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Richard Tithecott. *Of Men and Monsters: Jeffrey Dahmer and the Construction of the Serial Killer*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997. xiii + 192 pp.

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In *Of Men and Monsters*, Richard Tithecott uses specific examples of the various media representations of serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer as a means by which to examine the larger issue of America's fascination with serial murder. Tithecott sees the construction of the serial killer in narrative representation as part of a growing cultural tendency to reject intellectual critique of one's own cultural values as contributing factors to violence. As evidence, he points to the culture's frequent use of words such as "motiveless" in constructing serial murder tales. The refusal to entertain a serious discussion of motive, to posit crime as essentially unknowable and thus, at least by some definitions, metaphysically evil, serves to distance the serial killer from the comfortable everyday world and place him in some mythic realm where he is at once profane and sacred. The popularity of the serial killer in fictional narrative, then, is a symptom of a larger cultural denial of responsibility in the production of violence. If nature (or God or destiny) intends one to be a serial killer, and this nature is perceived as unknowable and uncontrollable, as so many of these narratives imply, what is the point of trying to do better as a society? Tithecott wishes to remove the word "nature," with its associations of biological determinism and historical inevitability, from discussions of serial murder (p. 8) so that we may acknowledge our ability to change the parameters of a world we have created (or at least transformed) through narrative representation.

Part One of Tithecott's study, entitled "Policing the Serial Killer," is centered around the idea that mainstream American discourse is more and more dominated by the

voices of those who "describe a world threatened ... by inexplicable horror" and advocate "imprisonment or execution ... as the state's only suitable response" to crime (p. 15). The entertainment industry is also dominated by these authoritarian voices, so that we are witnessing a widespread "intensification of what might be called a cultural 'policing mentality'" (p. 16). Part of this policing mentality insists that violent criminals such as serial killers are both sane and evil, so that "Sane beings motivated by evil can be imprisoned or capitally punished and estranged from the rest of us" (p. 21). The policing mentality also "elevates the FBI to a community service, above politics" (p. 22) and dismisses the language of modern psychiatry as somehow complicit with the transcendental "evil" of serial murder itself. The policing mentality, in its attempt to configure serial killing as an "asocial" evil so that the social order itself is preserved, finds intellectual justification for its agenda in the Freudian psychological emphasis on the childhood origin of adult personality—a zone outside of society and located within an uncontrollable "nature." Thus, from the policing perspective, words and language, products of society, seem unsuited to deal with the reality of serial murder. Only the Gothic, with its "acknowledgment of language's lack of certainty, of the voids which destabilize its meanings" (p. 49), seems appropriate to describe the serial murder phenomenon, whether in fact or fiction.

However, Tithecott finds a contradiction between the mainstream desire to hold the serial killer individually culpable for his "evilness" and yet to exonerate silently middle-class, domestic, misogynist society for its own

culpability in perpetuating violent ideologies of radical selfhood. He then argues that "Having constructed a barrier between nature and our culture, ... we expel the unspeakable serial killer to the natural world" (p. 63). Relegating the killer to the realm of nature also allows demonization of behaviors objectionable to mainstream, heterosexual America. Specifically, the representations of Jeffrey Dahmer thus allow the middle-class audience "to explain acts of savagery by referring to [Dahmer's] putative homosexuality, to confuse homicidal with homosexual tendencies, confuse 'sexual homicide' ... with homo sex" (p. 73). Dahmer's alleged cannibalism, so often emphasized in his media portrayals, offers "a continuation of the colonizing of homosexuality by heterosexual culture, the conflation of heterosexuality with civilization and homosexuality with savagery" (p. 81). In some literally unspeakable way, the cultural fascination with Dahmer's savagery also "indicates a [white] desire to appropriate those powers previously ascribed to the [black] savage" (p. 83). It is through these specific links between Dahmer and popular culture that Tithecott's work displays its true strength.

Part Two of Tithecott's study expands on the idea that readers of the serial killer spectacle find something personally recognizable in this form of so-called "unspeakable evil" and, indeed, honor the serial killer and his power even as they deny their own complicity in his creation. This uneasy acknowledgement/veneration can be found in the various representations of Dahmer as "super" serial killer—the relentless automaton or killing machine, for example, which Tithecott identifies as a specific "expression of anxiety on our part about modern humanity or ... modern man in 'machine culture'" (p. 96). Even Dahmer's lengthy confessions, hailed by investigators as honest attempts at self-explication, take on an air of the uncanny and the unspeakable, according to Tithecott: "The confession purports to tell us the truth, and yet we know it says nothing .... There's a power to his storytelling, and yet his power is also demonstrated by his ability to 'escape' his story. He remains unrepresented, hidden from view" (p. 103). Dahmer is at once human and preternaturally silent, which makes him a seemingly omnipotent figure. The oft-repeated fact of Dahmer's cooperation with police authority after his capture illustrates another facet of society's high regard for powerful figures: "Together, the serial killer and his pursuer seem

to be united by a special bond of knowledge and mutual respect .... the killer, physically imprisoned, is figured by society as a seer, able to transcend physical barriers and look deep into the soul of fellow monsters and police alike" (pp. 110-11). Thus, "detective, monster, and audience ... conflate into a single figure" (p. 117). All are interdependent, to the extent that the serial-killer subject not only "fades, is not only unspeakable, but grows invisible, indistinguishable from that which represents it" (p. 134). The serial killer's invisibility is part of his representation as a postmodern Satanic figure, for "the Dahmers of our culture are ... inscribed with secret powers, with superintelligence, and special knowledge and vision" (p. 141). Furthermore, these murderous fantasies of omnipotence are gendered as masculine—part of our tendency "to regard male-female politics in terms of a violent hierarchy" (p. 156). Tithecott concludes by linking misogynistic fantasies of selfhood—those that destroy all notions of difference—to the self-destructive philosophies of fascism that have so plagued the politics of the twentieth century.

Other notable recent studies of the cultural representations of serial murder, such as Philip Jenkins's *Using Murder* or Mark Seltzer's *Wound Culture*, have similarly employed Tithecott's multi-disciplinary critical strategy. Whereas Jenkins and Seltzer cast a very wide net indeed in their respective analyses, Tithecott benefits from narrowing his focus onto one specific serial killer and then inspecting the media treatments of that individual. Tithecott finds that Dahmer's representation as monster, demon, taboo-breaker, sacred being, victim, etc., depends in large part upon the ideological agenda and biases of those who represent him. Thus, Tithecott's work at once complements and expands upon Jenkins's assertion that serial murder in all of its representational guises serves a variety of political purposes in contemporary culture. Within the growing field of what we might call "serial killer cultural studies," Tithecott's approach is fairly conventional. However, his application of generally accepted theory to the specific Dahmer case is deftly handled.

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