

Session Four Lecture Notes: Serial Killers II – Boredom & Blankness

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

* Aesthetic of kenosis (emptying out; evacuation of content)

Kenosis is a Greek word for emptiness, which is used as a theological term. Ancient Greek κένωσις (*kénōsis*) means an "emptying", from κενός (*kenós*) "empty". The word is mainly used, however, in a Christian theological context, for example ἐκένωσεν (*ekénōsen*) in Philippians 2:7, "Jesus made himself nothing ..."

Etymology is from Greek κενώω (*kenōō*) "to empty out". The Liddle Scott Lexicon gives the following simplified definition simplified for the noun:^[1]

1. emptying, depletion, emptiness (of life) (e.g. Vettius Valens)
2. depletion, low diet, as opposed to *plerosis* fullness (e.g. Hippocrates)

Last week we started our three-week unit on the figure of the serial killer. We talked about some of the key traits of postmodernity (sometimes called "late capitalism")

surface v. depth models

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)

• pastiche instead of coherent stylistics/theme (think about in relation to the film: Jameson: 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").

Relate to signs of 1980sness (music, fashion)

The question that gets asked of postmodernity – and we asked different versions of it in class last week – is whether **critique** is still possible.

I wanted to talk a bit about that word. In some ways, we were using "critique" in the kind of ordinary language sense of analyzing, evaluating, judging something. Specifically: we asked how to read, how to analyze or judge Ellis' *American Psycho*. We talked about whether the reader experiences Ellis' text in different ways: are we in collusion with Patrick and the logic of violence (relieved when porn and violence break our tedium of consumerism excessive choice)? Or, is the reader worked over like a kind of victim in the text, subjected to shock and assaulted by the form of the text?

Role of creating spectatorial desire (boredom, frustration, then scenes of violence as "something happening")

→ In economics, a *commodity* is a marketable item produced to satisfy wants or needs.

Is this book a commodity, then? Is the violence a commodity that satisfies our desire for something to break the tedium?

Can we just read along and follow its logic or does it call for an active, deconstructing readerly stance to fight that position (and if so: if we have to take it apart, break it up, break it its parts; read against the grain; undo it, is that itself a form of violence; does the text demand we do violence to it—dis-member it as it were—in order to undo its violence)? But we also talked about **whether the text might not allow a position from which to evaluate it (just read it or don't: endure it or don't;** but how do we judge it other than by continuing to read and let it wash over us)... This was our way of asking the key question: Where can we locate **meaning** in postmodern texts?

The philosophical use of the word “critique” means an exploration of the conditions of possibility for thinking about something (in this case, violence): What kinds of questions need to be asked in order to think about violence?

Other people use the word critique as a kind of “fault-finding” or vocabulary of judgment (critique of capitalism would mean: How can we interrogate and criticize it?)

But yet other thinkers see **critique as something that *suspends* judgment and focuses on exposing, unpacking and seeing them anew.** (One formulation for this approach is “*not judgment, but practice*”.) This would mean, for example, **interrogating the ways in which categories of evaluation are themselves ordered and formed:** so, for example, this model of critique would mean that instead of assuming a text “ought” to “condemn violence,” we’d ask what is at stake in asking that texts *do* something; what is at stake in demanding that violence be condemned; what is at stake in figuring violence as something fixed and knowable enough to be condemned? (We’d be suspending judgment in order to expose and unpack the very questions that one might ask of violence. Instead of assuming we know what violence is (so we can judge it), we’d be using critique and this method of questioning to suspend arriving at a sense of what violence *is*. Critique would not be an end, but a process... It’s an activity that continually poses the problem of its own terms of inquiry. It’s a mode of questioning things. Can we make any final judgments on this novel or just keep questioning as an open stance of possible engagements – that’s the question that in some ways the novel itself poses in its last line... which we’ll get to.

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