The Outer Edges:
Horror and the Media in the Late 1940s

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During the late 1940s, America experienced a general panic over the threat from monstrous killers and sex offenders, and social nightmares were reflected in popular culture, in horror publications like Tales From the Crypt. Two novels in particular reflected social concerns, but with a degree of sophistication which makes them stand out from both contemporary and later examples of the genre. Though largely forgotten today, both Robert Bloch's The Scarf (1947) and Charles Jackson's The Outer Edges (1948) deserve to be remembered as horror classics. Crucially for later literature, both perceptively explore the processes of social construction by which the mass media identify and demonize villains and "monsters", and transform disturbed individuals into near-supernatural "fiends". Both would also be very important for later horror fiction: The Scarf is the pioneering serial murder novel, while Jackson's harrowing portrait of the child killer would bring traditional horror themes into mainstream fiction. This paper will discuss the two novels in their historical context, and assess their contribution to the development of the horror genre in the mid/late twentieth century.

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Most periods of history seem to take a grim satisfaction in producing the worst villains and the greatest violence, in being tragically different from the long periods of peace and morality which supposedly prevailed in earlier years: presumably, some day, people will look back at the enviable tranquility and social calm of the late twentieth century. At the time, of course, matters look very different. In this context, I want to consider a period of American history that has in retrospect acquired quite a nostalgic glow, namely the late 1940s, the years between World War II and the outbreak of the Korean conflict. To use some current cliches, this was the time that the "greatest generation" had returned home after fighting "the good war", and the social history of the time is reflected in images of young veterans settling down in the new suburbs, enthusiastically ready to initiate the baby boom. Nor were most Americans too concerned as yet about menaces like Communism: until 1949, the United States remained the only power armed with nuclear weapons. For all this apparent tranquility, the late forties in America were a remarkably dark period, at least to judge from popular culture. A glance at the contemporary media will reveal a society alarmed at threats which seem remarkably similar to those of our own day, including serial killers and child molesters, maniacs and monsters, psychopaths and "fiends", all of whom were described as if they were entirely novel productions of that society, which was allegedly marked by unprecedented violence and savagery. Even supernatural menaces and "killer cults" made their appearance in these years, for instance in stories like Shirley Jackson's The Lottery (1949): in 1954, Gore Vidal's Messiah even invented the idea of cult mass suicide

In these years, America experienced a general panic over the threat from monstrous killers and sex offenders, and these social nightmares were reflected in popular culture, most sensationally perhaps in horror magazines like Tales From the Crypt and others from the EC stable. Two novels in particular reflected social concerns, but with a degree of sophistication which makes them stand out from both contemporary and later examples of the genre. Though largely forgotten today, both Robert Bloch's The Scarf (1947) and Charles Jackson's The Outer Edges (1948) deserve to be remembered as horror classics. Crucially for later literature, both perceptively explore the processes of social construction by which the mass media identify and demonize villains and "monsters", and transform disturbed individuals into near-supernatural "fiends". Both would also be very important for later horror fiction: The Scarf is the pioneering serial murder novel, which brought traditional horror themes into mainstream fiction, while Jackson's harrowing portrait of the child killer was already raising subversive questions about the genre of thriller writing itself, no less than of the media treatment of true crime. It has some claim to rank as an anti-thriller.

I want to discuss the two novels in their historical context, and assess their contribution to the development of the horror genre in the mid/late twentieth century. Three things strike me particularly about these novels. First, they were pioneers in eroding the barriers between what had been the strictly separated fields of horror and crime fiction or thrillers, and in exploring strictly secular this-worldly nightmares through the lens of horror, they created a hybrid which would be very influential in the last quarter of the century. Second, the type of villains which they explored are exactly the sort which we have come to know so well in recent years, particularly the serial killer. And thirdly, their innovative use of narrative techniques would be much imitated, especially the first person narration of The Scarf. And crudely, I suggest that these books, and others of the same period, deserve to be much better known, and recognized for the minor classics they are.

The Sex Crime Panic

Popular culture would not have developed so dark a tone if its audience was not accustomed to depictions of “maniacal” violence in the daily headlines. Historically, serial murder stories had tended to emerge in waves, and one such era of prolific killers had recently occurred, roughly between 1935 and 1941: most notoriously, this was the time of the intense publicity attracted by serial child killer Albert Fish, but there were numerous lesser cases. Cases declined during the war years, but certainly did not vanish, and there was a new spate of well-publicized serial killer cases from 1946 onwards. Moreover, the cases of the 1940s often involved terrifying instances of extreme killers, who claimed many victims, and demonstrating chilling varieties of obsessive and insane behavior. Jake Bird, for example, was a drifter who killed two women in Washington state in 1947. When arrested, he confessed to over forty homicides in the previous decade, with confirmed offenses recorded in Illinois, Kentucky, Nebraska, South Dakota, Ohio, Florida and Wisconsin. Around the same time, a well-publicized case in Texarkana involved an offender known as the “Moonlight Murderer”, who apparently timed his attacks to coincide with the phases of the moon. Perhaps the best known serial killer of this period was William Heirens, who committed several hundred burglaries and three murders, including that of a six year old girl whom he dismembered: he left at one murder scene a note reading “For Heaven’s sake catch me before I kill more. I cannot control myself”. There were also spectacularly gruesome acts like the 1947 “Black Dahlia” mutilation murder in Los Angeles. In 1949, the US experienced one of its most notorious mass killings, when Howard Unruh killed thirteen during a twelve minute murder rampage in Camden, New Jersey.

Such cases were generally interpreted as the crimes of “psychopaths”, a popular label which at the time implied extremely violent and criminal behavior, “compulsive and irresistible” in its nature, by individuals who might be intelligent, but who lacked the slightest self-control, and failed to recognize the difference between right and wrong. They were what an earlier period might have termed monsters. Belief in such monstrous individuals was naturally promoted by the recent international, headlines, by stories of German and Japanese atrocities, and by the opening of the German concentration camps. The guards and administrators were clearly not insane, and often seemed to be intelligent, sober individuals, and yet they perpetrated such awful crimes. Absent a theory of demon possession, the idea of the psychopath seemed highly credible.

“Sex psychopaths” like Albert Fish or William Heirens were extreme manifestations of the problem, but lesser monsters were reputedly responsible for a notorious wave of rapes, acts of child molestation, and other crimes. Concern over sex crime reached panic proportion between 1947 and 1950, when allegations about the scale of the problem reached proportions which sound quite familiar from the 1980s, and 1990s. The atmosphere of the time is represented by a series of articles published by Collier’s magazine, which reported that sex crime by “the rapist, the sex psychopath, the defiler of children” had “virtually gone out of control”. According to journalist Howard Whitman, cities were developing “no-woman’s-lands” where females were afraid to go unprotected. “The shadow of the sex criminal lies across the doorstep of every home.” The menace to the young was grave. “Children in alarming numbers have been the victims of molesters, exhibitionists, perverts, and pedophiles. The sex hoodlum, hanging around schools with comic books and bubble gum to lure his victim, has imbued parents with a stark new fear.” The nation faced “the grotesque, baffling problem of pedophilia... pedophiles who were roaming about, abusing, molesting, luring and perhaps one day killing.”

Perceptions that crime was out of control were stimulated by reports of a handful of spectacularly brutal acts, which were then reported at a regional or national level to create an image of a systematic problem. Such cases occurred sporadically from the mid-1940s onwards, culminating in the "Horror Week" of November 1949, when three young girls were murdered within the space of a few days. In Fresno, California, a seventeen month old toddler was raped and left to die, while in Burley, Idaho, a girl of seven was raped before being drowned in a drainage ditch. In Los Angeles, a six year old girl named Linda Joyce Glucoft was murdered by Fred Stroble, the elderly grandfather of her playmate. For the media, Stroble became a symbol of unalloyed evil, and was billed as a "Sex Fiend," a Weeping Werewolf". In response, most states now passed draconian sex psychopath laws, which aimed to identify and catch figures like Stroble and Heirens before they committed such bloody deeds: in practice, this meant indefinite imprisonment for very minor sex offenders, including many homosexuals, under a series of unjust and ineffective laws which remained in force until struck down by the courts in the libertarian 1960s and 1970s.

The Scarf

In response to the daily diet of newspaper horror stories, publishers and film-makers inevitably responded to what seemed to be a widespread public taste. Though censorship rules made it impossible for the cinema to deal overtly with perverts, rapists or child molesters, warped killers were not subject to the same restrictions, as violence could be depicted even when sex was taboo. Fictional explorations of sex crime thus concentrated on the most serious aspect of the problem, namely the "maniac killer," whose sexual motivation could be subtly implied. The best known portrayal was Peter Lorre's performance in the German film M (1931), which appeared in an American remake in 1951. Also influential was Alfred Hitchcock's version of the Jack the Ripper story in The Lodger (1926), which was remade in both 1932 and 1944. The number of treatments accelerated from 1937, the year in which Night Must Fall portrayed a deranged sex-killer who carried the heads of his women victims as trophies. Later years brought Stranger on the Third Floor (1940), Shadow of a Doubt (1943), The Brighton Strangler (1945), Spiral Staircase (1946), The Sniper (1952), and While the City Sleeps (1956): both the latter draw heavily on the Heirens case. There was even a humorous treatment of serial murder in Arsenic and Old Lace: remember Cousin Jonathan? (play 1938; film released 1944). Each film depicted monstrous predators motivated by a perverted and compulsive sexuality, and thus these productions raised public sensitivity about sex criminals. The 1940s also produced a popular "Regional Murder Series" books focusing on the bizarre crimes of a particular area: Chicago Murders, Cleveland Murders, and so on.

The nature of public enthusiasms is well reflected by Robert Bloch's 1947 novel The Scarf, and particularly a passage in which a sensationalistic Hollywood journalist suggests the popularity of bizarre violence as a media theme. Encouraging a colleague to write on the Cleveland Torso murders of the late 1930s, he urges: "People like to read about it. Look at the way those true detective magazines sell. Sex crimes. Blood. Everybody wants to know. . . . . Ever hear about the ritual murders we had out here? The devil worshipers? They cut up a kid." (Bloch 1947: 207-208).

In addition to "wanting blood", the audience perceived by Bloch was also seeking a different kind of villain from those which inhabited contemporary crime fiction. The idea of describing insane killers was not new, but there was now a market for stories which portrayed the reality of extreme violence - or at least, the reality as it was perceived by the psychiatric orthodoxy of the day. Bloch himself remarked on the post-war revival of the

psychopath as a villain in fiction, and how "Psychopathology defied the deductive method . . . .the psychotics emerged to confound all the bright young men and little old ladies playing detectives" (Bloch 1977b: 8-9). Through his long career, which ran from the 1930s through the 1990s, Bloch would mine the history of American true crime and especially serial murder for fictional themes. His American Gothic recounts the story of H. H. Holmes, while the author tried unsuccessfully to persuade Hitchcock to make a film based on the Cleveland Torso murders (Bloch 1993). Of course, Bloch is best known as the author of Psycho.

Initially, Bloch's interests were strongly occult-oriented, as one would expect of an alumnus of the Weird Tales school, and in various stories from the 1940s and 1950s, he developed the idea of the serial killer as demonically possessed (Enoch, 1946), or as cult devil worshipers (Sweet Sixteen, 1960). One of his most popular and widely anthologized stories remains Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper (1943), which supposes that the original Ripper carried out his murders in order to secure eternal life and youth; and that the same individual was in fact responsible for countless murders in successive decades, up to and including the Cleveland killings of the late 1930s.

In The Scarf, however, Bloch moved from the occult to the world of psychopathology, depicting a classic Freudian case-study: the book is thus important in helping to create the secularized monster story of the sort that we are so familiar with from the work of Thomas Harris and his countless clones. The anti-hero, Daniel Morley, is raised by an oppressive mother who savagely represses any manifestations of his childhood sexuality, and who ties his hands at night to prevent masturbation. Dan's accumulated resentment finally explode when, at age 18, he is seduced by a middle aged schoolteacher, who ties his hands with a scarf during sex play. He strikes out at her and flees from his previous life. Over the coming years, he meets several more women, all of whom he comes to hate, and several of whom he strangles with the same scarf: when ultimately captured, the press dub him a modern-day "Bluebeard". Incidentally, Bloch's violation of the traditional generic boundaries would cause problems in publishing the book, since his contacts were in the fantasy horror world, which this work was not exactly: after some difficulties, it ended up with the mystery-suspense publisher of Dial Press.

Much of the book concerns Dan's attempts to come to terms with his murderous self, which is his real personality. To quote the book's blurb, "It was diabolic to have come upon the hard way only to meet an implacable enemy - and recognize him as yourself. Something was waiting, watching there inside him, something of which he never dared be unaware" Though a kind of automatic writing in his "Black Notebook", he not only expresses this self, but develops a philosophy of murder which is uncannily prescient of the musings of real-life serial killers like Ted Bundy. These passages are also remarkably innovative for the time. Dan writes, for instance, that "Murder is something you do. Something the real you feels, experiences, lives by, lives with. That's the only way I can put it into words. There's only one way to learnt he truth, and that's through action. Murder isn't a word. Murder is a deed" (121). Contemplating the case of Jack the Ripper, he writes, "There always have been and always will be a few men in the world who dare to dramatize death - to give it a meaning" (174). The Scarf was regarded as a sufficiently important contribution to merit a laudatory review from leading psychiatric theorist Fredric Wertham in a professional psychiatric journal: you may remember Wertham as the leading force in the campaign to suppress "horror comics" in the early 1950s, the movement which eventually closed up EC comics, and which drove William Gaines to set up a new line of work, as founder of MAD magazine (Bloch 1993: 197-200).

Crucially for the horror genre, The Scarf was told in the first person, in a technique that would be widely imitated in horror fiction. Sometimes the stories are told in the "I" persona, otherwise they report events through the eyes of the killer, but in either case, the reader is put in the disturbing situation of seeing the crime through the killer's eyes, and in the best writing, of cheering when he escapes, groaning when he is caught: throughout, we are bound to the narrator in a kind of fascinated horror. A few years after The Scarf, Jim Thompson used a first person narrator for The Killer Inside Me (1950), which remains a noir classic, and Thompson returned to the theme in his Pop. 1280 (1964). In 1955, Patricia Highsmith told the story of The Talented Mr. Ripley from his point of view. In more recent memory, we think of Harris's Red Dragon, as well as Shane Stevens' By Reason of Insanity, or Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho.

Using an "I-Camera" in fiction was by no means a new device with Bloch, even when exploring severely disturbed characters. Indeed, the idea was pioneered in the 1820s, when James Hogg told the story of a crazed serial killer in his own voice in the Confessions of a Justified Sinner, and some such tactic may conceivably be what Dickens' had in mind for the uncompleted portion of Edwin Drood. In the present century, however, the serial murder novel dates from the work of Bloch, particularly from Psycho, but as we have seen, the foundation for this book was laid a decade earlier, in The Scarf.

The Outer Edges

While serial murder fiction has a long and quite distinguished tradition, other sorts of crime have been treated much more gingerly. Crimes against children have been regarded very nervously, in a way which raises worrying questions about the whole appeal of the genre. Countless novels portray men who kill women, but only very rarely is the child killer featured. Can we speculate that this is because the former genre invites some element of reader identification, while only a monster would kill children? This dichotomy is particularly marked in the cinema. Think of the mad slasher films of the 1980s, and count how many women fell victim to slashers and maniacs: then estimate how many of these were young, attractive, and generally in a state of undress. It is hard to deny the suggestion that this sort of crime is supposed to be somehow sexy or romantic. In contrast, how unthinkable would it be to portray a killer stalking an attractive child, or to depict such a victim as sexually provocative.

For whatever reason, writers and publishers have rarely explored crimes against children, though during the child abuse panic of the 1980s, novelists like Jonathan Kellerman and Andrew Vachss did portray heroic crusaders against child abuse. In this context, it is all the more remarkable to find Charles Jackson's astonishing novel The Outer Edges (1948), which focuses quite sympathetically on a mentally defective 16-year old named Aaron Adams who rapes and mutilates two small girls who accept a ride in his car. The novel describes the incident from the point of view of the various individuals who are affected by it, including Adams himself, who is allowed to speak through his own voice. Much of the book's chilling quality derives from its domesticity, its setting in New York's suburban Westchester county, where extreme violence is superimposed upon vistas of conventionality: "It was always there somewhere, always present, the evil that was the other face of goodness: just back of the beautiful weather, in the woods, trees, fields, city streets, in the car driving behind you, in the next apartment, in the man you may never meet, in your friend or brother, in the criminal whose name is your own.... If the miserable grubs but knew of the hidden thought and the innocent face that threatened them from every side - then was doomsday near" (238, 187).

That Jackson could get away with a treatment of child murder may have something to do with his solid mainstream reputation: he was the author of the 1944 autobiographical novel The Lost Weekend, which in the following year was filmed by Billy Wilder. The film is commonly regarded as one of the greatest Hollywood products of the era, and it won multiple Oscars. The film of course focused on alcoholism, and this may have added to Jackson's credentials in dealing with another major social problem of the day, namely the sex psychopath. Naturally enough, though, there is no film of Outer Edges: while maniacs who killed women were fair game for the cinema, child murder was simply an intolerable topic.

Though Jackson's exploration of violence against children prefigures later popular treatments, he is far more sophisticated than authors like Kellerman or Vachss in his willingness to reject contemporary demonologies of child abuse, to accept the orthodoxies of the day about "monsters" and "predators". Just as Lost Weekend humanized the alcoholic, perhaps for the first time in serious fiction, so Outer Edges tried valiantly to do the same for the so-called psychopath. Seen from within his own mind, Aaron emerges less as a monster than an uncomprehending child, who has no notion of the harm he has done, and who peppers his speech with childish expressions like "Jeepers" and "Cripes". Observers mistake his childish innocence for callous brutality, as when he reconstructs the crimes "with intelligence and evident enjoyment" (183). Adams is a victim of fate: "His fate cried out; he had gone as relentlessly and surely to his fulfillment as if others had driven him to it. The moment arrived, and he, not the children, was the unwitting, the unwilling, victim" (186)

The Outer Edges, in fact, is less a book about murder than about the media themselves. It is less concerned with the unimpressive murderer himself than the means by which the media transform him into a fiend, generating polychromatic images that different consumers can regard with horror or admiration according to taste. As one journalist remarks, the case is "a beaut. But that's what he was here for: gore and bloodshed, rape, and if possible, mutilation, was what they wanted. It was his job to give it to them, even to stretching a point here and there if he thought of something good." As the cliché still holds, "If it bleeds, it leads." Meanwhile, these stories are gobbled up by an enthusiastic public which accords star treatment to the killers: "True, this Adams chap isn't a terribly interesting specimen, but the case is quite enthralling to em. A murderer in our midst can really assume heroic proportions, you know. If he is strong enough in personality and drive to be the leader type, he becomes a charismatic force - well, rather like Father Divine, you might say" (230). Such a damning portrait of a serial murder fan has a particular resonance today, when so many avidly consume the documentaries about true life cases, and patronize the countless websites on these matters.

Every age tends to think it has invented sex, crime, and violence, and that things were wonderfully different in the recently bygone past. The experience of the American 1940s reminds us how false such a perception is. Not only were there crimes very much like those of today, but both journalists and novelists responded to them in much the same way. So well known were these genres, in fact, that already by 1948, Charles Jackson could satirize them so acutely. In terms of popular culture treatments of violence, we have nothing to teach the era of The Scarf, The Outer Edges and The Killer Inside Me, to mention only some of the greatest achievements of a remarkable period.