

# PRETEND CAPITALIST MONSTERS IN AMERICAN POP CULTURE WE'RE DEAD



ANNALEE NEWITZ

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CAPITALIST MONSTERS IN

AMERICAN POP CULTURE

*Annalee Newitz*

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# INTRODUCTION

## *Capitalist Monsters*

They've got us in the palm of their big hand

When we pretend that we're dead

They can't hear a word we said

When we pretend that we're dead

—17, from *Bricks Are Heavy* (1992)

At the turn of the century, critics hailed two movies as exciting reinventions of the horror genre: *The Sixth Sense* and *Blair Witch Project*. Both are about dead people who refuse to stay that way. The signature line from *Sixth Sense*, Haley Joel Osment's whispered, creepy "I see dead people," was an instant pop cultural meme. T-shirts with this phrase and morphed versions of it ("I see stupid people") were everywhere at the dawn of the new millennium, as were parodies and rip-offs of M. Night Shyamalan's terse, quiet movie about a little boy plagued by needy ghosts.

Osment's character Cole sees spirits who cannot rest until they get some kind of closure on their lives. He's begun to go insane when Malcolm, a child psychologist, helps him understand that the dead are not there to hurt or frighten him—they just need to be heard by one of the only human beings who can. Every dead person has a story that Cole must interpret. Only by talking with these terrifying creatures, who often appear to him soaked in blood or with their brains dripping out, can he bring peace to himself and his preternatural counterparts.

Of course, some ghosts could give a crap about closure. Certainly this is the case with the bloodthirsty spirits who haunt the remote Maryland woods in *Blair Witch*. When a bunch of art students decide to slum it around the countryside to get footage for a sarcasm-laced film they're making

about the legend of these spirits, they discover what documentary filmmakers have known for almost a century: the natives don't appreciate their condescending attitude. Murdered in mysterious, supernatural fashion, the students in *Blair Witch* are reduced to little knots of hair and teeth because they've refused to heed stories the locals tell about the Blair Witch's power to kill from beyond the grave.

Nothing is more dangerous than a monster whose story is ignored.

Like all ghosts, the dead people in *Sixth Sense* and *Blair Witch* come to the human world bearing messages. They remind us of past injustices, of anguish too great to survive, of jobs left undone, and of truths we try to forget. Gloopy zombies and entrail-covered serial killers are allegorical figures of the modern age, acting out with their broken bodies and minds the conflicts that rip our social fabric apart. Audiences taking in a monster story aren't horrified by the creature's otherness, but by its uncanny resemblance to ourselves.

One type of story that has haunted America since the late nineteenth century focuses on humans turned into monsters by capitalism. Mutated by backbreaking labor, driven insane by corporate conformity, or gorged on too many products of a money-hungry media industry, capitalism's monsters cannot tell the difference between commodities and people. They confuse living beings with inanimate objects. And because they spend so much time working, they often feel dead themselves.

The capitalist monster is not always horrifying. Sometimes it is, to borrow a phrase from radical geneticist Richard Goldschmidt, a "hopeful monster."<sup>1</sup> Instead of telling a story about the destructiveness of a society whose members live at the mercy of the marketplace, this creature offers an allegory about surmounting class barriers or workplace drudgery to build a better world.

Regardless of whether its story is terrifying or sweet, capitalist monsters embody the contradictions of a culture where making a living often feels like dying.

### ✱ Economic Disturbances

Stories about monstrosity are generally studied from psychoanalytic and feminist perspectives, but I argue that an analysis of economic life must be synthesized with both in order to understand how we define "monsters" in U.S. popular culture. Capitalist monsters are found in literature

and art film as well as commercial fiction and movies. Certainly we can find dramatic differences between its literary and B-movie incarnations. But, even as they cross the line between one form of media and another, the stories' fundamental message remains the same: capitalism creates monsters who want to kill you.

It's crucial to acknowledge that the people creating the books and movies I analyze in *Pretend We're Dead* may not have self-consciously intended to draw connections between what is monstrous and what people do for money. The "capitalist" part of capitalist monsters is usually a subtext and may not even be the most important part of a narrative. It lurks in the background, shaping events and infecting the plot line.

And it must be contained, figured, talked around, repressed. Stories where economic concerns rise to the surface and become overt are generally marginal affairs, embraced only by audiences of the highly educated or hardcore fans.

As an example, consider the strange case of Brian Yuzna's brilliant 1989 monster movie *Society*. Set in Beverly Hills, this low-budget gore fest follows the paranoid adventures of teenager William Whitney, who discovers that his adoptive parents and sister are polymorphous, incestuous, human-eating aliens who have raised him for food. As the story unfolds, Yuzna draws an overt connection between the ruling class and evil beasts who eat the poor for fun. While *Society* is intentionally ironic and playful at times, the message is unmistakable: the rich are repulsive alien monsters. Further, these elite aliens are literally incestuous, so we are unable to avoid the implication that wealth is being hoarded by a few inbred elites who have no intention of sharing it with anyone who isn't part of their "family." *Society* culminates in a grotesque, skin-dripping orgy at the mayor's house where all the rich white folks of Beverly Hills melt into one, throbbing body which sucks the flesh off a human "meal."

While *Society* boasts all the standard fare of a horror film, complete with glopmy makeup effects and gratuitous nubile teenagers, it was never released theatrically in the United States. Theatergoers in England got a chance to see it on the wide screen, and gave it rave reviews, but in the United States it went straight to video. Yuzna speculates that this discrepancy has everything to do with how Americans view class. Interviewed about *Society*, he said:

I realized that the British don't have a hard time realizing that there are classes. Americans, it's like messing with their mythology; you're threat-

ening their whole world. The American world view is predicated on this idea that those who have more really deserve it. . . . One of the points of *Society* is that not only do a very small number of people control the world, but . . . whatever class you are born in is the class you will grow up in.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, Yuzna's open depiction of class warfare made his film too disturbing, too economically horrifying, for a mainstream American audience. Even *The Psychotronic Video Guide*, known for its promotion of weird, underground films, describes *Society* as "very anti-establishment."<sup>3</sup> Thus, while we might say *Society* is a success artistically and certainly within its own terms as a capitalist monster movie, it hardly qualifies as "popular." It rests on the extreme edge of the pop culture spectrum, a film too overt for its own good. Like one of the nineteenth-century literary novels I will talk about in chapter 2, Frank Norris's *McTeague*, *Society* reaches only a small audience which is already willing to accept the basic idea that wealth generates monstrosity.

A more "standard" entry in the capitalist monster genre might be *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), a popular and Academy award-winning horror film about serial killers, released just two years after *Society*. Certainly one would not want to argue that *Silence* is an unself-conscious production; Jonathan Demme, its director/*auteur*, is well known for his thoughtful, critical films about U.S. culture. Yet *Silence* is hardly the blanket condemnation of class warfare that *Society* is.

We are reminded repeatedly in *Silence*, through flashbacks and scenes between hero Agent Starling and seductive psycho Hannibal Lecter, that Starling's traumas are related to her class background (Lecter calls her a "rube"), yet her preoccupation with her poor, rural background is sutured neatly into a splashier narrative about gender and the art of violence. Judith Halberstam notes that *Silence* "dramatizes precisely . . . [how] monstrosity in postmodern horror films finds its place in what Baudrillard has called the obscenity of 'immediate visibility' and what Linda Williams has dubbed 'the frenzy of the visible.'"<sup>4</sup> It participates in a hypervisual and distracting gore aesthetic of oozing wounds and skinned flesh. The spectacles of murdered and mutilated bodies are so heavily foregrounded that the questions about social class and economic mobility which fuel the narrative are safely contained as subtext.

## ✱ Dead Labor

A number of theorists and literary critics such as Halberstam have dealt with monster stories as something more than sheer entertaining spectacle. Perhaps most famously, Carol Clover's groundbreaking study, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, paved the way for an analysis of monsters as rooted in anxieties around masculinity, urbanization, and sexual desire. Other critics, such as David J. Skal and William Paul, have investigated the political and social meanings of horror in film. Some studies of the horror genre, such as James Twitchell's *Dreadful Pleasures*, Drake Douglas's *Horrors!*, and even David Kerekes's and David Slater's *Killing for Culture: An Illustrated History of the Death Film from Mondo to Snuff*, offer a way of blending aesthetic appreciation with cultural criticism.<sup>5</sup> I think the "appreciation" approach is still by far the most common in work on monsters, which indicates the degree to which many people remain uncertain as to whether one can call something "aesthetic" if it is also disgusting or outright goofy the way many monster movies are.

I take it for granted that pop culture stories are worth analyzing in my work. What matters to me is not aesthetics, but why monster stories are one of the dominant allegorical narratives used to explore economic life in the United States. As Clover explains, something about the flagrant violence of generic horror lends itself well to allegorical reading. Addressing the problem of gender in slasher films, she writes:

The qualities that locate the slasher film outside the usual aesthetic system . . . are the very qualities that make it such a transparent source for (sub)cultural attitudes toward sex and gender in particular . . . the slasher film, not despite but exactly because of its crudity and compulsive repetitiveness, gives us a clearer picture of current sexual attitudes, at least among the segment of the population that forms its erstwhile audience.<sup>6</sup>

Like slashers, narratives in the capitalist monster genre are often too violent to fit within "the usual aesthetic system." And yet, as I will argue, such violence offers an intensely raw expression of what it means to live through financial boom and bust, class warfare, postcolonial economic turmoil, and even everyday work routines. Like gender, capitalism is a social construction which gets passed off as natural only by means of psychological repression and various forms of public coercion. Understandably, then, it is

in extreme images of violence and misery that we find uncensored fears of capitalism.

Perhaps above all else, capitalist monsters represent the subjective experience of alienation. As Karl Marx and other philosophers have explained, there is a particular kind of social alienation attached to labor in free market capitalism. Marx describes alienation as the sensation of being brutalized and deadened by having to sell oneself for money. Alienation is what it feels like to be someone else's commodity, to be subject to a boss who "owns" you for a certain amount of time. Capitalist forms of work, Marx writes:

Mutilate the laborer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work and turn it into a hated toil . . . they transform his life-time into working-time . . . Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole.<sup>7</sup>

Elsewhere, Marx has stated simply that "capital is dead labor." Of course, the accumulation of wealth does not literally mean the death of laborers, although often it does; more importantly, capitalist work implies a symbolic death. It is the death of individual freedom, of pleasurable, rewarding activity, and of a rich social life. In short, it is the transformation of "life-time into working-time." Capitalism, as its monsters tell us more or less explicitly, makes us pretend that we're dead in order to live. This pretense of death, this willing sacrifice of our own lives simply for money, is the dark side of our economic system.

### ✱ Great Monsters in American History

In this book, I deal with five types of monsters: serial killers, mad doctors, the undead, robots, and people involved in the media industry. I use each chapter to trace the evolution of stories about these monsters from their late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century incarnations up through early twenty-first century ones. As we tell and retell these monster stories over time, their meanings gradually shift to reflect changing social conditions and economic anxieties. Moreover, these monsters tend to jump from one form of media to another. They can be found in B movies, pulp fiction, and classic American novels. My choice of texts from all these media reflects this diversity of venues.

Every monster story I discuss in this book is North American, and all

except for a tiny subset were created in the United States.<sup>8</sup> I chose to narrow my focus in this way so that I could focus explicitly on the kinds of fantasies produced by a nation devoted to capitalism as both an economic and a moral system. Many of the financial concerns shared by people in the United States are quite different from those experienced by people in Japan, Brazil, Italy, and other countries whose pop culture is full of stories about ghosts and otherworldly beasts. Analyzing stories about monsters produced in the United States gives us a window into what Fredric Jameson would call the “political unconscious”<sup>9</sup> of a powerful but troubled nation.

I’ve also chosen to examine monster stories beginning with ones published in the 1880s and continuing through to the present day. I start with the 1880s because it was an important turning point in U.S. economic history. Aside from being a time of tremendous financial crisis, it was also the era immediately following the Civil War Reconstruction. The United States no longer depended on slave labor to fuel a large portion of its economy, and labor unions were beginning to make their presence felt. Moreover, civil rights for people of color and several waves of immigrants meant that new workers were pouring into the free market and changing its character forever. At the same time, technological innovations allowed the United States to develop industries devoted to the manufacture and maintenance of communications devices, among them the machines that later became radios, cameras, film projectors, and televisions. Analysts later termed the economic relations spawned by these devices “the culture industry.” The culture industry changed the way we tell stories in such a profound way that its hegemony could be compared to the rise of print culture after Gutenberg built the first press.

The monsters in this book reflect the character of the American economy in the years since the 1880s. They rampage through narratives preoccupied with postslavery economics, the culture industry, and new definitions of labor.

I locate the literary roots of capitalist monster stories in late nineteenth century naturalism rather than in gothic romanticism of the same era. Halberstam and many other theorists such as Marie-Hélène Huet<sup>10</sup> have made a strong case for tracing monstrosity in literature back to the gothic and romantic traditions. But I argue that the naturalist novel, featuring what Donald Pizer has called “melodramatic sensationalism and moral confusion,” provides perhaps the first glimpse of certain thematic and spectacular obsessions that come to dominate the capitalist monster genre.<sup>11</sup> Stephen Crane’s attention to gore in his naturalist classic *The Red Badge*



of *Courage* certainly influenced later disturbing images in film and fiction related to economic horror, and the overt connections between class, brutality, and murder in Frank Norris's *McTeague* might be said to make his novel a slightly more staid and realistic version of Yuzna's *Society*. A concern with yoking the surreal extremes of human behavior with socioeconomic status make naturalist aesthetics an obvious precursor of capitalist monster tales.<sup>12</sup>

The twentieth-century modernist and postmodernist fixations on what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer call "the culture industry" are also deeply important to capitalist monster narratives, especially after the 1950s.<sup>13</sup> As the market in images, culture, and information came to replace industrial mass production, the issues foregrounded in these stories shifted. Simultaneously, the mid-century movement toward decolonization in the United States and abroad changed the stakes for global capital and for race relations. Put simply, forms of ownership and production that were immediately relevant in the early twentieth century became what Raymond Williams calls "residual formations" within dominant culture.<sup>14</sup>

The media industry may be an "emergent formation" that is still in the process of achieving market hegemony, but it nevertheless underwrites the ways we have experienced and expressed alienation over the past fifty years. Frank Norris represented a monster created by capitalism in the 1880s by putting a gigantic mining drill into the hands of his demented protagonist McTeague; in the 1980s, David Cronenberg offered us a similar kind of monster in *Videodrome* (1983) by surrealistically inserting a mind-controlling videocassette into the body of his media mogul antihero. Both stories disturb us by showing what it means to become the "appendage of a machine," but the forms of capitalist production associated with these machines are very different.

### ✱ The Nightmare of Social Construction

Capitalist monsters may be the bearers of stories, but they are also protagonists in them, individuals propelled by (and often attempting to propel) social circumstances they cannot control. For this reason, a cluster of issues which came to be called "identity politics" in the late twentieth century are central to how economic horror maps its social terrain. Gender, race, sexuality, and national identity are crucial to how we are asked to imagine (or not imagine) our economic identities in these stories. I don't mean to imply that any of these categories come to stand in for

class. Rather, they provide a context for economic crisis; they complicate the idea of class by providing alternate models of oppression and liberation; and most importantly, they operate alongside capitalism as overwhelming social forces which help to create monsters as often as they create “normal” individuals. A capitalist monster story is, like a naturalist one, quite profoundly interested in social structures. But it is also focused on how specific individuals—often marginalized ones—cope with them.

What the monsters I deal with in this book share in common are position(s) which place them at the mercy of social, rather than “natural,” forces. Theirs is a monstrosity that grows out of what Judith Butler has called “subjection,”<sup>15</sup> the process by which an individual is granted psychological interiority—subjectivity—only by assimilating (often unspoken) social norms and taboos. That subjection results in monsters points up the degree to which economic horror narratives are trying to articulate a connection between “civilization” and human disturbance. By contrast, many other horror genres locate “terror” in the realm of nature: humans in such tales are menaced by wild animals, creepy nonhuman beings, aliens, natural disasters, etc. Capitalist monsters are, to put it succinctly, freaks of culture, not freaks of nature.

It is therefore no surprise that the monsters I examine here are all *made* monstrous, rather than *born* monstrous. Serial killers are created by “bad environments”; mad doctors build or concoct monsters in their labs; the undead are reanimated as monsters; robots are always built by someone else; and of course people in the media industry are only made monstrous by virtue of the narratives they produce and consume. Indeed, the constructedness of these monsters is often at the crux of their stories. It underscores their connection to human-made institutions like the economy, demonstrating the degree to which ideology is “made material” in individuals as well as their social apparatus.<sup>16</sup>

One might say that in the stories I look at in this book, monsters are always constructed. This forces us to question the human agency behind their creation, socialization, and education.

*Westworld* (1973), Michael Crichton’s proto-*Jurassic Park* film about a cyborg revolt at a theme park, foregrounds the horrifying implications of what it means to construct identities for the sole purpose of maintaining a service labor force. Protagonists Peter and John visit the “Delos” park, which promises “vacations of the future.” Peopled by cyborgs who are “there to serve you,” and paid for by the exorbitant 1,000-dollar-a-day guest fees, the park is divided into Medieval World, Roman World, and West-

world, each populated by robot “natives.” Peter and John stay in Westworld, a simulation of the Old West complete with gunfights, prostitutes, and wild saloons. As it turns out, all the most exciting forms of entertainment in Westworld require using the robots: John has a gleeful adventure shooting a sheriff robot, both men get in a barroom brawl with more robots, and later they enjoy a night of sex with robot whores. Yet Peter is made uneasy by the robots’ obvious resemblance to slaves and kept women. Late at night, we see workers hauling away all the robots who have been “killed” by their human masters. Clearly, the robots’ constructed social position at the park is more than a little disturbing. Seeing their dead bodies left behind like so much litter underscores just how problematic the human/robot relationships in *Westworld* actually are.

Created by and for the entertainment economy, the robots of *Westworld* are effectively slaves of the culture industry. Yet due to their programming, the robots’ options for revolt are fairly limited: they manage to kill several humans but can’t escape the park’s boundaries. This, finally, is the dark side of social construction, the moment when subjection becomes teratogenesis. In *Westworld*, as in other narratives, we see how the market (inflected by a history of racial slavery and sexism) helps to create antisocial monsters who are destructive of human life precisely *because* of how and why they were constructed. *Westworld*’s cyborgs were *made* dangerous to fill a market niche for specialty vacations and to fulfill a human desire for interactive entertainment. Allegorically speaking, individuals in this fabricated race of cyborgs are so thoroughly alienated during the subjection process that they can only imagine an end to suffering in violence and murder. But ultimately, humans are the biggest problem in this movie. They are so thoroughly alienated themselves that they get amusement out of producing servants they can kill without guilt. The monster’s construction is simply a more literal version of his human counterpart’s.

Capitalist monsters are the fantasy outcome of social constructivism in a class-stratified world. Their tales demonstrate why identity constructed under capitalism is a nightmare.

### ✱ Pretend We’re Dead

I have divided my analysis of economic horror into three clusters: mental monstrosity, bodily monstrosity, and narrative monstrosity. What’s at stake here are three basic ways that economic forces “mark” us. The economy structures not just the way we think, but also (as many people have

noted) the shape and health of our bodies. It also affects how we tell stories about transformations in both our psychological and physical states under capitalism.

In chapters which focus on serial killers and mad doctors, I explore mental monstrosity in tales about people who go insane because they lead lives which they perceive as forced on them by profit-driven institutions. I argue that the serial killer is a figure whose brutality condemns methods of capitalist production by taking them to their extreme, ultimately mass producing dead bodies. This grisly mass production is what drives the “publicity machine” in Norman Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song*. As Mailer details how serial killer Gary Gilmore turned himself into a commodity image for the culture industry with his public pleas for execution, it becomes clear that the professional media are an integral part of Gilmore’s homicidal mania. I consider *The Executioner’s Song* in the historical context of naturalist fiction, especially Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, and in light of movies about serial killers made during and after the 1970s. Tracing their aesthetic origin to Mathew Brady’s Civil War photographs of dead bodies, I ascribe the relevance of films like *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* and *Private Parts* to a continuing cultural association between image consumption and the act of serial killing.

I turn next to the madness of doctors in narratives that are about the importance of professional middle-class work. Doctors in the Jekyll/Hyde tradition (in which I include Frank Norris’s crazed dentist from *McTeague*) are driven mad partly because they feel they must be at work all the time, performing intellectual labor which involves selling off one’s ideas to professional institutions. To express their nonprofessional sides, they make monsters of themselves.

Bodily monstrosity comes to the fore in my chapters on the undead and robots, beings who are, in many cases, physically disfigured by the very economic practices which grant them immortality and superhuman powers. The undead, in my analysis of short stories by H. P. Lovecraft and a variety of zombie movies, represent the horrifying return of beings whose identities were forged in a colonial-era, slave-based economy. Comparing fantastical horror stories with D. W. Griffith’s racist epic *Birth of a Nation*, I explore why both whites and people of color live in fear that their colonial ancestors will rise again to bring the world back to an earlier, more overtly brutal phase in capitalist history.

Robots are also marked as physically “other,” but not in a racial sense. They are a “lower class,” usually cast as the new manual laborers in a global

capitalist future. Having assimilated technology into its body, or vice versa, the robot is a monster who is programmed and manufactured to serve a specific purpose: usually, its job is to perform intensive labor and to fight for a human society which does not view cyborgs as human equals. Beginning my analysis with Charles Chaplin's *Modern Times* and Isaac Asimov's classic *I, Robot* and continuing with contemporary movies like *RoboCop* and cyberpunk novels by William Gibson, Rudy Rucker, and Marge Piercy, I connect representations of the robot's mechanical body to its degraded social status. I conclude my chapters on the undead and cyborgs with an analysis of how both monsters are portrayed as engaging in revolutionary acts aimed at overthrowing the people who created them.

I conclude with a chapter on narrative monstrosity, which deals with the hideous and sometimes pathetic creatures who participate in the culture industry as producers and consumers. From hack writers and bloodthirsty actresses trapped in Hollywood hell to prisoners of television and video games, these are media monsters whose lives are ruled by commodity images and corporate propaganda. Trapped inside a storytelling machine which exists solely to make money, characters in these tales struggle to tell the difference between narrative truth and the slick, commercial lies that do well at the box office. Often, their conflicts turn them into rampaging monsters—or, worse, pieces of media themselves come to life and eat the audiences who watch them.

*Pretend We're Dead* is ultimately an extended meditation on how works about monsters represent economic crisis. The extreme horror we see in these stories—involving graphic depictions of death, mutilation, and mental anguish—is one way popular and literary fictions allegorize extremes of economic boom and bust in the United States during the past century. What becomes clear when we analyze monster stories is that the capitalist culture industry hasn't simply generated happy fantasies of self-made men with good, clean work ethics. It is just as likely to spawn gore-soaked narratives of social destruction. The history of capitalism can be told as a monster story from beginning to end.

# 1. SERIAL KILLERS

*Murder Can Be Work*

Affixed to the lid of the box was an old daguerreotype, very similar in style and composition to the Civil War work of the eminent photographer Mathew Brady. Based on the picture's aged and battered condition, I judged it to be about the same vintage as Brady's work. The image displayed was that of a dead white man: scalped, eviscerated, and emasculated, with arrows protruding from his arms and legs. His eyes were missing. —Caleb Carr, *The Alienist*

In his critically acclaimed bestseller *The Alienist*, Caleb Carr tells the story of a late-nineteenth-century serial killer named Japheth Dury who becomes a murderer because his cruel, frigid mother humiliates him constantly during childhood.<sup>1</sup> Dury is the owner of the box and picture described above, which a team of investigators find in his tenement flat along with a bottle of human eyeballs floating in formaldehyde. Inside Dury's box, under the photograph, the investigators find his mother's dried heart. Dury's parents, we discover, are the first of many people he has murdered in imitation of the photograph on the lid of his box — itself one of many photographs taken by his missionary father depicting white people killed by the Sioux in South Dakota. Having endured his mother's mistreatment, his father's photography, and life as a social outcast because of a disfiguring facial tic, Dury turns to murdering unruly young children (particularly cross-dressing boy prostitutes) who remind him of himself as a child.

Dr. Laszlo Kreizler, the alienist (i.e., psychiatrist) of the book's title, constantly reminds his team of investigators that murderers are created by their social context. The nature of their crimes can be ascribed to traumatic events in their early—or not so early—lives. Dury, for example, cuts out his victims' eyes in part because of the photographs he saw as a boy and in part because he has suffered under the scrutiny of his mother and other

people who taunt him about his facial tic. And yet there is more to this “context” than childhood trauma, for Carr’s novel traces not just Dury’s personal history, but the history of an entire nation, in the process of revealing its killer. Set in the New York City of 1896, and including in its cast of characters Police Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt and Professor William James, Carr suggests that intellectual and material history are just as responsible for “inventing” Dury as his mother’s abuse is. *The Alienist* is ultimately about how late-nineteenth-century philosophy, science, and economics help set the stage for a team of investigators who will be capable of finding a serial killer. This is not exactly a novel about serial killers, but rather about a social apparatus which detects them. Quite frequently, this apparatus is contingent upon historical developments such as the inventions of “alienists” and fingerprinting techniques. But just as importantly, the network of sociohistorical forces Carr associates with the origin of serial killers and their trackers is bound up with the pursuit of “real” history and human beings’ relationship to it.

Carr’s own novel follows the trajectory of this desire to possess knowledge of history—writing about serial killers, a fashionable topic in recent decades, he takes readers back nearly one hundred years to the first serial killer investigation ever conducted. Something about the random, apparently unmotivated violence of serial killing seems to send us to the history books, the research room, and psychoanalytic case histories. What is it about this particular form of violence that brings up history and historical “truth”?

Serial killings are characterized by their relative randomness and a lack of any personal connection between the killer and his or her victim. But the literature and popular culture surrounding serial killing, like *The Alienist*, are dense with explanations which clarify both the killers’ motivations and how society helped to create them. In a general sense, then, the serial killer narrative relies upon historical analysis of various kinds to establish what Fredric Jameson has called a “cognitive map” of what would otherwise appear to be meaningless brutality.<sup>2</sup> The cognitive map provides a layout of the totality of social and historical relations which go into the creation of a given situation. Thus, the cognitive map provided by serial killer narratives tries to chart the way that human history and social relations can create random, senseless violence between people who do not know each other. To put it simply, these narratives try to answer one question often asked by people confronting (and participating in) a culture of violence: *how did we come to this?*

Narratives about serial killers have tried to answer or at least to present the question for audiences to puzzle out themselves. In their urgent need to figure out why people kill each other, stories about the past century's most glamorous type of sociopath share stylistic and thematic concerns with nineteenth-century antiwar novels like Stephen Crane's naturalist masterpiece *The Red Badge of Courage* as well as current turn-of-the-century narratives about terrorism. While most contemporary horror narratives have their roots in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gothic tales, serial killer stories are preoccupied with realism. To understand why books and movies about these murderers take the shape they do, it's crucial to understand their origins in literary naturalism, whether that's the old-school sensational realism of Crane or that of contemporary writer (and war chronicler) Norman Mailer. Following in these authors' narrative footsteps, turn-of-the-century portraits of serial killers in pop culture treat their subjects as real-life monsters, and as a result many of these stories are based in fact or have a pseudo-documentary feel to them. Perhaps the most extreme examples can be found in fake documentaries like *Blair Witch Project* and in true crime biographies of notorious killers like Jeffrey Dahmer. But the realist's urge to get at some kind of social truth haunts every story in the pantheon of serial killer tales.

At the same time, no storyteller—and especially no Hollywood movie-maker nor a writer with a major publishing house—wants to be the bearer of bad news. And thus the “truths” that our serial killers reveal to us in these stories often become comforting if creepy tautologies. Death is truth, they tell us, and truth is death. Other stories, however, offer a more complicated and tantalizing snapshot of social reality: there are many ways to be dead, and being executed by a serial killer might be less terrifying than many of them.

### ✱ Naturalist Origins

Like today's gleefully blood-spattered serial killer stories, naturalist tales of murder in the late nineteenth century have often been viewed with critical disdain because of their preoccupation with topics unacceptable for drawing room chatter and small talk. American literary critic Donald Pizer sums up objections to naturalism in an essay defending it:

Because much naturalism is sordid and sensational in subject matter, it is often dismissed out of hand by moralists and religionists. . . . Many