HARTS & Minds

DINING OUT ON DAHMER: UNSTABLE STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE IN SERIAL KILLER CELEBRITY CULTURE

K. Charlie Oughton

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Abstract

This article will focus on filmic representations of the crimes of serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer.[1] Specifically, it will examine how these representations create tension between attempts to document the crimes in order to prevent similar repetitions whilst simultaneously reinforcing these atrocities' importance in the lives of those affected, in a form of what Johan Galtung has termed 'structural violence' and the diverse outcomes that can have.[2] This will be examined primarily through the fictionalisations *Dahmer* and *Raising Jeffrey Dahmer* and the documentary *The Jeffrey Dahmer Files*.

The article will begin by positing Dahmer as an antihero, establishing his place as a serial killer celebrity following the work of theorists Michael Stone in *The Anatomy of Evil* and David Schmid in *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture*. This will focus on the 2002 film representing Dahmer as a conflicted man who offends via charisma. It will be argued that the film's direction suggests the reinterpretation of Dahmer's crimes as feats to be applauded as evidence of his attempts to develop relationships, even if his actions are condemned. This discussion will utilise Judith Butler's conception of gender performativity to elucidate Dahmer's display of masculinity as a mechanism to leverage power over the other men with whom he associated.

Following this, the article will demonstrate that *Raising Jeffrey Dahmer* and *The Jeffrey Dahmer Files* constitute a re-evaluation of this mythos, imposing structural violence on those connected to Dahmer. It will discuss how Dahmer's representation in these texts bare closer semblance to genuine footage of him as a rather awkward man and will argue that interviews with his associates forces them to find commonality with him in order to understand the circumstances of their macabre association. As a result, and following from the theories of Jack Levin and Richard Tithecott, they will be demonstrated as being co-opted into a differing glamorisation, generating further structural violence by encouraging future serial killers and serial killer-related media.

The article will conclude that while the serial killer is still represented as an antihero, this is increasingly diversified into the representation of a complicated killer used to reaffirm both wish fulfilment and taboo. It will finally assert that more holistic depictions are socially vital both to prevent crime and to explore human endeavour.

Key Words: Horror, film, serial killer, celebrity, homosexual, biopic, cannibal, Jeffrey Dahmer

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Context

Structural violence, as elucidated by Johan Galtung, is the phenomenon through which social apparatus disrupts the ability of people to fulfil their basic needs.[3] In the context of this article it is used to signal to capitalist media practices whose motivating factor is profit over ethics. In doing so, this media exacerbates the victimisation of people connected with Jeffrey Dahmer and perpetuates cultures that encourage the celebration of true crime narratives. As Dahmer was a serial killer, necrophiliac, paedophile and cannibal whose aim was to incapacitate sexual partners in the hope of forcing them into a submissive sexual relationship, such a celebration raises a number of vital ethical concerns.

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Jeffrey Dahmer's cultural impact, and the structural violence this enacts on media cultures and the people connected with him, must first be understood by contextualising representations of his life and crimes in relation to other infamous serial killers, such as John Wayne Gacy and Ted Bundy. This will establish his comparative importance within popular culture, which can be arguably best gauged by publications such as the open-source website, *Wikipedia.com*, where its users choose how information is told and presented.[4] The site, as an indication of what popular culture indicates to be the hallmarks of 'success' in such crimes, ranks its serial killers using two primary scales: the quantity of victims they attacked and subjective ideation of the malevolence of their acts.[5]

This quantitative measurement of serial killers in celebrity culture is, however, misleading. Quantitative impact does not equate to cultural impact in terms of media reproduction. This most basic of measuring tools is inappropriate considering that the most famous serial killers, such as Dahmer, are often not those with the highest number of victims. While Dahmer's primary victim count is high for an American criminal, lesser-known figures (such as the Columbian Luis Garavito) committed far more crimes. Number alone is not the prime factor of interest in Western culture, and this is not simply the result of a language barrier or cultural ignorance, as the prominence of adapted narratives of Vlad III, Prince of Wallachia or Erzsebet Bathory (as Dracula and Elizabeth Bathory or Countess Dracula respectively) demonstrates. While both of the latter are said to have killed many, it is the nature of their crimes that give rise to their fame in modern cultures, with both being conceived as supposed vampires.

Alternatively, the qualitative scale of serial killers is expressed by Michael Stone's twenty-two point serial-killer profiling system, as described in his work *The Anatomy of Evil*. This is effectively the populist version of such a system, ranking the supposed severity of crimes from murder in self-defence through to perversion-based killings. The ratio-based denotation of the numerical scale effectively judges the acts by Western moral and cultural norms. It is the combination of the qualitative and quantitative elements of the killers' crimes that bestows cultural importance on them. As I will now demonstrate in respect of Jeffrey Dahmer's representation within media, this is because it underpins a process of the serial killer's deviation and indeed ascent from popular notions of humanity.

Dahmer as American icon
Moral bias is particularly pertinent when considering Dahmer as a sub-cultural icon in relation to other American serial killers. In *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture*, David Schmid has written of their cultural associations in terms of their deviant behaviour's impact on society by tracing how they are understood through pre-existing popular cultural iconography. I posit that Dahmer, like Gacy and Bundy, represents a negative reflection of the American Dream – the notion championing cultural productivity of the individual within the confines of patriarchy. It is based around the performed, socially ratified behaviour posited by Judith Butler in work such as *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*. Considering the American Dream in this way, each killer appeared at points to be socially acceptable in spite of their crimes, with Dahmer presenting in a controlled and articulate fashion in his court appearances and media interviews. This is clearly demonstrated by his first, televised court appearance and an image from it that was used as an illustration in Paula Chin's article on Dahmer in *People Magazine*. It has become one of the most famous images of him, as evinced by its proliferation on internet search engines. Chin's piece was published at the start of Dahmer's trial and featured a front cover photograph of Dahmer wearing a grey striped button-down shirt. His hair is short and he is staring forward, looking to the left of the camera. The connotations of the shirt are of formality and normalcy - this is alluded to in the first sentence of the strapline, which reads 'He was a quiet man who worked

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in a chocolate factory'.[6] The emphasis here is to convey a man who conforms to traditional appearance and behavioural norms, including regular participation in gainful employment. Dahmer, however, is different to the other killers as the visible signifiers of his image were projected onto him rather than being self-prepared. Indeed, his alcohol dependency led to functional difficulties and an erratic appearance throughout his life. In fact, Dahmer was given the shirt for that court appearance by the son of Patrick Kennedy, one of the officers who had been interviewing him, as is discussed in *The Jeffrey Dahmer Files.* This happened as Dahmer had complained about how grizzled he felt after questioning. He had also recently been dismissed from his job and had an unstable lifestyle, quite aside from the murders alluded to in the continuation of the strapline. The shirt gave him the appearance of ordinariness when he was anything but ordinary. The reproductive and editorial aspects of the internet nevertheless cut away this contextual information, leaving instead the image of the apparently clean cut young man, productive because of his degeneracy. It leaves the distinct impression that morality is no bar to iconicity or the inferred greatness that bestows.

Dahmer's Cultural Roles
The filmic representations discussed below portray several very different representations of the serial killer. Such representations have been discussed in the work of Joseph Grixti, Richard Tithecott, Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer in relation to the serial killer as artist, predator and social misfit.[7] Dahmer's productivity is caused by depictions of him varying from a shy, awkward loner through to someone who loved the idea of his own criminality. Each has a different style and hails from a different perspective, owing to its intended audience, varying from the faux documentary style familiar particularly to true crime aficionados through to the accentuated, poetic style of fictionalisation known to horror film fans. The overarching impact of these representations is overviewed in the opening of Grixti's paper regarding the ways serial killers may be perceived as archetypes: 'There is no longer any such thing as fiction or nonfiction, there is only narrative'.[8] In this sense, the relationships between representation and the real, from Dahmer's own shifting appearance and its replication within these films, to the inevitability of the film makers to try and fill in the gaps both for the point of understanding and of narrative, becomes contested. As Jeffrey and his parents' interviews with Stone Phillips for *NBC News* illustrate where they discussed such varied topics as Jeffrey's mother's pregnancy, even the apparent facts of the case are disputed. These disputes may arise from anything from differing interpretations of events such as Jeffrey's personality as a child through to withheld information, such as Jeffrey's refusal to discuss some of the details of his crimes publicly. The following films, therefore, represent a kaleidoscope of interpretations based on the very different ways the man and his crimes have themselves been seen within first-hand material, from the unbelievably grotesque but true advent of his necrophilia through to his potentially surprising yet quiet restraint.

Dahmer had the macabre distinction of also being a cannibal in addition to his crimes as a paedophile and murderer. The impact of this is obvious in sensationalist filmic representations of his life, such as *The Secret Life: Jeffrey Dahmer* and the more recent *Dahmer vs. Gacy*, both of which focus heavily on the part ironic, part deadly serious glorification of his crimes. These tropes are common to horror film's subgenres and have been discussed as a central aspect of fan appreciation within academic discourse, which is: '[a] deadly serious undertaking [whose] seriousness can never be openly acknowledged. The gross-out aficionado savours his sense of complicity when the values of a smug social stratum, from which he feels himself excluded, are systematically trashed and ridiculed.'[9] As this suggests, the film makers highlight these aspects of the narrative to appeal to their audiences in the knowledge that their very interest in the figures represented is considered anti-social. It is particularly the case in *Dahmer vs. Gacy* which combines the comic and ironic death-match

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subgenre of fantastical horror with exploitation of the iconography of both killers. Dahmer is depicted as per his media interview with Stone Phillips for *NBC NEWS*, with aviator glasses and a mid-length hairstyle while the extremity of his crimes are depicted and highlighted with parody through the use of erotic extra-diegetic music. The effect is an ironic yet indulgently 'sick' depiction that primarily reflects an imagined and maniacal monster, rather than the troubled, shy man the killer otherwise was, as reflected largely in *The Secret Life: Jeffrey Dahmer*. These, however, are clearly not intended to be understood as serious character portrayals (contrary to *Dahmer Vs. Gacy*'s narrative, there is no such government attempt to reanimate the killers' DNA). They are aimed squarely at niche audiences who will appreciate the gleeful, anti-establishment seediness and periodic dark humour because the outlook is part of their lives despite their otherwise 'normal' existence and encourages them to celebrate that fact.[10] However, if one considers structural violence as communication that can encourage the participation of wider audience demographics in the consumption and continuing desire for serial killer narratives, other, more rounded depictions of Dahmer have more importance. These include *Dahmer*, *The Jeffrey Dahmer Files* and *Raising Jeffrey Dahmer*. Each of these representations highlight, commodify and reinforce the cultural significance of the figure of the serial killer as citizen.

What kind of a citizen is the serial killer? It is appropriate here to apply Schmid's discussion of celebrity directly to Dahmer. Schmid's discussion, detailed in *Natural Born Celebrities*, focuses on what he calls the 'multi-accentuality' of serial murder.[11] Borrowing the term from V. N. Voloshinov, Schmid argues how the images of serial killers are used to support 'a wide variety of ideological agendas' as a result of their continuously increasing 'knownness'.[12] This knownness is in itself, as Schmid describes, fraught with paradox as it incorporates the paradoxical projected emotions of the public varying from adoration to repulsion. Therefore, the question of what kind of celebrity a serial killer is becomes easier to answer if we think both of the historical and modern conceptions of the word. In line with the modern (and somewhat cynical) conception, Dahmer is a celebrity of sorts on the basis of being infamous and known to audiences from horror film aficionados through to true-crime enthusiasts and art house frequenters, in line with Schmid's thesis. The reason for his fame is, perversely, more akin to more traditional connotations of the word 'celebrity' as relating to someone who has done something of distinction, in line with Chris Rojek's theories as discussed in his work, *Celebrity*. In this light, Dahmer's talent is seen to have transcended Christian and secular notions of death by actually epitomising them on meta and concrete levels. On a meta level of structural violence, the idea of Dahmer as a person becomes transcendent owing to the media interest in his crimes. He died twenty years ago, yet films are still being made about his life. Far from being the preserve of subcultural aficionados, *The Jeffrey Dahmer Files* is popular enough to have earned prominent positioning on the paid-for, mainstream distribution platform Netflix. Furthermore, it was accepted for, and received critical appraisal at, prestigious mainstream showcases such as the London Film Festival. The Dahmer name, a signifier of celebrity with connotations of the cultural intrigue the killer's case generated, has come to denote cultural importance in and of itself. The name itself has attained cache (used in the hoarding sense of the term) wherein possession of the artefacts or knowledge of Dahmer confers a sense of cultural and indeed sub-cultural expertise on whatever the product may be, as well as on the person who bears it. It has become a totem of that paradoxical celebrity.

This form of serial killer celebrity is also expressed on a concrete level through Dahmer's calm, impassive stare as seen during his courtroom appearances - his actions had apparently left him unaffected (other than through voicing empathy with the families). He is seen to have achieved a certain mastery over fears of morality as well as a psychological mastery beyond secular realms of human ideation. As Cameron and Frazer have discussed, the obsession with

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death is key to overcoming fear of it and thus transcending its constricting impacts on human behaviour, as 'this urge to authorship is also connected with Enlightenment individualism, - the construction of self as narrative persona, as the hero of the text, as the author of an authorized version of one's life'.[13] This, they state, actually links killers to the supposed masters of imagination and progression, the cultural leaders of the Enlightenment. Moreover, Dahmer stated that he 'wanted death for [himself]' in his courtroom statement, as seen in *The Trial of Jeffrey Dahmer* (Magnum Video, 1992). As a result, Dahmer became associated with nonchalance in the face of the finality of the human condition and indeed one who acted to enjoy the physical exploration of corporeality both as ideation and as a social function. As a murderer whose crimes reflected philosophical debates of selfhood as reflected in Foucault's views on normality and abnormality in works such as *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, he became iconic of acceptance and refusal of the ultimate demonstrable outcome of consciousness. He has cheated what, for many, is the inevitable invisibility of erasure in death by becoming obsessed with creating its paradox. Dahmer remains and we know his name.[14]

It is my contention that the first multi-audience full-length feature on Dahmer presents the man in the mould of a superhero narrative. In *Dahmer* (the then largely unknown) Jeremy Renner plays the killer from his late teenage years through to the time of his murders. Dahmer is portrayed as a paradoxical anti-hero, due mainly in part to Renner's appearance and characterization. Renner's Dahmer is not just the gawky, awkward person seen in the Dahmer home videos in *Biography - Jeffrey Dahmer: The Monster Within*, although this aspect of him is reflected, but a handsome and publicly self-assured and charismatic young man who, if readers will pardon the phrase, is able to bend others to his will.

This strength of personality represents the notion of gendering as a social construct as described by Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter*: 'The naming is at once the setting of a boundary and also the repeated inculcation of a norm'.[15] In this sense, by taking control of the dialogue in the situation, the social order itself is brought into existence. As represented in *Dahmer*, his command of his victims can be considered the epitome of masculinity, so fantastical is his level of dominance. This remains true even when his more obviously perverse actions are depicted, such as the (factual) incident where his father, Lionel, discovers Jeffrey is using a box once belonging to him for storage of his own materials, which in reality, was the severed head and genitalia of one of his victims. In a hidden compartment Lionel had stored a ring exchanged with a former girlfriend and he wishes to see it again. In Jeffrey's hands in the filmic version, the box stores the cellophane-wrapped, severed head. Jeffrey protects his secret by presenting an image of virile masculinity, claiming that the box's contents are pornography – a socially acceptable taboo. His father accepts his explanation and leaves the room enabling Jeffrey to replace the body part with publications that (without close analysis) act as an appropriate alibi. This sequence represents a perversion of the idealised relationship between father and son. Lionel's ring is a symbol of Christian marriage and its connotation of love, suggesting his desire to share his memory with his son is a marker of Jeffrey's emotional maturity. Furthermore, Lionel's acceptance that the box now contains Jeffrey's pornography indicates his acceptance of his son's sexual maturity, if also his displeasure that the materials might upset Jeffrey's grandmother. The sexual object resulting from death supplants the one connoting the possibility of procreation within marriage and Jeffrey's behaviour is posited to the audience as the more masculine, controlling pursuit.

However, this aggressive masculinity is not the only important aspect of Dahmer's character. In terms of structural violence, of equal import is his manipulative nature, and in his representation in *Dahmer*, this is seen to make him more relatable. Police testimony in *The Jeffrey Dahmer Files* states that Dahmer was perceived as 'a honey', or someone popular, among the local gay community and that men wanted to 'take care' of him. At the same time, however, there are also connotations of the notion of a 'honey pot', with the suggestion that

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Dahmer's generosity was part of his popularity. In an interview with officer Pat Kennedy in *The Jeffrey Dahmer Files*, he stated that Dahmer was known for this generosity partly because he did not murder all those whom he was attracted to or for whom he bought drinks. As a result of this, Dahmer was also seen as a caring figure. This notional emotionality translates into a modus operandi and enshrines him as a more mysterious and engaging character. For example, in the first few minutes of the 2002 film, Dahmer propositions a stranger to pose naked for photographs to satisfy his urges. This is actually a rather desperate and sinister act, but it appears here as one of bravado owing to Renner's self-assured delivery and the filming style. His control of the situation is highlighted by the canted camera angle, which ensures he commands the scene's gaze and therefore the stranger's acceptance of his proposal. The stranger soon becomes Dahmer's victim, yet the camera's viewpoint suggests that the audience should be awed by Dahmer's prowess, Butlerian performance of masculinity, and strength of personality rather than feeling sympathy for his victim.

Like any superman, however, he is not shown without vulnerability. This is important because, as Butler implies with her notion of that gender is a 'naturalised effect', the ideal of masculinity he represents encompasses versions that are alternative to the traditional impression of manhood as being strong and emotionless, or inhuman and unheroic.[16] This is particularly evident in the depiction of Dahmer's encounter with his final would-be victim, Tracey Edwards (named Rodney within the narrative). Dahmer meets Rodney while the latter is working at a shop and the actors' effective chemistry ensures Dahmer appears instantly charmed by the man's friendly, playful, coquettish attitude. The likeability of the representation of Rodney's character acts as a conduit for the audiences' own attitude towards Dahmer. We see Rodney through Dahmer's eyes and vice versa, which humanises the latter while the shot and reverse shot technique highlights the interplay in the actors' faces. What is more, this alteration of tone encourages the audience to hope the relationship will develop, even if they likely know the factual history of Edwards' attempted murder and his beau's subsequent, final arrest. Dahmer even attempts to gain favour by providing for his new sweetheart, purchasing a knife from him to please the store's owner. This effect continues in the scene where the pair has adjourned to Dahmer's apartment and they attempt to engage in a romantic dance. The scene is shot firstly from behind and then from above, giving it an element of awkwardness in verisimilitude to the real killer's character. It contrasts his notional otherness against the possibility of hope. As such, it is a direct confirmation that the desires and qualities that Dahmer had in real life were key to his alienation and discomfort.

In this sense, however, Renner's characterisation of Dahmer in *Dahmer* (2002) is also one of the familiar and unfortunate trope of the homosexual as aberration. His portrayal here is not of one who delights in his own debauchery, but rather one who does so in order to end his own isolation. It is murder as an attempt to reach out, but it instead becomes a depiction of inner sadness.[17] Even in scenes where the murders take place, while there are salacious close-ups on Dahmer with the instruments he used to subdue his victims, there are an equal number of low-lit close-ups showing the lack of violence in the murders themselves. Furthermore, the shots in which Dahmer lays his head on the chest of one of his victims suggest that he treated the bodies comparatively caringly until disposing of or eating them. In the film, Renner as Dahmer is shown lying on top of the bodies as Dahmer did in real life, and indeed Dahmer commented when questioned in his interview with Stone Phillips that while branded a 'torture killer' by Michael Stone's framework in *The Anatomy of Evil* as detailed on the *Deadly Desires* episode of documentary series *Most Evil*, he killed in the way that he felt was as humane as possible. In this sense, Dahmer is presented as a vampiric romantic hero who kills to keep those he wants with him by giving them a form of life within him. It's a far more attractive suggestion than the reality that his desires were primarily aesthetic and sexual; emotional expression being arguably thwarted by internalised homophobia. The latter is

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depicted graphically in the final sections of the film that follow him walking into the woods at the back of his family home alone.

The film's plotting lends him an abstract, abject quality that reassures the viewer that objectifying Dahmer is appropriate as it is suggested this is how Dahmer thought of himself. The audience witnesses Renner's character performing desolation in order to understand the lack of connection Dahmer actually had, mirroring his famously blank face and bald, yet emotionless, courtroom apology to his secondary victims – the families left behind. It is an image that encourages the audience to consume him in theoretical replication of how he consumed his victims.

Co-opting victims into narratives

This abjection is also explored in relation to Dahmer's family in *Raising Jeffrey Dahmer*, developed with the co-operation of Dahmer's father and step-mother Lionel and Shari Dahmer. The film is an attempt to reflect Dahmer's character, his father's interventions and the impact of Dahmer's crimes on the family's lives. It illustrates the structural violence that can happen when families become co-opted into victim recompense narratives fuelled by capitalism as represented through character portraits and the implications of them.

Raising Jeffrey Dahmer portrays the killer as an insubstantial man very different to the notional celebrity murderer. The narrative consists of re-enactments of the events surrounding Jeffrey Dahmer's life and that of his family. Using a series of flashbacks and flashforwards, the narrative's timeframe positions the account as being from the perspective of Lionel Dahmer, with earliest (chronological) sequences showing Lionel receiving the telephone call that Jeffrey had been born through to final sequences in which Lionel and Shari watch as Jeffrey gives evidence in court.

Between these, the structure of the film switches back and forth between Jeffrey's childhood, early adulthood and arrest for murder, using contrasting filming styles in these segments to show Jeffrey in different aspects. For example, in some parts of the film, the directors use a slight hazing effect, which makes him appear somewhat ghostly. Particularly in the sequences representing his visits to Alcoholics Anonymous, it forms an externalisation of his lack of mental clarity and is diametrically opposed to the self-possessed hero-villain of *Dahmer*. This latter Dahmer is presented with a constantly dreamy facial expression and appears totally unable to comprehend the severity of his actions – further exemplified by what was intended to be the original title of the feature, *I'm Sorry, Dad*. His final appearance conveys the notion that he never truly matured beyond childhood as Lionel is shown helping his son tying a necktie after his son has forgotten how to do so. It manifests as an exoneration of Jeffrey Dahmer's relatives from the charges of neglect attributed to them for miscalculating the limits of his eventual crimes.

The notion of the unstable family unit investigated here is not the common one found in true crime narratives, such as that of Henry Lee Lucas, where the family are detailed and vilified. In *Raising Jeffrey Dahmer,* the misdemeanours or eccentricities of the family members are detailed, but the film views them from a sympathetic perspective. They are presented as ordinary people coping in extraordinary circumstances and the piece moves from a focus on the individuals themselves to detailing their treatment by the media. This can be seen from the initial scenes in the film, which focus on the Dahmer family's reaction to the news of his final arrest, a period of time when his father and stepmother were the subject of intense media coverage. These recreation scenes are filmed in full focus, often using a handheld camera. As a result they are consistent with Bill Nichols's notion of observational documentary intimacy, as stated in his work *Introduction to Documentary*. Nichols stresses the non-intervention of the film maker using the fly-on-the-wall style of film making, unlike Nichols' notions of other documentary modes such as the poetic and participatory. The

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emphasis is instead on recording rather than using the camera to imply additional subtexts such as moral judgements, supposedly representing what Nichols calls 'the lived experience of actual people we happen to witness'.[18] This filmic emphasis is particularly important considering the scene content, which is filmed as if to imply that reality and a lack of a moral judgement when in fact a moral subtext is precisely what is framing the narrative. Within minutes of the film's opening, the audience is shown a re-enactment of Lionel Dahmer receiving the call that Jeffrey has been arrested. This mise en scene connotes Lionel's personal purity – he is wearing a clinician's white coat and is in his stable, working environment. Contrasted against this is the content of the call. He is informed his son has been arrested and enquires whether the cause is paedophilia as per Jeffrey's previous conviction. This supposed personal purity of hygiene, in terms of his public service career and his interest in his son's affairs, is in itself in contrast to allegations that Dahmer's parents were partly to blame for their son's crimes. It was alleged that because of their primary concerns with their divorce, mental health issues and careers, their son's upbringing suffered, as will be discussed momentarily.[19] In the film, Lionel and Shari are then doorstopped by press officials demanding details about Jeffrey. Showing Lionel's obvious distress elicits sympathy from the audience and thus the film subsumes the importance of the serial killer narrative by focusing on framing the family as fellow victims from that first sequence to the closing reel. Indeed, so heavily is the narrative focused on representing Lionel's perspective that the final observational titles conclude with information relating to Lionel and Shari's continuing union rather than any of the case's other outcomes. Within this narrative timeframe, the scenes switch As a result, the film avoids the audience's potential suspension of sympathy in favour of highlighting the suburban and familial stability that Jeffrey, and later the media, disrupted, though did not destroy.

That said, it is not the case that the film ignores this alleged neglect. Rather, it is sidestepped, with the blame for the ensuing social damage caused to the Dahmer family placed firmly at the door of the media. The question of Dahmer's potentially damaging childhood isolation is represented in light of his reflected celebrity and shown in scenes where his parents watch a television talk show focusing on the murders. The notion of the serial killer as a necessary product of a detrimental and unstable upbringing is reinforced when the guests on the show offer anecdotes about their experiences with the Dahmer family. In each instance, the information focuses on alleged parental abuse and neglect. Indeed, parental elusivity is a trope in popular serial killer narratives, such as those concerning criminals Charles Manson and Henry Lee Lucas. In these instances, the parents may be spoken of or even seen, but rarely contribute in a caring way to their offspring's upbringing. As a result, the parents are transformed from being disinterested to being represented as archetypes of almost mythical cruelty, so heavy is the toll of their emotional neglect. The representation harks back to the traditional nature vs. nurture debate, which posits that the present and future behaviour of the child, in this case their criminality, is a direct consequence of either their developmental environment or an inherent biological trait. This is clearly shown in the film when each chat-show contributor speaks in silhouette, supposedly for their protection, and is repeatedly praised by the talk-show host for their bravery in providing supposed evidence. The implication is that they could be in danger as a result of this information and, as Dahmer Jr. is in custody, the danger could be Lionel and Shari's own potential desire for retribution. The importance of this for the film is the representation of the couple. Lionel and Shari elicit sympathy from the film-viewing audience by appearing incredibly supportive of each other and of Jeffrey despite his deeds, as well as being shocked by the accusations made against them. Indeed, in the final scene they emerge to meet the press to discuss 'Jeff' – the truncated, familial referent for their son rather than the signifier known to the public as a murderer. In presenting this sequence of events, the film enables them to reassert some control over the

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overall narrative of Jeffrey's life even as it forces them to relive the impact of the events on their own.

As a result of this celebrification of Lionel and Shari, *Raising Jeffrey Dahmer* enables understanding of the structural violence that engulfed the family as being a form of Devil's pact necessitated by the media attention they received. They became part of the story owing to their emotional support, and attempts to facilitate understanding, of their son the killer.

Cautionary tales create celebrities

The Jeffrey Dahmer Files takes this structural violence to its logical conclusion. It is a documentary reflecting Jeffrey Dahmer's life through his interactions with people he knew at the time he was arrested for murder. These people include his former neighbour, the officer who interviewed him, staff from the entertainment venues where he found some of his victims and the personnel who sold him the barrels in which he dissolved the bodies. The film encourages the respondents' role in this structural violence by showing sequences in which they detail Dahmer's crimes while sections of his life are recreated. By discussing their involvement they become characters publicly trapped within an at times dramatically lit and darkly poetic reimagining of his story.

The documentary is conspicuous for a number of reasons, namely the absence of involvement from his parents (who were contracted to exclusive involvement with *Raising Jeffrey Dahmer*) and the lack of footage of Jeffrey himself. Instead, it focuses on the mythos of Dahmer within the polarities of a deranged loner and genius and gains its effect from the respondents' emotive contributions. The film uses what Shaun Kimber, in his serial killer filmic study, *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer,* has noted as the typical trope of reflecting the power of the killer by demonstrating the impact they have on others and, probably owing to their anticipation of involvement with the project, their contributions are hyperbolic. [20]

In terms of these polarities, the most famous is that of Pat Kennedy, one of the police officers who interviewed Dahmer after his final arrest. A familiar face to Dahmer aficionados, the focus of his contribution is the relationship he developed with the killer. He emphasises how intelligent he perceives Dahmer to have been, both at the time of the murders and in retrospect. This places Dahmer's image within the cultural trope of the master criminal despite Dahmer's own insistence that he was of average intelligence. Dahmer contradicted his own assertion of his (Dahmer's) normative intelligence by informing Kennedy the case would make his police work famous. This apparent flattery appears to have facilitated a relationship that Kennedy states resulted in Dahmer having a more comfortable experience while in local custody. This is in contrast to the other polarity represented by a staff member at the bar where Dahmer picked up some of his victims. This contributor discusses Dahmer not in the hyperbolic, newspaper-ready way of describing a monster or of his fascination with the case, but in the very honest, emotive manner of one who is angry and upset as a result of mourning. For all the subject's personal flamboyance, it is this interview that steers the documentary towards its other perspective – that of Dahmer as social outcast.

There is, however, another contributor whose shifting tone and narrative represents both the positive and negative effects of structural violence within serial killer narratives. Pamela Bass was Dahmer's neighbour at the Oxford Apartments at the time of his final arrest, and her narrative places him on an oscillating scale of serial killer as both monster and normal man. Her contribution is ghoulish and yet presented in a factual manner. She is depicted in the same way as the other interviewees but gives two very different styles of information. At times she gives factual accounts of the events around the time of Dahmer's arrest, such as discussing the smell of the corpses in his apartment and detailing the grief tourists who converged on the area when the information about the murders was made public. She was co-opted into the narrative initially by her own behaviour, stating that she was able to charge

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visitors to hold crockery held by Dahmer while asserting that the attention brought by the case caused her great distress.

However, her most significant contribution is pure conjecture – her concern that a single sandwich Dahmer gave her contained human flesh. There is no evidence at all for this assertion, and indeed it contradicts Dahmer's known intention to eat the meat himself. Yet her commentary alters as the film progresses, first stating that the contents were a possibility before stating that this was objective truth. This clearly traumatised woman's testimony documents her emotion as a measure of the outrageousness of Dahmer's actions. Her manner moves between confusion and distress, suggesting that she felt Dahmer had either no intellectual understanding of basic morality, being amoral rather than simply evil, or gave her the meat as a knowing and malicious prank.[21]

Through her testimony, additional deeds are also attributed to Dahmer that project on him a quality that transforms him into an adaptable cultural cipher beyond his crimes – a notionally contagious creep. This becomes more obvious if we question the significance of the woman potentially eating human meat, as it has clearly caused her no physical ill effects. The conclusion is the notion of moral infection. It is a theme of more recent horror narratives as indicated by Jack Halberstam (as Judith Halberstam) in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, that the monster begins to become indistinguishable from the rest of society, 'because the enemy becomes harder to locate and looks more and more like the hero'.[22] Halberstam goes on to argue that 'monstrosity' has a 'productivity which leads to numerous avenues of interpretation'.[23] Rather than being simply theoretical, I further argue that Bass's statements hint that monstrosity is itself structurally contagious and transferrable through understanding. The parallels between eating the proffered sandwich – a gift of sustenance in the supposed form of human flesh guaranteeing her enshrinement into myth – and the 'refreshments' of the Judeo-Christian narrative of communion are obvious. By placing her experiences within this framework, the film absolves Bass of blame. She took the food in good faith. This is indicated by the observational titles at the end of the film that inform the audience that she recovered from serial drug misuse and reappraised her life after her contact with Dahmer - she was ultimately 'saved' by this experience. While this may appear an inconsequential detail at first, as her drug misuse was not connected to Dahmer, the title is a convention used within other true crime narratives to confer the idea of victimhood on a person.[24] She was coded by the narrative as guilty by association with Dahmer and as a result of her confessed drug use, ensuring that the meat becomes symbolic of punishment for her sins of involvement with the case. However, by bearing witness and demonstrating her recovery by taking part in the narrative she has proved that the killer as villain has been materially vanquished.

Yet, just as Dahmer is mythologised, so too are all of those on whom he had an impact. He continues to influence their lives through the continual media attention. They become part of Dahmer's mythos because they are not faceless; the camera encourages the audience to empathise with them by showing their emotions and linking them with Dahmer. This is the result of Dahmer's legacy in the context of structural violence**.** The media treatment of Dahmer's case brought the exceptional - the person who was able to break the rule of human decency – to the lives of ordinary people. In turn, the people he touched recreate this exceptionality by participating in the documentary, which in itself becomes part of the canon of Dahmer films and other media, thereby granting fame and 'immortality' to all of those involved with the medias' focus on the case. This 'Dahmer' cannon of infamy is itself incorporated into the entire pop cultural landscape's focus on celebrity and scandal.

What is more, the participation of these other connected people and victims in the film demonstrates how their involvement with the case continues to affect and compress their lives. From Pat Kennedy, the former policeman who used Dahmer's case as a teaching aid for

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his university criminology students, to the neighbour who shared a passing acquaintance, the media encourages them to revisit the crimes afresh. Dahmer's last murder was committed in 1991; *The Jeffrey Dahmer Files* was released in 2012 - a time lapse of 21 years. As a result, they are encouraged to view their lives as reorganised through the narrative of the serial killer and thus are implicated in carrying that timeframe forward. Their very existence is affirmed only by the proximity to criminality that brought them into contact with him.

That these relationships refocus attention on the serial killer is a concern of criminologist, Jack Levin. While an academic, Levin has also commented on serial killers for many mainstream broadcast outlets including the *Killing Spree* documentary series as well as having presented lectures to the American government. Levin is of key importance as his numerous appearances in media incorporate his ethical focus in relation to serial killer sensationalism in contrast to other true crime professional celebrities such as Robert Ressler (who focuses on profiling) and because Levin's appearance is so performative as to deviate from the narrative and make it appear more as metafiction that encourages the audiences' interactions as a result of the tropes that he, Levin, represents.[25]

As Levin notes in an article written with James Alan Fox for *USA Today*, the focus of many true crime narratives and the case of Dahmer in particular is on celebrating the killer rather than celebrating the lives of the victims. The victims are presented primarily through the (often sordid) details that brought them into contact with the killer. They are classified by their typology in terms of the reflected modus operandi. Sex workers are spoken of in terms of their supposed disposability, other victims are discussed in terms of the physicality that attracted the killer and others' identities are often dismissed through sheer lack of narrative focus. That this narrative suggestion exists is key concern for Levin, who argues that by focusing serial crime narratives on the lives of criminals, the criminals are symbolically (and it is implied, unethically) lauded. What is more, Levin argues that lauding the criminals' narratives and their victims' lives in relation to the narratives of those killers is actually dangerous as the narratives then add to the serial killer cult and may perpetuate a media-to-crime cycle by suggesting people can become famous by committing violent acts, as he and Fox continue: 'Not only does the superstar status some have accorded [these murderers] help to motivate [them], but it also can inspire countless other ignored and alienated Americans to become copycat killers in order to achieve their own degrees of infamy'.

The *USA Today* article admonishes media sources for encouraging serial killers while also suggesting the need to instead focus resources on safeguarding potential victims. Furthermore, Levin's own choice to be involved with these narratives appears to result from a wish to redress this balance by advocating on behalf of society by directing the public to reflect on the ethical considerations of the media. However, as David Schmid has discussed in *Natural Born Celebrities,* Levin's action may lead simply to the perpetuation of criminal culture, stating, 'Apparently, even the most explicit rejection and condemnation of serial killer celebrity finds itself implicated in (and perhaps even unwittingly encouraging the growth of) that celebrity'.[26]

Indeed, Levin's own involvement also problematises his theoretical approach, because the redress of ethics is attempted through one of the very mediums that create celebrities – television. Indeed, while Levin's intention is to condemn serial killing through his participation in programmes such as through his discussion of Dahmer, his very appearance arguably exacerbates Dahmer's very mythos. This is because Levin can be interpreted as a genre character that complicates the paradoxical fictionalization and ratification of the serial killer narrative.

Levin is an extremely memorable, straight-talking communicator with a strong screen presence who can facilitate largely non-academic audiences' information retention. While his background as an expert legitimizes the programme, his appearance adds a level of subtext.

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His bouffant white hair and fulsome handlebar moustache are extremely theatrical and replicate the style associated with mad scientist characters spanning from science fiction to horror from Gene Wilder's characterisation of Frankenstein through to *Back to the Future*'s Doc Brown. Because of this intertextual fictionalisation and his own sheen of theatricality, Levin adds a performative quality to the ethos of the programme itself, diluting the very vital reality his presence is intended to underpin.

The effects of this unintentional fictionalisation are also compounded by the genres they replicate, such as horror and science fiction. In these genres, the (mad) scientist creates the killer or develops an interest in him. The killer may reciprocate (as the real Dahmer did) with interest in the scientist's explanation of his behaviour. Within both fiction and fact, the relationship is compelling for the audience because of the exploration it affords. Indeed, the characters' justification of their interests in each other gives the audience moral justification for voyeurism for their own betterment. In traditional science-fiction, this justification can be purely in the interests of science, but the tone of these popular documentaries (as per Stephen King's elucidation of the difference between science fiction and horror in *Danse Macabre*) appeals to emotion rather than theoretical framework and neurological explanation, although the latter elements may be present. The documentaries encourage viewers to accept the rhetoric rather than logical argument of the scientist, undermining the scientists' supposed raison d'être. Because of the structural violence inherent within the media process, Levin's own image and feelings as depicting within his work becomes a key text and as a result problematises the very information sources he hopes will redress the wrongs he analyses, highlighting the structural violence in popular culture that reaffirms the celebrification of the serial killer.

Levin's appearance as a character within the narrative alters how we may understand the process of celebrification of Dahmer within all of the media in which he exists and in terms of its relationship with the audience. For this we can develop Tithecott's notion of Dahmer as a 'machine', literally something mechanical that functionally produces outputs.[27] To do this, it is worthwhile considering the opening of Grixti's paper on Dahmer, wherein he cites another text amidst another text, stating: '"There is no longer any such thing as fiction or nonfiction, there is only narrative"'.[28] Just as this quotation is intertextual yet used here to convey its own point, the same thing occurs with Dahmer. In each of his representations and in terms of the way Levin discusses him, he remains a complete paradox because his mythos is at its very core structurally violent because he was real and at the same time archetypical. On one hand, as Cameron comments (p. 62), the figure of the serial killer has strong links to the enlightenment ideation of the artist as one who discards social norms in order to transcend life and live based on aesthetic ideals – what Tithecott describes as '[verging] on the sacred', the idea literally reconfiguring notions of humanity by altering the paradigm of moral normality imposed by the text that is the Bible.[29] However, the key thing to remember about Dahmer across all of his representations is not him presented as a high-minded philosopher, but as someone, perhaps best demonstrated by Renner's characterisation, who used the bodies he collected for pleasure. As Dahmer stated in his interview with Stone Phillips, he attempted to create his sex zombies just not in the service of scientific daring do, but because he wanted someone who would pleasure his needs without requiring stimulation in return. It is the ideation versus the actualisation of companionship itself. The precise level of our 'over-identification' with Dahmer, to use Seltzer's term, is based on the idealisations of notions such as love, which can, in reality, can be profoundly mundane.[30] It was so profoundly boring for Dahmer that he tried to turn his companions into zombies partly so that they would not leave, but also partly so that they would just shut up. It is my belief that Dahmer transcends the narratives of most serial killers because he did not kill out of hate, as Tithecott observes, and because he was so much more concerned with aspirational human emotions and yet it was

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these very emotions that led to his cannibalism – a behaviour so unusual to many contemporary western cultures as to cause participants to be conceptualised as non-human by most of their societies.[31]

In this respect, the structural violence associated with Dahmer is in fact very similar to the way he is consumed as a cultural icon, the cannibal, the aesthetic hero or the loser. This can be most correctly understood through Grixti's comments regarding aligning serial killers to horror iconography. Rather than these being as Grixti puts it, 'beasts beneath' the skin whose function is 'a way of distancing them from what we popularly believe as the norm', the icons in fact bring these people closer, philosophically, to us.[32] Each representation is a meme-like snapshot that can be navigated away from and yet also contains pluralistic readings that makes them so potent. This is what makes Levin's presence a cipher for the general population. Levin is simply one whose very humanity leads to his interest in this other human being, but this interest and his own stylised physical appearance in itself becomes the text that encourages further investigation by the audience; the 'mad' scientist is the aspect of all who of us who applaud and yet are terrified by the lengths to which we may inspired to do things as a result of our complicated expectations for love and whom, in turn, reflect our expectations to others as the norm. We focus on the behaviours of others who expand what we see as conceptions of humanity regardless of whether they are moral or not, yet will also seek to realign ourselves with these people through irony, mundanity, or any other means possible to leave a link to ourselves as being the ones who can see beyond cultural norms when we choose to do so. In the digital age of easily creatable media, we can then become cultural commentators ourselves. It is our wish and our terror to be both ordinary and extraordinary and we look to pre-existing models to see how to achieve that state; Frankenstein reassembled of the pieces of the pre-existing creature, after all.

Conclusion

As this article has demonstrated, the case of Jeffrey Dahmer indicates how serial killer narratives can inflict structural violence on their stakeholders, from the families of those involved through to the consumers of the media themselves. Dahmer in particular is notable as his presentation is very different depending on the context in which he is viewed, ranging from suave aesthete through to isolated social misfit. What is clear from these narratives is that pop culture and media fractures Dahmer and other serial killers' public perception and identity. Owing to the differing media consumed by different audiences, we are offered either salaciously exploitative stories or documentaries that at least try to understand these criminals' mind sets. As has been demonstrated, however, both the demystification of serial killers and an increased focus on ethics becomes a voyeuristic enterprise simply because the criminals render them extraordinary.

As a way of progressing the representation of the moral deconstruction of structural violence, this article asserts the adoption of presenting such programmes in a cultural studies framework. By reflexively referencing the themes and tropes already inherent in true crime narratives, audience empathy and interest can be gained while also highlighting the pitfalls of its representation. After all, every good story has a beginning, middle and end – it may just be that we need to emphasise the closing credits as much as the edit.

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Notes

[1] The title's reference to notion of 'dining out' is used in relation to the idiom regarding providing for one's self due to others' interest in one's experiences (here, contact with the cannibal killer). Here it is seen as an economically useful yet psychologically harmful asset. The article itself will not focus specifically on Dahmer's cannibalism.

[2] Cf. Johan Galtung's 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research' in *Journal of Peace Research,* 6:3 (1969), 167-191.

[3] See Galtung

[4] *Wikipedia.com* is referenced here as one of the most popular repositories of open-source information. The claim being made here is not that it is theoretically or empirically accurate (far from it), but that it is a reflection of popular understanding. Therefore, the articles' features that do remain unchallenged on it may be considered as those that gain a level of consensus and which will in turn affect the conceptualisation of its topics for its users.

[5] The cultural acceptance of which is by certain medias' overly dramatic tone, for example in television documentaries such as *Biography - Jeffrey Dahmer: the Monster Within.*

[6] See Paula Chin, 'The Door of Evil', *People Magazine*, 36, 5 (1991).

[7] See Joseph Grixti, 'Consuming Cannibals': Psychopathic Killers as Archetypes and Cultural Icons', *Journal of American Culture*, 18:1 (2004), 87-96; Richard Tithecott, *Of Men and Monsters: Jeffrey Dahmer and the Construction of the Serial Killer* (Wisconsin: UWP, 1999), and Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer, 'Cultural Difference and the Lust to Kill', in *Sex and Violence: Issues in Representation and Experience,* ed. Penelope Harvey and Peter Gow. (Oxon: Routledge, 1994) pp.156-171

[8] Cf. Grixti, 'Consuming Cannibals'

[9] Quoted in David Sanjek's 'Fans' Notes: The Horror Film Fanzine' *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 18:3 (1990) 150-59 (p.151). For further discussion, see also I. Q. Hunter's *British Trash Cinema* ((Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[10] See this author's work within *Counter Culture ~UK: A Celebration* (London: Supernova Books, 2015).

[11] David Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) p.6

[12] Ibid.

[13] See Cameron and Frazer, 'Cultural Difference and the Lust to Kill', p.162.

[14] The entirely blasphemous, paradoxical parallels to religious icons implied by my wording are utterly intentional.

[15] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) pp.7-8

[16] Butler, p.8

[17] This is in opposition to the murders committed by the likes of Gacy, which at least outwardly appear to have been based (and are depicted on screen in this way) on externalised anger and frustration directed at others.

[18] Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001) p.111

[19] This insinuation was discussed and challenged by Jeffrey Dahmer in his and his father's interview with Stone Philips for NBC News.

[20] Shaun Kimber, *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) pp.110-11

[21] Indeed, the notion of intellectual immorality was a key aspect of the insanity defence Dahmer pleaded at the time of his trial.

[22] Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (London Duke University Press, 2000) p.162

[23] Halberstam, p.91

[24] Two other narratives of this type include the films *The Frozen Ground* (based on the case of serial killer Robert Hansen) and *Boys Don't Cry* (based on the murders of Brandon Teena).

[25] For an example of Ressler's contributions, see his descriptions of Edmund Kemper in the film *Murder: No Apparent Motive.*

[26] Schmid, p.2

[27] Richard Tithecott, *Of Men and Monsters: Jeffrey Dahmer and the Construction of the Serial Killer* (Wisconsin: UWP, 1999) p.81

[28] Tithecott, p.87

[29] Cameron and Fraser, p.62; Tithecott, p.81

[30] Mark Seltzer, 'The Serial Killer as a Type of Person' in Gelder, Ken (ed.) *The Horror Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 97-107 (p.98)

[31] Tithecott, p.20

[32] Grexti, p.90

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Biography

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