

5. Creator/Destroyer: The Serial Killer as an American Phenomenon

They were showing more and better pictures of him around the clock, plastering his image all over the country. The story was so sexy [...] there seemed to be this insatiable curiosity about [him] [...] and *where he might strike next*.

Gary Indiana, Three Month Fever

This is where the killing never ends.

Noah Foster, Scream: The TV Series

When Noah Foster, a character in the television serial *Scream: The TV Series*, observes that “[t]his is where the killing never ends,” he is making a statement which is as self-reflexive as it is characteristic of the American serial killer narrative; these narratives are both never-ending and structurally serialized. In *Serien-Killer: Mord als Mission?*, psychologist Rolf Degen asserts that the serial killer is intricately tied to the “American Way of Life”¹ (47). The way in which American soil becomes particularly fertile for the compulsion to kill, that which Degen calls pure *Mordlust*, is consolidated in its cultural imaginary. In *Monsters in America*, Scott W. Poole discusses the fact that early modern European imagination crafts the United States of America not only as monstrous, but also explicitly as *ravenously* monstrous. In these early illustrations, the element of insatiability that is geared towards the dead is drawn as cannibalism as “[o]ne of the earliest allegorizations of America is Philippe Galle’s 1580 “America” in which we see a giantess with a spear and a bow that has cannibalized a man and triumphantly carries his severed head” (31). It is not just Galle who figures the United States as, according to the painter himself, an “ogress who devours men, who is rich in gold and who is skilled in the use of the spear and the bow” (Galle qtd in Poole, 31). The construction of a metaphorical America that aligns the consumption of food

1 “[...] so ist der Serienmord des Einzeltäters doch auf besondere Weise mit dem „American Way of Life“ verknüpft” (47).

with a hunger for the dead is a sentiment that is carried through a plethora of early imaginations of the New World. Paolo Farinati's painting from 1595 is another example that presents "[...] an allegorical representation of the New World as a monstrous cannibal [in which] the artist imagines the New World as a giant roasting a human arm" (Poole, 31). This early allegorical image of America-as-cannibal comes to illustrate, as well as solidify, two specific aspects. Firstly, in spite of its optimistic promise, there appears to be murderous agency written deeply into the fabric of the New World; secondly, the fact that the dead are not only killed but also explicitly devoured and become nourishment for the living, highlights an American appetite for death which perpetuates life. This is to say that there seems to emerge a compulsion to produce death in order to maintain life. Contextualized within the figure of the cannibal, this compulsion is rooted in the fetish; death is absence par excellence, but moreover, death has been absent in America's optimistic promise and is, thus, over-compensated for and fetishized in its cultural imaginary.²

19th century Europe's external gaze then further refines America's allegorical imagination as a metaphorical cannibal that ultimately comes to be manifested in the form of the serial killer, a figure that maintains an undying appetite for the production of the corpse, thereby rendering cannibalistic consumption not only metaphorical, but also as serial. British author D.H. Lawrence identifies the American soul as the soul of a stoic and un-melting killer,³ while English author Anthony Trollope spends ample time commenting on the curious *Domestic Manners of the [se] Americans*⁴ which become metaphorically cannibalistic. The figurative America that emerges from these external observations is a ravenous killer, a figure driven by an insatiable hunger for the dead. This is a figure that compulsively produces the corpse in order to cater to an insatiability that is ingrained in a cultural imaginary which is equally hungry for the corpse: A serial killer. It is here that we are reminded of the epigraph, which quotes Gary Indiana's *Three Month Fever* and which emphasizes an American "insatiable curiosity about [the serial killer] [...] and where he might strike next" (318).

The sentiment of these external European voices is solidified by seminal American literary theoretician Leslie A. Fiedler. In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, he comes to similarly emphasize the endurance of murderous desire when asserting that: "[i]n our most enduring books, the cheapjack machinery of the gothic novel is called on to represent the hidden blackness of the human soul and human society" (27). As an American voice, Fiedler cements the observations of his European peers, thereby highlighting the genre of the gothic as canvas for this "hidden black-

2 See chapter 4 for an in-depth discussion of the figure of the cannibal.

3 See chapter 4 for the full quotation.

4 See chapter 3 for the full quotation and for a discussion of the dynamism of insatiability.

ness of the human soul”.⁵ In *Natural Born Celebrities*, David Schmid draws from the work of Karen Halttunen as he identifies the predominantly gothic discourse, which cloaks the figure of the serial killer because this discourse provides “the incomprehensibility of murder within the rational Enlightenment social order” (Halttunen qtd. in Schmid, 7). The claim here is that “serial killers, apparently so new and so threatening to the social fabric, are “not, after all, *new*, not really much of a surprise”” (Halttunen, 57). It is the repetition of death that the American cultural imaginary aestheticizes towards a food metaphor that formats death-as-absence into a perpetuity, which then paradoxically nourishes its cultural imaginary; ultimately, this overwrites death in favour of a reinstatement of life.⁶ The figure of the cannibal who consumes the dead in order to remain alive, ultimately develops into the serial killer who metaphorically consumes the dead in order to sustain their subjectivity. Written into its cultural imaginary, the serial killer’s repetition compulsion is then mirrored in the repetition compulsion found in the serialized narrative. A “play of mirrors that has no limits,”⁷ (Foucault, 90) it is by means of this gesture of mirroring that the serial killer ritualizes the serial consumption of an aestheticized death through the repetitive structuring of the serial killer narrative.

Fed by the *death paradox*,⁸ the resulting plethora of American narratives that aestheticize death develop a textual plurality into a narratological seriality. Continuously circling around death-as-lack, which is to say absence, the (serialized) text fetishizes the imagination of death.⁹ It is thus that the serial killer narrative, through the repetition compulsion of the serial killer’s agency, mirrors the structure of its format. Charles Brockden Brown’s 1798 *Wieland; or the Transformation* echoes the gothic tonality mentioned previously in which the serial killer narrative is rooted. A gothic tale in which the entire family is ultimately obliterated, Brockden Brown’s Jeremiaadesque *Wieland* also marks what is often regarded as the first American novel about which Fiedler maintains: “[f]or better or for worse, then, Brown established in the American novel a tradition of dealing with the exaggerated and the grotesque,” (155) which he explicitly ascribes to the projection of internal fears in the following clarification: “[...] not as they are verifiable in any *external* landscape or sociological observation of manners and men, but as they correspond in quality to our deepest fears and guilts as projected on our dreams or lived through in ‘extreme situations’” (Fiedler, 155, my emphasis). A reflection of the internal profile of the

5 See chapter 1 for an in-depth discussion of the American gothic.

6 See chapter 1 for a reiteration of the way in which the gothic text overwrites death in an act that reinstates life.

7 On the *death paradox*, see the Introduction for a detailed description.

8 See Introduction.

9 See chapter 4 for in-depth discussion of the fetish in connection with the *death paradox*, figured by means of the cannibal.

American individual, Brockden Brown's gothic novel, and the very first American novel, already *repeatedly* produces the corpse, thereby feeding its imaginary with an aestheticized death. As such, the novel also becomes exemplary of the American cultural imaginary, showcasing an aestheticization of that (abject) death which has been covered up by American optimism. It is also these *projections*, to use Fiedler's words, which come to haunt the American cultural imaginary, always present and ever-elusive as "[t]here are terrible spirits, ghosts, in the air of America" (*Studies in American Literature*, 81), an observation D.H. Lawrence made regarding Edgar Allan Poe's gothic meanderings in the early 19th century. If Poole's assertion is correct, that "[i]t is literature that, while often highly theoretical, can provide much insight into America's appetite for the monster" (12), then the repetitive reiteration of an aestheticized death within the serialized text in particular comes to outline a textual insatiability for the dead so overtly present in the *air* of America, which ultimately manifests as the image of the serial killer.

In outlining a psychological profile of the serial killer, psychologist Degen asserts that the serial killer's most intricate aspect remains their compulsion to kill without motive and without a particular "modus operandus" (46). Historically, as well as sociologically, the term 'serial killer' emerges as a behavioral profile in 1982, coined by the American Federal Bureau of Investigation. According to the FBI's official definition, a serial killer is "a person who kills more than three victims, during more than three events, at three or more locations, with a cooling-off period in between" (Innes, 2). That profile is refined by two seminal dynamisms: Firstly, perpetual repetition, as "the killings are repetitive; and they will usually continue until the perpetrator is identified and apprehended, dies or is killed" (Innes, 2).¹⁰ This element highlights the serial killer's compulsion to kill again and again, which ties into the second aspect of the refined serial killer profile, *Mordlust*. The FBI's profile of a serial killer further emphasizes that "the first evidence that seemingly unrelated murders are serial is the distinguishable pattern of behaviour exhibited by the perpetrator and the absence of any apparent motive, other than the *desire* to kill" (Innes, 3, my emphasis).¹¹ What becomes evident here is that the singular aspect that ultimately characterizes the serial killer is seriality itself; lacking motive, the figure of the serial killer is governed simply by an intrinsic¹² and compulsive desire to kill over and over again.

If we accept Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendentalist reflection on serial compulsion in which "[e]very ultimate fact is only the first of a new series" (227), based on the previously outlined trajectory, then the American cultural imaginary offers fertile ground for the production (as well as continuous repetition) of the serial killer

10 See also Degen, 48.

11 See also Degen, *Mordlust*, 48.

12 See Degen, 48.

narrative. The serial narrative partially amends finality through its own structural repetition compulsion, thereby providing an endless canvas for the figuration of an aestheticized death. Echoing the *death paradox* in its limitlessness, any form of conclusion in the serialized narrative ultimately is geared towards the superimposition of a next, thereby remaining inconclusive, structurally sustained by the series paradigm. In “Seriality”, Elisabeth Bronfen, reflecting on Emerson, asserts that “to conceive of life as a series of concentric circles also defies the idea of settling any case once and for all” (273). In the context of the serial narrative, this aspect of perpetuity is epitomized in casting the motiveless and compulsive serial killer as protagonist. Governed by their own repetition compulsion, the serial killer is compelled to perform the same ritual over and over again with different victims (Degen, 52). It is here that the serial killer’s agency performs an allegorization with the dynamic of an *appetite* because: “where food is concerned we can never let up; appetite keeps us at it” (Visser, 1). Aligning the serial narrative with its metaphorical consumption, the devouring of increments of the series becomes doubly ritualistic. Structurally, it allows for the natural progression of the serial killer figure’s repetition compulsion while simultaneously catering to the audience’s insatiable appetite. In “Series and Seriality in Media Culture”, Tudor Oltean highlights the way in which the serialized text has a binding effect on its audience as “[t]he purpose of the serial transformation is to bind the audience to a narrative sequential process, maintaining its involvement as receiver of successive episodes, and attempting to seduce it as a co-author of the whole” (Oltean, 11). Formulaically binding, the serialized text, thus, perpetuates a repetition compulsion through reciprocity, ritualizing serial consumption both on a diegetic level as well as through the medium itself. Bronfen contends that “seriality produces meanings that implicate us, as viewers and readers, as well” (279) and it is by means of this ritualization, navigated at the hand of the figure of the serial killer, that the serialized text which aestheticizes death caters to that same appetite which it simultaneously perpetuates.

It is this binding aspect of the serialized narrative, the structural formula, which allows for a continuous cultural renegotiation of murderous desire, a *danse macabre* which echoes Fiedler’s description of the gothic romance, thereby offering “its readers a vicarious participation in a flirtation with death – approach and retreat, approach and retreat, the fatal orgasm eternally mounting and eternally checked” (134). Structurally, serial narration caters to an ever-recurring appetite, one tied to a murderous desire that the serial killer narrative writes content for through structural compulsion, with form and content then mirroring one another. The illusion of perpetuity, which is structurally inherent in the series, which is to say its narratological stance, maintains “that one should be able to go on telling [...],” (Oltean, 27) complements the serial killer’s compulsive desire. It is thus that the serial killer narrative satisfies, not through simply aestheticizing death but by *repeatedly* aestheticizing death as “[t]he audience craves satisfaction through continuous consumption, so too

does the serial killer. Both have a hunger with an inherent violence" (Lee, 106). Again, we are reminded of the opening epigraph, which quotes Gary Indiana's *Three Month Fever*, and that outlines an insatiable desire of an audience not only to see the serial killer, but in particular to see where they strike *next*. If the mode of the serialized narrative pretends to be potentially eternal, then so must its continuous content, even if its situational content is punctually exchanged. It is the series paradigm that remains and the serial killer emerges as self-referential and circular from within this dynamic.

At its structurally most comfortable, embedded in the serial narrative, the figure of the serial killer is marked as American, with serial killing as a "phenomenon, although it can occur anywhere in the world [being] particularly prevalent in the Americas. In fact, serial murder in the United States alone makes up more than three-quarters of the estimated world total" (Innes, 1). In essence, the serial killer is stained with an insatiable hunger for murder, a continually reappearing appetite which he implements compulsively and, in order to maintain it, also becomes its creator. This constructive repetition, which is inscribed in seriality, can be seen as a result of the *death paradox*, which causes a fetishized overcompensation by means of the production of the corpse. The serial killer produces the abject corpse that the serial killer narrative figures as an aestheticized imagination of the corpse that caters to the appetite of both the serial killer as well as the serial killer's audience, both of whom are equally insatiable for the corpse. Nurturing the American cultural imaginary through the production of the corpse, the explicit consumption of the dead then feeds into the paradoxical cannibalistic casting of death as that which nourishes and reinstates life; this is because, by consuming it, we maintain an "instinctive realization that by the very act we perform we are repairing our bodily losses and prolonging our lives" (Brillat-Savarin, 41). Through its compulsively repeated imagination, the serialized aestheticization of death becomes the root of that insatiable appetite that is not just governed by the *death paradox*, but to which it simultaneously caters in a perpetual gesture of reciprocity.

When read in the context of American history, American optimism can be seen as having overwritten an *a priori* desire for death for which the serial killer in particular and the serial form more generally become symptomatic. Mark Seltzer asserts that serial killer narratives "have by now largely replace[d] the Western as the most popular genre-fiction of the body and of bodily violence in our [American] culture" a development which he regards as the result of what he terms *wound culture*, "the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma and the wound" (1). This public fascination, marked by compulsion, almost seems to dictate the implementation of the proposed food metaphor through its structural demand for repetition. Marked with insatiability both on the part of the cultural imagination as well as on the part of the audience, the metaphorical hunger-as-serial then comes to adhere to the ritual of translating

the *death paradox* into a predictability which endows death with a level of graspability through its repeated staging and aestheticization. It seems that the savage cannibalistic image of America can allegedly be domesticated within the structure of the serial.

While previous chapters were concerned with entirely fictional texts, this final chapter will focus on the fashioning of actual events in fiction; the fictionalization of the real serial killer, which marks a repetition in itself as such. The serial killer is a relatively modern phenomenon, albeit one rooted in the tradition of the American gothic, as “[...] by 1900 a new kind of person has come into being and into view, one of the superstars of our wound culture: the lust-murderer, the stranger-killer or serial killer” (Seltzer, 2). When consolidating the perspective that the serial killer appears to be a prevalently American phenomenon as well as a recent development, the question which arises is that of production; why does America, after only two centuries of existence, seem to have produced a compulsive killer as one of its recurring myths? Lee outlines the conceptualization of the serial killer as iconic: “[...] while the concept of serial murder can be considered a product of modernity, the postmodern condition has allowed the serial killer to flourish as the contemporary icon/superstar” (106). This conceptualization of the serial killer as iconic, however, is not exclusively tied to an external accentuation. Degen maintains that while the serial killer’s agency is rooted in a compulsion to kill, an emerging tendency for fame on the side of the serial killer can also be pinpointed in a significant amount of cases. While the serial killer’s primary object is *Mordlust*, celebrity status¹³ can manifest as a secondary force according to Degen. Once again mirroring their audience, Mark Seltzer diagnoses this dynamism of performative spectacle as rooted within American *wound culture* and this frames the serial killer spectacular: “These are the spectacles of persons, bodies, and technologies that make up a wound culture and the scenes that make up the pathological public sphere: the scenes, and the culture, in which serial killing finds its place” (22). What emerges is not just an insatiable appetite to repeatedly produce the corpse, but also an implicit connection between serial killing and the spectacular triggered by American *wound culture* which finds its place in its cultural imaginary.

As has been established, it is murderous desire that governs the killer’s agency; however, it is the compulsive repetition thereof which governs the *serial* killer’s agency, the formula of seriality becoming a specifically American trait due to its woundedness as “the subject of wound culture is not merely subject to recurrence but to the recurrence of recurrence itself” (Seltzer qdt in Lee, 106). Weaving together format and instance in order to explore the performative repetition within the serial format, the repetitive aspect of seriality offers itself to the aforementioned

13 “[...] dass auch die Gier nach Bekanntheit oder Publizität ein wichtiges Motiv ihres Handelns ist. (Degen, 52)

excessive recurrence (of death). Formally speaking, serial narration both implements and caters to a repetition compulsion, as stated in Stanley Cavell's "The Fact of Television":

To say that the primary object of aesthetic interest in television is not the individual piece, but the format, is to say that the format is its primary individual of aesthetic interest. The ontological recharacterization is meant to bring out that the relation between format and instance should be of essential aesthetic concern. (79)

Focusing on the death narrative as an infinite continuation, rather than highlighting the individual parts, the serial representation of an aestheticized death as well as the representation of the serial killer are capable of elevating a deadly inevitability to an alleged level of immortality by means of refusing to find closure. Drawing on Benjamin, Bronfen maintains that the serial format becomes illustrative of "the conviction that there is something that cannot be directly communicated, yet toward which the evolving reiterations gestures, and which, in so doing, sustains the intensity of this ungraspable kernel" (275). In this regard, a serial repetition of death is that which remains constant and, ultimately, what repudiates that which it pretends to approximate, namely death as an eternal absence which is instead fetishized towards eternal continuation within the imaginary.

Catering to a proverbial craving, this overt performativity of compulsive serial killing is worked through in Wes Craven's seminal *Scream* franchise, this chapter's first primary object of analysis. The films were inspired by the actual Gainesville Ripper, a serial killer who terrorized a Florida town in 1990, killing six students within a stretch of a couple of days. The adherence to real life events, a common horror trope, does not diminishes the distance between audience and artefact; read in the context of this volume, the fictional fashioning of the real also insinuates the possibility of containment, which is enacted through channelling real death into the imaginary realm.¹⁴ As such, the *Scream* franchise remains heavily fictionalized regarding the documentation of the Gainesville Ripper, while what is excessively re-enacted and laid bare in the franchise's overtly poignant self-reflexivity is repetition over the stretch of four consecutive films, which is to say a form of *seriality* which is specifically rooted in the compulsive production of the corpse. This comes to illustrate the cyclical nature of the serial killer, on which the *Scream* franchise draws a chronological and sequential image, which renders it a blueprint of contemporary television series. Unable to escape that repetition compulsion that the franchise puts in place, *Scream* was eventually rebooted as a television series, *Scream: The TV Series*. While said reboot lies beyond the scope of this book, we are reminded of the epigraph that quotes the show's Noah Foster reflecting on the serial narrative by ce-

14 This aligns with the notion of *taming*, see Michael Wood in the Introduction to this work.

menting the serial's eternal performativity.¹⁵ The *Scream* franchise lays the basis for this serialization of the serial killer narrative by performing the *death paradox* explicitly through the figuration of the compulsive serial killer while simultaneously endowing the franchise with an overt self-reflexivity which further emphasizes the way in which the audience comes to mirror the serial killer's insatiable desire for the corpse.

While the *Scream* franchise organically spirals into its inherent serial nature technically isolating the compulsion to *repeat* killing rather than to kill itself, it is *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*, the second season of the 2016 television serial *American Crime Story*, which not only consciously implements the serial killer into the serial narrative, but also consciously fashions the serial killer, thereby becoming performative of the serial killer's seriality. This chapter's second object of analysis, *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* fictionalizes and thus figures the notorious persona of Andrew Cunanan specifically as a serial killer, which is mirrored by the format of the television serial. The series reinvigorates Cunanan's notoriety which in itself is based on a fantasy, as Gary Indiana maintains: "[e]gregiously, with little or no regard for accuracy, Cunanan's life was transformed from the somewhat poignant and depressing but fairly ordinary thing it was into a narrative overripe with tabloid evil" (29). As such, the text overtly masquerades serial killing as spectacle based on the mediated image which elevated Cunanan to the extraordinary and fashioned him as a serial killer as "[t]he boilerplate figure of the serial killer, familiar by then to most Americans, was extracted from specious accounts of Cunanan" (Indiana, 29). The fact that Cunanan cannot be conclusively profiled as a serial killer because "the serial killer paradigm failed to match the case [...] he [also] didn't quite fit the "spree" pattern either; he finally became a mixture of two things he didn't resemble" (Indiana, 31) is less significant than the fact that Cunanan is actively (re)imagined as a serial killer in *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*. While Cunanan is a notorious fantasy, it is significant that this fantasy, which is to say the American cultural imaginary, not only fabricates but *serializes* him as a *serial* killer based on "the impossible tangle of myths Cunanan wove about his person" (Indiana, 30), which is to say implementing Cunanan's notoriety as a canvas for the figuration of the serial killer.

Gesturing to this element of the spectacular that the figuration of the serial killer carries within itself, the *Scream* franchise ultimately develops the final girl into that generic serial killer itself, conflating antagonist and protagonist while simultaneously casting the emerging voice of the serial killer as an authoritative one. *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* further develops this conflation into the figure of the pure serial killer, actively formatting him into seriality. Elaborating on contemporary television as "transgressive", Birgit Däwes asserts that: "[...] it is

15 He states that it is here "[w]here the killing never ends" ("Psycho").

no coincidence that so many transgressive television serials conflate the roles of protagonist and antagonist. The main characters we find ourselves rooting for are highly ambivalent in their moral and ethical points of view [...]” (25). Both the *Scream* franchise as well as *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* showcase the performativity of serial killing in casting the figure of the serial killer as protagonist, while also anchoring the narrative in reality. As such, the fictionalization of the American phenomenon of the serial murderer within the serial narrative emerges as a form of encoding reality in retrospect, the text manifesting as a repetition that feeds off the same notoriety that it perpetuates.

Both the *Scream* franchise and the television serial *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* figure the serial killer through the serialized text. This echoes what Oltean terms the “performative mode [...], the coherence and the credibility of telling rather than the accuracy of the depiction of reality” (8). Ultimately, the format is directed at the production of text, rather than the documentation of truth which spirals towards a form of obscuring. This dynamism is resonant of Jacques Lacan’s definition of textualizing as a remodelling of the frightful in which “[...] we obscure the picture in the very process of painting it” (191). Both of these texts perform the American trope of insatiability of death on a metaphorical level and, as such, further develop the cannibal, a figure discussed previously. Fictionalizing real events as a reimagined fantasy, the American cultural imaginary produces the serial killer who has:

[...] been creatively deployed for some two hundred years as a means of articulating a sense of social dislocation and, [...] as a means of examining the relation of the lone and often alienated individual to the [...] society that he or she inhabits. (Blake, 197)

Fetishized by the American cultural unconscious, it is thus that both the *Scream* franchise as well as *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* showcase the serial killer as the only constant and unwavering center of the narrative. While it is arguable that Sydney Prescott (as the final girl) and Gianni Versace (as the tragic celebrity) obtain a structural agency, it is only through serial killing that this structural agency can be maintained. It is this serialized murderous agency culminating in iconicity, then, that not only defines, but also actively crafts the story. A story for which the audience is as insatiably hungry as the serial killer is compelled to indefinitely (re)produce the corpse.

5.1 Catering to a Compulsive Craving: Wes Craven's *Scream* Franchise

After World War II, popcorn sales made a sudden rise – this time by an astonishing 500 percent! A survey conducted among [American] housewives proved the reason to be the new invention of television.

Barbara Williams, Cornzapoppin'!

A phone rings, once. It is a landline. A young woman, blonde and attractive, reaches for the receiver. “Hello,” she says. “Hello,” a male voice answers. “Yes?” the woman says. “Who is this,” the male voice inquires. “Who are you trying to reach?” the young woman counters. “What number is this?” the male voice insists, in response to which the young woman again asks “well, what number are you trying to reach?”. “I don’t know,” the male voice states. “Well, I think you have the wrong number,” the woman concludes to which the male voice says “do I?” “It happens, take it easy,” the woman says before hanging up the phone and walking away. The phone rings again. Twice. The young woman picks it up again and repeats “Hello?”. “I’m sorry, I guess I dialled the wrong number,” the male voice apologizes, a repeated mistake which is emphasized by the woman asking him “so why did you dial it *again*?” “To apologize,” the male voice says, to which the young woman states: “You’re forgiven, bye now,” explicitly signposting the conclusion of this conversation. “Wait, wait, don’t hang up,” the male voice insists. “What?” the woman responds. “I wanna talk to you for a second” the male voice urges. “They’ve got 900-numbers for that. See ya,” the woman asserts before slamming down the receiver in exasperation, an action that we witness merely mirrored in the reflective glass of a window tainted by darkness. Briefly, a medium shot isolates a moving swing in the residential garden, on the other side of said darkly tinted window underlining a suburban setting. The swing is in focus, the ever-so-slight movement clearly audible, marking an unknown, potentially dangerous presence. The film cuts back to the residence’s kitchen, to an extreme close-up of the stove, where the young woman fires up the gas and places a pan of *jiffy pop* popcorn on top of it. The hands that we had just closely observed handling the telephone receiver are now preparing a snack, which is explicitly associated with film and America in specific. As the young woman removes the wrapping lid, the phone rings again. At the other end it is the male voice, again, urging for a conversation while we hear the popcorn slowly being brought to a pop, and another one popping, and then another one popping. Audible repetition dominates the score. Pop, pop, pop.

This marks the notorious opening of Wes Craven’s 1996 film *Scream*, which will come to be the first in a series of four films. This is an opening that challenges the

genre conventions of the slasher, in which the alleged final girl, the young woman, Casey, will be murdered within the next couple of minutes by the killer behind the male voice on the phone. Murderous agency is instantaneous in *Scream*; Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener reference Carol Glover's *Men, Women and Chainsaws* when stating that Glover "has shown how the so-called final girl, or the girl who eventually hunts the monster down extends an invitation to identify even to male teenage spectators [...]" (110–111). At this point in the narrative, we are not aware that we have not yet been introduced to the entire franchise's actual final girl, Sydney Prescott. Casting an iconic celebrity such as Drew Barrymore as Casey as a marker of identification, only to immediately kill her off, places an intrusive and unexpected death at the very center of the narrative. Not only is the subsequent shattering of audience expectation of this opening sequence endowed with murderous notoriety, rendering this opening spectacular, but it also bridges the cornerstones of appetite (for) death, serial repetition, and the (specifically American) culture in which Craven's series is ultimately rooted.

Deeply written into this sequence is the notion of repetition. The ringing of the phone is repeated, their conversation is marked by doubling, the mirror image repeats Casey, and the extreme close-up of her hands becomes serial. It is the repetition of her hands that then also comes to align death, or rather, murderous desire, with appetite, her hands marking the bridge between the two; the very same hands that have so innocently concocted popcorn and absentmindedly fiddled with a kitchen knife during the initial phone call will also desperately cling to that same knife, a deadly weapon aimed at the killer in defence within the subsequent couple of minutes of the opening sequence.

Illustrations 25–28: Opening sequence alignment of food, death, film, Scream



It is then also the knife, a marker of the domestic sphere of the kitchen¹⁶ as well as the killer's preferred weapon of choice, which comes to bridge and reiterate the alignment of food and murderous agency which is excessively repeated. Upon removing the killer's mask as a last deed before being stabbed, the perspective changes to Casey's point of view and the killer's identity remains as yet unknown; the last thing she sees is a knife turned deadly, her blood already tainting its tip.

Inscribed with self-referentiality, this aspect is reiterated in the significance of the popcorn which becomes threefold; first of all, made from corn it marks the sustenance of the American individual as Williams also contends: "Popcorn, in fact, is the oldest truly American confection" (13). Corn stands as a signifier of America itself. In *Much Depends on Dinner*, Margaret Visser discusses the many implications of corn, calling a chapter "Corn: Our Mother, Our Life" and, ultimately, tying corn *flakes* to a specifically American identity as "eating [it] is a habit known to many countries on earth yet universally recognized as typically American" (44). Secondly, popcorn is commonly associated as a snack for moviegoers and it, thus, mirrors the metaphorical consumption of film, and more specifically, the horror film, as *Scream* so avidly underlines. When the voice on the phone inquires about the noise that he can overhear, Casey confirms that she is making popcorn to which he states: "I only eat popcorn at the movies," a ritual she cements by stating, "I'm getting ready to watch a video [...] just some scary movie," an explicit gesture to the audience. Finally, anchoring metaphorical as well as literal consumption, the fact that the concoctress of said consumption is brutally assassinated in the opening immediately aligns the food ritual with death. With a simple gesture, such as letting an assumed final girl converse with the killer while entangling the conversation with the preparation of popcorn, allows *Scream* to root the serial killer in a specifically American context, simultaneously implementing repetition as an underlying structure and establishing a connection between the consumption of food and murderous agency.

The fact that only a meager couple of minutes later we are faced with our alleged figure of identification Casey's insides, with the character hanging gutted and lifeless from a tree, reiterates the appetite for the corpse; echoing *American Psycho's* Patrick Bateman, the killer's response to Casey's inquiry about his intentions is curiosity as he wanted "[...] to see what your insides look like". The fact that the male voice is repeatedly able to predict Casey's agency, which he translates into his successful chase and conquest, ultimately killing her, marks the serial killer explicitly as the narrative's structuring force. This dynamic is further maintained through the form of the franchise itself, which not only references a plethora of horror films but actively reflects on the genre, implementing the serial killer as a structural force, as:

16 For an in-depth discussion of the re-encoding of the domestic space of the kitchen in alignment with the revenge narrative, see chapter 3.

Craven's runaway hit *Scream* took the basic premise of *Halloween* and deconstructed it. The film contained numerous references to other horror films, and the killers themselves are two slasher film aficionados whose fascination with the genre structures their mayhem. (Poole, 220)

Scream not only signals genre expertise, but also writes itself into the genre as a series through these repetitive acts by paying tribute to John Carpenter's *Halloween* and celebrating Craven's own *A Nightmare on Elm Street* by means of his cameo appearance as a janitor wearing a red and dark green striped sweater in allusion to his own Freddy Krueger. What could be read as playful intertextuality actually signposts the transgression of the *death paradox* from plurality towards seriality. As Valerie Wee points out, with regard to the film's "media-saturated" protagonists: "A significant proportion of the intertextual referencing in the *Scream* films functions as text," synthesizing that: "[t]he *Scream* films, therefore, take the previously subtle and covert intertextual references and transform it into an overt, discursive act" (47). In mirroring the audience's appetite for death, the excessive pleasure that is taken in the *serial depiction of death* isolates the serial killer as the metaphorical author of the story, thereby catering to the audience's appetite through the production of the corpse.

It is thus, that the *Scream* series' overt self-reflexivity that implements the genre of the horror-slasher as the formulaic recipe and as the undercurrent of its seriality. In *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, Carol Glover outlines the typical elements of the slasher, which she bases on Hitchcock's *Psycho*:

The appointed ancestor of the slasher film is Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). Its elements are familiar: the killer is the psychotic product of a sick family, but still recognizably human; the victim is a beautiful, sexually active woman; the location is not-home, at a Terrible Place; the weapon is something other than a gun; the attack is registered from the victim's point of view and comes with shocking suddenness. (23–24)

All of these elements are present in the opening of *Scream*, except for one; the location in *Scream* specifically is a home, but a home that is threatened; it is tainted with a dark presence which renders it uncanny. Throughout the entirety of its franchise, *Scream* continuously experiments with these elements, a repetition so heavily endowed with excess that it becomes fetishized in such a way that the horror film offers itself as particularly apt and it has the potential to "blow conventions into a million pieces and make a fetish out of excess" (Poole, xv). This formal fetishization that inscribes the films with seriality can be linked to Oltean's assessment of the serial format which dictates that "the same actor [is] to play the subject" (15). *Scream* implements character continuity with Sidney Prescott, the actual final girl, who maintains her persona throughout the franchise. At the same time, it is the figuration of the serial killer as Ghostface that also obtains a serial position. It is, thus, that

the franchise plays with the repetitive format of the television series as a blueprint formula; staged as a series, the *Scream* franchise figures the format through the serial killers' structural agency as the "very act of [serial] killing leaves the murderer hanging, because it isn't as perfect as his fantasy [...]. His mind jumps ahead to how he can kill more nearly perfect the next time. There's an improvement continuum" (Ressler & Shachtman, 33). Death is rendered overtly serial while simultaneously becoming endowed with spectacle, its performativity geared towards a tangibility of the fetishized absence through repetition as "[...] every concrete tale (be it a novel, film or a television series) is performance – the result of a whole range of transformations of the most elementary and abstract structure into a realized construction" (Oltean, 11). Within this formula of seriality, murderous agency is ritualized while both the narratological concept of the serial, anchored in Sidney, as well as the narratological concept of the series, Ghostface's interchangeability, ultimately underline the notion of repetition or recurrence. It is this ritualization, which is then also reiterated in the alignment of the food ritual with murderous agency, that serves as a mirror that plays with the corpse's paradoxical nutritive purpose upon which the audience feeds by means of serializing the plurality of the *death paradox*.

When read within this formulaic serial structuring, the 1996 original *Scream* can be seen as a form of pilot episode that sets the tone as well as puts a recurring paradigm into place. Situated in the suburban, idyllic fictional town of Woodsboro, the trope of small town¹⁷ security is challenged by means of the events that unfold throughout the film and that juxtapose the perceived notion of secluded safety. The implementation of the slasher offers itself to an abundance of aestheticizations of an abject death against this almost pastoral backdrop. As Barbara Creed's "Kristeva, Femininity, Abjection" points out: "[...] the horror film abounds in images of abjection, foremost of which the corpse, whole and mutilated, followed by an array of bodily wastes such as blood, vomit, saliva, sweat, tears and putrefying flesh" (66). It is the desire for the fictionalized abject that is explicitly staged as spectacle throughout the entirety of the series; the fact that this is excessively textualized by the protagonists' extensive knowledge of the slasher genre not only mirrors the audience's own appetite for the corpse, but ultimately diagnoses a collective unconscious that is marked as hungry for the corpse. Analogized as a mirror through its self-reflexive tone, this is epitomized in an emerging communal yearning to see the artificially abjected, aestheticized dead other. Randy Meeks, eagerly craving spectacle, exclaims: "Listen up. They found Principal Himbry dead. He was gutted and hung from the goal post on the football field," catering to the appetite of a nearby fellow teen, who responds: "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's go over there

17 See chapter 1, *Twin Peaks*: Trope the secluded small American town challenged by murderous agency.

before they pry him down!” In this instant the relentless desire to observe the abject within the other becomes evident.

This notion of spectacle can be linked to Seltzer’s concept of American *wound culture* which not only stages recurrence, but which also highlights a public engagement with the corpse: “The crowd gathered around the fallen body has become a commonplace in our culture: a version of collective experience that centres the pathological public sphere” (Seltzer, 22). As the franchise develops, it is not just death but also simultaneously the explicit staging of death-as-spectacle that becomes serial, ultimately catering to the audience’s appetite. Inscribing death with spectacle is then also mirrored in the diegetic public’s developing obsession with the life of the film’s actual protagonist, Sidney Prescott. As Sidney, recent survivor of an attack by Ghostface, finds herself fighting off hungry reporters, it is made abundantly clear that they do not merely voice an interest in her story but take it a step further, claiming the right to know, justifying their displaced interest: “So how does it feel to be almost brutally butchered? People want to know. They have a right to know! [...] How does it feel?” This juridical legitimization can be read as a form of constitutionalizing murderous spectacle as rightful. As such, Sidney’s victimization becomes a cultural commodity that is reflective of America’s *wound culture*, something that Seltzer also contends: “[t]his world of half meat and half machinery [America’s contemporary trauma culture] is one of the lethal places that make up our wound culture, in which death is theater for the living” (22). The journalists’ wording, which emphasizes “brutally butchered” and isolates the people’s right to know how that *feels*, highlights that it is not mere tragedy which the (diegetic) public craves; it is the fleshy tangibility of brutally butchering that ultimately fuels public interest and endows Sidney with celebrity status.

While *Scream* elevates the observation of murderous agency to an implied affective agency by means of the serial, it is the second film of franchise which adds poignancy to this aspect of the spectacular in its excessive play with the motif of the double. *Scream 2* not only appears as a double of its predecessor on multiple levels, the sequel also actively draws attention to itself as a form of doppelgänger, thereby marking itself as a recurrence, playing on the dynamism of seriality itself. In the opening sequence, we follow a couple to the movies, with the intention to watch *Stab*,¹⁸ *Scream*’s own diegetic double; within the diegesis, *Scream 2* performs what *Scream* extra-diegetically is – a slasher which is loosely based on actual events turned fatally spectacular. The avid level of mirroring which this mise-en-abyme puts into place provides room for the serial killer’s horizontal, intra-diegetic expansion. In *Dark Directions: Romero, Craven, Carpenter, and the Modern Horror Film*, Kendall R. Phillips contends that: “[...] the film-within-film [...] is essentially a ‘fictionalized’

18 The fictionalization of itself as *Stab* also hinting at the knife as a marker of both catering to an appetite and murderous agency.

version of the ‘real’ events in *Scream*. The complicated interplay here also serves as a space for reflection” (91). Phillips argues for the recurring double as text coming to serve as a spatial expansion of reflective space. *Stab* proves to be an exact replica of the events of *Scream*, as we follow the distraught hands of a hyper-fictional Casey attempting to escape from the doubled, hyper-fictional voice on the phone turned Ghostface. It is not only within the self-reflexive mise-en-abyme that the serial killer is explicitly repeated; hinging on spectacle, a quick pan to the movie theater reveals that the audience has dressed itself up as a plethora of Ghostfaces, waving about artificial blades at hungry imitators not of the identificatory final girl, but of the serial killer.

Illustrations 29 & 30: Doubling of *Scream* in self-citation, *Scream 2*



The fact that the intra-diegetic couple, carrier of the mise-en-abyme, makes a spectacle of purchasing popcorn to accompany their cinematic experience additionally bridges not only the connection to its predecessor, but also the fetishization of repetition. What is on display is what Seltzer deems to be rooted in America’s *wound culture*; an endless recurrence turned obsession with killing-as-spectacle that appears to find a vast audience lusting for more. It is also here that we are reminded of the journalist underscoring the public’s right to know how it *feels*. It is the cinematic screen that allows the public to discover what it feels like, albeit in an aestheticized, detached, and tamed form.

As the film continues, various other aspects are repeated and this heightens the audience’s self-awareness, challenging the boundaries between reality and fiction. Phillips further points out that:

[a]t one level, the likely audience for *Scream 2* would be watching the film in a movie theater not unlike the one depicted in the film, thus working to break through the obvious barrier that separates filmic violence – contained by the screen – and the audience, seemingly safe in the confines of the ‘real’ theater. (Phillips, 92)

A mirror is being staged that “draws our attention to the fact that we are about to see a film: a technology and an artefact which should not be mistaken for real life,”

(Elsaesser & Hagener, 63) Craven initially puts a dynamic into play that is shattered by the intrusion of an imitated abject death when one of the attendees, Maureen, is “brutally butchered” to death, becoming the imitated actuality which mirrors the spectacle. It is this immediacy which also echoes the opening of *Scream*, the proverbial pilot episode of the franchise, thereby establishing a structural connection not only via its recurrence on the diegetic screen through *Stab*, but also on a purely implicit level. In its opening sequence, *Scream 2* transgresses a former observational stance on the serial killer with a complex interplay between intra- and extra-diegetic levels, which ultimately casts the audience itself as the serial killer. Phillips is correct in asserting that screening the audience as such, Craven is “forcing the viewing audience to essentially view itself” (92). This creates a moment of simultaneity of the fictional and the hyper-fictional when harmless spectacle becomes threatening reality within these theatrics as Maureen is actually (diegetically) murdered by the actual Ghostface who is able to go unnoticed amongst his imitating peers. As Phillips concludes: “Put in this position, we are called to reflect upon our own viewing habits and the strange fascination that draws us to watch fictional depictions of violent acts while being repelled by real violence in our midst” (92). Weaving the audience into the plot by means of implementing a mirror trope also adheres to the serial narrative itself as “[w]hat is striking is the constancy with which the media use as entertainment the serial patterns that involve and fictionalize the audience” (Oltean, 6). The proximity between murderous agency and audience that is generated remains pleasurable because it remains an imitation. This dynamic is resonant of Sigmund Freud’s “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” which maintains that “[i]llusions commend themselves to us because they save us pain and allow us to enjoy pleasure instead” (331); the cathartic effect and *Scream 2*’s metaphorical nutritive purpose is heightened by means of challenging the boundaries between reality and fiction. It is film student Mickey Altieri who asserts that we are dealing with a “classic case of life imitating art imitating life”, which points to the perpetual reciprocity between reality and the cultural imaginary.

While the film initially draws a picture of a seemingly omnipotent serial killer, in the masked Ghostface, harboring the ability to appear almost out of nowhere, entering homes through closed doors and inhabiting an almost supernatural immortality, we later learn that in both *Scream* and *Scream 2* there were in fact two killers who were disguising themselves as Ghostface, which explains a previously eerie air of invincibility. The double that conceals itself behind the mask points to the doubling of agency that produces the corpse. While the production of the corpse continually increases, the serial killer’s agency remains condensed to a singular image, that of Ghostface. This staging of Ghostface as a constant is reinforced by the rest of the *Scream* franchise which remains loyal to Edward Munch’s scream mask and merely changes the agent behind it. It is then only by wearing the mask that the agent of death obtains omnipotence, feeding off its notoriety as that which renders Ghost-

face immortal. Once the mask comes off so does the killers' superiority, illustrated by Sidney's success in *Scream* as she overcomes her opponents in Billy Loomis and Stuart Macher who, when stripped of their protective mask, lose their potency. It is Sidney herself who, for a brief moment in the final showdown, wears the mask and asserts her power by becoming a part of the plurality of death agents. Echoing seminal figures from the horror genre such as Freddy Krueger or Michael Myers, it is through the act of murdering that these villains attain notoriety¹⁹ and, thus, inscribe themselves into the cultural imaginary, thereby rendering themselves immortal. It is through death that they remain alive; such is the nature of the metaphorical cannibal who paradoxically nourishes the corpse in order to maintain their own immortal stance. The fact that this is avidly reiterated through interchangeable Ghostfaces in the *Scream* franchise further highlights the narratological stance that the serial killer comes to obtain; anyone can step into his/her mask and, thus, can structure the story when masquerading as the serial killer through the achieved status of spectacular notoriety.

Immediately marked with the spectacular, the third film of the franchise, *Scream 3*, opens with a helicopter-ridden close-up of the Hollywood sign, the ultimate signifier of imitation. Building upon the opening sequences of the previous films so avidly and engorged with fatality, the film translates death into the Hollywood sign by means of its structural formatting. In *The Hollywood Sign*, Leo Braudy describes the notorious landmark as:

a group of letters, a word on the side of a steep hill that, unlike so many other cherished sites, cannot be visited, only seen from afar. Its essence is almost entirely abstract, at once the quintessence and the mockery of the science of signs itself. (2–3)

Playing on its elusive nature, this analogy is reiterated in the film by detective Mark Kincaid stating that: “to [him] Hollywood is about death [...] you get haunted”. Highlighting the interplay between Hollywood and death, hyper-real and real, the alignment of fashioning fictionality and murderous agency is carefully interwoven throughout the film. By re-reproducing Sidney's tragic life within the hyper-real, her individual reality is elevated to that of a work of art. In this elevation, however, it ceases to be her reality and instead becomes spectacular, a staged version which, in order to please the masses, has been polished, edited, and changed. These changes make it possible to elevate the mundane to the level of the sublime; however, this is only possible by means of aestheticization, as Benjamin observes in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” when he claims that:

19 The same dynamism of notoriety produces the figure of Andrew Cunanan as a serial killer in fiction.

[in] the film studio the apparatus has penetrated so deeply into reality that a pure view of that reality, free of the foreign body of equipment, is the result of a special procedure – namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted photographic device and the assembly of that shot with others of the same kind. The equipment-free aspect of reality has here become the height of artifice [...] (105)

In *Scream 3*, this notion recurs through the excessive doubling of both characters and spaces, resulting in the reproduction of a reproduction. In creating the heightened representation of art imitating art that imitates life, Craven imposes repetition on the already repeated fetishizing of its own seriality in continuously re-staging itself.

The franchise's third film specifically plays with this fetishized dynamic of recurrence when he lets the serial killer chase Sidney through a serialization of her home; this is an accurate replica of her home on the set of *Stab*. Sidney knows her way through the replica since it is a reproduction of her house. However, at a certain point she nearly falls from the first floor as one particular door leads into an abyss, pointing towards the fact that we are dealing with a mere replica after all.

Illustration 31: Sydney fooled by replica of her house, Scream 3



This shatters Sidney's implied familiarity with the set, thereby leading her back into reality, which is not the hyper-reality in which the *Stab* series takes place:

[...] we find Sidney recreating her evasions from the first film on the set. Of course, the houses used for filming are not complete, and in what might be read as commentary on the filmmaking process, in one telling moment Sidney seeks to run into a second-story room and finds herself dangling in thin air from the incomplete set-house. (Phillips, 95)

While this scene reflects on Hollywood's artificiality, it can also be read analogously to the *death paradox*. The linguistic productivity that is produced by the fetishizing of the absence *per definitionem*, which death maintains, is an illusion that ultimately remains incomplete. While the replica of Sidney's home is the recurrence and repetition of her near brutal butchering and the traumatizing chase through what is ultimately a mere prop, forms an additional mirroring of her haunting past; the fact that the set remains incomplete illustrates that the *death paradox* itself remains textually incomplete. Formatting itself as a series, then, partially amends this deficiency; while death will always remain absent, its fetishization by means of recurrence accommodates the spatial linearity for its textual productivity. Tied to the semiotic domain, the translation of death not only into text, but into a serial structuring of text comes to cater to an unamendable insatiability. It is this serial dynamic that is so apt for the implementation of a hunger metaphor. When Sidney W. Mintz states that: "[w]e more than abstract and desire it [food] – we really must consume it to stay alive" (5) he is pinpointing the punctual, but ultimately fleeting, satisfaction provided by the act of consuming:

Our desire for it can grow far beyond anticipatory pleasure; desire can turn to pain. When we get some we must put it inside our mouths to be processed there so that it can enter digestibly into our bodies. Because of the satisfaction of hunger [...] the feeling of eating can be intensely pleasurable. (Mintz, 5)

This intensely pleasurable sensation is bound to evaporate and be replaced by a subsequent appetite; a serial structuring ensures both the immediate satisfaction as well as the promise of a subsequent metaphorical meal.

While the serial killer's omnipotence finds justification in Ghostface's plurality, his immortal stance also becomes a structural device that connects the individual increments of the franchise by means of trauma. A text so heavily marked with recurrence becomes a traumatized text. As Bronfen explains in "Arbeit an Trauma: Wes Craven's *Scream* Trilogie", the serial killer is drawn as a nearly superhuman being because he is inherently connected to his victim, Sidney, being the personification of her nightmares (101). Illustrating this notion, Bronfen draws on *Scream 3*'s conversation between Sidney and detective Mark Kincaid. When asked to name his favorite movie by Sidney, Kincaid responds with: "My life" an answer which she has no choice but to replicate when she says: "Mine too" (101). This dialogue is preceded by Kincaid voicing his frustration regarding "ghosts that won't go away" referring to death as an abstraction of which Ghostface becomes a partial tangibility. Reading Ghostface as a personification of Sidney's repressed fear of death, and taking the fact that he is nearly impossible to overcome in his plurality into account, suggests that any textual fetishization can only ever serve as an approximation, never as a full compensation. The way each of the *Scream* trilogy films unfolds can be seen as a metaphorical meal, one which reflects on its own consumption. Structurally hinging on a sim-

ple protagonist-antagonist dynamism with an intra-diegetic Sidney and her serial killing counterpart Ghostface, the extra-diegetic level of the doubled audience is reflected in Ghostface's plurality. On an extra-diegetic level, Ghostface becomes the fetishized, over-compensatory placeholder for an absence; the hyper-real audience of *Stab* is then mirrored in the actual audience who is presented with the same canvas, all feeding on the same metaphorical meal.

Initially designed as a trilogy, it appears that the franchise remained unable to escape its own seriality or its own textual insatiability. Addicted to itself, the text seems caged by the structural paradigm of the serial killer. An inherent compulsion, as Seltzer asserts, “[s]erial killing has its place in a public culture in which addictive violence has become not merely a collective spectacle but one of the crucial sites where private desire and public fantasy cross” (1). It is thus that the fourth film of the series, which opened in theatres in 2011, an entire decade after *Scream 3*. Craven once again stages Woodsboro as the falsely believed safe place in which death strikes as a force of recurrence. Not only is the location repeated, but we further meet familiar characters that still reside in Woodsboro – Gale Weathers as well as Dewey Riley, the *Scream* series’ former protagonists work as a bridge between generations which finds its peak in the presence of Sidney as the aunt of the next generation’s protagonist Jill Roberts with the added twist that it is Jill who will turn out to be the murderer in disguise. Structurally, *Scream 4* maintains its ritualized seriality, but the tagline “New Decade, New Rules” rings true in the film’s conceptualization of the serial killer. The repetition of location, as well as characters, plays into a serial inevitability hinging on the uncanny which manifests as an “[...] involuntary repetition which surrounds what would otherwise be innocent enough with an uncanny atmosphere, and forces upon us the idea of something fateful and inescapable [...]” (Freud, 237). This is a familiarity that does not merely remain tied to location, but also shows that Woodsboro’s next generation is equally hungry for death, something that is evident in the self-reflexive tone that is repeated to an even more extreme degree as well as in the recurring repetition of the *Stab* series in an actual ‘Stabathon’. *Scream 4* presents itself as the performative repetition of the *Scream* trilogy that has been adapted and updated in content in order to saturate a contemporary hunger.

This notion of repetition is immediately evoked by the film’s opening sequence which layers no less than three hyper-realities onto each other – the ending of *Stab 6* which simultaneously marks the beginning of *Stab 7*, which is watched by two residents of Woodsboro and, in adherence to its paradigm, as the opening act of *Scream 4*, end up murdered by Ghostface. The layering of these hyper-realities remain initially unannounced, thereby challenging the audience’s perception of extra-, intra-, and hypo- diegesis; this is a notion that is repeated in staging the double (*Stab 6*) within the double of the double (*Stab 7*) only to maintain that the possible double of the double of the double (*Scream 4*) is not a rendition of a possible *Stab 8*, but that the audience now finds itself back in the reality of the film. Challenging the intra-

diegetic serial that the film puts in place, the opening sequence of *Scream 4* then immediately questions the borders of fiction within the fictional real and the hyper-real, thereby creating not only a hyper-self-reflexivity but further leaving the audience questioning its own safe space in a mirror image that is dictated by diegetic fluidity.

It is not only the boundaries between the fictional and the real that are challenged, but also the boundaries between victim and serial killer at the level of character development. Crafted to coincide within the same agent, the new decade's final girl Jill Roberts does not merely obtain the position of the victim, but ultimately reveals that she is the murderer behind the mask. Staging her own survival by crafting her own antagonist's serial killer persona, Jill desires to consolidate both antagonism and protagonism within her character. This gesture of conflation is entirely geared towards the spectacular. Jill wants to be famous, leeching off her aunt's notoriety as "it's about becoming you" is what she tells Sidney. Seduced by the prospect of iconicity, Jill claims that "[she doesn't] need friends. [She] need[s] fans". In combining both final girl and serial killer, Jill draws upon the spectacular amplification of the fame of each role. It is this self-administered fame, then, which she conceives of as a way to achieve immortality; masquerading as both final girl and serial killer, Jill emerges from the entirety of the narratological stance. This binding dynamic is reiterated during the meeting of cinema club during which Robbie Mercer and Charlie Walker point out that the one component that Ghostface is missing is a self-induced media presence. In an attempt to re-invent the serial killer, in order to become the "new new version", Charlie points out that "the killer should be filming the murders" and by uploading these clips into cyberspace "making your art as immortal as you". As will be later revealed, Charlie is also the second half of the killer duo behind the mask and in this instant is, therefore proclaiming, that by filming the murders he would render *himself* immortal.

Within this notion we find that aspect of immortality that is achieved by becoming famous as a serial killer, which is to say through the fame achieved by means of producing the corpse. As the final girl is revealed to be the serial killer, Jill becomes both creator and destroyer. *Scream 4* thus reifies *American wound culture* – both the creator and destroyer of the serial killer and bound to endless recurrence. It is within this dynamism that the *death paradox* gains resonance, thereby highlighting the productivity of the text, which is attained through the production of the corpse. Jill is willing to not only other her own death in her own creation as an active murderer in order to achieve immortality, but will further stage her own death as a means to overcome it. In her repetition of Sidney, however, Jill finds herself unable to achieve her hitherto acclaimed immortality, eventually being overcome by Sidney, the original, who sums up this circular transformation in her final statement: "You forgot the first rule of remakes Jill, don't fuck with the original". The analogy with abject death becomes evident when placed in the context of the *death paradox*. The text can

merely fetishize, which is to say produce, an aestheticized and incomplete image, a *remade death*; however, the original (object death) cannot be reiterated. What remains is only the serialized figuration of an image that will continuously be re-created and re-destroyed.

5.2 An American Tale: *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*

The battle for the mind of North America will be fought in the video arena – the *videodrome*. The television screen is the retina of the mind's eye. Therefore the television screen is part of the physical structure of the brain. Therefore whatever appears on the television screen emerges as raw experience for those who watch it. Therefore television is reality, and reality is less than television.

Prof. Brian O'Blivion, Videodrome

The people's shudder of admiration for the "great criminal" is addressed to the individual who takes upon himself, as in primitive times, the stigma of the lawmaker or prophet.

Jacques Derrida, Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"

In "The Electronic Funeral: Mourning Versace", Daniel Harris voices his bewilderment at the trivialization as well as commodification of public grievance. When Italian fashion mogul Gianni Versace was assassinated in Miami Beach on July 15th 1997, "the paramedics wheel[ed] him away to the morgue on his blood-spattered gurney [when] thousands of tributes placed by seemingly disconsolate fans astonished by his assassination flooded the internet" (154) Harris states further that marking this flood of mourning prominently involves "spontaneous eruptions of bewilderment and sorrow plagued by bad taste" (154). It is the dynamism of fandom that is conducted in *bad taste*, both overtly histrionic and superficially non-substantial, which appears to resonate with Harris. The unwarranted public grievance that he observes appears to be one of quantity rather than quality, which alludes to that form of fan-

dom that *Scream 4*'s Jill Roberts attempted to set into motion for herself. The spectacular (corpse) will live on when its iconicity is continually fed by its numerous fans; in the case of Gianni Versace, it was "a sob fest, an act of mass hysteria with a distinct note of competitiveness" (155) as Harris maintains. Ultimately, Harris consolidates that what he considers to be empty lamentations fueled by the actuality of Gianni Versace's corpse reify a collective unconscious, which is marked by apathy:

The tributes testify, not our sensitivity to violence, as the mourners would have us believe, but our collective numbness, our indifference, our inability to respond to the headlines as anything more than an opportunity to engage in a grisly spectator sport, fascinated by atrocities we savor from a vantage point of domestic invulnerability, safely ensconced behind our television sets. (155–56)

A testament to America's *wound culture*, which is marked by a hunger for violence from a distance, Harris is echoing the pertinent sentiment of the "New Decade" and its "New Rules" which *Scream 4* established. The spectacle and spectatorship of violence, which lie at the heart of America's *wound culture*, emerge as a repetition compulsion which appears so avidly tied to a screen; this is a screen which can be read as the Foucauldian mirror which fragments itself into episodic pieces when textually attempting to capture death. Based on the *death paradox*, it is the staging of death in a plethora of different aestheticizations that remains ever-productive, fueling the engagement in a "grisly spectator sport" as Harris contends.

An inherently serial nature can be related to these minds of insatiability if the television screen is, in fact, the retina of the mind's eye, an allegory of a collective unconscious, as David Cronenberg's 1983 horror film *Videodrome*'s alleged voice of education and scientific pursuit, Prof Brian O'Blivion claims. The screen, as both canvas and mirror, becomes a platform for the simulated reiteration of the repetition of murderous desire. The camera, as has been asserted by Walter Benjamin, is a tool that facilitates the confrontation with the unconscious: "Clearly, it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye, 'other' above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious" (117). It is the screen that feeds the literal eye of the spectator and the metaphorical I of the American cultural imaginary. In staging the serial killer narrative, it is the television screen which serializes this metaphorical gesture of consumption into ritual. What emerges is a compulsive desire to consume an aestheticized death as an act that relates to the formation of the subject as:

[i]n the new scheme of things, what one consumed became a changing measure of what (and of who) one was. Status did not so much define what one could consume; what one consumed helped to define one's status. The individual – a producer – came to be redefined as a consumer; her desires were continuously remodeled. (Mintz, 78)

In the context of the serial killer narrative, this metaphor extends to the signification of the audience being fed by the fictionalized serial killer within the episodic format of the series that formally ritualizes that same consumption. The television serial, which showcases the serial killer, embeds formula into content in its rendition of a cultural unconscious that seems to be marked by insatiability. The medium of television, seminal as a “[...] key agent in the production and circulation of cultural meanings” (Däwes 27) and its prominent format the serial, “serves as an ideal laboratory for the diagnosis of contemporary American epistemes and cultural codes [...]” (Däwes 27). Maintaining a formula where “[...] we may hope for the next episode [...]” (Däwes, 28), the medium of television picks up on an American promise which allows hope to craft a dream for each individual; while the serial killer narrative itself also allows for that debris which has been cast aside to reappear, as Harris noted, it is “a vantage point of domestic invulnerability, safely ensconced behind our television sets” (155–56). It is also from this vantage point that Versace’s assassin, Andrew Cunanan, emerges as a myth. Indiana maintains that:

[...] the scariest aspect of the Andrew Cunanan Story was the insensible proliferation of media coverage following the shooting of Gianni Versace: the killer, widely ignored while he left a trail of bodies from Minnesota to New Jersey, became, abruptly, a diabolic icon in the circus of American celebrity [...]. (29)

While a conclusive categorization of Cunanan as either spree or serial killer cannot be officially provided,²⁰ it is the fictionalization of this sudden diabolic icon as a serial killer which becomes characteristic of the American cultural imaginary’s repetition compulsion.

Composed as an anthology of true crime, the television series *American Crime Story* fictionalizes the story of Andrew Cunanan²¹ specifically as a serial killer narrative in *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*, thereby lending the title to the series’ second season.²² The opening episode, “The Man Who Would Be Vogue”, begins on the day on which Gianni Versace was assassinated, July 15th, 1997 in Miami Beach Florida; this temporal and spatial setting engraved in white letters on a black screen marks the first image that is shown. Feeding off the notoriety with which this situating is pregnant, given the context of the serial, the opening image visualizes a juxtaposi-

20 See Indiana, 31. Similar to the figure of the zombie, Cunanan’s status as serial killer refuses final categorization which simultaneously endows his figuration with interpretability, see also chapter 2.

21 In what follows, any mention of “Andrew Cunanan” specifically references the figuration of his persona in *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*, not the actual Andrew Cunanan, unless where explicitly specified.

22 Thematically different each season, the first season of *American Crime Story* centers on the O.J. Simpson trial, while the third season is concerned with the impeachment of Bill Clinton.

tion of Versace's luxurious morning routine against a forlorn figure on the beach. Both men are overlooking the same ocean, a metaphorical imaginary.

Illustration 32 & 33: Alignment of Versace and Cunanan, The Assassination of Gianni Versace, "The Man Who Would Be Vogue"



While Versace is cloaked in luxury, a figure marked by excess, the as yet unnamed Cunanan appears meagre in comparison; his clothes seem ragged and all his possessions are reduced to a backpack which has been carelessly dumped on the ground; this is another aspect which clashes with Versace's meticulously polished palace. While these two men are marked by difference, they are simultaneously aligned in their vision. Both of them are gazing at the ocean and both of them are visualized from behind which allows the audience to share their same vision. The alignment is thus triplefold; Versace, Cunanan as well as the viewer are overlooking the Atlantic Ocean in a moment of peace, which is to be shattered by death; by the looming *Assassination of Gianni Versace*.

Naming the first episode of the season "The Man Who Would Be Vogue", the serial narrative immediately suggests that this is not the story of fashion mogul Versace himself. This is not the story of a man currently en vogue, but rather this marks the beginning of the forlorn figure at the beach who would be vogue. This wording implies that it is the figure of Versace, which has to be overwritten by his assassinator Andrew Cunanan, a notion which is solidified by a close-up of Cunanan's possessions that he fiddles with at the beach, visually setting his agency into place. Rum-maging through his backpack, Cunanan places a copy of Caroline Seebohm's *The Man Who Was Vogue: The Life and Times of Condé Nast* in front of him. What comes to overshadow the: "[P]ersonal recollections and confidential company archives to reveal the life and times of the man who revolutionized magazine publishing and design in America and set still-intact standards of taste" (blurb) is the gun that a distraught Cunanan places on top of the book.

Illustration 34: *Condé Nast and gun, The Assassination of Gianni Versace, "The Man Who Would Be Vogue"*



Before the opening credits are shown, the television serial already aligns text with a murderous desire that is embedded in a visual allusion to iconicity itself. The agent holding the gun on the day on which Versace will be assassinated is the figuration of serial murderer Andrew Cunanan. This is his American crime story, his claim to fame. As Andy Warhol suggests, in regard to said fame, “[t]he right story in the right place can really put you up-there for months or even years” (Fame, 45) highlighting the way in which storytelling feeds into celebrity culture. Not yet vogue, he is the man who *would* be vogue because of his murderous agency, which the image cements. Only mere minutes later, we will come to witness Andrew Cunanan shooting Gianni Versace with the gun with which we are already familiar; an act which renders serial murderer Cunanan the centre of the story. Opening the series as such, it is evidenced that murderous agency directed at celebrity carries enough spectacle to endow Cunanan himself with a level of celebrity status. It is Andrew Cunanan who becomes the television series’ structuring force and protagonist.

The immediate assassination of Versace that precedes the episode’s opening credits echoes that invocation of the spectacular, something with which the opening of the *Scream* franchise also plays. An instantaneous confrontation with murderous agency renders both the agent thereof and the story spectacular, by creating a form of excess.²³ While we know that Versace will be assassinated, the way in which his assassination is screened is not only immediate, but is fragmented with quick cuts revealing more and more of his lifeless body. It is this form of visual repetition, which formally fetishizes the corpse that is not just any corpse but the celebrity

23 A similar dynamic regarding spectacle and storytelling is at play in the opening of *Twin Peaks*; see chapter 1.

body, thereby adding to the pertinent sentiment of an instantaneous over-exaggeration of death. In *Natural Born Celebrities*, David Schmid isolates criminal activity directed at celebrity as marked with the machinery of fame, exemplifying “as Mark Chapman found out when he killed John Lennon, by attacking the famous, you become famous” (10). Read alongside *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*, it becomes evident that the television serial becomes textually productive in telling the story of Versace’s murderer, Andrew Cunanan. While the Italian fashion designer lends his name to the series, the fragmented narrative circles around his assassin Andrew Cunanan who is not only staged as a serial killer, but who also becomes the structural force of the serial killer’s narrative episodic format. While the audience already knows that the objective of the television series is the assassination of Gianni Versace, it becomes all the more telling that rather than working towards the cathartic outcome, the narrative is framed by the shooting of Gianni Versace. Crafted as an ellipsis, Gianni Versace’s initial assassination is visualized from Versace’s point of view. Marked with recurrence, the motif of the double feeding into the fragmented narrative, the final episode of the series, “Alone”, will come to repeat the same scene from Cunanan’s point of view. The series, thus, concludes by repeating the beginning, but reformats the alignment of perspective; re-encoding the recurrence of the assassination in such a manner cements the active outlining of the serial killer with an authoritative voice. After all, this remains an American Crime Story, a fabricated narrative in which the serial visualization of a story on a screen – Videodrome’s North American arena – caters to the mind’s appetite through its retina; and the appetite emerging from America’s wound culture craves the serial murderer.

The dynamism of repetition or *recurrence*, as Seltzer terms regarding *wound culture*, gains momentum when taking the view into consideration that prior to assassinating Versace we observe Cunanan walking into the ocean. Surrounded by crashing waves, Cunanan voices an internal exasperation in a few excruciating screams.²⁴ Marking just one of many baptizing rituals that the character undergoes, Cunanan is prominently visualized taking showers or diving into swimming pools, frequently immersing himself in water throughout the entirety of the season. This overt notion of cleansing, read as a baptizing gesture, seems to allude to Cunanan’s compulsive reinvention of his personality.²⁵ In a flashback, “The Man Who Would Be Vogue” showcases a conversation between soon-to-be-vogue serial murderer Cunanan and the object of his murderous desire, currently en vogue fashion designer Gianni Versace. Staging himself as a repetition when masquerading as one of his many personae, Cunanan pretends to be a novelist musing that he would “change my name to Andrew Da Silva [...] when they make a movie of my novel” (“The Man Who Would

24 This is a gesture that calls to mind Laura Palmer’s final excruciating scream, which reinstates her as alive in the closing episode of *Twin Peaks* (see chapter 1).

25 See also chapter 2 for an account of the baptizing that the figure of the zombie undergoes.

be *Vogue*). A movie based on a purely fabricated novel never to be written, Cunanan stages himself as an author believing his story to be endowed with enough potential for spectacle. It is a different story that will be told, however, only over his dead body which comes to overshadow and feed the episodes that follow. Ultimately, Andrew Cunanan has to die while his ensuing iconicity as a serial killer maintains “an unparalleled degree of visibility in the contemporary American public sphere. In a culture defined by celebrity, serial killers [...] are among the biggest stars of all, instantly recognized by the vast majority of Americans” (Schmid, 1). It is not the plethora of personae that Cunanan masquerades as which render him worthy of storytelling; instead, the repetition of his murderous agency is the one constant that he maintains and this feeds the audience’s appetite and catapults him onto the television screen.

Stripped of his post-mortem celebrity status as serial killer, Cunanan marks the epitome of an American ordinary. When his utilitarian love interest, Norman Blachford, debunks Cunanan’s charade by stating that: “I’m saying that your name is not Andrew Da Silva. It’s Andrew Cunanan” (“Descent”) and proceeds to expose Cunanan’s actual and unspectacular family history Cunanan is horrified and refuses to acknowledge his ordinariness. Having fabricated many dazzling stories about his past, hinging on a plethora of personalities which he has crafted, when Blachford further inquires what it is he finds insulting about the mundane, Cunanan responds “it’s ordinary”, thereby identifying ordinariness as a threat to his self-perceived extraordinariness (“Descent”). Dismantling Cunanan’s compulsion to pretend, in “Creator/Destroyer”, the eighth episode of the series, we learn that Cunanan’s immigrant father is of Philippine origin and has come to adopt the American Dream as his life’s quest. Outlining the root of Cunanan’s obsession with the spectacular, the flashback reveals that at a job interview Cunanan’s father Modesto states that “[t]he United States [is] the greatest country in the world” based on its promise of prosperity which he solidifies by rejecting his given name, thereby urging his interviewers to “call me Pete” (“Creator/Destroyer”). Modesto’s job interview is mirrored with a young Cunanan’s own interview at Bishop school where he is asked what his one wish would be. Cunanan’s answer stands as an epitome of the American Dream when he elaborates: “[a] home overlooking the ocean. Two Mercedes. Four children, three dogs and a good relationship with God” (“Creator/Destroyer”). Having been indoctrinated by his father, who constantly reassures Cunanan that he is special, extraordinary even, when Cunanan is then called out for his answer containing more than one wish, he counters with his one wish being “to be special” (“Creator/Destroyer”).

Anything but special, expanding on Cunanan’s origins, the series debunks Cunanan’s family history as heavily charged with the promise of an American Dream. This promise is, ultimately, exposed as corrupted when Modesto has to flee the country in order to avoid embezzlement charges and, more poignantly, when Cunanan’s

supposed extraordinariness leads his father to sexually abuse the boy, urging him “not to make a sound” (“Creator/Destroyer”). The slow dismantling of the false American Dream, the Cunanans have been attempting to capture simultaneously challenges the mantra by which Cunanan has been brought up, while also allowing him to fashion his personality as pure canvas; much like how his father’s compliance with the American Dream was corrupted, Cunanan himself spirals into becoming a corrupted projection screen. As such, he is staged as a core trope of the American imaginary; providing a canvas for a promise which he attempts to keep by becoming spectacular. Cunanan specifically marks himself as American when referencing his grandmother as an American-Italian who has never been to Italy vis-à-vis Versace in a flashback to his alleged first encounter with Versace. As such, he is marking himself as American and is anchoring his persona in a type of Americanness. An extraordinary Americanness that the series figures into the fame of the serial murderer, which “in American popular culture that addresses serial killers because these figures not only connote monstrosity but also personify another iconic American figure who inspires sharply contradictory feelings: the celebrity” (Schmid, 8).

“Creator/Destroyer” heartbreakingly ends with Cunanan’s realization that “I’m a lie”, an epiphany that he has after confronting his father Modesto with his embezzlement charges and return to the Philippines. Contesting the promise of the American Dream, which Modesto dismantles as corrupted and after he has been forced back to a shack in the Philippines, he tells his son that: “[y]ou can’t go to America and start from nothing. That’s the lie. So I stole” (“Creator/Destroyer”). Read alongside Lacanian psychoanalysis, one could claim that as Modesto is dismantled, the more the symbolic crumbles and the more Cunanan turns himself into a fabricated image, not only perceiving himself as a lie but also adapting telling lies as a form of labor, turning his identity into an imaginary. This dynamic is solidified in “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” when future victim Jeff tells Cunanan’s current love interest and additional victim David: “He’s got no one. He’s got nothing. Everything he’s told you about his life is a lie. You know that, right?” It is this emptiness, this “nothing” which Cunanan commodifies and fetishizes into the spectacular overcompensating for an absence with extraordinariness. Having staged himself as a rich entrepreneur in order to impress David, Cunanan references his own compensatory compulsion when he says: “I know that I over-exaggerate sometimes” (“Descent”). While the narrative’s fragmented chronology formally underlines Cunanan’s manifold cons, it becomes ever more uncertain which of Cunanan’s accounts are true and which remain purely fabricated. Having anchored his Americanness with his return from the Philippines, this dynamism further alludes to the American trope of storytelling as that fabric which crafts something from nothing. When he states that “I have nothing” (“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”) his storytelling is that which comes to fill the text with emptiness, thereby substantiating an absence in which he crafts his stories both large in number and “over-exaggerated” into something substantial. The fact that he ultimately

emerges as a serial killer writes a compulsive serialization of an aestheticized death into the American cultural imaginary with “[...] the huge serial killer industry that has become a defining feature of American Popular culture since the 1970s” (Schmid, 1). The fact that the real Andrew Cunanan cannot be conclusively classified as either spree or serial killer becomes less significant than the fact that the serialized text instrumentalizes his iconicity specifically to produce him as a serial killer.

Cunanan’s obsession with Versace becomes symptomatic of his strive for extraordinariness against the backdrop of Cunanan’s own origin story. Versace comes to literalize Cunanan’s manufacturing of his self in his manufacturing of clothes; Cunanan praises the icon’s self-reliance when he admiringly states that:

[...] the man invented his own fabrics. When they told him what he wanted wasn’t possible he just created it himself. [...] I see the man behind it [something nice]. A great creator. The man I could have been. (“Manhunt”)

It is pertinent here that Cunanan adds that Versace is the man that he could have been, a statement which he commemorates by taking a baptizing shower which cements his desire to become Versace, to overwrite the fashion mogul in order to reinstate himself as vogue. This aspect is further cemented in the same episode’s concluding scene in which we observe Cunanan at a nightclub. Surrounded by extravagant sound and lighting, he engages in a conversation with an unnamed stranger. Introducing himself using an abbreviation of his real name, he states “I’m Andy”. Upon being asked by the stranger “So what do you do?” Cunanan states “I’m a serial killer”. This is an answer which is swallowed and digested by the noise, coinciding with sensory excess, the stranger asks for a reiteration when he yells “what?” Being granted a moment of correction, which is to say, being able to readjust the potential error in translation Cunanan elaborates:

I said I’m a banker. I’m a stock broker, a share-holder, I’m a paperback writer, I’m a cop, I’m a naval officer, sometimes I’m a spy. I build movie sets in Mexico and skyscrapers in Chicago. I sell propane in Minneapolis, import Pineapples from the Philippines. You know I’m the person least likely to be forgotten. I’m Andrew Cunanan. (“Manhunt”)

Referencing the personae that he has previously crafted for himself, his overt listing culminates in the desire to become immortalized, as someone “least likely to be forgotten”.

Textually reminding us of the excessive doubling in *American Psycho*,²⁶ Cunanan’s fragmentation of identity is solidified by the nightclub’s flashing lights, which come to visually fragment his body as well as the conversation that he is conducting. Illuminated as such, with the repetitious lighting jumping back and forth, Cunanan

26 See chapter 4 for a detailed analysis of *American Psycho*.

is rendered both visible and invisible. The sequence marks the end of the episode and the scene then concludes with a completely black screen and only then do we hear him utter the words: "I'm Andrew Cunanan" ("Manhunt"). Merely audible but no longer visible, this voice-over accompanying darkness, absence, formally echoes that which Seltzer terms senseless murder, "where our most basic senses of the body and society, identity and desire, violence and intimacy, are secured, or brought to crisis" (Seltzer, 2). An assertion of his actual identity, "I am Andrew Cunanan" is underlined by the black canvas, which he comes to personify as a serial murderer. Rooted in Cunanan's initial statement, which asserts that he identifies as serial killer, the surrounding atmosphere of sensual deprivation through chaos facilitates "[t]he emergence of the kind of individual called the serial killer is bound up [...] with a basic shift in our understanding of the individuality of the individual" (Seltzer, 2). Composed as such, Cunanan is marked as a deviant canvas, not a white but a black projection screen; the serial killer as celebrity sustaining the opposite of benevolent success, outlining a corrupted American Dream fed by malignancy, while simultaneously having been produced by the same ideology of optimistic promise. A result of the same machinery of fame, Cunanan, alongside his many personae and against the backdrop of a black projection screen, marks a deviance that prevails.

The text thus writes Cunanan's self-proclaimed occupation of serial killer into the fabric of the American cultural imaginary by means of the serial narrative, with the format mirroring his repetition compulsion. Further echoing Ellis' Patrick Bateman,²⁷ Cunanan asserts his own performativity when he states: "I tell people what they need to hear" ("Manhunt"). Through his constant reinvention, Cunanan challenges the boundaries of his own subjectivity. Apart from his stance as serial killer, which cements the only constant part of his personality, his self becomes thoroughly fluid. This dynamism is highlighted early on in the narrative, the pilot episode, when an unnamed friend confronts Cunanan's theatrics asking, "[d]o I pretend to know the person you're pretending to be? I can't keep up. Every time I feel like I'm getting close to you, you say you're someone else" ("The Man Who Would Be Vogue"). Adding the fact that he predominantly stages himself as working in the film industry, in the crafting of movie sets for high-grossing films such as *Titanic* in particular, he states "I make movie sets. Right now I am building the sets from the *Titanic* movie" ("Ascent") which illustrates the way in which he seems to spiral further and further into a fabricated image, a mere performance, a *story*. His substantiation is purely artificial, which his friend Lizzie exposes in "Descent" urging him to maintain "who [he is] trying to be", ultimately pointing to Cunanan's fragmented self; this is a self which he does not want to acknowledge as singular because this would simultaneously re-instate his own mortality. Instead, he duplicates himself into many personae, all of

27 See chapter 4 for a full discussion of Patrick Bateman's fragmentation which develops into rudimentary cannibalism.

whom hinge around his singular defining character trait, that of being a serial killer; this involves bestowing mortality upon others in order to write himself into immortality. He refuses to be ordinary and crafts an image of himself as extraordinary; this is an image that can only be sustained through his murderous agency, however. Diagnosing ordinariness as a lack, the way in which acknowledgment feeds into Cunanan's murderous agency is then further solidified in "Ascent" when Cunanan ties rejection to a form of premature death, stating that: "[f]or me being told 'no' is like being told I don't exist". "No" becoming a carrier of absence, this statement explains why Cunanan spirals into a compulsion to kill upon being rejected by object of his desire, David, namely by over-exaggerating his own absence through the absence of an other. This sentiment is cemented when his love interest David confronts him with his murder of Jeff in stating: "He finally saw the real you and you killed him for it" ("House by the Lake").

Dissatisfied with his ordinary origins and scrambling for an identity, Cunanan adapts serial killing as a lifestyle in much the same way as Seltzer describes:

By the turn of the century, serial killing has become something to do (a lifestyle, or career, or calling) and the serial killer has become something to be (a species of person). The serial killer becomes a type of person, a body, a case history, a childhood, an alien life form. (4)

It is then the serial format which also becomes particularly apt for the narratological development of the figure of the serial killer. Television formats have recently developed towards complexity, as Birgit Däwes claims, "[s]ince the 1990s, television series and serials have become increasingly complex in their narrative patterns and time structures", Däwes further anchors this structural evolution of the serial format in Jason Mittell's seminal definition of complex TV, marking a:

new paradigm of television storytelling [...], redefining the boundary between episodic and serial forms, with a heightened degree of self-consciousness in storytelling mechanics, and demanding intensified viewer engagement focused on both diegetic pleasures and formal awareness. (qtd. in Däwes, 18)

Building on this dynamism, in "Forensic Fandom and the Drillable Text", Mittell further defines complex television as said *drillable text*, thereby highlighting the "narrative complexity of media storytelling, especially on television" (1) which manifests in "increased seriality, hyperconscious narrative techniques such as voice-over narration and playful chronology, and deliberate ambiguity and confusion" (Mittell, 1). Expanding on Mittell, and weaving in Schmid's assertion that serial murderers "[...] exert equal parts repulsion and attraction, a fact that ensures their simultaneous abjection from and ingestion into the social in a process that is potentially infinite" (8), it is this conceptualization of infinity that is avidly reflected in a serial format. Mirroring its protagonist's subjectivity, the chronological depiction of events in *The*

Assassination of Gianni Versace is thoroughly discontinuous. While there is a punctual situating for every jump, the narrative does not follow a temporal linearity but remains fragmented and pluralistic; the series' narrative complexity is marked by recurrence. This can be theorized alongside Seltzer, in the consolidation of the formatting that the series contains and that mirrors the trauma of *wound culture*. This is to say that rather than through temporal and spatial chronology, *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* provides structural linearity by means of a trauma which manifests as the serial killer's repetition compulsion.

In telling the serial killer, the serial narrative comes to fetishize its own seriality. The format comes to mark an (over-)exaggeration itself; while the serial killer destroys the series creates and thus compensates the absence(s) left by the serial killer through its encoding. The figure of the serial murderer then ritualizes murderous desire through the performance of a fetishized recurrence of murderous desire, which, in itself, is ritualized through that serial encoding. This notion culminates in the machinery of the serial which, like a cannibal, sustains life through the consumption of the dead, thereby becoming *reproductive*:

[...] the 'suspicion' that media are putting to maximum use the same, very productive and already verified machinery; that, metaphorically or not, this machinery exists and constitutes one of the most characteristic instruments of the contemporary culture. (Oltean, 6)

The machinery of limitless reproduction becomes a signifier of contemporary culture and the overt fragmentation of narrative in *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* further refines an established medium towards a distinguished palate. Accepting Oltean's comparison of serials to a dinner ritual, when stating that "[t]he serials lay all the narrative banquet dishes – which cannot easily be consumed simultaneously (because of the interwoven plots) – on the table" (18), the narratological structuring thus renders the story of Andrew Cunanan a complex meal. When read as a banquet dish, *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* reminds us of Hannibal Lecter's refined dinner parties and sophistication; marking the metaphorical evolution of the serial killer narrative towards cultivation.²⁸

This dynamism of heightened formal complexity is not only present in the fragmented staging of Cunanan's story, but is further reified in the content's conceptualization. When an escort agent inquires whether Cunanan "can [...] hold [his] own at a dinner table conversation" ("Ascent"), he instrumentalizes the prompt by outlining himself as spectacle when he states: "I am the dinner conversation" ("Ascent"). Continuously fashioning himself as the dish to be devoured, Cunanan consciously caters to an appetite by providing that which others crave. Cunanan crafts himself

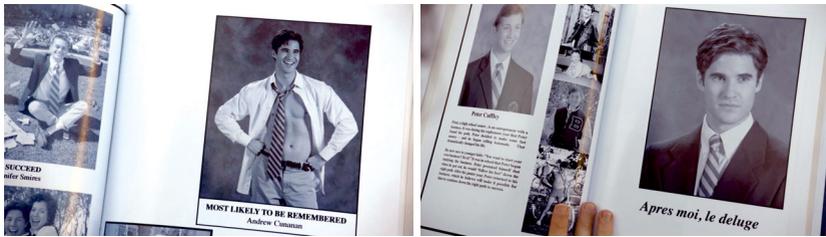
28 See chapter 4 for an in-depth analysis of Hannibal Lecter who emerges as a sophisticated cannibal.

as spectacle; as the simultaneous authorial figure and protagonist of his own spectacle, he does not simply desire to be seen. Instead, he wants to be craved and devoured. When the same escort agent refuses to add Cunanan to her repertoire, based on his Philippine heritage, which she “cannot sell,” he counters by saying: “[t]hen I’ll sell myself” (“Ascent”). As such, he not only proposes to turn his body into currency but also, rooted in his compulsion to lie with regard to his personality, posits a commodification of a crafted, fictionalized self. What emerges from the hand of the serial killer is a form of self-fashioning that hinges on the repetition of a plethora of different selves, which ultimately stand in contradiction to his singular physical mortality. Composing himself as the dinner conversation, Cunanan desires to be *both* the diner and the dish which ties back to an impossible desire for visibility. At his most successful, overlooking the ocean alongside Blachford, Cunanan states: “Oh, if they could see me now”. When Blachford inquires “who?” Cunanan over-exaggerates, saying: “everyone” (“Ascent”). So desperately desiring to be vogue, so desperately wanting to be seen, he has crafted himself as a body of spectacle, weaving himself into a communal fabric in order to remain remembered, immortal.

Deconstructing Cunanan’s proverbial “Ascent”, the season’s penultimate episode introduces the ensuing dismantling of Andrew-Cunanan-as-construct. It is here, in “Creator/ Destroyer”, a title hinging on an American bipolar dynamism of creative destruction,²⁹ that Cunanan crystallizes not only as a serial killer, but predominantly also as a celebrity gone awry. Once upon a time voted “most likely to be remembered” by his classmates, Cunanan’s yearbook showcases his eccentricity when he is depicted with an unbuttoned uniform, his tie loosely hanging over his exposed chest. In a flashback, it is revealed that Cunanan very consciously performs into the visibility that this deviant behavior grants him (“Creator/Destroyer”). The *enfant terrible* among his high school peers, the quote, which he chooses to commemorate himself in his yearbook, is “Après moi, le deluge” – after me, destruction – positioning him not only implicitly as creator, but more predominantly as destroyer.

29 See chapter 1 for a detailed discussion of creative destruction in the context of the American gothic.

Illustrations 35 & 36: Yearbook Cunanan, *The Assassination of Gianni Versace, "Creator/Destroyer"*



Fashioning iconicity through deviance, Cunanan performs as the undying celebrity body, crafting a form of visibility that is related to immortality. The fact that eventually it will be his murderous agency becoming that characteristic which renders him extraordinary is avidly underlined by “Après moi, le deluge”. Ever the dinner conversation, the fact that his peers cannot stomach him, sets his metamorphosis from creator (of himself as spectacle) to destroyer (of others as spectacle) in motion. His notoriety comes to hinge exclusively on the repetition of destruction; this is what renders Cunanan visible, but which also cements a distance. We are reminded of Harris’ assertion that wound culture’s fascination with violence is only perceived as pleasurable when it is tied to a screen, observable from a safe distance. It is, thus, Cunanan’s deviant claim to fame, the black projection screen that he manifests, which captures him in a golden cage. Ever so visible, he is also utterly alone.

This aspect culminates in the series’ final episode, “Alone”, which hinges on the self-referential and circular loneliness of the serial killer as celebrity. In *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Jacques Derrida reflects on mortality, arguing that subjectivity precedes and is, ultimately, bound to a lone sovereignty, contending that:

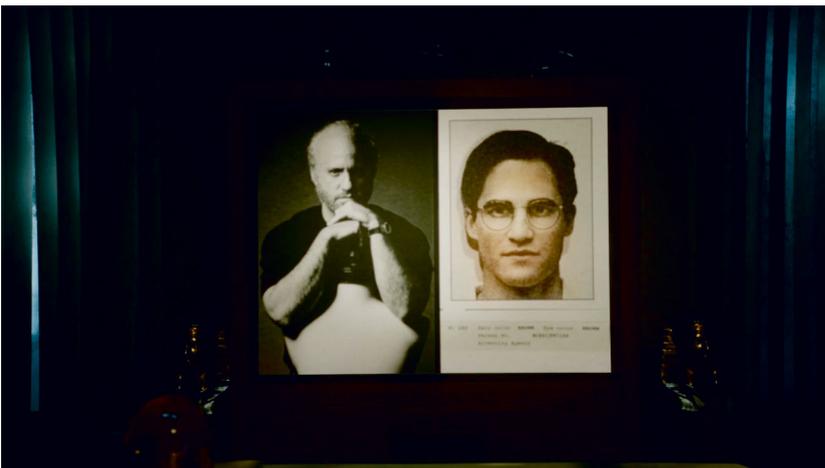
I am alone. Not: I am alone in being able to do this or that, to say this or that, to experience this or that, but “I am alone,” absolutely. “I am alone” does moreover mean “I am” absolute, that is absolved, detached or delivered from all bond, absolutus, safe from any bond, exceptional, even sovereign. (22)

Being absolute in one’s subjectivity while isolated becomes pertinent in “Alone” in which the fact that Cunanan’s identity is anchored in serial killing, while all other aspects remain fluid, is problematized. The final episode performs both the fame as well as the loneliness of the serial killer as celebrity. Through his murderous agency, Cunanan has achieved that notoriety which he so avidly craves; however, his claim to fame also adds volition to Fiedler’s pertinent question of “[...] differentiation; How could one tell where the American Dream ended and the Faustian nightmare began?”

(143). Caught in an American Dream turned Faustian Nightmare, Andrew Cunanan is currently most wanted; however, it is not the celebratory fans, but rather the FBI, who seeks him out, not to celebrate but to punish him. He is still exceptional, but it is an extraordinariness based on his only constant character trait, his stance of *absolutus*, through that serial killing agency that has rendered him much more visible than any of his other theatrics. Cunanan ultimately emerges as pure destroyer and as someone forced by his origins to both fetishize creation and overcompensate by means of crafting a plethora of personae. “Après moi, le deluge” suddenly harbors a visibility that becomes threatening to his freedom, when the entire world turns its panoptic gaze on him.

Abhorred rather than admired, Cunanan’s American Dream turns into a Faustian Nightmare. Hunted by the FBI, he finds himself surrounded by the reduplication of his manifold doubles as images of him flash on every television screen. A television screen marked by increasing proximity, rather than distance, becomes a dire reality for Cunanan; while completely alone, *absolutus*, he is not distant from and therefore not protected by the screen. The real Cunanan’s identity, as lack, is catching up with the plethora of stories that Cunanan had previously crafted in order to amend his own inadequacies, to compensate for his ordinariness. Haunted by a plethora of images flashing on every screen in Miami, it is one in particular that stands out and which captures Cunanan’s attention. Momentarily, Cunanan’s notoriety places him next to his idol, but names him the destroyer of Versace, Cunanan’s deviance as serial killer providing the only reason for their fleeting, shared fame.

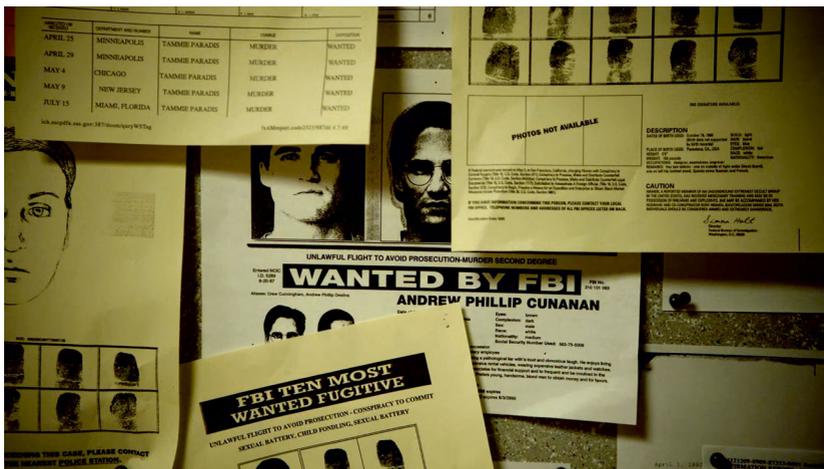
Illustration 37: Doubling Versace and Cunanan on television screen, The Assassination of Gianni Versace, “Alone”



Visually adjacent, Versace's superiority remains intact while Cunanan's masquerade is debunked. We are reminded of the manifold grievances over Versace's demise outlined by Harris; this is a mourning which is framed by antagonism towards Cunanan. No longer is he banker, spy, pineapple farmer, architect, or stockbroker. No longer is he a creator. No more reinvention, no more baptisms. Cunanan is reduced to pure destroyer. The debris that remains is Andrew Cunanan, serial killer. This is visualized by Cunanan observing his own suicide in a mirror, exerting his structural stance as serial killer in a self-serving circularity.

As *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* concludes, the narrative comes to reinstate Versace's benevolent iconicity while rendering Cunanan malignantly mundane. This aspect is cemented through the juxtaposition of the protagonists' graves which come to symbolically stand for the two men. A testament to their popularity, their perceived *vogue*, Versace's mausoleic shrine exerts an overt superiority in comparison to Cunanan's modest grave, which disappears among all of the others which look exactly the same; this is a juxtaposition which echoes the television series' opening scenes; it is a juxtaposition which ultimately characterizes Cunanan as serial. It is a serialization which the series had already alluded to in its second episode, "Manhunt". Temporally situated after the assassination of Versace, we briefly witness a detective on the case, Lori Wieder, passing an FBI board which displays the currently *most wanted*. What stands out is the fact that Cunanan does not stand alone and has already been overwritten by others, becoming serial before slowly disappearing into the background. Marking an oversaturation with serial killers, this brief scene both illustrates the serial killer's exponential growth as well as the ordinariness that the figure ultimately has come to acquire.

Illustration 38: FBI board, *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*, "Manhunt"



What remains is only repetition compulsion. What disappears in the process of the serialization of murderous agency is identity. If, as Seltzer consolidates, “[...] the serial killer [...] is an individual who, in the most radical form, experiences identity, his own and others, as a matter of numbers, kinds, types, and as a matter of simulation and likeness,” (4) then it is this form of simulation and likeness which also marks the serial killer’s identity. Any iconicity that was achieved remains tied to a repetition compulsion to kill; the repeated production of the corpse feeds the serial killer’s subjectivity. *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* emphasizes the way in which the American cultural imaginary not only fashions the myth that surrounds the actual Andrew Cunanan as a fictionalized serial killer narrative, but also highlights the way in which it is the serial killer narrative, not the serial killer, that ultimately prevails. Reiterated by the television format, the serial killer’s seriality renders him serial and thus overwriteable; there will always be a next in a context dictated by *wound culture*. As this particular *American Crime Story* comes to an end, Andrew Cunanan might have been devoured and served up to quench an appetite, but this appetite has only been temporarily sated. A subsequent craving will follow, one dictated by an ever-recurring hunger and satisfied by the series’ binding ritual. What emerges is not purely an American appetite for death, but more specifically a craving for the recurrence of murderous agency; it is that constant which manifests as the flipside of American optimism, as the serial compulsion to aestheticize death. *Over and over again*.