

CHAPTER 12

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE MONSTERS WE MAKE

In previous chapters, I have demonstrated that the functionalist tradition of sociology and Emile Durkheim's concept of anomie help to explain the presence and actions of serial killers in modern society. I have argued that a sociological theory known as social constructionism and a concept known as moral panic together help to explain how and why society turns serial killers into celebrity monsters. I have explained how the managers of the state, including politicians and law enforcement authorities, the news media, the public, and serial killers themselves, each contribute to the social construction of serial killers as folk devils in the contemporary popular culture. Moreover, I have presented tangible evidence and examples of the way that serial killers are depicted as celebrity monsters in the news and entertainment media.

In the final chapter of this book, we now examine how serial killers are woven into the very fabric of society and how they are imprinted on our collective consciousness by the combined efforts of state authorities and the mass media. I contend that the presence of serial killers in society creates an imbalance in the social order—a state of anomie—that must be eliminated if equilibrium is to be restored. I provide an argument that society constructs the grizzly public identity of serial killers, and frames them as monsters, in an effort to make sense of the incomprehensible nature of their crimes. I demonstrate how the social construction of serial killers as monsters eliminates or minimizes the state of anomie that is triggered by their arrival on the public stage. However, the transformation or reduction of serial killers to grotesque caricatures in the news and entertainment media does harm to society by blurring reality and fiction. I'll explore the negative impact of stereotyping and social reductionism in this chapter, as well.

I present an unlikely argument in this chapter that serial killers serve a function in society because the public can learn something about itself and the dark side of the human condition from them. Serial killers offer society a way to exorcise its own demons in a safe and controlled environment. They provide a catharsis for the public's collective fears and rage, as mentioned in chapter 10. Also, the framing of serial killers as monsters in the news and entertainment media clarifies certain moral boundaries separating good and evil in society. Although it may seem like an outrageous claim, I maintain that serial killers actually serve a purpose in the social order.

Serial Killers and Anomie

As explained in chapter 8, Emile Durkheim defined anomie as a condition of deregulation and normative breakdown in society. Anomie represents an environment where social norms—that is, expectations of behavior—are confused, unclear, or simply not present at all. Anomie occurs in a society when the rules on how people ought to behave and interact with one another disintegrate. As a result, people do not know what to expect from each other. A society characterized by anomie often fails to exercise adequate control over the actions and behaviors of its individual members. Most important to our discussion, the state of norm confusion or normlessness that occurs in a society characterized by anomie can lead its individual members to engage in various forms of deviant behavior, including extreme acts of violence and murder.¹²⁵

Although Durkheim saw value in the presence of a limited amount of crime in society in that it helps to establish moral boundaries, he also acknowledged that it is possible for illegal behavior to exceed acceptable limits and for society to devolve into chaos as a result. More specifically, Durkheim believed that criminal behavior should remain within tolerable limits because a crime rate that is too high can indicate an emerging problem and, ultimately, reflect a state of anomie in society. Durkheim viewed anomie as being directly related to the collective consciousness of society. Individuals can become isolated and float aimlessly when there is no collective consciousness to unite them or enforce social norms. In such an environment, Durkheim said that people will fail to establish common

bonds with those they live and work with. These conditions foster a social environment where anomie can prevail.

Society's need to understand serial murder is consistent with its general tendency to look for logical explanations of all human behavior. There is a deep and powerful need in modern society to minimize mysteries and to make sense of things. The Internet and other communication technologies have made society accustomed to receiving information and answers to its questions instantly, on demand. Society requires explanations for seemingly aberrant and incomprehensible behavior in order to establish a sense of control, predictability, and emotional security. Society demands logical explanations for extremely threatening and unfamiliar behavior such as serial murder in order to reduce its collective fear. Stated from the functionalist perspective of Durkheim, society must have intellectual and moral clarity in order to avoid the onset of anomie.

The functionalist concept of anomie offers important insights into the role and effect of serial killers in the modern world. Generally speaking, serial killers threaten the moral order and collective consciousness of society. More specifically, the emergence of a prolific serial killer such as BTK or the Son of Sam on the public stage creates a state of anomie. Society loses its equilibrium and becomes immersed in fear as its members strain to understand why a ruthless killer is preying on them. Under such conditions, the anxiety and norm confusion caused by the sudden appearance of a serial killer must be either eliminated or abated so that society can return to normal functioning and regain its equilibrium.

Serial Murder Is Utterly Meaningless

The meaningless nature of serial killers and their crimes contribute to social anxiety and norm confusion. Most serial killers target complete strangers as their victims and they do so simply for the perverse pleasure of murdering them. If strangers are the targets of serial killers and their murderers have no motives, then no one in society is safe. It is particularly frightening to think that the man living next door, who appears to be ordinary, could actually be a serial killer. Also, the uncanny ability of the serial killer to blend in suggests that the moral boundaries of society are actually permeable because those who behave immorally in one instance can also exhibit upstanding

moral behavior in another instance. Such an unpredictable and chaotic environment is highly conducive to the emergence of anomie.



Jodi Arias testifies at her trial in 2013. (photo credit: Associated Press)

Moreover, serial homicide stands in complete contradiction to modern society's demand for logic and reason. When it comes to criminal behavior, we are accustomed to knowing the motivations of the perpetrator, especially when the crime is murder. The criminal justice system gives great priority and attention to establishing the motives of alleged murderers. In the highly publicized murder trial of Jodi Arias in 2013, for example, the prosecutor presented massive amounts of evidence to prove that she was jealous and enraged by her ex-lover, Travis Alexander. It was his involvement with another woman which led her to kill Alexander in a particularly gruesome fashion. Travis Alexander was stabbed at least twenty-seven times in the chest and shot in the head. Due in large part to the prosecutor's successful demonstration of her motives, Arias was ultimately found guilty of the premeditated murder of Alexander. Much of the hype surrounding the Jodi Arias trial can be explained by the fact that her brutal slaying of Alexander

defies the gender norms of homicide explained in chapter 2. Unlike the one-time killer Jodi Arias, however, serial killers generally lack such clear-cut motives, so their murders are more confusing to the public.

Serial Killers Disrupt the Social Order

Serial homicide is also meaningless because it represents a complete breakdown in the stability and predictability of society. Consider, for example, the crime scenes of serial killers, which are often grotesque and seem to be completely lacking in logic or purpose. The crime scenes of serial killers horrify society because they represent random displays of unimaginable violence and carnage. In particular, the crime scenes of mentally unstable, disorganized serial killers such as Jack the Ripper often reflect animalistic savagery that shocks the senses of the beholder and defies explanation. According to professor of linguistics Alexandra Warwick:

The meaninglessness of the [serial murder] crime scene . . . represents a break in perceived order, where otherwise contained or repressed elements surface, casting doubt on the clear delineations of social and psychological structure, and collapsing the boundaries between the self and others, the public and private, and the interior and exterior existence. The serial killer emerges from the crime scene of most extreme unintelligibility: the murder of a person for no apparent reason.¹²⁶

I interpret Dr. Warwick's comments to mean that the crime scenes of serial killers can reveal more about the anxieties and fearful nature of a society immersed in anomie than they do about the criminals who produce them. This is an important conclusion. In a state of anomie, society is deeply fearful of unpredictable and incomprehensible phenomena. Moreover, a collective consciousness weakened by anomie cannot alleviate society of its terror. The crime scenes of serial killers are certainly unpredictable and incomprehensible, and—consistent with the concept of anomie—many people find serial killer crime scene photos too gruesome to even look at.

Large urban cities are especially susceptible to the effects of anomie brought on by the presence of serial killers. When serial homicide occurs in large, impersonal cities like New York, it randomizes murder and fosters a sense of loneliness, fear, and despair. Sociologist Jon Stratton says, "The idea of the motiveless serial murder suggests a new kind of city . . . The city of motiveless murder is, from the point of view of the individual inhabitant, an unknowable city, a city of no reason where individuals and events are no

longer linked by hidden connections which can be read by knowledgeable readers.”¹²⁷

No serial killer in the last fifty years is more representative or symbolic of anomie in modern urban society than David Berkowitz. The seemingly motiveless murders committed by the Son of Sam in 1976 and 1977 are unprecedented in terms of the panic they evoked. David's reign of terror precipitated the largest manhunt in the history of New York. Moreover, the state of panic that resulted from his killing spree was exacerbated by a cold and indifferent social environment that existed in New York City in the late twentieth century. The urban landscape of New York at that time was itself anomic or lacking in reason. Poverty and violent crime were both rising rapidly and the city was fraught with social tensions and disorder in the late 1970s. In such a sprawling and anonymous city, social bonds between people were broken and there was no longer a predictable atmosphere in which individuals could read or understand the situations they encountered. In other words, a lonely and anomic social landscape during the “Summer of Sam” provided an ideal context for the murders of David Berkowitz, which had significance for him but seemed to be meaningless and random in the eyes of the public.

In summary, anomie or a state of conflicting social norms emerges in a community when someone from within behaves in a way that threatens the collective sense of morality or collective consciousness. Serial killers' extreme violation of social norms makes them a serious threat to the social order. The actions of serial killers are completely irreconcilable with society's need of logical explanations for human behavior. The motiveless nature of the killings and the incredible brutality of the crime scenes make serial homicide appear to be completely meaningless. Moreover, the ability of serial killers to mask their identities and go unnoticed in public means that anyone could be a serial killer. The classic example of this is Ted Bundy, whose seeming normality is frightening because he did not appear to be a serial killer. He is terrifying because the average person would simply not recognize him for what he actually was, which means that any of us could easily have fallen victim to him. It is the incomprehensibility and seeming randomness of serial homicide that produce widespread terror and anomie in society.

The Social Construction of Evil Reduces Anomie

Society turns serial killers into high-profile folk devils in order to alleviate its collective fear and confusion. More specifically, society frames serial killers as evil or monsters in an effort to make sense of the incomprehensible nature of their crimes. The social construction of serial killers serves to minimize the anomie triggered by their presence on the public stage because it offers simple black-and-white explanations of their motivations and crimes. The process by which law enforcement authorities, politicians, and the news media construct the public identity of serial killers has already been thoroughly analyzed and explained in this book. Therefore, we turn our focus here to how the social construction of serial killers as celebrity monsters affects society.

Many people are drawn to dangerous things and people such as serial killers because they create a sense of invigorating psychological and physical arousal. For some people, however, the euphoria over serial killers is accompanied by a feeling of anxiety, shame, or guilt. During my research for this book I had people tell me that serial killers are a “guilty pleasure” for them. I believe that the source of the guilt is the same as the source of the excitement—that is, a lack of understanding of the motives and behavior of serial killers. To a certain extent, society’s anxiety and guilt are neutralized by the media because, as previously discussed, the news and entertainment media routinely present narrative frames that provide overly simplified explanations for the actions of serial killers. Popular narrative frames of serial killers include childhood neglect and abuse, brain trauma, or mental illness. Interestingly, and paradoxically, these stereotypical narrative frames provide meaning to the actions of serial killers and, therefore, reduce society’s collective confusion, anxiety, and guilt concerning them. In other words, the overly simplified narrative frames of serial killers in the media serve to neutralize the feelings of shame or guilt experienced by some people over their morbid fascination with them.

It is important to recognize that serial killer narratives allow society to engage in pleasurable fantasy entertainment. My research has revealed that the graphic serial killer images depicted in the popular culture offers a pleasurable mix of excitement, shock, and horror to enthusiastic fans. The key to such pleasure is that stylized serial killer images in the news and

entertainment media enable the public to delve into the world of the macabre and sinister without actually coming into contact with a serial killer or being exposed to real danger. That is, mass media images of serial killers allow us to experience the excitement of danger, and the adrenaline rush of fear, but in a safe and controlled setting. As explained in chapter 10, I believe that this is a large part of the popular appeal of serial killers.

We have seen that the single most common narrative framing of serial killers by law enforcement authorities and the news media involves the use of supernatural labels. Because the crimes of serial killers seem so unreal and cold-blooded, the perpetrators are typically framed by authorities and the news media as lacking human qualities or, more simply, as pure evil. Serial killers are often described as being dead or empty inside and as having “cold, dead eyes or a dead expression.” Fundamentally, the evil identity of the serial killer reflects society’s need to distinguish and distance itself from the incomprehensible actions of the perpetrator in order to feel safe. As such, the serial killer identity is not a natural human category. Rather, it is an unnatural one that is socially constructed with a specific purpose in mind—that is, to convince society that the serial killer is not one of us. That is why law enforcement authorities and the news media tell society that the serial killer is neither civilized nor human.

The Social Construction of Evil Has Negative Consequences

Labeling the serial killer as evil may help to create moral clarity for the public but it is very problematic because evil does not exist objectively in the world. Just like the concept of “good,” the concept of “evil” is a social construction and the labeling process is tautological. As explained in chapter 9, the social construction of evil involves circular reasoning. The social process goes something like this: How do we know that serial killers are evil? They are evil because they do evil things. Conversely, if serial killers do evil things, then they are evil. This circular reasoning maintains that the serial killer is not a product of the normal social fabric or moral code. According to law enforcement authorities and the news media, the serial killer has no morality. By stressing the evilness and monstrosity of the serial killer, the news media create a perception that he is not one of us. Instead, the media contend that he belongs to the realm of the inhuman “other.” On the

contrary, the serial killer is indeed one of us if evil does not exist objectively in the world as a separate entity, and I believe it does not.

By framing the serial killer as evil, society is able to make sense of the apparent meaninglessness of the crimes and crime scenes. This is done, however, at a cost to societal morality. Because the serial killer is viewed as an evil aberration or outsider, the members of society are relieved of their moral responsibility to comprehend his existence and motivations. If the serial killer is pure evil, then he need not be studied or understood—just eliminated—because there is no cure for evil and there is no way to predict or prevent evil behavior. Such conclusions by police authorities and the media reflect faulty, circular reasoning and they are simply not true. The motives and desires of serial killers are far more varied and complex than what is stereotypically portrayed in the news and entertainment media. The social construction of evil is dangerous because it supports biased and incorrect conclusions. In fact, the framing of any group as evil in society is dangerous because it can lead to a slippery slope. When the label of evil becomes a viable designation in society, who or what will be the next group to be deemed as such and targeted for elimination, rather than given thoughtful consideration and careful analysis?

The Serial Killer Identity Blurs Fact and Fiction

Another problem with the social construction of serial killers as evil is that it obscures the distinction between reality and fiction in the minds of the public. As demonstrated in chapter 10, the socially constructed identity of serial killers does not distinguish between real-life predators such as Ed Kemper or Jeffrey Dahmer and fictional killers such as Hannibal Lecter or John Doe in the movie *Se7en*. The blurring of reality and fiction by the media in this regard can be traced back to the 1950s case of Ed Gein, a multiple murderer and body snatcher known as “The Plainfield Ghoul.” Gein’s crimes, committed around his hometown in Wisconsin, generated widespread notoriety after authorities discovered that he had exhumed corpses from local graveyards and fashioned trophies and keepsakes from their bones and skin. Incredibly, Gein created masks from human faces and made clothing from human flesh that he wore. Following Gein’s capture, the news media sensationalized his crimes and transformed a mentally ill man into a cartoonish vampire and grave robber. Gein’s shocking case also

influenced the creation of several iconic Hollywood characters, including Norman Bates of the movie *Psycho*, “Leatherface” of the cult film *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and “Buffalo Bill” of the film *The Silence of the Lambs*. As a result of tremendous hype and exaggeration of his crimes by the news and entertainment media, Ed Gein remains a ghoulish monster in the contemporary popular culture.

The author E. L. Doctorow argued that “there is no longer any such thing as fiction or nonfiction, there is only narrative.” This statement is certainly true of the way the news media handled the infamous case of Jeffrey Dahmer. As mentioned in chapter 10, the news media seized upon the cannibalism theme of the Dahmer case in 1991 and created a connection with the fictional Hannibal Lecter from the highly popular film *The Silence of the Lambs*. By linking him to Hannibal Lecter, the news media turned Dahmer into a super villain with enduring consumer appeal. Author and academic scholar Joseph Gixti commented on the social construction of Jeffrey Dahmer’s public identity and its powerful impact on society when he said:

Jeffrey Dahmer’s elevation to the rank of ambiguous monster-hero in the iconology of contemporary culture . . . is not restricted to readers of popular “true crime” paperbacks . . . Accounts involving such figures are very frequent and prominent in the mass media—in news and . . . a range of popular entertainment. In a sense, such celebrations usher figures like Dahmer into a hall of fame where historical murderers acquire mythical proportions . . . like Jack the Ripper . . . There they rub shoulders with a long line of fictional figures created over the centuries in variously loaded attempts to come to cognitive terms with evil by visualizing and personifying its threats and horrors in reassuringly recognizable forms. Within the popular cultural domains that underlie the construction of this chamber of horrors, boundaries between fact and fiction often tend to become blurred.¹²⁸

The very important point being made by Gixti in the above statement is that Jeffrey Dahmer has become an entertainment commodity in modern society. There is more than ample evidence to support this conclusion. According to a former neighbor of Dahmer’s in Wisconsin, for example, there are people willing to pay \$50 each to sit on a couch that the serial killer gave her and are also willing to pay just to hold a glass that he once drank water from.

Such obsession can have very negative consequences for society. My research suggests that it does not matter to the average person whether a serial killer depicted in the mass media is a real-life predator or a fictional

one. They are equally frightening and entertaining for the public to behold because of the exaggerated serial killer identity that is well established in the popular culture. However, the blending of fact and fiction in the social construction of the serial killer has obscured the reality of serial homicide by turning actual criminals into cartoonish ghouls like Freddy Krueger or Michael Myers in the *Halloween* film series. Jeffrey Dahmer has become a source of popcorn entertainment in contemporary culture just like Hannibal Lecter, and the two are now interchangeable in the minds of the public.

The Serial Killer Identity Desensitizes the Public

Tragically, due to the blurring of fact and fiction in the mass media, the harsh reality of serial homicide is comprehended by individuals only if or when a loved one is unfortunate enough to fall victim to a psychopathic predator like Jeffrey Dahmer. The social construction of celebrity monsters desensitizes the public to the actual horrors endured by the victims of serial killers and their loved ones. As astutely noted by Andy Kahan, the victim rights advocate and opponent of murderabilia based in Houston, everyone knows the names of notorious serial killers such as Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy but no one remembers the names of their victims. By turning serial killers into celebrity folk devils, the news and entertainment media do a disservice to the victims' families who have been deeply harmed and should not be re-victimized for the selfish purposes of commercial entertainment and financial profit.

Ironically, while attempting to eliminate its fear over the incomprehensible nature of the serial killer, society inadvertently constructed a super villain that fuels that very same fear. As stated, the social construction of evil is an unending, circular process. Frequently, all the public knows about an unidentified serial killer is what he leaves at his crimes scenes. Therefore, the crime scenes become the basis for constructing the identity of the killer. The more gruesome the crime scenes are to behold, the more frightening the public identity of the unknown killer will be. Dr. Alexandra Warwick explains how the crime scenes of serial killers come to objectify the perpetrator when she says, "The scene of the crime is the scene of the continuing invention of the serial killer, who is the necessary figure that is imagined to stabilize such confusion, even when confusion is the very condition from which he is created."¹²⁹ Dr. Warwick correctly observes that

the serial killer is constructed in an effort to make sense of a seemingly meaningless crime and crime scene but, ironically, it is the meaninglessness of the crimes and the resulting sense of confusion and fear that inspires society to create the frightening serial killer identity. In its attempt to explain the actions of the serial killer and reduce its collective anxiety, society reifies the serial killer as a larger-than-life monster. The social construction of the serial killer as evil is a self-fulfilling prophecy of fear. Or to paraphrase W. I. Thomas, if you believe your worst nightmares will come true, then they will.

The Serial Killer Serves a Function in Society

In the final pages of this book, I present an argument that serial killers actually serve a purpose in society. I recognize that this statement seems incredible at face value but, according to the functionalist sociological tradition I refer to in this book, everyone in society has a role and a purpose. From a functionalist perspective, all types of behavior, whether good or bad, are to be expected. That includes serial murder. Emile Durkheim believed that crime and deviance are inevitable in any society and, in limited amounts, are actually functional and necessary. He claimed that some crime is necessary because it promotes clarification of the moral boundaries that define a society and establish its social order. According to Durkheim, the bonds that unite a society are strengthened when moral boundaries are clarified and reinforced. Esteemed sociologist Kai Erikson discussed the importance of protecting moral boundaries in society and explained how the process works when he wrote:

On the whole, members of a community inform one another about the placement of their boundaries by participating in the confrontations which occur when persons who venture out to the edges of the group are met by policing agents whose special business it is to guard the cultural integrity of the community . . . [T]he confrontations . . . act as boundary maintaining devices in the sense that they demonstrate to whatever audience is concerned where the line is drawn between behavior that belongs in the special universe of the group and behavior that does not. In general, this kind of information is not easily relayed by the straightforward use of language.¹³⁰

Typically, language is insufficient to frame the problematic behavior of those who are considered to be deviant, so society by way of its policing agents

constructs symbols and images to demonstrate the dangers allegedly posed by the “other” to the community.

From a functionalist perspective, the social construction of the serial killer identity is symbolic and it helps to clarify the moral boundary that separates good and evil in society. It defines the actions of the serial killer as inhuman and beyond reason. By accepting the framing of serial killers as evil, the public is given moral clarity. Such clarity can be both reassuring and comforting. By framing the serial killer as evil, the public has an explanation for the actions of the criminal and it also has a reason to feel better about itself. Why? The serial killer identity provides the public with a reference point for judging the acceptability of its own behavior. The actions of the serial killer clearly set the bar for acceptable behavior very low, so it is easy for the public to minimize its own moral failings by comparison. For example, a person might think, “I may not be a saint but at least I don’t kill or eat people!” In addition to providing moral clarity, the framing of serial killers as evil is functional because it provides the public with a point of reference and a way to put its own negative behavior in perspective. It suggests that despite all of our faults, compared to serial killers, the rest of us are not so bad.

Serial killers do horrible things to innocent people. Ted Bundy and Ed Kemper, for example, raped, tortured, and killed their victims, and then engaged in necrophilia and dismembered the corpses. I would argue that such actions do establish the outer limits of human depravity. Is there anything worse one person can do to another than what Bundy, Kemper, Ramirez, and their ilk do to their victims? As stated throughout this book, when the crimes of serial killers are reported by the news media, they are typically framed as the inhuman acts of vampires or monsters. The killers are almost always depicted as being pure evil in order to distinguish them from decent people. From a functionalist perspective, such media framing suggests that if you want to know what evil is and what evil does, then you need to look no further than Ted Bundy and other serial killers.

The Serial Killer Is One of Us

In the social construction of serial killers, law enforcement authorities and the news media compare the actions of the perpetrator to the average person

in society. Because the so-called “normal” person is the point of reference in the social construction process, the serial killer identity can be seen as a reflection of the public. The serial killer identity is like a mirror that permits society to consider how the perpetrator is both different from and similar to itself. The mirror reveals that the serial killer is different from the public in many ways, but it also reveals that the serial killer is very much like the public in certain ways. The serial killer identity contains many human characteristics that are valued such as drive, fortitude, persistence, and reliability. As a result, I believe that the serial killer identity blurs the boundary between good and evil. Moreover, it sends a subliminal message that the public may not be that different from the serial killer after all.

Society’s attempt to understand and explain what created the serial killer leads to the possibility that something within the human condition—that is, something from within the world we do understand—created the serial killer. As argued by Dr. Warwick:

Far from their actions being beyond explanation, serial killers are offered as actually being the key to the understanding of the whole of the human condition. What makes them? The answer, undeniably, is that they are we. We are they . . . [Ironically, by labeling the individual who has violated the norms], society collapses the boundary between the normal and the abnormal while simultaneously offering absolute assurance of that boundary’s real existence.¹³¹

If evil comes from within the human world and not outside it, then the boundary between normal and abnormal is far more ambiguous than suggested by the stark black-and-white images presented in the news and entertainment media. If evil is created from something within the human condition, then even so-called normal people in society—those considered good—are not entirely immune to its influence. If the serial killer was not born that way, then the distance between the killer and the normal person is much shorter than we thought. To the extent that evil emerges from within society, we are all closer to the serial killer than we might imagine and more capable of abnormality than we would like to think. From a functionalist perspective, therefore, the horrors perpetrated by the serial killer enable society to consider both the source and limitations of its own violent tendencies.

The Serial Killer Clarifies Moral Boundaries

I believe that the serial killer identity represents a collapse of the boundary between human and monster. As a social construction, the serial killer identity involves a merging or integration of man and monster. This serves an unexpected purpose. Most everyone in society has dangerous urges and thoughts lurking in their minds and the person who behaves like a monster helps the public to exorcise them vicariously. The late Gary Gilmore, who was executed for committing multiple murders, once said, “The mind needs monsters. Monsters embody all that is dangerous and horrible in the human imagination.” The late Richard Ramirez famously told a reporter that “we are all evil” when asked if he was evil. David Berkowitz told me that inside everyone lies the “desire to take out one’s anger and frustration upon someone else . . . Man can become violent in a moment’s time . . . Everyone has the potential to do terrible things.”

Arguably, society needs serial killers because they are like emotional lightning rods that protect people from their own violent tendencies. The socially constructed serial killer identity gives society an outlet to experience the darker side of the human condition that otherwise it cannot or will not consider. As explained in chapter 10, this factor is a key source of the public’s fascination with serial killers. The actions of the serial killer offer society a taste of madness and blood in a controlled environment and, most importantly, they provide a catharsis for the public’s primal urges. The serial killer allows society to act out its darkest fantasies without getting hurt. In a sense, the serial killer allows people to go safely insane. How does this serve society? It provides an escape valve for the public’s pent-up anger and frustration as people observe the carnage perpetrated by the serial killer and participate vicariously in his crimes. From a functionalist perspective, the moral boundaries of society are clarified and reinforced when the serial killer acts on his monstrous impulses while the rest of society sits back and observes the spectacle.

The Public Identifies With Monsters

Strangely enough, part of the appeal and functionality of serial killers has to do with empathy. I believe that people are driven by an innate and spontaneous tendency to empathize with everything around them. My research suggests that not only do people blur the line between real and fictional serial killers, they genuinely identify with both serial killers and

monsters in Hollywood depictions of them. The public secretly pulls for the misunderstood monster in the 1931 classic horror film *Frankenstein*, as well as the cunningly brilliant Hannibal Lecter in the more recent classic *The Silence of the Lambs*.

Psychologist Heath Matheson contends that empathizing with the monster or killer in a movie makes it more fun to watch and scarier, too.¹³² Empathy enables us to identify with the monster or killer. Once we grasp their needs and desires, we can then identify with their purpose, no matter how terrifying it may be. According to Dr. Matheson, a really effective movie monster or serial killer is one that we can identify with and believe is goal oriented, and able to achieve those goals.¹³³ A classic example is the fictional movie monster King Kong, the giant gorilla, who struggled valiantly to locate and protect his lost love after he was captured and taken to New York City. King Kong has become a frightening but lovable anti-hero in popular culture.

From a functionalist perspective, the ability to empathize with a monster or serial killer makes it more predictable and less scary. As discussed in chapter 10, the public needs to understand things that are baffling and scary in order to make them less frightening. I believe that people do this to make sense out of everything foreign they encounter and, thereby, reduce their fear. Simply stated, empathetic understanding reduces fear of the unknown. Therefore, the more one can relate to or humanize a monster or serial killer, the less scary it becomes.

Although empathizing with a monster helps us to identify with its purpose, it also exposes one of our most primal fears—that is, the fear that we could become monsters ourselves. Commenting on this point, psychologist Dr. Raymond Mar says, “I think that the scariest monsters are those in which we are able to see an aspect of humanity present. Evil is scary enough, but the idea that humanity, and perhaps ourselves, are capable of such evil is even more terrifying. Understanding our own capacity to be or become a monster creates true existential fear.”¹³⁴

Applying this logic to the social construction of the serial killer identity, a dual process of humanization and dehumanization seems to be in effect. That is, we try to humanize the serial killer in order to make him less scary but we also try to dehumanize and separate him from the rest of us in order

to create a moral boundary between good and evil. Thus, there are contradictory processes of humanization and dehumanization occurring simultaneously in the social construction of celebrity monsters. I believe that this results in further ambiguity regarding serial killers in the minds of many people.

The Public's Enduring Love Affair with Dr. Hannibal Lecter

The powerful visceral appeal of serial killers has led to a macabre love affair between them and the American public. Society's passion for serial killers is well documented by its insatiable appetite for Hollywood films on the subject, which number in the hundreds over the years. The box office returns reveal that Hollywood and the public love stories about serial killers. From the earliest known film on this subject, Alfred Hitchcock's *The Lodger* (1927), to *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011) and its sequels, serial killer films consistently make big profits, attract large audiences, and generate cult followings. The films typically present a gruesome story of serial homicide in the most graphic way possible and yet, ironically, the perpetrator is often portrayed as a sort of anti-hero. According to the findings of my research, movie audiences will generally root for the serial killer to succeed in his mission at some level.

No serial killer in history has projected the monster as anti-hero image more powerfully or vividly than Dr. Hannibal "The Cannibal" Lecter. Despite his fictional origins, Hannibal Lecter is perceived by many people to be the quintessential American serial killer. His stature in the popular culture was recently enhanced by the hit NBC television series *Hannibal*, which focuses on his early life and career. As a larger-than-life popular culture icon, Dr. Hannibal Lecter constitutes a mythical and almost supernatural embodiment of society's deepest and darkest fears. Society is riveted by the diabolical depiction of Lecter because he enables people to project their fears onto a clearly delineated super villain. He is made even more frightening by the fact that he is an accomplished medical doctor and psychiatrist—that is, a successful, well respected, and seemingly "normal" man. The broad appeal of Dr. Lecter to the public was expressed by criminologist Dr. J. C. Oleson who wrote:

Hannibal Lecter may be such an attractive character because he is something more than human (or something less): a vampire, a devil, or some infernal combination of the two. Springing from

the literary tradition of Milton's Satan, Goethe's Mephistopheles, and Stoker's Count Dracula, the character of Hannibal Lecter may be so successful because he plays upon the public's primal fascination with monsters.¹³⁵

Like many Hollywood monsters and boogey men, Dr. Hannibal Lecter is exciting and magnetic because he is completely goal oriented, devoid of conscience, and almost unstoppable.

Hannibal Lecter is uniquely different than any other Hollywood movie monster or killer, however. Unlike cartoonish characters such as Godzilla or Freddy Krueger, Dr. Lecter is human. He is also brilliant, witty, and even charming. Similar to the avenging angel serial killer Dexter Morgan, Lecter has a set of strict ethical principles that he lives and kills by, but unlike Dexter, his motives are not altruistic. My research suggests that Dr. Lecter's enduring popular appeal and the terror he invokes are due to the fact that he is depicted as a mortal man. In many ways, he is like the rest of us. He bleeds and he feels pain. His humanness makes him a much more relatable and identifiable villain to the public than other one-dimensional monster characters in films. At the same time, his similarity to the public also contributes to his ability to induce fear. Much like Ted Bundy in real life, Hannibal Lecter seems normal—terrifyingly normal. He represents our worst collective fear in the modern world—that is, the fear of the murderous everyman who lives next door. Paradoxically, because Dr. Lecter is depicted as a real person rather than a supernatural monster or boogey man, he elicits greater empathy and greater fear at the same time. He is simultaneously very frightening and fun to watch. That is why we love him.

Conclusion

In this final chapter, we have seen that the impact of the serial killer in society can be explained in terms of the functionalist concept of anomie. The serial killer creates an imbalance in the social order that must be eliminated. We have seen that the social construction of the serial killer as evil by law enforcement and the media reduces the anomie created by the killer's presence in society. The social construction of evil relieves the public of its moral responsibility to comprehend the motivations of the serial killer. Although this can be comforting, it is also dangerous because decisions based on good-versus-evil comparisons are rarely informed and are often

misguided. We have seen that the socially constructed serial killer identity serves a purpose by enabling the public to consider its own dark nature in relationship to it. The stereotypical image of the serial killer depicted in the news and entertainment media also helps to clarify the moral boundary that separates human and monster.

In summary, the public loves serial killers, and there are a number of very good reasons why that is so. First, they are rare in the business of murder with perhaps twenty-five or so operating at any given time in the US. They and their crimes are exotic and tantalizing to people, much like traffic accidents and natural disasters. Serial killers are so extreme in their brutality and so seemingly unnatural in their behavior that people are drawn to them out of intense curiosity. Second, they generally kill randomly, choosing victims based on personal attraction or random opportunities presented to them. This factor makes anyone a potential victim, even if the odds of ever encountering one are about the same as being attacked by a great white shark. Third, serial killers are prolific and insatiable, meaning that they kill many people over a period of years rather than killing one person in a single impulsive act, which is the typical pattern of murder in the US. Fourth, their behavior is seemingly inexplicable and without a coherent motive such as jealousy or rage. They are driven by inner demons that even they may not comprehend. Many people are morbidly drawn to the violence of serial killers because they cannot understand it and feel compelled to. Fifth, they have a visceral appeal for the public similar to monster movies because they provide a euphoric adrenaline rush. Consequently, their atrocity tales in the news and entertainment media are addictive. Finally, they provide a conduit for the public's most primal feelings such as fear, lust, and anger.

The serial killer represents a lurid, complex, and compelling presence on the social landscape. There appears to be an innate human tendency to identify or empathize with all things—whether good or bad—including serial killers. I believe that we try to humanize serial killers to make them less scary, but we also try to dehumanize them to create a moral boundary between good and evil. Arguably, the serial killer identity is a mirror reflection of society itself. As such, there is much that the rest of us can learn about ourselves from the serial killer if we look beyond the superficial monster image presented in the mass media. Like it or not, the serial killer is one of us. From a functionalist perspective, they offer a safe and secure

outlet for our darkest thoughts, feelings, and urges. They excite and tantalize us. They also remind us that despite all of our faults, the rest of us are just fine. Why do we love serial killers? We love them because, oddly enough, we need them.