serial murderer who took the lives of approximately 52 people. Instead of a glamorized version of the truth, this film gives a more realistic portrayal of the frightening murders committed by a man that seemed nothing but ‘normal’ and ‘average’ to the people around him. *Citizen X* is in stark contrast to a movie such as *The Silence of the Lambs*, the exclusion of a ‘larger-than-life’ over the top serial killer or a charming cannibal with genius insights allowing for an objective viewing of a man that murdered innocent people. Certainly, this is not an exact example of a documentary-style serial killer film, but it does serve as proof that a fiction film does not have to provide a glamorous villain to be a good movie.

The examples of good documentary-style films are not in abundance, signaling that there is a great need for them. However, three examples of films based on the lives of the serial killers Ted Bundy, Richard Ramirez, and Jeffrey Dahmer are the movies entitled *Ted Bundy* (2002), *NightStalker* (2004), and *Dahmer* (2003). Although these films do not portray the serial killers in a positive light, they do give an almost supernatural portrayal, especially of Richard Ramirez, making them seem unreal and ‘other-worldly’, whereas, in my opinion, the factual representation of the life of a serial killer should show the audience the factual consequences for a murderer, that life driven by obsession is actually
boring and frustrating, in the end becoming an imprisonment – literally and figuratively. For audience members that are not necessarily driven by primary motivations and are instead in awe of fame and the power that comes along with it, the reality that a measure of infamy does not save a serial killer from answering to the law could be the shock that they need. It is also through the incorporation of a more realistic approach to the portrayal of serial killers that the public can be educated by using the press as a helpful tool instead of as a destructive medium. The reason that the visual media would serve as a useful tool is because it is the most effective form of communication in the 21st century because of television being the more prevalent information vehicle in homes across the world. It is an important step in communication to use television to educate instead of only to entertain.

It is not my belief that these changes will demolish the incidence of serial killings; the primary motivations will certainly still be present. However, these changes could influence and hopefully decrease the phenomenon of copycatting as well as removing secondary motivations – which exacerbate the problem – from the equation. It will no doubt be a long and arduous road but it is a step that is vital in order to do away with a culture obsessed with violence and the gruesome depictions thereof. Education is the first and most important step in stimulating change in any respect, an education that will be strongly supported by utilizing the media as a useful vehicle in communication, instead of it being a component in the currently developing vicious cycle.
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