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# Conspicuous Consumption

## The Figure of the Serial Killer as Cannibal in the Age of Capitalism

*Martin Lefebvre*

THE AIM of this article is twofold. First, following on the heels on some of my previous work on memory and imagination in the cinema (see Lefebvre, 1997, 1999, 2000), it posits a conceptual model for the way ideas, conceptions or feelings – that is, anything that makes up the life of the mind – are represented or ‘figured’ in memory with the help of the imagination. Second, it uses this model to begin to outline what I believe constitutes part of our culture’s ‘memory-image’ of the serial killer in both fact and fiction. As we shall see, the content of this memory-image focuses on the cannibal and the rhetorical function that cannibalism has played ever since the term was introduced to the Western imagination during the late Renaissance.

In previous work, then, I have shown how certain conceptions of memory – especially those that were developed in ancient Greece and Rome and which informed rhetoric as well as those associated with the Renaissance’s *artes memoriae* – were useful for conceptualizing what happens to our semiotically processed worldly experiences (ideas, feelings, etc.) when they are committed to memory. The basic idea that I have put forward is that human memory, unlike silicon chip memory, is not simply a passive storehouse of information where items are preserved without alteration in a term-to-term coded relation. Human memory, instead, is *poetic memory*; it is an *active process* whereby *relations* are created by way of the imagination. What we commit to memory, in other words, must have an iconic dimension (as do all signs, according to the semiotic theory of Charles Peirce) whose emergence requires the faculty of imagination (the faculty of creating images, likenesses). Through this iconic dimension the ‘memory-image’ is connected to whatever we wish to remember, but it also connects to other images stored in memory with which it shares some character and inscribes

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itself in a vast and indefinite network of likenesses. Memory and imagination reconfigure our experiences. The art of memory, especially during the Renaissance, was an attempt to consciously use this process to lay the foundation for a specific form of knowledge based on analogies and likenesses (see Foucault, 1966; Yates, 1966). The ‘memory-image’ is what I refer to as a ‘figure’. The term is not to be understood as meaning ‘trope’, since a trope is a textual manifestation. Yet the figure as a trope (metaphor, metonymy, etc.) and the figure as a ‘memory-image’ (or *memoria*) are connected through their shared origin in rhetorical thought and theory. A trope may be the expression of a part of a memory-image. But unlike the trope, which is fixed, the figure is a semiotic and mental construction that remains open and is subject to transformations as the mind (as well as culture) acquires new representations. It is only when one tries to describe the figure that it fixates itself. In what follows, both trope and figure will be evoked and I have tried my best to keep them clearly distinct. In particular, I will show how a given metaphor, that of ‘capitalism as cannibalism’, can find its way in a given figural network, that of our memory-image of the serial killer. My purpose is not to justify this particular metaphor (which has a long history nonetheless) but rather to show how it inscribes itself in an imaginary cultural logic, a personal and collective (*ana*)logic: the modern figure of the serial killer. Starting with the repeated actual presence of cannibalism (as well as food) in serial killer narratives, I will investigate the rhetorical network that surrounds cannibalism since the inception of the term as a result of Columbus’s travels to the New World. I will then examine how this network offers our imagination a *topos* for our memory-image of the serial killer. Finally, I will take a look at two films (Alfred Hitchcock’s *Frenzy* and Atom Egoyan’s *Felicia’s Journey*) that activate this *topos* in their representation of serial killing, *even though they avoid any direct thematization of it*. This avoidance, in fact, is precisely the reason why both films are studied here. For the claim that I make is that cannibalism is nonetheless ‘present’ in both films (in our viewing and memory of them) through traits that belong to a figural network (that of the modern serial killer) whose origin goes back to Jack the Ripper. Thus the absence of any act of cannibalism in these two films makes its ‘presence’ in our experience of them – in our experience of the imaginary or figural serial killer – all the more compelling.

### **What’s Eating You?**

In the introduction to his book-length study of the phenomenon of serial killers in American film and fiction, Philip Simpson notes how often serial killers are associated with ‘biting and eating’ (2000: 5), before adding that ‘the serial killer is a literalisation of the devoured/devouring motif [of] carnivalesque folk culture’ (2000: 15) as described by Bakhtin in his work on Rabelais. However, the historical source of this association could very well be found at the point of origin of the modern figure of the serial killer, that is with the famous Whitechapel district murders of late 19th-century industrial London, attributed to one Jack the Ripper. As the story goes, on 16

October 1888, some two weeks after the murder of Catherine Eddowes, whose body was found with her uterus and left kidney missing, the Chairman of the Whitechapel Vigilance Committee received a letter and a parcel addressed ‘From Hell’. In the cardboard box he found half a human kidney, the accompanying letter stating that its author had fried and eaten the other half. Though the police considered the letter likely to be a hoax, still others believed in its authenticity. Yet, real or not, cannibalism quickly became part of the Jack the Ripper mythos. Since then, of course, other serial killers have been known to eat human flesh: Albert Fish, Ed Gein, Jeffrey Dahmer or, more recently, Armin Meiwes for instance. However, it would appear that the phenomenon is not as ubiquitous among real-life serial killers as it is among fictional ones (‘Hannibal the cannibal’ or ‘Patrick Bateman’ – the ‘hero’ of *American Psycho* – come immediately to mind), which raises the question of what it is that ensures the imaginary association between serial killers and cannibalism?

### **Cannibalism and the Modern Imagination**

Tales of humans eating other humans likely go back to the dawn of humanity. As William Arens noted in the opening chapter of his important and controversial book, *The Man-eating Myth*, ‘the idea that others at some far distance eat human flesh knows no beginning and probably will know no end’ (1979: 10). Arens’s claim, as is well known, is that anthropophagy, understood as a custom or a way of life – that is, as a socially sanctioned practice – is nothing short of a myth, an imaginary construction of alterity which has, among other things, served and sustained the development of the discipline of anthropology ever since its emergence during the 19th century. For anthropologists, therefore, the question is not whether individuals have indeed feasted on human flesh – so much we know – but whether whole societies have. Yet whether or not such practices have in fact taken place in various cultures – and there has been interesting work done in this area since Arens first published his revisionary account of cannibalism some 25 years ago – may be of more limited interest than the far wider phenomenon of anthropophagy as myth. As Laurence Goldman wrote:

The vexed debates about whether, when, who, and where anthropophagy was actually practiced often improperly overshadow the simple fact that cannibalism appears everywhere to have been a matter of some cultural preoccupation. That is, irrespective of whether people *x* or *y* did or did not consume human flesh, the behavioral possibility or potentiality for cannibalism appears universally sedimented in some domain of cultural thinking. We have yet to encounter any case of a people bereft of a locally etched understanding of anthropophagy. This much [. . .] is indisputable. (1999: 2)

In this light, the *cannibal* may be said to belong specifically to early modern European imagination. I am referring, of course, to the word ‘cannibal’ and to the way it has inflected or ‘coloured’ – if I may put it like

this – the older concept of anthropophagy. For we owe the term to the first encounters between Columbus and his crew and the inhabitants of the New World, as the former translated the name of the Carib people of Martinique, St Croix and St Vincent into ‘Canib’ and, eventually, into ‘Cannibal’. The idea that these people were man-eaters may have come from the inhabitants of the northern islands of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo, and the Bahamas – the Arawaks – whom Columbus first met, and who apparently despised and feared the Caribs of the southern islands. As Arens writes: ‘The word for man-eater is now cannibal and not “arawakibal”, because Columbus first encountered the latter, who were eager to fill him in on the gossip about their enemies to the south’ (1979: 45). And, though Columbus himself may have been sceptical with regard to the Arawaks’ tales about the Caribs, he nonetheless participated in disseminating them with the publication, in almost every capital in Europe and as early as 1493, of a brief account of his first journey to the New World.

But whatever goal Columbus may have had in mind in describing the man-eating habits of the Caribs, it soon became clear that ‘cannibalism’, whether true or not as a cultural practice in the Caribbean, would serve the interests of colonialism. To the Europeans, cannibalism rendered these people subhuman, fit only to be enslaved. Arens shows clearly that ‘the operational definition of cannibalism in the sixteenth century was resistance to foreign invasion followed by being sold into slavery’ (1979: 51).

From the start, then, cannibalism entered the European imagination as a rhetorical tool. One connected in good measure both with fear of the other and the will to dominate him, and with the economics of New World colonialism and the beginnings of capitalism.<sup>1</sup> Early illustrations of these two strands of the imaginary cannibal are perhaps best seen in Montaigne’s essay ‘Des Cannibales’ (1969) and in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (2001).

Montaigne’s use of the trope is dialectical, almost subversive: instead of calling on cannibalism to legitimate colonial domination over the savage-other, he uses it to criticize the savagery of his own countrymen in the context of France’s religious wars. The alterity in Montaigne’s essay is not that which exists between the New World inhabitants and the Europeans, but that which exists between Catholic and Protestant. Yet it is the trope of cannibalism in its colonial tie-in to alterity that enables the argument.

Not surprisingly cannibals also surface in *Robinson Crusoe*. The novel has a long history of being interpreted as the tale of the rising modern *homo economicus*. Political economists were quick to point out the entrepreneurial aspect of a colonial discourse wherein cannibals appear as a threat to the hero’s domination of his island. Marx (1976: Book 1, ch. 1, iv), of course, used the novel to illustrate the relationship that capitalism instils and conceals between labour time and value and which, according to him, is rendered transparent by Crusoe’s non-alienated and solitary relation to the objects that he produces and that form his wealth. Since then, however, Baudrillard (1972) and others have shown that Marx’s analysis was strangely

blind to the fact that on his island Crusoe is not as solitary as it would seem, and his relations to the objects of his wealth not as transparent as Marx would have it. For Crusoe's wants are from the very beginning ideologically overdetermined by the culture from which he comes and to which he still belongs. As Tony Purdy writes:

Despite the fact that Crusoe in his island solitude is cut off from the commerce of the market, it is clear that his 'personal needs' have lost little of their social character. Far from revealing the 'natural man' and his 'basic needs', Crusoe's survival depends on a painstaking reconstruction of the civilization from which he is exiled and which continues to determine his 'needs'. In fact, if Defoe's hero does embody economic man, it is at a level that Marx failed to theorize . . . the level at which the desires created by the social and economic system are 'naturalized' and justified by the myth of use-value and the philosophy of individual needs. (1984: 220–1)

In this environment, the cannibals may be seen as a primitive threat to the activities of economic man. But there is possibly yet a more subtle underground and dialectical relation between cannibalism and capitalism in Defoe's novel. This concerns what Crusoe refers to as his 'original sin'. Though the language is clearly biblical, the absence, in the novel, of any sustained development of the matter has given rise to several interpretations. Crusoe's 'original sin' as he puts it, refers to his choice of a seafaring life in opposition to his father's wishes. Ian Watt, in his influential reading of the novel, has suggested that 'Crusoe's "original sin" is really the dynamic tendency of capitalism itself, whose aim is never merely to maintain the *status quo*, but to transform it incessantly' (1957: 65). Of course, what strikes me here is Defoe's use of the phrase 'original sin', which refers to the Fall of Man brought about through consumption, and in particular *food* consumption. Thus, if we accept Ian Watt's reading, we can see an imaginary thread in the novel between capitalism and the forbidden consumption of food, and therefore between capitalism and cannibalism, between Crusoe and the island's cannibals.<sup>2</sup> Capitalism's 'original sin' is one of both *production* and *consumption*, with the latter possibly being represented by way of Defoe's novel as the evil and savage other of the former. In this reading, *Robinson Crusoe* substantiates claims such as that made by Crystal Bartolovich, according to whom the cannibal operated in the early modern European imaginary 'by providing both an example of – and a limit text for – European proto-capitalist "appetite", which was tending in its mercantile and colonial forms toward limitlessness, as the logic of capital – ambivalently – requires' (1998: 211). Thus, according to Bartolovich, the early modern conception of the cannibal operative in travel literature and narratives such as *Robinson Crusoe*, put forth a model of 'appetite' that eventually played into the very contradictions of emergent capitalism. 'If the cannibal represents consumption without reserve', she writes, 'then capital must meet in cannibalism not only its own limit – that which it must renounce – but also the figure of its own desire' (1998: 223).

It is this particular imaginary thread between cannibalism and capitalism in its relation to the figure of the serial killer that I would like to investigate in the following pages of this article.

### **Capitalism and Cannibalism: From Production to Consumerism**

I have thus far suggested that one strand of the figurative network of the cannibal is, from the very origin of the term itself, connected to capitalism in the modern Western imaginary, though this does not by any means exhaust its representation, nor explain away its various discursive and rhetorical functions. What is more, though on a different level of relevance, it goes without saying that both cannibalism and capitalism are tied as interpretants of the term *consumption*, that is, both belong to the term's meaning. This connection has been further enhanced by the violence and *savagery* with which capitalism has been described, particularly by Marx and others following in his footsteps. In other words, then, *savage consumption may be said to characterize both cannibalism and capitalism*. However, when used metaphorically, it is almost always the former which serves to represent the latter as in Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend*, where the metaphor is literalized on the screen, or in comments such as those of film critic and theorist Robin Wood, who writes that 'cannibalism represents the ultimate in possessiveness, hence the logical end of human relations under capitalism' (1979: 21).

But in discussions about capitalism, the trope of cannibalism has served different ends and represented different processes of 'consumption'. In *Capital*, for instance, Marx uses it to criticize the political economists' view that exploitation is natural:

We may say that surplus-value rests in a natural basis, but only in the very general sense that there is no obstacle absolutely preventing one man from lifting from himself the burden of labor necessary to maintain his own existence, and imposing it on another, just as there is no unconquerable natural obstacle to the consumption of the flesh of one man by another. (1976: 647)

What is at stake here is a behaviour which appears to be abject and 'against nature' – an abomination – and can only be understood so, even though there may be instances of it found in nature. According to this view, capitalism's *appetite* is for labour, its *consumption* that of the worker's time, from which surplus-value is extracted and accumulated in profit – a metaphor which, if pursued to the limit, reminds us of Freud's view of money in that it yields the image of profit and surplus-value as faeces. For Marx, then, it is capitalistic *production* that is cannibalistic for it endlessly feeds off the living blood of labour (an idea also conjured up by Marx's use, elsewhere in *Capital*, of the images of the capitalist as vampire, werewolf, or parasite forever feeding off the lifeblood of the proletariat). On film, Fritz Lang immortalized this cannibalistic image of capitalistic production in *Metropolis* at the moment where Feder, the young hero, being subject to an

hallucination, sees a large work station turning into Moloch as it devours the city's underground workers.

Another use of the 'capitalism as cannibalism' metaphor can be seen to relate to the development of industrial capitalism and, in particular, to the emergence of mass production according to the principles of Fordism (as well as post-Fordism). Ford's gamble with regard to assembly-line production was grounded in his belief that *mass production* would entail *mass consumption*. In this context *consumerism* becomes the new target of the cannibalistic metaphor. Consequently, writes Crystal Bartolovich, 'the most recent business and cultural discourses on cannibals displace the emphasis from capitalist production to mass consumption' (1998: 235). This view is echoed by Mary Kilgour, who claims that since the 1960s 'cannibalism clearly provides a perfect, if rather simplistic, image for the nightmare of a consumer society, uneasy about its own appetites' (1998: 241). She goes on to cite George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* as an example, seeing that in the film 'the refugees from the cannibal zombies hide in a shopping mall, whose walls separate two mirror forms of conspicuous consumption' (1998: 241). This 'tropical' displacement, therefore, involves moving from cannibalism as a metaphor for the nightmare of capitalist production in its treatment of labour (capital's working-other) – whether it be in the form of slaves brought back from the New World during the era of primitive accumulation or in the form of workers during the industrial age – to cannibalism as a metaphor for the nightmare of unbridled consumerism in late capitalism. Thus, whether on the side of production or on that of consumption, the trope of cannibalism has served to illustrate some of the anxieties of capitalism from *Robinson Crusoe* to Marxism, from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* to Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, and, as we shall now see, to the imaginary serial killer.

### **Anxieties of Consumption: Serial Killing and Reification**

I have already alluded to the connection that exists between serial killing and cannibalism, and whose source most likely lies in the profound impact that the Jack the Ripper mythos has had on our modern collective imaginary. In Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, in the Hannibal Lecter series of novels by Thomas Harris and in the films adapted from them, and in films such as *Doctor X*, *Blood Feast*, *Night Owl*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Tenderness of the Wolves*, to name but a few, serial killers are indeed depicted in the guise of cannibals and are sometimes seen feasting on their victims' bodies. However, understanding why modern fictional serial killers are so often associated with 'biting and eating' (as Simpson puts it) and – ultimately – with cannibalism, requires that we consider how the rhetorical and metaphorical network of cannibalism discussed earlier adheres to the imaginary serial killer.

As a starting point, let us briefly take into account the prototypical case of Jack the Ripper. How does he, understood as a cannibal, feed into the capitalism-instilled modern anxieties toward consumption? To begin with, I will say that part of what is interesting about the Ripper murders and

the supposed cannibalism of their perpetrator, from my point of view at least, is that they took place in a poor working-class district of London soon after the transformations wrought by a century of industrial revolution were largely completed, having entirely transformed the urban and social landscape of the British capital. Thus, on the basis of setting alone, these murderous and cannibalistic deeds truly belong to the age of industrial capitalism. In addition, successful execution of the murders seems to have required the anonymity that the modern industrial city provides for its large number of inhabitants as well as the commodified relations capitalism establishes between them. On those counts alone capitalism may be seen to constitute one of the conditions of possibility for these gruesome murders. I should insist, however, on the fact that in mentioning the events of 1888, I am not discussing them as real-life events, rather I am interested in the way they organize imaginatively, through a sort of memory after-image, into what I consider to be a coherent constellation from which the figure of the modern serial killer emerges. Also coherent, then, with the theme of consumption – at the meeting point of the carnal and the economic – is the fact that most of the Ripper's victims were prostitutes, that is, women whose bodies and favours were sold and bought as commodities. Now it could be said that these facts are somewhat peripheral, or at best merely circumstantial, to the Whitechapel murders. But in my mind what is important about such facts is the way they cohere with what constitutes the central characteristic of serial murder: namely its seriality.

Serial killing is often described as the multiple murder of strangers. Though, unlike mass murder where several people are killed in a single event, serial killing requires repetition, seriality. The two closely related aspects of this definition that I will be concerned with here are the somewhat arbitrary character of the victims and the seriality of the murders. Both, as we shall see, point to *reification* as a common denominator.

The fact that serial killers have been said to murder complete strangers has led to the notion that their crimes are 'motiveless'. Most premeditated murders, of course, are not an end in themselves, but a means of achieving something more or less singularly tied to the individual victim, whether it be money, advancement or revenge. What is striking about serial killers – at least in fiction – is not so much that their crimes are motiveless (though they may appear to be so at times, as in John McNaughton's film, *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer*), but rather that the motives, generally speaking, have very little to do with the individuality of the victims. The latter appear as more or less interchangeable, and are conceived more as *types* than as *individuals*. Whence, for instance, the Avenger in Hitchcock's *The Lodger*, who attacks only young curly-haired blonde women; or John Doe in Fincher's *Se7en* whose victims are picked to illustrate certain types of behaviour considered illicit by the Scriptures. The victims are arbitrary in the sense that they are substitutable within the series to which they belong. Interestingly, though, the phenomenon is perhaps best illustrated by the countless faceless and nameless actors and

actresses who play these roles in the slasher-gore variation of serial killer movies.

Much has been written about the anonymity and even invisibility of real-life serial killers. The way, for instance, Jack the Ripper – likely hiding behind the mask of the Benjaminian *flâneur*<sup>3</sup> – could blend in his urban environment without ever being noticed or caught, or the way ‘Ted Bundy’, as Mark Seltzer wrote, ‘struck everyone as *chameleon-like*’ (1998: 11) and thus easily blended in society. Yet the same should be said of what serial killers do to their victims, though in an even more radical manner. At issue, then, is the way serial killers can be seen to strip away the humanity and individuality – the very subjectivity – of their victims with the utmost violence. Herein also lies the seriality principle of serial killing and the source of much modern anxiety surrounding it. ‘Serial killers’, writes Richard Dyer, ‘kill serially: one murder after another, each a variation and continuation of those before, each an episode in a serial’ (1997: 14). This is an apt description given that the FBI’s Robert Ressler, the man who first coined the term ‘serial killer’ in the 1970s and who was the co-founder of the agency’s Behavioral Science Unit (BSU), claims he was inspired in part by ‘the serial adventures we used to see on Saturday at the movies’ (in Seltzer, 1998: 16). But equally important, if not more so in my view, is the fact that serial killers turn their victims into serial objects, no different in that regard from the object-types produced on the assembly-line and consumed in large surface retail stores – that is, objects of *serial consumption*. Which is to say that occurrences of serial killing, though they may be said to pre-date capitalism (and *a fortiori* late capitalism), take on a particular meaning in the context of it, if only in our imagination: an anxiety over reification and its violence.<sup>4</sup>

Reification, to collapse several definitions, is what happens when worldly processes and relations are ‘thingified’ and represented as non-identical with themselves. This has been the object of much debate in Marxist circles ever since Lukács first erroneously attributed the term to Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism in his famous 1923 essay ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat’ (in Lukács, 1971), before extending the theory to bourgeois society in all its aspects, not just its economic ones. Though Lukács’s view on the matter has often been criticized, the issue itself has not disappeared as can be witnessed by Timothy Bewes’s recent claim that ‘all the signs are that the overriding characteristic of contemporary consciousness is precisely the fear of reification’ (2002: 173). In *Capital*, merely a few paragraphs prior to his discussion of *Robinson Crusoe* in fact, Marx describes commodity fetishism as that which happens when ‘a definite social relation between men . . . assumes the *phantasmagoric* form of a relation between things’ (1976: 165).<sup>5</sup> In the context of capitalism, cannibalism and serial killing become themselves images of reification; images of men and women as body-objects repetitively, serially, consumed; images of human flesh as meat to be consumed. Read allegorically, they show us what happens to human bodies as they are incessantly fed to us in

advertising, in fashion, in images of all sorts, and also in medicine. Not surprisingly, then, many theories about the identity of Jack the Ripper, theories which also belong to the figure of the serial killer, have focused on butchers, surgeons and even a painter, that is, people whose relation to living bodies is one of reifying them into food, science (modern medical knowledge has come in great part from the study and dissection of cadavers) and art.

This is not to suggest, however, that cannibalism or serial killing narratives are progressive forces foregrounding reification under capitalism – though the trope of cannibalism was used in the 1920s by Brazilian modernists (such as Oswald de Andrade) in an attempt to develop a radical left-wing cultural politics.<sup>6</sup> In fact, in most of the serial killer films and novels I have consumed quite the opposite happens: by showing the serial killer/cannibal as a mentally disturbed individual or as an evil monster, as is so often the case, the anxiety over reification that these texts render manifest, itself becomes reified. What I merely wanted to outline here is the condition under which cannibalism and serial killing can appear to meet coherently in the modern figure of the serial killer – as can be witnessed in a great number of texts – because both can be seen to turn their victims and their bodies into *objects of consumption*, into *consumer things*, that is, into interchangeable non-individual material things that can be produced and consumed serially. Which is why cannibalism, though not always thematized as such in serial killer narratives, is never really far from sight. Two examples that come immediately to mind, of course, are Alfred Hitchcock's *Frenzy* and Atom Egoyan's *Felicia's Journey*.

### **Food Everywhere: *Frenzy* and *Felicia's Journey***

In view of everything that I have discussed until now, it may sound strange for me to focus on two serial killer films where no act of cannibalism is depicted. *The Silence of the Lambs*, featuring 'Hannibal the cannibal', would probably have been a more obvious choice than *Frenzy* and *Felicia's Journey*. However, the point I wish to make is that while it is possible for the outlined constellation to be thematized in a text, it is also possible for it to be operative at some 'level' other than the thematic level, even when it is nowhere to be seen literally speaking. This other level is what I call the 'figural'. Briefly, it can be described as an analogical network of traits that are organized in different *topoi* and that make up how a given representation is itself represented ('figured') in memory with the help of the imagination. One need only consider how we recall things through a complex web of such relations and likenesses – as beautifully described by Proust, for example; but also by Freud in his *Interpretation of Dreams*. In the cinema, it was Sergei Eisenstein who came the closest to describing the figure through what he called *obraznost* ('imagicity') in his theoretical writings from the last decade of his life. The figure, then, is a memory and imaginary object, a *memory-image*, that is both personal and collective in that it may be shared. The serial killer, I believe, possesses its own figure

in our culture; a figure for which Jack the Ripper may be a founding moment and which finds in the trope of cannibalism and in the latter's ties to capitalism one of its *topoi*.

Now in both *Frenzy* and *Felicia's Journey*, the serial killer is actually thematized. What isn't thematized, however, is the layered figural network of the serial killer, the way that, through the trope of cannibalism, the figure of the serial killer itself has become a trope of anxieties over capitalist consumption. And yet it was while watching and thinking about both of these films that the whole idea for this article came about. What initially intrigued me about them is the way serial killing seems almost peripheral to their concerns. Indeed, in both films only a single murder is actually depicted on the screen (in *Frenzy*). At the same time, both are literally obsessed with food.

*Frenzy* takes place around Covent Garden in London. The killer, one Bob Rusk – whose surname obviously associates him with food – operates a wholesale greengrocery in the market. In one of Hitchcock's classic mistaken-identity and transference-of-guilt scenarios, another man, Richard Blaney (note that the order of his initials inverts that of the killer's), is wrongly accused and convicted for a series of sex murders. The victims are women who are raped and then strangled with a necktie. The film's opening clearly associates, through metaphor, serial killing, cannibalism, and capitalism in a manner that suggests some anxiety over consumption and its effects: namely pollution in this case. As a British Member of Parliament is seen making a speech outlining his government's efforts to clean the Thames and 'clear it of industrial effluent . . . and the waste products of our society', the corpse of a young woman with a necktie around her neck is seen floating down the river. The effect of course is ironic with regard to the politician's speech, but it also firmly associates the serial killer's deeds with the production of industrial waste and pollution, that is, with some of the consequences of industrial capitalism. And since the excreted waste appears here as a human body, one also finds the film's first indirect allusion to cannibalism, one directly tied moreover to both serial killing (she is a victim of the necktie murderer) and capitalism (she exemplifies the Thames's industrial pollution). And, should anyone miss the point, direct reference is made in the dialogue to Jack the Ripper and the 'From Hell' letter that accompanied the box containing a piece of a human kidney, while onlookers, standing next to Alfred Hitchcock in one of his trademark cameo appearances, register the event in shock. Here then, the serial killer, responsible for this excretion of human waste, appears in the traditional role of the cannibal, playing out the contradictions of capitalism and representing its voracious consumption of resources and commodities, including human beings consumed serially.

I mentioned earlier how, in *Robinson Crusoe*, cannibalism can be seen to embody the dark, savage side of economic man, both Crusoe and the island's cannibals being linked to each other through the notion of 'original sin'. Fittingly, much of the same constellation can also be seen at work in

the central scene of *Frenzy*, around which much of the plot develops. This, of course, is the violent rape and murder of Brenda Blaney in the office of her matrimonial agency. Tania Modleski, among others, has referred to this scene as ‘among the most disturbing scenes cinema has to offer’ (1988: 113). Her commentary, though it strangely neglects to consider serial killing, points toward the biblical undertones of the scene, which she interprets in feminist terms. She describes the scene:

In *Frenzy* when Bob Rusk, owner of a fruit market, forces himself sexually onto Brenda Blaney he says, ‘[You know in my trade, we have a saying. We put it on the fruit: don’t squeeze the goods ’til they’re yours. Now that’s me. I would never do that.]’ (Of course, he proceeds directly to contradict himself and ‘violate’ goods that are not his.) As he sits on her desk, Rusk comments on Brenda’s ‘frugal’ lunch, and then he begins to eat the (English) apple she has brought. When he is finished raping and strangling her, he spies the apple, resumes eating it, puts it down, picks his teeth with his tie pin, and again picks up the half-eaten apple (shown in close-up) as he leaves. Now given the numerous references to gardens in the film, . . . it seems plausible to argue that the Adam and Eve myth is being invoked . . . (1988: 106, quote from the film corrected in brackets)

Here, then, is ‘original sin’ and the image of forbidden consumption which, in *Robinson Crusoe*, as I have said before, can be seen to associate capitalism and cannibalism, Crusoe and the island’s cannibals as opposite sides of a single coin. What Modleski omits to mention in her description, however, is that Bob Rusk uses a pseudonym for his business at the Blaney matrimonial agency. This might be an irrelevant detail should the alias be anything else than what it is, namely ‘Robinson’. Indeed it is in posing as ‘Mr Robinson’ that Rusk comes to the agency to discuss his peculiar ‘appetite’ for women before raping and strangling his prey. And, though she is not a prostitute, as were Jack the Ripper’s victims, Brenda Blaney does nonetheless own a matrimonial agency which promises sexual companionship in exchange for money. Here then are human relations presented as reified commodities, a process which Rusk pushes to its untenable limit through serial killing. Thus, after the murder, ‘Mr Robinson’ is seen rummaging through Brenda’s handbag and taking whatever money there is, profiting, one could say, from his cannibalizing. (The theft will later be an incriminating factor for Blaney’s wrongful conviction, since he also turns out to possess money that can be traced, through powder residue, to his ex-wife’s handbag.)

Furthermore, the relation of inversion between Rusk (as the savage serial killer/cannibal) and the film’s actual ‘Robinsons’ (the representatives of civilized society) is managed through an elaborate web of dialogue, clothes and food. For instance, in a pub conversation a doctor is heard profiling the necktie murderer: ‘On the surface,’ he says, such murderers ‘appear as ordinary likable, adult fellows. But emotionally they remain as dangerous as children, whose conduct may revert to a primitive, subhuman level

at any moment.’ Of course, the description of the killer as a child whose behaviour is primitive and subhuman, reminds us of the way the natives of the New World were described in early modern travel literature. As for food and clothing, the two can be seen to rehearse the savage vs civilized opposition of cannibalism and capitalism.

The neckties that Rusk uses as murder weapons obviously stand as a clear distinguishing trait of civilized society and of its conventions of civility. Not surprisingly, Rusk can easily masquerade as ‘Robinson’. In fact, Blaney, police inspector Oxford and his aide, Sergeant Spearman, and even Sir George (the politician whose speech opens the film) can all be seen wearing similar neckties – Sir George is even heard asking whether or not the girl lying in the river is wearing his club tie. What Rusk does, therefore, is to turn this appendage of civilization on its head by using it to strangle his victims. In short, he is savagely killing and ‘consuming’ his victims with the very accoutrements of modern civilized – that is, capitalist – society. (Of course, that this a specifically male item of clothing used in order to kill women reinforces Tania Modleski’s excellent feminist reading of the film, which is not at odds, I hasten to say, with what I am proposing here.)

As for food, the whole film, as I mentioned earlier, is obsessed with it. Food is everywhere. Here, for instance, is a brief description by film critic Raymond Durnat, which condenses several events in the film:

Rusk rapes Mrs. Blaney, her legs conspicuously apart, and a few shots later Mrs. Oxford takes the lid off her latest dish to reveal a soggy quail with its legs lifted up and apart. Rusk’s grapplings with the barmaid’s body in the potato sack, and its conspicuously protruding foot, are reiterated as the Inspector’s utensils prod at a slithery little bundle of pig’s trotter. The snapping of the dead girl’s fingers is echoed in Mrs. Oxford’s brisk breaking of breadsticks. Meat is corpses. We are all eaters of the dead, violently slain for us. Decency is a matter, not of kind, but of degree. (1974: 396)

Though he gets some of the details wrong, Durnat’s description nonetheless captures quite well the spirit of Hitchcock’s equation of food and bodies in *Frenzy*. And, as the description implies, the comparative terms are the killer and the police officer, both men representing the two extremities of civility: so-called decent consumption on one hand, and indecent or savage consumption (cannibalism) on the other. And yet, the point that the film seems to be making is that these are merely different sides of the same coin. Tania Modleski mentions that the scenes at the Oxfords’ dinner table – the surname itself suggesting higher education and civility – connote cannibalism. But this is the case only because the same can be said of the murders and all that surrounds them. Thus, after having killed Blaney’s girlfriend, Babs, Rusk disposes of her body in a burlap sack of potatoes which he then dumps on the bed of a potato lorry. After realizing that some incriminating evidence has stayed with the body, Rusk will need to recover it while the truck is in motion. This leads into some Hitchcockian macabre slapstick.

But what is truly interesting about the body in the potato sack is that it offers us an image of the ‘meat and potatoes’ meal that inspector Oxford is really longing for instead of the ‘repellent, virtually inedible’ (Modleski) ‘ghastly’ and ‘awful’ (Spoto, 1976) food his wife prepares for him. This leads us back to Crystal Bartolovich’s idea that should the cannibal represent ‘consumption without reserve, then capital must meet in cannibalism not only its own limit – that which it must renounce – but also the figure of its own desire’ (1998: 223).

Like *Frenzy*, Atom Egoyan’s *Felicia’s Journey* also follows a path of conspicuous consumption that involves food. The film’s main character, serial killer Joseph Hilditch, works as a catering manager in a plant in industrial northern England. Hilditch is obsessed with food, which, he says, must be prepared with ‘caring hands’. He is for the most part a mild-mannered man and first appears as a good Samaritan, helping out young women who are in trouble, giving them fatherly common-sense advice. However, when the women finally work through their problems and plan to leave him to restart their lives, we are led to understand that he kills them. The plot centres on one such young woman, 17-year-old Felicia, who has come to England from Ireland in search of her boyfriend who, unbeknownst to her, has joined the British army. Felicia is pregnant and Hilditch makes her dependent on him – by stealing her money – so that she will rely on his kind advice in the search for her boyfriend. In the process he will convince her to have an abortion, seeing that he cannot get himself to kill an expecting mother.<sup>7</sup>

Cannibalism, capitalist consumption and seriality can be seen to all come together by condensing a number of elements from a few scenes in the film. We learn that Hilditch’s mother was a French gourmet cook who hosted a popular television cooking show for the BBC during the 1950s. Every night, Hilditch prepares an elaborate dinner while watching his mother’s cooking show on tape and following her cooking instructions. The question, then, is to see how this activity relates to Hilditch’s serial killing in such a way that it may be understood to stand in for it. What is striking at first about the meals Hilditch prepares for himself is their sheer excess. For though he lives and eats alone, Hilditch’s meals could easily feed a large family. At one point, for instance, we see him prepare and eat a whole turkey. This obviously points toward the idea of uncontrolled consumption. Worth noticing also is the use of television screens and video images in the film. For not only does Hilditch watch his mother’s old television show, he also films his victims on video while they’re having conversations with him in his car. The hidden camera is positioned so that we only see the women in the passenger seat, while Hilditch stays off-screen save for part of his arm. There is a sense in which this framing recalls that of his mother’s television show where young Hilditch was never far off-screen. At times, the video images of the women in the car are inserted in the unfolding narrative. However, we also see Hilditch watching these recordings on the same television set on which he watches his mother’s cooking show while he is eating

dinner. Here the connection between food preparation, eating, and serial killing is clear and is established through the sharing of the video apparatus, one type of video image being paradigmatically tied to another, as if both were interchangeable. Hilditch's television, in other words, is used for screening only two types of images, which are in the process become associated: the preparation of food and (the 'preparation' of) the victims of serial killing.

But as Hilditch stands before a television screen playing an old movie in the foyer of a hospital, a third video image occurs that serves to buttress the association/substitution of food and (soon to be murdered) young women that takes place on his own television screen. The old movie is William Dieterle's 1953 *Salome*, where we see the Jewish princess's dance and the head of John the Baptist cannibalistically *served on a platter*.

Now, how this relates to capitalist forms of serial production and consumption is best illustrated by the way Egoyan's *mise-en-scène* renders certain elements contiguous. In one scene we see Hilditch in his kitchen preparing dinner and watching his mother's cooking show. The recipe requires that he use a food processor. Hilditch reaches for the machine and turns it on. However, nothing happens: the machine has obviously broken down. Without showing any emotion whatsoever Hilditch simply throws it in the garbage bin. He then goes to a backroom where we see dozens of boxes, all neatly stored away as if in a warehouse. The boxes have his mother's likeness on them and each one holds a food processor – a brand which Hilditch's mother most probably endorsed in advertising. All of a sudden, then, modern serial consumerism invades or contaminates the whole network that connects the serial victims with food. Moreover, this is further developed when we come to realize, later on, that Hilditch keeps his video collection in the same backroom as he does the food processors.

Unlike the other girls he has picked up, however, Felicia is saved when Hilditch has a change of heart and refuses to 'cannibalize' or 'commodify' his victim. Interestingly, what offsets the process of reification that Hilditch's serial killing exemplifies is a Christian fundamentalist religious discourse – a discourse to which the story of John the Baptist belongs. For the real division may not be that which opposes capitalism and cannibalism – both being two sides of a single coin as we have seen – but that which opposes the two of them to religion, to the idea of an unreifiable realm beyond our material world, a world without consumption where money has no place. Toward the end of the film, as Hilditch is digging Felicia's grave, he is visited by women whom we have met earlier and who belong to a Christian group that proselytizes door to door. Felicia had earlier gone to stay with them at their church's Gathering House. The women come to Hilditch seeking room for members of the church who will soon congregate for a Prayer Jubilee. Though they are depicted as little less than fanatics, the two women have an immediate impact on Hilditch. At that point he had already started referring to Felicia as his 'special angel'. Hilditch seems to undergo a sort of

mystical experience in the company of the women from the Gathering House after which he lets Felicia escape and hangs himself in his kitchen.

In his recent book on *Reification, or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism*, Timothy Bewes notes that the most important corollary of religiosity as found in Adorno's aesthetic theory, in Lukács's work on reification, as well as works by Lucien Goldman, René Girard, Giorgio Agamben and Søren Kierkegaard, is the 'affirmation of the concept of reification *in the name* of something that is unreifiable – something, indeed, which is *only provisionally nameable* as the "freedom from reification"'. He adds:

. . . what is further affirmed is the necessarily reified status of the concept of reification itself, as well as of the religious metaphor as a solution to it. 'Religion' implies freedom from all reification – including, in the final analysis, from religion. . . . The mind which sees 'religion' *per se* as an idealistic, nihilistic, metaphysical or teleological world view is a product of the reified consciousness which true religiosity supersedes. Not only is the concept of reification implicitly 'religious' or 'idealistic' . . . the concept itself, and the profound unhappiness of those theoretical and philosophical approaches which refuse it, attest to the *innate religiosity* of mankind and the world. This 'religiosity', however, is an immensely complex claim, implying as it does the essential *reversibility* of all concepts. . . . Reversibility implies a certain underlying assumption: that there is an other to language, something completely outside the text and inarticulable by it; that the text is as nothing, merely thinglike, in relation to this outside; and that to speak in the name of this inarticulable otherness is necessarily to elaborate, or simply to presuppose the contradictory aspect of everything that composes the here and now. (2002: 202–3)

Whether or not a Kierkegaardian brand of 'unreligious religiosity' is, as Bewes claims, the only genuine means of liberation from reification under the condition of late capitalism, is not something we need to consider here. Yet it may very well be what *Felicia's Journey* is implying in making its serial killer, and not the religious fanatics, the locus of a mystical experience through which Felicia and her captor can both free themselves from their reified existences, at least momentarily.

### Conclusion

My concern in discussing *Frenzy* and *Felicia's Journey* has not been to critique or even to offer thoroughgoing interpretations or readings of the films, but more modestly to show that both, even though they make use of very different formal or material traits, work through the theme of serial killing by calling on the familiar *locus memoriae* of cannibalism in such a fashion as to bring forth one aspect of the modern *figure* of the serial killer. Methodologically speaking, the distinction between *theme* and *figure* is an important one to make. The theme is what is given in a text, the figure, on the other hand is its *poetic and imaginary (ana)logic*, the way that we have of representing, of figuring for ourselves, through imagination and memory,

the contents of a work. Which is why it was important to consider these two particular films rather than films like *Blood Feast* or *Red Dragon*, which thematize cannibalism as an attribute of the serial killer. Thus, even though cannibalism is nowhere to be seen at the thematic level in neither of the two films discussed, still it can be shown to inform both of them in profound ways. In *Blood Feast*, *Red Dragon*, or in Ellis's *American Psycho*, the play of relations that make up this aspect of the figure has simply passed on to the thematic level and appears, therefore, as an impoverished given. One caveat, of course, is that in analysing the latter texts one is likely to miss out on the figural altogether. Of course, there is no method that safely and invariably leads one to the figural. What is required is that we attend to the ways in which the components of a text reverberate within us and within our culture, to the ways our imagination and our memory create relations for them. As readers or spectators, the figure is what we may be able to see in our mind's eye once the text has been consumed and integrated into the imaginary and memorial networks through which we give meaning to the world. It may be as vague as the feeling that is associated with it, but it may also be described more or less successfully, as I have tried to do here.

To conclude, then, I will say that in investigating the relation that our modern imagination instils between serial killing and cannibalism, through the latter's historical and rhetorical ties to capitalist consumption, my goal here has merely been to start documenting one aspect of the figure of the serial killer. I have tried to show how this 'memory-image' or figure underlies certain cultural texts and how it can serve to explain – to give coherence and meaning to – some of their peculiarities, and in particular a certain insistence on food in serial killer narratives. The map I have drawn is far from complete however, and much work remains to be done on this single *topos* of the figure alone. What is more, there is no doubt in my mind that other *topoi* exist as well, some of them even interacting closely with cannibalism – as is the case, for instance, with sexuality and gender in their relation to consumption and 'original sin'. This only testifies, to my mind, to the richness of the figure of the serial killer, and to the depth of its imprint upon us as it continues to haunt – with increasing frequency it would seem – our contemporary imaginary.

#### Notes

1. In a rich discursive analysis of Columbus' writings, Peter Hulme (1986) shows how the concept of 'cannibalism' emerged in a context where two discourses interacted and conflicted, an Oriental discourse and a discourse of savagery. The common element for both being *gold*. According to Hulme, Columbus was essentially torn between two intertexts in conceiving of the Canibs:

The conscious conflict is that of two elements, 'the soldiers of the Grand Khan [el Gran Can]' from the discourse of Marco Polo and 'the man-eating savages' from the discourse of Herodotus, are competing for a single signifier – the word 'canibales'. As is well known, it is the discourse of savagery that eventually won over Columbus' discursive struggle.

2. A related point is made by Peter Hulme in his study of the novel. Hulme sees Robinson Crusoe as a divided self and the novel's structuring as attempting to reconcile the unreconcilable. Though Hulme doesn't discuss food, he does make the point that Crusoe's capitalism is, in the end, 'sanguinary':

The discretion between the two parts of the narrative structure and between the divided selves of Robinson Crusoe is a technique for negotiating the unspeakable – and eventually uncloseable – gap between the violence of slavery and the notion of a moral economy. The imperial production of *Robinson Crusoe* as a boy's adventure in the nineteenth century inevitably foregrounds the colonial alibi – the man alone, on a desert island, constructing a simple and moral economy which becomes the basis of a commonwealth presided over by a benevolent sovereign. The colonial reading must reassert that the book's tremendous effort to reconstruct that economy fills up the narrative space in which, in that other place, silently, Crusoe's other half, his ghostly 'partner', is developing those plantations built on the violently-extracted labour-power of slaves which will provide the capital to displace that moral economy with a less volatile mode of production. Crusoe, so satiated with his sudden transfusion of the profits produced from the blood of thirty years' slavery that he needs letting, is on reflection an appropriately sanguinary emblem of such exploitation. (1986: 222)

3. Discussing Baudelaire and the *flâneur*, Benjamin writes:

With the emergence of big cities, prostitution comes to possess new arcana. Among the earliest of these is the labyrinthine character of the city itself. The labyrinth, whose image has become part of the flâneur's flesh and blood, seems to have been given, as it were, a colored border by prostitution. The first arcanum known to prostitution is thus the mythical aspect of the city as labyrinth. This includes, as one would expect, an image of the Minotaur at its center. That he brings death to the individual is not the essential fact. What is crucial is the image of the deadly power he embodies. (2003: 189)

Of course, the Minotaur was known to *feed* on seven young men and seven young women each year.

4. This line of argument, while distinct, overlaps in part with that developed by Jon Stratton (1996) in his study of the 'situatedness' of serial killing in relation to the modern and postmodern constructions of the 'social'. According to Stratton, any definition of serial killing is inextricably linked to conceptions of the social. Such definitions can be seen at work, indirectly, in the way police detection works in the investigation of serial murders. While the 'modern' serial killer is thought of in terms of the rational divide between sanity and insanity, the 'postmodern' serial killer, on the other hand, lives in a different social context, one where anomie and reification have come to replace psychosis. The serial killer becomes an amoral aesthete. Yet, as Stratton remarks with regard to Jack the Ripper:

In spite of their differences there are many similarities between modern and postmodern serial killers which spring from their originating relation to the

social. Many of the concerns of the postmodern serial killing can be found in the Ripper murders. (1996: 92)

One of them I believe is anxiety over reification and its violence in the modern and postmodern environments.

5. Emphasis mine. As Gillian Rose notes, most translations of *Capital* into English make the mistake of using the word ‘fantastic’ rather than ‘phantasmagoric’. In the German original, Marx writes ‘*die phantasmagorische Form*’. See Rose (1978).

6. A separate article would have to be devoted to the re-appropriation of the trope of cannibalism in Latin America, where it also served, during the 1920s, as a critique of First World economic and philosophical modernity. Cannibalism in this case is not a monstrous image of capitalism but a ‘native’ response to it in a struggle for economic and cultural independence.

7. Mothering hovers over both films in complex ways as the Mother is connected to ‘production’ through both food (lactation) and procreation. A primordial image of cannibalism may also be found in breastfeeding (the infant with a piece of flesh of the mother’s body in its mouth). In *Frenzy*, Hitchcock – who had by then a long history of showing mothers, including Mrs Bates in *Psycho* – gives us a shot of Rusk with his mother, while in *Felicia’s Journey* the issue of mothering is explicitly thematized. Of course, the mother’s production is *natural* and not *serial*. That the victims in both films (as in several, though not all, serial killer narratives) are women (i.e. *natural* producers) seems to reinforce the idea that what is at stake concerns the unsettling of modernity understood as a problem of appetite. Of course, this could also be read psychoanalytically. In Lacanian terms: serial killing and capitalism (both as production and overconsumption) as ways of reintegrating the Real, the plenitude of indifferentiation with the mother.

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