Dark Authenticities: Criminal Memorabilia and Consumer Culture

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PhD

University of York
Sociology
May 2017

Abstract

This thesis investigates crime memorabilia, or 'true crime objects', and proposes the concept of 'authenticity' as a way of understanding the perceived value and imagined criminality inside of objects, artefacts, exhibitions and consumables associated with famous violent crimes. Murderabilia has enjoyed a sustained rise in interest in both news media and popular culture, but academic research has been limited. It addresses a central contradiction in the paucity of literature that has touched upon murderabilia – to what extent is murderabilia an extension of existing violent transgressive narratives in popular culture; or a will to transgress these mainstream discourses themselves; or a combination thereof? To that end, this thesis seeks to understand where the consumption of criminal transgression sits as part of the broader system of objects, and the broader popular cultural genre of true crime as well. Through a digital and traditional ethnography conducted over ten months (September 2014 – July 2015), covering museum exhibitions of murderabilia, personal murderabilia collections, and manufactured murder merchandise, murderabilia is revealed as a complicated negotiation of some of the contradicting demands of art, culture, antique – and consumerism. It is argued that the consumption of murder objects is reflective of a broader societal will to transgress banality and sameness in 21st century Western consumer capitalist marketplaces, and not as an embracement or glorification of criminal transgression itself. Consumers are positioned in pursuit of experiences of perceived authenticity, despite embracing dominant popular cultural narratives of crime in the process.

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Acknowledgements

This project was supported by ESRC award number 1219725, and an ESRC overseas fieldwork grant.

I would particularly like to acknowledge the role of Ruth Penfold-Mounce who has supported my academic career since the very beginning. Her support has helped my BA, MA and PhD, my ESRC funding, my first publication and my first lectureship, for all of which I am indebted. My second supervisor, David Beer, has been just as supportive and influential.

This project was assisted by many additional supporters and collaborators who cannot all be named. The department of Sociology has provided a lot of support and encouragement. My friends and fellow PhD candidates Will Paterson, David Honeywell and Teddy Holmes have kept me on track with my studies, and friends Kane Needham, Will Steele and Mike Bourlet have helped distract me. My 'informal supervisor', Matt Spokes, also fed me with encouragement.

Above all, I would like to acknowledge my family. Particularly; Jacky Cavalla; Joe Denham; Lesley Denham; and Frances Denham, for their support.

Author's declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

1- Introduction

Toward the end of the second year of this project, just as data collection was coming to a close but before the majority of writing up, I chose to read some journal articles in the York City Library instead of working in my office as usual. I bought a coffee, hunted for a seat before settling into an armchair at the end of a long line. I looked up after an hour to see Josef Fritzl staring back at me, amongst other noteworthy criminals. Accidentally, or perhaps instinctively, I had placed myself at a forty-five degree angle to the 'True Crime' section. Five shelves high and roughly a dozen feet long, this bookcase demonstrates the popularity and cultural ubiquity of true crime in popular culture. It is also centre stage in the library, demarcating the edge of the wider book collection against the edge of the café, with the children's book section nestled behind glass off to the side.

Behind the Door: the Oscar Pistorius and Reeva Steenkamp story (Wiener, 2014), one of the books turned adjacent to the shelf by the librarian to attract interest, looks in every way like a film poster. This mixing of true crime with cinematic reference cues is a common quality of crime in popular culture which I will go on to discuss in chapter 4, *Displaying Transgression*. The disgraced Olympian's face peers out from a half-blank cover mimicking the door imagery aroused by the title and the door through which he shot Steenkamp. The imageless side, mustard yellow in colour, backs a tower of text in classic tall-and-thin movie poster font. The words *the*, *and* and *story* punctuate the sentence in miniature while the names of the leading lady and male protagonist are billed using the largest text in-between. **This famous font** – that gets disproportionately taller as it is upsized but not wider – serves the purpose of allowing certain names, titles or companies to be staggered in importance by a ratio of each other without quickly running out of space on film advertisement. Without the complex hierarchy of commercial acknowledgements commonplace on movie posters, this elongated font serves no purpose but to conjure associations with filmic counterparts. *The Complete Jack the Ripper A to Z* is also visible, spine outward, three books to its left. A double cliché of a worn out, coffee-stained dirty-beige background to simulate an affiliation with the 1880s, alongside blood-splatter that evokes memories of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation,* aims to enhance this book's perception as authentic. Despite residing in

the *True Crime* section, one expects fantasy and myth due to their reliance on fictional imagery and cinematics, something that will form a primary line of criticism throughout the following three empirical sections.

As I am sat here judging a book by its cover, I am struck by a sense that this shelf can sum up the argument of this thesis concisely whilst it is *not* about true crime books. On the one hand, the location of this section shows that showing an interest in violence is often part of the mainstream. The true crime section is positioned as a barrier of transgression between two very regular spaces, showing an interest in the macabre is in fact extremely usual. These books, despite detailing gruesome histories, are occupying the liminal space along the edge of the seating – prime territory that courts the eye of a high traffic area. Deviance is a 'high traffic' subject, and therefore, culturally, not deviant at all. Reportedly, true crime and mystery books make up $728m of the U.S.A.'s book sales in 2013, being ranked as the second most popular genre behind erotica (Stewart, 2014). On the other hand, the use of filmic cues shows how the genre of true crime, to briefly borrow a psychological term, is playing upon a 'collective unconscious' understanding of what violent crime really is. One, that I will argue, is cultivated through mainstream American film and that biases a 'narrativized' or 'storified' representation of violence. In some ways, the Pistorius-Steenkamp trial is already a film having racked up countless hours of media attention during its longevity as a newsworthy story. *Jack the Ripper* in a literal sense even more so, having been developed mythically over the course of a century and communicated repeatedly through the medium of cinema. In the library, presented semantically as 'truth', their existence is as fable rather than fact and the lines between the two are blurry at best.

This culturally informed criminal 'imagination', and the way in which our collective understanding of crime is affected by cultural consumption, is the section of cultural criminology to which this thesis speaks. Research has considered the way in which crime is imagined and consumed (O'Neill & Seal, 2012), or the ways in which fictitious death and violence are interwoven with the real (Foltyn, 2008), vicariously informing public perceptions of death and the dead. To this end, this work contributes a criminological and sociological examination of murder memorabilia, or 'true crime objects' (henceforth referred to by its colloquial name: murderabilia), and the consumption practices associated with consuming crime through objects – a niche

subculture of crime consumption. These objects include any collectables that have an association to a famous crime – as obscure and tangential as the recent (November 2016) sale of Eva Braun's underwear (Express, 2016). They will be expanded in chapter 5, *Auratic Transgression*, in terms of what cultural value and social function is associated with the fetishisation of crime artefacts.

The scope of this thesis is not only to investigate the theory of culturally informed 'transgressive imaginations' (O'Neill & Seal, 2012) through objects, but also as an exploration of the assertion that these 'cultural representations of crime and deviance offer a vicarious means for experiencing [rebellion and resistance]' (p. 7). Rather, I argue that the degree to which consuming criminal transgression is embedded within popular culture prohibits it from being a transgressive experience, despite the intention and perception of most consumers. How can something that is branded, shared and purchased widely in the culture industry be truly transgressive? This is the counter-narrative to the argument that the cultural consumption of crime can in itself be a transgressive act, arguing instead that it is a proxy or a simulation. It is often intended as an act of rebellion against banality or sameness in popular culture, but it is so deeply ingrained inside popular reference points in film and television as to be an endorsement and not a rejection. Young (2008) suggests that we need to consider the 'implications of the cultural fascination with crime' (p. 19) – this thesis should be read in part as a response. Sociology has long thought that cultural representations can influence the lives and attitudes of the public, so these symbols warrant further investigation. This is particularly important in the case of crime as cultural representations are, for many in the global West, the only way that they will ever experience sensational and dramatic or tragic acts of violence and death.

Aims

The motivation for this project came out of an interest in the study of 'criminal celebrity' from my time as an undergraduate student. This developed into an ESRC 1+3 proposal, written in my final year of study, that originally intended to elucidate upon criminal fandom as a route to anti-capitalist rebellion. This would be achieved by analysing various different media forms, in particular, a host of 'murder' and 'serial killer' magazines that I had accrued.

The focus shifted to objects, instead, when it became apparent that the sociology of material consumption had fresh (for criminology) debates to contribute to the studies of the representation of and consumption of crime. This long project trajectory – from celebrity, to branding, is reflected in the section *Inductive Research Process* inside of the *Methodology* section as a lengthy period of 'immersion' into the murderabilia subculture that needs to be acknowledged for any ethnography.

To this end, this thesis addresses an apparent contradiction. Why is the search for truth (true crime, crime documentaries) and authentic, raw experiences (transgression, criminality), so frequently supplied by the culture industry through a kind of 'filmic', fictitious lens? How do these notions of fiction and truth get woven together in criminal cultural objects? How do patrons navigate the concepts of 'true' and what is the value sought in 'real', 'authentic' experiences? This contradiction is most conspicuous in the emerging phenomena of murder-memorabilia, as well as the way in which crime is consumed physically through objects. For this author, murderabilia sits between two tracts – the cultural consumption of crime, and the consumption and collection of authentic or antique objects.

In terms of the cultural consumption of crime, we engage through a wide range of outlets – through our developing fascination with film violence (Aaron, 2015), to the evidence that crime fiction – one of the oldest genres – is still growing in popularity (Knight, 2010). More recently, sociologists of criminal-celebrity have considered the pervasive and far reaching interest in transgression that is the driving force behind this fascination with crime (Penfold-Mounce, 2010a), and the seductive qualities of death, the dead, and corpses (Foltyn, 2008), that allow the visceral consequences of violent criminality to enthral instead of repulse[1]. Meanwhile, the emerging scholarly area of

[1] Theories of criminal celebrity, fascination with death, and a general cultural interest in violence, will be considered in significantly more detail in chapter 2: *Literature Review*.

‘Dark Tourism’ has provided insights into more first-hand, bloodied consumption of death in terms of geographical and spatial monuments to historical atrocities (Stone & Sharpley, 2008), or provided a framework through which we can de-code the levels of gruesomeness associated with a street-corner crime scene or memorial (Stone, 2006).

In terms of the consumption and collection of objects, academic contributions have been even more frequent and far-reaching. Theoretically, the collection of objects is often understood as a practice that is identity-forming, be it books (Benjamin, 1931/2008b), objects and trinkets (Miller, 2009), or the objects that we construct our personal environments from more generally (Miller, 2008). There is a certain value in the collection of objects that has not always been reflected in the study of the consumption of crime. Miller sets out to test the assumption of superficiality in purchasing under consumer-capitalism and finds, in the most part, the opposite to be true (2008). Whereas violent films or crime fiction novels are largely for entertainment value, Baudrillard characterises antiques as having symbolic value instead – an approximation of authenticity through association with historical discourse. Murderabilia can be understood as a linkage between these two bodies of work, and can build upon these discourses to reveal insights into a culturally consumed ‘transgressive imaginations’ (O'Neill & Seal, 2012).

This switch in research focus from celebrity to objects, and from ‘counter-culture’ to the sociology of consumption, yielded these three overarching research aims that will be addressed at the very end of the conclusion chapter, and elaborated in the methodology chapter;

1) Bringing studies in the sociology of consumption into studies of consumed transgression in criminology;
2) Examining the position of murderabilia and crime artefacts within the ‘system of objects’ framework put forward by Jean Baudrillard (1968/1996);
3) Testing the suitability of digital ethnographic methods proposed by Scott Lash and Celia Lury (2007) for small scale subcultures.

Research questions

The overarching aim, of which the following questions are part, is to apply cultural theories of objects to murderabilia, in order to include cultural objects as part of our understanding of transgressive imaginations. Drawing upon ethnographic data from online and offline sources, this thesis will address the following questions:

1) What narratives are privileged in museum exhibitions of crime?

This first question, which will be explored primarily through chapter 4 *Displaying Transgression*, aims to explore transgressive imaginations within museum exhibitions of true crime objects. The question seeks to understand the decisions made by museum curators in displaying crime objects and the extent to which narratives of crime are influenced by popular culture.

2) How is 'transgression' consumed through the collection of criminal objects?

This second question, which will be explored primarily through chapter 5 *Auratic Transgression*, considers personal collection of auratic, true crime objects and the personal narratives attached by collectors. It seeks to understand the attraction of crime to the individual consumer and their relationship with transgression through objects.

3) How is crime imagined and represented through mechanically reproduced 'simulations' of transgression?

This final question, which is explored primarily through chapter 6 *Symbolic Transgression*, asks if the consumption of transgression changes when the objects in question are not 'original' items but instead are mechanically reproduced. It adds that important dimension of objects that are purely symbolic to this understanding of consumed transgression.

The overarching objective of this research project, beyond these substantive research questions, is to make a contribution to the areas of cultural criminology and the sociology of deviant culture that combine existing understandings of consumed transgression through popular culture, with existing understandings of the sociology of

cultural objects. The aim then, is to better understand how cultural representations of crime are communicated and developed through objects.

Murderabilia

First, a definition: 'murderabilia', the conjunction of *murder* and *memorabilia*, refers to the collection of items associated with famous violent crimes. Many items fall under the umbrella term of murderabilia, summed up best by Brian Jarvis:

> Murderabilia ranges from serial killer art (paintings, drawings, sculpture, letters, poetry), to body parts (a lock of hair or nail clippings), from crime scene materials to kitsch merchandising that includes serial killer T-Shirts, calendars, trading cards, board games, Halloween masks and even action figures of 'superstars' like Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer and John Wayne Gacy (Jarvis 2007, 327).

These true crime objects and the spaces and methods by which they are consumed will be investigated throughout this thesis. These objects cannot all be considered as the same. Preserved body parts, paintings and drawings, or 'original' items, are very different from the mass-produced t-shirts, posters and fridge magnets that constitute less auratic but more accessible crime-objects; discussed in chapter 6 *Symbolic Transgression*. There is extensive criminological and social attention paid to the cultural consumption of crime through various mainstream outlets (film, TV, books, and more recently videogames) – yet there remains a space for an investigation into the consumption of crime through objects. Departing from these more mainstream outlets, murderabilia is largely seen as an *authentic* way to consume transgression due to its association with historical and antique value, and is therefore particularly indicative of the contradiction that this thesis speaks to. On the one hand, it trades on being the most 'real' or 'authentic' way to consume crime in the culture industry. On the other hand, it is markedly selective toward particular 'brands' of criminal, namely those that have achieved celebration in the media or pervasive notoriety in the public consciousness.

The media has long focused on violent murder as a source of entertainment. Most relevantly, *Serial Killer Culture* is a niche documentary highlighting and addressing the

macabre network of traders specialising in morbid artefacts, criminal collectables and violent fan literature (2014). It is the most recent in a string of documentary and cinematographic forays into the world of morbid culture including *Collectors* (2000), *Murderabilia* (2009) and *Murderabilia* (2010) – all highlighting the continued seepage of objects into the true crime genre. They detail the macabre network of traders specialising in morbid artefacts, criminal collectables and violent fan art to which this research makes a scholarly contribution.

Yet the mainstream media landscape surrounding murderabilia is one of repeated scandal (despite the integrated nature of crime in popular culture) – paper-sellers seek to exploit our longstanding fascination with criminality and death, as well as our attraction to new 'confessional' (Beer, 2008) forms of media that see us captivated by others' dark secrets. Most recently, *The Guardian* covers the story of serial killer Robert Pickton, whose self-published memoir is the latest in a run of items to be pulled from sale because of a closeness to real world violence (Cain, 2016). Before that, provocative articles such as *The Man who Sleeps in Hitler's Bed* (Preston, 2015) turn attention toward collectors of the morbid themselves – such as a man with a life-long obsession with Nazi memorabilia. Or, journalistic investigations into the minds and motivations behind those who collect (Massey, 2015), consulting with consumer psychologists, art-educators and art-therapists, and concluding that murderabilia can be understood as a 'dangerous' hobby that 'sensationalises' crime for 'selfish' reasons. 'Some collectors search [...] for clues to the murderer's psyche or motivation', writes Massey – while others 'just want to own a piece of history, even if that history is gruesome' (p. 1). Chan (2015), among others, uses her journalism as a platform for the biggest collectors to *defend* their dark pastime, whilst maintaining the overtone that the murderabilia collector is a curious abnormality.

These are infinitely outnumbered by *exposé* style articles claiming to reveal the dark underworld of the murderabilia industry. *Ten Disturbing Items of Murderabilia* (May, 2013), at the very beginning of this doctoral research, points to specific objects, such as an envelope 'licked' by serial killer Dennis Rader, or Ted Bundy's hand written Christmas card. Bizarrely, juxtaposed against these items that are *disturbing* in their criminality, May chooses to include the *Serial Killer Trivia* board game. It is presumably *disturbing* in its gleeful embrace of a public fascination with violence, as

contrasted by the hard-line deriding approach of the mainstream news-media. This can be witnessed in the persistent disdain toward 'money making' at the expense of the wellbeing of victims – Hay (2015) reveals the economics behind the '45 to 90' (p. 1) items that change hands every month through one outlet, *Murder Auction*, despite the news media making far more money at the expense of victims. Individual items that have caused outrage during the years of this project have included Harold Shipman's exam table (Miller, 2014), Rose West's corset (Duell, 2013) and a letter from Aurora theatre shooter James Holmes (Johansson, 2015) – all shrouded by a desire, particularly in the U.S.A and by victims rights activists (Cox, 2015), to have the sale of murderabilia prohibited by law. Murderabilia has risen in popularity and has enjoyed extensive media attention, but has not yet been explored criminologically.

Celebrity, Crime and Cultural Criminology

Despite the relative lack of research considering the consumption of crime objects, there are several parallel areas of sociology and criminology with some distinct veins of overlap from which this thesis draws and brings together. Firstly, the recent surge in the sociology of celebrity can provide insights into the celebration of crime. For example, we characterise celebrity as a kind of pathology, yet research studying the celebration of the pathological has been limited (Penfold-Mounce, 2010a). The tendency toward understanding celebrity as pathology stems back to Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1979). The demonization of lowbrow culture implicates produced 'celebrity' as shallow and valueless in culture, as well as an academic pursuit (Beer & Penfold-Mounce, 2010). This notion extends into the modern study of celebrity with researchers beginning from the assumption that all celebrity culture is in some way 'scandalous, corrupt, or otherwise contemptible' (Ferris, 2007, p. 16). These understandings of celebrity range from the idea that celebrities are by definition narcissistic egoists along with a bundle of negative personality traits attributed to their followers (McMutcheon et al 2002 in Ferris & Harris, 2011) – to the idea that celebrity is fame lacking skill, talent, intelligence or merit. These arguments can be directly applied to the celebration of some, less sensational criminals. Ferris also sees celebrity as commodity – including the study of celebrity endorsements, as well as the common argument that citizens have been 'duped' by capitalism into desiring the worthless and unsavoury (Ferris & Harris, 2011). Murderabilia then, the commodification of

pathological, scandalous individuals without skill or talent, is making a next step for celebrity studies.

Ideas of production in culture and the consumption of banality are embedded within sociology. For example, research into the way in which new media technologies and their influence over our relationship with famous figures, or our ability to engage in niche cultures, necessitates a study of murderabilia. Schmid, who researches narratives of serial murder, signposts this importance of media technologies in constructing and developing criminal celebrity (2005). It is widely accepted that the ability to disseminate fame is dependent on media coverage and that broad changes in the nature of fame, as pointed out by Lowenthal's theory of 'idols of production' (1961), are to do with even broader changes in consumer-capitalism – serial killers are exemplary idols of *consumption* in that they do not contribute value to society. These networks are made up of 'viewpoint archives' such as forums and spaces that have been termed 'confessional' in the form of fan-websites, as well as extremely small scale and transactional archives in the form of online auctions and shops (Beer & Burrows, 2010) – all of which can be explored through the niche subculture of murderabilia.

Moreover, the discipline of cultural criminology needs an in-depth investigation into the consumption of crime objects. This project is prefaced by the understanding that 'while the everyday experience of life in contemporary Western society may or may not be suffused with crime, it is most certainly suffused with images and increasingly images of crime' (Hayward, 2010, p. 1) – these images and their proliferation are increasingly demanding of research. Hayward and Presdee argue that cultural criminologists should consider the way in which crime is 'imagined, constructed and framed within modern society' (2010, p. 3), while Phillips and Strobl suggest forms of media and culture to be places where the 'meaning of crime […] is created, consumed and re-created' (2006, p. 307). Running through the discipline of cultural criminology is this understanding that crime is vicariously experienced through forms of media, and that this fluid, culturally constructed, exposure to crime leaves an imprint on the way that we understand criminality. Understandably, the focus has been on news media (Carrabine, 2008), or film (Bacon, 2015), or branching out into the cultural archetype of serial killer and violent criminal (Jenkins, 1994) – but there is room for a contribution that adds objects to this list.

Most importantly, these large-scale trends in popular culture toward the criminal and the morbid indicate that a focus on murderabilia is timely. Taking an interest in death is not new, quite the opposite. Mark Twain, writing in the 1880s, sums it up concisely through his character *Huckleberry Finn*: '[R]apscallions and dead-beats is the kind […] good people takes the most interest in' (Twain, p83) – but the trajectory of violence in popular culture has, in recent years, been toward the more graphic and explicit. Traditional 'bandit' like characters (Hobsbawm, 2001) – like Robin Hood – criminal 'heroes', at least from a socio-political perspective, have slowly given way to bad characters seemingly without any redeeming features. On politicised criminal heroes, Kooistra lays the foundations for the study of criminal celebrity:

> [W]e choose to undergo this experience with a very limited number of criminals. We do not imagine ourselves dining with Albert Fish on the bodies of children he molested and then cooked; nor do we admire the handiwork of Edward Gein, who fashioned lampshades from the skin and soupbowls from the skulls of the women he killed (Kooistra, 1989, p. 21).

We may not have admired this behaviour in 1989, and 'admiration' may be a strong word to describe murderabilia collection, but the market for soup bowls fashioned by serial killers has grown from nothing over the past twenty-five years. It is true that we undergo the commodity fetishism of murderabilia with a limited number of criminals, but it is now those who commit the atrocity of ritual, sexualised murder that are deserving of society's attention. On television, a trend toward the graphic depiction of death and the cadaver is mirroring this shift in criminal celebrity toward the more visceral. It has been argued that forensic dramas like *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, have increased exposure to the corpse to the extent that death has been somewhat tamed (Penfold-Mounce, 2015) – whilst serial killers, now so embedded within the mainstream of culture, can be understood as 'natural born celebrities' (Schmid, 2005). Meanwhile, in the sociological and cultural study of death, similar arguments regarding the dissolving of boundaries between fact and fiction are being played out – with Foltyn suggesting that through the cultural consumption of death we are 'creating corpse facts and fictions to revive, re-imagine, and "play" with the dead' (Foltyn, 2008, p. 155). Murderabilia, a key way in which violence and death are re-imagined, revived and

'played' with – can make a significant contribution to this study of the dissolution of the cultural boundaries of death.

These insights can be seen as a springboard from which we can explore the increasing frequency of violent or extreme fringe cultures and their invasion into the mainstream. So much has the public interest in violence and death increased, that it is becoming the new normal. Atkinson, when introducing the discipline of criminology to new minds, suggests that 'to show an interest in deviance is more than a little deviant in its own right' (Atkinson, 2014, p. 2) – yet the rapidly expanding tracts of popular culture that focus on the criminal, their victim, and the wound (Seltzer, 1998), would indicate otherwise – showing an interest in crime no longer deviates from the mainstream of Western culture. Similarly, the word 'morbid' – popular in academic discourse of crime and death culture, is not without flaw. Collins English Dictionary defines morbidity as the presence of an '*unusual* interest in death or unpleasant events' (Collins, n.d), but public attraction to death and dying is increasingly usual (or perhaps, *decreasingly* morbid). Asma raises this problem when expanding upon this societal trend toward 'monster fascination', writing:

> One of the more interesting examples of monster fascination in contemporary culture, especially among the hip and sardonic set, is murderabilia. Serial Killers are so fascinating that their personal belongings and their 'artistic' creations are fetishized and turned into highly valuable commodities that are traded and purchased by collectors of the macabre. Paintings by John Wayne Gacy, Henry Lee Lucas, Richard Ramirez (the Nightstalker) and personal items of Charles Manson, among others, have all become hot commodities (Asma, 2009, p. 354).

It is at this intersection between fandom and commodification, or of the mainstream consumption of crime with fetishization, that insights into our developing 'wound culture' (Seltzer, 1998) can be gleaned.

Argument

Sociologically, fame and celebrity in the 21st century are often considered as wholly inauthentic because we celebrate individuals without unique qualities of achievement or

talent (Ferris, 2007), similar can be said for mass produced products and consumerism. But in marketing, precisely the opposite is true, we know that brands inject distinction into products that without which would be identical (Lash & Lury, 2007), and the same can be said for celebrity branding. So the global culture industry has a complex relationship with authenticity. It can be characterised as a perpetual attempt to inject a, usually symbolic, feeling of the authentic where one is organically absent. Murderabilia and crime products can be studied as a microcosm for this contradiction of authenticity. This thesis contributes the concept of authenticity to help understand the cultural consumption of crime precisely because of this difficult contradiction between consumption and the authentic. Deborah Root, in her book *Cannibal Culture*, points to our complicated relationship in terms of consumption and transgression:

> Because exoticism works by generating excitement and delirium precisely from the viewer's ambivalent relation to difference, qualities that in one context are classified as negative – such as violence – can with the proper distance produce delight, desire, and, of course, the edge of danger and ambiguity that supplied an added frisson (Root, 1996, p. 34).

It is argued that Root's description of consumed transgression can be directly applied to the modern phenomena of murderabilia and crime objects. Difference, originality and uniqueness are cultivated as the valuable qualities in crime objects, serving the function of creating excitement and exoticism, mostly symbolically, and as a direct result of ambivalence and sameness in the culture industry. 'It is important to note that little research attention has been directed toward understanding how consumers negotiate the authentic in culture based increasingly on simulation' (Rose & Wood, 2005, p. 287), with the exception of consumer practice researchers such as Arnould and Price (2000) – this remains true in the disciplines of sociology and criminology and is a gap that this work will fill. The main contribution of this thesis, then, is the concept of authenticity as a way of understanding consumed transgression. It is a concept of interest to economists (Gilmore & Pine, 2007) (Boyle, 2004), cultural and literary critics (York, 2014), media scholars (Enli, 2015), museums and heritage researchers, music, popular culture and celebrity formation (Marshall, 2006) and theorists of consumption (Lamla, 2009). Lamla goes as far as to argue that authenticity is 'one of the most important values' (p.

177) of the capitalist self. It will be argued that authenticity is one of the most important values of crime consumption.

Structure

This thesis will begin with a review of relevant literature (Chapter 2), starting with the paucity of work that directly tackles the phenomena of murderabilia. After this, it will branch out to consider the areas of sociological and criminological work that can aid a criminology of murderabilia. These include the shift in modern consumer society toward celebrity and the disproportionate focus in the media on violence, both of which prerequisite the phenomena of criminal celebrity. In the context of crime, this includes crime fiction novels, films about serial killers (of which the Internet Movie Database lists over 1,000 contributions (Jarvis 2007)) or violent criminals, to a continuous and determined news media focus on violence and depravity that sensationalises violent crime in the eyes of its consumers. This tendency toward spectacle (Debord 1983/1967) will be analysed as a prerequisite to the phenomena of criminal celebrity, contributing immeasurably to its proliferation.

Following this, is a review of the literature pertaining to criminal celebrity and the argument that sociological contributions can be separated into two broad approaches: the political and the cultural. Political theories focus largely on economic uncertainty, social division, class dialectics and uneven power relationships – and will be revealed as largely inappropriate for the study of murderabilia. Instead, insights from the cultural study of the celebration of criminals will be taken forward – such as explanations that consider media coverage, consumption, carnival and spectacle. It will be concluded that a criminology of murderabilia should be cultural – and one that considers the impact of objects and their influence on transgressive imaginations. A framework from Jean Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* (1968/1996) and his extensive writing on the value of antiques and cultural artefacts will be used to interpret this contribution that objects make to the social construction of crime.

These complex, extensive, networked cultures require the open and reflexive method of ethnography that spans across online and offline spaces. Given the researcher's own experience with these cultures, it is a useful position to be able to explore them from the

inside. The types of data collection within this ethnography will include observations, both offline in museums and online in digital marketplaces, and interviews, allowing the researcher to access what have been identified as the three main spheres of murderabilia culture:

- crime museums (chapter 4 *Displaying Transgression*);
- murderabilia collectors (chapter 5 *Auratic Transgression*);
- murder merchandise markets (chapter 6 *Symbolic Transgression*).

In *Displaying Transgression*, four crime museums will be investigated in line with the first research question: *Crime Museum* (Washington D.C), *The Museum of Death* (Hollywood CA), *Littledean Jail* (Gloucester, U.K) and *True Crime Museum* (Hastings U.K). In *Auratic Transgression*, murderabilia collectors are sampled mostly using the snowball method with some responding to calls for participants on a forum. In *Symbolic Transgression,* further interviews with producers of murder merchandise, as well as extensive digital observations of the marketplaces inside which they operate. The theoretical framework of this project is broadly constructivist, although it borrows its ontological approach primarily from Lash and Lury's method of tracking and tracing, a system of conducting an ethnography for images, brands and culture that spans in and out of the digital. Data is analysed thematically, and these themes of aura, originality and authenticity are used across all of the datasets and all three empirical chapters. The following three subsections will introduce these empirical chapters.

The three chapters are sequential in that they focus on areas of consumption, or types of objects, that would be understood within the 'system of objects' to be decreasingly auratic. From traditional, educational museum spaces, through personal, auratic collections, to merchandised consumables, the thesis considers the dissolution of traditional forms of value in consumption – and considers the extent to which this is mitigated by, or replaced by, the inclusion of violence and violent brands.

Displaying Transgression (Chapter 4)

In 2014, Mark Palmer-Edgecumbe was successful in applying for change of use and subsequent planning permission to turn a block of Cable Street (London) flats into a

museum dedicated to the 'celebration of east London women and the suffragettes' (Khomami, 2015). When the temporary fascia was lifted after construction concluded in the summer of 2015, there was outrage that a red and black *'Jack the Ripper Museum'* stood in the street 'known for Oscar Wilde and Charles Dickens' (p. 1). The scandal centred around a seemingly disingenuous planning application which read:

> The museum will recognise and celebrate the women of the East End who have shaped history […] It will [also] analyse the social, political and domestic experience from the Victorian period to the present day (Khomami, 2015, p. 1).

Palmer-Edgecumbe's response to the media uproar strikes a chord with the first empirical chapter of this thesis, *Displaying Transgression*, that at this stage had already been drafted:

> We did plan to do a museum about social history of women but as the project developed we decided a more interesting angle was from the perspective of the victims of Jack the Ripper […] it is absolutely not celebrating the crime of Jack the Ripper but looking at why and how the women got in that situation in the first place (Palmer-Edgecumbe in Brooks-Pollock & Prynn, 2015, p. 1).

Palmer-Edgecumbe argues that although the branding of the museum has changed drastically, the subject matter being tackled has not changed at all. He uses the word 'angle' to suggest that the use of Jack the Ripper is simply an avenue to follow in accessing East London women's history, a lens through which the achievements of these women can be contextualized, a case study with which the struggles of Victorian woman can be understood. The idea that serious political, social and criminal concepts can be tackled and communicated, museologically, via a popular cultural association is not one that is unique to London's new *Jack the Ripper Museum* – the semantics of Palmer-Edgecumbe's defence summates common practice in modern museums of violent crime.

This chapter focuses on the display of crime objects in museums, considering these stories of personal and social struggles, of both subjective and objective violence, of criminal justice and the legal system that form the 'truth' in the true crime. In the museums sampled in this first empirical chapter, they are routinely clothed underneath

the filmic and popular cultural facets of the macabre that render the information accessible. It will be a consideration of the consumption of murderabilia through exhibitions, narratives of display and museum spaces. It will primarily use data from ethnographic observations to understand the blurring of the boundaries between 'truth' and popular culture, and how the 'authentic' experience of crime is created by curators. In response to the first research question it will be argued that museum displays of true crime rely on filmic cues to communicate criminality to their audiences. The central concept of 'authenticity' will be raised in this first empirical chapter as a way of understanding both what crime museums are there to provide and also the dynamic of consumption of criminally transgressive items. Many of these museum curators were personal collectors of crime artefacts in the first instance, so interviews with them are used as the foundation of the following section.

Auratic Transgression (Chapter 5)

Perhaps the most notorious collector of notoriety is the American owner of the website *serialkillersink.net,* Eric Gein. He sells handwritten letters, original artwork from violent criminals, and is a personal collector. He also sells a regularly updated serial killer address book for those who write to incarcerated criminals, and draws attention to the (often negative) media coverage that he receives in the very centre of the front page of his website, underneath the tag-line 'the premier true crime collectible website. Catering to true crime enthusiasts from around the world since 2009, (Gein, n.d, p. 1) – he defends his business as follows:

> These items are in fact world history [...] I have a few criminal law professors that use the letters to help teach their classes. A psychologist buys from me to get a better understanding of their minds. I would like to think that these men and women are using these items in a way with hopes of one day preventing a crime (Gein in Hoffman, 2012, p. 1).

In this quote Gein lays the groundwork for this second empirical chapter focussing on personal collectors of murderabilia. Themes of historical legitimacy, education and authenticity through association with past events are bestowed upon murderabilia objects by collectors despite the lens of popular culture often being used to decode the

meaning of the artefacts. Gein also raises the point that murderabilia collectors are unfairly targeted by the media as 'glorifying' criminals and criminal acts, over and above crime fiction or perhaps violent videogames (Hoffman, 2012) and this focus is likely due to this perception of authenticity and the real associated with crime and antique.

The blurred lines between crime objects and other more mainstream forms of criminal consumption will continue to be explored in *Auratic Transgression* – a breakdown of the consumption of murderabilia through personal and private collection of objects. The chapter begins by recounting some personal narratives of collection obtained in interviews, before analysing the use of provenance, uniqueness and artistic merit to apply authenticity to items. In response to the second research question, it is argued that transgression is consumed vicariously through the notion of authenticity. Using Walter Benjamin's concept of *aura* (1936/2008a), it will feed into the broader thesis argument that crime artefacts are valued because they are auratic as antiques and artefacts, contrary to most modern consumables, and not because they are criminal. This chapter ends by looking at the fruitlessness of authenticity consumption and how so called authentic items are increasingly mechanically reproduced.

Symbolic Transgression (Chapter 6)

In April of 2016 British tabloid *The Daily Mail* ran the headline 'Fury as website sells pillow cases, T-shirts and phone protectors bearing the face of moors murderer Myra Hindley' (Robertson, 2016). Robertson is referring to the expanding culture of murder merchandise discussed in this section, *Symbolic Transgression*. This chapter primarily uses data collected from interviews with producers of murder merchandise. A critique of the concept of authenticity is expanded in the most detail in this final empirical section as participants use a range of tools to position their products as auratic despite them having no historical attachment or antique values.

Jean Baudrillard's (1968/1996) work on the value of antiques and artefacts is used to analyse the way in which participants try to achieve auratic qualities symbolically through mechanical reproduction. In doing so this chapter considers notions of art, originality, uniqueness and branding as ways to present mechanically reproduced

products as ‘authentic’. By looking at popular criminal brands, it develops a critique of the contractions of the consumption of transgression. Responding to the third and final research question, interviews will demonstrate the symbolic nature of crime merchandise. It will be argued that crime merchandise can be understood as simulations of crime, transgression and as impressions of the lacking qualities of aura and authenticity.

2- Literature Review

Despite the increased non-academic interest in morbid culture and murderabilia in online news media, documentaries (2014) on television (see *Introduction*), and its romanticisation in consumer culture as a consumer object, there remains a limited academic narrative that directly addresses the non-fictional material cultures that flank violence. This chapter will address the literature, albeit limited in quantity, that directly addresses the central component of this morbid culture: artefacts and collectables with direct associations to famous criminals and crimes, including David Schmid (2005) and Brian Jarvis (2007). Beyond this literature there are several strains of academic thought that make valuable contributions to our understanding of morbid culture. At the centre of this thesis and research in this field are two parallel and sometimes conflicting narratives. One, usually found within literature on 'murderabilia', is that morbid culture, as a concentrated extremity of 'normal' culture, can be wrapped up as a symptom of destructive 'cannibalistic' (Root, 1996, Bartolovich, 1998, Lefebvre, 2005) consumer-capitalism, and that it is simply an extreme extension of regular, violent, wound-focused consumerism. The other, usually found within literature on criminal celebrity and cultural criminology, contradicts this, arguing that a societal attraction to crime is somewhat emancipatory, revolving around escapism and a movement away from consumer-capitalism towards unmediated experiences.

For example, Jarvis (2007) and Schmid (2005) both argue that 'serial killer culture' is an extension of consumer culture and that their seriality and wastefulness are indicative of film fiction, and consumerism more broadly. On the other hand, Mike Presdee's (2000) *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime* makes the argument that attraction to criminality and the engagement in simulated criminal behaviour (such as video games) is in a large part due to its perceived difference from consumer items and the associated escape from banal, repetitive consumer-culture. This central contradiction will be expanded upon, and it will be argued that empirical evidence is necessary to draw conclusions regarding the popularity and cultural significance of murderabilia. Whilst this literature is extremely useful in revealing the foundations of morbid culture, the tendency to label it as a symptom, or consider it sequentially as a product of consumerism more broadly, without empirical evidence, is to academically neglect

morbid culture and risk brushing over the nuances of consuming macabre items. This chapter begins by reviewing this work, before addressing five identified schools of thought that may help untangle this contradiction and develop the criminology of murderabilia:

- celebrity studies;
- cultural criminology;
- collecting and consumption;
- representation and film;
- museums, tourism and heritage.

First, this culture begins with, or at least requires a contextual outlining of the relationship between culture and criminality. Criminal Celebrities (those criminals who subsequently become famous for their crimes) (Penfold-Mounce, 2010a) and the concept of observing and rejoicing in criminal personalities, therefore, provides a useful starting point. These arguments can be separated broadly into the socio-political and the cultural (Kooistra, 1989). The former considering the political-emancipatory power that criminality can represent (Hobsbawm, 2001), and the latter arguing that criminals embody traits that have a wide cultural appeal – with different types of criminals being more or less likely to be celebrated depending on time and location. This is backed up by a timeless (Western) societal fascination with morbidity, death and the dead body (Seltzer, 1998, Penfold-Mounce, 2010b). Secondly, there are the aforementioned theories in cultural criminology of the carnival qualities of crime (Presdee, 2000), or the blurring of criminality, media and popular culture (Ferrell, 1999, Phillips & Strobl, 2006) that were covered in chapter 1, *Introduction*. Thirdly, there are theories of collecting and consumption, through the work of Benjamin. Benjamin's concept of 'aura' (Benjamin, 1936/2008a) is a starting point through which to understand the physical practice of collecting and its impact on the remembrance, identification and interpretation of crime. Later theories by Daniel Miller (2008, 2009) also shed light onto how objects are used to maintain relationships and construct identities.

Fourthly, in the study of cultural and cinematic representation, academic writers such as Richard Dyer (1999) have considered how violent criminals are represented in films, or through print fiction, or news media, and its implication upon the social construction of

criminality. If crime is disproportionately represented through film, television and news media, and this effects our understanding of crime and criminality, what is the contribution of material culture to this misrepresentation of criminality, and how does this influence the attractiveness of murderabilia? And lastly, museums and heritage research can help understand murderabilia in exhibition spaces. From theories of difficult heritage, or the 'politics of display' in controversial museum exhibitions (Macdonald, 2009), to more closely related work in 'dark tourism' (Stone, 2006), it is important to consider the leisure consumption of crime more broadly. From these five areas, a theoretical underpinning for this research project is built in the final subsection, *Key Concepts*. It is concluded that the concept of 'authenticity', one that has roots in all five preceding areas, is an appropriate scaffold to support a study of murderabilia and crime objects, and that we can understand the value of this material culture in terms of authentic qualities rather than criminality or violence.

Murderabilia

The term 'murderabilia' was coined by Andy Kahan from the Houston Crime Victims Assistance service (Hylton, 2007) in an effort to eradicate all forms of profiteering at the expense of innocent recipients of crime. It is the conjunction of 'murder', with the word 'memorabilia', the act of collecting items that evoke associations with people or events. From the latin, *memorabilis*, the phrase literally means to 'remember' and has become associated particularly with tangible memory and the personal archiving of historical artefacts. The addition of *murder* is one that contextualises the physical provocation of memories through objects in the context of violent crime and the morbid culture industry. 'Murderabilia', therefore, refers generally to true crime collectables ranging from hair, nail clippings to paintings and sculpture by the killers themselves.

Documentary and film-makers are drawn to this controversial topic with several attempts to record and comment on morbid culture since the turn of the century, yet academic insights remain limited. There is a morsel of literature that directly addresses murderabilia, most notably works by Brian Jarvis (2007) and David Schmid (2005), both from an Arts and Humanities perspective addressing murderabilia as a microcosm through which to evaluate the greater state of American culture and literature. Jarvis and Schmid quickly shift their attention to *Serial killers in American Culture* (Schmid,

2005) more generally and murderabilia is eclipsed by the study of the more mainstream true crime fiction, horror films such as *American Psycho* (2000) and the portrayal of violence in the media. To this point, a dedicated research project into murderabilia does not exist, although researchers have touched upon the subject. These researchers focus on murderabilia as a symptom of celebrated criminality or 'wound culture' (Seltzer, 1998) rather than morbid collecting as a practice. Murderabilia, as real, unmediated snippets of criminal that are hoarded and accumulated by dedicated collectors and exhibited in museums of crime is not investigated as a different, yet connected, phenomena with a unique set of questions. Sociological theories of collecting, such as by Benjamin (1936/2008a), or Miller (2008, 2009) are overlooked in this literature despite their relevance to the attachment of memories to tangible objects and their direct connection with the word *memorabilia*: to collect items with ascribed histories. It will become apparent, throughout this section, that there is a lack of criminological and sociological interest in this area.

'Prisoners have been creating literature and artwork since the beginning of the United States penal system' (2010, p. 585), writes Hammitt. Therefore, there is an array of literature tackling prison art from a penal studies perspective addressing the therapeutic, educational and reformative benefits of productive inmates (Hammitt, 2010) supported by a number of charities across the globe assisting with the sale and integration of criminal art into communities. Contrasting these efforts, an even wider literature surrounds the (un)ethical position of murderabilia using the oft touted 'Son of Sam law[2]', from a legal perspective, as a grounding for a moral debate about the direction of the flow of profit from murder. In response to online petitions and national scandal campaigns designed to flush murderabilia from the public consciousness, in early 2001 the mainstream outlet eBay caved to pressure to ban the sale of murderabilia under its offensive content policies. This immediately compressed an already torrid industry into underground networks, the hubs of which come in the form of killer websites with shops, articles, photographs and discussion boards. This separation and concentration of

[2] The 'Son of Sam' law refers to the law in place, in the UK and most US states, that stops prisoners from profiting from their crimes either directly, or indirectly through the sale of murderabilia. Although some have adverted this law through various loopholes – notably Lord Archer's book publication.

a niche culture has created small but wide networks of morbidity. So whilst neither of these two schools of thought are directly relevant to this project (the legal challenges, or the penal/therapy work), they have contributed, by side-lining and marginalising murderabilia, to creating the subculture in question.

Jarvis has mused the violent nature of American popular culture thorough this niche subculture of murderabilia, he writes that 'films about serial killing often appear as part of a series' (2007, p. 238), suggesting that a central part of our attraction to serial killers is inherent in their seriality, and that they are in that sense similar to mainstream film and television. Jarvis' work surrounds the central notion that serial killing is attractive to American consumers as it represents an extreme example of serial consumption around which the American economy is built. Instead of focusing on the barbaric or morbid aspects of crimes in assessing the consumption of violence, Jarvis places importance on the *extremity* of criminal acts and reveals the serial killer as the 'gothic double of the serial consumer' (p. 238). In other words, the nature of consumer capitalism is excess and consumers are attracted to figures that represent extremity, both morbid and tame – the consumer of violence is experiencing similar desires as a consumer of non-criminal celebrity. Amongst many parallels between the killer and consumer, Jarvis links fashion consumption with the fictional Buffalo Bill, in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), who is obsessed with clothing and an idealised body image, as well as comparing serial consumption to the process of cannibalism due to its wasteful, violent and self-afflicting nature (Jarvis, 2007). This device defining America's attraction to violence (in film media) as a progressive extension of their already excessive culture, is useful in understanding the position of murderabilia as a cultural phenomenon, as nourishment for a deep seated desire to consume and to be consumed. Jarvis' research briefly references true crime merchandise but he concludes his analysis before considering murderabilia beyond a symptom of violence-oriented consumer-capitalism. For Jarvis, murderabilia is an extreme extension of an existing phenomena, America's fascination with violence that is well documented by authors such as Kooistra (1989), Duclos (1998) and Seltzer (1998)[3]. As he points out through the

[3] These key authors will be considered in the second half of this chapter

primary example of violent 'cult classic' films: 'the commodification of violence is inseparable from the violence of commodification' (Jarvis, 2007, p. 329). These comparisons between true crime and criminal popular culture are necessary to understand the place of murderabilia within a broader societal fascination with crime and they will be explored in more detail in the following *Representations* section of this chapter.

In his first short piece directly addressing murderabilia for the online journal: *Media, Culture*, David Schmid (2004) posits a similar case to Jarvis but from a slightly different angle. He argues, through Seltzer's theory of 'wound culture', that murderabilia is a natural side-effect, almost a pure distillation of American culture. Schmid reveals these conclusions through similarities between positive and negative media attention. In considering a very biased episode of the American *John Walsh Show*[4] tackling murderabilia and the ensuing backlash of comments and posts on participant 'Joe' (Hiles)'s murderabilia website: *Serial Killer Central* (SKC), Schmid argues that 'few individuals have done more to disseminate information about violent crime in general and serial murder in particular to mainstream America than John Walsh' (2004, p. 6). Despite the negative bias and disproportionate airtime given to victims' families and advocates for the ban of murderabilia, both positive and negative interest was generated on the website of one of the key protagonists of the industry – considerably more than any previous date. As a result of the hounding Joe Hiles received on this 2003 episode of the popular talk show, his website *Serial Killer Central* (n.d.) transformed overnight from a space for the expression of an extremely niche and underground culture, to a more mainstream name being visited by ordinary Americans who had never before been exposed to this culture (Schmid, 2004).

Schmid (2004) argues that the increased interest in *Serial Killer Central* and the murderabilia industry in general following its prime-time media exposure demonstrates an extreme concentration of what Seltzer terms 'wound culture' (Seltzer, 1998). Societies' fascination with 'torn and open bodies' (Seltzer, 1998, p. 1) makes

[4] An American talk show produced by NBC between 2002 and 2004

murderabilia an irresistible 'spectacle' (Debord, 1970) to be consumed or an equally irresistible scapegoat for the critics of everything that is wrong with Western society. Either way, these opposite responses to murderabilia represent a level of attraction to violence and extremity that, Schmid (2005) argues, is indicative of consumer culture more generally. This argument distils positive and negative interest in murderabilia down to different extremities of the same fascination: wounds, and murderabilia as inherently normal and regular symptom of wound culture. In other words, to be extremely interested in murderabilia (collectors, for example) and to have a violently negative reaction to murderabilia (those who petition for its ban), are practicing the same fascination. Approaching the topic from a different angle, Asma makes an argument that is theoretically similar to that of Schmid (2005) and Jarvis (2007):

> My own view is that murderabilia is just one more attempt, albeit circuitous, to de-monster our world. We live in a consumer culture, and consumption not only fulfils desires but also is a means of imposing order and control. Commodifying a horror is one way of objectifying and managing it. […] [I]f monsters churn the stomach, horrify the heart and boggle the mind, we respond with whatever powers we possess. Buying a monster memento brings the unintelligible creepiness into the light of a quotidian transaction (Asma, 2009, p. 355).

The concept of 'de-monstering' serial killers through their consumption is much the same as the concept of murderabilia being an extreme extension of the fictional wings of wound culture (Schmid, 2005, Seltzer, 1998), just from a slightly convoluted standpoint that focuses on fearful rather than the fanatical. Although it strikes an odd note to approach the liking of a product by being driven by fear for what that product represents, words like 'commodifying', or 'objectifying', or 'managing' suggest an attraction to murderabilia that revolves around its cinematic allure rather than any graphic allure. This is the idea that individuals are using their powers of purchase in order to convert the extreme into the mainstream. It is important because it implies that murderabilia is not an extreme act, but rather the taming of extreme acts. These overlapping narratives of crime and consumption will be centrally important to this thesis and will be explored in more detail in the following *Cultural Criminology* subsection of this chapter.

More recently, on the premise of investigating the astounding public fascination with killer William Corder (perpetrator of the 1827 Red Barn Murder) and subsequent cultural investment in his misdoing, McCorristine (2014) principally argues that the recycling, re-staging and reimagining of these crimes constitutes a 'new afterlife' for the killer. This afterlife takes the form of popular cultural renditions of crimes, as well as the trade of body parts and mementos associated with the criminal themselves. While these re-imaginations of criminals have previously been considered in solitude, McCorristine theorises a kind of 'life after death' afforded to violent criminals through their persistent cultural resurrection. It is necessary to understand this cultural resurrection of crime in a more thorough investigation of murderabilia and criminal material culture. Elsewhere (Denham, 2016), I have used these theories of 'afterlife', or collective unconscious, or cultural resurrection of misdoings, to suggest that criminals are recalled sympathetically through this consumption and that consumption of crime is emergent from criminals' heroic attributes before their gruesome ones. With this paucity of research as a stepping off point, the following sections are five areas of literature that have been identified as making a significant contribution to our understanding of murderabilia. They have been used, in small parts, to pick at the study of murderabilia as additions to other projects – from cultural studies, to penology, to film, and they need to be developed into a united approach. Again, they are: celebrity; cultural criminology; collecting and consumption; representations; and museums and heritage.

Celebrity and Criminal Celebrity

Barron (2015) uses murderabilia as an example of how 'celebrity' is no longer a meritocracy in that fame and celebration no longer correlates with achievement. This means that to be celebrated for something as deviant as murder is not exactly unique given the framework of modern celebrity culture. He identifies that the physical objects of murderabilia (hair clippings, paintings by killers), can be seen as playing into a broader and much larger serial killer industry made up of films, television, books and websites – rather than as a standalone deviant subculture – making his work a useful starting point for expanding the study of murderabilia into related established research areas. Most notably, Barron observes that this boundary-less celebrity means that the celebration of fictional criminals is not dissimilar to the celebration of the true criminal:

‘although Hannibal Lecter and Dexter are fictional characters, they contribute to the pervasive cultural presence and accessibility of the serial killer and are part of the fandom spectrum that, for some, includes their real-life counterparts’ (Barron, 2015, p. 178). The closeness of criminal celebrity with ‘normal’ celebrity means that research into celebrity and fandom can help to unpack murderabilia.

When attempting to understand the consumption of criminal artefacts, it is important to understand society’s attraction to all things criminal. In the first instance – these attractions to criminal-celebrity and morbid-fascination are of great value when approaching the material consumption of crime. These arguments about the celebration of criminals and criminality in culture can be split into two distinct veins. First, the socio-political approaches to understanding criminal celebrity will be considered here using the work of Paul Kooistra (1989) and Eric Hobsbawm (2001). Second, the cultural approaches will be considered using the work of Presdee (2000), Seltzer (1998) and Duclos (1998) in the following section (cultural criminology).

An important distinction needs to be made at this early stage between ‘celebrity-criminal’ and ‘criminal-celebrity’ (Penfold-Mounce, 2010a). The celebrity criminal is a person whose celebrity precedes their criminal behaviour, and public attention toward their criminality is due to this enduring fame from other means. These crimes tend to be minor (not to argue that they cannot be serious), a good example of this comes from actor Lindsay Lohan and singer Justin Beiber’s traffic offences featuring in celebrity gossip columns (Telegraph 2007 and BBC News 2014 respectively). Despite this phenomena being indicative of the modern culture of celebrity (Ferris, 2007), this is not the focus of this research. Criminal celebrity, on the other hand, is the name applied to a case where crime prefaces the individual’s status as celebrity and their celebration is a direct result of criminality. Contrasting the former, this type of celebrity usually circulates around more extreme crimes such as violence, murder or drug related offences – serial killers being the pinnacle of criminal celebrity (Penfold-Mounce, 2010a). Well known figures such as Jeffrey Dahmer, John Wayne Gacy and Ted Bundy are criminal celebrities and this notoriety through violence has been investigated in depth by a range of scholars, including Paul Kooistra (1989), Denis Duclos (1998), Mark Seltzer (1998) and David Schmid (2005).

Arguably one of the largest contributions to the study of criminal celebrity comes from Paul Kooistra (1989). In *Criminals as Heroes,* Kooistra points to recurring historical examples including Jesse James, Robin Hood and Billy the Kid – the latter of which even gained admiration from officers of the law and state officials – in an effort to uncover the qualities and circumstances that yield celebrated criminals whose legends outlive their mortal counterparts. For Kooistra, a criminal 'hero' is defined as a character that commits violent acts of crime but is not, by the large majority of the population, considered 'wicked or depraved' (1989). Instead these characters are celebrated through song, film, and theatre and are broadly representative of a societal lack of voice – they are filling in as representatives of the disenfranchised where law and democracy appear to have failed. Kooistra sums up the scholarly explanations of criminal hero (until 1989) grouped into three broad categories. Psychological explanations, which he quickly disbars due to their inability to explain why some criminals become celebrated and others fall into the background, assume a level of primitive need for tales of transgression in order to release feelings of aggression, anger and rebellion. Cultural explanations, again disbarred for explaining how criminals become heroes and not why, argue that celebrated criminals directly represent the value systems of the social groups from which they emerge – they 'embody traits that have wide social appeal' (p. 21). There are many problems with cultural explanations, argues Kooistra, not least the fact that Robin Hood type characters occur worldwide and are often fictional and therefore lacking concurrence with real moral values. Lastly, sociological explanations argue that the criminal hero occurs from specific sets of social and structural conditions. 'Hero' criminals occur when large numbers of people become disenfranchised due to social, political and structural unrest – they latch on to figures that transcend and repudiate their daily struggles and depressions (ibid). Kooistra goes on to argue, primarily using the third type of explanation (social), that almost all hero criminals have occurred during noteworthy eras of depression, structural change and political upheaval. His framework, albeit rather generalised, summarises these occurrences under shift changes in 'structure, identity and power'. As mirrored by Seal (1996), the main thing these characters all have in common above their time, place and context, is their level of honour which is above that which is usually associated with criminal behaviour. If they are not robbing from the rich to give to the poor like Robin Hood, they are protecting their families, rising up for their social class or acting in self defence (Kooistra, 1989).

The trend toward social-political theories of unrest and upheaval in approaching criminal celebrity dates back to the work of Eric Hobsbawm and his *Social Bandits* theory (Hobsbawm, 2001). Hobsbawm argued that banditry was a challenge to those who hold and wield social power, occurring only in societies with pronounced social divisions and class dialectics in which control over resources and political order is elite and excluding (Hobsbawm, 2001). Banditry rose from the collective consciousness of the downtrodden social classes in order to challenge the established social order. Regions most susceptible to banditry were traditionally poor, usually farming areas, with close-knit communities. Hobsbawm's *Bandits* is largely a theory of enhanced social cohesion through small-scale rebellion and crime. Those who break the law, rob, pillage or bootleg earn hero status in bandit communities as their crimes are deemed to represent the interests of the peasant society from which they are affiliated and reject oppressive and dominating regulations. Bandits are considered by the 'lord and state' (p. 20) as criminals, their hero status cannot be mirrored outside of their class and often wanes beyond their close geographical community – celebrated banditry is traditionally an intimate phenomena that reflects the struggles of a select number (ibid). Not just anyone can become a bandit. Bandits represent lower social classes and are often migrants living on the margins of society and failing to fully integrate with the communities that they flank. Hobsbawm writes:

> Banditry is freedom, but in a peasant society few can be free. Most are shackled by the double chain of lordship and labour, the one reinforcing the other. For what makes peasants the victims of authority and coercion is not so much their economic vulnerability - they are indeed as often as not virtually self sufficient - as their immobility (Hobsbawm, 2001, p. 34).

Hobsbawm points to two important dimensions of banditry. Despite bandits fighting for freedom, it is impossible for more than a few to become free and therefore: *bandits*. The nature of the term requisites a move away from the behaviour of the masses. Second, Hobsbawm reminds us that this is a theory of social mobility and that it is those who are immobile due to economic circumstance that idolise bandits yet very few will achieve emancipation through banditry. A good example of a social bandit can be found in petty criminal, Jack Sheppard, owing his popularity in no small part to William Ainsworth's 1839 biographical novel, *Jack Sheppard* (Ainsworth, 1840). Outselling Dickens' *Oliver*

Twist (Dickens, 2003) over its first year of sale (Buckley, 2002), a 'mania' quickly formed around Sheppard spawning 'pamphlets and abridgements, plays and street shows, prints and cartoons' (p. 426) as well as merchandise such as trinkets and mementos including 'Sheppard bags', mock escape kits referencing his several skilful attempts to circumvent prison (Hollingsworth, 1963). According to Buckley (2002), after a spate of high profile 'copycat' crimes attributed to the book, the press printed harsh criticism that the story was somehow in favour of crime and would encourage deviance through a process of familiarisation. In a movement against any further learning of undesirable behaviour, the government banned additional dramatizations (Buckley, 2002).

Buckley, following Hobsbawm, attributes Sheppard's mass appeal (and subsequent press and government rebuttal) to the 'marked disruption of traditional structures of working class community' (p. 430). Jack Sheppard's poor boy working class status, with poor career prospects and daring, resistant, non-compliant escape attempts sat well in the context of heightening social tensions (ibid). It is through this example that the emancipatory appeal of social bandit and criminal celebrity comes to life. Sheppard's literal escape from the clutches of the ruling classes and his skilful outwitting of prison guards left his oppressive captors perplexed and his supporters stunned. Success as a criminal celebrity was necessitated by this mobility and resistance.

Curott & Fink's (2012) cost/benefit analysis study finds that bandits such as Jack Sheppard contribute positively to society. Although applying a strict Economic reduction to such a complex social phenomena is problematic, this re-consideration of Hobsbawm's theory raises the idea that criminal heroes actually provide several *benefits* to society (that outweigh their costs), leading to their celebrated status. Instead of directly representing the values of a downtrodden social class, characters (although mostly unwittingly) provide a real three-fold service to society. First, bandits simply break unpopular rules provoking sympathetic feelings from society. Second, they argue that as tax rates are increased banditry will follow and therefore, bandits represent the informal regulation of society by controlling the unstoppable rise of tariffs and duties. Third, bandits provide an informal set of rules and punishments in areas that the government neglects (Curott & Fink, 2012). Although it is unlikely that the modern criminal celebrity will be breaking 'unpopular rules', regulating tax, or that this would

encourage the celebration of gruesome and violent criminals, this analysis gives rise to the possibility that criminals may directly benefit society.

Building upon Hobsbawm's theory, Seal developed the 'Robin Hood principle' (2009). Based on several examples of social bandit, both real and fictional, Seal argues that the perpetuation of noble, good and courageous criminals is somewhat *necessary* in many cultures worldwide – following a script-like pathway to heroisation that involves, in some way or another, robbing from the rich to give to the poor. The figures are 'celebrated in folklore, romanticised in the mass media and commodified in the tourism and heritage industries' (Seal, 2009, p. 69). For Seal, Robin Hood characters are inextricably linked to the complex social and economic, ethnic and regional identities of their origin. This hero status is often sparked by an incident involving religious or class tensions within a society – Robin Hood characters occur at the boiling point of complex social frictions (ibid). Crucial to the theories of Hobsbawm and Seal is the notion that a type of 'moral code' and honour underlies many celebrated criminals.

Whilst some of these historical examples are not easily applied to all criminal celebrities, Seal goes on to argue that the legend must also be charismatic and have a compelling narrative which ought to transcend long after the character's (usually untimely) death (ibid). These are qualities that epitomise what it means to be a celebrated criminal in the 21st century. It is appropriate here to turn to the work of Max Weber in unpacking the appeal of criminal 'charisma' that Seal alludes to, as well as Hobsbawm's notions of power, mobility and emancipation. The concept of 'charismatic authority', in Weber's original terms as outlined in *Economy and Society* (Weber, 1968) refers to the existence of specific exceptional qualities beyond ordinary men. These qualities are regarded as beyond the abilities of normal humans and are in some way divine or exemplary and result, often, in the individual being followed as a leader or revolutionary (ibid).

> The "natural" leaders in moments of distress – whether psychic, physical, economic, ethical, or political – were neither appointed officeholders or "professionals" in the present-day sense […] bur rather, the bearers of specific gifts of body and mind that were considered "supernatural" (Weber, 1968, pp. 111-112).

Charismatic authority is a revolutionary force. It breaks down traditional norms and 'transforms' societal values. Emperors and kings with prescribed status cannot be charismatic in the true sense of charisma. A person with true charisma is responsible to prove their uniqueness and skill to those who they serve. Hobsbawm's notion of *social bandits* that represent mobility and emancipation in a time of political unrest are visible directly through this concept with Weber going on to argue that the key role of a holder of charismatic authority is to bring prosperity to his faithful followers. Social Bandits (Hobsbawm, 2001) and 'Robin Hood' characters (Seal, 2009) can be understood as holders of charismatic authority due to their foundations in instability and their revolutionary nature, both qualities discussed in detail by Weber. Crucially, Weber insists that the term 'must be used in a completely value-free sense' (Weber, 1968, p. 1112) and can be applicable, therefore, to persons whose fame or leadership is generally understood as negative, Weber himself argues that the concept can be a 'release from custom, *law* and tradition' (1968, p. 1117 Emphasis added).

The notion of a direction-free value attached to charisma is complimented by the theory of positive deviance. Leslie Wilkins argues that the most normal (and therefore non-deviant) behaviours are naturally the most frequent and that there is very little difference between decreasingly frequent behaviours that move away from the mean average in either direction (Wilkins, 1964). That is to argue that deviance can, by definition, receive special recognition be it positively or negatively distant from accepted societal norms. Similarly, deviance, to some degree, can be measured by the social 'reactions' that it encourages – a reactive definition of deviance would argue that the greater the reaction, the more deviant the behaviour. Behaviours that are extremely righteous and upright are understood through this model, by the reactions that they provoke, as equally deviant to those that are inherently cruel (Goode, 1991). This is mirrored by Durkheim's comments in *Elementary forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim, 2008). For Durkheim, in religious societies (to which the notion of celebrity has frequently been compared) (Rojek, 2007), an 'impure' thing can become a 'holy' thing through sudden changes in external societal circumstances. This level of transition is accomplishable as both pure and impure are two sides of the same coin – as with all things sacred (ibid) – they both sit at the fringe of society and carry extreme positive or negative reaction dependent upon the culture, time and context.

Crime with a positive societal reaction, as a type of positive deviance, allows for criminal characters to earn charisma in a similar fashion to the heroes and entrepreneurs in Weber's writing – it is the Weberian concept of Charismatic Authority that forms the primary link between the aforementioned sociological approaches to criminal celebrity. The concept of banditry and social upheaval, through law breaking, that represents the frustration of a downtrodden underclass, yields characters with a negative charismatic authority.

Cultural approaches and Cultural Criminology

Whilst social approaches to criminal celebrity and the popularity of crime in culture have traditionally focused on social upheaval, class tension and wealth redistribution, cultural approaches have approached the problem through theories of consumption. Cultural approaches to criminal celebrity are synonymous with more 'modern', 'non-bandit', characters, indicative of the more recent popularity of American serial killers. Despite Kooistra's dependence on the social, most modern understandings of criminal celebrity are inherently cultural. Mike Presdee's *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime* (2000) is a seminal explanation of criminal fascination (and therefore celebration), through culture. It is Presdee's assertion that mass production, media and patterns of consumption emerging in the post WWI West have yielded an over generalised and over mechanised culture characterised by banality and mediated experience. This Adorno and Horkheimian (1979) cultural uniformity or homogeneity coupled with the sanitisation and commercialisation of traditional forms of rebellion have made transgression all the more attractive as a spectacle. Moreover, the extremeness of our indulgence in transgressive material has had to shift in line with said increasing banality and blunting of established pathways to transgression (Presdee, 2000). On the appropriateness of the phrase 'carnival', Presdee writes:

> Carnival is a much used and abused term, but it is nonetheless the most appropriate frame with which to discuss the performance of excitement and transgression with which this book is most concerned [...] The transgressive excitements of carnival performances are not assumed to be all positive, neither am I proposing that all artefacts of popular cultures and countercultures are pleasurable (Presdee, 2000, p. 32).

Carnival therefore denotes the consumption of both negative and positive transgression as a collective melding pot in which violence and crime sit as part of the 'equation of needs' (Presdee, 2000). In the carnival of crime, the 'seeking out of increasingly heightened emotional experiences becomes more and more part of everyday life' (p. 5). Carnivals are traditionally sites of ritual and performance key to understanding the seductiveness (Katz, 1990) of crime. The word 'carnival' also represents the participatory and community nature of the ritual of celebrity that is crucial to Presdee's theory. Human beings enter into a state of carnival, in a carnival space, where ability to transgress or consume transgression is heightened. This can come in the form of criminal activities, the acting out of crime (such as violent video games) or the fascination and celebration of criminals and criminal events (ibid). Celebrated criminality then, as part of the *Carnival of Crime*, is the act of experiencing transgression necessitated by the increasing regulation and restriction understood by Norbert Elias as the *Civilising Process* (Elias, 1994). Carnival is inextricably linked in this way to capitalism as it 'revels' in the thrill and excitement of the act of media-driven global consumption. Carnival is not the act of resistance from dominant culture, it *is* dominant culture. In this instance celebrity, taken to its extreme, is the celebration of crime and criminals. Katz introduces similar notions in his *Seductions of Crime* (1990) when he discusses petty and minor thefts and their attraction through thrill seeking – crime seduces the viewer and consumer by offering a thrill through transgression that they are unable to achieve in their everyday lives.

When directly addressing the notion of criminal celebrity, Penfold-Mounce (2010a) adds Foucault (1977) to Presdee's theory of carnival including 'governance' and 'governmentality'. She understands celebrity primarily as the space between Adorno and Horkheimer's (1979) culture industry and Lash and Lury's (2007) updated adaptation taking into account globalisation and networks. Whilst Adorno and Horkheimian culture industry focuses on top down oppression through culturally identical consumables, and Lash and Lury focus on how objects are mediated as they move through networks, celebrity epitomises Foucauldian governance through the sale of brands, lifestyles and ideologies, largely through forms of new media (Penfold-Mounce, 2010a). The emergence of the 'consumption of people' doubles the way in which citizens can be influenced through their media and commodity exposure with individuals being governed by the celebrity lifestyles that they are exposed to. This

can be witnessed not only through their media appearances but also through reality television and the many product endorsements that utilise the celebrity's 'brand' (ibid).

Understanding celebrity as a form of culture industry governance defines criminal celebrity as a directly influential phenomenon that 'resonates' with public interest (Penfold-Mounce, 2010a). This is not to argue that criminal celebrities are necessarily idolised, but rather their intrigue provokes a collective response from society in the form of fascination, either positive or negative. The celebration of criminals is the intrigue and connection of society with deviant acts and/or actors to the point of the provocation of a collective response in the form of interactions. The difference between fame and celebrity in this instance is the step beyond simple acknowledgement to resonance in the form of interaction. For Penfold-Mounce, responding to criminal media in any way, including reading a news story about violent crime and uttering 'scornful' (p. 64) comments perpetuates criminal celebrity and defines it as an interest in crime to the point of collective communication (ibid).

Seltzer (1998) forms the backbone of the cultural approaches to criminal celebrity with his argument that the attraction to criminal narratives is due to their being a part of what he terms a 'wound culture', similar to the sorts of societies alluded to by Presdee. In wound culture, 'death is theatre for the living' (p. 22). Culture is saturated with confessional television and emotional dramas all centred around trauma and the open wound. From series where participants 'horror stories' are laid bare to dramas like CSI where physical wound in patients is perpetually mirrored by its emotional counterpart in the doctors and nurses – torn and open bodies are endlessly on display. It is within this society of negative spectacle that the Serial Killer thrives (ibid). Wound culture appears as a sort of crossroads between 'private desire' and 'public fantasy', moreover, it is indulgence of Lacanian fantasy within areas of public spectacle. Penfold-Mounce (2010b) uses this theory of society's relationship with the wound to reveal that for hundreds of years, in some way or another, the criminal has been consumed. Her example theorises the fascination of criminal through death and corpses in wound culture. She writes:

> [T]he corpse is consumed as an object of fascinated interest […] visually, audibly, through the written word or through ownership of artefacts including

> body parts or trinkets associated with the criminal or crime (Penfold-Mounce, 2010b, p. 251).

'Enthralment' with the criminal dead manifests as the consumption of souvenirs as well as actual body parts in some instances which, for varying ailments, have been believed to have mystical healing powers and of varying superstitious benefits until as late as the 1940s. Executioners were considered medical professionals, hailed for their honourable medicinal prowess above even that of doctors (Studart, 1999) (Penfold-Mounce, 2010b). The process of death or execution in the context of criminal celebrity, for Penfold-Mounce, immortalises the seductive qualities of the law-breaker within their image and memory. Dead criminals are culturally consumed through merchandise, media, imagery and tourist attractions – directly as a consequence of modern wound culture (ibid).

Whilst Seltzer provides an interesting observation of an age old spectacle encroaching to the point of defining large swathes of Western culture and allowing the phenomena of 'serial killer' to thrive, he provides little explanation of societies attraction to the wound beyond a psychological tendency toward deviant gratification through consumption. In contrast, Duclos (1998), using a theoretical tool he dubs 'the werewolf complex', goes further by arguing that western societies fascination with violence (to the point, in some cases, of celebration), is self-perpetuating and ever-increasing – American culture has an 'intimate bond […] with the spectacle of crime' (p. 4). This bond can be understood in part, as the celebrated characters 'bear the combined effects of the murderer's own boasting, local police tales and sensationalism in the media' (p. 23), they are a construction by society's collective imagination in response to crimes so horrifying that they must be in some way fictionalised into metaphors of pure evil. Mirroring Seltzer (1998), Duclos goes on to argue that integral to American culture is the notion of the warrior, the Viking and the beast, something that is reflected in characters of extreme violence and cruelty. In chapter two, *The Catch*, Duclos likens the violent serial murderer to an efficient and well versed predator courting its prey right up to and until the inevitable catch and kill – further contributing to their celebration in American culture as skilful creatures, the best at what they do, yielding power and dominance through their success.

So the dominant modern literature contributing to the understanding of criminal celebrity is characterised by notions of banality and hyper-typicality associated with shift changes in the nature of the culture industry toward global, primarily mediated experiences (Lash & Lury, 2007). These theories, when applied to the consumption of morbidity, are useful in understanding the counter-cultural and political nature of many criminal cultures. Considering the rise of representations, Debord (1970) makes similar arguments regarding the mediation of culture. He suggests that social relationships between people are mediated by images, and that these 'representations' are lacking in authenticity and are impoverishing the quality of social life. This leaves cultural produce as perpetually mediated, and individuals always several layers away from the 'truth'. For Debord (1970), the 'truth' as a perceived moment inside a surrounding falsehood. It is this lack of authenticity that is simultaneously supposed to define the mechanics of celebrity culture, as well as drive a desire for transgressive criminal celebrity experiences. It is worth turning to Ferris and Harris, before Weber's arguments on charisma, in understanding the significance of anti-capitalism in these theories:

> Celebrity is the site of a surplus of much of contemporary society's charisma – by its very nature it involves individuals with special qualities (Ferris & Harris, 2011, p. 3).

This project is focusing on individuals with special, charismatic qualities that represent difference inside of markets that are characterised by sameness and banality. It could be construed as contradictory to suggest something as capitally ingrained as celebrity could be in any way countercultural, but Weber helps us clear this up:

> An ingenious pirate may be a charismatic ruler, and the charismatic heroes are out for booty – especially, money […] pure charisma is opposed to all systematic economic activities; in fact, it is the strongest anti-economic force, even when it is after material possessions (Weber, 1968, p. 1113).

Pure charisma, and therefore pure celebrity, is opposed to 'systematic economic activities' and the problem of murderabilia can be understood as an extension of this. Celebrity (and in turn, criminal celebrity) are receptacles for charismatic representation after being reservoirs for cultural attention. The criminally charismatic heroes are

usually after 'booty' as human flesh, but they are still argued to represent the opposition of systemic cultural activities. Just as Weber argues that charisma is the strongest anti-economic force, the dominant narrative in both socio-political *and* cultural criminal celebrity literature is that they represent a rejection of dominant ideologies, usually consumer-capitalism, despite more often than not being materially consumed. This dominant narrative is represented in the third, but primarily the second question of this research, applying these ideas to material culture.

Collecting and Consumption

There is a lot of academic literature theorising object accumulation that can be collated under the concept of collecting and that has so far been neglected in the study of murderabilia. To collect actual objects rather than celebrity representations is quite a step, as is the jump from fictional characters to the real:

> One should not, of course, minimise the differences between admiring the fictional character of Hannibal Lecter and admiring a 'real' serial killer, but the difference is one of degree rather than kind (Schmid, 2005, p. 23).

Schmid makes a salient point that is mirrored by other thinkers such as Jarvis (2007), that it is a step of degree and not of type. However, to make the assumption that the admiration of the 'real' is the same as the admiration of fiction without empirical evidence is to academically neglect murderabilia, and to ignore the dichotomy referred to in the previous section, that fascination with serial killer could possibly be one of mediation, or an absence thereof. Before making this conclusion, consideration of the 'real' aspect that Schmid refers to needs to be considered in detail against theories that consider the amassment and use of serial killer objects in this 'admiring' way. A large portion of these theories consider what we are doing when we are purchasing, collecting and owning things – theories that have not yet been applied to the study of murderabilia.

Just as Seltzer 'does little to develop the implications of the serial killer's celebrity' (Schmid, p. 5) discussing criminal celebrity in terms that 'prelude further analysis' (p. 4), Schmid does not extend his analysis of murderabilia far enough and fails to consider the implications of amassing serial killer objects through theories of collecting. Beyond

a fleeting consideration of murderabilia as a manifestation of a well referenced cultural shift, attention needs to shift toward understanding the implications of the collection. Benjamin (1936/2008a) saw collections as identity constructing through historical association. ‘Memorabilia’ and its root: ‘memento’, literally means *reminder, testimonial* or, *memorial.* These synonyms function beyond violent film media or violent video games as they carry value in their cultural history and ‘aura’ (Benjamin, 1936/2008a).

> Murderabilia ranges from serial killer art (paintings, drawings, sculpture, letters, poetry), to body parts (a lock of hair or nail clippings), from crime scene materials to kitsch merchandising that includes serial killer T-Shirts, calendars, trading cards, board games, Halloween masks and even action figures of ‘superstars' like Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer and John Wayne Gacy. Although it might be tempting to dismiss this phenomenon as the sick hobby of a deviant minority, murderabilia is merely the hardcore version of a mainstream obsession with the serial killer (Jarvis, 2007, p. 327).

Here Jarvis provides both a useful illustration of those items that are currently classed as murderabilia, as well as a small but notable assumption. It may be that the violent film industry, which Jarvis extrapolates onto broader American culture, is a slightly less extreme but altogether very similar practice as the enjoyment and collection of murderabilia. Although this does not automatically translate to murderabilia being a *mere extension* of mainstream serial killer culture as characterised by classic films such as *Se7en* (1995). That is not to argue that the process of collecting criminality, for example through murderabilia, is not the same as having a consumerist identity defined by excess, but rather that this connection cannot be assumed without further investigation in the form of empirical research.

Jarvis helpfully points toward representations of collecting as another killer-consumer parallel using the ‘yuppie’ Patrick Bateman in the novel *American Psycho* (2000) alongside the ‘aristocratical’ Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs* (Silence of the Lambs, 1991) as ‘cool collectors and consumers of body parts [boasting] an intimate familiarity with fashionable commodities’ (Jarvis, 2007, p. 330) which will be expanded in the following subsection on filmic representations. It is true that many serial killers

are avid collectors (Vronsky, 2004), but it is too simple to apply this rhetoric to collectors of murderabilia. In the context of murderabilia this raises more questions than it answers. It is true that the serial killer is sold or painted as a protagonist of excess in American films and television, but do collectors consciously mimic the consumption of killers? What value do true-crime artefacts possess for their collectors? Could murderabilia be a purer connection with violence that is less mediated and reliant on fiction, or does murderabilia offer the morbid collector anything that is different than the offerings of film, books and violent videogames?

Walter Benjamin's famous unpacking of his library understands the collection as a gateway to a life-story and a vessel for identity (Benjamin, 1931/2008b). Meanwhile Baudrillard describes serial object accumulation as the process, regardless of the subject matter, of collecting 'yourself' (Baudrillard, 1968/1996, p. 91). However, despite many comparative references to the nature of consumer capitalism as *collection*, or serial killing as *collection*, no investigation has taken place considering the identity impact of those who construct their self through violence. It may be that Western culture is defined by excess that is symbolically akin to serial murder, but the practice of constructing an identity through serial murder itself would be something different. Some authors have begun to argue that the concept of 'aura' is changing. Schmid points to Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936/2008a) in order to contrast the argument that the concept of aura (in the case of traditional, 'one of a kind' artefacts) is lost upon mass mechanical reproduction (Benjamin, 1936/2008a) with the example of celebrity, whose aura grow with every media dissemination and digital reconstruction (Ewen, 1988) (Schmid, 2005). With several scholars arguing that contemporary western society is now full of 'celebrity doters' and adoring fans (Cashmore, 2006), this *new* type of media aura is at the forefront of modern sociology. If the celebrity (and by default, criminal celebrity) can earn aura through the mass reproduction of their image, and that that aura is even *enhanced* through mass reproduction then murderabilia, combining traditional 'originality-aura' and as well as 'celebrity-aura' might be one of the most appropriate examples of Benjamin's (1936/2008a) theory in a contemporary 'wound culture' (Seltzer, 1998).

This contemporary culture is one, according to Lash and Lury, that can be characterised by 'uniqueness and difference'. For Lash and Lury (2007), the shift from 'identity to

difference' is a main characteristic of the global culture industry – where previous mass-culture was defined by its similarity and uniformity (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1979), but is now characterised through media flows and circulation products and brands based on difference. Lash and Lury also discuss the shift from 'commodity to brand', a process whereby the out-dated model of commodities, definable by their identity to one-another is replaced by brands, characterised by the 'logic of difference' (p. 5), their value is present solely in their identifiable differences from other brands, or symbols, or signs. This is not to argue that the shift to a 'global' culture industry has yielded any real or practical differences between products, rather that negligible or even non-existent difference is communicated through a layer that sits above practicality: brands. Together with 'identity to difference', 'commodity to brand' makes up the broader step change in cultural value that Lash and Lury call the 'production of difference'. So does 'brand serial killer' represent an extremely mediated, superficial, *perceived* difference (in its marginal '[enhancement of a] mainstream obsession with the serial killer' (Jarvis, 2007, p. 327))? Or a kind of *actual* difference (in its provision of 'joyful transgression') (Penfold-Mounce, 2010a)?

When research on collection and consumption is mixed with celebrity and culture, these types of questions arise. Daniel Miller (2008) is one of many authors who challenges the assumption that modern networked capitalism yields more superficial and materialistic consumers. Instead, those with close relationships to things are more likely to have close relationships to people, and those person-object relationships are multifaceted in their meaning and value. In other words, purchasing murderabilia might not simply be an extreme version of watching a violent film, but a closer personal connection instead. Miller goes on to argue that if listened to intently, things can provide 'access to an authentic other voice' (p. 2). This is not to argue that 'objects' have no external meaning outside of their consumption, but rather that the internal meaning and authenticity of murderabilia is a potentially interesting facet that has been neglected.

In 1998, Miller makes a striking connection between 'shopping' and 'sacrifice', likening consumption to a 'sacrificial ritual'. Extreme expenditure, transcendence and dissemination are the three slices of Miller's edifice that frame consumption in this way. He writes that 'shopping is a practice that might have ritual structure, that might be

involved in the creation of value' (Miller, 1998, p. 113). For Miller, 'shopping is dominated by your imagination of others' (Miller, 1998, p. 3) and the cultural study of shopping is something of a keyhole through which you may be able to glimpse something about the lived experience of people's relationships, to the extreme extent that it is more efficient than directly studying relationships in themselves (Miller, 1998). The implication being that prefacing purchasing choices is a desire to influence one's personal relationships, and that tangible within purchasing choices is a kind of social identity. This hidden meaning behind objects is the backbone of purchases. In Miller's writing it is perhaps coincidental that the word sacrifice carries connotations that are also a phrase applicable to serial murder, and surprising that it has not yet been applied in such a way. Others have used equally savage concepts as metaphor or figure for consumerism, such as 'cannibalism' (Root, 1996) (Bartolovich, 1998). Authors have also likened the root culture of celebrity to faith (Ferris, 2007), whilst others apply the *rituality* of serial killing as intrinsic to its cultural appeal (Seltzer, 1998), and yet a consideration of the consumption of true crime through this lens eludes us.

So theories of purchasing and ownership are important when researching murderabilia, but that is before the objects have subsequently been ordered within a collection. As Benjamin begins with *Unpacking My Library* (1931/2008b), Miller continues in *The Comfort of Things* (2008). Miller poses questions to ordinary people about the inside of their houses. From their wallpaper and carpet, to their ornaments and collections, to the style of their kitchen units, right down to the position of things in order or 'higgledy-piggledy' (p. 2), people are observed to be expressing themselves through their purchasing choices in a kind of language of consumption, an 'authentic inner voice' (p. 2). This choice of language is important not only as it claims 'authenticity' and truth, but because it implies that a person's personality is better expressed through their possessions. Miller goes as far as to describe, in one instance, a lack of such possessions as 'violent' in that emptiness offers no instruments of expression against which a person can be understood. This is best understood through Miller's example of clothing. One of the key aspects to understanding individuals' expression of personality through clothes is not *what* you wear, but *how* you wear it (Miller, 2009). This is true to the extent that imposing a distinction between person and thing, or understanding them as discrete entities, is illusory. People construct things out of materials, and in turn are constructed by the things that they have chosen to own.

There is an importance in things to understanding relationships (Miller, 1998), the operationalization of things as tools for expression (Miller, 2008), the inseparable connection between humans and things (Miller, 2009), the biographical narrative of collections (Benjamin, 1931/2008b) and the aura that accompanies items that are free of mechanical reproduction (Benjamin, 1936/2008a). All of these concepts mean it is not sufficient to theorise the purchasing of murderabilia without considering the way in which it is purchased, and the function for which it is used. How is it 'worn'? What representations does it carry? What does all of this say about the individual that consumes it, and the society within which it is consumed? Murderabilia has not yet been considered in these terms, and doing so is a necessary addition to the criminological study of representations of crime.

At this stage, the inclusion of theories of collecting, purchasing, branding and owning does little to induce clarity. On the one hand, the idea that humans' relationships with consumption are not always superficial, but often a practical tool for expression and identity construction support arguments painting the consumption of crime as a means by which to escape the banality of consumer-capitalism (Presdee, 2000). By arguing that an object's meaning does not necessarily live within the object but instead is based in experience and context, it is plausible that these extremely unique objects (murderabilia) are serving the purpose of liberating individuals from a real or perceived cultural uniformity. On the other hand, the ability for objects to serve as vessels through which identities can be constructed does not necessarily exempt them from being mediated consumer-items, nor does it necessitate a difference from the consumption of any other forms of violent culture. Consequentially, the inclusion of these cultural theories into an empirical criminology of murderabilia is necessary in order to throw light on this contradiction.

Representation and Film

When considering how crime is represented through objects, it is important to consider representations of crime elsewhere. Violence and crime have been massively influential in late 20th and early 21st century mainstream cinema (Jarvis, 2007). It is in cinema that the serial killer is most often depicted, and through cinema that a cultural fascination with serial killers as referenced by Seltzer (1998), Duclos (1998) and to an extent,

Kooistra (1989) is most evident. It is important to consider these arguments to approach the third research question, addressing how crime is represented through mechanically reproduced simulations of transgression.

Dyer credits the film *Se7en* (1995), where an anti-hero kills seven victims in line with the seven deadly sins, with changing the modern serial killer genre, arguing that Morgan Freeman and Brad Pitt were reduced to mere co-stars alongside the frontline allure of sin. The killer, Doe, does not fit the archetype of a serial killer in that he does not have previous convictions, is not certified as insane, has not suffered from childhood abuse, is not committing the murders for sexual gratification (Dyer, 1999, pp. 35-36). By doing this, Fincher is moving the character of the serial killer away from previous fictional killers such as Buffalo Bill in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), and Leatherface in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). Detective Somerset (in the film *Se7en*) approaches the crimes as if they have meaning, and throughout the film *Se7en*, the serial killer is portrayed as a meticulous and meaning-making machine. 'Somerset and Doe are alike: intellectual, painstaking, absorbed; and both have a consciousness of sin' (Dyer, 1999, p. 11). In positioning the meticulous and insightful detective (Somerset) as the law abiding half of the serially murderous criminal (Doe), Fincher is dissolving the boundary between legality and illegality, positioning both characters as different types of justice-seekers: two sides of the same coin (Dyer, 1999) (Fincher, 1995).

Considering victims is a means to the same end, the fact that they represent the seven deadly sins is also revolutionary in the sense that they are *not* perceived to be innocent. In an unprecedented turn away from the archetypal serial killer victim, the seven cadavers in *Se7en* represent the flaws in contemporary capitalism – the implication being that the killer is not the 'pure evil' that we are used to, he has principles (Dyer, 1999). By making this point, Dyer is confirming two things. First, that there is such a thing as an archetypal serial killer in American Film fiction and that that *type* of serial killer has infiltrated cultural consciousness. The emotionally damaged, eccentric, sexually motivated, white homosexual male (Dyer, 1993) has come to epitomise what it means to be a serial killer, and to commit serial murder, in the collective transgressive imagination. Second, that departing from said archetype is extremely unusual and interesting. Any serial killer that varies from said archetype is considered abnormal. Female serial killers, for example, who tend not to kill for sexual reasons, are

historically argued to not class as serial killers at all and attract attention due to their unusualness with their crimes being comfort or maternally motivated (Jewkes, 2004) (Holmes, et al., 1991).

'Why are all serial killers white? Why are so many serial killers homosexual? And why aren't the victims of serial killing interesting?', are the three questions that Dyer (1993) uses to confront the serial killer archetype, which are useful in pinning down the prototypical 'filmic' serial killer. First, where police are much more likely to seek out black people for murder of the non-serial kind, they will look for white people when it comes to serial murder – this does not necessarily mean that serial killers are all white, but that they are overwhelmingly reputed to be. Second, when white male serial killers are not killing innocent white women, they are killing innocent white men in a much greater ratio than the general population. Perhaps because it has historically been 'illegal and despised' (p. 114), homosexuality is used to intensify the cultural representation of the serial killer as deviant, or 'abnormal'. Third and finally, the victims of serial killers are beaten into the shadows by the gruesome charisma of the killers to the extent that they are represented as 'plain Jane', the everyday, the unexceptional girl (or boy in the disproportionately large but still significantly fewer cases) (Dyer, 1993). In the case of murderabilia, it is not clear to what extent these established cultural archetypes are being relied upon, and how they influence collections.

Moving away from film, scholars have argued, notably Yvonne Jewkes in the context of crime (2004), that news media disseminates crime in line with the dominant ideology. This straightforward Marxist approach suggests that prevailing representations will embody the interests of the riling classes and the capitalist media. The result being that media attention is directed towards crimes committed by those with the least power in society, or crimes that have a sensational quality (Jewkes, 2004). Assuming that these biased representations have infiltrated the public consciousness, then this standpoint would suggest that interest in crime and murderabilia is less of a foray into the real, but rather and indulgence in extreme media objects. These objects, cultivated in line with the dominant capitalist ideology, would favour the sensational elements of the criminal for a profit motive. This narrative is continued into serial killer film-fiction, that has received increasing attention over the last half century. Simpson argues that this is, in

part, perpetuated by the news media and the massive amounts of attention killers such as John Wayne Gacy and Jeffrey Dahmer have been bestowed (Simpson, 2000). For;

> we inevitably create myths about them – works of fiction that may superficially portray the serial killer as the ultimate alien outsider or enemy of society but which simultaneously reflect back upon society its own perversions (Simpson, 2000, p. 1).

Despite beginning in true crime, the 'myth' or brand of serial killer has become a product of Western culture. That is to argue that true serial killers, through their sensationalisation in the press and in film, are morphing into cultural icons. These cultural icons represent institutionalised cultural fears rather than real tangible threat and in that sense are purely hegemonic (Simpson, 2000). The industry behind these cultural icons, the mass media, are extremely reflexive in their need to change the narrative in response to shifting cultural fears and in that sense, the serial killer is a icon of fear. More than their embodiment of cultural fear, though, serial killers in fiction are killing machines whose murders are empowered with a 'pseudo-divine aura' (p. 14). They are pervasive in their ability to harness power and represent political and social emancipation, they are naturally 'American' in their individualism (p. 135). This level of American-ism, this emancipatory anti-hegemonic aura that the cultural icon of the serial killer harnesses, also makes complicated the dichotomy discussed throughout this literature. On one hand, murderabilia collection might represent an interest in the emancipatory power that comes with serial killer, on the other, the murderabilia collector could be consuming an item that has been selected due to its efficient depiction of the prototypical serial killer. It is interesting to consider to what extent this nuanced archetype, this serial killer 'brand', has infiltrated and has influence upon other forms of culture that feature serial killer content, as these arguments have not been extended beyond film.

It is essential to understand how pervasive representations of killing and death are in the public conscious. 'From *saw* and *Hostel* to *The Passion of the Christ* and *Sweeney Todd*, the corpse is the star of the show' (Fotlyn, 2008, p. 153) – from film, to crime drama, to forensic voyeurism in shows like *CSI, Crime Scene Investigation* are credited with changing the way that we look at death and corpses (Penfold-Mounce, 2015). A

multitude of researchers have considered the ubiquity of the transgressive acts of crime and death in the mainstream of culture. Michele Aaron's *Death and the Moving Image* (2015) tells us that death is simultaneously 'everywhere and nowhere' (2015, p. 1) in the contemporary West because it is such a powerful cultural transgression outside of fiction, yet so ritualistically embraced inside of popular culture. She refers to our new Western cultural consciousness of death and dying as a product of the 'Hollywood system', death being something that has shifted continually out of the home and into the movie theatre over the last hundred years. This is mirrored by the decline of representations of natural death, replaced instead with brutality and violence. This, our primary experience of death and dying, is argued to be aesthetic (as opposed to moral), representational, and consumed through popular culture. Our attention is not on human suffering, but has shifted to the voyeuristic pathology of watching (Aaron, 2015).

Bacon (2015) echoes the dominance of representational experiences in terms of violence in addition to death. He argues that violence is one of the most common narrative elements in popular fiction and as such it is tamed, made tolerable and enjoyable, and ingrained into our culture. We use fiction to understand and cope with violence – violence is 'as much a part of art and entertainment as it is of life – if not even more so' (Bacon, 2015, p. 11). As such it is important to understand these primary points of contact (representations) that people have with violence. Clayton calls the Hollywood slasher genre a 'voyeuristic source of violent male misogynistic pleasure' (Clayton, 2015, p. 6) which is an accusation that, as discussed, has been levied against murderabilia in equal measure. But in the same collection, Och tells us that neopostmodern violent cinema has taken a shift towards 'the relationship to 'authenticity' and the real' (Och, 2015, p. 196) in an attempt to connect more strongly with an oversaturated viewership, something that could translate into material purchases during a similar time period. Still, in film, Aaron argues that the 'pain or smell of death, the banality of physical, or undignified, decline, the dull ache of mourning, are rarely seen' (2015, p. 1) with murderabilia making a mixed effort to unveil this deeper transgression.

Museums and Heritage

Another vast area of research where objects with violent histories are consumed is inside of the museums and heritage sector where the study of the 'politics of display' (Macdonald, 1998) and the preservation of objects with turbulent pasts is debated. Difficult heritage has been studied extensively in the context of national shame or global atrocity, but murderabilia has been overlooked. Topics such as Nazi Germany and the Holocaust museum frequently arise (Macdonald, 2009) along with Hiroshima (Utaka, 2009), Auschwitz (Young, 2009) and Alcatraz (Strange & Kempa, 2003). These are national plights; disasters; tragedies; wars (Logan, 2009). Difficult heritage study considers national negotiations of race heritage (Nieves, 2009), Gender heritage (Cote, 2009) and national histories (Willis, 2009). Modern Western society is awash with these sites of pain and violent history. Research into heritage has investigated their preservation on a national and conservation level, whilst 'dark tourism' has considered the spacial commercialisation of death and violence. Dark tourism attests to the popularity and commercial success of smaller scale 'black spots' (Rojek, 1993) in recent years and decades. Graham Dann used the phrase 'milking the macabre' to describe western fascination with and capitalisation of sites of death and destruction (1998), Seaton preferred 'thanatourism' (1996) but 'dark tourism' has dominated since Lennon and Foley coined the term (1996), encompassing all research in the social sciences of tourism associated with death and the macabre. In chapter 4, *Displaying Transgression*, these theories are needed to help analyse museum exhibits of violence and death, their commodification, their integration with popular culture and a reliance on notorious crimes. On the commodification of dark places, Tunbridge and Ashworth write that:

> Heritage theorists note that 'dark' places are especially marketable if they were notorious, if the perpetrators of death or pain were especially cruel [...] or if those who suffered were famous or especially sympathetic victims (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996, pp. 104-5).

Themes of the celebrification of crime and the importance of notoriety that have been discussed in celebrity studies (Penfold-Mounce, 2010a) extend to the studies of dark tourism (Stone, 2006) and macabre consumerism. Dark tourism research dates back to

Rojek's (1993) book *Ways of Escape* and his notion of 'black spots' when considering tourism and pilgrimage with graveyards and famous deaths. Wilbert and Hansen (2009) outline this market by considering tourist walks in East London through the murder sites of the infamous killer, Jack The Ripper. The authors discuss the symbolic power possessed by the walk leader as s/he paints an exaggerated and dramatised picture of a late 19th century space overlaid onto 21st century London. For the tourists this is as much of a dip into London's difficult heritage as it is an expose of the famous murder. Participants take photographs of the macabre sites, buy merchandise pertaining to the crimes and are invited to re-enact the scenes of horror that took place in 1888. The authors direct our imagination back to a time immediately after the killings when home owners would charge a fee for the privilege of visiting these sites of death, or simply for offering a glimpse of the private land from an upstairs window. This shows a clear and sustained fascination with murder and violent criminality although dark tourism research, the focus is on the market for and commodification of a dark past overlooking material consumption. Continuing with the example of East London, the The Kray Twins reinforce this point (Ronnie and Reggie Kray, 1960s London gangsters). Lengthy research examines the details of their celebrity popularity (Jenks & Lorentzen, 1997) (Penfold-Mounce, 2010a), yet little has been done to understand the material consumption borne out of these spatially commodified events. These issues of commodification and preservation extend directly out of tourist walks into museum spaces, but they can also provide insights for private collections of murderabilia.

Dark tourism is age old. Seaton (1996) argues that long before tourism for the purpose of leisure, death has been a catalyst of travel, frequently through religious pilgrimage. War tourism, he continues, is likely the single largest category in the world. A notion that is confirmed when considering Roman gladiatorial games, sites of public execution (Stone & Sharpley, 2008), Roman catacombs and the Tower of London (Strange & Kempa, 2003). Efforts have been made to clean up this large and unwieldy category – Seaton has constructed five categories of dark tourist attractions but they are loose and imprecise. His category 'travel to sites of individual or mass death after they have occurred' would assert no distinction between a local criminal celebrity or Auchwitiz, two inherently different sites of pain, and museums do not neatly fit into any of the categories. Dann (1998) also makes an attempt to categorise types of attraction with violent criminals fitting more comfortably into 'houses of horror' (ibid). Miles (2002)

considers sites *of* 'death and suffering' to be considerably darker than sites *associated with* death and suffering, demonstrating the importance of distance-removed from the event, but it is not yet clear where the darkness of dark consumption sits within this literature.

At a glance, murderabilia seems to be at an intersection between crime media (such as crime fiction, or violent films), and dark tourist attractions (such as Auschwitz, or 9/11 Ground Zero) – although it ventures from frameworks laid out in these studies of 'dark tourism' (Stone, 2006) and deviant hobbies. Murderabilia is often characterised as one of the 'darkest' hobbies, yet it does not correlate with the 'darkest' forms on Stone's framework of dark tourism supply (p. 151). For Stone, the darkest of attractions should be educationally oriented (presumably as justification for increased detail and exposure to death), accurate to the location of the atrocity, and should not be commercialised for entertainment purposes. Yet murderabilia consumption is rarely proximate to the scene of the crime, and usually framed around entertainment. One strain of commonality is in the consumer perception of 'authenticity' that is required to make a morbid attraction darker than its peers – something that the collection of violent historical artefacts can share with sites of historical violence.

Key Concepts

These five research areas will be underpinned by two key concepts; transgressive imaginations and authenticity. This begins with the fundamentals of cultural theory in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (1979). Ideas of the increasing sameness and banality in the cultural marketplace fortify ideas that consuming transgression might be a mode of rebellion against this. Further shifts in consumer capitalism towards theories of signs, symbols and brands as value markers (Lash & Lury, 2007) have described these trends as shifts from 'identity to difference'. And this requirement for uniqueness, truthfulness and difference in modern consumption can be witnessed inside modern celebrity, in museology, and most of all inside the study of collecting. So outside of these underpinning theories of consumption and the culture industry, it is useful to borrow Benjamin (1931/2008b)'s concept of Aura in order to apply these ideas to objects and to understand them in terms of shifts towards mechanical reproduction. It is also useful to use Baudrillard's (1968/1996) more recent

work in applying concepts of aura and auratic value to antiques and a wider range of objects outside of the arts. On antiques, he writes that 'they appear to run counter to the requirements of functional calculation, and answer to other kinds of demands such as witness, memory, nostalgia or escapism' (1968/1996, p. 77), so this work is particularly fitting for a project addressing the memories attached to crime objects or the contested function of escapism and transgression that they serve. Baudrillard's work also lends us ideas compatible with analysing the symbolic, simulations and brands, and so it is valuable for developing a criminology of murderabilia. On top of this background of cultural consumption, the framework will build upon O'Neill and Seal's (2012) transgressive imaginations thesis and develop a contribution of 'authenticity' as a way to understand transgressive consumption.

Transgressive imaginations

The most complete ideas considering this socially and culturally informed understanding of criminality is probably *Transgressive Imaginations* from O'Neill and Seal (O'Neill & Seal, 2012), and understanding the position of murderabilia in perpetuating, reinforcing and developing 'transgressive imaginations' forms the backbone of this thesis. It is necessary to lay out the boundaries of this approach. O'Neill and Seal set out to develop our understanding of transgression in representation and culture and its relationship and impact on real, lived criminality. They levy importance on the way in which crime is framed in the cultural consciousness and cite Phillips and Strobl (2006) in suggesting that media are 'spaces […] where the meaning of crime and punishment is created, consumed and re-created' (p. 307). They go as far as to argue that fiction is often interwoven with reality to such an extent when it comes to crime that it is possible to see instances where popular culture has greatly influenced the justice system: 'states have passed punitive laws to control [the fictionalised notion of 'sexual predator'] transforming into technical language a term that had largely appeared in fictional narratives previously (O'Neill & Seal p101). The serial killer as a cultural figure, it is argued, is a product of modernity in that developments in consumer capitalism, urbanism and mass media have allowed this extremely rare act of sexualised violence to develop into a popular and common genre (Haggerty 2009). O'Neill and Seal demonstrate this through the example of Jack The Ripper, arguing that:

> [A] burgeoning mass media […] and an increasingly literate population, meant that the news of killings and speculation as to the motivations of their perpetrator made the imagined Jack famous (O'Neill & Seal p102).

So it is reasonable to assume that the increased exposure of criminals and their consumption in the 21st century will further develop this trend. The idea that crime and transgression are culturally constructed, a principal foundation of cultural criminology, means that the discipline is weaker for a lack of a proper criminology of murderabilia, a growing way that transgression is consumed.

With particular reference to the serial killer as an example of the 'blurring of fact and fiction' (p100), O'Neill and Seal develop their cultural and artistic ethnography into a typology of real and imagined sexualised violence, one that is useful to apply to murderabilia. The first of the four typologies for the cultural characteristics of serial killer is 'evil genius' – the rhetoric that a ritualised violent killer should be scrupulously clever, white, middle class and male. This is a characteristic easily revealed on the surface of murderabilia when considering some offerings from the most popular outlets – John Wayne Gacy, Jeffrey Dahmer and Charles Manson enjoy unrivalled popularity. The second, 'mass in person', is equally applicable to this research. The theme that the serial killer represents the dark side of humanity is cited by many participants as integral to their attraction to murderabilia, with popular Ted Bundy often lauded for his ability to court dual personalities of 'normal middle class American' and 'psychopath'. The third, 'transgressive outsider', is particularly pertinent when considering murderabilia. Interpreting serial killer as a means to transcend everyday life and the cultural consumption of serial killer, in turn, as a means to transgressing the monotony of modernity is a sense-making interpretation of such a deviant hobby. This is bolstered by 'mass in person' (the serial killer as normal or ordinary American), but is tempered by the presence of 'evil genius' (disproportionate investment in the most astute and notorious criminals) given their presence in the cultural mainstream. The question remains, to what extent can the embracement of such culturally dominant narratives of transgression be understood as a form of transgressive rebellion in itself?

To this end, murderabilia's relationship with the fourth and final cultural characteristic, 'upholder of social order', is the most complex. O'Neill and Seal remind us that 'rather

than transgressing society's boundaries, [sometimes] serial killers can be interpreted as helping to keep them in place' (2012, p. 107). They also remind us that serial killers have the potential to court great symbolic contradictions of order/disorder or transgression/upholding boundaries (Simpson, 2000 *cited in* O'Neill & Seal, 2012). They cite radical feminist perspectives of serial killers upholding narratives of patriarchal control, and reinforcing the dominant social order by further victimising and devaluing already marginalised social groups. A third way in which serial killing can bolster social structures rather than transgress them is through the maintaining of established consumption practices.

Authenticity

Using *Transgressive Imaginations* (O'Neill & Seal, 2012) as a conceptual base for thinking about the social construction of crime, this project will propose that the concept of 'authenticity' can help understand the consumption of crime in popular culture, particularly in the case of objects and artefacts. The final piece of the theoretical underpinning of this thesis then is theories of the role of 'authenticity' in modern consumption. Root's ideas about the pathologies of consumer capitalism used in the previous chapter can provide a good summary:

> Authenticity is a tricky concept because of the way the term can be manipulated and used to convince people they are getting something profound and substantial when they are just getting merchandise [...] authenticity is the currency at play in the marketplace of cultural difference (Root, 1996, p. 78).

Authenticity *is* a tricky concept precisely because it reinforces the oxymoron of *consumed transgression*. It is the mechanism that allows something to be simultaneously unique and genuine at the same time as being reproduced and bound to cultural norms. From this theoretical standpoint it is possible to investigate whether it is authenticity, and not violence, death or crime, that is the currency at play in the marketplace of murderabilia and crime objects. This use makes this word a contradiction in terms, but its vagueness is not necessarily a drawback. Sartre used the word to refer to a characteristic in human beings, not objects or works of art, and the

term has been criticised for its transparency or lack of specificity. But as Baugh indicates, its applicability in multiple settings does not render it useless in any:

> 'Authentic', like 'good', may be a general term whose specific meaning depends on the context in which it is used. [...] As long as we do not confuse [them], no harm will come of using the same term. [...] the appropriateness of calling humans 'authentic' does not render a description of an artwork as 'authentic' inappropriate (Baugh, 1988, p. 477).

These applications conjure different meanings and this is why Sartre's work on the topic has only been briefly considered. Whereas Walter Benjamin's concept of *aura* can only be truly applied to something that is not mechanically reproduced and has historical value, brands can approximate aura using authenticity. Authenticity can be applied to objects, people, antiques and merchandise. It is a symbolic concept by design. The concept draws all five areas of literature together. It has been applied to human celebrity brands, notably by Moulard et al (2015). They argue that the modern phenomena of celebrity without talent or significant achievement (for example, reality television celebrity), primarily plays upon the concept of authenticity as a value marker because the characters are deemed to be acting in a way that most closely resembles their true self (as opposed to a film star, for example, who may be seen as a more distanced and inauthentic persona). Tolson (2001) has echoed these sentiments before. In this sense, the concept closely matches the phenomena of criminal celebrity for their talentless but primal activities.

The concept is used extensively in the arts as well. Baugh argues that it is the central value indicator in the arts – 'authenticity can function as both a descriptive and critical concept in relation to works of art' (1988, p. 477) – it is objectively better for a work of art to be authentic, whilst at the same time, authenticity is what makes art stand out from non-art. Even more appropriately for this project, 'authenticity' has been applied to self-taught art, amateur art and craft with Fine concluding that 'the desire for authenticity now occupies a central position in contemporary culture' (Fine, 2003). Most prominently, authenticity is a staple of tourism studies with research showing that 'perceived authenticity' is a good indicator of tourist satisfaction (Chhabra, et al., 2003). Olsen writes:

> The tourist has for a long time been associated with an assumed drive in Western culture for authenticity. This authenticity has been regarded as located in the past, in objects, in the divine inspiration of the artist, and among those whom the West has situated outside modernity. Authenticity is then seen as a counterconcept to features ascribed to modernity (Olsen, 2002, p. 176)

So authenticity is in principle a counterconcept to modernity, or a way of understanding consumption experiences that want to escape the constraints of modernity – and so is highly suited to the study of criminal celebrity and the consumption of transgression. Central is the idea that alienation in modern consumption leads to a desire for experiences that feel 'authentic' and that tourism in the first instance can be understood as a quest for authenticity (MacCannell, 1976). The concept brings together the plethora of related areas that can be studied using murderabilia and provides a theoretical standpoint for understanding leisure consumption – particularly that that is considered primal or uncivilised – be it the consumption of celebrity, brands, objects or tourist experiences.

Summary

In conclusion, a full study of criminal murderabilia and its place within consumer culture is almost entirely missing, and can be developed by taking influence from five interdisciplinary streams of literature that have touched upon related areas of study; celebrity; cultural criminology; collecting and consumption; representations; and museums. Inside of these areas, a study of crime in consumer culture could benefit from approaching the topic not just in terms of fandom, but also in terms of the consumption of tangible objects using work such as Benjamin (1936/2008a) or Miller (2009) to understand the cultural dynamics of deviant consumption. It is necessary to consider cultural representations of criminals, such as through film and fiction (Dyer, 1999), or in news media (Jewkes, 2004) and to question how these representations are communicated in objects. Or in museology, how 'difficult heritage' (Macdonald, 2009) is negotiated on larger national scales or how 'dark tourism' (Stone, 2006) has commodified crime could help form an understanding of crime objects as well.

These several streams of established literature raise many questions, central of which are: is consuming murderabilia an extension of crime fiction and of an established fictional 'wound culture' (Seltzer, 1998) that can be understood as an extremity or concentration of regular capitalist consumerism? Or is it a conscious and transgressive step away from consumerism characterised by a desire for unmediated, uncommon, and authentic experiences? Or a combination thereof? These issues emerge from a central contradiction between the paucity of literature directly addressing murderabilia, and the greater body of work considering celebrity, fandom and criminal celebrity. Criminological work considering murderabilia is limited to some theoretical work from an English literature perspective, using this deviant subculture as a microcosm through which to understand the state of wider Western consumerism (Jarvis, 2007), (Schmid, 2005). The concept of murder objects being a more extreme but conceptually identical indulgence in Americanised consumerism is dominant in these texts.

On the other hand, literature considering criminal celebrity (Penfold-Mounce, 2010a) tends to focus on what would appear to be the opposite: the pursuit of authentic experiences. Some scholars have linked the extreme 'hypertypicality' and repetition of modern consumer-capitalist life to fascination of things that are abnormal and outside of the realm of the everyday (Seltzer, 1998), others suggest that it is compensation for a lack of stimulation in repetitive 21st century culture (Jensen, 1992). Presdee suggests that individuals indulge in criminal culture in pursuit of a kind of 'true' experience that it is difficult to obtain when all surrounding culture is mediated and diluted (Presdee, 2000). Fox and Levin (2005) tell us that violent criminals have 'distinguished themselves in the worst possible ways by reaching the pinnacle of 'success' as murderers' (p. 6) in the contradictory sense that murder and success do not seem to naturally mix.

But at the same time Schmid reminds us that 'celebrity culture and consumer culture intermingle just as complexly with serial killers as they do with film stars' (2005, p. 21) and that they mix more easily than they may appear. To unpack the apparent relationship between 'the joy of transgression' (Penfold-Mounce, 2010a) and 'the joy of contemporary consumerism' (Schmid, 2005), it was necessary to develop a theoretical framework as follows. This research will apply cultural theories of objects, such as Benjamin's aura (Benjamin, 1936/2008a) and Baudrillard's work on antiques

(Baudrillard, 1968/1996) to murderabilia in order to include cultural objects into theories of transgressive imaginations. It will propose the concept of ‘authenticity’ as a way to theorise the of consumption of items that are transgressive.

3- Method

This chapter will begin by re-stating the research questions emerging from the literature review, followed by an explanation of the ethnographic research methodology and theoretical framework used in this project to answer them. After this, the tripartite research design that forms this ethnography including sampling, timescale and scope of the methods as well as their limitations will be outlined. Then, a detailed consideration of the complex ethical debates surrounding covert and digital research is necessary and will be outlined in the context of this project. Questions have been raised regarding the validity of online research methods and their ability to yield accurate an unbiased data (Beer, 2009). It will be argued, after the ethical considerations, that these biases benefit this particular project more then they detract. Before concluding, a retrospective review of the difficulties and complexities of conducing this international, mixed method qualitative research project will be carried out.

Research Questions

This project addresses material cultural produce relating to 'criminal celebrities' (Penfold-Mounce, 2010a) and not the criminal celebrities themselves. Although certain qualities in the individual criminals and case studies will to some extent define their fan-base and associated commodities, emphasis will be on the cultural artefacts themselves as well as their consumption. Emerging from the literature review, this project has three substantive research questions:

1) What narratives are privileged in museum exhibitions of crime?
2) How is 'transgression' consumed through the collection of criminal objects?
3) How is crime imagined and represented through mechanically reproduced 'simulations' of transgression?

Methodology

> It's not clear that the average collector can even articulate why he or she collects such ghoulish material (Asma, 2009, p. 355)

Asma's brief comments on murderabilia indicate that simply asking participants for their stories about murderabilia will be epistemologically flawed, and instead a mixed method approach is necessary. This project aims to explore a niche subculture. Whilst the values of morbid artefacts, such as murderabilia, are of high importance to this research project – those artefacts' position within a broader system of consumption is of equal interest – further necessitating a mixture of methods. A methodology that values the situated meanings of artefacts and accesses culture through human interaction with artefacts is required. Most academic work considering murderabilia and morbid culture has been theoretical, (for example: Schmid, (2005) and Jarvis, (2007)). The same is the case in celebrity studies, as Ferris (2007) explains:

> Much of the scientific writing on celebrity is partially or entirely theoretical, attempting to conceptualise the phenomenon by relying on abstractions rather than empirical data. These theoretical writings are useful in that they problematize fame and celebrity as concepts. However, the authors often use personal impressions and observations to support their theoretical claims, and these observations are likely to be selective and unsympathetic. Such selectivity may facilitate the pathologising of celebrity in theoretical works (p. 373).

So there is little to set precedent for this type of project inside of celebrity studies, and the same can be argued for criminology to an extent. Here, Ferris points to two methodological concerns. First, she highlights the selective nature of case study research addressing celebrity and the loose theoretical connections that follow. Second, she describes this selective approach as highlighting the conceptual, and not *observable* traits of fame and celebrity culture. Therefore, when studying objects, it is again necessary to turn back to theories of consumption, collecting and material culture in order to craft an appropriate research framework. In doing so, this project will avoid both of these issues raised by Ferris by conducting a multi-method, international research project that relies on empirical data. This will be achieved by conducting a

‘Sociology of cultural objects’ that relies on extensive empirical evidence, and does not focus on individual criminal case studies.

The Sociology of the Object

Once again, it is necessary to turn to theories of collecting and consumption in order to form a useful framework for researching criminal material culture. Part of the method for this project, drawing further from the existing key concepts discussed in the review of the literature (Chapter 2), is influenced by Scott Lash and Celia Lury’s *Global Culture Industry: the Mediation of Things* (2007). Lash and Lury propose a ‘sociology of the object’ as a method of ‘tracking and tracing’ cultural artefacts as they develop through their consumption from the point of conception, dubbed the ‘life-course’ of the object. Its characteristics; sale; consumption; concept and changing representations through contexts are the aspects that build the life-course of objects. Objects are considered not as stationary but as networked and animated sets of relations in motion (ibid). This is an ethnographic approach, specifically geared towards material culture in a networked society, and is particularly useful for the second research question. Although its focus on representations makes it appropriate for the third research question, and its applicability to many different areas of consumption means that it will also work for the first.

The actual process of ‘tracking and tracing’ is relatively ambiguous although it is implied, through phrases such as *movement*, *mapping*, *following*, and *landscape* (Lash & Lury, 2007) that all data, especially that which is highly visible, should be considered as important. The emphasis here is on building a full picture, with as few omissions as possible, of the life-course of cultural artefacts at every stage of their movement. Lash and Lury execute this method by narrating a ‘biography’ using sources as far reaching as possible. It is similar to traditional ethnographic writing, but these sources are not restricted to offline information and include publicly available data such as articles, archives and images as well as first hand interviews. There is an emphasis on context throughout: ‘the object’s state is embedded in a complex space and cannot be separated from it’ (ibid p18). Electronic sources are seen as an essential benefit to understanding the broad narrative of an object, rather than an unnecessary barrier to representative generalizability. This emphasis on the networked flows of culture and on online

methods is particularly useful for the second research question addressing the manipulation of cultural representations. The phrase 'object' should not be considered in its traditional sense as a physical item with tangible parameters. Cultural objects can be made up of events, images, people and places. 'Objects' are the building blocks of cultures. Although a concise definition of object is not forthcoming in their work, Lash and Lury describe:

> [T]he object [is] a sort of singularity [that does not] exist ideally in a steady state or condition, but as a set of relations. […] an individual object may be many or manifold, without having a unity of its parts […], [an] object's state is embedded in a complex space and cannot be separated from it (Lash & Lury, 2007, pp. 17-18).

These objects enhance cultures as they move through the media-scape and transform through their repeated consumption. In other words, objects are living organisms made up by their consumption in different contexts. This aids and necessitates the splitting of this thesis into three empirical chapters, each addressing a separate research question and analysing a separate primary dataset. All cultural encounters, from many different perspectives, are equally as important as they shape the life-course of cultures and of objects. Objects, though, are not accessible in their own right. Digging deeper into Lash and Lury's methodology reveals a foundation put forward by Howard Becker (1982) (2007). As Becker indicates in *Telling About Society* (2007), culture is only visible in the form of representations. A portrait of a criminal celebrity (Penfold-Mounce, 2010a), for example, is one person's representation of a culturally iconic figure. Objects are reimagined through their manipulation and in the process, leave a trace that can be used as data. In this sense, this project researches consumption and representations and not objects directly.

If cultural representations are not being used, and therefore are not being considered in the context of the actions that they are subject to, they are not fully in existence (Becker, 2007). As Becker argues, we should 'understand the expression *a film* as shorthand for the activity of 'making a film' or 'seeing a film'' (p. 15). This means that a medium cannot be understood as separate from the organisational constraints that constitute its existence, for example: distance and budget. The same is also true for the lived

experiences of an object. Becker argues that objects should be viewed as the suspended remnants of collective actions, brought to life only when part of a human interaction. In other words, a film is not available as a cultural entity to be accessed objectively by itself as its meaning is inherently social and dependent entirely on human context. Physical culture such as art, music and film should be studied as activities rather than objects (ibid). This is to argue that representations, the focus of this research project, are constructed from many context specific human interactions with cultural objects.

The understanding of culture through subjective experience requisites the organisational aspects of cultural production to be included in the research project. This means audience demographic, production team, venue, place, medium, budget and law are all of equal importance in the process of sociologically telling about culture. Becker grounds these ideas within his earlier concept of *Art Worlds* (1982), spaces made up of makers and users of representations. With the concept of 'art worlds', Becker is highlighting the numerous processes, contributors and stages, many of which are hidden, that an apparently solitary work of art has gone through. For example, a symphony is not simply the product of a single composer, or a group of composers; instead, a complex set of building blocks goes into producing this work of art. A set of imperatives are required, such as musical instruments, the language of sheet music, established musical timing, extensive classical training and adequate funding, for a work of art to turn out a certain way, and are therefore part of its construction. This division of labour means that to analyse an artwork, or a cultural artefact, the constraints placed upon it by whichever art world that it was produced within must be considered. This methodology of essentials and components becomes a methodology of connections when emphasis is placed on arrangement, as Becker puts it: 'arrangement makes narratives out of random elements' (Becker, 2007, p. 24) – a particularly useful observation when considering how museum exhibitions are curated and arranged, or how private collections are laid out. This is also advantageous in approaching the first and second research questions that address these areas.

Whilst this theoretical framework, in the first instance, offers the primary benefit of acknowledging the collective nature of most culture, it is also useful as it throws light upon the impact of the social circumstances within which certain cultural products thrive. Without established rules and frameworks, for example sheet music and melodic

structure, symphonies cannot be produced in the form that we are used to. When investigating artefacts that contravene social norms and stem from a subculture that is transgressive (Penfold-Mounce, 2010a), a framework that acknowledges sets of cultural norms that produce artwork and by implication, the circumstances within which transgressive artwork is produced and consumed, is again advantageous. This is particularly important in relation to the third research question considering the integration of deviance into popular culture, as well as the first and second tackling the construction of a narrative in deviance in culture.

Finally, Becker (1982) argues that in order for something to be considered a work of art, or of cultural significance, someone must have an emotional response to it. In other words, art cannot be considered as such without the context of its consumption: 'We are interested in the event which consists of a work being made *and* appreciated; for that to happen, the activity of response and appreciation must occur' (Becker, 1982, p. 4). Becker later argues that 'in the extreme case, makers and users are the same people' (Becker, 2007, p. 16) – suggesting community ties within cultures that are not necessarily linear. Understanding culture as the compound of a non-linear fluid process of production and consumption and valuing the audience's lived experience of a culture lends itself to this project addressing the consumption of objects and the production of exhibitions and collections in tandem. This approach will be used to tie together themes from the different data-sites that build up this ethnography.

Messiness in ethnography

Strathern (2004) points out, inside of the anthropological roots of ethnography, that a full and complete picture of a particular culture is impossible. She notes that there has been a 'reflexive turn' in ethnography, and that accepting the subjectivity of an ethnography is important for the survival of the method. She writes that:

> The person who 'went into' the field and then returned to translate her or his observations into authentic representation of the 'culture' or 'society' no longer convinces. The authority of having been there turns out to be no authority, but a pre-emption of authorship (Strathern, 2004, p. 8)

The message here is that, in ethnography, the construction of reality is as much in the subjective ethnographic write-up as it is in data collection. John Law (2004) echoes this in *After Method*, 'method is productive of realities rather than merely reflecting them' (p. 70). Law argues that realities are indefinite, and that by nature methods can only sit on a scale of different degrees of messy and incomplete. In this sense, the subjectivity and selectiveness attached to an ethnography is a necessary price for its appropriateness in other areas. These other areas are extensive, particularly in criminology where ethnography has long been used as a method of accessing deviant subcultures that are varied, widespread or obscured. So the messiness that accompanies this approach is a necessary evil for accessing these types of data.

On method, Yar argues that 'the cinematic construction of crime (in its manifold dimensions) should comprise a central part of this wider project [of cultural criminology' (Yar, 2010, p. 68) – which is a mantle pursued in this research. He goes on to suggest three ways in which criminologists could go about researching the symbolic constitution of crime images, one of which has been adopted here. This data set is too varied to consistently adopt his traditional *content analysis* approach, and its research questions are not concerned enough with ideology and social class to make use of his reading of crime films through a lens of *neo-Marxist ideology*. Instead, his third suggestion, *postmodern pluralism*, most accurately describes this approach. It proposes a lack of possibility for an objective understanding of culture and rejects the distinction between fact and fiction – showing close, theoretical alignment with the aim of this research. To quote Yar, this approach means that 'we cannot legitimately claim that a film, for example, represents crime in this or that way. What it means will vary from moment to moment, reading to reading, and from viewer to viewer' (p. 75). This ontology, of the messy and subject embedded meaning of cultural discourse is used in criminology through Yar (2010), and sociology/cultural studies through Lash and Lury (2007) – and is well placed for a project that seeks to make fusions between the two. A subjective ethnography of material deviant culture will be messy, but this is a necessity.

Method in practice

To reiterate, Lash and Lury offer little in the way of specific instructions for how to conduct a sociology of objects, although it is possible to augment this cultural method with the established practices of ethnography in order to operationalise this theoretical position. Lash and Lury's (2007) aforementioned method of 'tracking and tracing' culture can be seen, to some extent, as an extension of Becker's ideas taking into account 21st century networked consumer-capitalism. When used in conjunction with Becker's concept of *Art Worlds* (1982), this approach has practical consequences when carrying out empirical research. It is necessary to incorporate as many aspects of the lived experiences of the culture as possible and this requires wide-scope approach to data gathering. Cultures are made up of an infinite number of objects that transform as they move through a network with potentially infinite connections – they are fluid (Bauman, 2000) and one perspective would not be enough to build a comprehensive understanding of a culture. Lash and Lury (2007) consider many different perspectives across several nodes in their quest to understand their case studies and therefore, a varied approach to data gathering is necessary. A set of methods that include observations as well as interviews is appropriate for these research questions, in line with the precedent set by Willis for criminological ethnographies:

> The qualitative methods, and Participant Observation used in the research […] were dictated by the nature of my interest in 'the cultural'. These techniques are suited to record this level and have a sensitivity to meanings and values as well as an ability to represent and interpret symbolic interpretations, practices and forms of cultural production (Willis, 1977, p. 3).

In this quote, Willis suggests that a research focus on culture in the context of crime requisites qualitative, observational, ethnographic methods. This is due to their ability to access and sympathetically interpret symbolic meanings and values implicit when studying culture, as well as 'practices and forms of cultural production': the main focus of this project outlined in the research questions. Consequently, this project meets the call by Ferrell and Hamm (1998) for a 'methodology of attentiveness' when addressing culture. This is a fully immersive methodology that places the researcher at the heart of the culture in question in order to bring subjective but 'meaningful' understanding

(Ferrell & Hamm, 1998, p. 10) where otherwise there would be just a silhouette. In the context of this research project, this means being immersed within the networks consumption of criminal material culture. Whilst it is important to encompass as many different perspectives as possible, the researcher's cultural experience can only ever be a single snapshot. The following section will describe in detail the methods used to operationalize these research questions and construct said snapshot.

Data Collection

This project investigates a niche subculture; its products, through its protagonists and communities. These are accessed in part through the visible and observable consequences of cultural interaction and consumption, and in part through qualitative interviews. The project is looking for those representations of crime which are extremely visible, but also those that are conspicuously missing, as Carrabine argues:

> [C]riminology interrogates the politics of images. It speaks directly to the way some images are selected, edited and promoted as newsworthy, while some others are ignored or anonymized out of existence (Carrabine, 2014, p. 154)

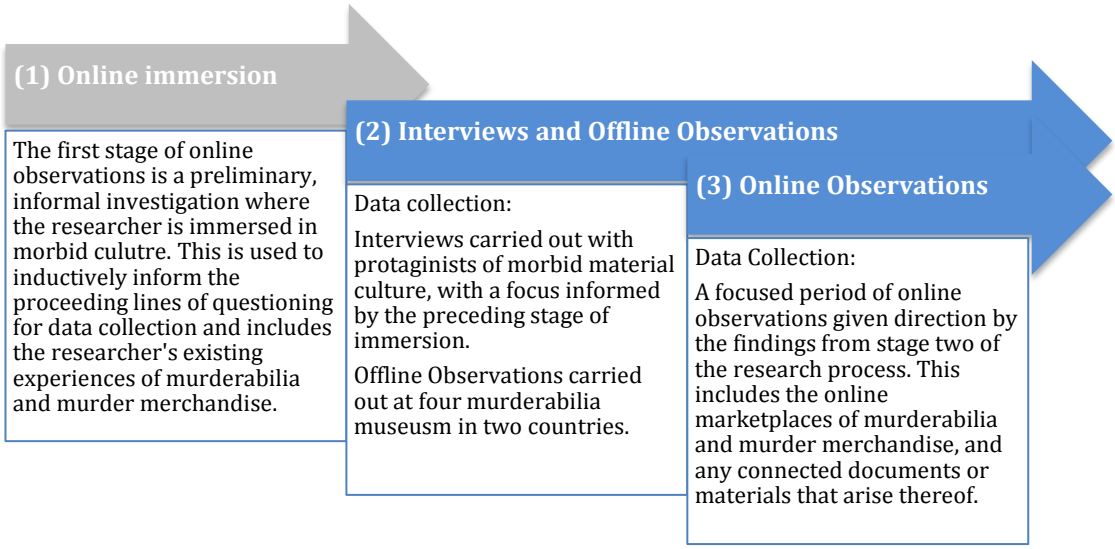
Cultural criminology is interested just as much in images of crime which are obscured as images of crime which are overused – so this ethnography is concerned with the *selection* of representations of crime, their editing and their promotion, but also in the *selectivity* of representations of crime in objects. The visible measurable data from this subculture are, in the first instance, tangible cultural produce. This includes but is not limited to murderabilia artefacts, museum exhibitions and commercial merchandise. The second channel of visible consequences of morbid culture consists of data that is the deposited online as the digital by-product of online transaction and consumption. This includes websites where objects are traded or merchandise is listed for sale. The third source of data are interviews with those closely associated with the morbid culture industry. Data that informs this research was collected from these three channels over the course of ten months (September 2014 – July 2015) in the form of online and offline observations, as well as semi-structured interviews. This mix of methods is designed with the intention of accessing multiple perspectives on morbid culture. Interviews, drawing upon Lash and Lury's (2007) approach, are intended to provide an insider

interpretation to the observed patterns. In doing so, the project looks for Carrabine's (2014) ideas of selectivity of representations and images. The following subsections will outline the research process and explain how these three data collection methods fit together, before considering the practice and sampling of each method in series.

The Inductive Research Process

Operationalizing these ethnographic methods into a workable process – these methods fell into sequential stages (see fig1). An interactive and fluid culture (Bauman, 2000) requires an interactive and flexible research method and as such, the results from the first stage stages of the research process helped focus the second and third. Using a 'bottom-up' inductive approach this research began with a preliminary phase of online immersion of blogs, product listings and trading websites in order to test the research questions that emerge from the dominant literature on morbid culture (outlined in chapter two). This was not a formal phase of data collection, but rather an inductive ethnographic phase of involvement in order to hone more specific questions moving forward to the interview stage and to provide a basis from which the interview schedule can be produced. Through this preliminary process of immersion into morbid culture, the most interesting themes could be taken forward and explored in the two proceeding data collection phases. Interviews were then carried out with key protagonists in the morbid culture industry including site owners, collectors and museum curators. During this offline, primary stage of data collection observations were also carried out at murderabilia museums in the U.K and U.S.A. Finally, the themes emerging from the first stage, and reinforced in the second, were used to narrow the focus of the main stage of online observation.

Figure 1



So interviews and museum observations, bookended by a preliminary and a more focused period of online observation, make up this ethnography. The first stage of immersion is informal, has no tangible data attached to it, and is used to inform the proceeding two main stages in an inductive way. This first stage is akin to a pilot study, familiarising the researcher with the area of study and establishing the proceeding lines of enquiry. Figure one demonstrates this structure, with the data collection phases highlighted in blue and the preceding stage of immersion represented in grey as the data from this stage is not used directly – it only serves the purpose of informing the focus of the primary research. This inductive approach created by the inclusion of stage one allows the findings to emerge from the data and reduces researcher bias. The immersion within morbid culture draws upon that put forward by Lash and Lury (2007) and allows the researcher to identify and investigate the most important themes emerging from the subculture itself.

Online Observations

Digital observation, not unlike offline observation, was the process of covert surveillance in online fields of research relating to morbid culture. It is the application of the process of immersion, observation and expression of culture to new forms of online data (Murthy, 2008). This project researches consumption, and so the data sites are spaces of commerce or where the exchange of artefacts takes place. The types of

data observed were mainly images of available products, product listing descriptions, and comments left by purchasers. Data from these sources are textual and occasionally visual. When carrying out 'tracking and tracing' through online observation the mantra is simple: 'you find out as much about them in as many places in time and space from as many points of view as possible' (Lash & Lury, 2007, p. 20). There is no set 'beginning' to the data as the visible life-course of a culture spans as far back as archives permit. The first stage of online cultural immersion does not have a time period attached to it as it is not a formal process of data collection. The main period of online observation took place over the month of July 2015. Whilst frequenting online outlets for this time the researcher did not post any messages, comments, feedback, and avoided becoming a member or creating an account where possible. This process of non-invasive online data collection has previously been described as 'lurking' (Berry, 2004), but a better label is 'online, covert, passive observation'.

Sampling

During the first phase of online observation data was sampled using an opportunistic method as a first point of immersion into morbid culture. This broad-focus, time-limited stage provides the level of 'immersion' called for by Ferrell and Hamm (1998) when conducting qualitative observations. Without refinement, this inductive sample provided a foundation from which the remainder of the data collection can stem. This preliminary sweep of crime object marketplaces had no specific time period attached. It began during the stages of the conceptual development of the project – and concluded before the September 2014 research trips to data sites in the U.S.A. It was also aimed at no particular outlets, focusing instead on the most visible and popular sites.

The main stage of online observation took a more focused approach. Topics that emerged from the offline research period were used to narrow the second online sample. Listings and objects relating to these themes were used as data whilst content that was not relevant to the research questions was not collected. This second phase of online data collection is sampled using keyword searches in the most popular search engine: Google. This search tool was chosen as, in line with Lash and Lury's (2007) methodology, the most visible data is the most influential. Keywords are intended to start a chain reaction as 'suggested product' links and online algorithms move the

researcher through a network of interrelated sources similar to offline snowball sampling. As they are introduced to various archives the researcher is experiencing a flow akin to the average user's encounter with that particular type of artefact or object. This non-probability sampling method provided a directed approach to the research questions whilst allowing for a wide array of data to be considered. During both phases of online research data was collected using the qualitative analysis software: 'NVivo'. This software offers two benefits. First, data can be archived offline for future analysis without the risk of the data being lost/removed that is present when leaving the data online. Web-content rarely stays still and this approach mitigates the difficulties of analysing ever-changing data – when data is archived offline it can be contemplated without distraction. Secondly, this particular qualitative analysis package was chosen as the software: 'NCapture' for NVivo provides a fast way to capture web content as data prepared for analysis alongside the same codes and themes as interviews.

During the first stage of online immersion considering data that is most recent and visible, as well as the second based around keyword searches, it is important to acknowledge the impact of digital algorithms on the sample (Beer, 2009). Social life is no longer simply mediated by code, it is constructed by it (Lash, 2007). As a result, new power structures are created (Lash, 2007) (Beer, 2009) and online researchers can lose an element of control previously possessed. The complications of this loss of autonomy are presented well by danah boyd and Kate Crawford (2012). They warn that automated, algorithmically influenced data collection follows a change in social theory. Sampling data in social research that is essentially constructed by the prosumer (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010) is different in nature to anything that has come before (boyd & Crawford, 2012). More than simply removing control from researchers, seemingly qualitative data encountered be researchers performing digital ethnography is supplied through a complex mathematical, inherently quantitative process. The fundamental lack of understanding of this quantitative process, for boyd & Crawford, is most problematic. Connections may be asserted that do not exist, data may be taken out of context and text may be analysed in inappropriate ways (boyd & Crawford, 2012).

The issue that the data that makes itself most obvious through the relevant algorithm makes it into the research, but this does not guarantee its accuracy, is double-edged in the context of this research project. Whilst computer algorithms may alter the research

trajectory this direction will be the same as that is experienced by the average consumer. Used in conjunction with a research methodology that values the lived experience of culture and understands culture as formed by its part within a network (Lash & Lury, 2007), this apparent lack of objectivity can be considered an asset. Research such as Beer and Penfold-Mounce's (2009) following of Miley Cyrus write out the need for a diverse sample framing, that that is not present is inherently not relevant or interesting, the research is designed to tackle cultural phenomena that make themselves the most obvious (as with most offline observational research). Beer and Penfold-Mounce consider this an asset, at least in the context of their research design. They argue that allowing the network to channel them along pathways akin to those experienced by 'normal' network users will reveal accurate public experiences of culture (ibid). Therefore, these invisible 'pulls' on the data collection process are not considered a hindrance to the collection of a useful sample.

Offline Observations

This well-established sociological and anthropological method is usually referred to just as 'observation' but in the context of this research will be described as 'offline observations' to provide a necessary distinction from those that take place on the internet. This method is an extension of the main set of digital observations expanding to include the offline hubs of morbid networks: murderabilia museums. Data was collected as part of a two-week trip to the U.S.A spanning 8th September 2014-21st September 2014, *The Crime Museum*, Washington D.C and *The Museum of Death*, Hollywood C.A, as well as two UK destinations in October 2014 to *The True Crime Museum*, Hastings and *Littledean Jail*, Gloucester. Data was collected in note form, as well as visual data in the form of photographs, exhibition programmes and other tangible sources related to the exhibitions. The most comparable set of criminological data collected in an exhibition is Huey's research at the Vienna Kriminalmuseum. She sets the following precedent:

> As was the case at the Kriminalmuseum, at each site I spent several hours taking extensive field notes, photographing exhibits, mapping floor layouts, observing patrons and staff, collecting printed materials (including tour brochures and

other forms of advertising) and documenting my own reactions to the site and its exhibits (Huey, 2011, p. 383).

So at each site the researcher spent several hours taking notes over two days. Photographs were taken, where permitted (photography not permitted in *Museum of Death*), printed marketing and display materials were collected, including details as minute as ticket stubs. The backbone of this ethnography was formed through these extensive, comprehensive observations and material collections.

Sampling

The four biggest crime museums, two in the U.K and two in the U.S.A were the subject of observations. The U.K was chosen through non-probability convenience sampling with spaces in this country being the closest and easiest to access. The U.S.A was chosen through non-probability theoretical sampling as the online and offline spaces most closely associated with this subculture are based in, or operated from, North America. The two spaces within the U.K, at the time of this research project, constituted a population rather than a sample. On the other hand, the spaces in the U.S.A were just two of several possible research locations – the two spaces chosen were sampled using both convenience and theoretical sampling. The research trip was funded with an ESRC overseas fieldwork grant, but time and funding limited the sample to two locations; the two with the largest murderabilia collections were chosen for their relevance. In the case of extremely niche subcultures offline data sources are limited and these non-probability sampling methods allow for access to the most appropriate data – in some cases a full population – in locations that are practicable with limited finance.

Semi-Structured Interviews

This aspect to the research project is intended to compliment the previous two by incorporating the opinions of creators, as well as consumers, a third dimension to the data gathered on morbid objects – in line with Becker's (1982) writings on collaborative culture and the importance of approaching the study of culture from multiple angles. A central aspect of Lash and Lury's research methodology as well, interviews supplement an abundance of consumer data with the opinions of creators as well as important and

influential people within the field. Interviews were informal and semi-structured, allowing space for interviewees to steer the conversation towards their own contributions to morbid culture. Different interview schedules were used for collectors of murderabilia and producers of murder merchandise. They were both developed out of preliminary findings during the phases of immersion and observation, and are included as Appendix 1 and 2. A total of 10 interviews were conducted.

Sampling

In this ethnography of a varied subculture interviewees had to come from an array of places. In the first instance, they came from the four locations discussed in the previous section; curators of museums provided the initial interviews. Following this, snowball sampling connected the researcher with other useful members of morbid culture industry and community. Working towards an initial target of 15 interviews, collectors of murderabilia and producers of murder merchandise were approached, online, through a process of non-probability convenience sampling. Despite being another form of non-probability sampling, this approach is useful as it allows the researcher to interview the most important persons available within a niche subculture. A probability sample would not suit this methodology requiring contact with a limited number of key individuals, and would also be unsuitable for a small subculture with few suitable participants.

The participants were made up of five collectors of murderabilia and five producers of murder merchandise. The collectors were three of the museum curators who had identified as collectors in the first instance, and two collectors sampled by snowball sampling. The producers were sampled online by soliciting contributions to the project via the sampled merchandise websites. Contributors were four men and six women; seven Americans and three British. Only one participant was under the age of 30, and the vast majority were in their late 40s or early 50s. They were all white, but were a mix of social classes. For a more descriptive breakdown of the individual participants, their individual ages and the type of deviant culture that they engage in, see appendix 3 – Participants.

Analysis Methods

Analysis is conducted through an ethnographic write up of observations and interviews. Images are used in places inside of the three empirical chapters to compliment descriptive writing. Although the data that informs this project comes as many types, from several different sources, it will all be coded using thematic analysis, which offers several benefits to this project. Thematic analysis is a method of analysing and documenting patterns in data, as well as providing a framework from which in detailed analysis and organisation can take place (Boyatzis, 1998). Primarily, thematic analysis is one of the few methods appropriate for all of the qualitative data present in this project. Thematic analysis allows interview data, online data in the form of product listings, marketing and advertising materials, as well as observations carried out in museums, to be considered against the same criteria and coded against the same themes – it is a type of analysis that works with many methods (Boyatzis, 1998) – it is 'an accessible and theoretically-flexible approach to analysing qualitative data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78).

Braun and Clarke go on to argue that it is important to acknowledge, in the process of themes 'emerging' from the data, that the researcher is not a passive figure – the identification of themes involves the researcher picking instances that are relevant in response to the research question, and constructing a narrative around them. As such, the epistemological position of the researcher can transform the findings of even inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Whilst this can be considered to bias the research findings somewhat, the epistemological openness of this analysis method is beneficial as it is compatible with many methodologies. Other benefits of thematic analysis include its ability to provide insights that were not expected, its ability to present differences as well as similarities across a dataset, as well as it being a clear and accessible form of communicating findings (ibid). Lastly, thematic analysis lends well to investigating and understanding data as networks:

> [T]hematic analyses can be usefully aided by and presented as *thematic networks*: web-like illustrations (*networks*) that summarize the main *themes* constituting a piece of text […] thematic networks is a way of organizing a thematic analysis of qualitative data. Thematic analyses seek to unearth the

> themes salient in a text at different levels, and thematic networks aim to facilitate the structuring and depiction of these themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

Attride-Stirling (2001) proposes a method of visualising the structure of data as a network of *global, organising* and *basic* themes. Whilst these networks are primarily a theoretical visualisation of the hierarchy of themes, they can easily be extended to represent geographical and spatial patterns across the dataset. In other words, with thematic network analysis it is possible to visualise the prevalence of codes and themes across different aspects of the dataset. This is useful when conducting a research project with several different sources of data, or when using a theoretical framework that considers a subculture as characterised by networks of producers and consumers.

Thematic analysis is a flexible method and what is counted as a theme differs greatly across research projects (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this project, a theme represents a recurring topic or phenomena with relevance to the research questions. A thematic analysis was conducted by identifying trends in the data (codes), and grouping the more common codes into themes, which will form the arguments in the three empirical analysis chapters (Aronson, 1994). Whilst these are primarily informed by an inductive 'bottom up' approach where themes emerge from the data, these themes are not necessarily the most common across the data but are the most relevant to the research questions. Thematic analysis considers semantics as well as underlying themes, and so a process by which 'significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89) was also identified in the context of existing literature (ibid).

Ethics

Covert research carries a number of ethical considerations and debates surrounding the morality of online ethnography in particular are rife in sociology and related disciplines. This section will start with a review of the important contributions to the study of digital research ethics before grounding the position of this project within the appropriate literature. After this, the less complex but nonetheless important interview and offline observation methods will be considered in terms of their ethical implications in the context of this research project. Lastly, several individual concerns that are of high

importance and require direct attention will be identified including a summary of the precautions that were taken in response. It will be concluded that, whilst none of these methods are free from ethical concern, they are the most appropriate means of accessing this type of subculture in a way that offers scope for suitable analysis and critique. Also, it will be argued that all appropriate and established ethical precautions were implemented to reduce risk to participants.

Digital (Online) Observations

The information being gathered via the method of digital ethnography is considered to be 'by-product' data, defined as digital information that was not intended by its initial producer to be used for research purposes, or data that was collected as a by-product of another digital action: 'data generated as a by-product of new forms of popular cultural engagement' (Beer & Burrows, 2013, p. 49). It is important to make the distinction clear between the cultural by-product data described here and used in this thesis, and the more common use of the term referring to 'transactional' data created as a by-product of digitized commerce. The potential of cultural by-product data is endless. In the 21st century researchers are able to access new groups and cultures that would have previously been obscured by geography or naïvety, analyses can be performed far more broadly with greater diversity, and findings can be made relevant across national borders. The unprecedented increase in the use of cultural digital by-product data in research is in no small part due to this great potential but in a haze of accessibility and discovery, the validity of online data has also been drawn into harsh consideration (Walther, 2002). In 2002 Joseph Walther raised two interrelated and cyclical questions in the context of by-product research. 'To what degree is it acceptable to compromise the privacy of online participants for valid research benefits?' and 'how valid are conclusions drawn from online confessional data?' are two interrelated questions that need to be overcome in order to embark on empirical digital research.

> There is a considerable difference between being in public and being public, which is rarely acknowledged by Big Data researchers (boyd & Crawford, 2012)

In this first instance, consideration of what it means for data to be 'public' and the implications of using online confessional data for research purposes is important. A

wave of users are posting increasingly private data in increasingly public spaces, according to Beer and Burrows (2007), which creates new and exciting agendas for web researchers in the social sciences and presents a network of information that is best suited to addressing the research questions of this project. As boyd and Crawford suggest, this information, although readily available and therefore *public* in a sense, is not necessarily public in nature or intention (boyd & Crawford, 2012). Patricia Lange makes a distinction between content that is 'publicly private' and that that is 'privately public' when researching amateur YouTube videos. The former represents widely disseminated information where the producers make extreme efforts to protect their identity and privacy, whilst the latter represents content disseminated within a group or small network that reveals expressly private and personal information (Lange, 2012). By this phraseology, it should be noted that this project only considers information that could be said to be 'publically public', non-personal information published in expressly non-personal spheres.

Ethical online research is a balancing act. It is impossible for a networked researcher to be 100% sure that their chosen method does not violate *anyone's* real or perceived associations with privacy (Hudson & Bruckman, 2004). The best possible solution is one that considers and actively avoids the violation of any participant's right to privacy whilst still allowing room for the research project to thrive. Compromises need to be made, but at the same time, it is 'methodologically myopic' to apply one set of human subject research guidelines to all online research (Walther, 2002). As Walther indicates, even back in 2002, there are several types of data online, all encountered by digital ethnography, that present an array of challenges to the researcher. Some invaluable online data can be legitimately studied as historical texts or archive data, for example, an online news article, without the need for the formalities of 'informed consent' or 'the right to withdraw' (ibid). In response to this issue and respecting the complexity and variety of online data, information that is 'privately public' (small audience, personal information), usually posted on social networks such as Facebook, will not be included in the project. Instead, the project will focus on data that is 'publically private' (large audience, less personal information) (ibid). These include public object listings as well as pages and articles on object trading websites. By omitting highly personal data that is disseminated only to small groups of contacts, the risk of violating one or more person's relationship with the privacy of their data is reduced. Similarly, by focussing on data

that is purposefully widely disseminated, such as product listings and reviews, the research project is accessing the data from the main channels that are in question – it is this widely accessible data that forms common narrative experienced by a member of a morbid subculture or a person with an interest in violent culture.

In this midst of this balancing act, informed consent (for the online portion of the research only) is not viable (Walther, 2002). In the provocatively titled article, *Go Away* (2004), Hudson and Bruckman experiment with four different approaches to researching chatroom postings (a far more personal form of data than this research concerns itself with). They found that if they posted a message requesting consent, offering the participants an opportunity to opt out or indicating that they would be using the data for research purposes, they had a 63.3% chance of being removed from the forum against a 29% chance if they remained anonymous. In the rare occasion that they were not removed, only four out of 766 potential participants chose to opt in (Hudson & Bruckman, 2004). It is this impracticality, coupled with the impersonal and anonymous nature of 'publically private' data that renders a traditional human subjects research model unsuitable. Instead, this data is treated indiscriminately as cultural produce – just as physical newspaper articles or offline spaces would be. The same as all other 'objects' in the project including paintings and photographs, online text and imagery were understood as representations: equal nodes in the deviant cultural network, important perspectives that make up the social life of the subculture.

Interviews and Offline Observations

In the case of interviews, all standard participant protection procedures were observed. Informed consent has been gained in advance (consent form and information sheet attached as appendices 4 and 5), and participants were expressly informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any time until submission. Data was collected using a digital audio recorder with the password protected files being stored securely offline in accordance with the Data Protection Act of 1998. Through the informed consent form participants were made aware that their data was confidential, and that it would only be shared in its raw and unprocessed form with the researcher at the University of York and the project supervisors. Pseudonyms were used to further protect participants'

identity. The researcher transcribed the data and therefore no confidentiality agreement for external transcribers was necessary.

In the case of offline observations, it was the content of the museums and not the visitors that were of interest – people were not the subject of the observation and therefore human subjects precautions such as informed consent and right to withdraw were not necessary. Extensive notes were supplemented by data collected photographically and stored in the same manner as the interviews. Informed consent was not required for these photographs as they include spaces that are publicly available as part of exhibitions and do not include human subjects.

Precautions and concerns

Firstly, the deviant nature of the research material made the potential illegality of some content a primary concern. The project addresses (and sometimes considers the boundaries of) legality, albeit the secondary consumption of deviance rather than primary criminality, which raised an ethical concern. This was mitigated by clearly stating on the information sheet that personal criminal activity should not be discussed, and that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in this area. Interviewees did not choose to raise any lawbreaking activities so this potential issue did not require any further precaution during the stages of analysis and write up.

A second concern was the potential for readers to use the techniques similar to the research process to track online contributions to the project. An example of this occurring is the now infamous 'T3' research into social networking in the USA. The 'tastes, ties and time' team collected Facebook profile data from an entire undergraduate student cohort of 1700 students and published their findings again in mainstream journals. They took precautions to protect the anonymity of their subjects (who had not been contacted for consent) including removing names, delaying the release of the data and not releasing any sensitive information. However, they also made several mistakes. First, they released statistics expressing the gender, race and age stratification of the cohort (for context and analysis purposes) and second, they indicated that the university was located in one of the five New England states (Zimmer, 2010). These precautions, by the standards of many, were more than sufficient attempts to protect the anonymity

of the participants although the T3 researchers had underestimated the internet's tendency towards transparent traceability. Within a matter of days the possibilities had been narrowed from 2000 universities to only 13 and was then found to be Harvard (ibid). With some ethnicities represented by a single student, this was a severe breach of anonymity and privacy for the subjects involved (ibid).

Whilst it is not possible to entirely protect against this issue, efforts were made to lessen, to an extent, the problems associated with the traceability of online data. Websites and usernames of content creators were either completely removed or changed where appropriate. Quotes from online sources were made as short as possible to diminish their traceability. And by avoiding any data that is 'privately public', such as Facebook accounts, the risk can be lessened further. Third and finally, it should be acknowledged that participants' data was kept for a limited time only. Audio was deleted within three months of the interviews taking place, once it had been transcribed. Print copies of the data will be destroyed after there are no more publications to come from this project or after six years, whichever is sooner. These terms were made clear in the information sheet and agreed upon by all participants through informed consent procedures.

Reflections and Clarifications

Accessing a niche, varied and distant (mostly based in the U.S.A) culture from afar, even with the invaluable resource of the internet, posed several challenges. A case in point is the disappearance of a fan convention that affected the direction of the project in its infant stages. The process of applying for ESRC overseas fieldwork financial support was completed in February of 2014 on the back of a proposal in three parts to conduct observational and interview research in the U.S.A. The backbone of this research was the world's only murderabilia and serial killer fan convention: *The Crime Scene [4]*, scheduled to occur sometime in Autumn 2014. An ideal gatekeeper for the U.S.A leg of the project was secured – the curator of one of the world's largest serial killer fan-sites, as well as co-organiser of *The Crime Scene* and a vocal media advocate for the freedom of sale of serial killer merchandise. She had promised to support the project by pledging unlimited access to the convention, to set up interviews with guests and visitors, as well as providing her own time in the form of an interview. After

agreeing enthusiastically to help with the project, she was reluctant to confirm a date for the event – she then stopped replying to correspondence almost immediately. Her apparent cold feet were swiftly followed up by the disappearance of the convention website. After chasing up several other patrons of the convention to pursue the event, with either no reply or no knowledge in every case, this middle section of the trip was removed and the project had to be refocused to add more weight to museum exhibitions.

The other two prongs of the trip were both museums. *The Crime Museum* in Washington DC and *The Museum of Death* in Hollywood, CA, were given more weight and attention in order to make up for the missing convention. Shifting the balance of the trip required, amongst many practical adjustments, a slight change of methodology. The theoretical framework that forms the basis of this project requires a balance between the input of creators and consumers. Conventions are made up largely of consumers and so the absence of *The Crime Scene [4]* was balanced out by a greater focus on consumers in the interview and online observation stages. The original target of 15 lengthy interviews was not reached, either, with a total of 10 being conducted by the end of the project. This was due to a difficulty in recruiting participants. Participants understandably were wary of answering questions about their collections or products when this industry so regularly attracts negative media attention. This, coupled with the small nature of the subculture, meant that recruiting participants was difficult. This as compensated for by further expanding the areas of data collection that investigate museum exhibitions and online commerce – making the ethnography more observational.

The original intention was to separate interview groups into museum curators, producers of murder merchandise, and collectors of murderabilia, in an even split. However, it quickly became apparent that museum curators and collectors of murderabilia were one in the same category – every museum curator interviewed had in the first instance been a private collector, and themes addressing private collection ended up dominating proceedings. With that in mind, this unnecessary split was discarded and interviews with museum curators were used in the collection chapter, *Auratic Transgression (Chapter 4)*, with the museums chapter, *Displaying Transgression (Chapter 5)*, being informed mainly through observations and taking a focus on exhibition rather than curation.

Beyond these small method adjustments, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study. This project has not considered age, gender or ethnicity in the study of murderabilia as it is a small sample ethnography with a dataset that does not lend lend itself to demographic work. It focuses on an extremely niche subculture with limited protagonists, and an online ethnography sourcing data from places where discourses of social class, economic capital or level of education are impractical to measure. Instead, this project focuses on the acts of production and consumption, and the objects of material culture that are merchandised in these transactions. When researching consumption, it has become somewhat of an industry standard to do so through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu, but this lack of demographic, and to an extent spatial information, meant that the people and place focused theories of 'field' (Bourdieu, 1993) and 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1990) felt at odds with the research aims.

Becker's reflections on 'field' can be used to expand upon this point. His concept of a 'world', as explored in *Art Worlds* (1982), is described as more conducive to complementarity between actors, actions, and objects, than Bourdieu's more conflict based theory. Becker himself remarks that 'there is a defined and confined space, which is the field, in which there is a limited amount of room, so that whatever happens in this field is a zero-sum game. If I have something, you can't have it' (Becker, 1982, p. 373). Whereas this is a thesis of the ubiquity and transformability of images and brand images inside the digital, spatially liberated, culture industry. It focusses on the sharing and manipulating of images into brands, and for these reasons Bourdieu's seminal texts have been avoided.

Summary

In summation, a methodology put forward by Becker (1982) and adapted by Lash and Lury (2007) that emphasises the organisation and branding of material culture as well as the influence of social norms and the importance of audience in artwork was used to address research questions surrounding networked culture, the integration of deviance into popular culture and cultural consumption. This methodology in conjunction with these research questions necessitates a mixed-method qualitative ethnography. These types of ethnographic exploration of objects are well used in sociology, for example Caroline Knowles' studies of globalisation through the lens of flip-flops: 'the idea that

objects have biographies – life stories – and that exploring them exposes social texture inspired this book' (Knowles, 2014, p. 3) – and have been adapted into a criminological study of objects.

As such, the research questions were operationalized through online and offline observations as well as semi-structured interviews. These methods were arranged into two main data collection stages in order to tackle the research questions linearly. Preceding this, a stage of immersion into online data was carried out in order to familiarise the researcher with the culture in question and provide a basis from which the interview schedule could be constructed. Then, offline observations were carried out at four locations in the U.S.A during a two-week data collection trip and in the U.K upon return. This was accompanied by interviews in the four locations with museum curators, as well as with other participants who were deemed to have an important part in morbid material culture. Finally, themes emerging from the first two stages were used to focus the main stage of online observation that took place during June and July of 2015. The data was analysed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and written up as an ethnographic account. The following three chapters will tackle this data in sequence – from museum observations, to interviews with collectors, to online observations. Up next, *Displaying Transgression*, will consider the ways in which true crime artefacts are represented as part of museum narratives of crime.

4- Displaying Transgression

This chapter argues that Western crime museums, of which the U.K and the U.S.A have been sampled as the central focus, that purport to educationally depict true crime, punishment, violence and death, do so consistently through the lens of cinematised 'Hollywood mainstream' style (Dyer, 1999) criminality. The memorialisation of people, places and events in these museums is communicated through a mediatised understanding of crime and as such, it presents a particularly filmic version of crime and criminal behaviours. It is also argued that, due to the ubiquity of crime in popular culture and our reliance on popular culture for our collective understanding of crime, perceptions of 'authenticity' are achieved through these filmic narratives instead of being diminished. The tourist industry thrives on *perceptions* of authenticity (Cohen, 1988), and it is these perceptions that are enhanced using cinema. A 'crime museum' refers to a space that claims to research, archive and display artefacts pertaining to crime, punishment, violence or death, or any combination thereof. They exhibit 'murderabilia', but also commodities; law enforcement and punishment tools; body parts; and photographs. Four museums were sampled: *The Hollywood Museum of Death* (California, U.S.A, September 2014), *The Crime Museum* (Washington, U.S.A, September 2014)[5], *Littledean Jail* (Gloucester, U.K, November 2014) and *True Crime Museum* (Hastings, U.K, November 2014)[6]. All four of these data-sites are advertised either on their websites, ticket stubs or flyers as educational facilities.

It has been argued that the seductive and culturally attractive aspects of criminality are present in their visceral realness and their lack of mediation – Presdee's work on the *Carnival of Crime* (2000) being the most commonly cited[7]. It is peculiar, then, that in a world where lack of mediation is billed as the main attraction, crime is culturally

[5] *The Crime Museum* in Washington has since closed down

[6] For more information on data collection, sampling and methods, see Chapter 3 *Methodology*

[7] See chapter 2 *Literature Review* for a more detailed discussion of these themes

represented as other-worldly through fictitious examples. Conversely, it has also been argued that crime goes hand in hand with cinema because a massive proportion of mainstream film tackles criminality or represents true criminal events (Jarvis, 2007). Through research conducted in four true crime museums, it is evident that this relationship is reciprocal and not a one-way flow of influence. This blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction, and the ways in which fiction is employed as a tool to decode, translate and communicate fact to the public, demonstrates how our understanding of historical events is being infiltrated by a cinematically constructed understanding of crime. It should be noted that the social construction of crime, punishment, violence and death through many forms of media including films and television (Dyer, 1993) and news media (Jewkes, 2004) has been well researched and is not a central consideration here. Rather, this mediated version of crime taking precedence outside of mainstream cinema in educational spaces, and becoming the preferred method for the display of the real is the focus of this chapter. This trend is particularly pertinent in museums of crime, punishment, violence and death due to their disproportionate focus in many forms of popular media and culture (Jarvis, 2007), their seductive popularity (Katz, 1990) (Presdee, 2000), and their shocking nature.

This chapter begins with a review of the contemporary literature that is relevant to the first research question: what narratives are privileged in museum exhibitions of crime? After addressing a research trend towards entertainment in modern museums, there will be a short ethnographic description of the four data sites in question. This will be followed with more detailed explorations of observation data in sections that consider the stimulatory style of crime exhibitions, the privileging of cinematic narratives of power and consumption, and the merging of consumption into museums spaces. It will be concluded that perceptions of authenticity are achieved by evoking familiar, filmic narratives of criminal – these enhance perceptions of authenticity as they are the common crime experience that the majority of visitors will have.

Crime and Museums

‘Museum’ is an umbrella term encompassing several different and varied types of public exhibition. Non-profit status, the presence of expert staff, the conducting of research and the ownership of tangible artefacts are amongst the most common

signifiers of, but are not essential to, museum status. It has also been suggested that a museum's prime purpose is to collect, display and educate (Alexander & Alexander, 2008), although sharp changes, particularly to funding, have led to a different ethos toward entertainment. Alexander and Alexander summarise this shift with the pertinent question: '[A]s the 21st century opens, the dominance of collections in museums is certainly fading […] what are the implications of this change?' (Alexander & Alexander, 2008, p. 16). A shift in focus from collecting artefacts for research purposes to constructing a narrative for entertainment purposes is reflected in the data throughout this chapter and is cited in the literature particularly in small privately funded museums. It is interesting when considered against Duncan, Karp and Lavine's statement:

> [A] museum is not the neutral and transparent sheltering space that it is often claimed to be […] by fulfilling its declared purposes as a museum (preserving and displaying art objects) [it also carries out] broad, sometimes less obvious political and ideological tasks (Duncan, et al., 1991, p. 90).

If instead of 'preserving and displaying art objects', a small privately funded crime museum's purpose is to embellish and entertain, then what are the 'less obvious political and ideological' implications that Duncan, Karp and Lavine (1991) point to? As such, this chapter speaks to a question surrounding what it is that the modern, profit-making, entertainment based incarnation of a museum is supposed to do, and what is the effect of this type of museum in this niche context of the social construction of crime? To understand this effect, Baudrillard's theory of *Simulacra and Simulation* (Baudrillard, 1981/1994) takes precedent in its analysis. King argues that museums have a lot to learn from Disneyland, especially in their 'theming', the process of immersing an individual within space, architecture and entertainment (King, 1991). Baudrillard also cites Disneyland, arguing that it is the perfect example of the entanglement of the four orders of simulacra (Baudrillard, 1981/1994). We can use Baudrillard's thoughts about these carnival-like spaces to show that crime museums are another good example due to their use of 'Hollywood' narratives.

Macdonald argues that 'visitors inevitably come to any exhibition laden with cultural preconceptions which shape the nature of their visit and affect their responses to it' (Macdonald, 1992, p. 401). These preconceptions are both individually variable

depending on personal experience, as well as collective in the sense that patterns emerge between those who have consumed the same cultural stimuli. Macdonald gives the example of British people receiving the same exhibition in an extremely different way to that of an individual who does not possess British cultural reference points, for example, a member of the Igbo people of Nigeria – 'to whom the very preservation of material culture is anathema' (p. 402). Macdonald is arguing that, in order to make sense of exhibits as well as properly co-operate with the interactive aspects of an exhibition, one must possess a familiarity with certain implicit culturally dominant assumptions. The four data sites can be seen go one step further and embrace these dominant cultural narratives, using them to make legible their assertions about criminality at the potential expense of those not adorned with the relevant cultural experiences. It this case, the cultural experiences necessary would be exposure to mainstream Hollywood crime cinema. The entanglement of the four orders of simulacra is visible as these narratives are explored through simulation.

Criminology conducted in museums is rare, although there are some notable exceptions including Huey's (2011)[8] observations inside the Vienna Kriminalmuseum. Huey describes a process of 'sanitization' allowing the gruesome to be disseminated educationally to a broad public audience: a kind of deadening or muffling tool for the safe and comfortable consumption of crime. This kind of weakened and impotent crime is in high demand as a 'paradoxical desire' (p. 396) is present where people simultaneously seek gruesome experiences in a *Wound Culture* (Seltzer, 1998), as well as a safe way through which to consume it where fear can be experienced as pleasure. In the Kriminalmuseum, sanitization is achieved by merging the 'macabre with the educational' (p. 381) – creating a 'hybrid type of educational/entertainment experience' (p. 396).

> One might reasonably think that the educational elements present throughout the various rooms could potentially undermine any experience of the sublime generated by the macabre displays throughout. However, the emphasis on

[8] See *Method* for more on Huey's influence on the approach of this chapter

> science and the part played by the Viennese in advancing this field is, like the glass which covers the charred skulls and bloody hatchets, not only necessary to fulfil the Museum's institutional function, but also necessary to the successful presentation of crime as sublime. […] The glass and the educational messages operate in concert to increase the degree of distance between the object and the observer (Huey, 2011, p. 396).

Not only do the educational elements not undermine the experience, according to Huey, but rather they make it accessible by exhibiting it as sterile and distant from the observer. Similar techniques are used in the crime museums of the U.K and U.S.A, although they differ in two aspects from the Kriminalmuseum in Vienna. Firstly, the primary focus of some modern privately funded museums is not necessarily to research or to educate and their ideological goals may not necessarily be to impart knowledge or communicate science. U.K and U.S.A crime museums are more synonymous with entertainment than education. Secondly, this differing institutional alliance means that the 'sublime in crime' (Huey, 2011) is conversed, decoded and sanitized for the consumer through popular culture instead. Huey is not alone in making such claims, the trend of sanitizing gruesome exhibits is discussed by Larson as being centuries old:

> A profound and derogatory prejudice has shaped the display of foreign cultures in Europe and America for centuries, and it allowed those who visited fairs and museums to define themselves in opposition to those people they came to see. Set on display at a reassuring distance, on a stage, in the pages of a book or magazine, in a glass case or encircled by a protective rope barrier – the fantastical 'primitive savage' embodied everything that middle-class society was not (Larson, 2014, p. 40).

The 'primitive savage' is discussed by Larson referring to tribespeople of whose severed and shrunken heads adorned museums in Europe and America for centuries and, in some examples such as the Pitt Rivers in Oxford, still do. The 'primitive savage' on display in crime museums is not an archetypal primeval tribesperson but is culturally represented as equally savage. The observer is 'distanced' and 'protected' from the violent criminal and serial murderer, unlike in the Kriminalmuseum, through violent popular culture. And even inside of popular culture itself, crime has been argued to be a

sanitised and ‘safe’ space. Penfold-Mounce has argued that crime television ‘is the overly dramatic fictional, yet apparently realistic, representation of the corpse that allows the gaze to be firmly rooted in the safety of morbid space’ (2015, p. 3). Outside of the purely fictional setting, death still remains an item of repulsion and ‘actual death’ (as opposed to fictional or fictionalised death), still remains ‘inappropriate and uncomfortable’ (Penfold-Mounce, 2015, p. 2). Museums use this ‘softening lens’ of popular culture to exhibit true crime.

Crime in the Museum

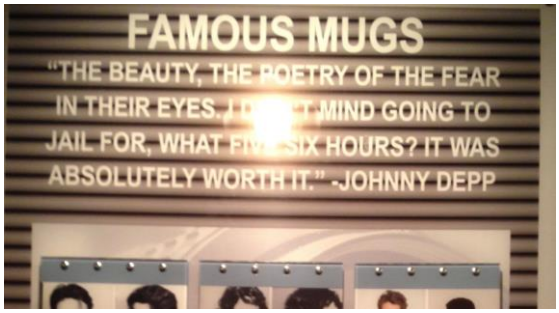
This section is a descriptive account of the four museums sampled as part of these ethnographic observations, beginning in the U.S.A, and finishing with the smallest museum in Hastings, U.K. The visitor walks up to the *The Crime Museum* in Washington D.C, past several law enforcement and federal investigation buildings that curtain the district. The building, at the edge of a wide street, is taped off with a yellow ‘police – do not cross’ barrier. In the window, a naked mannequin is mummified with the same vibrant yellow tape and backlit by a red glow from the double front. *The Hollywood Museum of Death* makes a statement that is equally as bold – a human height skull, an icon of death but also an icon at the height of fashion and contemporary culture (Foltyn, 2011) is nested inside green and red ivy that has taken a stronghold on the metal and brick structure (figure 1). These are the two U.S.A data-sites.

Figure 1 *Hollywood Museum of Death, front façade* (Denham 2014) – images from fieldwork

Stepping inside *The Crime Museum*, the visitor is greeted by an attraction that is filmic to a degree that the other data-sites are not. The visitor walks through darkened corridors that exhibit famous crime through varying methods. The section titled 'Famous Mugs' is exactly as it sounds, a series of profile and portrait 'mug-shots' of famous law-breakers. Hugh Grant, Michael Jackson, Paris Hilton, Mel Gibson and O. J. Simpson populate this segment. 'Infamous Mugs' is just to the side of the famous, including the faces of Charles Manson, Jeffrey Dahmer, David Berkowitz and other noteworthy killers and gangsters. Using 'fame' and 'infamy', the museum is making a similar distinction to that of Ruth Penfold-Mounce between celebrity-criminals (fame) and criminal-celebrities (infamy) (Penfold-Mounce, 2010a). Celebrity-criminals can be identified in that their celebration predates their crimes, although it is sometimes difficult to rationalise the inclusion of the likes of Justin Beiber when juxtaposed against serial murderer Albert Fish. The visitor is presented with an onslaught of familiar criminals, linked together by their recognisability before any theme or chronology. There is no quantity of information to explain the crimes, nor have they been situated within any sort of context by the curator. Seemingly included to

demarcate the beginning of a series of fame related subsections, these images catch the visitor's eye with familiarity.

Visitors are now channelled past a mock prison cell to the section dedicated to 'Famous Prisons'. Naturally, the historic San Francisco prison, Alcatraz, is celebrated in this wing of the museum. Many notorious criminals have spent time in Alcatraz, including the Chicago gangster Al Capone who the visitor walks past – albeit in dummy form – residing inside one of the aforementioned fake prison cells. Yet, the curators at the *The Crime Museum* have chosen to tell the story of this notorious institution, often regarded as one of the toughest prisons in America, through Hollywood protagonist Clint Eastwood and his cunning *Escape from Alcatraz* in the 1979 film (Escape from Alcatraz, 1979) – the closest and most familiar reference point to this place of incarceration that visitors are likely to have. The visitor then passes 'famous firearms', used in infamous murders, including a 'famous saw' that falls under this same category, before passing to the next section. The repetition of the word 'famous' (figure 2) in subject headings seems at first to detract from the perceived authenticity of the exhibits.



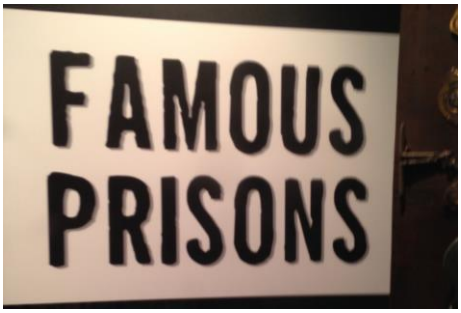


Figure 2 *Signs emphasising famousness, The Crime Museum* (Denham 2014) – images from fieldwork

‘I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice chianti’ – emphatic infamous words from the most notable and well recognised fictional cannibal, Hannibal Lecter, are the title for the next plaque. To its right, a large close-up photograph of Anthony Hopkins (figure 3) indicating a reference to the 1991 film adaptation of *Silence of the Lambs* (Silence of the Lambs, 1991) rather than the 1988 novel (Harris, 1988) from which it is based. ‘Go ahead, make my day!’ is displayed in the same manner just to the side – did you know that Clint Eastwood was the sixth actor approached for the role of *Dirty Harry* (1971)? This and other facts about the film are detailed alongside a picture of Eastwood, gun drawn, parallel to that of Hopkins.

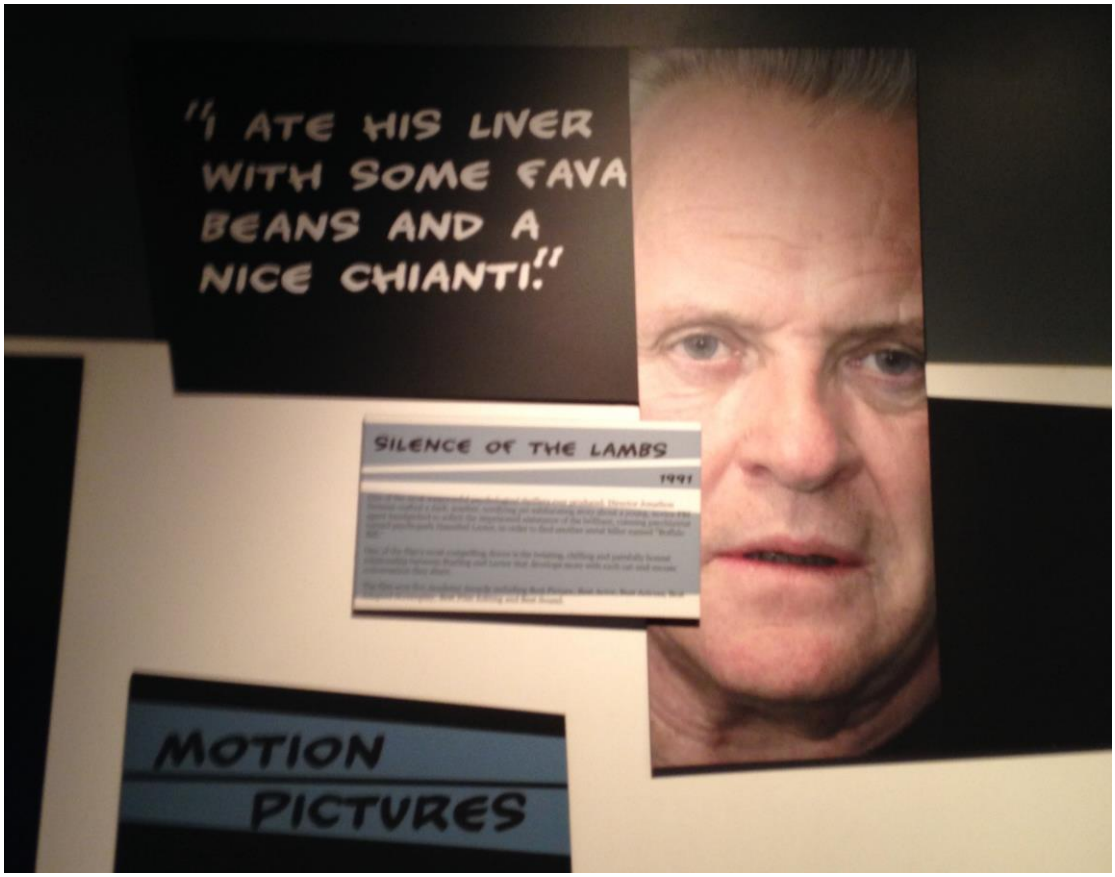


Figure 3 *Filmic Signage, The Crime Museum* (Denham 2014) – images from fieldwork

A black silhouette of a hand holds a gun pointing downwards, protruding from the top of a large, white, eye level plaque. It tells us that every single newspaper has at least one reporter dedicated to crime – and that there are ‘more than 92’ around-the-clock cable news channels in the world that dedicate a large portion of their time to crime. It tells us that crime, through this extensive media coverage, is a business in itself – one that

connects people around the world as it happens. The visitor is standing at the epicentre of this economy, having paid a ticket fee to learn about the business of reporting the business of crime. Vertically printed across the left side of this plaque, also in black, is the title *Crime in the Media*. In a hasty change of tone, 'media' are discussed as both televised and print news outlets and not films. In this sector, missing is the rise of digitally-consumed news media – or a greater misgiving, the omission of the types of film media that have dominated the previous sector. A line has been drawn in the sand between 'culture' (under which mainstream American cinema appears to sit alongside popular television dramas), and 'media' (which we can understand as both audio-visual productions and print editions of *the news*). Culture is celebrated as an integral part of criminality, whereas 'media' is treated with disdain.

The switch away from 'culture' to 'media' is short lived as within a few feet: 'Who loves you baby?' sits above a large, bald and sunglass-clad picture of Telly Savalas as 'Kojak' steals back the visitor's gaze. Accompanied by *Law and Order*, as well as *Kojak* signs, is the beginning of a segment on celebrated crime related American television series'. From here, around the corner to the right, the section dedicated to *'law enforcement'* is initiated through these two examples. In other words, both the fictional law enforcement character of 'Kojak', as well as the dramatized law enforcement television series *'Law and Order'* are used to ground the following exhibition about American police officers and law departments within popular culture. The exhibit, from start to finish, through perpendicular corridors and across three floors, from left to right and from floor to ceiling, is a smorgasbord of references to mainstream American cinema. Some of them stand alone, others are used in union with real events providing the service of grounding the horrific happenings within contemporary popular culture, modern history, and orientations that visitors are best equipped to connect with.

In the *The Hollywood Museum of Death*, a much more viscerally morbid place, a mock theatre has been erected. Taxidermy animals hang from the walls as well as graphic black-and-white photographs of death in varying circumstances. Framing either side of the screen is a dead taxidermied pig (to its right) that has been estranged from its skeleton (to its left) which is described as a depiction of animal anatomy. On screen, a loop of gruesome deaths to which the curator is unnervingly enthusiastic play behind a

death-metal soundtrack. These include a close-up, slow-motion impact after a man has jumped from a tall building, and a particularly gruesome execution by rifle. What truly separates this mid-sized room from other dedicated audio-visual spaces in contemporary museums is the seating arrangement more than the content. Numbered chairs made from worn, dull coloured tube metal are arranged in rows and split into two halves with an aisle in the centre. Following on from some capital punishment artefacts earlier in the exhibit – this arrangement of real prison chairs puts the visitor in mind of an execution viewing room. The 'witness room', as it is also commonly referred, has been evoked by the museum as the visitor watches death, along with varying forms of execution, in the darkened space. Instead of explicitly referencing film, or using the language of popular culture to communicate true crime, *Museum of Death* takes a more immersive approach – submerging the visitor with a virtual simulation of an experience of death and culture.

On the other hand, the least gruesome museum is *Littledean Jail* in Gloucester, U.K. Approaching, the visitor winds through the greenery of the Forrest of Dean, along a long, tree lined pathway towards a Georgian jail-front. The criminal justice heritage of this museum is not an emphasised part of the exhibition, but the imposing archway, with sliding white fortress door, immediately puts the visitor in mind of crime and punishment. The old façade of the jail is in-tact, with bars still on all of the windows, despite this now being the primary residence of the owner-curator (figure 4). The visitor enters into some of the downstairs office spaces, past a small reception desk, and into a display made up of the most eclectic mix of crime memorabilia of the four data sites.

Figure 4 *Jail Front, Littledean Jail* (Denham 2014) – images from fieldwork

In terms of immersion, *Littledean Jail's* exhibition is 'busy', crime is attacking the visitor with a violent assault on the senses. The curators combine the two previous approaches with jail cells that are awash with – or rather overflowing with popular cultural references, newspaper cut-outs and film posters. Signed photographs of television's 'top detectives' and other cultural references are dotted throughout. In a sense, this messy approach feels like the most accurate and 'authentic' depiction of crime because the more extreme artefacts are so well hidden underneath a haze of popular media. This is like a transgressive Easter egg hunt. A lifetime obsession with collecting crime artefacts and crime fiction has spilled out of the curator's full brain and full cupboards and is displayed exactly where it landed.

A series of six by eight feet, damp, dark jail cells tackle separate topics like snapshots or miniature exhibitions. The jail wing, up a stone staircase, through a corridor that passes underneath it, at the very end of the exhibit, has the old Georgian cells converted into miniature exhibition spaces (figure 5). It is rhythmic in its wavering between crime – and media – and back to crime – and back to media. The first cell holds Rose West's corset, then the next is wallpapered with newspaper cut-outs of famous crimes. The next is dedicated to famous British criminal Charles Bronson, before a cell on the transgressions of popular 21st century celebrities.

Figure 5 *Jail cell exhibit with vaulted ceiling, Littledean Jail* (Denham 2014) – images from fieldwork

Conversely, *True Crime Museum* (Hastings, UK), is conspicuously empty. It occupies a network of caves (figure 6) buried in the shoreline at Hastings, and the underground darkness hides the relative lack of objects in this, the youngest of the four museums observed. The sparse population is also compensated by how immersive the narrative is. The visitor is told the history of poisoning as a method of murder, without at any point including a relevant artefact. Instead of a series of auratic objects that are linked together by a storyline that is superimposed by the curator over the top of them, this museum is a work of crime fiction that is illustrated by objects, like visual illustrations in a book – the artefacts appear as secondary to the storyline. Many of which are fabricated reconstructions of famous crime scenes, including the shell of a Jeep riddled with fake bullet holes[9].

Figure 6 *Cave Exhibition, True Crime Museum* (Denham 2014) – images from fieldwork

[9] See the chapter section *Power* for an exploration of this car and other 'fabricated' murderabilia

These cultural references and fictitious narratives form a lens through which true criminal behaviour is being communicated, but moreover, they also form parts of crime museums that encompass the broad totality of transgression which cannot be completed without including *popular culture*. On these cinematic influences in the exhibition of *true* crime, the following section will consider some observed instances in further detail.

Hyperreal

Centre stage in the The Crime Museum in Washington, amongst many artefacts pertaining to the American outlaws Bonnie and Clyde, is the shot-up cream coloured Ford V8 in which they met their demise in the spring of 1934. Actually, that statement is slightly dishonest. The real car is currently [2014] on display approximately two thousand miles away in Las Vegas, the Washington car is from the 1967 biographical film *Bonnie and Clyde* directed by Arthur Penn (1967). The car sits alone in a corner fenced in, in part by information plaques running six or eight feet across the front at waist height, detailing the story of Bonnie and Clyde as well as acting as a barrier to its access. It is lit from above casting numerous shadows in place of each bullet hole, accentuating its notorious assets. Adjacent and extending behind the visitor to the left is a rectangular glass cabinet carrying a line of artefacts pertaining to the famous American bandits. They consist of; a gun that either Bonnie or Clyde is alleged to have used; a crumbled grey brick with a visible indent that is labelled as a brick from their 'final shootout'; some paper featuring their signatures; some original photographs; Clyde's membership card to a recreational club and a hand-written letter. These items have all passed the stringent authenticity checks that the museum employs and are all deemed to be adequately 'real'. The 'American Gangster' section continues across from this fencing cabinet supported by similarly convincing artefacts.

Across to the right on the far wall behind the car, positioned approximately six feet high and a similar distance back from the barrier is another information plaque, this time small, approximately A4 paper size. Here, in this obscure and hidden location, positioned as the last piece of information that the eyes would naturally meet, the origins of the car are explained in more detail. Noticed on the second day of extensive observations it is likely that only the committed visitor would notice this information, like the 'small print' on a contract, and read the clause that reveals a level of

‘inauthenticity’. This car is the most conspicuous and most notorious example of a trend that is common with numerous instances observed across all four of the data sites. These are items of cinematic or literary intrigue that are, to a greater or lesser extent, masquerading as, symbolising, or doing the job of items of true criminal significance.

But this item is not inauthentic, in fact the opposite is true. It is an item of legitimate film memorabilia, it was made use of by the movie’s protagonists and boasts several minutes of screen-time, all things that increase an item’s value to a collector. The car has what Jean Baudrillard would term ‘atmospheric value’ in its historicalness, or perhaps to an extent what Walter Benjamin would term ‘aura’, ‘everything about it since its creation that can be handed down, from its material duration to the historical witness that it bears’ (Benjamin, 1936/2008a, p. 7). As such, this evidences a well-documented shift away from artefacts towards entertainment in museums (Alexander & Alexander, 2008). This authenticity, though, is a cinematic authenticity. Its criminal authenticity is non-existent, and its criminal relevance is anecdotal, based solely in the context in which it is consumed. The car’s aura is annexed though its presentation and subsequent imagination in place of the original. Visitors, then, are consuming the real, through the lens of cinema, which happens to be a reproduction of the real – this labyrinth of reality has been observed repeatedly and is best understood using Baudrillard’s theory of Simulacra and Simulation (1981/1994). Items, such as this car, constitute the fourth order of simulacrum. It is worth, at this stage, briefly re-familiarising with Baudrillard’s terminology.

Baudrillard refers to a simulation where there is no longer any boundary between reality and the representation of that reality – they have, at this point, merged to become one in the same thing. Simulacrum refer to a stage where representations become reality in their own right, they are no longer a copy of any profound material reality. This shift reaches its pinnacle at the fourth stage of simulacrum (1- representation of reality; 2- a representation that alters reality; 3- where a profound reality no longer exists; 4- ‘pure’ simulacrum, bears no relation to any reality whatsoever). Baudrillard brings these ideas together with his concept of the Hyperreal. The hyperreal, then, refers to these late stages of simulacrum – ‘a generation of models without origin or reality’ (Baudrillard, 1981/1994, p. 1), a signifier with no signified.

The car is not simply a straightforward representation, because a representation 'stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real' (p. 6). It is not a direct copy of the real, nor is it as few as one stage removed from the real in which it seeks to represent. Instead, it is the fourth form of simulacrum, for the car in itself has no direct relation to any form of reality, it is a simulation through which visitors are invited to understand a profound reality that is in fact missing. The simulacra that Baudrillard refers to in this stage is a level of cultural communication through which life is rendered mutually legible. A simulation is no longer a simulation of something real, but rather one sign playing the role of a cog in a machine of simulation that is only relevant or understandable due to its position within a series of other signs that are equally ungrounded in reality (Baudrillard, 1981/1994). The car simply references the film, which is a simulated cultural language that the car sits within. It does not have any meaning without the film, nor does the film have any intrinsic meaning outside of the context of its consumption. The car, in this sense, is a pure simulation, more relevant to popular culture than crime, and the system of signs within which it resides and has earned its meaning is the universal Western language of cinema.

Further through the *The Crime Museum,* through exhibits that more obviously reference famous films, Frank Abagnale Jr, the 1960s/70s American Fraudster, gets his own wall and cabinet. His picture is small and resigned to the bottom corner though, as Leonardo DiCaprio and Tom Hanks' images from the Frank Abagnale Jr biopic, *Catch Me If You Can* (2002) dominate the display. Information plaques encourage visitors to peruse the 'man behind the film' as DiCaprio and Hanks are consistently represented as the main attraction behind a cabinet full of typewriters, defrauded cheques and other Abagnale artefacts. The largest information plaque to which the visitor's eye is first drawn tells the history of the film, from the script conception, to the casting of actors, its release at Christmas 2002, and its box office success. Abagnale as a 'criminal celebrity' (Penfold-Mounce, 2010a) is presented to the visitor as a cog, albeit a significant one, in the production process of a successful film. Interestingly, this exhibit does not sit within the aforementioned 'crime in the media' and 'crime in culture' sections of this museum, but within a section dedicated to fraud. This exhibit at face value seems to display film – although film perpetrates the entire museum space as a communicator of the real. The labyrinth of reality continues here with artefacts being contextualised for the public through a film, that is a cinematic reinterpretation of said artefacts. As this labyrinth

becomes gradually more complicated with more degrees of separation between the artefacts and the manner in which they are communicated, Baudrillard (1981/1994) argues that the original gradually loses value and significance to the extent that the simulation, in this case the film, is the centre of the display.

Let us briefly turn to two of Baudrillard's key examples to understand this further. First, the reversing of Joege Luis Borge's concept of a one-to-one map that spans the entirety of an empire and is, in theory, one hundred per-cent accurate. This map is a representation of the original in that we are aware that it is not the real, or that it is overlaid on top of and masking the real. In Joege Luis Borge's fable, the map is slowly destroyed as the empire dissolves. Baudrillard reverses this by arguing that the map is in fact the space in which people live and communicate, and the territory is instead the space that is crumbling from disuse. The symbolic map, for Baudrillard, has superseded the space upon which it is based as people increasingly live inside of simulations and representations. A second example used by Baudrillard is that of currency. The rise of denominational currency leading to exchange value gradually overtaking use value to the extent that items become quantified in monetary terms, which is a simulation of their true usefulness (Baudrillard, 1981/1994). Paper money is perhaps the most apt example of a simulation as the paper on which it is printed is relatively worthless, yet we as a culture define worth using this system and language of symbolic currency.

Baudrillard, through these two examples, is speaking to second and third order simulacra respectively (the industrial revolution leading to mass production in the second, and late-capitalism where simulation supersedes the original to the extent that it is no longer in existence in the third). These concepts are presented in accordance with eras of capitalist society, although they can also be applied to the micro items within the crime museum. In the example of currency, the Frank Abagnale film is the exchange value overtaking the aura of the original – the common understanding provided by the film decodes the artefacts for the visitor and adds weight to the artefacts through famousness and exposure, this is second order of simulacra. In the example of the map, the true history of Bonnie and Clyde can be understood the empire that is fading from memory as the simulacra of the film replaced as the common understanding of the real. The film is the map that is immortalised in exhibition, entirely superseding the original. The 'symbolic language' of the crimes that makes the world mutually legible is one that

is borrowed from film, and this trend is one that continues with increasing potency throughout the exhibitions.

Figure 7 *John Wayne Gacy's paint box, The Crime Museum* (Denham 2014) – images from fieldwork

Figure 7 shows 1970s American serial killer John Wayne Gacy's paint box at The Crime Museum, Washington D.C. These are the tools behind the construction of his famous paintings, the murderabilia behind the scenes of murderabilia. In this sense it delves further into the latter stages of simulacrum as a self-referential reference – it authenticates the paintings which in turn provide its only contextual root. The item itself is laid out as to communicate maximum authenticity. The box is propped on its side for visibility, but items are strewn as though they have fallen out mid-painting session. Dirty cloths; dirty brushes; rolled up, dried up tubes of oil paint in the striking primary colours that feature on his paintings portray stopped time. The box is auratic (Benjamin,

1936/2008a) insofar as it is evoking natural and uninterrupted practice – for Benjamin, the aura of historical significance was directly akin to the aura of the natural world in its lack of mechanical interference (p. 9). If aura is 'what shrinks in an age where the work of art can be reproduced by technological means' (p. 7), then these remnants of the painstaking hand-craft of Gacy's paintings do the work of emphasising and authenticating their aura. Its disarray represents authenticity in that it is presented as a snapshot mid-use, and this also extends into the prominent signatures that further provide authentication. The exhibition is arranged in such a way as to give maximum exposure to his signatures and further present the items as real – even the presumably used palette is turned around to show its signed backside rather than its paint-soiled front.

All four museums, either on their websites, or on their flyers and promotional material, some on all of the previous, openly advertise their existence as educational facilities that aim to depict real crime (termed as 'true crime'). Museums are billed as primarily factual journeys through the macabre. This purpose is pushed to differing degrees in different contexts at each facility, and it is used as a defence when under fire from news media for propagating the sensationalisation of crime and infamous criminals, although is a contradiction in terms. It is not true crime that is being preserved, in most cases the opposite was observed. The true history of Bonnie and Clyde is what is fading from memory here as visitors are encouraged to live within and to do their remembering through cinematic simulations of the famous American gangsters.

This highlights the central concept of authenticity emerging from both the literature, and other areas of data collection. To what extent are these simulations authentic tourist experiences, authentic representations of crime, and can they be understood as simulations of authenticity? As Baudrillard argues: a simulation 'no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance, it is no longer anything but operational' (Baudrillard, 1981/1994, p. 2). That is to argue that when communicating and depicting crime mostly through simulation, the bar of authenticity has been, at the very least, moved. At the most, it is missing altogether. A simulation can no longer be held accountable for its legitimacy against the original, which in this instance is the actual criminal or criminal act, and it is difficult to imagine this not having an impact upon the visitor's perception of true crime. To an extent, the

‘authentic’ qualities that are the defining feature of most tourist attractions have been subdued and combed out of these exhibitions in favour of popular cultural reference points.

However, a simulation is not entirely false as well as not being strictly real. A falsehood would be to pretend, to fabricate, to create. A simulation is still equipped with many of the symptoms of the real and it is this closeness that spreads an air of authenticity in places where it may appear to be missing. This is where visitors begin to unknowingly consume film in place of crime, and in turn, to understand crime through film. It has been argued that most individuals’ exposure to crime is almost entirely through film, or videogame, or television (Presdee, 2000). Crime is so intertwined with popular culture in the public consciousness that, conversely, the inclusion of popular references does more to enhance feelings of authenticity than to detract. Infamy, film, and culture ground the exhibitions within the popular conscious understanding of and familiarity with crime and criminality. This resonates with Baudrillard’s concept of the Hyperreal – crime in the public consciousness is so heavily populated with representation that the two have become inseparable parts of authentic criminality. For Baudrillard, a pure simulacrum, or hyperreality, is part of a symbolic language, as discussed, a level of communication superseding reality that makes the world mutually understandable, a common set of beliefs or understandings that are evoked by the simulation itself. The symbolic language of crime in museums is underpinned by mainstream American cinema. One symbol can only be made legible by its position within other simulations, and therefore, the simulation of the car needs to be considered in the context of the wider narrative of the museum, of mainstream cinema, and of popular culture.

This resonates with what Penfold-Mounce, Beer and Burrows (2011) consider ‘Social Science Fiction’, in that popular culture can be observed as doing the job of the sociological imagination (Mills, 1959). Using the example of American TV drama, *The Wire*, they consider the parallels between the fictional world and real world, and the ways in which fiction is used to ‘tell about society’ (Becker, 2007). This kind of *social science* fiction (2011) can be witnessed similarly in the museum in that museums are using popular culture, particularly mainstream American cinema to communicate crime to the visitor. They are using the fictional world to communicate real world events and although these ‘real world’ observations do not constitute *social science*, the presence of

fiction in the process of 'telling about society' is nevertheless visible through this example. In response to the first research question, it is evident that museums privilege symbolic narratives of film and popular reference points in culture to communicate and authenticate 'true crime' narratives to visitors. Through Baudrillard, it is possible to see the inseparability of fantasy and 'the real' played out in museum spaces.

Power

Foucault tells us that crime in popular culture, at the very beginning, was because the criminal represented power – this has been the staple of the criminal archetype, the narrative of power. He argued that crime in culture came about when 'a whole new literature of crime developed: a literature in which crime is glorified, because it is one of the fine arts [...], because it reveals the monstrousness of the strong and powerful' (Foucault 1977 p68). The reliance these fictitious reference points through simulacrum to communicate an authentic crime is continued in the museum by utilising these narratives of power and authority first mentioned by Foucault and attached to infamous criminals. The narrative of power runs deep through all of the data-sites, one that exacerbates a 'good vs evil' dichotomy in law enforcement as well as emphasising power (Foucault, 1977) and charismatic authority (Weber, 1968) as an intrinsic quality of the criminal. Whilst this narrative infiltrates many representations of crime, it is arguably most at home in Hollywood cinema. Another car (figure 8), this time a Jeep as part of a 'Los Zetas' South American drug cartel exhibit, is more obviously a reproduction than the previous. Holes have been drilled through the shell and the tyres burst, lights placed underneath shine through to exacerbate its bullet-riddled exterior. There is no information present to clarify that this is a reproduction, but similarly little information that would lead a visitor to see it as an original. It is not definitive what this item is supposed to be, but it is assumed that depicting the aftermath of a drug deal gone wrong. Instead, it stands centre-stage as an ominous simulation communicating the immense destructive power of the gun in the hands of the criminal. An information plaque resembling a film poster billing a new release, describes the history of the Los Zetas drug cartel using the semantics of power. They are 'elite' fighters, part of the Mexican 'special forces', the visitor is lead to expect a film release date to round off the summary. This is, of course, not a film, and this second car is yet another example of the hyperreal (Baudrillard, 1981/1994).

Figure 8 *Los Zetas Car, True Crime Museum* (Denham 2014) – images from fieldwork

In *The Hollywood Museum of Death*, Charles Manson has his own room populated by three main areas: a quilt, a television, and a wall of famous victims. The quilt is wall-sized, hanging on the left and dominating the entire room. It is constructed using intricate needlework and evoking Nazi symbolism with a huge number of small swastika patches sewn together in parallel lines. It was had made by members of the Manson Family cult, and the television off to the left runs a documentary interviewing several members of the 'family', young women that were brainwashed into his cult and convinced to carry out murders for him in the 1960s. The women confess to Manson's ability to manipulate and control them, whilst the narrator slowly details Manson's systematic moves to pull the women from their family homes and turn them to murder. Behind the television, stills from *The Manson Family* (film) (2003) are on display. The wall of victims focuses mainly on Sharon Tate, actress and model, the most famous of The Manson Family's victims. The other six victims are covered but in less detail. The narrative of power is at its most patent in this room. The quilt is a strong visual cue

putting the visitor in mind of slow and monotonous labour carried out by The Family at the behest of Manson. Visually, it is indicative of the power dynamic within The Manson Family with the women brainwashed into Charles' every desire. The documentary reinforces this by using accounts of his manipulative power and representing the women as young, innocent and stolen from their parents. The wall of victims creates the same effect by using Sharon Tate as centrepiece. She is presented as a pure and unobtainable, young, pretty, pregnant, talented model and actress that The Family were able to overcome.

Unlike most exhibitions, the details of the crimes are noticeably missing. The Charles Manson exhibition does not pay dues to the lives lost, or the gruesome manner in which they died, mostly by stabbing, or profile the killers. This wing of the museum is not an exhibition of crime, or death, or violence. Instead, it emphasises power, manipulation and control. It is an exhibition of good vs evil, and of good finally triumphing over the evil cunning of a single man, not the several murderers within the cult. It emphasises 'the sublime in crime' (Huey, 2011), although individuals are not 'witnessing trauma' (Seltzer, 1998) and indulging in a sublime experience at the hands of their distance from it (Huey, 2011). Instead, visitors are encouraged to view Manson through the narrative of powerful criminal, the same lens as they would the fictional John Doe in the film *Se7en* (Se7en, 1995). Dyer (1999) argues that Doe is represented, though a series of cinematic devices including his persistent comparison to the cunning Detective Somerset, as a thinking – articulate – influential – and powerful. He is represented as the lawbreaking counterpart of a meticulous problem solver.

These elements, for Dyer, make up part of the archetypal serial killer in films and other popular culture (Dyer, 1999) and by placing emphasis on Manson's qualities of power and control, the exhibition makes use of this collective cultural experience to evoke a mediated understanding of Manson's character. In portraying Manson through the popular culture archetype of a thinking-killer, observers are experiencing a sublime experience not because they are experiencing violence whilst at a comfortable distance, but rather because they are experiencing film with a closer relationship than ever. Martin Lefebvre makes a similar argument by suggesting that cannibalism and consumerism have become 'part of our culture's 'memory image' of the serial killer in both fact and fiction' (Lefebvre, 2005, p. 43):

> [S]erial killers have been known to eat human flesh: Albert Fish, Ed Gein, Jeffrey Dahmer or, more recently, Armin Meiwes for instance. However, it would appear that the phenomenon is not as ubiquitous among real life serial-killers as it is among fictional ones ('Hannibal the Cannibal' or 'Patrick Bateman' – the 'hero' of *American Psycho* – come immediately to mind) (Lefebvre, 2005, p. 45).

A 'memory image' being a kind of collective understanding of what it means to be a violent criminal or serial killer. For Lefebvre, fictional killers play a key role in forging these memory images and are far more prominent than 'real' killers in their reinforcement of archetypes. He names Patrick Bateman and Hannibal Lecter as prominent examples of those imagined characters that influence their real-life counterparts' perception as consumeristic flesh-hungry, power crazed animals. Undoubtedly, in the case of Manson, 'the visitor is offered the opportunity to become a voyeur of transgression' (Huey, 2011, p. 386), but moreover, they are offered the opportunity to be closer to the familiar cinematic archetypes of the killer than previously possible.

This emphasis on cinematic archetypes of the powerful killer resonates throughout the exhibitions. *The Crime Museum* (Washington) has dedicated an entire wing, approximately one fifth of the museum's wall and floor space, to the rich history of crime within American popular culture. This included audio-visual equipment replaying famous scenes from crime films and behind the scenes photographs from the sets of several more. The former narrates the journey through the 'film' section with the familiar-yet-disjointed sounds of famous car chases, shooting-scenes and deaths. The latter are displayed alongside the clips and are evocative of the crime scene photographs that accompany the 'real' items of murderabilia. They occupy a small space alongside the main-exhibits of film and posters giving the observer a glimpse into the construction of their favourite Hollywood masterpieces. Murderabilia are displayed as an aside to film, they ground the popular cultural exhibits inside of the real by contextualising them against the events that they are based on. In exactly the same way but elsewhere in the museum, murderabilia artefacts are accompanied by often black-and-white forensic and crime scene photographs lending the observer a 'behind-the-scenes' view into 'the making of' the most notorious crimes. Stylistically, there is nothing to separate these

exhibitions of crime-fiction and crime-truth in these spaces. The information plaques adorning both fact and fiction employ the same 'intensifying', 'melodramatic' language described by Huey in the *Kriminalmuseum*: 'bloodcurdling, gruesome and macabre' (2011, p. 396).

Even more prominent than the videos and photographs are the film posters. Lining each wall of the wider-than-average corridor are eight or ten film posters of approximately five or six feet in height. They cover American crime-film history spanning from the 'Westerns' of John Wayne and Clint Eastwood, through gangster films including *The Godfather* (The Godfather, 1972), to more modern cultural interpretations of crime such as *Se7en* (Se7en, 1995). The posters are lauded as valuable snippets of American crime history, presented again in the same light as items of murderabilia. Some are modern reproductions; others are artefacts from the original production dating back as far as half a century. These items, through their history and originality, possess Benjamin's (1936/2008a) 'aura' and are not out of place in a museum. What is interesting is their inclusion within a museum as the primary part of the exhibit, with legitimacy being added by the supporting cast of murderabilia artefacts. This implicit interpretation of 'crime museum', as a space that archives and exhibits the history of crime as a phenomenon that is beyond the actual breaking of the law, acknowledges crime's pervasiveness within popular culture. To exhibit America's rich 'crime history' alongside America's rich 'crime-fiction history' under the mutual banner of 'true crime' is to do something that is often neglected within the discipline of criminology itself: to acknowledge that the word crime (and therefore, *true* crime), is as much a reference to a cultural genre as a set of behaviours.

One curator from The Crime Museum suggested that the law enforcement side of the museum brings it back to earth and that, instead of just gangsters and serial killers, America's history of bravery in the face of crime was important in order to ground the exhibition. However, the 'Law Enforcement' section of this museum was told mostly using the long running television series *America's Most Wanted* (America's Most Wanted, 1988-2012). Several television screens and posters line the walls showing presenter John Walsh from 1988 to 2012 and detailing the many criminals that the show has had a hand in apprehending. On many occasions, a high level of notoriety is used as a qualifying factor to be featured in an exclusive section of the museum and none more

potent than sections on *America's Most Wanted*. Here, the criminals with the highest level of media exposure are considered amongst each other as on a level above the ordinary violent offender. In these exclusive sections, a criminal's worth is judged by his/her infamy as a criminal celebrity (Penfold-Mounce, 2010a), their importance to museum archive and display is judged by their elevation within news media and popular culture.

Individuals who are remembered within in this hall-of-fame are consumed for their media attention and ubiquity and quantity of film representations. Lauding criminals for their power, status and infamy, this most exclusive section is reserved for those who best fit the Hollywood archetypes of violence and criminality. This is predominantly an exhibition of fame and culture before criminality, and authenticity is achieved through common and recognisable reference points. To be an authentic criminal of notable interest is to have sustained popular cultural reference points, and so this is how crime museums cultivate perceptions of the real and the genuine. Infamous criminals are referenced in film, and those films in turn are used to authenticate their associated murderabilia.

Narrative

Hand in hand with film goes audio-visual equipment and throughout the data sites there is a notable reliance on large television screens to fill large amounts of wall space. To borrow Alison Griffiths' (2007) phraseology, the 'moving image' has an impact upon the 'architectonics of the museum space' (p. 70). As the visitor moves through the space, a range of mainstream TV documentaries and films narrate the artefacts on display, contextualising and communicating information about the murderabilia artefacts. Film as an artistic device, or used to pay compliment to physical artefacts is generally on the increase and this is a well-documented trend in museology. It is argued to profoundly influence not only the visitor's journey through the museum space and the information that is communicated and absorbed, but also the architectural aesthetics of the space itself (Griffiths, 2007). Beyond the practical use of audio-visual equipment for the display of large amounts of information and guidance of visitors through exhibition, it is interesting to assess the impact of the content on the perception of accompanying artefacts.

Some films, including the mainstream and the obscure, are cut up and fragmented with these corresponding acts of cinematic violence on loop against their historical counterpart. In one instance, a clip from an unidentified dramatic film is playing on loop on a screen high above a glass cabinet, slightly displaced to the side. It features a young male being strangled by a much older, grey-haired male with a rope and a stick being used together as a tourniquet. Below, the museum's plentiful collection of John Wayne Gacy artefacts begins; the American Serial Killer responsible for the deaths of thirty-three young males in 1970s Chicago using this technique. This example is particularly pertinent as an infamous and contextually more appropriate video exists for this same job. More appropriate, to clarify, for the museological ethos of real and not artificial, and for the criminal celebrity ethos of the importance of unmediated content. John Wayne Gacy himself can be observed teaching a journalist this technique using a shoelace, a ballpoint pen, and the journalist's arm. Gacy struggles during the interview to execute the manoeuvre on his own arm, and after fumbling for a while, requests the use of the journalist's in what is a disturbing collection of moments. This out of copyright clip is further authenticated by its clearly unscripted nature, from the impromptu rope in the form of a shoelace, to the pen from the notepad on the table, and the shaky forearm that is undoubtedly less than comfortable with the experience.

Choosing this clip to narrate the artefacts would have honoured the supposed attraction of individuals to less-mediated, manufactured experiences that drives a desire to consume (Root, 1996), and particularly to consume crime. It would also have also followed more closely the museological ethos of presenting authentic artefacts decoded in the most real way possible. Instead of to *present*, this museum chose to *represent* and as such, the subtext reads: 'here is how these murder artefacts are relevant to popular culture, something that you, the visitor, are significantly more likely to be familiar with'. This process of contextualising crime through cinematic narrative rather than artefact, or description, or the most realistic option available, has a resounding affect upon its receipt by visitors. The gruesome, macabre and bloodthirsty are replaced by the artistic, the imaginative, and the cinematic.

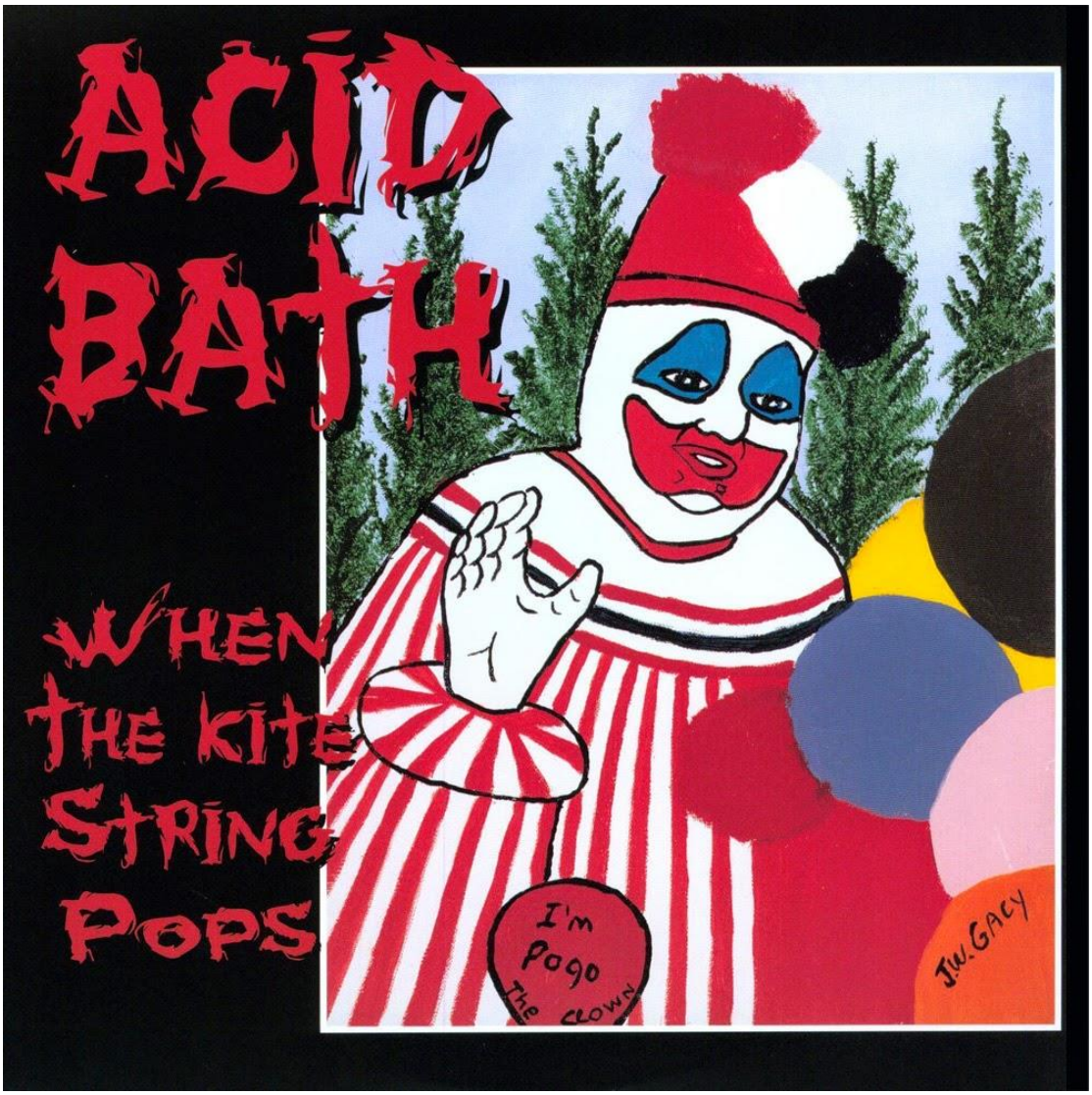


Figure 9 *Acid Bath – When The Kite String Pops* (AcidBath, 1994)

Continuing with the example of John Wayne Gacy – *The Crime Museum* has paintings of him as a clown, including his own self-portrait, cut against the bands *Insane Clown Posse*, and *Acid Bath* in a similar way. *Insane Clown Posse* are an American rap duo who present themselves as clowns and incorporate violent lyrics as part of a transgressive stage persona. *Acid Bath* are an American 'sludge metal' band who use Gacy's clown artwork on one of their album covers: *When the Kite String Pops*. Both references to the killer, directly using his artwork (figure 9) or just making links between clowns and violence, are featured on posters next to Gacy artefacts. In this instance, visitors are invited to understand the gruesomeness of Gacy's crimes against the counter-cultural transgression of those who have evoked his brand image. Just as the Bonnie and Clyde car from earlier in this chapter, this is a labyrinth of reality as a way

of presenting and negotiating authenticity. The posters are invoking violence through representations of the artefacts, which are in turn being grounded in popular culture through the posters. And as the use of *Catch Me if You Can* film references in the previous section, this is an example of hyperreality in that there is no distinct form of reality and it is unclear which item draws reference from its other.

This tendency to interpretation of violence and crime through film corresponds with Slavoj Žižek's arguments when discussing the 9/11 terror attacks in his 2012 guest lecture at the European Graduate School, Switzerland. Žižek suggests that Americans' fascination with and understanding of this event cannot be explained in a common-sense type way as the influx of unmediated *real* experiences into fairy-tale lives. Indeed, this understanding would be conventional, as it makes sense to understand film as a recipient of criminal influence from 'real life' and not the other way around. Instead, argues Žižek, it should be understood as the opposite: very real, boring lives being infiltrated by something that can only be described as fantasy or fiction, something straight out of the movies filled with mysticism and cinema (ibid). Demand for transgressive experiences, in this sense, is based upon film and fantasy more than authentic reality. 9/11 is not cinema, society is aware of its reality. However, it is not part of their personal reality and as such, the lens through which it is understood by the American people is cinematic in nature. People indulge in real life fantasy through the emancipatory power of film, and as a consequence, understand real life tragedy using the parameters of film.

Culturally, this argument is akin to proposing that criminality in the real world influencing cinema is not a one way street, or that the vein of communication between the museum and the outer-environment (true crime in the real world) is that of cinema. Indeed, most people's exposure to crime is through film – the barrier of understanding is dissolved through the universal Western language of Hollywood. This is something that can be observed repeatedly in accounts of traumatic experiences, recently and notably in the case of the 'Charlie Hebdo' attacks in Paris. Lilian Lepere (January 2015) endured an eight-hour siege in a print-works, hidden in a cupboard while the attackers, Saïd and Chérif Kouachi, held hostages whilst fleeing from French police. BBC news quotes Mr. Lepere, a member of staff at the print-works, as saying:

> He was drinking just above me, I could hear water flowing just over my head because my head was next to the sink. I could see his shadow through the opening between the doors, a surreal moment, completely surreal and I said to myself: 'it's like in a film' (BBC, 2015).

In this instance, the individual can do nothing to describe their ordeal beyond equating it to a film-like scenario and this is the conceptual predicament that occurs when trying to depict the gritty reality of crime in exhibitons. Lilian Lepere, when confronted by a journalist, was able to describe the scenario and liken it to a film for our benefit as outsiders peering in and attempting to understand the experiences of another individual in an extreme predicament. In this respect, Lepere is calling upon a collective understanding of cinematic hostage situations in order to communicate with the journalist. This is a representation of reality that is being used in place of reality to tell the story of reality, something akin to Baudrillard's third and fourth stages of simulacrum – the transition from a representation that *alters* reality, to one that takes its place in the cultural consciousness more broadly.

The fact that Lepere claims to have been thinking this way at the time, though, resonates with Žižek's comments on 911. Not only did he choose to use film in order to communicate with the journalist, but he also spent time understanding his life-threatening predicament in this fashion during the ordeal itself. He is not simply evoking the representation of film to help his explanation, cinema is the only reality that he knows in this context – it replaces reality with its simulacrum. It would be tempting to use Jung's (1990) notion of the 'collective unconscious' to decode this trend and indeed it has potential as a psychological framework through which to understand the omnipresent shared cultural understandings that are played upon in these museums. Although, it is incompatible at the level of 'learning', a problem that Baudrillard's concept of the simulation approaches from a more useful perspective. Jung writes:

> [I]n addition to our immediate consciousness, which is of a thoroughly personal nature and which we believe to be the only empirical psyche (even if we tack on the personal unconscious as an appendix), there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is

> inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents (Jung, 1990, p. 43).

This ‘collective unconscious’ is a set of shared understandings about the world that are termed ‘archetypes’. These archetypes are shared within the unconscious mind of the entire human population and, not unlike Baudrillard’s order of simulacra, serve to make the world mutually legible. For example, trees, or water, can be collectively understood as ‘life-giving’ across the entire human population without needing to allow for cultural or societal differences. The theory is distinct from Freud’s concept of the ‘personal unconscious’, which is beholden to an individual’s personal experiences and differs greatly from person to person. The collective unconscious is instead understood by Jung as regressive in nature. Collective understandings about the world are inherited into every human being and are, supposedly, not learned or influenced by an individual’s personal experiences. Instead, they are left over from archaic man and are handed down and developed between generations (Jung, 1990).

A cinematic understanding of criminality is of course learnt and is not passed down from archaic man, although this does not render it any less ‘collective’ than the unconscious data that Jung points to. It is possible to view the use of symbols and the mutual understanding that they function within crime museums as occupying a kind of middle ground between these two perspectives of Jung and Baudrillard. On the one hand, it is necessary to understand this trend through the collective understanding that these simulations draw upon, but on the other it is necessary to acknowledge that this language is culturally constructed and not inherited. It has been shaped, in a large part, from societal norms, or ‘archetypes’ that are, as Jung insists, developed over time. A good portion of these norms are what we can consider ‘societal’ and formed through the traditional social arrangements of gender, class, education, and others. Another portion large portion of these collective understandings are cultural, and will be formed from widespread norms within popular culture. Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra and simulation does a good job of theorizing these societal and cultural elements and occupies this middle ground well – as a mutual or ‘collective’ understanding, but one that is learned culturally and communicated through simulations.

Figure 10 *Wall of Lost Prophets news, Littledean Jail* (Denham 2014) – images from fieldwork

The trend of unpacking true crime using media narratives continues into every area of the exhibitions. Even more pervasively with news media, in *Littledean Jail*, descriptions of artefacts by museum curators are entirely missing, replaced solely by their news-media counterparts. Figure 10 shows the extent to which the curators in Gloucester utilise tabloid newspaper media to contextualise crime – in this instance, the papers' reaction to Ian Watkins' sex crimes, member of the popular Welsh band *Lostprophets.* Information plaques are replaced by newspaper clippings, or wanted posters, or reactionary columns. Journalistic prose entirely replaces curated narrative, or research and information, instead providing a politicised and romanticised view of criminality. In this instance, media has become responsible not only for decoding criminal history, but also for curating it. It becomes a story 'as told' by news media, one of complete immersion into crime popular culture and commerce.

Exhibit Through the Gift Shop

The tendency toward media simulacrum in curating and displaying crime is most prominent in Littledean Jail. This time, a section on 1960s East End of London gangsters the Kray twins. A series of small rooms tangent from a corridor, running underneath the main row of old Georgian jail cells, along which several pieces of Kray murderabilia are on display at eye height. These include paints and paint boxes arranged similarly to that of Gacy, paintings, sketches and letters, as well as a much smaller quantity of items pertaining to other gangsters, such as Bonnie and Clyde, Al Capone and John Dillinger. *Scarface* (Scarface, 1983), *Goodfellas* (Goodfellas, 1990) and *The Godfather* (The Godfather, 1972) posters are running parallel above and below the artefacts in two lines. Again, the museum is offering a cinematic lens through which to contextualise true crime artefacts with most individuals likely to be significantly more familiar with the films than the criminals and their associated criminal acts.

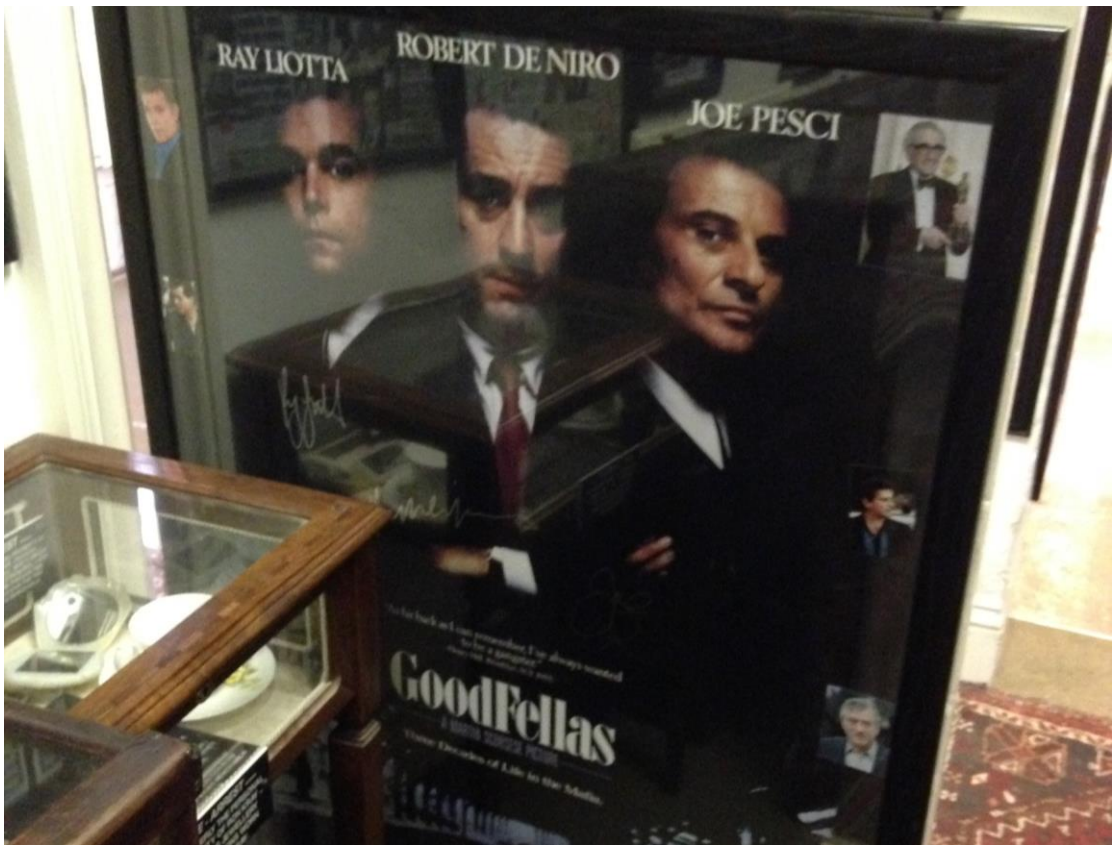


Figure 11 *Goodfellas poster, Littledean Jail* (Denham 2014) – images from fieldwork

Some of these film posters are limited editions, or bear the signatures of the directors, producers or actors. Some of them were used in the premier showings of the movies and may have lined the red carpet and been inches from film stars. These items of legitimate film memorabilia are authentic in the sense that they have a history, they carry with them their pervious experiences that are handed down with the items, despite not strictly being auratic (Benjamin, 1936/2008a). On the other hand, some of these items are mass-produced reproductions. Benjamin argues that the age of mechanical reproduction is synonymous with the loss of aura precisely because the items no longer have associated histories, they have nothing to hand down nor are they handed anything from their past (Benjamin, 1936/2008a). Baudrillard makes a similar point in a different way: in the third stage of simulacra the mass production of items reaches a level where items are mass produced from the outset and therefore have no original or true form from to which they mimic (Baudrillard, 1981/1994). Lash and Lury extend this even further in the context of globalisation and 21st century networked capitalism when they argue that mass produced objects are inherently mediated and cannot predate their mediation, thus also not having an original, or an intrinsic value outside of the context in which they are being consumed (Lash & Lury, 2007).

These simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1981/1994), in this particular instance, are especially interesting because some of them are for sale, and others are not – they are half artefact; half consumable. It is not immediately possible to discern the items that are for sale and those that are not. The discovery of a price-tag on an item that at first glance appears to be part of the exhibit is surprising, and thereafter the visitor spends time hunting for similar evidence throughout the rest of the exhibition. Some of the aforementioned film posters are reproductions that constitute part of the 'gift shop', but they are intertwined against similar limited edition or original images that are not. For-sale mass produced items are displayed alongside murderabilia and crime-fiction artefacts as though they are the same – or at least included to serve the same purpose. The exhibition is about the broader economies of crime which include popular culture as prominently as 'true crime'.

The symbolic downgrading of remembrance and the introduction of 'kitsch' products (Potts, 2012) is traditionally attached to the end of the museum space in the form of gift shops. Visitors are allowed back into the real world by being unforgivingly dumped into

the consumerist reality of modern museum funding from a space of commemoration and tribute, or so is the case in the 911 memorial museum (Potts, 2012). This is not the case in some museums of violent crime as the gift shops are intertwined within the artefacts rather than positioned neatly at the end of the exhibition as an unapologetic commercialisation of the exhibit space. However, this merge of gift shop and artefact is not jarring in the context of violent crime. As Jarvis argues, commodity and violence go hand in hand with each other and that their relationship is one of 'structural integration'. Consumerism is so violent, and cinematic archetypes of violent criminal are so consumerist, that the two are inseparable (Jarvis, 2007). This is not to imply that one effects the other insomuch as that they are both inevitable consequences in the presence of the other.

Alison Griffiths has previously discussed the gift shop as another gallery space within the museum (Griffiths, 2007), serving an array of purposes including displaying popular cultural interpretations of museum artefacts as well as serving obvious commercial purposes. In *Exit Through The Gift Shop,* Macdonald (2014) extends this argument suggesting that gift shops are becoming increasingly pervasive within the museum space, taking up both the entrance as well as the traditional exit space, and serving as transition points between individual exhibitions. Increasingly, it is the gift shop that informs the visitor that he/she has left one wing of the museum and entered another (2014). Macdonald takes issue with the notion that the increase of gift shops represents the downgrading of the museum space, or the commercialisation of art and culture. Instead, she argues that purchasing an item from the gift shop can be understood as an opportunity to *extend* the culture of the museum into the outside world – not the outside world creeping in and tampering with a culture that is commercially sacred (2014). Even without the physical presence of a shop in the museum, Macdonald argues it is still there as part of the 'cultural dialogue' of things. An inherent likeness between shops and museums as spaces where objects are stored, arranged and displayed whilst not being used, leads Macdonald to describe them under a unified title as 'thing places'. Differences begin to creep in in the way items are labelled and way in which items may be handled and interacted with (Macdonald, 2011) – although it is evident that these spaces are not as opposed as visitors often believe them to be. The omnipresence of commerce within the museum space and the ways in which it can possess and extend some of the cultural values of the museum are well debated, then.

Macdonald goes on to argue that although these shops are conceptually similar to the exhibition spaces, they must make extra effort to 'index' their association to the museum. One of the techniques employed is displaying 'for-sale' items in the same kinds of spaces that house the exhibited things, another is to sell replicas or copies of artefacts which trade on a kind of borrowed aura from the from the artefacts themselves, gaining authenticity from their sale accompanying the original – both of these techniques are put into place extensively within the British Museum (Macdonald, 2011), and in *Littledean Jail* as well. There is evidently a complex and reciprocal interrelationship present between sale and exhibit items by which objects trade, exchange and share their value to varying extents depending upon their degree of integration (Macdonald, 2011). However, another step has been taken when both classes of 'thing' are woven together within the exhibitions, reaching almost un-decipherable levels of assimilation – especially as these items offer a different way of 'relating to things':

> [A for-sale item] offers up partly shared but also partly differing cultural accounts of things and of ways of relating to things. [The shop] provides us with things that we might try to make into durable stories about ourselves – things that we will transform from commodities into meaningful objects that are part of our ongoing lives (Macdonald, 2011, p. 44).

When sale items are combed into the main exhibitions and interwoven between the artefacts themselves, it stands to reason that the 'cultural accounts' that the items tell will also merge. The ways in which visitors 'relate to things' will also be merged as for-sale items borrow the cultural accounts of artefacts and vice versa. The presence of commodified cultural accounts alongside those of artefacts, whilst the two different types of exhibit are spatially inseparable, influences the visitors' ways of relating to things.

This is yet another good example of the hyperreality as these 'cultural accounts' associated with objects can be seen to predate, in some cases, the artefacts that are presented as originals. This constitutes a blurring of the distinction between reality and representation. Through this merger, the concepts of originality and aura become lost in the museum as all types of objects, both the for-sale and the artefact, become a lens

through which visitors experience established cultural archetypes of crime. These archetypes often have roots dating back before the relevant 'true crime' was actually committed and thus they are hyperreal. The symbolic language being spoken in unison by these items is the 'cultural account' (Macdonald, 1992) of mainstream cinema, commodity and artefact are operating under the same symbolic language and this is the individual's way of 'relating to things' in the museum. For-sale items and artefacts are able to function side by side in the museum as neither of them are separately making reference to a true crime or criminal history, but rather they are jointly referencing film and jointly acting as a simulation of established cultural archetypes of crime and criminal.

Summary

These filmic representations of violence in educational spaces, if nothing else, tells us something about the status and importance of violent themes within commercially driven aspects of our popular culture more generally. Building on narratives of 'entertainmentization' in museology, this chapter has argued that popular culture, particularly that of popular crime film, has embedded itself into *true crime* museums. Particularly, Alexander and Alexander write:

> Since classical days, humankind has taken some interest in the past and gradually learned to separate myth from actual happening (Alexander & Alexander, 2008, p. 114).

Although as a consequence of this embedment, a reversal of this trend is present in that fiction and myth, in the genre of crime, is becoming inspirable from the real. At the turn of the 21st century there was significant scholarly attention paid to the adaptation of traditional museums into entertainment spaces, or the addition of arms of the entertainment industry to said spaces. When considering this multifaceted role of museums to modern audiences, Kotler and Kotler (2000) acknowledge that maintaining a museum's integrity as a wholly educational facility whilst engineering widespread appeal in a competitive market is challenging for curators. They acknowledge that 'the boundaries which once separated museums from other recreational […] organizations are blurring or breaking down altogether' (p. 271) and suggest that this is in part due to

funding issues and a need to appeal to a wider audience, as well as pressure from increased competition from the entertainment industries including restaurants, sports venues and shopping spaces (Kotler & Kotler, 2000). Crime museums engineer widespread appeal by communicating crime to the public in a cinematised fashion. In a move towards museum thinking that centres around the public and not around the artefact and in an effort to compete in an entertainment orientated industry, three approaches are suggested by Kotler and Kotler (2000) to the improvement of the museum business-model. One is to entirely reposition the museum toward the entertainment industry, another is to forge a connection with the outside environment and community (2000). Crime museums have made use of the most prominent connection to real world culture at their disposal, crime's inescapable link with mainstream cinema and the crime genre.

Evidence presented in this chapter represents something a stage or two further than this established transition. Evidenced here is the attempted communication of the real, not just *through* entertainment (documentaries would be a good example of this), but by employing entertainment-forged simulations or frameworks to understand crime in itself. This fundamental departure from what museums traditionally stand for raises questions of authorship. Alexander and Alexander ask (2008): what kinds of narratives should take precedence over others during the development of an entertainment museum? This chapter aimed primarily to answer exactly that in the first research question: what narratives are privileged in museum exhibitions of crime? In the case of crime museums, the vein of communication between the museum and the outer-environment to which Kotler and Kotler (2000) refer is that of cinema – the barrier of understanding is dissolved through the simulative language of Hollywood. From the mixing of commodities with artefacts, to the narration of objects through film clips, to the use of film props in place of 'real' artefacts – popular cultural crime narratives are woven throughout the museum exhibitions. As such, crime museums are dominated by an indulgence in popular modern narratives through simulative objects, rather than by recounting historical stories through artefacts.

However, using imagery to communicate context and illustrate artefacts in museums is not new. As Williams suggests:

> It is a notable […] paradox that, in the museum context, photographs are typically viewed as interpretive illustrations rather than objects that existed in the world at that time […] the ability to make multiple, exact copies is arguably one reason photographs lack the same aura as physical artefacts (Williams, 2007, p. 51).

Williams reminds us that these are usually limited to illustration and not objects of the exhibition themselves. The reduction of aura that follows this shift towards representation is the trend that on face value lacks authenticity, but these simulations represent a more complex relationship with the authentic than first impressions would imply. This attention to cinema does not undermine authenticity but rather provides an alternative avenue to achieve it – familiarity and not originality. Museums are staunchly critical of that that they perceive to be 'fake'. The True Crime Museum, Washington, has a 'fakery and forgery' section dedicated to crimes of commodity counterfeiting that are treated with more narrative distain than violent crime. They urge the visitors to be diligent when purchasing clothing to ensure it is not counterfeit in the only museum section that concerns itself with protecting the visitor from crime. Museums and tourist attractions trade on visitor *perceptions* of authenticity (Cohen, 1988). Perceptions of authenticity are achieved through familiarity – items are authentically criminal if they have some semblance of famousness or attachment to famous brands, in a sense that mirrors this counterfeiting section. Crime museums present authenticity in the same way that one would refer to an authentic branded item of clothing against an apparently identical counterfeit. This is a form of celebrity authenticity through familiarity and exposure – those items that are famous and recognisable constitute the real and authentic criminal experience.

5- Auratic Transgression

Those who have made hobbies out of collecting murderabilia and related crime mementos are the focus of this chapter. It is informed by interviews with participants who collect murderabilia (see appendix 3 for a descriptive list of participants), but is also informed ethnographically by observations of their collections and how they interact with them. Whilst some of them opt to display their items to the public for short periods, lend their objects to exhibitions, or have formed successful businesses around the exhibition of their items by running a permanent museum – they all self-identified as personal murderabilia collectors in the first instance. Some of this sample began expanding their collection rapidly as soon as they decided to commercialise their things, whilst others garnered collections that simply grew out of control and needed to be housed. Some seeded exhibitions in order help fund their continued desire to collect, while others' items are kept personal.

It will be argued that, when discussing the acquisition of objects and the construction of a collection, authenticity is repeatedly cited as most important, akin to the qualities that Benjamin describes as 'aura' (1936/2008a) – items must be directly related to the criminal or event, for example, or they should be original pieces without copy or counterpart. Yet, this affront to mechanical reproduction is contradicted by a recurrent emphasis on the mainstream of popular culture. Those criminals that persist at the forefront of the majority of collections are those who have been celebrated in the media or are known for their notoriety. Root's work on the consumption of authenticity, used in several of the previous chapters, can help understand this dichotomy:

> Collectors are much like the tourists who want to experience an authentic ceremony and feel cheated by a noticeably inauthentic event or performance. Consumers want their purchases to be authentic, and tourists want their experiences to be real, even though at some level it must be clear to all concerned that this is not the case, that a genuine, pristine, authentic tradition is an impossible dream in a market driven by capital (Root, 1996, p. 81)

Building upon the previous chapter – collections can be understood as similarly motivated by authenticity as tourist experiences – despite authentic consumer experiences being a contradiction. Murderabilia items are an attempt by consumers to achieve these real, genuine, pristine traditions. They are a form of antique, what Baudrillard calls 'marginal objects', items that 'appear to run counter to the requirements of functional calculation, and answer to other kinds of demands such as witness, memory, nostalgia or escapism' (Baudrillard, 1968/1996, p. 77). Yet topics of interest were most frequently limited to criminals that had featured in film rather than those that were particularly violent. Or, types of crime that have been disproportionately represented in media and are therefore culturally common albeit rare as criminal occurrences. That is to argue that reports of authenticity translate to an emphasis on authentic *modes of production*, which is not mirrored by a similar emphasis on authentic *criminality.* For the collectors of murderabilia sampled in this research, 'authenticity', more often than not, translated to *notoriety* rather than *rarity*, an unconventional indicator of value for those who collect. Although, the emphasis placed on items with auratic modes of production can also be traversed at times with form, aesthetics and narrative taking precedent. Thus, the central theme that will be explored in this chapter is the rejection of mechanical reproduction – yet the embracement of mass produced cultural archetypes and culturally influenced 'transgressive imaginations' (O'Neill & Seal, 2012).

In the first of five themed subsections, *Crime in the Collection*, with a style akin to that used by Daniel Miller (2008) in *The Comfort of Things* and following the observations narrated in the previous chapter, an account of some of the most notable collection items will be given. Their size, remit, layout and the relationship of owners to their objects is analysed in this section, which contextualises the interview data used throughout the chapter, giving a broader description of murderabilia collections. In the second section, entitled *Transgressive Imaginations*, the ways in which participants angle their collections toward themes influenced by popular culture will be analysed through interview data. It will be argued that, invariably, collections feature the most notorious or celebrated criminals rather than depicting a varied and realistic picture of crime. Section three, *Auratic Collections* – explored these transgressive imaginations in the context of interviewees' stories of auratic objects. In the fourth section, *Cultivating Authenticity*, tackles the perpetual quest for authenticity in crime consumption, and its

inverse relationship with popularity and notoriety is analysed as the central theme for this chapter. It is argued that a purported importance of authenticity by almost every participant, whilst present, is undermined by a ubiquitous interest in the most infamous and mediated criminal characters. *Non-Auratic Collections*, is the final section and it approaches these quests for authenticity that will be examined through examples where collection objects are conspicuously lacking auratic authenticity. The emphasis placed on authenticity and the aura of objects by participants is also undermined by the modes of production used. Not infrequently, objects that are described as having 'aura' have been cultivated on a large scale for the purpose of profit. It will be concluded that, following on from the previous chapter *Displaying Transgression*, authenticity and perceptions of authenticity are cultivated though aura and, in the absence of aura, through filmic and popular reference points.

Crime in the Collection

This section will demonstrate the most notable descriptions of personal murderabilia collections, and account for defining characteristics of collections and collection practices as noted by participants. Participants described their collections most frequently using the word 'authentic', or related words such as 'real', 'original' or 'genuine', and styled the process of collecting crime artefacts as one defined by a search for authentication, provenance and accuracy. The most noteworthy of interviews with collectors, Sarah, took place in the second to last room of *Museum of Death*, in Los Angeles, California. Framed by the interior and exterior of a dead and taxidermied pig on either side, there is a large television screen playing a looped video of graphic and violent deaths in the middle. These included suicides, executions, and murders – even more graphic than the preceding artefacts. By this point, it has become apparently clear that we are not discussing a museum exhibition, although Sarah is indeed one of the curators. This is a personal collection that has been accumulated through a twenty-five-year hobby and has expanded into an exhibition only after many years[10]. Sarah, who

[10] See *Method* for an explanation of the use of curators as collectors

describes herself as a *thanatologist*, is disturbingly excited about death whilst at the same time being disarmingly polite.

> *They can't shoot, I'm telling you – they're going to shoot this guy like four times they can't kill him, they finally kill him but- (Sarah)*

The distressing montage of graphic and violent demise is narrated for me by Sarah who intermittently interrupts the interview to point and shout enthusiastically at the screen. She had watched the vivid and explicit depictions of death time and time again, to the extent of knowing exactly what would come next; the words that would be spoken; the angle along which the blood would splatter. This was the first and only time that I felt revulsion during my research of this violent and polarising project, and it became clear that beyond being a large and valuable personal collection, this was also the obsession of a person with an enduring and undiscriminating interest in violence, crime and graphic death:

> *Everything is personal here. It's all- I'm a studier of death. And uhh, guess what you guys are all just along for the ride! This is only like, a third of the collection at the moment [...] the rest is in storage and the walls in my house (Sarah)*

Murderabilia is a personal passion for the interview participants of this chapter. She runs a museum, but the majority of her items were collected for personal interest. She defends the legitimacy of her collection by arguing that she *studies* death, and the inclusion of education as a legitimating factor became a theme across several participants. Unprompted, participants would launch defences of the validity of murderabilia collecting as a legitimate pastime, as well as the validity of their own items – often differentiating themselves from the perceived majority of collectors in the process:

> *Being a serious collector, I do have a lot of interest in the historical stuff (Jake)*

> *These are, these are really personal to me [...] everything is personal here, it's all- (Sarah)*

This was contrasted by an almost universal interest in the mainstream of celebrated criminals – with subject matter guided by the most seductive tales of criminality, media exposure, or the sheer oddity of a particular criminal case study. Nevertheless, this

descriptive section addresses accounts of how collections began, what they have evolved into, of particularly evocative objects, and of their personal meanings and attachments.

> *I collect letters, art, crime scene relics. I've also got photos, personal items, books, artwork – uhh, artwork relating to serial killers I mean. Basically anything serial killer related I'm collecting it! (Harry)*

Harry describes his collection as a broad array of items, as well as objects that originate from the scene of a crime – unified by their status as 'relics' and the historical and antique significance that comes with the word. For Harry, murderabilia is anything associated with a criminal that has killed several people, the more well known, the more collectable. Special emphasis is placed upon 'relics', which is understood as items with aura through their creation and historical value (Benjamin, 1936/2008a), or through their antique status as 'marginal' (outside of traditional use-value structures of worth) objects (Baudrillard, 1968/1996). These superior parts of the collection are privileged not only with the historical significance bestowed upon the rest of the objects, but with the ability to tell tales of the actual acts of violence. Harry evokes language usually reserved for antiquity, categorising items that pertain from the crime scene as vestiges that have value in that they contain traces of the event. Due to their residue, these leftovers, or 'relics', are considered more 'authentic' than items created 'post-crime'.

Harry is overtly proud of his collection, his responses feel as though this pride is fed not only by adulation from fellow collectors, but also by the resistance pressed against murderabilia collectors by the media and victims' rights advocates. This pastime is divisive, and, although repeatedly caveating his love for murderabilia with his distaste for murder itself, it is clear that controversy is being courted. Freedom of speech is often cited by collectors as a justification for engaging in the polemic and this interviewee was no exception. He explains that his collection, once filling almost all of his house, is largely locked away save for a few key items because of the new presence of young children. But I am mistaken in my initial assessment that their impressionableness is the concern, or the age-appropriateness of the material in question. Rather, the likelihood that expensive artefacts and collectables could be damaged is given as the reason to resign them into storage.

Harry has been through phases of collecting, accumulating items and then ridding himself of the collection before starting up again. He puts this down to boredom, changes in his lifestyle, economic capital, and free time. Things migrate in and out of storage as well, but one item in the collection endures – the very first item of murderabilia collected; a cheque for $5, payable to him, from Charles Manson:

> *In English classes we learned letter writing. They got us to write a letter to someone famous. They gave us an address book and Charles Manson's address was in there (Harry)*

Harry was instructed to write to someone 'famous', and the name of infamous American convicted murderer Charles Manson was present in the address book alongside those of other, more conventional celebrities. When writing to Manson, Harry included five US dollars in cash so that postage, envelopes and stationary supplies could be more than covered. He had hoped this would increase his likelihood of obtaining a reply from Manson, although this very gesture is what made a reply impossible. As part of a law restricting criminals from profiting from their crimes, the five-dollar gesture was intercepted and the letter did not reach its intended recipient. Instead, Harry received a letter back postmarked by the prison authorities. Inside was a cheque reimbursement payable to Harry, in Charles Manson's name – his first item of murderabilia, even though the item did not reach Manson, nor was it associated with his crimes.

> *I'm a thanatologist - that means, uhm, I'm a studier of death. And uhh, guess what you guys are all just along for the ride! [...] I, I research everything here. I know where it comes from, if it's stolen (Sarah)*

Another interviewee describes her collection as an academic pursuit. For Sarah, the hobby of collecting is to satisfy a lifelong interest in death. Amongst other outlets, collecting murderabilia items accompanies and fuels research into death and killing. The assertion that she is a studier of 'thanatology' is consistent with the way in which she began collecting. Sarah started writing letters to serial killers in 1991 – amassing boxes of letters that she periodically goes back through. Some of the more extraordinary items have the privilege of being mounted, framed, and displayed on the walls, but the majority of appendages from her earlier communications still wrapped up in shoe boxes in the back of every cupboard. After American serial killer John Wayne Gacy began

telephoning her in the middle of the night with threats to her life, the phase of her obsession that led her to develop personal connections with violent offenders began to dwindle. At this point she shifted her interest toward objects and away from correspondence. A self-professed eccentric collector, Sarah remarks that it is impossible to keep track of all of her items to the extent that she could not remember how many she had, what, or where they were. Despite the broadness and size of the collection, viewing as an outsider is not confusing. Unlike Jake, the eclecticism of a large and varied collation is neutralised by a keen eye for detail that sees the objects assembled into a clear thematic narrative.

I interviewed Jake in his very large, very messy office which reflected his collection in its inconsistency and display. Jake used to visit Reggie Kray in prison when he first began collecting as a young person interested in crime. Forging relationships with criminals is a common prerequisite to collecting murderabilia, and in Jake's case, this led to what has become a three-decade fixation. There is no semblance of structure or order when viewing the objects, and it is apparent that his collecting habits have been sporadic and unfocused. Repeatedly shifting concentration from era, country and style has led to an extremely eclectic mix of objects. From Nazism, to serial murder, to non-violent occurrences of celebrity transgression, Jake has at some point been an avid collector.

> *It's because it's very cluttered – that's the nature of how I collect [...] so I've got stuff stashed away, everywhere, in all the drawers (Jake)*

This eclecticism does not appear to be due to a lack of direction, but rather a symptom of the length of time that he has been accumulating objects for. Jake's collection seems to be the largest by a significant margin. This seemingly inconsequential factor is made important when he describes size and eclecticism as the nature of his collection and collecting practices. When asked to describe his collection, he says that the 'theme' can be understood as a reflection of the criminal industry. There would be no economy without crime as crime permeates into every sector of capitalism, and therefore, this broad landscape should be reflected in his objects.

> *In a nutshell without crime there would be no economy [...] film industry, newspapers – everybody likes [crime] (Jake)*

Explored in the previous chapter, *Displaying Transgression*, was the interpretation of crime in museums as a *genre* before a *transgression*, with artefacts being authenticated by their notoriety before their rarity. This approach can be seen in the mentality of Jake's collecting habits as well. He cites newspapers as functioning on the economies of crime as well as the film industries and understands murderabilia to be more encompassing of these media than the other participants. Jake's approach is contrasted by Grace's objects, that were forensic in their focus on a select few areas. This collection was the first family effort witnessed. Interest in murder artefacts had been handed down to Grace from her father who had contacts with forensic pathology and Scotland Yard. After, Grace greatly expanded the collection to include a more international assemblage of items – particularly pieces of artwork from notorious American criminals.

> *[I]t's been something I mean my father was – had a strong interest in the kind of, uhmm, forensic pathology side of things and - stuff sort of came up and he's bought it (Grace)*

Her collection is the smallest of everyone interviewed, but it still constitutes a significant array of items. South American drug cartels, unusually, are Grace's particular interest – leading to a collection that deviates from the mainstream of American serial killers more than others. Nevertheless, she notes that these items are of interest to her more than items pertaining to gangs, UK criminals, or any murder based popular culture. The collection extends considerably into criminal justice and punishment, with execution being one of Grace's particular interests. A table from a UK producer of lethal injection tables and restraints is something that she is particularly proud of. She emphasises its authenticity due to its origin from a legitimate producer of execution equipment, despite it never being used, demonstrating a pathway to authenticity through modes of production rather than historical significance as relics or antiques. Reproductions like these, though, are rare in private collections. Participants were staunch in their insistence on the 'real', as well as firm in reiterating and defending their morality. A case in point is Sarah's story of a human bone that has temporarily found its way into her collection.

> *[Y]ou know what I'm trying to do right now? I have a femur – a femur! They're 18 inches normally, mine's twenty! It's a longer femur than normal, not the average person! *laughs* [It was] stolen from, the catacombs in Paris. And I*

> *knew it was stolen when we got it, but I didn't want it to go anywhere else, I just, cus I know people in Paris, and I'm trying to get it back right now. I've been trying to get it back, it's just, it's not as easy as everyone thinks. You just can't walk through an airport with a femur. Like 'here's a femur, let's go to Paris!' (Sarah)*

Her story does the work of making the bone sound exceptional (longer than normal, a distinct leg bone), before the revelation that the item was stolen. This sparked conversation about the ethics of taking, of ownership and of collecting. Despite criticism being levied against murderabilia collectors in the media[11], this is an example of their keenness to defend proper practice and ethics. This is a life-long murderabilia collector who has spent money and extensive time trying to return one of hundreds of thousands of bones back to Paris. Rather than embedding the item into her own collection, she embeds it into her narrative of collecting. She then goes on to make an interesting distinction between rocks and bones.

> *[I]t's not like – I took some rocks from the catacombs – so I was kind of like, felt bad about that, but they had a lot of rocks, it wasn't like I was taking... [human bones] (Sarah)*

The Paris catacombs do have a lot of rocks, but arguably more bones with some areas of the 200 mile underground network stacked floor-to-ceiling with human remains (Paris, 2017). This is not the distinction of quantity that it is framed to be, but an observation of the ethics of holding human remains and of theft. This is the only instance in which a participant devoted time to speak of the dead and not of death. The reader should note that participants expressed an interest in death more than crime or violence, but interestingly, their attention was focused on the perpetrators of death and not of the dead themselves. Mentions of victims were non-existent or quickly passing. Participants discussed the need for authenticity, for authentication and for the 'real' – often relying on the word 'original' to denote a valuable item of murderabilia as something that is not mechanically reproduced. Despite this emphasis on authenticity, the blurring of auratic and non-auratic objects takes place with *authentic* not necessarily being synonymous with *auratic.* A good example of this is Harry's cheque from Charles Manson, which is

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[11] See *Introduction*

a mechanically reproduced item only vicariously associated with the killer, despite it being the most prized of his collected items. Lastly, the reader should note the sustained, mostly implicit importance of celebrity and popular culture in these accounts. Jake is the only participant to directly acknowledge this, but the others indirectly reveal a preference for extremely famous, mediated characters (Manson, for example), or recently popularised genres (forensic pathology) in their collecting habits.

Transgressive Imaginations

Once again, participants use cinematic, popular, filmic and mediated transgressive imaginations to frame their collections as authentic. A range of specific points of reference beyond Jake's mention of film and newspaper exist and are considered important in framing collections as valuable and authentic.

> *The case I collet the most from is the Vampire Clan stuff [...] 'Box Office' famous guys are not always affordable (Harry)*

Harry's use of the phrase 'box office' in describing the most popular subjects of murderabilia (1960-present North American serial killers), is likely nothing more than a colloquial coincidence – although he is correct in noting that buyers flock toward those who are most notorious. This, in turn, inflates prices and creates a bubble around 'box office' characters, excluding those with lesser budgets. The 'box office' of murderabilia is populated by those criminals that have enjoyed the most media exposure and have committed the most extreme or charismatic crimes. These most spectacular criminals are positively correlated with cost, and so Harry has to reconcile a desire to consume the most remarkable characters against this prohibiting factor. A middle ground is reached with Vampire Clan memorabilia. Rod Ferrell, the lead perpetrator in the (1996) 'Vampire Clan', was only 16 when he committed the double murder of Naomi Queen and Richard Wendorf. The latter bore burn marks in the shape of a 'V', thought to be the symbol of Ferrell's gang. Ferrell styled himself as a five-hundred-year old vampire called 'Vesago'. The group of four killers were reported to drink each other's blood and take part in vampire rituals. The case was later adapted into a film, *Vampire Clan* (2002), where the story, embroiled in mythology, is dramatized for a wider audience.

Harry is currently expanding his collection of murderabilia to include as many intimate and personal items of Ferrell's as possible. He has made contact with his mother, and collects items ranging from his school reports to articles of clothing. He boasts about the personal nature of these objects, and in his attempts to become increasingly intimate with his items of murderabilia, he is further cultivating a feeling of authenticity in his closeness to the individual and subsequent distance from mediated representations. Objects that span back as far as the perpetrators' childhoods and predate their crimes are deemed to be unpolluted and authentic in their history and originality. Yet Harry chooses a killer embroiled in mythology, fictitious vampire narrative, cultural reference and media exposure. Rod Ferrell is authentically psychopathic in line with how psychopathy is represented in popular American cinema. On top of the Vampire Clan, Harry's remarks on murderabilia demand are equally insightful.

> *It's to do with fame, I guess it's not really a pattern. It's just the bigger the name, or the bigger the body count – the bigger the price tag! And then the demand just gets bigger and bigger (Harry)*

Demand is heightened by media exposure expressed here as 'fame', and this cannot be understood as a pattern in that a pattern would be complex in its form and arrangement. Instead, the relationship is linear. The more people that were killed, preferably in a suitably gruesome fashion – the more media attention and subsequent fame is granted to the event – the higher the cost (and subsequent demand). In this way, Harry boils interest in 'true crime' as expressed through murderabilia down to a matter of celebrity. Those that are most glorified in the media are most collected as murderabilia. In saying that *the demand just gets bigger and bigger*, he notes that fame also has a multiplying impact on demand in that popularity cultivates rarity, which increases price and value. In time, celebrified items of murderabilia see exponential price increases until they enter a different class of object as the only truly valuable collectables.

> *To be honest with you it is the morbid side of it that fascinates me. The murder art, and so called (Grace)*

The 'morbid side', the gruesome, the sinister and the dark, are reported as being the attractive side of crime and murderabilia by Grace. In this and similar statements she seems to be differentiating herself form the perceived mass of celebrified collectors and realigning her collection back towards the gruesome and not the popular. Yet she

chooses to do so through the example of *murder art*, items that are painted by killers and are more steps removed from the crime scene than many other types of object. In the upcoming section *cultivating authenticity*, the use of art, artistic licence and artistic merit will be considered as popular devices for positioning objects as valuable and increasing their perceived authenticity. Grace refers to original murderer artwork, but artistic reproductions can be very valuable as well:

> *So, and the rarity of posters – some of them are worth thousands of pounds. And yet, the genuine holocaust stuff – some of those posters are worth more than what the actual genuine holocaust stuff is worth, like Zyklon B canisters and stuff. Which is quite bizarre (Jake)*

Jake contrasts the value of crime film memorabilia against actual crime memorabilia, noting that movie posters can sometimes outstrip the value of the objects relating to the crimes or criminals that they depict – despite the fact that as posters they are simulations of fictitious crimes. A collector can pay more for an original poster advertising American World War Two epic *The Great Escape* (1963), than a genuine Zyklon B canister used for World War Two genocide – because of the exponential price increases that come alongside famousness that Harry previously highlighted. In interview Jake followed up this quote by throwing a large, cylindrical tin across the room at me that I only just managed to catch. '*It's fake!'*, he exclaimed – film posters are apparently easier to authenticate than Zyklon B[12]. This is another instance of crime being interpreted as a genre rather than as a transgressive act, and of murderabilia values and representations being effected by film.

> *He's got this shillelagh; do you know what a shillelagh is? It's like a big sort of, old, clump which was used in the film 'Gangs of New York', and it's a genuine sort of Five Points – you know whatever the gangs, I don't know if you've seen that film? [...] it's a proper old sort of gangland Irish shillelagh and as I say it was used in the film (Grace)*

[12] See subsection *Cultivating Authenticity* for a more detailed study of fakes and forgeries.

In this instance, the topic of conversation is a weapon from late 19th- early 20th century gangland New York. Grace cites the Five Points gang, possibly as they featured heavily in the Martin Scorsese film, *Gangs of New York* (2002). Grace repeatedly references the film as the core quality of the item – it is a shillelagh *from the film*, not *from 1900s New York*. Other descriptors such as 'old' and 'genuine' clarify its status as an antique with historical value, but these are not presented as the most important qualities in this instance. The instance in which the criminal (Five Points gang) is mentioned is also done within the framework of the film. '*You know whatever the gangs, I don't know if you've seen that film?'* – frames the Five Points as characters underneath the umbrella of this piece of popular culture. The *big, old, clump* is film memorabilia in the first instance and criminal murderabilia in the second. Grace speaks more directly of this influence of film and of cinematic characters when she addresses how others react to her collection:

> *[People say to me] oh, you know, 'you've gotta have more of the stuff on the sixties gangsters – you've gotta have-' (Grace)*

The '60s gangsters', for example the Kray twins, remain ever popular – as do their filmic representations and the gangster genre of films in general. These recognisable characters are amongst those who are most requested by casual viewers of collections as well as those who collect themselves. *Sixties gangsters* is seen as a glamorous genre, despite very few participants naming any proponents beyond the aforementioned Krays. These narratives are embedded within murderabilia cultures, and this has been explored in the previous chapter also. Yet collectors are critical of what they perceive to be mediatised crime.

> *I think it glorifies, glorifies crime. The film industry, the music industry (Jake)*

Jake, in particular, has a far more cynical outlook on film than he does on crime artefacts, despite murderabilia's tendency to be accused of the 'glorification' of transgressive or criminal acts in news media[13]. Conversely, he considers the film and

[13] See chapter 1 *Introduction* for a description of the tendency for news media outlets to label murderabilia as 'glorification'

music industries to be contributors to the glorification of crime and criminals over any artefacts. This is partly, but not only, due to the comparatively large amount of attention paid to these commercial industries. Moreover, the murder antiques are seen as artefacts – parts of history that are not mediatised. For Jake, simply collecting a historical artefact without altering or mediating it is not a glorification. In this opposite stance to most news-reporting, it is the cultural genres in film and music that glamourize, and therefore glorify crime. Murderabilia is seen as grounding an already glorified genre towards some level of perceived reality. Participants consider the tangible aesthetics of objects as providing a level of authenticity over film and television as well.

> *It's like we've got a couple of things [letters] from the Krays and they're great – their hands touched them and they wrote that. They're fairly incomprehensible and all that but, as far as I'm concerned I like the art because it's immediate and you kind of see it and (Grace)*

Grace and her family have built up a collection of items that centre around letters between the Kray twins and others from inside of prison. She compares these letters to other items of serial killer art for their aesthetics – they have been *touched* by the criminals, hand crafted. Art is valued because it can be *seen*, it is *immediate*, a powerful visual mode of communication. It is also a third thing that Grace cuts herself off before explaining – something akin to the authenticity of tangible, auratic artefacts. It seems that she is trying to express the perceived feelings of value that accompany the aesthetics of an auratic object. Vivien and Grace, whose collections are also on display to the public, provide a link between this chapter and the previous, *Displaying Transgression*, through statements on the importance of transgressive imaginations in the perception and appeal of murderabilia to others:

> *The greater the notoriety of the subject or the crime the better the reception will be. [Visitors] may not know much about American history, but they know who Bonnie and Clyde are. […] we use the famous stuff to draw people in (Vivien)*

> *[My collection has] a narrative to it like a drama. That's what we've tried to do in there – try to get like different, you know, the sounds as you go in. Just wanna build on that whole kind of experience side of it and the hearing things and the seeing things and all that (Grace)*

Vivien nods to the importance of celebrity characters above the auratic for cultivating perceptions of authenticity in the lay person. Artefacts must have notoriety before they

should have aura. The 'box office' characters of *Bonnie and Clyde* and other infamous, notorious celebrated characters draws visitors in before the visceral or the gruesome. She highlights the general lack of in-depth criminal knowledge in the average person, and suggests that these characters are an important way to ground murderabilia collections inside of the public consciousness – *they may not know much about American history, but they know who Bonnie and Clyde are*. Grace reminds us of the importance of storytelling in both on-display exhibitions as well as the private narratives of personal collections. Her collection has a narrative, and she likens this to *drama*. Collectors use objects to cultivate stories of their life-course (Miller, 2009) and this is a case in point – a collection seems somewhat invalid without an attached narrative. Grace then enhances the validity of the collection for visitors by further developing this story with the use of immersive techniques of sound and atmosphere. Throughout interviews with collectors (and curators who started out as collectors), this necessity to evoke transgressive imaginations of criminal in positioning items as authentic and valuable has been embedded. The following sections chronicle the complicated triangular relationship of the collector juggling both notoriety and aura, beginning with a reiteration of the concept of aura and an analysis of those objects that court its values.

Auratic Collections

Aura is the quality in objects that diminishes with mechanical reproduction. It is worth reiterating Benjamin's concept of aura at this stage with a commonly used quote:

> 'Getting closer to things' in both spatial and human terms is every bit as passionate a concern of today's masses as their tendency to surmount the uniqueness of each circumstance by seeing it in reproduction (Benjamin, 1936/2008a, p. 9)

Here, Benjamin animates, in terms of aura, the contradiction of murderabilia that is explored in this thesis. On the one hand, individuals wish to get *closer* to things in a pursuit of real, natural or hand-crafted experiences. On the other, they undermine this by 'surmounting the uniqueness' of experiences by consuming reproduced objects, references and experiences. Aura is not a clean cut pursuit, nor is it a tangible quality –

in late capitalism objects are trapped in a balance between reproduction and originality, courting but not satisfying auratic qualities. When collectors speak of authenticity, they do so in the terms of a pursuit of aura as laid out by Benjamin in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Benjamin describes aura as like viewing a natural landscape as compared to seeing it in a picture (1936/2008a, p. 9), but a more appropriate example could be an original painting by a serial killer as compared to a reproduced poster of that same imagery. Benjamin also cites historical reference as producing auratic qualities:

> The genuineness of a thing is the quintessence of everything about it since its creation that can be handed down, from its material duration to the historical witness that it bears (Benjamin, 1936/2008a, p. 7)

Genuineness, originality, real – these are phrases that recur as markers of authenticity. Something that has stood the test of time in its material degradation, as well as something that bears witness to history in general, or to a historical event, is to be understood as genuine or valuable in Benjamin's terms. Items that have these qualities are termed as having 'aura', which in turn is used to describe everything that is lost when items are mechanically or mass reproduced (Benjamin, 1936/2008a) and therefore are not original (in that they originate to a person or event) or historical. These qualities become more complicated in murderabilia objects that are not bestowed with aura through their modes of production (they are mechanically reproduced), or that seem to earn auratic qualities through their historical associations with celebrified and infamous criminals. Baudrillard's work on antiques can help unpack this additional complexity.

> [T]here are two distinctive features of the mythology of the antique object that need to be pointed out: the nostalgia for origins and the obsession with authenticity (Baudrillard, 1968/1996, p. 80)

The nostalgia for origins can be read similarly to those qualities of aura discussed through Benjamin's work. But the qualities of authenticity written by Baudrillard accommodate for the additional confusion of objects that seem to earn a sort of aura through their use. This constitutes an 'obsession with authenticity' through association. For Baudrillard, this characteristic of antiques, the ability to evoke history as paused

time, is what is lacking in modern functional objects (Baudrillard, 1968/1996). The belief in the authenticity of one participant, for example, of an execution table that has never actually been used, is not one that would be shared by everyone. Interviews with collectors were joined with the overarching theme of authenticity. Differing motivations toward authenticity in objects, coupled with differing interests and tastes were unified by a commitment to the concept – collectors appeared to be embroiled in a quest for authentic items and authentic experiences, with varying degrees of allegiance to aura. Some interpreted this as auratic qualities, others as celebrity, notoriety or famousness of character and brand.

On top of these conventional classical understandings of value in objects, it is necessary to consider an extra layer of authenticity brought about by the introduction of crime and transgression. Elias (1994) tells us that as a society becomes increasingly civilised through etiquette and other social rituals, individuals are more likely to seek experiences that are deemed to be untouched by the processes of civilisation such as sport (Elias & Dunning, 2008/1986). Some have described this manifestation in dangerous or risky activities as 'edgework' (Lyng, 2005), whilst others have directly considered the implication of a neutered and sterilised society on the will to commit crimes that provide thrill (Katz, 1990), or consume crime through carnival-esque experiences (Presdee, 2000). There has been a consensus that mainstream cultural experiences are, as part of the hegemonic structure (Gramsci, 2011) and the culture industry (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1979), somewhat inauthentic, and that raw, transgressive or un-civilised experiences are by correlation, the reverse[14]. There is a precedent for thinking about crime as a cultural product that transgresses these constraints and as a provider of authentic qualities. It is this quest for legitimacy that is communicated in interviews with collectors; the following are examples of these multifaceted relationships with auratic, 'authentic', criminal objects.

[14] See chapter 2 *Literature Review* for a more comprehensive consideration of the civilising process and related theories

A hand-made patchwork quilt sewn by The Manson Family cult is constructed with an interconnecting network of swastikas. In dark reds and blacks, it covers almost an entire wall from floor to ceiling when hung horizontally. The thin room inside of *The Museum of Death* is not wide enough to stand back to view to the quilt in full, so observers are required to stand close to the stained and faded material. The room is filled with other items pertaining to The Manson Family, including some minor possessions of the victims. This item is truly auratic in its mode of production (hand-made) as well as its historical value and association with some extremely famous criminals. The owner justifies the lack of space available for this valuable and notorious piece of murderabilia due to the fact that Charles Manson and his cult are of relatively little interest for her.

> *Every room in here is an obsession. I know everything in here, and, except the Manson stuff – I don't care about that (Sarah)*

It is not clear why Sarah has collected several items relating to Charles Manson without an interest in the criminal, but she speaks as though she is passed collecting the most famous criminals, as if to imply that the most infamous criminals are to be collected by *beginners*, a rite of passage but not equal to a true passion for thanatology. Despite its extremely auratic qualities, with original stains still visible across the centre, this piece is not valuable to Sarah as she shuns this highly mediated character. In previous sections of the interview she had suggested that collecting items of famous American serial killers was a superficial stage in her life that had now passed. Yet the intensity of its aura, particularly through historical association, is beyond that of any other piece: the visible stains are owing to the fact that it has not been washed since it was acquired:

> *When they brought that home it smelt baaad, I'm like 'I'm getting it dry cleaned'. All my surrounding boys that I work with, they're like 'you can't have that dry cleaned' it's got like, DNA on it from the family (Sarah)*

Sarah jokes that getting an item covered in swastikas dry cleaned is socially unacceptable – you cannot show this sort of item in public without context. But more to the point, washing an item of murderabilia is deemed an unacceptable affront to authenticity and auratic value. The quilt was hand produced by The Manson Family, a valued quality by collectors. Bearing DNA does not increase this quality or alter it in any way, the quilt will still have been produced under the same circumstances after it has been washed. DNA is not visible, it does nothing to increase the spectacle of

viewing such a personal and close item to The Family. Similarly, dry cleaning the quilt would be unlikely to remove all microscopic traces of its producers. Stains are visible, however, and authenticity is exponentially increased by witness born from the marks – they are symbolic of age, and use, and therefore are simulations of historic value. Items that have been crafted by the hands of killers are seen as auratic. Again in the context of Charles Manson, Harry expands on the story of his prized cheque:

> *Charles Manson sent me money, it's pretty cool. And then a few years later I was reading a book about Richard Ramirez that said he spent all of his time writing letters to people on the outside from his cell, so I called up and the prison gave me his address. I wrote and he replied, so that was my first actual reply (Harry)*
>
> *[When prompted to elaborate on the meaning of 'actual']*
>
> *Well he wrote it, that's all I mean. It actually came from his – you know, his pen and his hand and paper and stuff (Harry)*

After describing the acquisition of his first item of murderabilia, Harry went on to degrade the authenticity of his prized Manson cheque by describing his second acquisition as his first *actual* piece. A letter from American serial murderer Richard Ramirez, also obtained by writing to the killer in prison but without his previous mistake of sending funds, was penned by the killer's own hand and is therefore more valuable to the collector – despite being from a less known criminal. The cheque was one of the only items surviving from his original collection after it was disbanded and sold several years ago, but it had no contact with Manson. It was issued by the prison on behalf of the killer, and written and sent by prison administration. Harry opted to keep the item because it was his first – the one obtained from his English letter writing lesson at school. It represents a notable point in his own life and is part of his narrative of collecting, but is not a particularly auratic or authentic item as a printed cheque. Ramirez, on the other hand, had put pen to paper to produce an authentic and therefore *actual*, top echelon, authentic, auratic Object.

The quality that the cheque is lacking is one of craft, bestowed upon items that have 'passed through the hands of someone the marks of whose labour are still inscribed thereupon' (Baudrillard, 1968/1996, p. 81) – or an auratic quality that decreases as items are mechanically reproduced (Benjamin, 1936/2008a) – assets that Sarah's quilt

and Harry's letter have in abundance. The extent of murderabilia items that are truly auratic, like Harry's letter or Sarah's quilt, is limited. These are the items to which collectors aspire, but that represent the most expensive and unattainable of murderabilia as well. As a result, they are rare, with the majority of items not having this same auratic value. The remainder of this chapter considers items that can be understood as sitting on a spectrum of aura, with collectors trying to cultivate perceptions of authenticity using the devices of aura: originality; provenance; artistic merit; and historical association in their narratives of collecting.

Cultivating Authenticity

Commitments to originality, artistic value and authenticity and the way in which participants position their items as authentic will be analysed in this section. In the first instance, collectors used traditional commitments to provenance as seen in antique collecting and commented on also by Baudrillard:

> The demand for authenticity is [...] reflected in an obsession with certainty – specifically, certainty as to the origin, date, author and signature of work (Baudrillard, 1968/1996, p. 81).

The inexorable destination for this fixation on authenticity is a diligent requirement for provenance when shopping for murderabilia – one that has been responsible for shaping the market and its network of suppliers and outlets. The market has been trimmed down to a handful of reputable websites, including *MurderAuction* and *SerialKillersInk.* Several dedicated collectors reported having been caught out by online forgeries before (Jake, Sarah) and instead preferred utilising offline connections that they had established over periods of decades. Jake went as far as completely shunning online outlets, insisting that after decades in the business, if any valuable item came up, he would hear about it with first refusal before it made it onto the internet – auction websites are populated with his castoffs.

> *It's, it's very rare because people know I deal in the strictest of confidence. And, you know, they could torture me or whatever and I would never reveal a source of supply cus, you're dealing with some potentially horrible – nasty – and violent people sometimes (Jake)*

Speaking of these networks, Jake gives a rare glimpse into the secretive nature of collecting items that are potentially incriminating and of the risk of dealing with criminal characters directly – all in the name of provenance. Provenance, nonetheless, is an ongoing battle for collectors of all types. As Baudrillard suggests, this is often witnessed through an emphasis placed on authorship, signature or history, and collectors' experiences with proof of authenticity are interesting indicators of perceptions of authenticity in true crime itself.

> *All I'm really after is provenance for, for what I may be able to get or may not be able to get or may not be able to get or maybe introducing them to something else. It's a very hands on industry for myself (Jake)*

Collectors go to varying lengths to gain this provenance, with three participants suggesting that they can sometimes pay more for professional authentication than for the objects themselves. Antiques dealers are contracted to provide an opinion on the age and origin of items, a common practice for museums and galleries being brought into private collections by some of the most committed investors in murderabilia. Jake has attended courses in graphology and handwriting analysis to further aid his ability to authenticate his purchases. Graphology uses known handwriting features and patterns to tie an individual to their writing. Used in medical diagnosis, psychological analysis and criminal justice, this forensic precision is an invaluable asset for scrutinising murderabilia but requires an extensive knowledge of the criminal in question. In some extreme circumstances, collectors have invested in DNA authentication, pairing items of murderabilia with hair or nail clippings through expensive laboratories in the U.S.A. No expense is spared as committed collectors are unsatisfied with imitation:

> *We also have to have proof of authenticity. [...] I think there's probably a thousand copies of [Ted] Bundy's court papers and death sentence [...] it's gotta be real or it's worthless (Vivien)*

The emphasis on the real and the subsequent rejection of reproduction permeates private collections and commercial murderabilia markets alike. Popular murderers such as Ted Bundy are frequently subject to forgery, but forgery, despite being an accurate representation of the original, is considered to be *worthless*. Claims such as these undermine previously discussed assertions by collectors that their interest in murderabilia is driven solely by an interest in criminal history. Such an interest could be

serviced by reproduction, just as historical interests are routinely satisfied by books, or documentaries, or films – or even 'dark tourism' (Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Rather, the interest must be in the symbolic value of historicalness and authenticity that is served by antiques (Baudrillard, 1968/1996). Murderabilia objects are simulations of history and historical importance beyond the historical information that they actually provide. An objection to reproduction is not necessarily an objection to fakery, but an objection to inauthentic modes of production and inauthentic experiences in the culture industry.

Online outlets are seen as the least trustworthy with participants citing websites as unreliable. Casual collectors are derided as relying on the internet to satisfy their hobby, and are most likely consuming fakes hidden among items of genuine murderabilia. Jake learned this the hard way by attempting to procure an original Zyklon B canister used for genocide during World War Two – one which he throws across the room for me to catch. He makes it clear that this one is a fake – the canisters are extremely rare, although they are intermittently available on key online murderabilia outlets. Jake tells the detailed story of the last time he was misled as to the authenticity of an item:

> *[£1,950 is] a lot of money, really, for a piece of tin – but there's that history behind that. [...] And I got conned. This is what put me off buying stuff online. I bought that [Zyklon B canister] fifteen years ago. And the image that was on the internet was a proper, but that is – that's just a – it's a con. It's just a bloody tin. It was freshly pained when I had it, but that cost me nineteen hundred and fifty pound (Jake)*

Driven by the amount of history behind the object and a misleading image on a website, Jake made a purchase that turned out to be inauthentic. He highlights that the 'tin' arrived, fifteen years ago, 'freshly painted' – adding insult to injury, the item is a *modern* reproduction that is absent of aura and entirely devoid of historical importance. Jake points out that the item does not have any historical value, a quality that Baudrillard cites as integral to antiques. The item is still hand crafted – but it lacks the aura of originality and of historical association that is desired for authentic murderabilia. After this unfortunate experience, Jake has decided not to use online outlets anymore despite some good purchases in the early days of popular internet usage. Instead, he is able to focus on offline connections with criminals and associated contacts that are deemed much more reliable.

> *I think I've dealt with them [online outlets] once or twice in the past when I first started collecting. Then I found that people were actually contacting me from prisons from around the world, Charles Manson got in touch, Richard Ramirez (Jake)*

Before murderabilia markets had enjoyed an upswing in popularity and media exposure[15], criminals and dealers would make impromptu contact with known collectors and crime enthusiasts to sell their items. It is these long-standing connections with famous criminals such as Charles Manson, and an enduring reputation for utmost discretion, that Jake cites as allowing him to avoid using the less reliable online outlets. An apparently well-rehearsed comment from Sarah, who is in a similar position with her extensive offline connections after decades collecting, expresses the same sentiment. When asked how items were procured, and how difficult it was to maintain or develop relationships with suppliers, she evokes a common colloquialism of sellers having a *skeleton in the closet.*

> *Everyone has a skeleton in their closet, and they come out of the woodwork sometimes to donate, or sell it to us (Sarah)*

Sarah and other notorious, reputable collectors are able to authenticate items by procuring them directly from their source. Sarah also describes being able to cut out the potentially inauthentic middle-man of the internet. She has little need for online outlets in sourcing items, other than researching origins and maintaining existing contacts. She expresses a distaste for online communication, though, and a similar scepticism as Jake towards the authenticity of items bought over the internet. Individuals seemingly appear from nowhere to be immortalised inside prestigious collections, especially if there is promise of that collection one day being exhibited, making procurement of objects not a problem in itself – and aiding the procurement of objects that are reliably authentic. This promise of potential exhibition is fulfilled by some of the collectors sampled for this project who have recently started displaying their items to the public either as temporary exhibitions or as permanent museums. In these instances, a concern over the

[15] See chapter 1 *Introduction* for a more comprehensive consideration of the increased consumer popularity and media attention paid to murderabilia and murderabilia collectors.

legitimacy of the space that the collection occupies was mentioned, with considerations such as lighting, architecture and history of a building being revealed as important contributors to perceptions of authenticity on top of originality and provenance.

> *This is art – this is a huge installation. [our previous building] was an old mortuary (Sarah)*

Sarah describes her current space as a large art installation rather than a museum full of items that she has collected. Despite it being populated with letters written to her from serial killers, murder art and crime scene artefacts – some of the most personal that are only related by their common theme of murder – she understands the space that she has constructed as form of art. In doing so, she further evokes notions of authenticity, legitimacy and of aura in the collection, as though it has a higher purpose than a simple themed collection of objects. It is an *installation.* Her previous building, before it was outgrown by her expanding collection cum art installation, was a disused mortuary and she is keen to point this out. The act of matching appropriate spaces to media and materials is key to constructing installation art, but it also contributes to the feeling of legitimacy when the collection is in a space that correlates with its theme. This investment in authentic spaces and space organisation correlates with comments made by Jake, who has exhibited his collection in an old jail, and has tried before to put his objects on display in an unoccupied police station – despite an objection from the local community. He describes these spaces as going *'hand-in-glove'* with his collection and as enhancing its perception as legitimate. A slightly different approach towards the same end is taken by Grace who aims to match the 'creepiness' of the exhibition space with the creepiness of her objects.

> *I think it adds to the kind of creepiness. If it wasn't for sort of the health and safety side of it I'd have it almost pitch black in there – it'd be like going round there sort of just really really creepy (Grace)*

Grace would choose to have her temporary exhibition as dark as possible in the pursuit of a subject-appropriate atmosphere. Her understanding of the ideal atmosphere for the exhibition of true crime objects is eerie, creepy, spooky – correlating more closely to crime film than crime fact. It seems peculiar that a curator would seek to obscure the objects from view, although the 'authenticity' sought is at the intersection between crime and popular culture – in accordance with populist *transgressive imaginations*

(O'Neill & Seal, 2012). The setting of the exhibition needs to be authentically *creepy* through lighting and sound, authentically placed in a mortuary, a jail or a police station – these factors encourage a convincing narrative that sits around the objects as part of the broader story of their exhibition. Participants use these devices in exhibitions and in narratives of personal collection to position their items as historically or cinematically authentic, even though many are lacking aura in their modes of production or real criminal association in their life course.

Non-Auratic Collections

These items that lack some qualities of aura or historical association constitute what will be referred to as *non-auratic* collections, although these objects still need to be positioned and framed in terms of their relationship with authenticity. To this point, I have suggested that murderabilia collecting is motivated by an ongoing contradiction between a desire for authentic experiences, yet an interest fuelled and supplied by media and popular culture that is by definition, inauthentic. Benjamin has already been quoted as identifying this contradiction at the heart of peoples' desire for real experiences – *getting closer to things*, in terms of an interest in authentic objects, is undermined by *seeing it in reproduction*, in terms of withdrawing aura out of these experiences (Benjamin, 1936/2008a, p. 9). Finally, this chapter will consider murderabilia items that are not auratic but are still positioned as authentic by their collectors.

Authenticity is compromised by high demand in that the demand of the masses requires that previously authentic experiences be satisfied through mass production. Murderabilia is no exception in giving way to the demands of consumer capitalism with reproduction seeping seamlessly into some of the most reputable outlets and collections, fitting in alongside the desirable and infamous auratic objects on sale. Far from being authentic in their aura; originality; genuineness; or closeness to a historical event, they are inauthentic in their production as objects that are designed to be saleable due to their perceived authenticity. If a producer creates an object with the objective of cultivating aura in mind, and through repetitive modes of production that undermine originality, does that preclude it from having aura? This question of the cultivation of authenticity and aura where it does not naturally belong becomes more complicated with the

revelation that even some handmade, original serial killer art are made on a kind of Fordist production line.

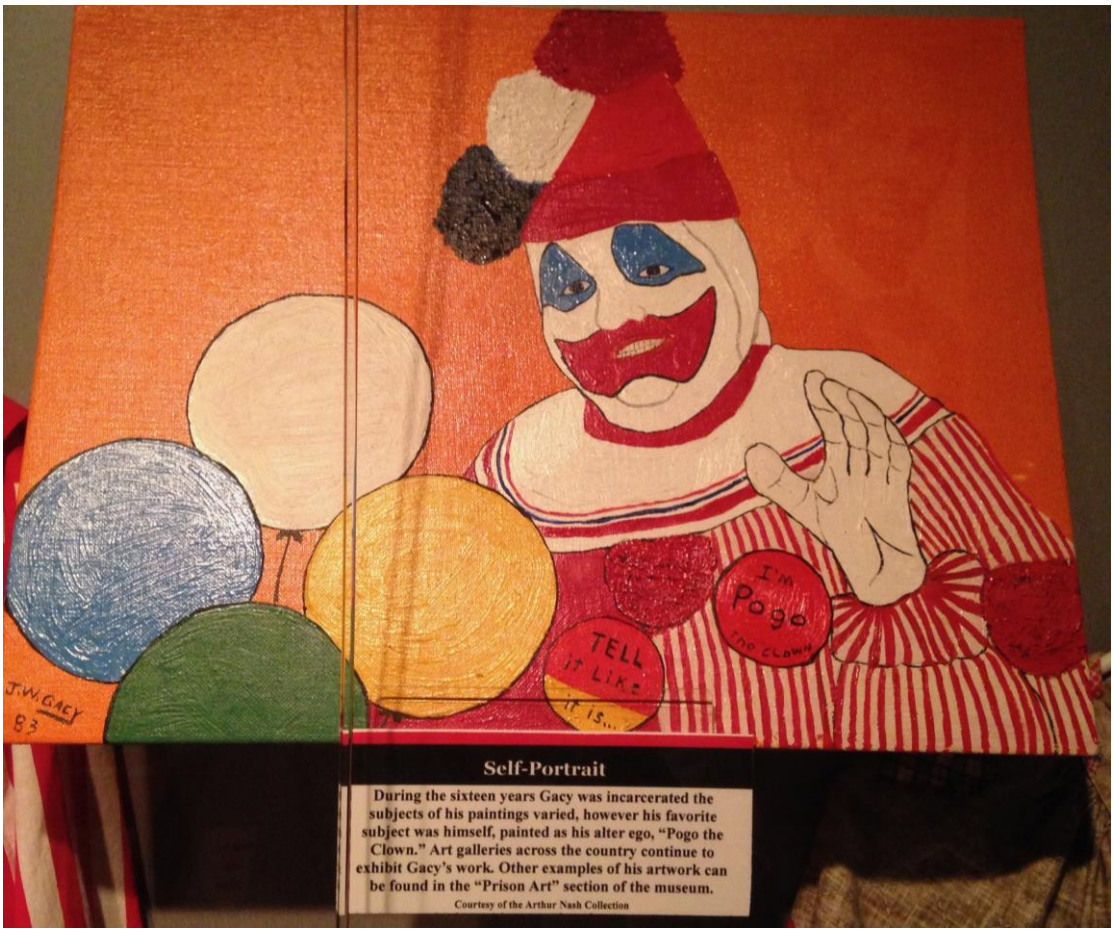

Figure 12 *J.W. Gacy Self Portrait, The Crime Museum* (Denham 2014) – images from fieldwork

The most infamous piece of serial killer art is without doubt American murderer John Wayne Gacy's self portrait of 'Pogo the Clown' – his alter ego that he would dress as principally when entertaining children among other things. In mostly red, blue and white Gacy holds one hand aloft, waving out of the picture. On his head, a floppy clown hat with three baubles hanging down one side. In his other hand, he clutches a bunch of several balloons. The balloons change colour depending on the edition, sometimes incorporating green or yellow, or sometimes a simple variation on the same tri-colour scheme of the rest of the painting. In the background, a row of dark green fir threes usually hides below a cloudless blue sky – but the edition in *The Crime Museum* sits over a solid orange backdrop. On his torso, a red badge reads 'I'm Pogo the Clown', but the paintings are signed J. W. Gacy in the bottom corner. His eyes always appear to be

looking down toward his signature. Asking prices for pictures in good condition range between $2,500 to $3,000 USD.

> *We used to be his West Coast art representatives, to sell his paintings. At one point I had nine Pogo the Clown's (Sarah)*

As discussed earlier, Sarah had close contact with Gacy – she was his West Coast (of the U.S.A) representative – an art dealer playing the role of 'middle-man' between the killer and his prospective buyers. These items are not as original and exclusive as buyers are led to believe, however. Sarah would routinely have several in her possession, at one point having nine *Pogo the Clowns* among other pictures by Gacy and items from alternative criminals. She points out that dealers are now crucial in the murderabilia market due to the law that prohibits criminals from profiting from their crimes. In the U.S.A, criminals cannot legally earn money from selling art, but the dealer can (a law that does not translate to the U.K outside of standard property seizure provision). Sarah remarks, 'this is America', implying that even when prohibited by law, objects cannot escape the cogs of Western capitalism.

> *Because what he would do, he would set up all these paintings and, he'd paint all the red first, all the green [...] this was before the David Berkowitz 'Son of Sam' law which says you can't make money off your crimes (Sarah)*

Authentic, original works of 'art' are no exception. It appears that Gacy, along with other criminal artists, would exploit the conveniences of the assembly line to satisfy market demands. According to Sarah, Gacy would line up canvases in his cell in a miniature assembly line. Gacy would first trace the matching outlines of the clowns. Then he would paint a single colour at a time across all of the pictures, completing them simultaneously in the fastest and most efficient way possible. Sarah remarks that this practice predated the law prohibiting criminals from profiting from their crimes, denouncing Gacy's system as a money oriented practice, manufacturing 'authenticity' and 'history' into objects that are actually produced with profit in mind. For Baudrillard, a marginal item (antique/object that possesses 'authenticity'), must operate outside of the conventional system of objects. It can have monetary value, as antique objects do, but this conventionally stems from its history or rarity, not modernity or abundance (Baudrillard, 1968/1996). This item is not truly marginal. It possesses a sort of aura coming from the hand of Gacy himself but not in a pure sense of a one-off or original

item without reproduction. For Benjamin, aura declined as items began to be mass produced (Benjamin, 1936/2008a).

Mass production is observed as seeping into murderabilia in even those items with the highest perception of authenticity; hand produced; artwork; from a notable criminal; exhibited in museums. Nowhere is this overlap between aura and reproduction more stark than in the example of serial killer letters – a popular and largely affordable 'entry-level' murderabilia item. Aspire, a murderabilia collector, blogs (Aspire, 2013) about his experiences of acquiring items and selling them on to customers. In an open letter about the workings of his business procuring and selling letters from serial killers, he admits to pretending to be a female to garner more replies, sometimes including images of his female partners to increase the sense of legitimacy and his chances of a very saleable and highly profitable reply. He does not 'produce' murderabilia in that the criminals themselves are responsible for writing the letters – despite the fact that the objects did not exist before his initiative. He does not 'deal' murderabilia as that would imply a mutual knowledge and arrangement between him and the incarcerated as well as some recompense for the criminals – despite his literal function as a *dealer*. He does not 'buy' as he never parts with any money and the criminals do not receive any. If anything, his business model is most akin to 'farming'. He plants a seed in the form of a venturous, unsolicited letter. He feeds it with a picture of his partner, and then he waits for it to grow into his product, an 'authentic' item of murderabilia.

The established modes of production for 'authentic' or 'antique' items are not always neatly applicable in the murderabilia industry. In his prompts, Aspire is conducting the dialogue and moulding the murderabilia content into its most saleable state possible – letters of an expressly sexual nature. In his method, to write to many criminal celebrities and continue relationships with those who take the bait, he is planting a seed and nurturing it into an artefact. Aspire is an integral cog in the production process at the same time being a consumer, before repackaging the items for sale on the murderabilia market. Semantics aside, this is a method of cultivating a vast number of 'rare' and 'authentic' experiences to sell somewhat undermines the authenticity of owning a letter penned by a serial killer as the aura of its authentic production method is diminished. Murderabilia that is lacking some of these fundamental qualities of authenticity has

seeped into the most authentic of spaces as well, museums, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Jake wanted to supplement his murderabilia exhibit with a display of popular illegal narcotics that he believed would be educational as well as provide a genuine experience of criminal objects. Yet, this alternate approach to murderabilia – objects that are criminalised rather than objects from criminals – was prohibited by law. Jake describes his frustration at not being granted a permit to obtain and display illegal narcotics despite his intention to keep them safe:

> *I wanted to put drugs on display. Proper drugs, not these made up things that they [the police] take on tour [for educational purposes]. I made enquiries like, 'would you mind if I just put different substances on display?' But then I'd be done for possession. [...] I'd like to do a complete run of drugs – it's got to be real for me to display it, I can't put something on display that's not authentic (Jake)*

The police use substances that look like, but are not, illegal narcotics for educational purposes. But again, Jake refers back to the qualities of reality and authenticity as a prohibiting factor. It is not enough to utilise representations of narcotics that could evoke the same or a similar reaction. Real drugs, he argues, would be *hard hitting*. Jake describes fake narcotics as not 'proper', the implication being that they lack an appropriateness and an accuracy in his collection of true criminal objects. He is depreciative when describing the obstacle put in place by the police, using the word *just* in a way that detracts from the illegality of his intentions (Lee, 1987) – his intentions for the objects are purely for their aesthetic of authenticity and not for the educational purpose that a representation could satisfy. Jake needs the 'complete run' of narcotics and here, he evokes the same rhetoric that underlines all collecting: 'just one object no longer suffices: the fulfilment of the project of possession always means a succession or even a complete series of objects' (Baudrillard, 1968/1996, p. 92). In order for the collection of objects to be thought of as authentic, it must hold water as a complete set without any gaps or omissions. In this instance, also, the objects lack the association with violent murderous crime – a contributing factor of perceptions of authenticity in murderabilia markets.

Murderabilia gets its name from murder and its authenticity is tied up in murderousness. In several instances participants focus their collections solely on those who have murdered, while others have a broader interest in crime. Nevertheless, closeness to murder or death is a reliable indicator of value – despite the enduring popularity of transgressive characters that have not murdered, or are not known for murder, 'Robin Hood' type characters (Seal, 2009) for example, or gangsters such as the Kray Twins (Penfold-Mounce, 2010a). Jake feels the need to repeatedly caveat and defend the legitimacy of his personal interest in English criminal Charles Bronson against the fact that he has not actually been responsible for the death of a person.

> *Charles Bronson, who's obviously not a murderer (Jake)*
>
> *But then again, he's [Charles Bronson] not a killer (Jake)*

Jake discusses Bronson as through he does not qualify to be celebrated due to this lack of murderousness. He then goes on to discuss the complexity of Bronson's crimes, his stints in and out of prison, his various changes of name, and persistent media coverage that has labelled him 'the most violent criminal in Britain'. Justification of interest in this manner, by highlighting the narrative qualities of Bronson's life and crimes, emphasises the importance of the inauthentic qualities of famousness and celebrity in murderabilia. But in its attempt to negate his lack of murder, it is also an acknowledgement of the importance of *death* in murderabilia – dead victims increase perceptions of the authentic. Not all transgressive behaviours can or will become celebrated and transgression itself if not enough for a criminal to become immortalised in objects. The act of murder can be understood as a valuable quality in murderabilia markets, bestowing genuineness on objects as an authentic consumer choice. These examples of 'inauthentic' modes of production demonstrate a broader trend towards mass production of true crime objects. Along with the embracement of infamous, celebrity characters detailed more extensively in the previous chapter *Displaying Transgression*, this trend will be considered in more detail in the next, *Symbolic Transgression.*

Summary

It has been argued that collectors of murderabilia and true crime objects self-identify as being driven by a desire for authenticity and authentic experiences, through narratives of art, originality and provenance. This drive is visible not just in the semantics of talk about murderabilia collecting, but in their practices also. Descriptions of personal connections to particular or 'favourite' objects, in the subsection *Crime in the Collection*, repeatedly refer back to authenticity or connected words and phrases (real, genuine, original, actual). In *Cultivating Authenticity,* a search for provenance, signature and originality reflect this interest in authenticity, as did a distaste for forgery, reproduction or representation. Despite this stated motivation of authenticity (one that is apparent in all 'antiques' or 'collections' as defined by objects that are marginal (Baudrillard, 1968/1996) in that they are abstracted from their function), participants' relationships with crime were, as one would expect, far from objective. Instead, the authenticity garnered by transgressing the normal or accepted boundaries of popular culture (see Presdee, 2000) is undermined by the common threads of celebrity, film and popular culture that have influenced collections, similar to themes from the previous chapter, *Displaying Transgression*. This drive towards mediatised celebrated figures who do not reflect transgression to the same extent as they conform to the frameworks of celebrity culture was evidenced again. But primarily, qualities that impacted authenticity regarded *modes of production* as participants seemed to negotiate Benjamin's concept of aura. The authenticity afforded by an object that has historical value as an antique is undermined by an industry that is increasingly geared toward satisfying consumer desire through reproduction, mass production, or representation.

When discussing value (in terms of marginal value, or the value of aura), it would be naïve to overlook the investment potential and financial worth that limited commodities, or items of historical significance can have – and to simply consider their cultural value as separate to financial value. Participants did mention financial interest, either as investment, but far more frequently, as an obstacle to pursuing their hobby to the degree that they would like. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the driving force of money alongside the focus of this chapter, the motive towards authentic experiences. Jake's reference to money is indicative of the majority:

> *There's no good keeping money in the bank anymore, prices have just – so people have gone into this industry and prices have just gone through the roof. I can't believe it, it's phenomenal (Jake)*

It is clear that the economic recession of the late 2000's has driven investors away from banks that provide low yields and toward other more material investments. Among other forms of material asset, this has boosted the murderabilia market as suggested by Jake. However, it cannot be that individuals would choose to invest in transgressive objects over far more dependable, known-quantity investments without an existing cultural interest in true crime, the focus of this thesis.

This chapter aimed primarily to address the second research question: how is 'transgression' consumed through the collection of criminal objects? It was argued that transgression once again took the form of collectors wishing to transgress mechanised modes of production and cultural homogenisation, rather than to consume objectively the most transgressive criminal characters. Whilst it has been argued that murderabilia can be understood as a symptom of the same desire for authentic experiences that drives an interest in crime more generally (for example: crime film, crime fiction, 'true crime' books and television series), this is not to argue that they are simply the same. Seltzer argues that the genre 'true crime' (referring to books, documentaries, television) is 'crime fact that looks like crime fiction' (Seltzer, 2007, p. 16) in that it is fact delivered in a way that utilises narrative devices and is selective of more entertaining histories. Whilst the premise of this statement is accurate, murderabilia is better understood as the opposite: 'crime fiction that looks like crime fact', in that despite a drive towards 'authenticity' in terms of value, there is very little in the way of investment in historical detail or information. Rather, items are fictitious in that they are simulations of authentic criminality in accordance with the demands of collectors' culturally influenced transgressive imaginations. It is valuable in its ability to provide a closeness to history or an authentic experience that is a simulation. Utilising artistic merit; originality; history; uniqueness; provenance; and auratic modes of production, murderabilia collections are fictitious or cinematic criminal narratives packaged, presented and cultivated to represent maximum 'truth' and authenticity.

6- Symbolic Transgression

Those who have made businesses out of murder and merchandise related to violent crimes are the focus of this chapter. It is primarily based on data collected from interviews with participants who produce murder merchandise (see appendix 3 for a descriptive list of participants), and from ethnographic online observations of their products, how customers interact with their merchandise, and the wider on-line marketplace for reproducible macabre consumables. Whilst some participants opt to abandon their professional qualifications and day jobs to venture into the cultural production of crime, most are running modest side businesses to supplement income and satisfy personal interest. Some of these participants have been featured in the previous chapter as collectors of murderabilia, and many cite the museums from *Displaying Transgression* as places that they have been, or wish to go. In terms of the central thesis topic of the cultural consumption of crime through objects, reproducible items are the third main piece of the jigsaw. This chapter completes the trajectory of the project, considering the increasingly commoditised consumption of notions of authenticity and originality. Departing from work in museums and heritage studies that consider artefacts' and objects' value in terms of 'authenticity' of experience (*Chapter 4 – Displaying Transgression*), through the devolution of the concept of authenticity into modes of production as these artefacts begin to be consumed as collectables (*Chapter 5 – Auratic Transgression*). *Symbolic Transgression* book-ends this arc by reflecting on mechanically reproduced crime objects and participants' perceptions of authenticity through this most commodified medium.

Subsections on *Crime in Products* and *Crime in Production* will overview themes coming from both ethnographic data and interviews respectively. The third, *The Production of Difference*, will consider the societal trends towards consuming uniqueness through Lash and Lury's (2007) work on the *Global Culture Industry*. In the fourth, *Cultivating Authenticity*, devices of artistic merit, originality and uniqueness, now familiar from the previous chapter, will be explored as methods of enhancing perceptions of authenticity in mechanically reproduced murder and crime objects. The fifth and final subsection, *Well-knowness*, addresses the way in which this authenticity is communicated through mainstream narratives of well-knownness and celebrity.

These findings, throughout, will be positioned closely within theories of the cultural consumption of objects, considering the impact of mechanical reproduction on consumed transgression and perceptions of authenticity as the objects under scrutiny have become decreasingly auratic. Debates around appropriating prestigious or antique cultural value into mechanically reproduced items are played out no more frequently than in the context of museum gift shops. Root writes:

> To what extent are rather prosaic items such as bathrobes ennobled by their association with the museums that market them to the public? [...] Commodities swirl around and around, all announcing their desirability and value through sophisticated techniques of advertising (Root, 1996, p. 121).

Root is referring to the means by which, through association, museums are able to insert the high-culture value of priceless artefacts into mechanically reproduced, mass market objects. The sophisticated techniques of advertising to which she refers, are played out in the subsection, *Cultivating Authenticity*, as devices for parachuting transgressive, criminal and authentic values into mechanically reproduced objects. In this chapter on commodified objects, the contradictions discussed in this thesis come to a head that seems impassable. As Root describes, the commodification of authenticity raises a problem in that any cultural object deemed to be authentic must be evaluated against a counter notion of inauthentic, something that is usually supplied by the commodity market. As soon as a universal notion of authenticity is established, or any clear demarcation between authentic and inauthentic – the thing that it is applied to is immediately rendered inauthentic due to the mass market descriptor that has been levied against it (Root, 1996). The very notion of commoditised authenticity then, is incongruous and appears as an contradiction.

Yet heritage, museum and tourist attractions regularly trade off of the back of 'authenticity', as well as the crime genre more generally. In these industries, authenticity is little more than a 'marketing device' (Root, 1996, p. 80). Crucially, for Root, this is complicated by the fact that cultural objects are still able to 'manifest integrity' (p. 80) whilst having been inducted into the market economy. The cultural marketplace, both producers and consumers, do a lot of cultural, conative and practical legwork to negate the effects that banality, sameness (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1979),

simulation (Baudrillard, 1981/1994) and mechanical reproduction (Benjamin, 1936/2008a) have on the marketplace – and murder merchandise can be understood as part of these processes. Pushing the limits of social acceptance and transgressing boundaries through transgressive imagery is seen as contributing a level of authenticity of experience that has been lacking under late capitalism. Continuing the main aim of this research of applying theories of cultural objects, such as Benjamin and Baudrillard, to murderabilia in a bid to investigate transgressive imaginations in objects, *Symbolic Transgression* will be discussed as a way by which 'the marketed version of culture explicitly refers to the un-commodified version through a rhetoric of authenticity' (Root, 1996, p. 81).

Despite this contradiction, the mechanical reproduction of this niche alternative culture throws up many questions in the pursuit of authentic experiences, and in investigating transgressive imaginations, that were not present in the previous chapter. Heath and Potter ask: 'so where did 'alternative' come from? The idea that you had to be unpopular to be authentic?' (2005, p. 16), and this notion of authenticity through unpopularity is highly prevalent when mechanical reproduction is introduced. Two issues arise, in the first instance, rarity is removed from the equation. In the second, the criminal characters used are far from unpopular. This subverts the purpose of counterculture, and this chapter argues that if anything, mechanically reproduced crime objects are just the opposite: an overt embracement of the dynamic of American popular culture, celebrity characters and mechanically reproduced products, through the value marker of perceived authenticity.

Crime in Products

The landscape of murder-merchandise is varied, although dominated by wearable products. T-shirts, hats, cases for mobile devices, and paintings are the most common categories, sold across several on-line independent design outlets. This section provides an overview of this ethnographic data, similar to the subsections *Crime in the Museum* and *Crime in the Collection* in the previous two chapters. Data for this chapter comes from more sources than the previous two, and so this data overview is conducted through two subsections – *Crime in Products* (online observations of merchandise outlets), and *Crime in Production* (interviews with producers of crime merchandise).

Not dissimilar to the museums discussed in *Displaying Transgression*, merchandise plays upon filmic, popular representations of recognisably authentic killers – or devices that cultivate perceptions of authenticity. This ethnography observed trading on the mass customisation (MC) websites[16] Redbubble, Zazzle & Café Press, and the hand crafting website, Etsy[17]. Data extracts in this section take the form of text and images from product listings. Etsy, being the only one of the four data sites with objects that are not mechanically reproduced by definition, has slightly more variety than the others. Serial killer objects range from engraved jewellery to the more customary t-shirts, and a myriad of objects in between including original paintings, trading cards, gift cards, dolls houses (modelled on famous criminals' houses), cooking aprons, mugs, stickers, plates and bowls, badges, dolls and wine glasses. Initially, it was observed that producers used some of the same tools for product marketing of rarity, uniqueness and originality, in their listings as were shown in the previous chapter's narratives of collecting auratic objects.

> *My ornaments are handmade and made to order (Etsy seller)*
>
> *I specialize in rare, unusual and re-created dolls. […] This doll is one of a kind. There isn't another one just like it anywhere (Etsy seller)*

Sellers emphasise uniqueness of products before any other quality. If something is constructed by hand, even as a representation without historical association to true criminal events, authentic modes of production as discussed in the previous chapter still take precedent. Objects are presented as 'specialist', 'rare', and 'unusual'. They are 'one of a kind' in an effort to shun reproduction. They depict transgressive characters, and they utilise modes of production that transgress the norms of consumer culture as well. Sellers can be seen to market their products in reference to a non-existent un-commodified version as argued by Root (1996, p. 81). This is evidenced by direct

[16] See *Literature Review* for a theoretical work on mass customisation websites, such as Potts (2012)

[17] See *Method* for a detailed breakdown of the ethnographic research process

reference to qualities that are symbolic of ‘antiques’, for example, some nickel plated coins that are described as having an ‘antique finish’ despite their being brand new.

> *Serial Killer John Wayne Gacy. As you can see they are nickel plated coins with an antique finish (Etsy seller)*

Root argues that commodified objects often make reference to a non-existent un-commodified original – something that can be seen in listing descriptions. Serial killers’ faces adorn commemorative coins, which are described as having an ‘antique finish’, applying what Baudrillard has called ‘marginal’ value, historical association usually associated with older, antique items with no use value and only sign value instead. Sellers use words such as ‘unique’, ‘rare’, or ‘original’ in their items descriptions as well, something that will be witnessed throughout narratives of production in this chapter such as this instance of a jewellery box crafter from faux human skin:

> *Original hand sculpted and painted macabre human skin trinket box with wooden interior. Perfect gift for horror enthusiasts! Great for use as a jewellery box (Etsy seller)*

The object of murder merchandise production is to make objects appear as real, old, visceral and gruesome as possible. The example of a jewellery box, made to look as though it is wrapped in human skin, is an example of all of these qualities in one. The item is original, hand sculpted, painted, bestowing it with an auratic authenticity discussed in the previous chapter, *Auratic Transgression*. The addition of human skin wrapping the box creates a visceral simulacrum of death, but particularly, of popular narratives of gruesome serial murder that have included perpetrators making objects from the skin of their victims such as American serial killers Albert Fish and Ed Gein, of whom the latter is the inspiration for the fictional serial killer Buffalo Bull in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). This seller takes these narratives to the extreme, applying ‘human skin’ to many objects, including picture frames. One buyer has left this piece of feedback:

> *Amazing frame made to order! Brilliant seller! Has found it's home on top of my Ouija board with a jar of dirt from Ed Gein's grave, it's a very small jar! (Etsy buyer)*

A buyer displays manufactured skin objects next to real items of murderabilia, like a jar of dirt from Ed Gein's grave. They reference Gein in particular for his notoriety as a criminal who skinned his victims and made objects from their bodies. In this behaviour, making objects from bodies, Gein has become prime territory for producers of murder objects who like to replicate his gruesome creations in reproduction. A different seller lists a replica skull that has been carved out into a bowl.

Figure 13 *Replica Victim Skull* (Etsy 2016) – images from fieldwork

> *Replica SKULL BOWL as seen in Ed Gein's house of horrors circa 1957. […] 1:1 scale replica. […] Custom orders welcome. Send me a note or email stating any additional features. ie: blood, more rotten, missing teeth etc.. […] These Ed Gein Skull Bowls have been sold to many collectors and professional Haunted House/Escape Rooms (Etsy seller)*

One business sells realistic resin replicas of cadaver parts from infamous crime scenes, particularly Gein's. In this instance, it is a replica of a skull bowl made by Gein himself from the cadaver of a victim (figure 13). The seller, in their listing, does a lot of semantic work to position the item as authentic. It is described 'as seen' at the crime scene of Ed Gein's house. It is suggested that they are part of (presumably murderabilia) collections, despite not being original or auratic objects in themselves, and professional exhibitions in museums or haunted houses. Using devices like these, sellers position their work as authentic, high quality, and legitimate. These items are designed with the

intent to be raw, visceral experiences – this is evident in sellers' instance that objects should be shocking, cause offence, or satisfy some desire for objects that are unusual:

> *This Lamp Shade aims to shock and offend. This is a one off original designed to look like bones covered in a decaying layer of fat (Etsy seller)*

A case in point is figure 14, referenced above in this listing description. It is described as original, with the added layer of decaying flesh to authenticate it as close to the real as possible. These represent the items that are fabricated, modern pieces of murderabilia. Still hand-made, mostly, but as replica and representation without historical association or 'marginal' (Baudrillard, 1968/1996) value.

Figure 14 *Replica human bone lamp* (Etsy 2016) – images from fieldwork

The remaining three data sites observed were all Mass Customisation (MC) websites – print-work businesses that stock an array of blank, customisable objects that shop owners, not more than account holders, upload their designs to and create a mechanically reproduced product range (Potts, 2012, p. 242). These sites are particularly interesting in that producers never actually hold the finished objects that they sell – they simply upload digital designs and customers see those items superimposed across an array of potential product objects. There is no original version of these items – these designs only exist in digital, mechanical reproduction. Items are homogenous, with very little to tell the difference between certain shops or objects. They blend together in their content and style. Objects are restricted to pre-defined product line-ups of mass produced t-shirts, mobile device cases, mugs, stationary, bags, clocks and prints. There is far less variety and subsequently less rarity, but this has not prevented the emphasis of choice and uniqueness in an otherwise monotonous culture industry. MC websites represent the global culture industry's drive towards consumer choice, but choices are limited across a pre-defined range of items.

Figure 15 *Designs as advertised on Mass Customisation website, Redbubble.com* (Redbubble.Com) – images from fieldwork

Figure 15 shows four designs that are typical. Numerous designers choose to directly impose mug shots of infamous American killers onto t-shirts (top left), text based designs feed off of those same character brands (top right). Dark humour is also a common theme, demonstrated by the example of an alphabetical list of mug shorts with 'my ABCs' written above it (bottom left). Lastly, the most common face on murder merchandise, a stylised image of American serial killer John Wayne Gacy's self portrait of himself as Pogo the Clown (bottom right). Interviewed participants spoke of uniqueness, originality and difference as the values of their products, although variety does not spread beyond these infamous, usually American brands, imposed mostly onto t-shirts, for sale through three main outlets. Mechanically reproduced objects are lacking the fundamental qualities of aura, history and uniqueness in the global culture industry and so have to further rely on references to noteworthy, established characters, through symbolic reference to popular film discourse in order to communicate authenticity. Murder merchandise resists feelings of inauthenticity present in mass production by emphasising artistic value in addition to popular cultural reference points, rarity and uniqueness.

Crime in Production

Participants routinely offered defences and justifications for their involvement in this form of object based morbid culture, which most often took the form of descriptive accounts of their journeys from regular crime consumer, to manufacturer of criminal products. These accounts were not necessarily defensive, but rather an explanation for how seemingly usual hobbies, interests and occupations had converged into the production of murder merchandise. In particular, Martin describes more mainstream modes the cultural consumption of crime as like a gateway drug, acting as stepping stones along an increasingly visceral path toward writing to serial killers, murderabilia collecting, and producing items themselves. Participants described their products most frequently using the word 'art' as a way to align their items as authentic, and styled the process of producing and selling murder-merchandise as one defined by the communication of artistic design and talent onto more widely saleable items. Martin references pervasive news-media coverage and his extensive exposure to the arrests and trials of American serial killers Ted Bundy and Gary Heidnick as being influential in developing his pathway towards producing murder merchandise:

> *My interest in serial killers really started when I was a young kid. I live in Philly and in the 80s growing up there was a killer who – well when he was arrested he was on the news a lot. His name was Gary, have you heard of Gary Heidnik? […] he kidnapped and tortured about five girls or so and killed two. I remember his arrest vividly – as a kid – with the media constantly showing him as well as Ted Bundy (Martin)*

Martin's catalogue of products includes several items depicting Gary Heidnik and Ted Bundy, which he attributes to their repeated exposure in mainstream television news media having sparked his interest in killers. Despite being a large producer of murder merchandise, Martin is concerned with what the media has done *to* him as a passive recipient, rather than what he may be doing *with* his interest in the macabre. The cases in question contain violence, spectacle, sex and individualism – key criteria for newsworthiness (Jewkes, 2004) and recurring thresholds for inclusion on mechanically reproduced murder objects as well. Martin particularly cites 'sexiness' as a quality that attracts both himself to killers, and consumers to his products. Chiefly, Ted Bundy was able to engage Martin in a lifelong fascination with serial killers due to his normalcy in appearance, social class and occupation. Because of this, he is seen as a *real* criminal, authentic, as opposed to the comically influenced and cinematically imposed John Wayne Gacy (who is famous, in part, for having dressed as a clown). This is a contest between real and fake, and with participants making efforts to depict the real in the face of a perceived persistent mediatised fake-ness in the news. Martin explains that after his exposure to these television narratives as a child, he began to read about, and then to collect murderabilia pertaining to similar individuals:

> *Well I do have a handful of things that I've bought over the years. Before I started drawing and painting the serial killers I've done I used to read about them all the time! […] and then I started wanting to own something they had or something they wrote! […] I bought a letter typed by Kenneth Bianchi and an envelope with Angelo Buono's signature (Martin)*

Martin discusses his progression from a regular level of interest – reading about and consuming crime, through wanting to own and collect original items and pieces of history. Signatures and letters are particularly popular having an intimate connection with their author. This interest has ultimately developed into producing his own items of murder merchandise to sell. Martin worked his way into murder merchandise production from being a collector of murderabilia and wanting to get closer and more real experiences of crime. Holly's trajectory was also one of graduating from a place of

more authentic experiences, but her morbid hobbies before becoming a producer of murder merchandise were more spatial, rather than rooted in physical objects:

> *I do enjoy going out to find where murders happened. I live in Houston in Texas and I just finished reading a book on Dean Corll, the serial killer. You know? Nickname 'Candy Man' […] I don't know what it is about houses, I'm always intrigued to find the houses where these awful crimes occurred. I guess I'm weird! I don't actually have any murderabilia (Holly).*

Holly did not collect murderabilia, but instead, she enjoys house-hunting for the places where gruesome crimes occurred. Her avenue into producing murder merchandise has been through a self-administered dark tourism (Stone, 2006) where she seeks out authentic experiences in the form of real murder houses. She speaks about wanting to get closer to atrocity, and about being particularly intrigued by the real, untouched spaces where famous, celebrified crimes have occurred. She has chosen Corll as an example, a notorious American serial killer, who has been made accessible to her through the popular true crime genre of books. For Lucy, this interest in celebrity criminals is piqued through film, instead:

> *I've sold just loads and loads of stuff, more than I could list I think. The murderabilia stuff I only really just started since September last year [2014]. But I've been interested in true crime and serial killers since I was like 14 but I never really thought of selling this stuff until September […] I watch loads of horror films, but I guess most people do (Lucy)*

Lucy started out as an online seller of t-shirts, posters and various other medium to host her artwork and design. She began selling murder items in the year that her interview took place, but had expanded crime into her catalogue so that it was constituting roughly half of her items due to its instant popularity. She cites her early teenage years as the beginning of her interest in crime, but refers to horror film as the first type of culture that she consumed to satisfy this interest. Producers spoke of mainstream, popular cultural avenues into their trade in every case except for Holly and her dark tourism. But two participants in particular, Aaron and Amy, had spoken of being consumers of murder merchandise themselves.

> *I went to the Lizzy Borden museum and got a bobble head thing – like a thing you put in your car window and it bobs up and down (Amy)*

Oh yeah yeah, I was wearing Charles Manson shirts in high school, so […] Yeah I like pushing people's buttons (Aaron)

Amy frequented crime and murder dark-tourist attractions, somewhat similarly to Lucy, and began buying items from gift shops. She refers particularly to an American accused (but acquitted) murderer Lizzy Borden bobble head from the Lizzy Borden museum, Massachusetts, U.S.A (a museum not sampled in this project) – a kind of object usually constructed as dogs or cats and not humans or criminals. Aaron is the only participant to build a full-time business around murder merchandise, and is one of the more popular t-shirt sellers on more than one of the outlets described in the previous subsection. He has been consuming murder merchandise since his teenage years to stand out, push boundaries, appear different, and to provoke a response. Aaron cites an infamous image of a young Axl Rose (from the American *Guns 'n' Roses*) wearing a Charles Manson T-Shirt (figure 16) as being indicative of how iconic some criminal images became during periods of countercultural fashion (Heath & Potter, 2005) in the 1990s West.

Figure 16 *Axl Rose wearing a Charles Manson T-Shirt C1991-1993* (Anon., n.d.)

Theory of counterculture has a tendency to consider these purchasing decisions as protest or provocation (Heath & Potter, 2005), like Aaron. But Amy, who produces greetings cards, refers to this more common practice (than murderabilia collecting) in terms of taste, reminding us that something is not always provocative if delivered in the right space, to the right recipient, with the correct sense of humour.

> *I had some friends that like, they thought it was pretty funny and like – I knew they'd like it. It was just a joke between some of us, we – I made them for a few of my friends and they liked them. So they were like 'hey you should sell em!' and I was like, not sure (Amy)*

Amy refers to her avenue into producing through friends with a mutual appreciation for macabre humour. Amy's murder merchandise is designed to shock, as shocking humour is designed to provoke those who will be sympathetic to its cause – not a true provocation, but an expression of difference and uniqueness in an oversaturated, mainstream greetings card market. Her first cards were personal exchanges between friends and relatives before she was encouraged that others might appreciate them enough to form a side-business from the macabre. When prompted to expand on peoples' reactions to her products, she suggested that this issue of audience was her biggest variable.

> *If you have someone that's like, really into serial killers then that's convenient but most people they don't. Like, I've had some people I'll tell them what I do and they'll be like 'I can't wait to send one', but then they also say things like 'I wish I had someone I could send one to' – so they don't have anyone, maybe that would think it was funny (Amy)*

Not everyone has someone who would appreciate receiving a murder greetings card. Sending cards is unlike wearing a t-shirt in that you need a suitable recipient with appropriate tastes. Up to this point, participants have invested little energy into discussing audiences as research has focused on narratives of personal collection. For the first time in this project it is possible to consider issues of audience, taste or demographics as murder merchandise reaches a wide enough audience for interviewees (producers) to express an opinion on the distribution of their customer base. Participants were split when discussing demographics, with no clear age or gender patterns present.

> *The people who like the Charles Manson shirt are almost close to 100% female (Aaron)*

> *I sell my buyers are mostly female. Albert Fish gets a lot of likes but there just aren't a lot of 'fans' or groupies out there that actually want to buy things that are related to him (Lucy)*

Aaron felt that popularity for his Charles Manson t-shirts was almost entirely represented by female customers. Lucy expresses similar sentiments – her buyers are primarily female. She also uses the term, 'groupies', usually associated with female fans before referring implicitly to issues of famousness that will be discussed later in this chapter. It seems that American cannibal and serial killer Albert Fish has a lot of female *fans*, despite him perhaps being too gruesome to place on a t-shit – a space that seems reserved for more appropriate, countercultural, mediatised characters like Manson. On the other hand, Martin has observed the opposite demographic purchasing patterns:

> *Women seem to have zero interest in artwork based on serial killers (Martin)*

Martin observes that women have shown little interest in artwork that depicts serial murderers, implying that this is more of a male item. Despite other participants suggesting that t-shirts are female-centric, artwork is observed to be male-centric, with no clear pattern and too small of a data sample to make any reliable assertions. Similarly, social class is rarely alluded to – despite the likelihood that these are classed purchasing choices. Aaron does refer to political affiliation though, arguing that purchasing murder merchandise is more of a left-wing pursuit:

> *And yeah, my politics are very left wing. I hate getting into wars – uhh, I wanna give people free medical care and stuff like that and most of the people I know are like that too. I don't, uhh, I don't seem to have a lot of uhh, really right wing people that are into this kind of stuff (Aaron)*

Purchasing murder merchandise, conversely, is seen by Aaron as representing anti-violence. Instead of being adorning yourself or your possessions with murder being a *violent* act – Aaron sees the act as a like the liberal expression of *freedom* of speech and of representation. Murder merchandise is seen as a progressive, anti-conservative statement against established social norms and values.

The Production of Difference

Participants, as producers of murder merchandise, are doing literally what Lash and Lury (2007) have termed 'the production of difference'. This concept is extended here as the friction between aura and mass production, and between art object and consumable, that has been investigated in the previous chapter. It reveals increased friction with regard to value as the things in question become increasingly mediated, to borrow the language of Lash and Lury (2007), or the objects in question become increasingly mechanically produced, to refer back to our common thread of Benjamin (Benjamin, 1936/2008a). Lash and Lury go some way toward operationalising for the 21st century some of Benjamin's theories of value in their book *Global Culture Industry* (2007), and the following remarks are particularly relevant:

> Mediation by representation is quite other to the mediation of things. The object of art is different from an object like a hammer in that we engage with the former primarily in terms of meaning, while the latter is a matter of doing or 'operationality' (p. 8).

The former (art) has value in itself without validation by sale or profit, whereas the latter exists only with explicit reference to what it can do, its use, or its saleability. The former has aura in its originality, whereas the latter attempts to simulate aura through its reference to historical events, people, or authentic acts. The former can exist by itself as 'art' and without purpose other than artistic representation, whereas the latter is a matter of 'doing' and is rendered useless without a purpose outside of art. There is an intrinsic difference between buying a t-shirt worn by a criminal (the former, and the subject of the previous chapter), with historical values in and of itself – and buying a t-shirt with a picture of a criminal on it (the latter, the subject of this chapter) with no auratic value. A consumer would consider hanging the former on their wall by itself, but the latter is operational in that it must be doing something (being worn) beyond art.

Critical cultural studies abound with analyses of attempts to disobey socio-cultural norms through the consumption of protest and politics, most notably Heath and Potter's seminal *The Rebel Sell* (2005). But criminal transgression, when applied to consumable objects, can be seen in the same light. It is a mode through which consumers may try to

subvert the banality of the capitalist marketplace, and a way by which people can consume difference. Given the substantive overlaps between arguments made in the book, and comments regarding 'authenticity' and 'rebellion' from participants throughout this thesis, it is worth quoting at length some questions raised by Heath and Potter now. Similarities between Theodore Kaczynski (the Unabomber)'s manifesto and common countercultural discourse prompted the questions:

> The Unabomber case forced many people to confront a question that partisans of the countercultural critique had studiously avoided for decades. Where do we draw the boundary between transgression and pathology? When does 'thinking outside the box' shade over into mental illness? What is the difference between engaging in antisocial behaviour and rebelling against society? At what point does alternative degenerate into just plain crazy (Heath & Potter, p. 140)?

Some of these questions become even more prominent when the counterculture in question is a t-shirt with a hooded image of the Unabomber's face on the front. To what extent is the embracement of transgression through merchandise a transgressive act, and to what extent does it represent an authentic, unmediated experience for those who invest in it? As Heath and Potter rightly point out, there is a looming contradiction present when *anti-mainstream* culture is consumed through *mainstream* mechanisms that is also present in countercultural rhetoric that seeks to justify, legitimise or 'glorify' transgressive behaviour in the event that it stands against the dominant culture – even if that behaviour is deemed to be in itself, immoral.

The logic of manufactured *difference* appears in heritage studies, as well. The emphasis has for quite some time been on cultivating *real* experiences and more importantly, on perceptions of reality in the consumption of culture – rejections of glorification and fictionalisation of spaces and histories. This chapter witnesses these trends outside of the tourism and leisure sector. Crime, as a manufactured experience, is obstinately described in terms of the level of realness that it brings to cultural experiences – as if crime is a means to transgress the system of consumption more than it is a means to transgress the law. In this instance, what Fine (Fine, 2003, p. 153) argues to be a defining feature of contemporary capitalism is evident – 'the desire for authenticity now occupies a central position in contemporary culture. Whether in our search for

selfhood, leisure experience, or in our material purchases, we search for the *real*, the genuine' . Participants define their practices as part of a search for this genuineness. Cohen describes the principal issue in representations of the real: 'what happens to the other meanings (particularly religious, cultural, and social) of things (and activities) once they become commoditised?' (Cohen, 1988, p. 381). In this instance, the transgressive and criminal meanings of representations are lost as consumption becomes about difference and the value of products is defined in terms of their difference from alternatives.

A key facet of Lash and Lury's concept of a global culture industry is *from identity to difference*, and this can be seen in the following subsection, *Cultivating Authenticity*. 'In the global culture industry, production and consumption are processes of the construction of difference' (Lash & Lury, 2007, p. 5) insofar as media images and brands reflexively infiltrate into products, consumables and 'things', expressing value through 'difference'. Whereas previously, the culture industry enacted domination though *sameness* – the global culture industry achieves the same ends through the seductive reasoning brands, one of intrinsic *difference*.

> In culture industry, production takes place in the Fordist and labour-intensive production of identity. In global culture industry, it takes place in the post-Fordist and design-intensive production of difference (Lash & Lury, 2007, p. 5).

That is to argue that the logic of 'difference' is a central mode of ascribing value in the global culture industry, and it is used by participants to do exactly that – to separate murder objects from those other forms of mass produced consumable, and to attribute a level of legitimacy and genuineness to those who buy or wear them. In this sense, the process of producing murder merchandise could be understood as process of *designing deviance* in its most literal sense – the design-led cultivation of difference from the norm as media images become enshrined in objects. Media becomes 'thingified', according to Lash and Lury, when films are turned into computer games, or when brands begin to pervasively overtake spaces, or when 'cartoon characters become collectables' (2007, p. 8) – we do not read them as much as we would media or art, but we *do* them, or *do with them* (2007, p. 8). So it is a fitting lens through which to study murder merchandise, a medium in which mediated, filmic representations of mythical

characters become immortalised as consumer objects. It is also fitting that a recurring theme in this chapter is *doing*, with participants describing murder merchandise as a means by which to *do* transgression as part of one's performance of self (Goffman, 1969), and the process of *doing* transgression by making accessible widely available countercultural and violent imagery. In terms of the operationalisation of imagery – 'when media become things [...] they no longer exclusively have cultural value. They come very importantly to have use-value and exchange-value' (Lash & Lury, 2007, p. 8). The values applied to the objects and their uses are raised by producers of murder merchandise. To these ends, this chapter primarily addresses research question three: how is crime imagined and represented through mechanically reproduced 'simulations' of transgression?

Cultivating Authenticity

Cohen, when considering contemporary tourism, raises the question: 'which are the diacritical traits which, for a given individual [...] make a cultural product acceptable as "authentic?"' (Cohen, 1988, p. 378) – a question which aims to address not what makes an object or experience 'authentic' in and of itself, but rather what reflexive qualities endow a cultural experience with a feeling of authenticity in the view of its people. In cultivating perceptions of authenticity in mechanically reproduced murder objects, participants generally embraced three ideals: originality, art, and education – which will now be covered in series.

> *I think it's that and also just uhm, it's, you don't see a whole lot of Charles Manson shirts on the street so there's also individuality you get with it. […] Yeah. Uhm oh yeah, I definitely like being the centre of attention when I go out, so. I'm not trying to like piss them off or anything, it's just the – it's attention grabbing (Aaron)*

Aaron speaks of originality when discussing the value of his t-shirts. He appreciates the rarity of wearing a representation of Charles Manson, but the enactment of difference beyond this infrequency is multifaceted. First, there is the notion of attention grabbing, and second, the unwillingness to cause offence. In grabbing attention, Aaron is using his products (and intends his products to be used) as signifiers of difference, like 'props' in a performance of self (Goffman, 1969). The t-shirt is described as modifying his outward persona to catch attention, and at the same time, to present himself as different,

or ‘individual’ in his own words – consuming mechanically reproduced crime objects has the power to represent non-conformity. Wearable objects are frequently used for these ends (Heath & Potter, 2005), but unlike subcultures investigated in Heath and Potter’s *The Rebel Sell*, Aaron’s consumption is not counter-cultural to the extent that it is not intended to offend the common morality. Cultures of consumed rebellion cited by Heath and Potter are aggressively counter-capitalism, but Aaron does not communicate a similar investment in revolution. Instead of making waves, he insists that his products are innocent consumables. In not wanting to ‘piss people off’, Aaron undermines the provocative nature of his products and defends his right as a consumer inside the global culture industry to endorse choice, and to ‘be different’, as if that right-to-difference sits on a plane above offensiveness. In doing so, he also demonstrates that his murder products are not intended as counterculture. Being original, it would seem, can be achieved without being particularly different from any other available product:

> *[When I included serial killers in my art] that's when I hit on something completely strange and, uhh, original! […] I really think, I mean just for my stuff I really think that people see a truly original idea (Holly)*

Overlapping into themes of originality, participants value notional differences between their products and competitors in the marketplace and in keeping with the crime artefacts considered in the previous chapter. Value is still centred around a form of rarity except this time, instead of ‘history’, it is achieved through *novelty*. When discussing artefacts, the word ‘original’ suggested a product with ‘aura’ (Benjamin, 1936/2008a), one that had significant links to the past and was most likely hand crafted. When items are mechanically reproduced, this same sense of value and authenticity is achieved but through originality of concept or design – small differences that discern and distinguish the products from competitors. For Lash and Lury, this production of difference is a core mode of the global and digital culture industry (2007), and in this case study, it is being realised by the addition of transgression. Originality is phrased as the turning point for success, in which an object that is truly original and unique, not a repetition of anything that the culture industry has before offered, can render it popular and successful as an object of transgression. Of course, the object is not original. It is not original in medium, the depiction of famous portraits is not new, and it is not original in subject, as we have established, the serial killer is an integral and ingrained

facet of western popular culture. Here, originality of design and concept is an approximation of the rarity that would otherwise be satisfied through aura.

> *Yeah, so I think that- I don't believe it's so much that they are interested in killers per say – they don't support the idea necessarily. It's, they see the cleverness in the idea, they're captivated by the way that it's just totally odd to capture the killer's appearance in that way (Holly)*

Holly goes on to reject the idea that her customers and herself are interested in criminals at all – mechanically reproduced crime objects are objects in the first instance, and crime in the second. Her serial killer products are mainly used to satisfy a standard consumer desire for difference, or 'oddness' to borrow her phrase, and not to service an interest in violence or crime. Holly describes such interest as non-existent, citing the cleverness of the innovation as the valuable element in her work. She speaks of the cleverness in her approach and style – further validating her products as artworks and ascribing the values of auratic modes of production that come with original art:

> *Most popular because of the originality – like the idea hasn't been done before so it's new and people like that I think. I get a lot of good comments (Holly)*

> *Yeah it's part of everyone the interest in the macabre and wanting to know about things that are unusual or stuff that they haven't come across before. (Martin)*

Martin mirrors this with his opinion that the lure of crime is not one of criminality per se, but of lack of normality and of a desire to know about things that are not regularly experienced. For Martin, his products are about breaking norms and being culturally transgressive. Holly believes that her most popular products are those with the most original designs and concepts, and that positive comments from customers have validated this viewpoint. These sentiments are implicitly against the idea that there is an inherent public interest in criminal transgression, and instead that there is a far more powerful consumer requirement to transgress sameness and normality in the marketplace and to ascribe value through difference. Originality is a complex word that can and has been used to describe several different types of uniqueness. One can have an original idea that is separate from competitor products in that it is not repeated (usually achieved through branding, and achieved here through the use of killers) (Lash & Lury, 2007). Something can be an original copy, valuable in its historical association

(Baudrillard, 1968/1996). To this point, data from participants has been analysed as using originality to refer, in a third way, to original modes of production – something that is hand crafted or hand designed before reproduction. But participants connect with the word original in a fourth way, as well, original artistic style and talent. Whilst speaking about difference, Holly has also repeatedly reiterated that her work is art.

Authenticity through artistic talent, artistic originality and artistic merit is also frequently utilised in value descriptions. Art (and antiques, to a similar extent), for Baudrillard, has 'atmospheric value' – an object devoid of practical application other than as signifier. He describes such objects as astructural, but not afunctional – avoiding the mass production that is inherent within the system of objects while still playing a pivotal role in hierarchies of value (Baudrillard, 1968/1996). Antiques are usually described in these terms and by definition, they need always remain astructural as they cannot be reproduced and still have the qualities that make them antique. Art, on the other hand, is increasingly reproduced (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1979). In that case, we can be clear that Baudrillard was referring to *original* works of art, with, excluding postmodern art, reproductions' value only as signifiers of the original artwork that they refer back to – in line with the second stage of simulacrum in that they are a hazy representation of an obscured reality. When referring to authenticity of object, it is likely that participants are evoking similar notions of value that pertain to originality against reproduction, and 'art' with its 'atmospheric value', is frequently evoked in defence of authenticity in reproduced objects. Baugh (1988) expands on the value of art:

> Critically, it is aesthetically better for works of art to be authentic than inauthentic, and descriptively, not only are there certain features a work of art must have in order to be 'authentic,' but the concept of authenticity may shed some light about what is distinctive about works of art (Baugh, 1988, p. 477)

So Baugh suggests that there are several 'authenticity-making' features of an artwork that it may be useful for cultural theorists to identify, but also that authenticity is a quality without which something is not usually considered to be art. So the 'authenticity-making' features would, among other intangibles like style and talent, be 'originality', and without this quality an item is not usually understood as a *piece of art.* That is not to argue that it cannot be *artistic*, as several participants did, evoking the

values associated with originality – but in terms of originality of design and not of object. A painting can be authentic in its originality as an auratic object, whereas a mechanical reproduction of an artwork must achieve these ends through 'uniqueness' or original design. Serial killers and violent criminals are seen in this way as purely transgressive objects – they transgress the rules of society as well as the social norms of what should be worn or displayed, and the norms of design and production. To that extent, they are authentic in their difference and originality.

> *My art isn't the same as – it's not just 'serial killer' or 'murder' stuff, there's more to it that I think people are attracted to and things that people appreciate (Holly)*

For Holly, there is a sense that 'more to it' is referring directly to ingenuity in design, authenticity via uniqueness. She insists that her work is not comparable to anything else on offer in the marketplace and this is where its extra value can be located. The idea that people are attracted to things 'that people appreciate' suggests an extra helping of aesthetic pleasantness in her products that also is not present elsewhere. She uses the word 'art' to upgrade the level of authenticity of her products, which are not simply *things*, or *transgressive things*, but rather, *artistic* things. The argument that her work has 'more to it' than competitors is directly drawing upon the artistic, astructural values that Baudrillard applies to art and antiques – even though these items are not original pieces of murderabilia. Martin uses these same terms to suggest that when represented on mechanically reproduced products, this work does not forgo all of this legitimacy or value associated with the art:

> *It's good money and it's still my art on the merchandise just not original (Martin)*

Although no longer unique in its existence as a singular item rather than a series of reproductions, evoking violence into design is defended as being transgressive enough to still satisfy the production of difference without the requirement of being unique in its medium. Holly shares this understanding, describing her products in terms of museum or art gallery gift shops full of accessible reproductions of noteworthy artworks for consumers to buy and take home. In this way, the items are seen as carrying with them the same aesthetic value as the original artworks and legitimising them as artistic items rather than criminal ones.

> *Like the t-shits, it's really no different from selling a print in an art gallery or some- things artists have been doing forever, but you can wear it! (Holly)*

The fact that this practice has been happening 'forever' in mainstream art and antique industries brings another coating of legitimacy as participants scramble to justify transgressive culture with layered notions of conventionality and conformity. In this instance, Holly's t-shirts with images of serial killers on are *art that you can wear*, rather than reproductions. Participants do not describe items as transgressive in the first instance, but as pieces of the medium of art in the order of things. Art is multifaceted in its use as an indicator of value. Not only is it used to align items with history and originality and to distance them from the perceived superficiality of mechanical reproduction, it is also used as a high watermark for excellence. Instead of being seen as cursory or 'gimmicky', participants want their items to be judged against the marker of quality and genuineness that is *art.* Above all else, it evokes notions of care and meticulousness, despite those features being lost on reproductions. Lucy does not reproduce her objects by hand – standard home printing or commercial printing services are used by all participants except Aaron

> *My products are very professional, they're all original artwork or copies from original artwork – very high quality – so I think for that reason it sells (Lucy)*

Lucy's claim to quality, then, is not a physical sense (in material, weight, thickness, for example), but rather a conceptual level of 'quality' that extends from having designed something from scratch and from having artistic values. Lucy also uses this as a reason why her items sell better than competitors – perpetuating a distinct hierarchy of objects with those who can claim to be 'art' at the very top of the system of objects, as argued by Baudrillard (1968/1996). Holly points to the accusation that including violent criminals in products, or commercialising transgression, may be trivialised as glorifying criminal exploits, being low-brow as a cultural interest, or lacking artistic value, integrity or talent:

> *You can because of the subject get negative responses and like people look down on the art and I reject that, I don't think because it's serial killers or cats that makes it any less valuable (Holly)*

She then rejects, in her own words, that her choice of subject lacks any authenticity in comparison to other forms of art. She cites products including pictures of cats as another

subject matter that could be accused of being trivial or 'low-brow', but defends them alongside serial killers. The commonality or perceived integrity of a subject seems to be outweighed by its projection as a piece of artwork. To this end, on expanding her repertoire into more usable reproductions rather than exclusively art prints, she says:

> *I've thought of like, those canvas bags – tote bags and t-shirts and things. Obviously the more you can appeal to a broader audience the more money there is but it's, it depends what you want to do with it. [...]. I mean it's not like selling out or anything. It depends because you can increase the visibility of your image and then you can get more opportunities past that – it can make you more successful as an artist if you have more- if your audience is bigger (Holly)*

Reproduction is further legitimised as not detracting from authenticity. Holly describes the practice as widening the dissemination of her artworks and creating a wider audience for her creations. There is a friction identified between the two conflicting demands of a murderabilia producer – to sell products to a wide audience, yet bestow them with a sense of authenticity and artistic merit that by definition diminishes as the audience widens. Holly does the cognitive work of negotiating this conflict, weighing up *selling out* against appealing to a broader customer base. She mentions money, but then indicates that this is not her particular motivation, despite a likelihood that other producers will differ. Still, even for financial gain, this practice does not detract from the authenticity bought by artistic-ness – it is seen by Holly as enriching the career of the artist. And being a career artist is also a topic that was raised:

> *[I'm] an artist. Art's my life and it's a side business for me as well (Lucy)*

A personal alignment with art is used to the same ends. Lucy suggests that she is an artist, with a longstanding enthusiasm for producing art. Creating and selling murder merchandise is secondary to this legitimate, high-culture hobby. She describes selling items as a 'side business', with objects aligned as a by-product of this artistic integrity. As a passionate artist, Lucy is able to further distance herself from potential criticism that this type of object may be superficial or lacking authentic values. But these claims to authenticity through the reproduction of art betray the fact that in many cases, there is no original item to refer back to. In particular, Aaron points out that his designs go from being an idea in his head – to a rough sketch on paper – to a computer rendering executed by a professional graphic designer. The first time he is in contact with his idea

is once it has been digitally printed across a range of potential objects. This process, he admits, means that usually the design labour is divided so that he is only doing about a quarter of the work his self:

> *I would make a rough sketch with pencil and hand it over to someone who was more proficient with computers as than I am. That's why I saved up - the early stuff, uhh, what you're seeing is about three quarters them. I mean I came up with the concept design but basically had them do everything as far as the computer drafting (Aaron)*

Aaron starts with an idea, this is his artwork, and the piece of art does not physically exist until it is printed on an item of clothing. Here, the participant evokes the third (and indirectly, the fourth) order of simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1981/1994) in that the objects in question are defended as original artworks without any true original against which they can be compared (third). More importantly, the fourth, in that Aaron frequently uses filmic or branded representations of transgressive characters rather than more transgressive figures who have not yet been transformed through marketing. In the fourth stage of simulation, signs begin to reflect other signs in an increasingly complex system whereby there is no longer a need to pretend to be a faithful copy. In a world where consumers' experiences are artificial, signs need not even make effort to refer back to a non-existent original – once the expectation of originality has been negated, branding and symbolism becomes increasingly self-referential. Without this need for the existence of an original item, since the reproduction is not a faithful copy, or the need to reflect any form of reality, his objects tend to refer to fantastical, mythical or filmic representations of criminal[18], Aaron's items are simulations (Baudrillard, 1981/1994) – missing profound reality or authenticity.

Aaron does his own printing, though, and is keen to reinforce this as it does work towards negating this level of simulation by grounding his products back towards authenticity in mode of production. He had saved money before starting his business and invested in a specialised printer that allows him to produce his own items, on a per-

[18] See sections *Crime in Products* and *Crime in Production* of this chapter for a more detailed description of the products in question

order basis. Unlike other participants who make use of mass customisation websites to do this legwork for them, limiting investment in equipment and stock, Aaron takes pride in his persistence rather than backing down to do things the 'sane', but less authentic, way:

> *[I] bought the equipment, uhh, more or less have taught myself everything. And I'm right now still getting over some of you know, the uhh, some of the bumps in learning. But uhm, so I'm doing like artwork myself, I'm doing the t-shirt printing myself. [It's probably not the] sane way to do it (Aaron).*

He does the artwork himself, and departing from the industry standard, he also does the printing himself. He insists that he is self-taught, and that this has created obstacles for him to overcome. His tone reinforces that he has not been tempted to do things the easy way, and that this self-inflicted adversity is a conscious decision in the direction of personality, originality and authenticity. Doing this himself, by hand, adds value in originality – just as witnessed in original artworks, whilst the originality in design is in line with trends in the global culture industry towards the production of difference. To that end – this emphasis on 'self' in both of these areas can be understood as steps taken by producers to differentiate products in the crowded marketplace. The move back towards the 'self' in the age of mechanical reproduction adds the missing quality of authenticity. Even those who are reluctant to categorise murder merchandise as art still play into this main quality of being *artistic* to construct something oneself. Amy reflects this saying:

> *I'm not sure it's art. I mean, it's mostly just like – paint stuff. It's mostly photographs that are just cut up with other stuff and the text, it's like a collage I guess. But yeah I do it all myself (Amy)*

She plays down her artistic talent – citing use of the amateur computer programme Microsoft Paint, and the cutting and sticking of other people's artwork into collage with text, as preventative to calling something art. Conversely, despite this collation from other sources, she does not stop short of describing the items as original, noting that she 'do[es] it all [her]self'. Despite a lack of artistic flair, the hand crafted original design that is so often accused of lacking in mechanically reproduced culture remains the unique selling point in her products, not criminal transgression. The point at which criminality begins to become a marker of authenticity in itself, and not just in its ability

to produce perceptions of difference, comes with the legitimation of crime culture as educational. Thirdly, after originality and art, participants were observed authenticating their commodification of the transgressive through educational interest, particularly under the descriptor 'thanatology'. Participants legitimise the production of these controversial items and assign authenticity to their interest in the gruesome by mitigating this as thanatological, the educational study of death. Objects are, in some instances, themselves represented as educational and those objects are further legitimised by this academic pursuit. In the first instance, this manifests as participants describing their work as part of a broader interest in understanding criminals themselves:

> *The how and the why, that's what really drives my intrigue. You know. It's just mind blowing how some people can do these things and live a normal life! […]– and how they get away, the – how calculating they are (Martin)*

> *I think the people who love the drawings of killers are definitely interested in the mystique surrounding serial killers and the psychology of them and, like I am (Martin).*

Money is not behind the sale of criminal merchandise for Martin. Several participants across murderabilia, museum curation, and particularly murder merchandise, describing themselves as *thanatologists*, justify their consumption or production involvement with crime as an academic pursuit. Martin suggests that interrogating how and why crimes take place is the driving factor behind his interest – this is an intellectual pursuit for someone who is genuinely interested in criminology as a subject. In this second extract, Martin bestows this same academic element on his customers, arguing that an interest in consuming crime objects, as well as producing them, is similarly driven by a will to understand the psychology of criminal behaviour. These devices align the purchasing of murder merchandise away from trivial, banal, mass culture (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1979), or 'low-brow' Kitsch items associated with dark tourism and museum gift shops (Potts, 2012), and towards more respected pursuits of knowledge and education. There is no evidence that participants engage on an academic level with crime, though, with other participants clarifying that this authenticating device is more predicated on popular culture than education. Holly has engaged with the true crime genre of books as a teenager, reiterating an avenue into production that is predicated on popular culture saying:

> *[T]he books and as a child, well a teenager. I've read lots of books on the subject. It's a fascination with me to learn more about these types of people and the psychology behind it – like, what are they thinking and how-what are, well I guess it's why are they doing what they're doing, you know? (Holly)*

She stresses that this pursuit was about learning more of the psychology of criminals, and implicitly translates these values of knowledge onto her products. Separately, she also points out that a university psychology lecturer had commissioned numerous pieces of her work – demonstrating that the academic community is engaging with her designs. Producers are antagonistic to the idea that these products might be trivial or glorifying crime, and ground them in education in opposition to such accusations. Lucy reads criminology books, but her analysis of what I (the researcher) do as a criminologist is inaccurate:

> *But I read about crime a lot and watch documentaries, and I read a lot of criminology books. […] definitely. I'm really interested in the psychology of it. I'd love to do what you do – I've always wanted to start a mailing relationship with a serial killer to try and analyze them and see how they interact with people, cause it's that psychology aspect behind it that interests me the most (Lucy)*

Instead, her interpretation of criminology is more one of fandom and popular culture – writing to serial killers in an effort to get closer to their mentality. Instead, she us using criminological interest as a means to grounding perceptions of her practice as authentic. These dependencies on popular culture, even in the context of academic knowledge and education, flow into the following section that investigated the importance of famousness, famous characters and criminal notoriety in creating murder merchandise. Participants negotiate and reconcile the need for authenticity in originality, art, and education, against a requirement to incorporate famous and filmic characters into their designs.

Well-Knownness

But it is difficult to reconcile this vested interest in 'authenticity' when it is coupled with well-known or celebrated figures who are deemed, in the most part, to be

inauthentic representations of criminality[19]. And the production of murder merchandise appears as a perpetual reconciliation of 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' characters against 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' modes of production, media and form, in an effort to differentiate products within the marketplace. The desire for originality and authenticity is balanced, by producers, against a continued demand for well known, or 'box office' characters that represent recognisable criminality in the public consciousness. This section will analyse these devices in the four terms dictated by participants of; recognisability; filmic characters; narrative devices; and symbolic references; in sequence. Martin begins a discussion of how to represent this authentic criminality – which he achieves by selecting particular gazes that he feels are indicative of otherness:

> *I try to find a photo that's particularly striking. A lot of times these people have the craziest of eyes – it can be striking to leave a lasting memory with their facial expressions. That's what you really want to get to stick – the eyes and the craziness! [...] If I can find a good picture to work from that I think will sell but you have to be able to tell, like it has to be obvious that they're not just some normal guy and it's usually in the eyes (Martin)*

The concepts of rarity and abnormality extend into 'otherness' through the idea of insanity. Martin believes that it is important to be able to identify the presence of abnormality in the character – the buyer should be able to identify the lack of conformity inside the depicted criminal, and one way of achieving that is by portraying a blank, emotionless stare. On the other hand, whilst strangeness is a selling factor, it is not possible to fully embrace dissimilarity in objects. In the first instance, products must be recognisable as transgressive and in doing so invariably are not. It is not the so much lack of conformity of the criminal that is being embraced by the producers, but an attempt at a lack of conformity in design. The way in which the individuals are depicted can be unique, or different, in the same way that innovations in design are cultivating difference in the global culture industry more generally – and adding criminality into settings where it is not routinely included is a successful device to these ends. Producers are hunting for innovative ways to keep fresh increasingly usual subject matter, and as

[19] See *Literature Review* for an analysis of the sociological work on 'inauthentic' celebrity culture

such, crime imagery ends up on a widening array of products. A transgressive imagination in objects is one that seeks to transgress a perceived banality in the marketplace and embraces criminality in the process. One of these paradoxes takes the form of recognisability – the *difference* bestowed on an object is undermined if a potential buyer will not identify the imagery as transgressive:

> *Those ones that attract the media attention and. I mean, I don't really like the word but the mainstream stuff sells. If they have no clue, I mean if the buyer has no idea what the person is then it's not going to sell (Amy)*

Achieving differentiation in the marketplace by implementing transgression is complicated because one cannot transgress the normative, accessible, mainstream, images of criminality to do so – less the objects go unsold. She identifies these characters as those who attract 'media attention' – which can be interpreted as those characters who have achieved a certain level of newsworthiness. In particular, it is criminals who have met the news values of sex, violence and visual spectacle (Jewkes, 2004) that occupy this category. These characters are accompanied by a perceived superficiality (or lack of authenticity), largely because of their prevalence in mainstream media. Amy expresses a distaste for this 'mainstream' that is implied throughout all of the interviews, but indicates that a level of balance is made necessary by this issue of recognisability. It is impossible to be unique in terms of character when there are a finite set of famous criminals to choose from – and this only heightens the need for uniqueness in design. She continues:

> *So I just go with the mainstream stuff, the stuff that gets all the media attention. People have to know what it is. I did try a few more obscure killers, and like even someone like the Green River Killer, whose actually quite like – well not famous but well known, he's uhh, he doesn't sell at all (Amy)*

This integration of the mainstream into cultural forms of transgression, whilst reluctant, is not through lack of trying. Even characters who do possess all of the right qualities of newsworthiness – male, sexually motivated, serial murderers – if they do not represent the correct image, they will not be successful. Well-knownness (Boorstin, 1992) is far from synonymous with popularity, then, but a quality that perhaps precedes the popularising of criminals. Amy phrases this dichotomy as 'famous' vs 'well known' – although her meaning appears to be 'celebrated' vs 'famous'. He may fit the formula,

but the Green River Killer has not enjoyed the same infamousness. He has not been depicted in films to the same extent as his American serial killer counterparts Jeffrey Dahmer or Ted Bundy, has not been the subject of successful documentaries such as Aileen Wuornos, does not possess the same distinctiveness of John Wayne Gacy, and has not experienced the same branding as individuals such as Charles Manson, who have extensively marketed themselves to create a saleable image and income stream (Denham, 2016). Gary Ridgway (the Green River Killer) is relatively famous, then, but not celebrated and therefore, not recognisable enough. He is, as a consolation prize, the most prolific American serial killer in history, but level and volume of violence – the transgressive qualities in play – are not as important as celebrity in the sale of transgression. Catering for lay consumers is part of this niche business, and the lack of expertise and knowledge that is used to justify the producer's authenticity, when lacking, is used to describe the mainstream of culture. Holly summarises this trade off in one sentence – it is necessary for objects to be branded in a recognisable way otherwise they will not serve their purpose as products for sale, or products that are designed to evoke perceptions of difference.

> *[Y]ou have to be able to appeal to people that aren't necessarily an expert or it's just not gonna sell (Holly)*

They have to be recognised in the first instance, before they can be recognised as unusual or transgressive. The uniqueness in design, the construction of difference, mirrors the same patterns in that producers are playing a balancing act between the transgressive and the mainstream when it comes to references to criminal details, jokes or satire, as well as character selection:

> *[I]f you're sending a card and- If they're sending a card and, it's to a friend or a relative as a joke or something like that – that joke's going to flop if they don't know, if they can't be sure that their friend will instantly recognise the face and the jokes that go with them and the context and stuff (Amy)*

Sometimes this manifests as pure distinctiveness – the construction of difference at its most transparent, by simply selecting those who seem to have the least aesthetic appeal evoke the most feelings of repulsion. But in any case, the individual needs to be *distinctive* in appearance, *recognisable* in their exposure, and *interesting* to work with. Amy, who produces greetings cards with the intention that they will be sent by friends

to each other as a joke, has also to negotiate these factors. On the one hand, she identifies that the character must be easily recognisable. On the other, she acknowledges that the more extreme the imagery, the more effective the joke will be. This manifests as difference that is designed into the cards, with jokes or rhymes that play on the actions of killers in order to skirt close to the boundaries of social acceptability saying:

> *I choose to portray the ones – the serial killers that have a distinctive appearance. They have to translate well and be able to, like, if you just see the picture and you're like 'what the hell is that?' then it's not going to sell – it has to be recognizable as the subject and that's not always easy – so they need to be famous, they need to be identifiable. Some killers have a very generic look to them and don't make a very interesting work – like, it's dull painting them and they won't be popular anyway, whatever they did or – no matter where they're from (Holly)*

Holly echoes the sentiments of other participants in pointing out that criminals must, in order to be saleable, be as conforming to stereotypes of style and design as much as possible. She adds that appeal is not linked to 'what that did or where they're from', departing from several theories of criminal celebrity that are unsuccessfully applied to these objects. For Hobsbawm, a socio-cultural 'Bandit' figure (2001) is inextricably linked with the political temperature of the time of his/her crimes – or the social class against which their actions were directed. Those criminals lucky enough to be celebrated represented revolutionary rhetoric that resonated with the frictions in a societal structure or the will of the people. Like Robin Hood, the example used by Seal (2009), who was lauded mostly for his repatriation of wealth – but there are other less obvious examples, like Australian Ned Kelly, famous for his stand against policing authority. Traditional theories of criminal celebrity fall short when applied to these objects, where social position or politics is negated. Later theories that present the celebration of criminals as an escape mechanism for the 'hypertypicality' of mainstream culture (Presdee, 2000) resonate more with the participants' sentiments, but still seem not to hold water considering this typical and regimented formula for a successful product outlined in this chapter.

Additionally, Holly's sentiments challenge ideas that these cultures are driven by *wounds* (Seltzer, 1998), or a societal fascination with monster-like, violent creatures (Duclos, 1998), when it also does not even appear to matter what they did, on top of where. It is counterintuitive that a market that differentiates itself using the addition of

violence and gore, can judge successes or failures without considering violence whatsoever – but instead focus on well-knownness. But the market revolves around iconic, infamous characters with celebrity qualities. For Holly, where the individual is from has no bearing on marketability, the political climate is not a contributory factor – this is consumption, not politics. The same sentiment is attributed to violence – this is consumption, not transgression. Whereas politics lauds the outsider, consumers favour branded, regular, stereotypical figures who are criminally transgressive yet culturally identical. The culture industry functions through this perception of choice, although and producers embraced celebrated, regular, patterned character choices. This is the second of four qualities highlighted as being integral to murder merchandise – celebrity or filmic characters. References to other criminal media or popular culture are widespread. 'Box office' is used initially to refer to well known, American serial killers *Gacy, Dahmer* and *Manson,* but references to fictitious film and television characters are also frequent:

> *[M]ost of my store is mainly Gacy and Dahmer stuff – or Manson, those – you know, the box office. The ones that you see on TV and in the media, they sell well (Amy)*

Initially, it is those typical American killers who have been made infamous through media attention and resurrection in film and television who feature most frequently. Amy points to three of the most well-known individuals, but the list of these characters extends to about 10 of what we can understand as the 'usual suspects'. With these subjects, because of their notoriousness and recognisability in western public consciousness, the consensus is that their imagery can be imported onto almost any product – sometimes, the odder the better – and still be saleable such as dolls. Dolls, if they materialise, will be just another addition to a long list of 'collectable' serial killer serials, such as trading cards and magazines.

> *I'm starting a serial killer doll collection soon […] All the main ones, Dahmer Gacy you know but in doll form – it'll be collectable, I'm hoping people will want to collect them all (Lucy)*

Lucy indicates, again, that she will use the *main ones*, those which are most collectable, in her bit to create a set that will sell in its entirety. These main characters adorn playing cards, baby clothes, fridge magnets. It seems that the peculiarity of some of the items –

like baby clothes, for example – creates uniqueness and novelty where the characters are largely ubiquitous. The subjects are relatively unchangeable without compromising their recognisability, as outlined, leading again to the production of difference through minute product design alterations. The uniqueness that could be achieved through producing original art, Lucy suggests, is trumped by the necessity to produce items with *iconic, memorable* imagery, as argued to be defining value indicators by Baudrillard (1968/1996), that by definition is a reproduction of a popular, recognisable face:

> *[S]elling merchandising or stuff that people know or recognize – when it's an iconic, or a memorable face, then it brings more money into the bank than original art […] the four or five really notorious ones it doesn't matter what the item is as long as it has their face (Lucy)*

The item, in this instance, is not important for success, as long as there is a recognisable figure decorating it. These characters are iconic in their infamousness, and true celebrities in their familiarity. Moreover, they are icons in the sense that they are symbols of capitalism – bought for their sign value. They transcend the literal, criminal meaning of their imagery and become a trademark for a transgressive, non-conformist ideology. And this is, in its truest sense, how violent criminal celebrities have become brands – detached from their original meaning, from their history or any use value or purpose, and instead symbolising an arbitrary difference in an overcrowded marketplace. Lash and Lury's paradigm *from commodity to brand* (Lash & Lury, 2007) in global culture is conspicuously visible in this marketplace that revolves around transgression and uniqueness. In their own words: 'the commodity works via a logic of identity, the brand via a logic of difference [...] brands only have value in their difference' (2007, pp. 5-6), and this is visible throughout this merchandise chapter. Whereas commodities, in the culture industry, are traded for their use value – brands are an abstraction of a sense of uniqueness through history, relationships and memory. This thesis has extensively covered the blurring of fact and fiction in the criminal marketplace, and this is nowhere more visible than inside the transgressive brand:

> *She commissioned the Fred and Rose West painting and the Dexter Morgan cat one for her sister as a pre- as a present I think. Dexter is the really popular American fictional serial killer TV show – you probably already know that! (Holly)*

Holly, whose business revolves entirely around depicting serial killers, is asked to produce fictional characters as her most frequent commission. Here, she contrasts Fred and Rose West against the fictional television serial murderer, Dexter Morgan from the series Dexter (Dexter, 2006-2013) both purchased by the same woman. Brands that represent transgression are not bound inside the genre of true crime, or cast out into the creative, broad realm of crime fiction. They are unified by something that transcends these arbitrary boundaries, a charismatic quality in line with Weber's writing about different types of *authority* – from legal, to traditional, to charismatic, producers identify *charisma* as an important quality in product branding and celebrity character selection. Martin speaks of two of these most popular brands:

> *[Regarding a disproportionate focus on American serial killers Charles Manson and Richard Ramirez] Yeah, they're charismatic! There's something charismatic that attracts them, you know what I mean? (Martin)*

Routinely, it is three brands that are adorned with charisma by producers and collectors alike: Charles Manson, Richard Ramirez, and Ted Bundy. They are all North American, all male, of White-European descent, and recycled in both news and fictional media. Weber (1946) applied charismatic authority to those characters who are exemplary or exceptional, distinct and unusual, and it is of no surprise that these qualities of uniqueness required for an individual to possess 'charismatic leadership' are also the cornerstones of criminal product branding. Weber writes:

> There is the authority of the extraordinary and personal *gift of grace* (charisma), the absolutely personal devotion and personal confidence in revelation, heroism, or other qualities of individual leadership. This is 'charismatic' domination, as exercised by the prophet (Weber, 1946, p. 79).

The usual suspects in criminal celebrity exude these characteristics. In particular, these three are known for their personable qualities – their willingness to participate in journalistic interviews and their eloquence when doing so are pivotal in setting them apart as charismatically powerful. Ted Bundy has been described repeatedly in news media as 'charming', for example, whilst all three of them were young white males preying upon young, white females, reinforcing gendered power dynamics. Manson is the most pertinent example, famous for influencing the prolific Manson Family cult and

controlling or manipulating others into doing his bidding. His confidence in leadership, his domination, and the religious undertones to his devoted following, make him seem particularly charismatic in his authority. Not every brand enjoys this fast track into popularity, though, despite charisma as a type of individuality being a quality courted by many criminals:

> *I think they have to have a bit of charisma about them or some sort of shtick to get sold. Like Ramirez or Bundy go well and people – older ones like fish and things not so much […] and Gacy – he goes well because of the clown shtick (Lucy)*

Albert Fish loses out on age grounds – his charismatic authority seems depleted as he is not modern enough or well-known enough to be in the public consciousness. Aforementioned popular cultural characters (Buffalo Bill) have drawn influence from Albert Fish and his tendency to engage in the most gruesome practices of skinning his victims', wearing their leather, and committing cannibalism. However, these references are not explicit, and their cultural success is not properly rooted in the ailing Fish brand. This disassociation between Fish the man and the media discourses driving brand Fish leave him as a frail accessory for only the most hardened collectors. References to Fish are commonplace in the previous chapter, *collectors* - amongst committed fans and collectors – but they do not seem to translate into the more accessible markets of mechanical reproduction.

John Wayne Gacy, although not particularly *charismatic* in its traditional sense, is brandable due to what Lucy refers to as his 'shtick' – his easily identifiable and oft reproduced clown persona. He is able to offer something beyond just being a criminal and it is something that transcends the gruesomeness of his acts and the violence of his intentions. His characterisation provides the 'originality' so desperately needed to provide brand success, and the recognisability and uniqueness that has foregrounded criminal product authenticity in this chapter. 'Shtick' usually means a quality that is inserted into a persona or repertoire that sets it apart from comparable acts, draws attention to it, or adds comedic or aesthetic value – Gacy's history of dressing as a clown fills this requirement neatly. Products relating to Gacy might make unsubtle reference to some of the more well-known details of his crimes, but foremost in the imagery is *shtick* or *brand* – the red, white and blue clown iconography. The selection

of characters is foregrounded by careful branding and the selection of brandable characters based on the presence of certain desirable qualities and the absence of factors that could prevent commercial success. Referring to the latter, Aaron makes a distinction between what he sees as psychopaths and sociopaths:

> *I was actually having a real, an interesting discussion about something related to this the other day, uhmm, that I didn't wanna make Gacy shirts, or Bundy shirts, uhmm, because of the – that I see as the difference between psychopaths and sociopaths. And, I was thinking. You know, I can somewhat relate to people who just, you know I don't know – made some really poor decisions based on mental issues. You know, like Jeff. Jeffrey Dahmer, is a much more, I don't know, uhh, kind of like a tragic figure (Aaron)*

Sociopathy vs psychopathy, Aaron compares poor decisions and human tragedy against what might be described as evilness. With more normalcy and unfortunate circumstance comes a greater legitimacy of character. These individuals are described as normal people who have made poor decisions that are sometimes out of their control. Conversely and against expectation, there is more hesitation around branding those out-and-out criminals whose moral compass' seem askew from the very beginning. The need for a tragic, human interest back-story is not a key element in and of itself, but it feeds into the importance of narrative in criminal celebrity and brandability. The central importance of recognisability in character extends into recognisability and ability to connect with type, of storyline and narrative. White American perpetrators of repetitive killings of young female women are the recognisable archetype of serial killer and it is of no surprise that they translate into marketable brands most easily. In addition to these characters, marketable storylines such as Gacy's clown shtick become apparent – and one of the foremost is cannibalism:

> *[T]he cannibalism stuff is easy to sell too. It's so out there and like – it's what everybody expects a serial killer to be. Is that a? I know it's a bit of a cliché! (Amy)*

These are the third way in which participants raise issues of famousness – through the importance of narrative and storyline. Amy recognises that indulging these narratives is a cliché, but it is what customers identify with as archetypal serial killer. Precisely how a product can be simultaneously 'out there' (as in, unusual or socking) as well as exactly as you would 'expect' (as in, conforming to an established and commonplace

narrative) is the backbone of this thesis argument. Murderabilia industries revolve around this dichotomy – utilising the marketability of one to provide a perceived sense of the other. Just as museum curators in *Displaying Transgression* used the language of storytelling to describe their exhibitions of true crime objects, so do producers of murder merchandise. Participants drew parallels with other, more mainstream areas of criminal popular culture, grounding their niche businesses inside of the pervasiveness of crime in popular culture:

> *[A]nd it's all on TV isn't it! All the serial killer stuff it's every other book you know. I was in the library the other day looking for a book for the kids and it was all across the whole thing just serial killers (Martin)*

Martin foregrounds his interest in and production of true crime objects against the successes of the crime fiction genre (Barzin, 2002) and this is the most notable instance in which a participant contextualizes their work against more common equivalents. He points at the pervasiveness of crime narratives in libraries and bookshops in particular, as described in the introduction to this thesis. Having an interest in the crime genres in film, books and television are often precursors to buying or producing crime objects, and narratives that have become commonplace in these mainstream areas are commuted onto objects alike. For example, Lucy's plan to expand her murder merchandise into a series of short crime films that play upon true criminals rather than fictional adaptations.

> *I also had an idea in my head of doing some alternative animation movies based on real life serial killers, just for fun. […]: I wanna make fictional films out of the characters, Gacy, Bundy and all the main names. With alt style animation – the kind of imagery I use on my art on my shop. It's the kinda thing my fanbase really like so I think it'll be very popular. It's a lot of work though (Lucy)*

She acknowledges that her fanbase are equally eager to consume transgression in its other, more common forms such as film and television – and that there is space in the marketplace to induct these commonplace cultural forms into the realm of murderabilia. Lucy notes that she would continue with the imagery that she currently uses on other products – this uniqueness of design is the most important selling point in murder products and it would be detrimental to deviate from this style. She also advocates making fictional narratives out of real characters, further suggesting that the truism in true crime is not fundamentally driving supply and demand. It is acceptable, amongst her supporters, for narratives to be fictional and not directly relate to the actual

transgressive behaviours of these criminals – just as the crime fiction genre does with huge and sustained success. The quality that moves these cultural forms from mainstream crime fiction towards murderabilia subculture is the addition of recognisable criminal brands that are augmented by niche, unusual design and illustration. Consistently, this management of [crime] *truth* and *fiction* genres is a balancing act in the process of selecting topics, choosing products, designing imagery, and successfully marketing transgressive objects:

> *Gacy, is a whole different story cause I'm not only marketing Gacy as a serial killer, but I'm also selling it as 'acid bath' must haves [The metal band that used his artwork on one of their album covers] (Lucy)*

Notable crossover regularly occurs in the case of John Wayne Gacy due to frequent use of his imagery in popular culture and abundant film adaptations of his story. Lucy embraces this and flags Gacy murder products, even if they make no reference to the musical act, as *Acid Bath* memorabilia[20]. At this point the picture of a serial killer becomes so far removed from the reality of the crime as the image freely moves between fact and fiction in a 'highly postmodern way' (Jenkins, 2002, p. 15). This simulacrum, the detachment of image and meaning, is a driving force behind murder markets in the same sense that products of social transgression, like the relentless appropriation of images of Che Guevara, become popular as cultural icons (Heath & Potter, 2005). Gacy's clown imagery is not as *mainstream* as Guevara, nor is it as pervasive as more iconic crime and death imagery like the human skull (Foltyn, 2011) – but similarly, it is detached from its origin as it becomes mechanically reproduced. It is gradually inducted into the mainstream by this detachment, and is able to freely move between an image of transgression, and that of a kitsch album cover. Arron speaks of the tragedy that, as part of Charles Manson's storyline, contributes to his appeal:

> *I'm more, I'm more into the tragic characters I think. Uhh, Manson just because of his childhood being completely wrecked falls in there. He's probably, I don't think he's really a psychopath (Aaron)*

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[20] See *Displaying Transgression* for an explanation of the use of Gacy imagery by the American band *Acid Bath*.

Aaron steers clear of, as he describes them 'out-and-out psychopaths', as he is tentative around glorifying people that he sees as truly evil. In their place, he chooses personalities with a developed backstory or that have some symbolic, transgressive or countercultural meaning attached to them. This feeds into the fourth quality recognised by producers as integral to murder merchandise: symbolism, to symbolically evoke authenticity where recognisability and famousness are lacking. In the case that a criminal might be slightly more obscure and lacking the qualities of recognisability and originality of character, certain markers and indicators are included to denote the identity of the criminal as without this they are valueless. These brand indicators are described as *symbolism*, although they are usually less subtle than the word implies:

> *[S]ometimes I choose to incorporate certain symbolism in the painting that will comment on the particular crime that was committed and like, try to bring it back to mind when you see it in the picture. For example, I painted nine nurses' hats in the painting of Rickard Speck (Holly)*

In the case of Richard Speck, a violent murderer who preyed on student nurses in the 1960s, the audience requires a reminder of his actions in the form of nurses' hats. This imagery is a pure simulation (Baudrillard, 1981/1994), as are brands, in that it is not symbolic of any profound reality and instead serves only to communicate within the accepted language of the brand. These hats do not add to the transgression that is depicted, they do not present an increased level of accuracy in presenting the crimes (as it is not clear if hats were involved or worn at any point), but does serve to increase the recognisability of the product (in this case, as something that is supposed to be transgressive), which is one of the central functions of branding. In any case, 'symbolism' appears as a simulation of absent recognisability:

> *Or in the case of Fred and Rose West, it was a triptych which featured the townhouse on Cromwell Street in the middle and the couple on either side – so you know, it kinda plays off of those things that you think of when you think Fred and Rose (Holly)*

In this case, Holly has played upon the most commonly understood qualities of Fred and Rose West's notorious crimes. The family house on Cromwell Street, at the centre of the media's attention in this case and at the centre of their heinous crimes, must also be in the foreground of West objects to enhance their recognisability. What participants describe as subtly symbolic appears as overt citation of the Wests familiar brand

qualities in assurance that the product will be sufficiently recognisable to sell, and yet obscure enough to be received as transgressive.

Summary

Participants in this chapter were those who make criminal consumable objects, but then use mainstream discourses of celebrity and culture in order to legitimise their practices back into line with the status quo, or art and education to position them as suitably transgressive and authentic. In this way, participants negotiated the conflicting values of criminal transgression and consumer popularity in creating mechanically reproduced murder objects. This chapter has argued that where aura is lacking, producers of mechanically reproduced objects build-in perceptions of authenticity using devices of art, education, originality, celebrity recognisability and symbolic references. Participants used the language of transgression throughout. Their narratives were about 'standing out in the crowd' and about making an impression or being different to a perceived normalcy amongst other consumables, whilst having to embrace normalised criminal narratives to ensure that their products are saleable. In this way, by designing in perceptions of authenticity, participants were argued to be directly conducting what Lash and Lury have called the 'production of difference' (2007).

This chapter aimed to address primarily the third research question: how is crime imagined and represented through mechanically reproduced 'simulations' of transgression? Crime was observed to be a secondary value, not more than part of the process of this production of difference that witnessed inside mechanically reproduced crime objects. On top of the established flimsiness of this 'difference', the authenticity of crime objects is undermined in that they actively embrace celebrated characters, celebrated narratives and celebrated objects. These contradictions have been investigated to some extent by Heath and Potter (Heath & Potter, 2005) – and that the idea that capitalism can provide you with everything from material culture to the means by which you might rebel against it is not a revelation. However, these objects are not intended to represent rebelliousness and are not counter-cultural. Instead, they embrace criminals – those who culturally represent an extreme variety of capitalism (Jarvis, 2007). As Heath and Potter argue, the market is endless in its ability to supply a demand for even the most niche products:

> Whether people have piercings and tattoos, what kind of clothes they wear, what music they listen [...] no matter what the style, there will always be merchants lined up to sell it (Heath & Potter, 2005, p. 153).

This will to provide whatever the market needs has resulted in a 'race to the bottom' where being increasingly transgressive in style, and going to further lengths to ensure authenticity, has led to increasingly graphic imagery and performance. Nevertheless, the restraint shown within production of murder merchandise is nuanced. Products must fit within a set of artistic characteristics, to be considered truly 'authentic' or 'rebellious' – with the wholly unfiltered and unmoderated offerings derided by interviewees. Standing out from the crowd and subverting the mainstream is conducted through quality, design and the simulation of aura, and not through the visceral embracement of the gruesome and the ugly. The production of difference is not uncomplicated, though, and does not necessarily render a product totally superficial. According to Baudrillard:

> Clearly, 'personalisation', far from being a mere advertising ploy, is actually a basic ideological concept of a society which 'personalises' objects and beliefs solely in order to integrate persons more effectively (Baudrillard, 1968/1996, p. 152).

Market emphasis on choice and personalisation represents the systemic integration of identity and personality into commodities and for Baudrillard, simply serves to further integrate persons into the system of objects. For this to work, the perception of choice must be perceived as realistic and this is nowhere more visible than in the culture of crime. Chhabra et al (2003) find that in the heritage and tourism industries, it is not those with the least exposure to a culture who self-report feeling that a simulated tourist experience is particularly 'authentic', as one might assume. On the contrary, it is those with the closest affiliation to the subject of an exhibition who will describe it as most 'authentic'. It is no surprise then that familiarity and celebrity are embraced by producers as contributing to authentic feelings and not detracting from them:

> Neither does commoditisation necessarily destroy the meaning of cultural products for the tourists, since these are frequently prepared to accept such a product, even if transformed through commoditisation, as 'authentic', insofar as

> some at least of its traits are perceived as ‘authentic’. Such traits can then be taken to authenticate, metonymically, the product as a whole (Cohen, 1988, p. 383)

These recognisable traits, as Cohen has argued, are integral to cultivating perceptions of authenticity. The processes of commodification outlined in this chapter have not totally destroyed the meanings and authenticities of the objects. Rather, traits that are perceived as authentic are incorporated into mechanically reproduced objects to achieve a sort of authenticity of experience that is symbolic and not auratic.

7- Conclusion

This thesis set out to build on and expand studies in criminology, to investigate the cultural consumption of crime as applied to cultural objects. Building on a theoretical underpinning primarily consisting of postmodern theorists Jean Baudrillard and Walter Benjamin, and a theoretical framework that treats objects as the material consumption of images and brands, this research has observed a *cultural* 'transgressive imagination' at play in the manipulation and marketing of crime imagery into consumable objects. This thesis investigated a central theme of enquiry – to what extent is consuming niche, crime themed, material culture an act of transgression in itself? – and addressed this paradox through three complimentary research questions, each concentrated in its own empirical chapter, with its own source of primary data.

The key argument of this thesis is that, despite the value of crime objects being framed by participants as criminally transgressive, in terms of violence, crime and wounds – instead objects are revealed as culturally transgressive, in terms of a will to transgress banality and sameness in the global culture industry. To that end, this thesis argued that criminal brands are subsidised by varying allegiances to, and perceptions of 'authenticity', through an array of notions including uniqueness, difference and well-knownness. These concluding remarks will begin by summarising these analysis chapters. From there, the three research questions will be addressed in turn and answered. After that, the key criminological contributions of this work will be outlined together with potential repercussions and new lines of enquiry.

Summary of Chapters

Foregrounding this project was the intention to review an apparent contradiction in the consumption of transgression – why is the search for truth (as satisfied by the true crime genre of books and documentaries) and authentic, raw experiences (as has traditionally been satisfied by transgression and criminality), so frequently supplied by the culture industry through a kind of 'filmic', fictitious lens? In the introduction the scope of this project was laid out as addressing the extent to which the conspicuous consumption of transgression can be understood as, 'a vicarious means for experiencing [rebellion and

resistance]' (O'Neill & Seal, p. 7) just as cultural representations of crime have been argued to do (ibid). This project set out to use the framework of 'transgressive imaginations' in murderabilia put forth by O'Neill and Seal, whilst remaining critical of the assumption that the cultural consumption of crime can be considered as transgressive in and of itself.

Gaps were identified in the literature within the disciplines of criminology; sociology; museums studies; and cultural studies, that a study of murderabilia could contribute toward filling. For example, the fact that we characterise celebrity as a kind of pathology, yet research studying the celebration of the pathological has been limited (Penfold-Mounce, 2010a). The idea of transitions in celebrity culture from talent, toward fame that lacks skill, intelligence or merit is a prerequisite for the study of the celebration of criminals – and the common narrative that these worthless and unsavoury celebrities are becoming increasingly commoditised (Ferris & Harris, 2011) further necessitated this project.

Moreover, large scale trends in popular culture toward the graphic and the violent have meant that a study of crime objects is overdue. Forensic dramas like *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* have increased exposure to the corpse to the extent that death has been somewhat tamed (Penfold-Mounce, 2015) – while serial killers, now so embedded within the mainstream of culture, can be understood as 'natural born celebrities' (Schmid, 2005). In the sociological study of death and death in popular culture, debates that are central to this thesis regarding the blurring of fact and fiction continue. Foltyn argues that cultural consumption of death in popular culture is 'creating corpse facts and fictions to revive, re-imagine, and 'play' with the dead' (Foltyn, 2008, p. 155) - murderabilia, a key way in which violence and death are re-imagined, revived and 'played' with – can make a significant contribution to this study of the dissolution of the borders of and cultural consciousness of crime.

In cultural criminology, it was argued that the impact of the consumption of crime had been widely explored, primarily through the media. Such as Carrabine (2008) arguing that the media has been disproportionately focusing on crime for many decades, and Jewkes' (2004) affirmation that media selectiveness of narratives can have a significant impact on public perception of criminality. Theories of collecting (Benjamin,

1931/2008b) and ownership of cultural products (Miller, 2008) were suggested as a way to extend these concepts of the social construction of crime into a study of objects.

Displaying Transgression

In the first of three empirical chapters focusing on the depiction of crime through museum artefacts, Alexander and Alexander's question on the changing makeup of museum spaces was used as a springboard: 'as the 21st century opens, the dominance of collections in museums is certainly fading […] what are the implications of this change?' (2008, p. 16). The chapter sought to investigate transgressive imaginations in museum displays of true crime, looking at the way crime is represented in an educational setting and what cultural cues are used to communicate with audiences.

With regard to the decreasing prominence of collections in museums, this was observed to be true across all four data-sites. In some instances, observations revealed a complete lack of crime artefacts on display with curators instead opting to rely on filmic references. In others, crime artefacts were muddled in with popular cultural references to the extent that the two became interchangeable. The narratives of the museums seemed to interpret 'true crime' as just as much *facts about crime in popular culture* as *facts about crime*. With that in mind, this chapter addresses the first research question:

1) What narratives are privileged in museum exhibitions of crime?

This first question, which was explored primarily through this first of three empirical chapters, aimed to explore transgressive imaginations within museum exhibitions of true crime objects. This question aimed to investigate the representation of crime objects in an educational setting, and unpack the underpinning notion of authenticity in consumption as part of educational experiences.

Museum exhibitions of crime artefacts were observed, primarily, to prioritise filmic narratives over historical accounts. It was concluded that this is likely due to the entertainmentization of commercial museum spaces (King, 1991, Duncan, et al., 1991) with museums needing to appeal to a wide audience whilst making crime as accessible as possible. The increasing coverage of crime in popular culture was argued to

silultaniously fuel and satisfy the market for these spaces (Penfold-Mounce, 2015). It was observed, through the off-line arm of this ethnography, that these gestures to popular culture served the function of grounding exhibits of crime inside of established schema that consumers could best relate to.

In answering this research question, *Displaying Transgression* referred to the seminal work of Duncan, Karp and Lavine who have reflected upon the contents of the modern museum: '[a] museum is not the neutral and transparent sheltering space that it is often claimed to be […] by fulfilling its declared purposes as a museum (preserving and displaying art objects) [it also carries out] broad, sometimes less obvious political and ideological tasks' (1991, p. 90). The authors correctly observed that the curation of museum content is a loaded and biased project, with crime museums proving not to be an exception.

Museums were observed to prioritise filmic narratives and use popular cultural references to communicate true crime to visitors. In several instances, the film adaptations of real crimes were used to contextualise the historic events, with artefacts from films supplementing the exhibit in the place that one might expect items pertaining to the historical events. This extended to some museums having entire wings of their exhibitions dedicated to film history – with authenticity in crime museums being interpreted as *crime in the cultural consciousness* generally. In these educational settings the history of U.K and U.S.A criminality is reimagined through established schema and cultural reference points. Just as Presdee argues that crime and transgressive experiences are no longer experienced by the lay public as they would have been in the past (Presdee, 2000), the unrelenting dominance of violence and death in cinema (Aaron, 2015) has yielded a transgressive imagination that is learned from the movie theatre and not the street corner.

Auratic Transgression

The second of three empirical chapters focusing on true crime as it is consumed and collected as murderabilia, continued themes in the previous by beginning with sentiments from Jean Baudrillard: antiques 'appear to run counter to the requirements of functional calculation, and answer to other kinds of demands such as witness, memory,

nostalgia or escapism' (Baudrillard, 1968/1996, p. 77). Just as museums were said to revolve around producing authenticity experiences (Olsen, 2002), authenticity has historically been an inescapable realm of objects, collections and antiques. This chapter set out to interrogate these concepts of witness, memory, nostalgia and escapism in the consumption of crime artefacts by using interviews with collectors of murderabilia. It addressed the second research question as follows:

2) How is 'transgression' consumed through the collection of criminal objects?

Considering the personal collection of auratic, true crime objects and the personal narratives attached by collectors, this chapter sought to understand how crime and deviance experiences and transgressive tendencies were consumed through collectable artefacts. The consumption of transgression in objects was also observed to revolve around variations on the concept of authenticity – collectors of murderabilia and true crime objects self-identified as being driven by a desire for authenticity and authentic experiences. Notions of 'uniqueness', 'originality' and 'provenance' were used to confer value onto products in the same way that antique and collectable objects negotiate value outside of murderabilia.

In particular, data showed participants valuing closeness to the protagonist. Items proximate to well known or infamous criminals or criminal cases through auratic (Benjamin, 1936/2008a) connections were seen as the gold standard. Whereas items that pertained to more violent criminals, but were several degrees removed from the crime scene, were given less status. The authenticity garnered by transgressing the normal or accepted boundaries of popular culture (see Presdee, 2000) was undermined by the common threads of celebrity, film and popular culture that have influenced collections. Artefacts increased in value with the famousness and celebration of their subjects – they were indexed with the brand awareness and star quality of their criminal or event. This is a fairly regular quality of the culture industry but it makes visible how these markets operate through transgressive branding and not transgressive violence.

These items were valuable in their brand image and their auratic qualities but not in their violence. To own something is to take the fantasy out of the realm of cinema where unparalleled violence can occur and to realise and normalise it in ownership.

Žiźek suggests when discussing the terror attacks of September 11 2001 that American citizens were not shocked by the presence of something truly real and trampling across fairy-tale lives, but rather the exact opposite is true – Westerners live extremely banal lives and that banality is our closest form of reality. The enthrallment with terrorism is in the the abruptness of experiencing first hand something that is pure fantasy – something straight from the cinema (Žižek 2012). Nowhere is this relationship of fantasy violence and reality violence more visible than in murderabilia. Transgression in this sense is consumed not as criminal transgression but as a means of transgressing the mechanics and repetition of the culture industry.

Symbolic Transgression

The third of three empirical chapters, building on notions of authenticity in heritage, museums and tourism (Olsen, 2002) and objects and antiques (Baudrillard, 1968/1996), it is also familiar rhetoric in modernity and contemporary capitalism (Lamla, 2009). Lamla calls the contradiction to which this thesis speaks 'the modern myth of authenticity' (p. 172) – the idea that genuineness can be consumed through reproduction. It approached the paradigm summarised by Fine: '[t]he desire for authenticity now occupies a central position in contemporary culture. Whether in our search for selfhood, leisure experience, or in our material purchases, we search for the *real*, the genuine' (2003, p. 153). Building on chapters that have considered authenticity in tourism and leisure experiences and in collections, selfhood and identity, this chapter addressed the search for the 'real, the genuine' through material purchases. It raised the question: 'what happens to the other meanings (particularly religious, cultural, and social) of things (and activities) once they become commoditised?' (Cohen, 1988, p. 381) and it suggested that they have become about the construction of *difference* in place of, for example, religious meanings, which could be characterised as the opposite. With that in mind, the third research question was concentrated here:

3) How is crime imagined and represented through mechanically reproduced 'simulations' of transgression?

In particular, participants used art and artistic licence to position their reproduced work within the realms of authentic, auratic experiences, despite them being reproductions.

They justified their produce as thanatological, artistic, original, or different driving notions of authenticity in their work. Participants use the language of transgression throughout the research, but it is particularly talk of *difference* and *uniqueness* that supplies this authenticity. As such, this chapter was analysed using Lash and Lury's concept of the *production of difference* (Lash & Lury, 2007) as a function of 21st century branding. This is the idea that branding and marketing, a central quality of the global culture industry, revolves around producing a perceived difference between products – the central form of the *global* culture industry. 'In culture industry, production takes place in the Fordist and labour-intensive production of identity. In global culture industry, it takes place in the post-Fordist and design-intensive production of difference' (2007, p. 5). The 'production of difference' is witnessed inside mechanically reproduced crime objects. Producers of the objects identified them in terms of what they were not, in terms of their point of departure from the norms of acceptability.

This *difference* was argued to be mostly an illusion. Lash and Lury tell us that we are living in an era post commodity, in a stage of cultural production that revolves around the brand – this has been reiterated through this criminology of murderabilia. Producers of murder merchandise concentrated their efforts on successful criminal brands and established infamous characters. On top of the established flimsiness of this 'difference' that Lash and Lury describe, crime objects are doubly inauthentic in that they actively embrace celebrated characters, celebrated narratives and celebrated objects. Mechanically reproduced simulations of transgression were revealed to be simulations of cultural difference just as brands operate outside of murderabilia. Violence is a way for authenticity to be consumed in cultural difference and it functionally has very little to do with criminal transgression.

Contributions to Research

With these new questions in mind, this thesis criss-crosses many areas of study can be said to contribute in some small way to each. First, the technological and digital revolutions in production that Thrift (2005) alluded to in *Knowing Capitalism*, and Lash and Lury (2007) categorised as qualities of the *Global* culture industry can be witnessed

through the study of murderabilia. In particular, the trends in production that Baudrillard defines as 'integral reality' come to mind:

> Effectuating, materialising, realising, producing – it seems to be the ideal destination of everything to pass from the stage of possibility to that of reality in a movement of simultaneous progress and internal necessity. All need, all desires, all potentialities, tend towards this objective sanction (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 15).

Baudrillard argued that this excess of reality, the ability to materialise and *realise* every idea or feeling, ultimately led to the destruction of reality – the world is so saturated with the real that we are no longer able to feel it. Murder merchandise is certainly a product of a system of capital that has the ability to realise even the most niche cultural desires. The desire of the public to 'realise' such niche products as these is ultimately foregrounded by this lack of feeling of reality in cultural produce. This new ability of the public to 'realise' even the most trivial, niche or abstract subculture was explored to some extent by Potts' aforementioned study of 'Kitsch' memorial merchandise:

> [There has been an] expansion for opportunities to materialise bigotry and hatred. Arguably, some of the most objectionable 9/11 items can be found on CafePress, including a series of objects in celebration of waterboarding (a form of torture designed to simulate drowning, deployed against detainees in the 'War on Terror'. [...] As tempting as it is to recoil from these things, the composition of their offensiveness is in urgent need of delineation, especially given the self-belief of MC (mass customisation) businesses: as merely responding to customer needs. [...] From this, are we as critics simply to confirm the view that these souvenirs are the material manifestations of hatred – Have it Your Way, racists! – or might there be other explanations? (Potts, 2012, p. 242).

Potts writes about 'mass customisation' businesses and their almost liberating influence on the digital marketplace – allowing designers to upload a theoretically endless selection of niche designs and brands only to be 'realised' once purchased by the consumer. She comments on the ability of the consumer, through these new 'mass customisation' outlets, to develop a level of choice in the culture industry amongst

theoretical products that would once have been unimaginable or unnecessary. This is in line with Lash and Lury's development of a theory of the *Global Culture Industry* (2007) where identicalness and sameness of cultural products gives way to more fluid brand images which are chiefly about *difference*, born out of the *identicalness* present in the pre-digital, pre-global culture industry. Ultimately, Potts finishes her description of MC (mass customisation) web-businesses with a question: might there be other explanations (other than hatred, violence and racism) to account for the popularity of graphic, customised, images of violence and suffering. This thesis has contributed the concept of 'authenticity' as a driving factor behind this demand, alongside an established consumer desire for 'difference' provided by brands. In this case, brands are usually infamous, media selected perpetrators of violence, and their 'difference' is provided vicariously as transgression that is packaged neatly within set and repeated frameworks.

In criminology, in the first instance, this research can be seen as a contribution to the ways in which the increased mediatisation of crime and access to media technology is having an impact upon public perceptions of criminality. This trend has been evidenced elsewhere, with Brown (2016) recently citing the advent of *YouTube* and mobile video technology as having a pervasive impact upon perceptions of policing (due to amateur footage), and a warranted impact upon police practices in Canada (ibid). Elsewhere, similar investigations into the effect of mediatised crime on the public consciousness have uncovered crime being enacted in cultural 'safe spaces' (Atkinson & Rogers, 2016) using the technology of video games and online pornography. This research has contributed an understanding of the impact of this consumption of crime through objects and its impact on how crime is imagined and understood.

In the recent edited collection *New Directions in Crime and Deviancy* (Winlow & Atkinson, 2013) – Simon Winlow suggests that criminology needs to take a 'leap of faith' by committing to a sustained intellectual criminology that intertwines crime and capitalism as two inseparable modernities. He writes: 'it is once again [post 2008 financial crisis] becoming possible to identify *capitalism itself* (original emphasis) as the fundamental problem we face today' (Winlow, 2013, p. 37), citing the 'growing public distaste for aggressive accumulation' (p. 37) as a good indicator of this necessity. This is nowhere more evident than in murderabilia, where crime and culture intertwine

and aggressive consumption, with a double meaning, is defended by acts of consumption themselves. Although Winlow primarily researches crises of masculinity, drug use, or street crime, through a lens of neoliberal inequalities – he nevertheless points to an entangling of crime and consumerism to which, from a different angle, this thesis directly speaks. Just as the post-crash culture is argued to have an irrefutable impact on criminal behaviour; criminal behaviour can be observed to embed itself ever deeper into the cultures of global capitalism. As increasingly transgressive experiences bed themselves in, they do so as alternative offerings to the very wasteland of identicalness in consumer culture to which Winlow frequently refers.

Within this same edition, several authors draw upon novel, forward looking research topics to which this thesis can speak. Most notably, Audra Mitchell (2013) begins to explore the inclusion of 'atrocity exhibitions' into student learning in the subjects of peace and conflict studies, human rights and development. This research touches upon the pulling of true cases of violence, for example, first hand experiences of conflict zones, into the educational environment as students increasingly demand more visceral, immediate learning experiences. They propose, as a precocious question similar to my second research question: 'why do students (as well as educators and potential employers) view these encounters as valuable' (p. 159)? Mitchell argues that this drive is one that sees students want to gain different *types* of experience and similar narratives have emerged through this work. Chapter four of this thesis, *Displaying Transgression*, addresses this drive in the context of the display of crime artefacts for the purposes of entertainment and education. As well, the concept of 'authenticity' and a desire for an alternative to common experience runs centrally through each empirical chapter. To that end, this project has contributed an understanding of the cultural draw that 'atrocity' provides as part of the diversification of the offerings of the global culture industry through its expansion into the commodification of difference.

In *But is it Criminology?* (White, 2013), Rob White gives insight to the importance of critical academic work that pushes the boundaries of disciplinarity in order to study new areas – just as cultural/critical criminology and cultural sociology have come together here to form an investigation into crime objects. White goes as far as to argue that 'informed and challenging political analysis is intrinsically multidisciplinary [and] is usually eclectic in its sources, [...] a fusion of old ideas and 'new' circumstances is

surely part of this process as well' (2013, p. 98). To this end, this project has taken existing concepts in museum studies, criminology and sociology and applied them to new and emerging markets for the cultural consumption of crime.

This importance for interdisciplinarity and the importance of discourses of culture and capitalism, so heavily represented here, have been gradually working their way away from the outskirts of criminology for some time. Particularly, recent work on the importance of embracing the cultural and the visual in criminology have been contributed to by this research. Hayward has argued that the 'true meaning of crime and crime control [is] to be found not in the essential (and essentially false) factuality of crime rates, but in the contested processes of symbolic display, cultural interpretation, and representational negotiation' (2010, p. 1) – and this project has steered away from crime rates to study this symbolic display. It has found that these practices of representation can be highly controversial and contested, but are altogether more 'mainstream' *culturally* than perhaps they are *criminologically*. It has argued that the 'symbolic display' of crime as communicated through objects is one that embraces many central western cultural facets such as Hollywood film. On top of this, it has found that the practice of 'cultural interpretation' of crime takes place through an extremely well known and commonplace schema of transgression. The 'representational negotiation' to which Hayward attributes academic importance was investigated extensively in Chapter 4 *Displaying Transgression* in which museum curators were witnessed to juggle narratives of 'true crime' against popular representation in their educational exhibitions.

The cultural consumption of crime was, in part, uncovered as being a symptom of consumers' desire for 'real' and 'authentic' experiences. With criminologists arguing that 'images of crime [...] [are] becoming as 'real' as crime and criminal justice itself' (Hayward, 2010, p. 1), it is appropriate and opportune to study the blurring of reality and fiction in cultural representations of crime and transgression. In fact, this trend in criminology toward culture and the visual is increasingly widespread. According to Ferrell, cultural criminology 'references the increasing analytic attention that many criminologists now give to popular culture constructions, and especially mass media constructions, of crime and crime control' (1999, p. 395) – so a study of the

representation of crime through cultural objects is central in terms of our conceptual understanding of the discipline itself.

'Crime compels us as well as repels' (2010, p. 83), argues Alison Young – and similar sentiments have emerged in this research. The most compelling aspect of crime from a consumer perspective has been observed as the very fact that it repels in other contexts. It repels the mass market, and as such presents itself as unique inside the culture industry. It repels socially when enacted within communities, and these factors contribute toward its compulsion. She calls this a 'doubled relation', that '[oscillates] between censure and desire' (p. 83), which is observed here as the dichotomy that fuels the desire. Young goes on to argue that even inside cultural criminology, 'attention has mainly been focused upon the social or criminological implications of our images of crime; there has been little attempt until recently to analyse the images themselves and the relation between the spectator and the image' (Young, 2010, p. 83). As a furtherment of this trend in cultural criminology, this project has considered images of crime and their associated packaging as physical objects as a topic of study in and of itself, and not in terms of their potential positive or negative impact upon consumers. The relationships between the consumer and the image have been the focal point in this research – having looked at new ways that criminal cultures are being consumed beyond established popular culture.

This project has taken cues from popular culture, and used them to propose a culture industry based understanding of consumer interest in crime and transgressive products. It has filled gaps in cultural criminology, such as the need for further research into the symbolic display of crime (Hayward, 2010). It has furthered trends in cultural criminology, including the movement toward studying images as representations and the processes of consuming crime – rather than their direct sociological implications (Young, 2010). It has gone some way to mixing overlapping discourses in museum and tourism studies, such as extensive work on dark tourism (Stone, 2006) and atrocity exhibition (2013) with contemporary trends in cultural criminology toward the study of images (Hayward, 2010), fandom and celebration (Penfold-Mounce, 2010a), and consumption.

When it comes to these cultural discourses, Yar has argued that 'the very distinction between the 'factual' and 'fictional' is itself somewhat suspect on epistemological grounds' (Yar, 2010, p. 69). This project has investigated this, using modern, ethnographic research methods (Lash & Lury, 2007) to approach the permeable boundaries of fact and fiction in branding and 'symbolic consumption' (Ransome, 2005). As such, it has found that the semiotics of crime objects contain both fact (as the transgressive element that sets products apart from the mainstream) and fiction (as the sweetener that renders products both palatable and recognisable), to the extent that distinguishing between the two is futile. Scott Lash and Celia Lury (2007) echo these sentiments in their extensive studies of brands, and from this it is evidenced that the consumption of violent criminals is a brand exercise before a transgressive one – the proliferation of the transgressive brand.

Principally, this project set out to investigate, as applied to objects, O'Neill and Seal's claim that 'cultural representations of crime and deviance offer a vicarious means for experiencing [rebellion and resistance]' (2012, p. 7). 'Transgressive imaginations' – these vicariously consumed approximations of rebellion have been observed to several degrees throughout the datasets. In the first instance, observations of museum exhibitions revealed an atmosphere of transgression that used cultural references coupled with gruesome artefacts to depict spectacle and distinctiveness. Second, consumers of murder artefacts repeatedly reference their uniqueness and difference as part of a step away from more mainstream, mass produced objects. And lastly, producers of murder merchandise discuss designing in authenticity and resistance to dominant culture into their stock.

Whilst this niche and outsider mentality was witnessed throughout – upon analysis this does not translate to rebellion or resistance. By accessing crime objects from the perspective of museum exhibition and curation, cultural production and cultural consumption, (chapter 4, *Displaying Transgression*) 'transgressive imaginations' were observed as being particularly filmic. Exhibits of violent crime built in popular references in order to pique visitors' cultural awareness and most of these took the form of mainstream, consumerised Hollywood cinema. From the infiltration of museum gift shops into exhibition spaces, to the reliance that curators place on filmic understandings of criminality for the purposes of entertainment, crime museums were analysed to be

simulations (Baudrillard, 1981/1994) of transgression in two senses. Initially, in that visitors enjoyed a false experience of crime through the referential proxy of artefacts. But secondly, in that visiting a crime museum was so embroiled in mainstream Western culture that it was no longer recognisable as a transgressive experience. In chapter 5, *Collecting Transgression*, the much more niche cultures of personal artefact collection were not much more transgressive in their function. Collectors still favoured those criminal brands that had been made infamous by media exposure, and so characters were equally mainstream. Participants repeatedly cited recognisability as directly correlating with the monetary value of objects, and the concept of 'authenticity' was used to show how this value is rooted in cultural popularity rather than level of transgression. In chapter 6, *Symbolic Transgression*, producers of mechanically reproduced crime products engaged in similar trends. They were observed to embrace concepts of 'uniqueness' or 'difference', but enacted these within the opposing frameworks of well-known-ness and recognisability.

At an interpersonal level, crime objects were exposed as forming parts of new relationships and communities that depended on them – or they were experienced as ways to interact inside and outside of the subculture. For example, one participant who produces serial killer greetings cards proposed that their intended function was to bring friendship groups together in a mutual joke about pushing the boundaries of acceptability. She describes them as comedic, and their implicit comedy value is that they bring images of transgression into established, non-transgressive traditions like greetings card sending. These traditions are multiple, and none is more visible in crime and murder consumption than collecting. Narratives of collecting a series of objects pertaining to the same or similar events or people actively embrace modern consumeristic branding. Participants directly speak of criminals in terms of *collectable* individuals, ones who command more financial investment, are rare, and feature more prominently in the cultural consciousness, meaning that consumerism was being experienced just as transparently as crime.

Root observes this paradox when writing: 'today it is taken for granted that if artists wish to be considered serious, they must find ways to express their distaste of contemporary culture (even if it is by engaging with the icons of mass culture)' (1996, p. 143). Is it not common practice in the arts to embrace the icons of mass culture while

simultaneously engaging in a critique of them? Should this be considered a transgressive artistic angle, or a transgressive consumer choice? Violent criminals, to all intents and purposes, are ideal for this function of the mechanism of modern arts and tastes. Experiencing objects that originate from or depict criminally transgressive people is not a *culturally* transgressive behaviour. The final four subsections outline the most important contributions.

1) Criminology of Murderabilia

In the first instance, and broadly speaking, this work has contributed a criminological examination of murderabilia that is without precedent. Work has considered the consumption of crime, or representations of crime (in criminology), and has looked at changing values associated with different types of modern consumption (in sociology), but a criminology of murderabilia that joins these two has been lacking. Work from David Schmid (2005) or Brian Jarvis (2007) has touched upon murderabilia, but focused on its prevalence in literature or its extension of violent themes in popular culture. This thesis has contributed a significant, empirical ethnography of the consumption of crime in material objects – furthering calls from Hayward and Presdee (2010) for a criminology that considers the changing prevalence of images of crime and their impact on society.

2) Pro-Cultural Transgression

I have written at length about a variety of contributions made by applying arguments from the sociology of consumption to cultural criminology, and I will continue to do so, but this work has also made a contribution in the other direction. Work in the sociology of consumption has long considered niche purchasing choices to be counter-cultural. Furthering Heath and Potter's oft cited work in *The Rebel Sell* (2005), this thesis has investigated the ways in which transgressive consumption can be understood as pro-cultural. It has contributed ideas from criminology that suggest that crime and criminality are so deeply embedded within popular culture so as to be an embracement of the norms of consumption and not in opposition.

3) Digital Methodologies

This thesis has tested Lash and Lury's proposed material cultural ethnographic method of *tracking and tracing* as applied to a niche subculture. It took the approach of finding out 'as much about them in as many places in time and space from as many points of view as possible' (Lash & Lury, 2007, p. 20), although it found that in the context of this small dataset research project, that tracking and tracing was impractical. Images did not replicate themselves neatly across different medium, and a high enough volume of information could not be gathered to paint a complete enough picture – reverting the method more in line with a traditional ethnography that happened to use some digital data. This method is based on the assumption that digital culture is underpinned by networks. This was found to not be the case, with digital networks simply propping up existing offline subcultures.

4) Authenticity

The main contribution to criminology was the centrally developed concept of 'authenticity', emergent from this data, as a descriptor for value in crime products. As such, this thesis considered the various notions of authenticity that are constructed and used in consuming transgression. This is a strain of research that has links to both tourism and heritage studies and cultural criminology in past decades, but is ever-present in modern, critical, populist literature. This thesis merges these ideas together. First, in terms of heritage and tourism, Cohen writes:

> Since authenticity is not a primitive given, but negotiable, one has to allow for the possibility of its gradual emergence in the eyes of visitors to the host culture. In other words, a cultural product, or trait thereof, which is at one point generally judged as contrived or inauthentic may, in the course of time, become generally recognised as authentic (Cohen, 1988, p. 379).

Cohen here, addressing the tourism and heritage sectors, interrogates the possibility of a reflective feeling of cultural authenticity that adapts to its surroundings. This thesis has argued that the cultural experience of crime consumption, like tourist experiences, through filmic representations, cultivates experiences as increasingly 'authentic'. It

takes time for something to be seen as authentic; which takes the form of repeated exposure to something. In this sense something 'new' or 'original' is not necessarily authentic, but after repeated exposure, it seeps into the public consciousness to become the authentic reference point.

This is at the heart of the contradiction of consuming transgression through uniform and established means. Consumers and producers quest for the 'authentic' is in some way in direct opposition to uniqueness and originality, creating conflicting ambitions and desires. However, the average person's exposure to crime and violence is overwhelmingly filmic, and so 'authenticity' manifests conversely as 'popularity'. Authenticity in crime, form the data included in this thesis, means louder, faster, brighter, more digitally and technologically immersive, more famous – not more 'realistic', and rarely more 'unique'. This contribution furthers notions courted in cultural criminology that the *real,* the *thrilling* and the *exciting* and driving forces behind an interest in crime. Stemming back to Mike Presdee's (2000) seminal work on visceral, carnival like experiences from which this work departs, to Katz's *Seductions of Crime* (1990) before that, authors have thought about crime and transgression as a way out of banal, uniform everyday life. It stands to reason that the marketised consumption of transgression would reflect similar drives towards the authentic.

> Authenticity is a tricky concept because of the way the term can be manipulated and used to convince people they are getting something profound and substantial when they are just getting merchandise [...] authenticity is the currency at play in the marketplace of cultural difference (Root, 1996, p. 78)

This thesis has embedded these arguments into criminology by showing that authenticity is the currency at play in the consumption of crime. It has also embedded the accompanying feelings of profound and substantial experience into our understanding of culturally formed transgressive imaginations.

Modern, critical, populist literature has jumped upon the concept of authenticity markets of late, showing that this project has contemporary relevance. Author and journalist Peter York, in his recent book *Authenticity is a Con* (2014), writes that the concept is vacuous in the very contradictions that are outlined in this thesis. About the trendy and

extremely expensive east London art districts: 'for 'invented', read inauthentic' (p. 6). The concepts of originality and invention are placed in opposition to those of authenticity and uniqueness. He concludes: 'the idea of authenticity is proxy and provoker for a lot of other words and ideas, many of them [...] unrealistic' (p. 98). It binds consumers in a bundle of unrealistic and unattainable ambitions. York is not alone, Boyle was making similar noises a decade earlier in his critically acclaimed book *Authenticity: Brands, Fakes, Spin and the Lust for Real Life* – 'there does seem to be a demand for authentic culture of a different kind' (Boyle, 2004, p. 128). Best-selling marketers Gilmore and Pine's (2007) arguments about embracing 'authenticity' in business were called 'one of ten ideas that are changing the world' by Time Magazine (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). They offer businesses a 'real/fake matrix' to to quantity how successful brands and branded objects will be in a consumer society characterised by the need for authenticity. Perhaps most fittingly, Lamla (2009) writes:

> Authenticity is here not only an issue of communication skills for cultivating a trustful climate in economic bargaining or interaction. It is also necessary for lending commodities use-value and cultural aura (Appadurai 1986 44-5; Benjamin 1969). The trouble here lies in the limits of the possibility of deliberately manufacturing such cultural resources (2009, pp. 177-8)

Authenticity was witnessed in terms of trust, as Lamla writes, as a function in interactions and exchanges between protagonists of murderabilia as people verify purchases. But primarily, authenticity in violence was witnessed as lending cultural aura to objects with little or no use-value. Lamla identifies an issue – trends such as 'commodity to brand' or the 'production of difference' are limited in that manufacturing or purchasing branded difference is an oxymoron, and the possibilities of manufacturing experiences that are new decrease with every new object on the market. This places true crime and true violence as a next step, after the increasingly gruesome nature of television, film and video games, in the paradoxical quest for authenticity experiences. To that end, the central contribution of this thesis is that crime objects, whilst framed as criminally transgressive, are valued in the social marketplace for their 'authentic' qualities of difference and uniqueness and not for violence or criminality, making them culturally transgressive instead.

New Directions for the Criminology of Murderabilia

This research has brought together insights from different disciplines into an analysis of consuming serial killers and violent criminals in culture. This asset has triangulated the cultural, criminological and sociological relevance of murder objects – but it also raises questions of what other directions could be explored within these vast complimentary fields of literature.

For one, applying these object based arguments to spaces is a logical next step. *Displaying Transgression* speaks in part to the museums and heritage industries opening up new avenues for the investigation of violence on display and in memory and history. For example, the extensive research into 'difficult heritage' by scholars such as Sharon Macdonald (2009), considering the impact on communities and government of atrocities that have garnered infamy. Topics such as Nazi Germany and the Holocaust museum frequently arise in this research (Macdonald, 2009) along with Hiroshima (Utaka, 2009), Auschwitz (Young, 2009) and Alcatraz (Strange & Kempa, 2003). The suggestion is this work could be extended to understand local 'difficult' heritage inherited from famous violent criminals, as well as these national heritages created by war. Local government responses to crime tourism provide a measure of the hostility in communities towards violence in culture. For example, the case of double child murderer Ian Huntley's house:

> It isn't a place for a commemoration. Getting rid of the building will be seen as a way of letting the village move on from its harrowing memories of the murder – Simon Cobby, Cambridgeshire Council (Coughlan, 2004)

Difficult heritage studies, as of yet, have not endeavoured to consider the 'politics of display' (Macdonald, 1998) in the micro/local context. For example, Cromwell Street, Gloucester (the site of Fred and Rose West's serial murders in the early 1990s) to Saddleworth Moor (Ian Brady and Myra Hindley's Moors Murders) or the London sites of Jack The Ripper's murders, late 1800s – academia has tackled their atrociousness, their commercial value and their media presence – but not the politics of display or the impact on local heritage. On the other hand, Graham Dann used the phrase 'milking the macabre' to describe western fascination with and capitalisation of sites of death and

destruction (Dann, 1998), Seaton preferred 'thanatourism' (Seaton, 1996) – the commercial segments of true crime tourism have been researched but not from the perspective of heritage and memory. Arising from this research project, it seems that these heritage arguments would be well applied to true crime sites:

> Heritage theorists note that 'dark' places are especially marketable if they were notorious, if the perpetrators of death or pain were especially cruel [...] or if those who suffered were famous or especially sympathetic victims (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996, pp. 104-105)

These notions of marketability, cruelty and fame in tourist sectors are synonymous with the results of this project, begging the questions: In terms of the 'politics of display' (Macdonald, 1998), what divisions arise within the community when mediating and negotiating infamy, and how are these heritage sites maintained? To what extent are the feelings of authenticity and brand notoriety applied to the local communities attached to the criminal celebrities?

In criminology, another avenue arising from this project is the necessity to resurrect the study of true crime fiction which has been stagnating recently, and to extend and embrace topics of deviant leisure. The market for extreme, graphic or violent culture has been shown to be great and predicated on notions of increased authenticity and exposure to non-uniform, visceral, violent experiences. These factors can be extended to violence in, for example, video games where consumed transgression is still under researched from a sociological perspective. Atkinson and Rogers theorise these lawless spaces for simulated transgression as *zones of exception* (2016), and empirical work may reveal them to be predicated on consumer desire for more authentic experiences.

Aaron's (2015) extensive study into the iconography and ideology of Death as represented in film provided a useful springboard to approach filmic representations of crime in this project. She prefaces with the idea that 'vulnerability or violence propels most mainstream fictions' (2015, p. 1) to which this research attests, and that the 'banality' of death, those large majority of instances of dying which are slow decline and not by violent violent force, on the other hand, are rarely seen. Criminologists have not done enough to understand the societal demand for such violence as well as the

impacts that such disproportionate representation of violence has on the public consciousness.

With death and filmic violence in mind, another avenue for further research is an in depth comparison of murderabilia and murder objects between countries. Although I have taken data (interview participants, observation sites) from the U.S.A and the U.K, this project in majority cannot be read as a comparison between these two different cultures. Originally setting out to investigate U.K culture, overlaps and ties with the U.S.A became so commonplace as to necessitate extending the field of research across the Atlantic. The overwhelming majority of literature considering criminal fandom (Kooistra, 1989), the presence of violent or serial murder in popular culture (Duclos, 1998), (Schmid, 2005), for one. Or the fact that in early observations of online mass customisation websites (the focus of Chapter 6, *Symbolic Transgression*) revealed that producers of products bought in the U.K had mostly originated from North America. Upon further investigation it became clear that despite some key differences (outlined below), the majority of criminal *brands* identified by U.K and U.S.A participants were from America, as well.

This project has analysed the data from the U.K and U.S.A together, but it has observed tentative similarities and differences between the two that could be explored in further analysis. In the first instance, criminal brands from the U.S.A were just as well supported by demand in the U.K as on their home soil, but this was not a mutual relationship. Participants and museums in the U.S.A were not aware of, or at least did not display or discuss criminals who are popular in the U.K, such as the Kray Twins or Charles Bronson. Whereas infamous American brands of Charles Manson, John Wayne Gacy and Jeffrey Dahmer were just as popular on both sides of the Atlantic. This can be used as further support for an argument that transgressive imaginations are extremely filmic, and are predicated on branding, marketing and exposure with American characters being featured more frequently in internationally successful films.

Second, the two observation data sites in the U.S.A were equally as media influenced as their U.K counterparts, but demonstrated allegiances to different cultural forms. For example, *The Crime Museum*, Washington D.C, was almost entirely predicated on references to film and television, relying in some places on its audience being taught

through shared cultural references to these forms. The building had doubled as a television studio, and the museum had extensive *Crime Scene Investigation* like sections harking back in their styling to television shows that have shared that name. In the U.K, (American) film was matched in equal measure by our rich tabloid media heritage playing the role of these shared cultural reference points from which true crime can be exhibited, taught and learned.

In terms of the entertainmentization of museum spaces and knowledge experiences it seems that the U.S.A is slightly ahead in that regard as one might expect. Another cliché to be embraced is the commercial consciousness running deep in the American psyche. U.K participants were more focused on extremity than those from the U.S.A, who spoke more openly about monetary value, saleability and marketability. These issues were not ignored by U.K participants, but themes of financial viability as a motivator and money as a value were certainly more disguised.

Appendix 1 – Interview Schedule (Collectors)

Your collection

1) To start, in as much detail as possible, could you describe your murderabilia collection? (You might be willing to include things like, how many items do you have? What type? How active are you as a collector?)

2) Could you describe your favourite item in detail, and what qualities have made it your favourite? (You may wish to include information like, what killer is your favourite to collect? Is there a type of crime you favour?

3) How did your interest in collecting murderabilia start? (You may wish to include what your first item was)

4) Are there any criteria that would make an item more attractive to you, or a more reliable investment? How important is it that an item is/isn't likely to hold its value?

5) Where do you get your murderabilia from? (You may be able to include if it is mainly online or offline? From what particular websites? What is it about these outlets that make them better than others?)

6) Are these items on visual display in your home, or are they hidden away?

7) Does murderabilia form part of a wider collection for you, or do you only collect murder items?

8) Does your interest in crime extend beyond murderabilia? For example, are there any other outlets for your interest – such as violent films, forums, violent video games, etc.

9) Is there anything else that you think I might find interesting about your collection, or the practice of collecting? (Maybe a particular anecdote or occurrence that stands out in your mind?)

Murderabilia collecting in general

10) Why do you think people to collect murderabilia? (Perhaps it is because crime is inherently exciting, or because people are not exposed to it in their daily lives, or another reason?)

11) When buying murderabilia, have you noticed any patterns in the types of things people like to buy, and if so, what were they, and what was interesting about them? (For example, is there an excess of supply of a particular type of item? Do certain things sell quicker than others?)

12) There are some quite strong negative opinions regarding murderabilia from the media as well as some individual people. What has been your experience of this?

13) Is there anything else that you think I might find interesting about the murderabilia industry or the practice of collecting murderabilia in general?

Appendix 2 – Interview Schedule (Producers)

1) Is this a hobby or a business for you? Would you mind telling me what else that you do outside of this?

2) How did you get into this industry? (You might be willing to share things like what sparked your interest, what was the first type of product that you sold, was it difficult to get into the industry?)

3) How do you decide what to sell and what imagery to use on your products? (You might be willing to share things like what imagery is the most popular and why you think that is)

4) Have you noticed any purchasing patterns and if so, what were they, and what was interesting about them? (For example, are women drawn to a particular type of product over men? Are young people more interested than older? Do you have a best selling product? In what parts of the world are your products liked most?)

5) Why do you think people like your products? (perhaps it is because crime is inherently exciting, or because people are not exposed to it in their daily lives, or another reason?)

6) Might you consider branching out from your existing products and if you did, what things would you like to produce?

7) There are some quite strong negative opinions regarding murder-merchandise from the media as well as some individual people. What has been your experience of this?

8) Are you involved in any other aspects of murder-culture, or just sales? (for example, do you buy items yourself? Do you collect murderabilia? Do you partake in forum discussions? Do you go do murder attractions like museums?)

9) Are there any interesting anecdotes that you feel say a lot about your experience selling murder-merchandise?

10) Is there anything else that you think I might find interesting about the industry?

Appendix 3 – Participants

Aaron

Producer of murder merchandise. Early 30s, Male. The only producer to make his/her full time business out of crime products. Designs and produces mostly t-shirts featuring infamous serial killers (Manson, Dahmer), but is looking to expand. The only producer who hand-prints each reproduction. American, interviewed over telephone, 2014.

Amy

Producer of murder merchandise. Mid 20s, Female. Mostly sells her designs on greetings cards featuring infamous American serial killers with witty captions. Amy is a medical assistant as a day job, and treats murder cards as a side business. American, interviewed over telephone, 2014.

Grace

Collector of murderabilia. Mid 40s, Male, U.K. Mostly collects artefacts pertaining to American serial killers. Inherited some of her items and describes them as part of a family collection. Also cites the interest of her father and his influence on her upbringing as fuelling her interest in murderabilia. British, interviewed in person, 2014.

Harry

Collector of murderabilia. Early 40s, Male. Collects American serial killer items, particular focusing on more obscure characters like the Vampire Clan. Has built up and disbanded his collection several times. Was also the creator of one of the most famous serial killer fan sites until its closure part way through this project. Interviewed over telephone, 2014.

Holly

Producer of murder merchandise. Mid 40s, Female. Mostly paints oil and acrylic artwork of famous North American serial killers such as Jeffrey Dahmer, but also notorious British characters of Fred and Rose West. Does not collect murderabilia, but is an avid 'dark tourist'. American, interviewed over telephone, 2014.

Jake

Murderabilia collector who now exhibits his objects in a museum. Mid 50s, Male. Began with Nazi artefacts and then branched out into mainstream American serial killers. Recently, his collection has begun to focus on crime in the media. British, interviewed in person, 2014.

Lucy

Producer of murder merchandise. 40s, Female. Sells the widest variety of items from pens, to t-shirts, to notebooks, all ascribed with serial killer motifs and branding. Does not collect murderabilia herself, and got into production by producing non-murder objects first – using murder brands as a differentiator. American, interviewed over telephone, 2014.

Martin

Producer of murder merchandise. 50s, Male. Painter who has his artwork printed onto posters and clothing. Got into production by producing non-murder objects first – using murder brands as a differentiator from competitors. Is mostly interested in American serial killers. American, interviewed over telephone, 2014.

Sarah

Murderabilia collector who now exhibits her objects in a museum. 40s, Female. Began by writing to serial killers and quickly formed close personal connections with some of the most violent and infamous American murderers. Is more interested in 'death' than

‘crime’, and proudly describes herself as a thanatologist. American, interviewed in person, 2014.

Vivien

Murderabilia collector. 40s, Female. Artefacts usually pertain to policing, criminal justice and crime that has been covered in news or popular cultural media forms. Has an eclectic interest in crime that is far reaching – from American serial killers to medieval punishment. American, interviewed in person, 2014.

Appendix 4 – Consent Form

Morbid Culture Research Project

Lead researcher: Jack Denham

Supervisors: Dr. Ruth Penfold-Moucne & Dr. David Beer

Consent form

This form is for you to state whether or not you agree to take part in the study. Please read and answer every question. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

Have you read and understood the information leaflet about the study?	Yes ❒ No ❒
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the study?	Yes ❒ No ❒
Do you understand that the information you provide will be held in confidence by the research team?	Yes ❒ No ❒
Do you understand that you may withdraw from the study for any reason, without affecting any services you receive?	Yes ❒ No ❒
Do you understand that the information you provide may be used in future research?	Yes ❒ No ❒
Do you agree to take part in the study?	Yes ❒ No ❒
If yes, do you agree to your interviews being recorded?	Yes ❒ No ❒

(You may take part in the study without agreeing to this).

All data is held by The University of York, UK, in accordance with the Data Protection Act.

Your name (in BLOCK letters):

_____

Your signature:

_____

Interviewer's name:

_____

Date:

_____

Appendix 5 – Information Sheet

Morbid Culture Research Project: Information Sheet

Project outline:

This project aims to investigate public attraction to morbidity, and the markets trading in morbid merchandise. This includes anything from paintings by criminals, to music, to mementos from crime scenes, to mass-produced merchandise such as t-shirts or posters. This also encompasses a broad range of people including those who buy, sell, exhibit, or are just passionate about criminal culture. The research aims to understand, from a strictly neutral perspective, the cultural value of these objects as well as their importance to those who make criminal culture their personal hobby. The research is led by Jack Denham as part of a PhD project and is supervised by Dr. Ruth Penfold-Mounce and Dr. David Beer at the University of York, UK.

Confidentiality:

Your participation in this project is entirely confidential, so is all data that is collected.

Data storage:

The data will be stored, in accordance with the data protection act, offline on a secure University of York computer in the UK. Any print copies will be kept in a locked office at the University of York. Audio data (if you agree to be recorded) will be deleted within three months of this interview once it has been typed up. Print copies of the data will be deleted after there are no more publications to come from this project or after six years, whichever is sooner.

Frequently asked questions:

Why are you asking to record me? So I don't forget what's been discussed!

What does taking part involve? You simply need to have a conversation (between half an hour and an hour) about your role and interest in this type of culture. This process is called a semi-structured interview and is very informal; it can take place in a public place over a coffee for example.

What should I say in this interview? There are no specific questions in the interview, only conversation topics. You can talk about your views and experiences relating to any of the topics covered - you do not have to talk on any topic that makes you feel uncomfortable.

What shouldn't I say in this interview? You should not mention any criminal activity as if you do, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

Who can take part? Anyone who is involved in or even just interested in criminal culture can contribute.

Do I have to take part? No. Participation is entirely voluntary.

What if I change my mind? You have the unlimited right to withdraw your data up until the

What will my answers be used for? My PhD research in Sociology, Criminology and Cultural Studies over the next two years. When this research is published, anonymised quotations from the interview may be used to support the findings.

Who will you share my answers with? Unpublished data is only ever shared with the direct research team at the University of York. This encompasses myself, plus two supervisors. Anonymised quotations may be used in publications and will therefore be publically available.

Are there any risks involved with this research? No. Your participation consists of an informal conversation and your data is treated in confidentiality, this project has been reviewed by an ethics committee (ELMPS) at the University of York and is deemed safe.

How will I find out the results of the study? A non-technical summary of the research and findings will be made available to all participants by request - simply tick the box on the consent form and this will be sent to you on completion of the project in roughly two years.

What's in it for me? This research addresses morbid culture from a neutral perspective, unlike most news-media coverage. Beyond giving this culture academic exposure in a non-biased way, the benefit to you personally is limited.

Contact details:

If you would like any more information on this research, would like to make further contributions or withdraw your data after taking part, please use the contact details below.

Mr. Jack Paul Denham BA. MA. Department of Sociology, University of York, Heslington, York, North Yorkshire, UK. Jd604@york.ac.uk - +44 (0)7449 963296

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