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Damaged Goods? The Edginess of True Crime

"On the Saturday morning of January 9, 1993, while Jean-Claude Romand was killing his wife and children, I was with mine in a parent-teacher meeting at the school attended by Gabriel, our eldest son" (Carrère 7). Given in the opening sentence of Emmanuel Carrère's non-fictional novel *The Adversary*, this binocular perspective on the criminal act may have a sensational impact on an unsuspecting reader – Carrère is considered high-brow in France – but it is not sensationalist. The actions of the killer will turn out to be the eventual outcome of a fraudulent life, an existence built on sand which is chronicled in parallel to that of the narrator. It is a story far removed from accounts of serial killers stalking a petrified populace, yet as frightening, because it is domestic, sketching a life that unravels through everyday circumstance in a world that will be familiar to many readers. This emphasis on the proximity of horror, I shall argue, is an important feature of the consumer's response to the true crime story, to what I describe as the ontological disturbance stirred by the "truth" within the narrative.

True crime writers sometimes issue disclaimers alongside their publications, as if to reassure readers (and possibly themselves) that their work has a serious, moral purpose and is thus distinct from the world of "murderabilia", to borrow David Schmid's epithet for the burgeoning market in serial killer artefacts (Schmid1). However, what interests me about true crime is neither the public appetite for depravity, and moral questions attendant on the creation, production, and consumption of narratives of murder and torture, nor the neuroscience of psychopathy, sociological explanations for aberrant behaviour, or any other criminological approach, but rather the nature of the transaction between author and reader, producer and consumer.

Its capaciousness can be overwhelming. The true crime moniker is appended to numerous forms of literary expression, including the non-fiction novel, the popular memoir, journalistic reportage and the accounts of professionals who work in the field: forensic scientists, psychological profilers, police detectives, lawyers and the like. The one constant is the "truthiness" of true crime, a genre which, if it is still possible to call it a "genre", always to some extent constructs its own truths (Murley 13), while retaining connections to a world outside or beyond the text or story. My contention is that the visceral shock of true crime, which is quite real, lies not in the moral or emotional responses that may be solicited by its content but in the slippery ontological status of the material. With its promise of truth, revelations and insight, the genre repeatedly attracts consumers, even though the latter may then baulk at what they consume. The notion of "fictional truths" carries this ambiguity into the realm of aesthetics. As the true crime story unfolds, the question of interference may arise. Do these facts get in the way of the writing? To what extent does the writer's responsibility towards the truth inhibit creativity?

The 'Author's Foreword' to Emlyn Williams' *Beyond Belief* ((1967) – a true crime classic which capitalised on the public fascination in the UK with child-killers Ian Brady and Myra Hindley – addresses precisely this point. Williams details how his writing will adopt certain stylistic features, such as the abandonment of quotation marks signifying direct speech, in an attempt to render both 'the accuracy of history and the accuracy of imaginative understanding' (Williams, vii). Later commentators, struck by the amount of 'pure speculation and untestable hypothesis' (Cummins, Foley, King, 163) in the book, suggest that Williams sacrificed the former for the latter. This may be true, but the quality of Williams' writing undeniably lifts the events and characters from the printed page to the reader's imagination. This surfeit of literariness does not invalidate the truth of true crime, rather it sits uncomfortably beside it. As we shall see below, in my discussion of Capote's *In Cold*

Blood, the literary treatment of real crimes has released an aesthetic potential which transfers readily to other cultural outlets but does little to remediate the nervous disposition of the reader-consumer. True crime stories are constantly swirling around us. By dint of their saturation, of audio-visual media in particular, they have reached deep into the everyday, fomenting insecurities and spreading a blanket of existential darkness.

My hypothesis therefore is that true crime evinces a high concentration of cultural malaise, or edginess. Such presumptions invoking ontological disturbance (the stories are true and horrible), aesthetic degradation (telling true stories may diminish artistic input) and existential threat (the genre is ubiquitous) would seem to be good reasons for demurring from the study of it. Moreover, the categories themselves – the *ontological*, the *aesthetic* and the *existential* – are well worn. In the postmodern, deconstructionist epoch these paradigms or ways of thinking about culture are if not *dépassés*, then at best unstable. In this essay I will resort to more supple theories – Colbert's notion of "truthiness" in political rhetoric, Vermeulen's concept of "depthiness" in contemporary art, and Fisher's work on "eeriness" in everyday life – which elasticise these traditional categories in ways commensurate with the capaciousness of the true crime phenomenon.

Of these, Stephen Colbert's notion of "truthiness", developed in 2005 to characterise the perception-and feeling-is-all, facts-don't matter culture of politics that emerged in the USA during George W Bush's presidency, has gained most traction. Since then, psychologists, sociologists, philosophers and media specialists have been teasing out the implications and consequences of our living in a "post-truth" era.[1] Vermeulen's notion of a "new depthiness" in contemporary art builds on the concept of "depthlessness" articulated in Fredric Jameson's seminal work *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

[1] See for example Boler and Davis (2018), Lewandosky et al (2017) and Watts (2018).

Underpinning Vermeulen's theory is the idea of oceanic activity as a metaphor for the hermeneutic process. There are three figures: the deep-sea diver, the surfer, and the snorkeler. The deep-sea diver seeks meaning in the depths of the ocean. This is the person who "perseveres reading Proust or Joyce … a modernist" (Vermeulen 6), whereas the surfer looks for meaning on the surface, harnessing movement in the sequence of waves, as a postmodernist might do. Vermeulen hazards that the twenty-first century consumer of art resembles a third figure, that of the snorkeler, a person who remains on the surface but looks down as if to "intuit depth" (Vermeulen 8).

Vermeulen attaches his idea of "depthiness" to Colbert's "truthiness". Both foreground the process of interpreting, in one case the work of understanding the nature of public discourse, and in the other the meaning of the piece of art. However, whereas Colbert's "truthiness" stresses the internal, emotional state of both the interpreted and the interpreter, Vermeulen's "depthiness" is embodied in the snorkeler-interpreter, putting the onus back on his or her perspectival field. This contrastive juxtaposition begins to shed light on the edginess of our encounters with true crime stories, occasions when an acute sense of wanting to make some sense of the inexplicable is coupled with anxiety over the truths these stories may contain. True crime can in some cases induce a state of apprehension which goes beyond concerns over one's capacity to distinguish fact from fiction and into the realm of the paranormal. This is where Mark Fisher's ponderings on the significance of the "weird" and the "eerie" are apposite. Drawing on the fantastic and science fiction but also on film, television and post-punk music, Fisher links these commonplace impressions to Freud's notion of the Uncanny, or the *Unheimlich*, the feeling of not being at home while at home, which the Formalists termed "defamiliarisation". He defines the "weird" as constituted by "the presence of *that which doesn't belong*". The "eerie" pertains to a more complex psychological mechanism. It occurs either when "there is something present where there

should be nothing, or there is nothing present when there should be something". Tellingly, Fisher insists that we could encounter the eerie "in the raw", arguing that "the sensation of the eerie clings to certain kinds of physical spaces and landscapes" (Fisher 61). True crime occurs in strange places, or in places made strange.

Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* enjoys the unusual distinction of having founded not one but two literary traditions. Tom Wolfe saw it as the harbinger of New Journalism, whereby a novelist or poet deploys his or her skills in the service of investigative journalism (Nuttall 130). But it has also served as the touchstone for a more specific branch of literature, the first in a line of true crime publications in the USA the highlights of which include Vincent Bugliosi and Curt Gentry's *Helter Skelter* (1974), Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* (1979), Ann Rule's *The Stranger Beside Me* (1980), and Michelle McNamara's *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* (2018).

The book germinated in Capote's fascination with a press article detailing the murders on Saturday 14 November 1959 of four members of the Clutter family, at their farm near the village of Holcomb, Kansas. It resulted in him travelling to the area, where he scrutinised the investigation and, following the trial, repeatedly interviewed the two killers, Dick Hickock and Perry Smith, before finally witnessing their executions. The narrative alternates between two parallel storylines, the one chronicling the movements of the Clutter family members, their friends and acquaintances, in the days immediately prior to and after the discovery of the bodies, the other reporting the activities of Hickock and Smith over the same time frame, until, upon their arrest, there is a convergence. Throughout the novel a second psychodrama bubbles up through Capote's prose and this is one of displacement, as the author of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, the darling of sophisticated New York urbanity, finds himself in an alien world.

Years later Capote reflected upon his approach to writing his ground-breaking work:

> From a technical point, the greatest difficulty I'd had in writing *In Cold Blood* was leaving myself completely out of it. Ordinarily, the reporter has to use himself as a character, an eye-witness observer, in order to retain credibility. But I felt that it was essential to the seemingly detached tone of that book that the author should be absent (Cited in Nuttall, 135)

This is a curious statement, because the power and durability of the book lies in the style in which the events are documented. *In Cold Blood* showcases Capote's literary talents, whether he be parodying Raymond Chandler's fondness for imagistic character portraits – Mr Clutter's teeth are "unstained, strong enough to shatter walnuts" (Capote 3) - or reviving nineteenth-century literary tropes such as pathetic fallacy and free indirect discourse. These tropes signify the agency of the author, as an active journalist making incursions into unknown territories: the landscape of the Kansas plains; and the minds of the psychotic killers. At one point he occupies the mind of Andy Erhart, Herb Clutter's oldest friend, as he watches the burning of the blood-soaked items removed from the house: "But that life, and what he'd made of it – how could it happen? Erhart wondered as he watched the bonfire catch. How was it possible that such effort, such plain virtue, could overnight be reduced to this – smoke, thinning as it rose and was received by the big annihilating sky" (Capote 75).

At isolated moments in this non-fiction novel we are given awkward reminders that the events of the story are based on a roughly contemporaneous reality. A description of Mrs Clutter's night-time routine is prefaced with "Now, on this final day of her life…" (Capote 28), and in a similar vein the red velveteen dress that her daughter Nancy lays out for the following day is the one "in which she was to be buried" (Capote 54). But it is the "big annihilating sky" that opens and closes the investigation. The novel begins with the location of the village of Holcomb, "on the high wheat plains of western Kansas, a lonesome area that other Kansans call 'out there'" (Capote 1), and ends with a fictional encounter in a cemetery

between Chief Investigator Alvin Dewey and Susan Kidwell, an incidental character. Otherwise gratuitous, the purpose of this final scene would seem to be to allow Capote to sign off, with one last alliterative sweep across "the big sky, the whisper of wind voices in the wind-bent wheat" (Capote 336), before he returns to the modernity of Manhattan.

In Cold Blood – for many the foundation story of the true crime genre - is an exercise in literary aesthetics. It is also about a place made strange, visited by someone who is and remains out-of-place. In the next part of this essay, I shall consider a trio of non-fiction novels – David Peace's *1980* (2001), Haruki Murakami's *Underground: the Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche* (2013), and Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2104) – that further interrogate the aesthetic possibilities of the true crime story. With this selection I also take up Jean Murley's description of the phenomenon as a 'multifaceted, multigenre, aesthetic formulation' (Murley 2), especially the sense encrypted in her expression of a multiplicity, which in my analysis will translate to a plurality of voices. For these books consist of multiple tiers of narrative. Many different perspectives and voices, compacted like the layers of a millefeuille patisserie, create discordance. Making sense of it, finding the truth is not always possible. Curiously, this discordance is a singular feature of the most recent eruptions of the true crime phenomenon in our mass culture: the podcast sometimes augmented by the television drama documentary. The most influential of these to date – *Serial* (Season 1) and the ensuing television drama documentary, *The Case Against Adnan Syed,* HBO) – adopt an aesthetic that consists of the continuous aggregation of narrative voices, each of which, while offering clarity in some aspects, further obscures others.

This must be the place

By comparing true crime narratives from different literary traditions, I have cast the reader as a kind of dark tourist, discovering bad things in unfamiliar worlds, thereby underscoring the importance to these novels of place and time. However, the first of these, David Peace's *1980*, is very close to my home. This coincidence will serve to accentuate the psychological potency of true crime, demonstrating its capacity to introduce an eeriness into the habitual and the commonplace.

1980 is the third of four volumes published serially as the *Red Riding Quartet* (*1974*, *1977*, *1980*, *1983*), which illuminate the darkest corners of the social history of West Yorkshire and Lancashire in an era punctuated by the murders of women committed by Peter Sutcliffe, also known as "The Yorkshire Ripper". This is a baroque half-fiction, more fantastical and oneiric than *In Cold Blood*, yet Peace succeeds not only in recreating the grim, cultural everyday of urban England in the 1970s, but also in placing the machinations of the institutions – the police, the press, local government, mental hospitals and the criminal underworld - under a literary microscope. He does this by adopting a distinctive style of writing, which recalls the broken syntax of James Ellroy's "LA Quartet". Peace's prose has a rolling, incantatory quality, a rhythm broken by different forms of language; staccato dialogue, or the transcript of a radio DJ's patter. Repeated phrases land like blows, denting the mind, lodging the information deeper in the reader's consciousness, as in this juddering passage:

> It's 9.53, the number 13 coming up Headingley Lane. It doesn't stop. I cross back and turn right onto Alma Road. There's police tape and two cars waiting.
>
> I walk down the dim, tree-lined street, crossing to avoid the cordon, past the officers sitting in the police cars.

> At the end of the road is a school and I stop at the gates and stand and stare back down Alma Road -
>
> Alma Road -
>
> An ordinary street in an ordinary suburb where a man took a hammer and a knife to another man's daughter, to another man's sister, to another man's fiancée -
>
> An ordinary street in an ordinary suburb where a man took a hammer and a knife to Lauren Bell and shattered her skull and stabbed her fifty-seven times in her abdomen, in her womb, and once in her eye -
>
> And then, in this ordinary street in this ordinary suburb, he stopped -
>
> For now (Peace 33).

The first-person narrator is Peter Hunter, a semi-fictional, "clean" police officer, who has been brought over from Manchester to Leeds in order to head the "Ripper" investigation. Here he is visiting the scene of a crime that took place two days previously, where we find that blend of facts and fiction I have termed "truthiness". The name of the victim has been changed, the gruesome modus operandi of the killer is slightly inaccurate, and the number 13 bus has never been routed up Headingley Lane. But therein lies the clue, for this passage refers to the thirteenth murder committed by Sutcliffe, and the last of the series before he was arrested in January 1981.

The repetition of "Alma Road" would no doubt be innocuous and unremarkable to most readers, but for one whose children were raised within a mile of "this ordinary street in this ordinary suburb" it thuds into the consciousness. In the light of reading Peace, "Alma Road", like many other landmarks in the work, becomes a place of memory, the street sign on the corner of the main road bearing a dark trace, now redolent with an eeriness that can arise when the present is overlaid with a sinister past. Throughout the *Red Riding Quartet* Peace

mythologises a large slab of northern England, in a way which brings the past to the present. In my case it triggered a kind of psycho-geography, a process by which, via a detour through art or literature, familiar places can be invested with new meanings and associations. Not long after reading the novels, when, while driving through the city centre, I noticed the sign of a pub: The Griffin. Hitherto absent from my mental map of the city of Leeds, The Griffin now features on it. This pub, to which I had been oblivious, has now become, in my mind at least, what it was in the 1970s and 1980s, preserved in the pages of David Peace's saga as a rendez-vous for corrupt policemen, shady journalists and other sundry, semi-fictional characters.

Such minor adjustments to my mental landscape triggered by Peace's *Red Riding Quartet* are anachronistic. The crimes occurred long before I had ever been to Leeds but as I read Peace, the sense and referent of these names of streets and pubs coalesce and the time difference between then and now collapses. Then, in my teenage years, I remember seeing a map on the television news, shown before Sutcliffe had been apprehended, circumscribing the area in which his victims were found. Now, the writing of David Peace drives home the brutality of an age which, at the time, I had only vaguely sensed. *1980* is a novel stained with truthiness and characterised by a dark poetics exuding depthiness. But above all the meaning it injects into sites of my routine existence carries a charge, producing tremors of psychic disturbance that can occur as one moves around the city years after the book in which they originated has been shelved. My argument in this article is that true crime generates a particular psychological effect on the consumer, a feeling of mild discombobulation akin to Fisher's notion of eeriness, which arises through a combination of truthiness and depthiness. True crime can set the teeth on edge, and this was my experience of reading Peace's *Red Riding Quartet*, novels telling of crimes safely locked in the vaults of my cultural heritage

that reappear in my quotidian existence in the form of street signs and pubs, generating feelings of edginess which are momentary and don't last, but can never be entirely banished.

A different kind of cultural malaise is documented in Haruki Murakami's *Underground*, one which began with the astonishment of a writer in exile looking on at a tragedy in his homeland. The book was published in two parts in 1997 and 1998, with the English translation appearing in one integral version in 2002. It is predicated upon a major event in modern Japanese history, a co-ordinated 'terrorist' attack on commuters that took place on 20 March 1995. On that "beautiful clear spring morning" (Murakami 7), on five different lines of the Tokyo underground, two members of the Aum Shinrikyo, a sophisticated doomsday cult, boarded trains, punctured plastic bags containing liquid sarin with the sharpened tips of umbrellas, and disembarked. Months later, Murakami, who was living in the USA, read a letter in a magazine by a woman whose husband had been a victim of this attack. The letter recounts how the man recovered quickly from the unpleasant physical symptoms of the inhalation but found re-adapting to his work difficult. Bosses and colleagues began to lose patience and ostracised him to the extent that he felt he had no option but to resign. This letter, "barely audible, a grumble under the breath" (Murakami 3), galvanised the writer, just as the article from the *New York Times* had galvanised Capote some forty years previously. It was the trigger for the *Underground* project, a significant undertaking that involved the tracking down of as many victims as possible of the attack (some 700) and persuading a small percentage of these (60) to be interviewed for the book.

What materialised was a compendium of oral histories, the uninterrupted, individuated voices of the victims who give their recollections of the attack and speak of its after-effects and impact on their lives since. The victims make repeated references to the attitudes and behaviour of passers-by and fellow travellers on the day who seemed unwilling to come to their aid, and notably to a television crew who had to be persuaded to use their van as an

emergency ambulance. Just as the liquid sarin seeped out of the plastic bags, so an unpalatable perspective on Japanese society oozes from the victims' accounts. Without exception these accounts chronicle the physical symptoms of inhalation of the gas. What stands out is the contraction of the pupils, causing a dimming and darkening of the outside world, which becomes an irresistible metaphor for the limitations (as Murakami sees it) of a society in thrall to the gods of capitalism. People in corporate Japan – so many of the victims describe themselves as "salarymen" – lead lives so strictly programmed that on that day their fixed perception of existence meant that they failed to help others in distress.

For much of the book Murakami positions himself as curator of this atrocity exhibition. The editing of the victims' stories has been kept to a minimum, but their narratives are clearly contextualised, with each prefaced by a brief biography and account of how each attack was perpetrated and by whom. The material is organised in such a way as to optimise Murakami's critique of modern values in Japan. The first volume culminates with the story of one victim who died, a story which is told by his loved ones. Here the inference is that love and care derive from traditional kinship ties, and these are the bonds that compensate perhaps for broader social inadequacies.

The second, much shorter volume, entitled "The place that was promised", consists of interviews with existing and former members of the Aum cult, and a brief "afterword". Although he describes himself as "rank amateur" (Murakami 215) with regard to his understanding of religion and cults, Murakami challenges the assertions and inconsistencies of the cult members while at the same time eschewing moral judgements. The contributions of the cult members are by and large nondescript, especially by comparison with an essay by the author entitled "Blind nightmare: where are we Japanese going?" (Murakami 195-209) that concludes the first volume. Here Murakami finally brings himself to reflect on the event, and on the role of the perpetrators. He says that for months he had avoided thinking about

Aum, precisely because they dominated the Japanese media. This was an organisation that attracted highly educated people – scientists and academics – who were prepared to renounce everything connected with their previous lives, and yet it was demonised and dichotomised, reduced to the "evil other". Now, in this essay, Murakami alerts his reader to dangers that can occur when the personality of the individual is subjugated to the organisation, when a collectivist spirit overrides individual desire, when too much of the whole personality (actions, emotions and feelings) is funnelled into the betterment of the company. This, Murakami argues, was the reality of metropolitan, corporate Japan in Spring 1995, an image which was reflected in the dark mirror of the Aum cult. Shoko Asahara, the leader of the cult, simply offered an alternative, and for some more attractive, form of mind control (Murakami 201).

Murakami's victim-centred exploration of the explicit tyranny of the Aum cult and implicit tyranny inherent in corporate Japan compares interestingly with Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. They are both polyphonic narratives, offering a multiplicity of perspectives tilting at truths perceived to exist beyond the radar of textual expression. Given this presumption of a referential dimension - which is contingent on the very idea of a 'true crime' story - within a complex, multi-faceted textual universe, these types of ambitious literary projects could be said to be examples of "neo-modernist" writing.[2]

James situates his own work in the lineage of William Faulkner, Salman Rushdie and Ben Okri. *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, set against the backdrop of Jamaica in the 1970s and Miami and New York in the 1980s, is a literary kaleidoscope. Much of the action in the first part of this epic novel revolves around the failed attempt to assassinate reggae superstar

[2] The term "neomodernist" is used to describe functional, contemporary architectural design and a school of philosophical thought that attacks postmodernism from a modernist standpoint. I have adapted it here to describe this specific excrescence of a modernist aesthetic in contemporary literature.

Bob Marley, on 3 December 1976 in his Kingston home. However, events are conveyed through the words of fifteen focalised narrators, themselves part of an ensemble of seventy-five characters whose names are listed at the front of the book, like the cast of a play. Their voices are heard, fall silent, and speak again. There is no perceptible conductor orchestrating these verbal fire bursts. Narrative perspectives overlap and intersect, and much of the prose reproduces the lexical features and syntax of Jamaican patois. The reader is obliged to assume the role of plot-finder, burrowing into the text to retrieve threads of a narrative.

In a brief "Acknowledgements" section at the end of the novel, the author explains the aesthetic choices that led him to construct a novel "driven only by voice". But there are also political reasons for such a gargantuan simulation of direct, unmediated expression. The very idea of an overarching, synthesising narrator would summon too readily the ghost of an imperial past, of Christopher Columbus indeed, who once came and slaughtered the Taíno, the indigenous peoples of Jamaica and other Caribbean islands, in the name of "the civilised world". James angles instead for what philosopher Brian Massumi defines as "the autonomy of affect", an aestheticised, immanent narration, an "expression-event" (Massumi 87) which delivers the "electricity of a poet" (Boler and Davis 80). Nowhere is this more apparent than with the ritualised killing of the child gangster Bam-Bam, who is buried alive. James's technical brilliance in describing the event from the point of view of the victim living the last seconds of his life, as the earth chokes his words and thoughts, yields an especially harrowing passage of literature (James 266-268).

For all its polyphonic cacophony there is a unified presence in the text. At various junctures an elusive narrator comes out of hiding to ensure that the political and social contexts of events are not lost on the reader. Early in the novel the voice of Bam-Bam is infused with this other narrative voice, as he observes the conditions of his childhood in the ghetto:

> In the Eight Lanes and in Copenhagen City all you can do is watch. Sweet-talking voice on the radio say that crime and violence are taking over the country and if change ever going to come then we will have to wait and see, but all we can do down here in the Eight Lanes is see and wait. And I see shit water run free down the street and I wait. And I see my mother take two men for twenty dollars each and one more who pay twenty-five to stay in instead of pull out and I wait. And I watch my father get so sick and tired of her that he beat her like a dog. And I see the zinc on the roof rust itself brown, and then the rain batter hole into it like foreign cheese, and I see seven people in one room and one pregnant and people fucking anyway because people so poor that they can't afford shame and I wait (James 8)

The people do not wait and see, they see and wait, aware that their suffering is not necessarily, should not be, a condition of their existence. And in this extraordinary permutation of the true crime genre the reader too sees the wretched destitution, the political corruption, the misogyny and the misanthropy, and the cocaine-fuelled violence again and again, as she.he.they waits for the destinies of the various characters to play out.

In their respective works Murakami and James paint portraits of crime and violence in defined places over specific historical durations. However, whereas Murakami shows himself as the visible composer of his vision of Japan, James is much less visible as painter of crime and the politics of crime in Jamaica during the 1970s. Rather his characters appear to speak and act without restraint, as if they are not subject to external controls. The illusion of their reality is very strong. Thus, although the formal complexities of *A Brief History of Seven Killings* mean that, to return momentarily to Vermeulen's "depthiness", the reader has no option but to embark on some "deep-sea diving", there is also some "truthiness" in it. Bob Marley is always referred to as "The Singer", but never called by his own name – he is a

transcendent being on a pedestal above and beyond the horizons of the other characters in the novel - and the names of the ghettos - the Eight Lanes and Copenhagen City - are invented.

In these complex, divergent, "neo-modernist" works of literature, the "truthiness" of the true crime story is primarily connected with the evocation of place and with the meaningfulness of these places to authors and readers. With Capote and Peace the emphasis is on the individual, with Murakami and James it is associated with the collective and rooted in trauma. In *Underground*, the chorus of the victims' voices informs the author's diagnosis of an apparently free society throttled by conformism, whereas the polyphonic texture of *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is sufficient unto itself, a form of unmediated, immanent expression which demonstrates that the medium can indeed be the message. James's literary project is the most radical and experimental, Peace's closer to the crime fiction genre, Murakami's the least novelistic, but in their different ways these authors all draw on the lesson of *In Cold Blood*, that real-crime events can be a spur rather than a hindrance to the literary imagination. However, aesthetic value, often gauged in literary criticism by the index of difficulty awarded to the work in question, is simply one factor among many. An important feature of true crime is its propensity for shifting its cultural shape; it is multimodal, and over the past decade it has captivated the makers of podcasts and television dramas. In these modes attention also shifts, from the horde of narrators in books like *Underground* and *A Brief History of Seven Killings* to the role played by mass audiences of listeners and viewers.

Sound and vision

Nicholas Quah's assertion that true crime represents the "bloody, beating heart of podcasting" (Quah, 1) may border on overstatement, but the mushrooming of true crime

podcasts transmitted via mainstream and underground channels is a phenomenon of the contemporary era. It is a story that began in the autumn of 2014 with the transmission in the USA of Season 1 of *Serial* (October-December 2014).

The *Serial* podcast was a new departure in investigative journalism predicated on the possibility of a miscarriage of justice. The case relates to the murder in January 1999 of 18-year-old high school student Hae Min Lee, whose body was discovered three weeks later in a shallow grave in Leakin Park, a wooded area which separates Baltimore City from Baltimore County. Her ex-boyfriend and fellow classmate Adnan Syed was convicted of having strangled her in a parking lot, primarily on the basis of testimony from another classmate, Jay Wilds, who claimed that he helped Syed bury Hae Min's body in the park. On 6 June 2000 Syed was sentenced to life imprisonment for Hae Min's murder. Sarah Koenig, a journalist who reported on the case for *The Baltimore Sun*, created and produced the podcast, which is made up of twelve weekly episodes.

The transmission of *Serial* was an important moment in the history of popular culture, owing to its wildfire impact. By week six its audience had reached 5 million; 18 months later it had reached 170 million, with hundreds of thousands of so-called “armchair detectives” dialoguing on Reddit and other social media platforms. Like the reader of “neo-modernist” true crime stories – and *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is pertinent in this respect - the listener to *Seria*l hears (and is required to process information from) many different voices. This type of digital storytelling can make formidable demands on the listener. Using Lisa Zunshine's “Theory of Mind” model, according to which we are inclined (especially when reading literary fiction) to project from another's physical behaviour or speech an entire conscious state, David Letzler argues that the listener to *Serial* is asked to perform “intricate mind-reading processes”. Letzler estimates that in the Koenig-Syed dialogs alone “the listener must navigate eight levels of hypothesised mental states” (McCracken 47). However,

Letzler's listener is not in any way an avatar for the 170 million who have interacted with *Serial*. According to Marshall McLuhan's classic terminology, *Serial* is a "hot medium" (McLuhan 22-32): it activates one sense intensely. We are culturally attuned to the understanding that oral discourse is performative. Its communicative potential is annexed to the moment of enunciation, and it is thus inimical to textual revisitations, to the checking and backtracking by which we make sense of written text, especially poetry and literature. So, assailed though still enraptured by such polyphonic intensity, many listeners will not live up to Letzler's degree of engagement; rather they are more likely to parse the information they are trying to process, to make judgements based on what Zizi Papacharissi describes as "affective attunements" (Papacharissi 4), guided by what they share with the participants. Empathies engendered by ethnicity, gender, social class, age, intonation and accent may intervene in this vast exercise in democratic justice.

It is part of the brilliance of *Serial* that it displays such "truthiness", unadorned by moralizing commentary, rather than shutting it down, by for example including interviews with witnesses confounded by evidence that contradicts their original statements. So, Kristi Vinson, confronted with irrefutable evidence placing her in class in the late afternoon of 13 January 1999 rather than at home watching *Judge Judy* on television, exclaims, "That concerns me because I believe that Adnan did it". *Serial* acknowledges the reality of the "post truth" society, but resists it in an interesting way, by focusing attention on the aftermath of the event. *Serial*'s concern with the aftermath, which of course is also a concern with the prelude to the event, reveals two important aspects to the analysis of true crime stories. Firstly, it counters an abiding myth of the crime narrative, the illusion that it brings closure. And secondly it brings to the fore the distinction between the application of the law, and the ethics of justice.

The latest iteration of the story is a so-called “documentary film” entitled *The Case against Adnan Syed*, which was broadcast in March 2019 on the HBO television channel. The film, which was shown in four hour-long episodes, reproduces much of the information given in the podcast, including the sounds of the voices, but it also supersedes it. For example, the documentary filmmakers hired two private detectives, who feature intermittently on screen, to dig out new evidence and pursue neglected leads. Moreover, although the television film is a “cold” rather than “hot” medium, giving the spectator now armed with two senses (optical and auditory) more confidence in her.his.their ability to synthesise the information which is communicated, it continues to demand the interaction of its audience, to the extent that, given the frequent scenes shot inside and outside of courthouses, the spectator is encouraged to play the role of juror rather than amateur detective.

Lacking the subtle “depthiness” of the podcast, the film deploys an arsenal of visual affects designed to manipulate the spectator. One of the more egregious is the apparent intent in Episode 1 to dignify the original victim, by depicting a fairy-like, anime version of Hae Min Lee with a simulated voice, reading extracts from her diary. Otherwise, the low horizons, drone shots over Leakin Park, and split screens belong to the long-form crime drama, whereas the talking heads, still photographs, interview and courtroom footage are culled from the aesthetics of the classic documentary. Aesthetic choices thus appear to compound the “truthiness” surrounding the case. Nowhere is this more evident, or more problematic, than in its blatant racialisation. The film frequently takes the spectator into the home and lives of members of Syed's family, who are Muslims, since this is the location of the narrative drive to reopen the case. Later we learn that the entire Korean community of Baltimore is apparently of one voice, believing that Adnan murdered Hae, and on each occasion that the case went back to court, they protested on the streets of Baltimore. The filmmakers did not take the trouble to seek out a dissenting member of either religious or ethnic group.

Moreover, two of the three alternative suspects are young black American itinerants. So not only does the visual architecture of the film toy with the spectator's implicit biases, but entire communities are presented with homogenous belief systems to which they cling irrespective of whatever evidence may be supplied. And yet the fascinating aspect to *Serial* is that this dangerous saturation of "truthiness" also contains antidotes to its potential harms, and this is primarily a function of the extraordinary reach, firstly of the podcast then the documentary film.

In an early essay French philosopher Gilles Deleuze celebrates the advent of the *Série Noire* publishing house in France, founded in 1945 to bring the American hard-boiled crime fiction classics to a French readership. This was the moment when "the metaphysical reflection of the old, detective novel" gave way to "a mirroring of the other" (Deleuze 83), honest portraits of real criminals and their behaviours. Deleuze welcomes this entertaining dose of realism, but the more intriguing point of the essay is his unequivocal assertion that the detective or mystery novel of the Golden Age period is animated by the "idea of truth". He describes the classic detective novel as "totally philosophical…the product of the effort and operations of the mind" (Deleuze 81). The parallels with the impact of the true crime podcast are startling, for what the podcasts can do is restore and reinvigorate this tradition or model of the inquisitive mind in search of truths. With *Serial* the metaphysical engagement is laborious and protracted, and the ludic dimensions of the traditional murder mystery no longer pertain given that we hear and see the suffering of real people confronted by injustice, but here, as with other true crime stories, it is the quest for truth which drives the narrative.

Serial is not entirely unprecedented. Around the turn of the millennium *Peter R. de Vries – Crime Reporter*, a Dutch real crime programme in which a reporter backed by a television crew conducted investigations of notorious crimes and often adopted a critical stance towards the authorities, actively solicited contributions from local populations and

television viewers interested in the cases.[3] The substance of the programmes consisted mainly of elaborate reconstructions of the crime and interviews with bereaved relatives, and they attracted some bad publicity, being regarded as "a dangerous form of entertainment" (Reijnders, p.636). In a different media landscape *Serial* came to unlock the potential of such mass participation, by giving a platform to those able and willing to hold the "truthiness" of the American judicial system to new standards of evidence-based reason. In *The Case Against Adnan Syed*, the artifice of this "truthiness" is exposed through the intervention of Susan Simpson, herself a qualified attorney though here a neutral, dispassionate, deleuzian seeker of truth. Simpson, who appears in *Serial* and also features prominently in the documentary film, deconstructs the prosecution case, arguing that the corrupt Baltimore police coached Adnan's alleged accomplice Jay Wilds to give the (false) testimony that helped convict him. In 1999 Jay was interviewed twice by the police. However, the authentic, grainy footage of the first interview bears almost no relation to the second, which is shown after Susan Simpson's lengthy intervention. The latter is a pantomime reconstruction with the faces of the actors always out of shot, depicting Jay repeatedly fluffing the lines that the police have given him to repeat in court.

Shows like *Making a Murderer*, *The Teacher's Pet* and *Serial* have focused on historical cases and helped to re-instigate judicial proceedings, yet the ultimate goal, whereby a wrongly convicted person is freed from jail largely on account of the evidence presented in a true crime production, remains to date elusive. On the other hand, the cultural imprint of these productions is significant. *Serial* has created an after-life of the crime and its investigation, which shows no sign of ending soon, reminding us of the cardinal difference between these participatory investigations and the detective stories of a bygone era: the

[3] It is also true that prior to the boom in true crime podcasts, online bloggers also wrote about unsolved crimes. See Murley, 136.

absence of closure. In this, true crime productions, such as the recently broadcast *Mindhunter* about the beginnings of research into the minds of psychopaths, share a feature common to much contemporary popular culture, evident in the sequels and prequels of film franchises like *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter*, which is that they stretch time. The pace is generally slow, the episodes numerous, and the series multiply as the producers wring as much as possible from a popular story. The effect is to compound what some scholars have pinpointed as the sensation of "being contemporary", an existential condition in which we risk being trapped in what Emily Apter refers to as the "Now-Time", where future horizons are low and the past hazy. It designates a period of waiting for endings and beginnings, which seem far from imminent and may never come.

Conclusion: Riders on the Storm

Mark Seltzer argues that true crime has flourished as a cultural inflection of the human being's fascination with the spectacle of violence and horror; the impulse that drew the masses towards the guillotine during the Terror of the French Revolution would also explain the continued appeal of bullfighting and boxing. Media saturation of crime stories suggests we are living in what Seltzer terms a "wound culture". However, at the level of the individual, attraction is balanced, sometimes overwhelmed, by repulsion. Perhaps the relation between these two impulses is sequential. The first, the desire to see, is aesthetic, whereas the second, when we recoil disgusted at what we see, triggers the ethical. The great Algerian writer Albert Camus never knew his father, who was killed in the First World War. All he could recall was his mother's account of a man's distress on returning home having attended a public execution. However, the family story stayed with Camus who, for much of his life,

campaigned against the death penalty.[4] Thus the individual witness statements in *Underground* testify not to the reality of a "wound culture", to the spectacle of others' pain and distress, but to the dehumanisation of the citizen in hock to the corporation and the cult. And in the *Red Riding Trilogy*, David Peace reveals the scars of wounds inflicted on a community decades ago that, through the quality of his writing, are re-infected in the present.

Fundamentally, true crime exists because there is something more to say. Had Truman Capote decided not to go to Holcomb, the stories of Hickock and Perry would still have been recorded, but without his prolonged visit the poetic truths emanating from his interactions with the people and the places would be lost. In her wide-ranging, rigorous survey of the genre, Jean Murley shows how true stories disseminated in diverse cultural forms contain a wealth of aesthetic possibilities. In *A Brief History of Seven Killings* the truth is one event - the failed assassination of Bob Marley - at the centre of a vast canvas in which the chaos of Jamaican society in the mid-to-late seventies is reanimated through the multiple perspectives of the extensive cast of characters. The truthiness here is minimal, but important. It is in the eye of the hurricane, the still point in history around which the lives of the other characters whirl destructively. It acts as a brake, preventing the snorkeler from going too deep, giving the reader a chance to reconcile the narrative discordance on the surface with the coherence of the artistic vision underlying it.

Over the past decade true crime books have been superseded by podcasts and televisual drama documentaries. Like a virus, true crime has mutated. The podcasts also tend to fasten themselves to historical cases, but the investigations they undertake are live, interactive and, through the polyphony of a production like *Serial*, engulfed in "truthiness". These artefacts express a condition of existence, what the German philosopher Martin

[4] Camus refers to this memory in *The Stranger* (1942), *Reflections on the Guillotine* (1947), and in his last novel *The First Man* (1994), which was published posthumously.

Heidegger characterised as “thrownness”, a turbulent, raw state of being into which human beings are “thrown” (Heidegger, 179, 284, 348). The lyrics of ‘Riders on the Storm’, the famous song by The Doors, juxtaposes a reference to Heidegger’s concept (“Into this world we’re thrown”) with another to spree killer Billy Cook, the “killer on the road”. We are not so much the self-regarding consumers of Seltzer’s “wound culture”, but riders on the storm, in the “Now-Time” of the contemporary, buffeted by uncertainties. We may be able to rationalise the random violence of the true crime story, but not the culture which supports it. True crime encapsulates the anxieties, confusion and apprehension consequent on not knowing where the truth lies: in short, the edginess of life in a post-truth era.

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