

## Session Three Lecture Notes: Serial Killers I – Repetition & Commodities

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21L.435/CMS.840 - At the Limit: Violence in Contemporary Representation

Last week we talked about America the Violent: Mythic national conceptions (Americanness and violence); generation and regeneration; -- is violence only destructive or is it also discursively positioned as creative/generative/a mode of making? We talked about different forms of violence (including against the audience), which is a kind of textual violence we may want to return to today; and we talked about surface/flatness (television, blankness, snow, whiteness, cold – affect and environment); red versus white. Today, we start a three-week unit on the figure of the serial killer (and then later in the semester, when we get to the problem of mediation/reality TV, *Natural Born Killers* and *Man Bites Dog*, we'll come back to seriality, celebrity, and the serial killer).

Some remarks to frame today's discussion:

**By virtue of being a class on contemporary representation – in the time period of postmodernism (sometimes also called advanced or late capitalism). Our texts last week foreground some aspects of that mode in their representational strategies (emphasis on mediation/television; blankness; surface). Ellis does so as well, even more polemically. One reason I wanted to wait to today to talk about postmodernism as an aesthetic stance that may help us think about how to grapple critically with *American Psycho*.**

**postmodernism/the postmodern** → means different things, depending on the user. It can be used to refer to a historical period (some date it to the invention of television; some date it to the radical social upheavals of the 1960s; others place it around the 1980s—very few critical theorists would deny, however, that we are now in a post-modern historical moment). It can also, however, refer to a shift in thought, a cultural stance, and an *aesthetic* approach.

**modernism** (modern, modernity, modernization)

associated with: elitism, morality, ontology, authoritarianism, parody/satire

“depth” model/see under-inside-behind ideology/surface

NB Norman Mailer's review of *American Psycho*, 1991: “Since we are going to have a monstrous book with a monstrous thesis, the author must rise to the occasion by having a murderer with enough inner life for us to comprehend him. [...] We cannot go out on such a trip unless we believe we will end up knowing more about extreme acts of violence, know a little more, that is, of the real inner life of the murderer.”

vs.

postmodernism: **flat affect; pure surface; depthlessness**

**“Postmodern” often refers to:**

- a rejection of the Cartesian subject
- irony, self-reflexivity, or parody
- a mixing of high and low culture

- a critique of rationality
- urge to deconstruct/demolish totalizing systems of knowledge (religion, humanism)
- fragmentation instead of unity; distraction instead of organization
- quotation or citation instead of originality
- pastiche instead of coherent stylistics/theme
- Modernist “boredom” (in aesthetics) is often contrasted to postmodern super-fastness / “moments of schizophrenic intensity” (Jameson)

→ With modernism, artists felt they could challenge dominant culture through critique, subversion, and avant-garde practices such as irony or self-reflexivity that commented on the medium. With the postmodern, things change—and many theorists now believe such critique is no longer possible (*this is debatable!*).

Fredric Jameson, for example, sees the postmodern as having no possibility for subversiveness or satire (or at least, less so than with modernism); he sees the postmodern as being marked by **“blank” parody, which he calls “pastiche”**. He writes: “Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse” (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society”). Pastiche is speech in an exhausted language; postmodernism read this way signals the end of aesthetic innovation and originality; there is only quotation and mimicry (think about the way something like *Scream* figures horror films as constituting a “genre about genre,” an always-already-seen set of clichés that can only refer to their own generic history, re-presenting and circulating previously existing horror material).

Another famous theorist of the postmodern is Jean Baudrillard; he writes, “No matter how marginal, or banal, or even obscene it may be, everything is subject to aestheticization, culturalization, museumification. Everything is said, everything is exposed, everything acquires the force, or the manner, of a sign.” If postmodernism signals an impulse to deconstruct everything, and a repetition of earlier cultural productions, it brings to bear the question: can there be any new aesthetic creation, or is one only ever repeating old/dead/earlier styles?

**juxtaposition of humor and violence**  
**irony/mimicry/mockery/intertextuality**  
**pastiche vs. parody**  
**gore/excess/explicitness**  
**self-conscious/reflexive** (accepts/plays with its **generic clichés**)  
**mass/low culture vs. high culture**  
 conceptual and moral **relativism**

LOSSES:  
**collapse of American hegemony**; “center cannot hold”; American Dream v. Nightmare  
**waning of historicity**  
**waning of affect**  
**surface v. depth models**  
 postmodernism: **flat affect; pure surface; depthlessness**

Jameson: “What replaces these various depth models is for the most part a conception of practices, discourses and textual play...depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces” (62)

**multiplicity** (instead of singularity)

**fragmentation** (instead of totality, wholeness)

Note: Jameson uses the words “schizophrenic” and “intensities” (58)—we might want to keep those in mind when thinking about *American Psycho*: a mix of boredom and schizophrenia; a series of textual intensities that are as apt to land on a new album as on a mutilated body.

Lyotard’s postmodernity as “**incredulity towards metanarratives**”

or the end of master narratives (the Enlightenment, Reason, Progress, etc.)

→ TEXT SEEMS TO DO AWAY WITH ALL GREAT NARRATIVES  
(THEOLOGY/INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM)

**Opening line of the text?**

\* **Dante / 14<sup>th</sup> century, late medieval period/Divine Comedy (Inferno/Hell)**

Dante passes through the gate of Hell, which bears an inscription, the final line of which is the phrase *Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate*, or "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

→ Theology / salvation

**Epigraph of the text?**

→ Existentialism/freedom // dread, anxiety (subject “thrown into the world/existence, not of your own making, responsible for everything” – responsibility for individual choice, free will, subject condemned to freedom)

Another theorist of the postmodern is Jean Baudrillard: NB 1990 book *The Transparency of Evil*.

Baudrillard is very concerned with the abolition of **otherness** in postmodern culture. He suggests that while the (uncanny) double was the preeminent figure for modernity; the clone is the figure of postmodernity. He writes about cloning in order to suggest that the loss of otherness involves the loss of an original, and that a body deprived of otherness has lost its relation to death. (WE might think of late capitalism as an era marked by a radical loss of original: everything is an imitation of an imitation of an imitation; every character is wearing the same set of designers; **everyone looks the same – p. 89, mistaken identity but doesn't matter – and everyone is equivalent, with no distinction p. 123, bored by how beautiful Evelyn is;....**)

So the “**Hell of the Same**,” that provocative phrase, is suggesting that in structures of repetition with no original (we might say the Clone, but equally, might point to iterations of undifferentiated commodities), we’ve lost a relation to finitude because we’ve lost the concept of the original, material body. Destroying the other as a point of reference destroys communication and exchange, but equally, makes it impossible to have a relation to one’s own futurity. So live in a world of death but cannot understand it, for Baudrillard.

The question that gets asked of postmodernity – and we’ll ask versions of it many times in this class, and different texts will suggest different answers – is whether critique is still possible. Where can we locate **meaning** in postmodern culture? *The problem of critique*: Can we only read (and thus commit/and thus be complicit) or does the text admit any position from which one can critique it?

### Three epigraphs:

“That which is for me through the medium of *money* – that for which I can pay (i.e., which money can buy) – that am *I myself*, the possessor of the money. **The extent of the power of money is the extent of my power. Money’s properties are my – the possessor’s – properties and essential powers. Thus, what I am and am capable of is by no means determined by my individuality. I am ugly, but I can buy for myself the most beautiful of women. Therefore I am not ugly, for the effect of ugliness – its deterrent power – is nullified by money.** I, according to my individual characteristics, am lame, but money furnishes me with twenty-four feet. Therefore I am not lame. I am bad, dishonest, unscrupulous, stupid; but money is honoured, and hence its possessor. Money is the supreme good, therefore its possessor is good. Money, besides, saves me the trouble of being dishonest: I am therefore presumed honest. I am *brainless*, but money is the *real brain* of all things and how then should its possessor be brainless? Besides, he can buy clever people for himself, and is he who has power over the clever not more clever than the clever? Do not I, who thanks to money am capable of *all* that the human heart longs for, possess all human capacities? Does not my money, therefore, transform all my incapacities into their contrary?”

—Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*

“I am a sick man ... I am a wicked man. An Unattractive man. I think my liver hurts.”

—Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. Pevear and Volokhonsky  
(note liver ref. p 98)

“To define force—it is that x that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*. Exercised to the limit, it turns man into a thing in the most liberal sense: it makes a corpse out of him. Somebody was here, and the next minute there is nobody here at all; this is the spectacle the *Iliad* never wearies of showing us.”

—Simone Weil, “The *Iliad* or the poem of force” (1986)

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