

Predators and Prey: Newspaper Editors, Readers and the Monstrous – Andrew O’Day

‘Jack the Ripper. It’s a newspaper man’s dream’, states a journalist for *The Star* upon hearing the epithet for the very first time in the 1988 Euston Films/Thames Television production of the case. This paper examines the representation of ‘Jack the Ripper’ as monster in the press of 1888, as part of the economic imperative of New Journalism. Aimed at a mass market, newspapers were then produced using faster technologies (for example, the rotary press) and in a more appealing fashion than previously. Newspapers carried on the aims outlined by the editor of the *Twopenny Dispatch* in 1834 that that paper would abound in such events as ‘murders’ and ‘theatricals’. The focus here is on the visual covers of *The Illustrated Police News*, which attracted people to buy the paper, although there will be some mention of the written press.

While countless Ripperologists have sought the true identity of ‘Jack the Ripper’, the Whitechapel Murderer’s very ‘facelessness’ is crucial to the way in which he was seized upon and represented in the print media of the late nineteenth-century - and indeed in later film and television productions. In this respect, my paper carries on the work of Alexandra Warwick and Martin Willis’ recent edited volume *Jack the Ripper: Media, Culture, History* (2007: 2), since this ‘facelessness’ left a ‘blank space’, or, if you like, ‘blank canvas’ (see Warwick and Willis 2007: 5), which could only be ‘filled’ by the imagination. The case of the Whitechapel Murderer therefore blurs the boundaries between the known and the unknown, and between reality and fantasy. Fiction is a product of the imagination, the filling in of a ‘blank space’. So, while the Whitechapel Murderer is a historical figure (we know that he really existed and perpetrated the murders of *some* prostitutes in the East End of London in 1888), he is also a nebulous figure, who continually evaded detection and who, especially today, cannot be pinned down. There thus exists epistemological un-certainty. Due to the horrific nature of the murders there was a desire to attribute these deeds to an ‘other’, to a monster.

In his book *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*, L. Perry Curtis surveys the presentation of the Whitechapel Murder case in the written press of 1888, focussing on dailies, Sunday papers, weeklies and biweeklies with varying political slants. Furthermore, according to Curtis, ‘What transpired [...] was not just a series of five sadistic murders but a serial story combining mystery and sensation-horror, spread out over almost four months and cobbled together by a metropolitan press eager to boost sales’ (2001: 115). Therefore, Curtis points to the written press’s intertextual allusions to literary texts and monsters almost from the start of the crimes. The ‘fiend’, ‘ghoul’, ‘monster’ was likened to something out of the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe and was time and again compared to the double being, part-man, part-monster, from Robert Louis Stevenson’s gothic novel *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which was playing at the theatre of the time. But, Curtis (2001) does not focus in detail on the illustrated coverage of the case, and while Warwick and Willis (2007) incorporate press illustrations in their book, they do not analyse these fully, focussing instead on the written press as well as wider culture and other media. So, since Richard Altick (quoted in Curtis 2001: 83) observed that Victorians treated murders like a ‘spectator sport’, how was the case depicted in the visual press?

The Illustrated Police News was a weekly penny tabloid with a wide circulation which saw the most sensationalised reporting of the mid to late-Victorian era. It began in 1864 and ended production in 1938. As its main interest was in depicting murder, it leapt upon the 1888 Whitechapel Murders, allocating numerous covers and a great deal of cover space each issue to the case. The covers of this tabloid were composed of fine wood engravings, sometimes of sea monsters, and ghosts. On its covers, the Whitechapel Murderer was represented as ‘monster’ as an economic strategy designed to draw Victorians to buy the paper. *The Illustrated Police News* was inspired by *The Illustrated London News* which was launched because newspapers with illustrations sold more copies. I focus on the covers of 1888, and the development of the monster narrative, but there were, in fact, a huge number of later such covers devoted to the case.

The first covers of *The Illustrated Police News* concerning the Whitechapel Murders are notable for what they exclude as much as for what they include. The focus is on the horror of the murdered prostitutes - the discoveries of the bodies, lit up in the darkness, the mutilations and the inquests. By contrast, the murderer, who has not been discovered by the police, is absent, still a 'blank space' that remains to be filled. The presentation of the murderer as monster lagged behind that in the written press, but, as the series of horrific murders progresses, as a way of increasing interest, the nature of the murderer is exaggerated, with quantitative analysis pointing to the frequent use of words such as 'MONSTER' and 'FIEND' on individual covers.

This discourse was a way of representing a murderer who was faceless and it was a means of enticing the reader to a narrative. Looking at the visual depiction of the Whitechapel Murders, we can detect conventions that were used not only in the gothic novel but were also later employed in the film and television horror genre – including productions which focus on the case - and note how these are used in these media to entice an audience. The Whitechapel Murderer is the prototypical stalker, preying on defenceless women in the fog-shrouded streets of the East End, his features hidden from view, and newspapers, film and television horrors work with the idea that what is kept from view is potentially more threatening than what is revealed. On these covers, there is a play with light and dark, even in later editions when the murderer is also represented as monster. While the murder victims are depicted in the light, frequently a dark silhouette of the Whitechapel Murderer is presented, often from behind or dashing through a window such as on the cover of the November 17 1888 and the December 8 1888 editions of *The Illustrated Police News*. The case was represented on a later cover of *The Illustrated Police News* where in the foreground the female allegorical figure of Justice stands blindfolded over one of the gorily murdered prostitutes with the murderer presented dashing through an archway from behind, his face not visible. The meaning of the image is anchored by a caption reading 'JUSTICE IS BLIND!'. However, on some covers of *The Illustrated Police News*, sketches

of the murderer - resembling those made by police artists - can be found, such as on the editions of October 27 and November 24 1888, showing both the desire and failure to pin him down. Also the murderer is sometimes presented as a stock melodramatic villain, in menacing posture and with even a caption where he boasts of his villainy, which, as with the monster, makes him an embodiment of evil.

Because of the nature of the murders and the mutilations of the victims, among the many suspects initially considered to fill in the murderer's faceless 'blank space' were doctors and even butchers. Over time, however, the paper seized upon this 'type' of person, as opposed to a specific individual, to construct the notion of a monstrous beast, as was so in the written press. A common metaphor for the East End of the time was that of a jungle, which carried with it connotations of savageness compared with the civilized West End. The Whitechapel Murderer was seen as a monster ripping apart its animalistic prey, because the sexual activity of prostitutes was associated with bestiality. The covers of the early editions of *The Illustrated Police News* make implicit associations between the murderer and the slaughter of animals; the cover of the September 15 1888 edition features a box depicting a police officer 'MAKING INQUIRIES AT THE SLAUGHTER HOUSE', for instance, while, only a week later, the cover of the September 22 1888 edition features drawings of Annie Chapman side by side before and after death with two men with a horse at a slaughter yard pictured below. The cover of the November 17 1888 edition, though, makes the comparison between the murderer as monster and his victims as slaughtered animals more explicit, featuring an illustration of a victim accompanied by a caption 'PICKED OUT FOR SLAUGHTER BY THE EAST-END FIEND'.

The 'Jack the Ripper' letters which constructed the Whitechapel Murderer as a 'monster' also became a subject of these covers. Hundreds of letters were sent to the police and local press purporting to be by the Whitechapel Murderer. The question of their authenticity is pertinent here since most of the

letters have been deemed to be fakes created by reporters attempting to start a story. Until the famous 'Dear Boss' letter was received at the Central News Agency on September 27 1888 (believed by some to be genuine), the perpetrator of these crimes was simply known as 'the Whitechapel Murderer'. But the 'Dear Boss' letter, where the writer describes how he had to substitute red ink for blood, is signed 'Jack the Ripper'. Such a trade name highlights the construction of a monstrous slasher figure. This can be found on covers of *The Illustrated Police News*, such as those of the 20th and 27th of October 1888. The headline of the 27th October cover reads 'LATEST INCIDENTS IN CONNECTION WITH THE DOINGS OF JACK THE RIPPER THE EAST-END FIEND'. In the centre underneath that headline is a sketch of the murderer's possible appearance and to the sides of him are clearly visible the letter beginning 'From Hell'. The 'From Hell' letter addressed to George Lusk, president of the Whitechapel Vigilance Committee and received on October 16 1888 (again believed by some to be genuine) gave the Ripper a monstrous presence akin to the Devil. Contained in a three-inch-square cardboard box with half a human kidney preserved in wine, this letter also emphasised the Ripper as monstrous cannibal, who had eaten part of the victim Catherine Eddowes' organ. A scene of the vigilance committee examining the box and of the box accompanied by the caption 'THE BOX CONTAINING A HUMAN KIDNEY' are present on the top left of this cover.

After the murder of Mary Jane Kelly, with a lack of any new murders, the press eventually gave the 'faceless' Whitechapel Murderer the face of an instantly recognisable monster, designed to startle and again engage the reader. Here, Warwick and Willis' description of the case as providing a 'blank canvas' to be filled is particularly appropriate since a canvas can be a piece of fabric upon which a painting is executed, therefore filling an empty space. In the centre of the top portion of the December 8 1888 cover of *The Illustrated Police News*, in a prominent position, what is obviously a man is represented (wearing a hat, a long coat, trousers and shoes). But this man's face has been substituted with that of a skeleton which, with a menacing grin, leans towards Mary Jane Kelly who is, as the caption sensationally exclaims, 'OPENING THE DOOR TO ADMIT DEATH!' The image of Death

as a skeleton was a common one from the Middle Ages onwards. It was seen earlier in *The Illustrated Police News* where on the cover of the June 25 1870 issue a woman dies due to tight-lacing. Here in 1888, the Grim Reaper's traditional scythe (used to hack down its victims) has been replaced by the black bag associated with the Whitechapel Murderer in which were contained his weapons (a feature of many illustrations). With the lack of a literal human face to put to the Whitechapel Murderer, the press have given him a symbolic role as man-monster. We can detect the idea of the murderer as man-monster not only by looking at this specific illustration but also through the way the skeleton on this cover has taken the place of the male murderer in a similar pose while Mary Jane Kelly opens the door to her lodging on the bottom left of the November 24 1888 cover of *The Illustrated Police News*, and indeed in larger form on the November 17 1888 cover of *The Penny Illustrated Paper*. The repeated posture therefore creates an identification with the earlier images where we can see that the originally shrouded figure - the blank space - has been substituted by a monster. Allegory involves the construction of layers of symbolic meaning and here the murderer's monstrous nature is highlighted.

The issue of narrative is also important. Darren Oldridge (in Warwick and Willis 2007) argues that even before the 'Jack the Ripper letters' were received, the written press attributed the murders to one killer in order to involve readers in an ongoing narrative. This was also the case on the covers of *The Illustrated Police News*. Furthermore, sensationalised and associated with the horror of the unknown, the discourse of monstrosity worked in tandem with the serialised form of the Whitechapel Murder case in the press, with hermeneutic questions posed in each new issue engaging readers of the day in a continuing narrative to discover the outcome. Enabled by the fact that the Whitechapel Murderer was a serial killer, the serialised form in the press saw time and again headlines of *The Illustrated Police News* emphasising the 'LATEST' victims of 'MYSTERIOUS' crime (September 15 1888; September 22 1888; September 29 1888), with one edition headed 'THE SEVENTH HORRIBLE MURDER BY THE MONSTER OF THE EAST-END' (November 17 1888). Questioning, the

edition of October 6 1888 is headed ‘TWO MORE WHITECHAPEL HORRORS. WHEN WILL THE MURDERER BE CAPTURED?’, while ‘EAST END HORRORS. WHEN WILL THEY CEASE?’ is the headline accompanying the horrific image of the Whitechapel Murderer as Death on the cover of the December 8 1888 edition. Roland Barthes’ later notion of ‘the hermeneutic code’ – of the setting and solution of puzzles - was partly evident since the narrative enigma was strung out over time, drawing readers back in a ‘live’ event where anything could happen, but where no solution was reached. This visual serialised form - emphasised by the continuation of the ‘story’ after 1888 where the fact that a monster had been constructed drew readers in - not only prefigures modern television dramas but was one that many Victorians would have been accustomed to because literate Victorians often consumed fictions in weekly periodicals, such as the sensationalised narratives by Ouida.

Each issue would, furthermore, summarise the drama to that point, engaging readers. Often containing a sequence of drawings accompanied by captions, the illustrated reports of the Whitechapel Murders are important in the way in which they resemble newspaper cartoons and prefigure later film and television narrative, using similar strategies to draw in an audience. Narrative involves the telling of a series of events in sequence, and films and television programmes are composed of a series of scenes, that unfold visually and aurally, keeping viewers engaged. These scenes consist of numerous frames. Narratives are evident on many covers of *The Illustrated Police News*, but the ties between narrative and the monster are most apparent on the cover of the October 13 1888 edition. It is the central block of this cover with the headline ‘SKETCHES OF THE FIENDISH WORK OF THE MONSTER OF WHITECHAPEL. HIS SIX CRIMES’ that is noteworthy here. One follows the narrative from left to right looking at different framed boxes. Captions accompanying images, for example, read ‘THE FIRST OF THE SERIES OF WHITECHAPEL HORRORS’ and ‘TAKING THE DYING DEPOSITIONS OF THE FIRST VICTIM OF THE WHITECHAPEL MONSTER’; ‘THE WHITECHAPEL MONSTER VISITS

HANBURY STREET' and 'HOW THE MONSTER ESCAPES AFTER HIS FIENDISH WORK'; and 'THE MURDERER SEEN WITH HIS LATEST VICTIM' and 'THE MONSTER BUYING FRUIT FOR ONE OF HIS DUPES'. Written in a third person narratorial voice, these captions therefore sensationalise the murders for the reader of the paper providing a simplified story where evil is transposed onto a monster. There are also snippets of first person dialogue accompanying the images, strengthening the connection between this 'monster narrative' and later film and television productions in which characters can speak. For instance, one image is accompanied by the victim's words 'I SHARNT BE LONG GETTING MY BED MONEY LOOK AT MY SMART BONNET' while, more pertinent here, the illustration where 'THE WHITECHAPEL MONSTER VISITS HANBURY STREET' is accompanied by the shrouded killer stating 'WILL YOU?' to his victim, luring her to her death by promising her money.

This discourse of monstrosity, then, tells us about the aesthetic and economic strategies of the print media in the period of New Journalism where the Whitechapel Murderer was likened to a monster in order to sell papers. This is not so different from the sensationalist reporting in the tabloids of today, which owes much to the experiments of these Victorian tabloids. Referring to format, form and the 'dumbing down' of news values, tabloidisation is evident today where not only is the size of many newspapers smaller but also where stories are presented in sensationalist form on the front cover, using alliterative headlines, exclamations, and now photographs – as opposed to drawings - to lead people to buy the paper and read the main story inside. This conference paper contributes to existing scholarship since it has examined how words and pictures work together in the representation of the Whitechapel murder case. The illustrated covers examined in this paper are important since pictures have a more immediate impact than words. The covers would have appealed to a literate audience, encouraging them to buy the paper to read the detailed gory accounts inside, and, moreover, the covers would have appealed to a semi-literate or largely illiterate audience that had the money to buy the paper.

Bibliography

Barthes, R. (2000), *S/Z*, trans. R. Miller, Oxford, Blackwell.

Curtis, L. P. (2001), *Jack the Ripper and the London Press*, New Haven, Yale University Press.

Jones, S. (2002), *The Illustrated Police News: London's Court Cases and Sensational Stories*, Nottingham, Wicked Publications.

Koss, S. (1981), *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain: The Nineteenth Century*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press.

The Illustrated Police News, June 25 1870.

The Illustrated Police News, September 15 1888.

The Illustrated Police News, September 22 1888.

The Illustrated Police News, September 29 1888.

The Illustrated Police News, October 6 1888.

The Illustrated Police News, October 13 1888.

The Illustrated Police News, October 20 1888.

The Illustrated Police News, October 27 1888

The Illustrated Police News, November 17 1888.

The Illustrated Police News, November 24 1888.

The Illustrated Police News, December 8 1888

The Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times, November 17 1888.

Warwick, A. and M. Willis, eds (2007), *Jack the Ripper: Media Culture, History*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.