

THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Debate Group

American Wound Culture

by Eric Verhine

A young woman once told me about her fascination with Ted Bundy. She had been a member of the sorority from which Bundy had maliciously chosen several of his victims. Her sisters were dead, and their murderer enthralled her. That's odd. Consider with me a few more American oddities. Serial killing has become, in this our culture, a veritable occupation, which pays with both celebrity and riches. Movies about serial killing, and horror movies in general, annually take in millions of dollars. Think of other oddities. It seems to be an absolute necessity that drivers stop to gawk along with their passengers at a car accident or a police incident – the infamous "Gaper's Blocks." What are they looking for? *ER*, described frankly by Mark Seltzer as "an endless series of torn and opened bodies and an endless series of emotionally torn and exposed bio-technicians," is one of the most watched shows on television. What is its attraction? A possible form of behavior for a distraught teenager today is to gather his closest friends, arm himself lavishly, and execute every overbearing member of the football team. And when this occurs, what follows is not a reluctance and dread at relating this calamity, but a major media event which in turn may produce heartening CDs and even movies! Consider this final oddity. In an attempt apparently to oppose the

negative opinion that many have formed about the media and its focus only on "bad news," a local news network has created a show that will present only "good news." They describe it as "a good show, with good news, for good people." What time does this gleeful, hope-stirring program air? On Saturday mornings, from 6:30 to 7:00 a.m. Not exactly primetime.

Now that I have written it, I notice that something is wrong, or at least ironic, in this opening paragraph: calling these events "oddities." They are not, we all know, oddities. They are usual, expected, and even desired elements in American culture. What kind of culture is this? Mark Seltzer, professor of English at Cornell University, calls it a "wound culture," a culture obsessed with trauma and with the opening and pouring out of both bodies and psyches. Americans love to read about, watch, and often participate in the spilling of blood, physical and mental destruction and malady, and criminal behavior.

In our next meeting, the PDG will turn to a new area of consideration: American culture. I plan to have each semester one meeting that will focus solely on some aspect of American culture. The next meeting will focus on America's "wound culture." What follows in the remainder of this article are some of the central questions and theories we will be considering regarding this strange, familiar society.

How are we to account for this culture? Why does America

have such a love of physical and psychological trauma (Greek for "wound")? Some will probably argue that humans innately yearn for slaughter and destruction, that this is something one can trace all the way back to the ancients. The Romans serve as typical examples here. For, in addition to putting on their gladiatorial shows (which everyone today knows about because of the movies), the Romans staged many other dreadful forms of public violence. They staged, for instance, vast hunts. In 80 AD the emperor Titus inaugurated Rome's amphitheater by staging a public hunt in which 5000 animals were slain. The stench from the slaughter was so horrid that incense-burners were set out, and slaves needed to blanket the audience with sheets of perfume. Likewise, to press further back, did not the Greeks have their tragedies, their massive forums for cathartic release?

There are several possible problems with this theory as it is typically presented. First, it often does not attempt to explain *why* we love trauma, but only to demonstrate *that* societies in Western culture have loved trauma for a long time. One could still ask why the Romans and the Greeks shared our infatuation. Second, this argument asserts a claim about human nature in general, or states a universal truth about the nature of all humans as an explanation for our culture, yet, as is often the case, the examples are taken solely from Western culture. To add somewhat more credibility to this theory one would have to show samples of this

love in other ancient and modern cultures. Can one find parallel spectacles in other parts of the ancient and modern world? I hope that someone will be able to help the PDG on this issue. Third, this theory assumes that there is such a thing as human nature, that human nature is not itself malleable and inherently historical.

Most importantly, the claim that the desire for psychological and physical calamity is an innate human feature or a component of human nature is not really an argument unless it is rooted in some broader supportive context. One can always appeal to human nature as an explanation for anything. But what is human nature? And how does one know? To explain a behavior by transforming it verbally into a source of behavior in a supposed "human nature" is questionable at best. It's like telling your five year old who asks, "Where did God come from," that God came from God. That's not really an explanation.

Another central question is this: how does our modern way of thinking foster not only love of criminal activity but that activity itself? Seltzer, for instance, argues that the serial killer is unique to our society in part because of the *way we conceive* of what he calls the "individuality of the individual." Our society has, for example, the category of the "dangerous individual." Michel Foucault has shown, however, that this is a uniquely modern category, a category that came into being after an essential shift in thought in the 19th century. Before that shift, according to Foucault, people thought in terms of criminal *acts* which were committed by persons. After the shift, people thought of the character of the individual, that which lay under and necessitated the crimes, as intrinsically criminal. The shift itself was that shift in focus from people who committed criminal actions to types of people called "criminals." Or as Seltzer puts it, there was a "shift in focus from the criminal act to the character of the actor."

An example will be helpful here. Moderns very often use the

terms 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' without realizing that this usage involves a *way of thinking* (and in my opinion a bad one). It is clear that the term 'homosexual' or 'heterosexual' does not exhaust the individuality of a person; a person who engages in sexual actions is more than the sum of those particular actions. The same is true of any general label or name. It is thus true of the label 'criminal.' When one refers to someone as a criminal, one necessarily labels and reduces that person to a single or few actions, and identifies that person's identity with those actions and only those actions, though obviously the person is much, much more. (By the way, I think this is one reason why we "root for the bad-guys" in films like *The Godfather*: we see that they are more than their criminal acts, that they love and fear and envy and reason; in short, that they are whole persons, not abstract categories.)

Seltzer argues that this shift in conception is one element that helps to produce the serial killer, or more precisely, the way the serial killer thinks, for, according to Seltzer, the serial killer is a "statistical person... not merely one of an indeterminate number of others but an individual who... experiences identity, his own and others, as a matter of numbers, kinds, types." Thus, according to Seltzer, the serial killer experiences others as types or kinds of people, that is, as homosexuals, as criminals, as husbands, as women, and on and on. To the mind of the serial killer, then, each person is utterly simplified to an abstract unit, which then makes easy the horrific "murder by numbers."

Another essential issue which the PDG will take up is the culpability of the media and the entertainment industry in manufacturing America's wound culture. According to Oliver Stone's notorious and much misunderstood film *Natural Born Killers*, the entertainment industry is blameworthy for "desensitizing" people to violence, a commonly stated argument, and the media is blameworthy for selling and popularizing it. (We will be watching scenes from the film in order to

grasp Stone's "cinematic argument.")

The media is also at fault for generating mimetic or copy-cat behavior. A wise philosopher once asked, "how many people would fall in love, if they had never heard the word?" So the sociologist of today may properly ask how many teenagers would assault their schools with rifles and bombs if they had not heard of or, more appropriately, seen that pattern of behavior from the media, or how many young men would carry firearms if they were not trying to imitate some ridiculous celebrity, or how many serial killers American would have spawned had it not written about them, stalked them, and commercialized them for over a hundred years?

Please join the PDG on January 17 if you are interested in discussing this issue. The meeting will be held, as always, in the Honor's Lounge on the second floor of Gamble Hall. The meeting will begin around 7:00.

Spring Semester

I have at least two more meetings planned for the PDG in the spring. We are also planning to have at least one, but hopefully two, joint meetings with students from Georgia Southern and Savannah State.

As always, however, I want to welcome ideas for other meetings. If you have a philosophical topic about which you would like to write and then discuss, please contact me or my faculty advisor, Dr. Nordenhaug (see information below). The burden would press on you to think through the topic sufficiently to present it in written form in *The Philosopher's Stone*. About a week after your article appears, and after readers have had time to gather together their own thoughts on the topic, the PDG will meet to discuss your topic. It will be your choice to lead the meeting or not. In any event, we welcome new ideas, topics, and participants.

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