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# **Collecting the Dead: Antique, Aura and Authenticity in Personal Collections of Murderabilia**

Murderabilia (murder-memorabilia) has enjoyed increasing tabloid attention over the past two-decades. It follows a sustained appetite for the consumption of more ‘mainstream’ forms of crime and death-based culture, yet has not been explored in a dedicated academic study. Building on work in this journal that has considered dead criminals (Penfold-Mounce 2010a), the consumption of corpses more generally (Foltyn, 2016; Penfold-Mounce, 2015), or the way that we ‘play’ with death in popular culture (Foltyn, 2008) – this paper contributes an ethnography of collectors and collections of death, the dead and murder. It explores the idea that the cultural consumption of crime and death is driven by a desire for visceral, gruesome and violent experiences – and proposes that these desires are accessed, in the case of material objects, through consumptive values of antique, aura and authenticity.

Keywords: murderabilia; death; collecting; aura; murder

## **Introduction**

‘Murderabilia’ (murder-memorabilia) has enjoyed increasing tabloid coverage, but an academic sociology of murderabilia, aside from some brief inclusions in other projects (Jarvis, 2007; Schmid, 2005), does not yet exist. Building on from work in this journal that has considered dead criminals (Penfold-Mounce, 2010a), the consumption of corpses more generally (Penfold-Mounce, 2015), or the way that we ‘play’ with death in popular culture (Foltyn, 2008) – this paper contributes an ethnography of collectors and collections of death, the dead and murder.

Existing sociology and criminology can be used to cast further light on murderabilia. Elias (1994) tells us that as a society becomes increasingly civilised through etiquette and other social rituals, individuals are more likely to seek experiences that are deemed untouched by the processes of civilisation, such as sport (Elias & Dunning, 1986) – positioning murderabilia as providing a certain rawness that has been combed from modern civilisation. Lyng (2005) has described this manifestation in dangerous or risky activities as ‘edgework’, whilst others have directly considered the implication of a neutered and sterilised society on the will to commit crimes that provide thrill (Katz, 1990), or consume it through carnivalesque experiences (Presdee, 2000). There has been a consensus that mainstream

cultural experiences are, as part of a hegemonic structure (Gramsci, 2011) and the culture industry (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1979), inauthentic, and that raw, transgressive or uncivilised experiences are the reverse – there is a precedent for thinking about crime as a cultural product that transgresses these constraints and as a provider of authenticity therein.

This paper demonstrates the ways in which collectors ascribe this perception of ‘authenticity’ to their death products – and extends this criminological argument to include theories of collecting, antique and auratic value. It tackles the subculture of murderabilia collecting and assesses the notions of value placed upon objects by their collectors – showing how participants’ interest in death manifest through perceptions of authenticity in production and object creation. These markers of authenticity are akin to the qualities that Benjamin describes as ‘aura’ (1936) – items that are directly related to a historic event, or original pieces without copy or counterpart – and this emphasis on antique is counteracted by a similarly dedicated rejection of its opposite: mechanical reproduction.

The section ‘cultivating authenticity’ will present data showing how murderabilia collecting is motivated, alongside financial value and an established fascination with crime and death, by an ongoing contradiction between a desire for authentic experiences, and an interest fuelled and supplied by media and popular culture that is by definition, inauthentic. The myriad ways in which collectors see value in their death objects will be highlighted, and the central theme that will be explored is the rejection of mechanical reproduction as a marker of authenticity in death – yet the embracement of mass produced cultural archetypes and culturally influenced ‘transgressive imaginations’ (O'Neill & Seal, 2012).

It is argued that authenticity and perceptions of authentic death in collectables are cultivated through what Benjamin (1936) has called ‘aura’, and through various devices that attempt to approximate it. The way that collectors *access* their fascination with death and crime in their collections is revealed as functioning through their complex relationship with antique, auratic and aesthetic qualities.

## **Literature**

Freud’s (1920) words about the ‘death drive’ in *Beyond the Pleasure Pain Principle* are often used as a starting point for thinking about a societal fascination with death: ‘[External influences] compel the still surviving substance to ever greater deviations from the original path of life, and to ever more complicated and circuitous routes to the attainment of the goal of death’ (1920:28) – it is this aura surrounding death that this paper addresses from a

consumptive perspective, using Benjamin's (1936) definition of aura as the quality in objects that diminishes with mechanical reproduction.

Barron (2015) uses murderabilia as an example of how 'celebrity' is no longer a meritocracy in that fame and celebration have stopped correlating with achievement. This means that to be celebrated for something as deviant as murder is not exactly unique given the framework of modern celebrity culture. He contextualises murderabilia (hair clippings, paintings by killers), as playing into a broader and much larger serial killer industry made up of films, television, books and websites – rather than as a standalone deviant subculture. Notably, Barron observes that this boundaryless celebrity means that the celebration of fictional criminals is not dissimilar to the celebration of the true criminal – the closeness of criminal celebrity with 'normal' celebrity means that research into celebrity and fandom can help unpack murderabilia.

When it comes to celebrity, we can start back with Weber and his 'charismatic authority'. Weber's (1968) concept refers to the existence of specific exceptional qualities beyond ordinary people – ones that are divine or exemplary. Resulting, often, in the individual being followed as a leader or revolutionary. Charismatic authority breaks down traditional norms and 'transforms' societal values. Crucially, Weber insists that the term 'must be used in a completely value-free sense' (Weber, 1968:1112) and can be applicable, therefore, to persons whose fame or leadership is generally understood as negative. Weber himself argues that the concept can be a 'release from custom, law and tradition' (1968:1117). This is mirrored, somewhat, by Durkheim's (2008) comments in *Elementary forms of Religious Life*. For Durkheim, in religious societies (to which the notion of celebrity has frequently been compared) (Rojek, 2007), an 'impure' thing can become a 'holy' thing through sudden changes in external societal circumstances.

There is space in the theory of celebrity, then, to account for criminals, and this is reflected in an emergent body of research on criminal celebrities (Penfold-Mounce, 2010b) themselves – those criminals with 'celebrity status' (Kurzman et al, 2007). These can be broadly understood in terms of socio-political approaches to understanding criminal celebrity, such as Kooistra (1989), Hobsbawm's (2001) *Bandits*, or Seal (2009) – that have focused on criminals as embodiments of rebellion and social change. And cultural approaches, of which Seltzer (1998) Duclos (1998) and Schmid (2005) are most notable – drawing frequently on parallels between the consumption of pathological people and broader pathological consumptive practices in society.

On consumptive practices, any academic foray into murderabilia will need to account for work in celebrity branding, endorsement and the perception of authenticity linked therein. Hung (2014) cites two ‘paths’ that celebrity endorsements function through – ‘aspirational’, and ‘playful’. Whilst murderabilia might lack an aspirational association, it certainly represents a space in which collectors ‘play’ (Foltyn, 2008) with the dead. Others have stressed the importance of brand ‘personality’ in celebrity endorsement (Zamudio, 2016), although murderabilia collectors are not necessarily aligning themselves with the viewpoint of a criminal, unlike much of traditional celebrity endorsement (see O’Regan 2014).

Instead, murderabilia seems more closely linked with memorial, relic and the politics of preservation. Celebrities have for a long time been memorialized after death. For example, online ‘parasocial’ interactions with the celebrity dead on websites like Facebook (Gil-Egui, Kern-Stone & Forman, 2017) where the internet, not unlike in murderabilia, facilitates connections – or the ways in which television and mainstream media fixate and recast the controversial deceased, like the British reality TV star Jade Goody (Kavka & West 2010 – see also Hearnsum 2012; Harrison, 2016) and the aesthetics of tabloid photographs of the dead (Davies, 2010 – see also Howells, 2011). We can also resurrect dead celebrities, with Harris’ analysis of a holographic Tupak Shakur (2012) arguing that dead legacies no longer have to be material.

Murderabilia largely is material, though, and Doss (2002) has studied material culture arising from death – like the Oklahoma City bombing or the Columbine School shooting of 1999. Doss argues that mementos and memorials to these events have trouble sitting within a ‘contested site of cultural authority’ (64) in America where artists, politicians, corporations and the public disagree over issues of national identity. After that, Spokes, Denham and Lehmann (2018) have expanded this study of ‘contested memorial’ in their Lefebvrian analysis of ‘deviant spaces’ occupied by what they term the ‘difficult dead’, notorious sites of death and atrocity that have attracted controversy over their preservation. Murderabilia, as an extension, is a highly contested form of memento through collecting that requires closer analysis.

This paper draws influence from this groundwork in celebrity value, branding, media and materiality – seeking to expand the study of the ‘difficult dead’ out of ‘spaces’ and into material culture, contributing an ethnography of murderabilia. Bataille (2001) has argued that the most profound experiences of life include witnessing the death of another person – within a certain set of frameworks, against which Vidal (2015) describes our fascination with serial

killer art. My contribution is to highlight the consumptive functionality of this framework when it comes to murderabilia objects, and to demonstrate how ‘the aura of evil’ (Vidal, 2015:123) is attained through traditional consumptive forms of aura (Benjamin 1936).

## **Method**

Research has often considered how personal collections can be understood in similar terms to that of the museum: as a method of preservation and of fostering social memory (Maalsen & McLean 2017 – see also Miller 2008; Miller 2009; Geraghty 2014). ‘The reason we study material things is to gain a better understanding of the individual, society, or culture which thought of, designed, produced, used, and eventually discarded these things’ (Lovis, 1983:65).

To do this, Miller (2008) uses a series of ‘portraits’ of his participants in *Stuff* – his ethnography of people and their object collections – descriptive vignettes that account for the lives of collectors, how they display, identify with and produce narratives around their work. Following Miller (2008), an ethnography of 10 murderabilia collectors and their collections, concluded in 2017, is presented descriptively, before a detailed discussion of their subjective discourses of value. Participants were selected using snowball sampling. They were four men and six women; seven from the U.S.A. and three from the U.K. Only one participant was under 30, the rest ranged between 40 and 50 years of age.

Strathern (2004:8) notes that there has been a ‘reflexive turn’ in ethnography, and that accepting the subjectivity of an ethnography is important for the survival of the method. Law (2004:70) echoes this by writing ‘method is productive of realities rather than merely reflecting them’ and that methods can only sit on a scale of different degrees of messy and incomplete. In this case, the subjectivity and selectiveness to an ethnography is a necessary price for its appropriateness in other areas – particularly in criminology where ethnography has long been a method of accessing subcultures, like this one, that are varied, widespread or obscured.

## **Cultivating Authenticity**

Aura is the quality in objects that diminishes with mechanical reproduction. It is worth reiterating Benjamin’s concept of aura at this stage with a commonly used quote:

‘Getting closer to things’ in both spatial and human terms is every bit as passionate a concern of today’s masses as their tendency to surmount the uniqueness of each circumstance by seeing it in reproduction (Benjamin, 1936:9)

Benjamin animates, in terms of aura, the contradiction of murderabilia explored here. On the one hand, individuals wish to get closer to things in a pursuit of real, authentic, or hand-crafted experiences. On the other, they undermine this by ‘surmounting the uniqueness’ of experiences by consuming reproduced references, objects and experiences. In this section, vignettes from interviews with murderabilia collectors are used demonstrate this practice of *getting closer to things* through objects that Benjamin would describe as auratic – set out in three themes; (1) wanting to own aura, (2) wanting to procure it reliably; and (3) producing it as well.

When collectors speak of the value of murderabilia, they do so in the terms of a pursuit of aura as laid out by Benjamin (1936:9) – like viewing a natural landscape as compared to seeing it in a picture. But a more appropriate example could be an original painting by a serial killer as compared to a reproduced poster of that same image. Benjamin also cites historical reference as producing auratic qualities: ‘the genuineness of a thing is the quintessence of everything about it since its creation that can be handed down, from its material duration to the historical witness that it bears’ (Benjamin, 1936:7). Genuineness, originality, real – these are phrases that recur as markers of authenticity. Something that has stood the test of time in its material degradation, as well as something that bears witness to history in general, or to a historical event.

### ***(1) Owning Aura***

Participants referred to auratic qualities of items owned in their collection. For example, a hand-made patchwork quilt sewn by The Manson Family cult which is constructed with an interconnecting network of swastikas. In dark reds and blacks, it covers almost an entire wall from floor to ceiling when hung horizontally in Sarah’s collection. The room is filled with other items pertaining to The Manson Family, including some minor possessions of the victims. This item is truly auratic in its mode of production (hand-made) as well as its historical value and association with some famous criminals. Despite this fame, the collector is flippant about Manson:

*Every room in here is an obsession. I know everything in here, and, except the Manson stuff – I don't care about that (Sarah)*

It is not clear why Sarah has collected several items relating to Charles Manson without interest, but she speaks as though she is passed collecting the most famous criminals, as if to imply that infamous characters are to be collected by beginners, a rite of passage but not equal to a true passion for thanatology. Despite its auratic qualities, with original stains still visible across the centre, this piece is not valuable to Sarah as she shuns this highly mediated character. Earlier, she had suggested that collecting items of famous American serial killers was a superficial stage in her life that had now passed. Yet the intensity of its aura, particularly through historical association, is beyond that of any other piece: it has visible stains because it has not been washed since it was acquired:

*When they brought that home it smelt baaad, I'm like 'I'm getting it dry cleaned'. All my surrounding boys that I work with, they're like 'you can't have that dry cleaned' it's got like, DNA on it from the family (Sarah)*

Sarah jokes that getting an item covered in swastikas dry cleaned is socially unacceptable. But more than that, washing an item of murderabilia is deemed an unacceptable affront to authenticity and auratic value. The quilt was hand produced – a valued quality by collectors. Washing the quilt would not change this, DNA is not visible, it does nothing to increase the spectacle of viewing such a personal and close item to The Family. Stains are visible, however, and authenticity is exponentially increased by witness born from the marks – they are symbolic of age, use, and represent historic value. In contrast, Harry's very first item of murderabilia collected was a cheque for \$5, payable to him, from Manson:

*In English classes we learned letter writing. They got us to write a letter to someone famous. They gave us an address book and Charles Manson's address was in there (Harry)*

Harry was instructed to write to someone 'famous', and the very same infamous murderer responsible for the quilt was present alongside more conventional celebrities. When writing to Manson, Harry included five US dollars in cash so that postage, envelopes and stationary could be covered. He had hoped this would increase his likelihood of obtaining a reply from Manson, although this very gesture is what made a reply impossible. As part of a law restricting criminals from profiting from their crimes, the five-dollar gesture was intercepted. Instead, Harry received a letter back postmarked by the prison authorities. Inside was a



cheque reimbursement payable to Harry, in Manson's name – his first item of murderabilia, even though the item did not reach Manson, nor was it associated with his crimes.

*Charles Manson sent me money, it's pretty cool. And then a few years later I was reading a book about Richard Ramirez that said he spent all of his time writing letters to people on the outside from his cell, so I called up and the prison gave me his address. I wrote and he replied, so that was my first actual reply*

*[When prompted to elaborate on the meaning of 'actual']*

*Well he wrote it, that's all I mean. It actually came from his – you know, his pen and his hand and paper (Harry)*

Harry went on to degrade the authenticity of his prized Manson cheque by describing his second acquisition as his first *actual* piece. A letter from American serial murderer Richard Ramirez, also obtained by writing to the killer in prison but without his previous mistake of sending funds, was penned by the killer's own hand and is therefore more valuable – despite being from a lesser known character. Whilst the cheque represents a notable point in Harry's own life and is part of his narrative of collecting, it is not particularly auratic or authentic. Ramirez, on the other hand, had put pen to paper to produce an authentic and therefore *actual*, top echelon, auratic object.

The quality that the cheque is lacking is one of craft, bestowed upon items that have 'passed through the hands of someone the marks of whose labour are still inscribed thereupon' (Baudrillard, 1968:81) – or an auratic quality that decreases as items are mechanically reproduced (Benjamin, 1936) – assets that Sarah's quilt and Harry's letter have in abundance. The extent of murderabilia items that are truly auratic, like these, is limited. They are the items to which collectors aspire, with the highest associated value, but that represent the most expensive and unattainable as well. As a result, they are rare, and collectors are left trying to approximate the same sort of exclusivity and authenticity without historicalness. They cultivate these perceptions of authenticity using the devices such as; originality; provenance; artistic merit; and historical association, in their narratives of collecting. These ways in which participants go to great lengths to procure auratic items with reliable provenance, or use narratives to embed aura in their items, are unpacked in the following section.

## **(2) Procuring Aura**

‘Value’ becomes more complicated in murderabilia objects that are not bestowed with aura through their modes of production (they are mechanically reproduced), or that seem to earn auratic qualities through their historical associations with celebrified and infamous criminals. Baudrillard’s work on antiques can help unpack this additional complexity: ‘there are two distinctive features of the mythology of the antique object that need to be pointed out: the nostalgia for origins and the obsession with authenticity’ (Baudrillard, 1968:80). Commitments to originality, artistic value and the way in which participants positioned their items as authentic in the face of a lack of aura form the basis of this subsection.

Where the nostalgia for origins is somewhat absent, the obsession with authenticity is duly increased, which manifested as a demand for provenance: ‘the demand for authenticity is [...] reflected in an obsession with certainty – specifically, certainty as to the origin, date, author and signature of work’ (Baudrillard, 1968:81). A diligent requirement for provenance has shaped the market, which has been trimmed down to a handful of reputable websites, including *MurderAuction* and *SerialKillersInk*.

Several collectors reported having been caught out by online forgeries before and preferred utilising offline connections. Jake went as far as completely shunning online outlets, insisting that after decades in the business, if any valuable item came up, he would hear about it with first refusal before it made it onto the internet.

*It’s, it’s very rare because people know I deal in the strictest of confidence. And, you know, they could torture me or whatever and I would never reveal a source of supply cus, you’re dealing with some potentially horrible – nasty – and violent people sometimes (Jake)*

Jake gives a glimpse into the secretive nature of collecting items that are potentially incriminating and of the risk of dealing with criminal characters directly, in the name of provenance. Provenance, nonetheless, is an ongoing battle for collectors of all types. As Baudrillard (1968) suggests, this is often witnessed through an emphasis placed on authorship, signature or history, and collectors’ experiences with provenance are interesting indicators of perceptions of authenticity in crime and death themselves.

*All I’m really after is provenance for, for what I may be able to get or may not be able to get or maybe introducing them to something else. It’s a very hands on industry for myself (Jake)*

Three participants had paid more for professional authentication than for the objects themselves. Antiques dealers are contracted to provide an opinion on the age and origin of items, a common practice for museums and galleries being brought into private collections by the most committed investors in murderabilia. Jake has attended courses in graphology and handwriting analysis to aid his ability to authenticate his purchases. In some extreme circumstances, collectors have invested in DNA authentication, pairing items of murderabilia with hair or nail clippings through expensive laboratories.

*We also have to have proof of authenticity. [...] I think there's probably a thousand copies of [Ted] Bundy's court papers and death sentence [...] it's gotta be real or it's worthless (Vivien)*

The emphasis on the real and the subsequent rejection of reproduction permeates private collections and commercial murderabilia markets alike. Popular murderers such as Ted Bundy are frequently subject to forgery, but forgery, despite being an accurate representation of the original, is considered to be worthless. An interest in death and criminal history could be serviced by reproduction, just as historical interests are routinely satisfied by books, documentaries, films – or even ‘dark tourism’ (Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Rather, the interest in murderabilia lies in the symbolic value of historicalness and authenticity that is served by antiques (Baudrillard, 1968). Murderabilia objects are simulations of history and historical importance beyond the historical information that they provide – and in this way, objection to fakery is an affront to inauthentic modes of production and inauthentic experiences in the culture industry.

Online outlets are seen as the least trustworthy. Casual collectors are derided as relying on the internet to satisfy their hobby, and are most likely consuming fakes hidden among items of genuine murderabilia. Jake learned this the hard way by attempting to procure an original Zyklon B canister used for genocide during World War Two – one which he throws across the room for me to catch. He makes it clear that this one is a fake – the canisters are extremely rare, although they are intermittently available through key outlets:

*[£1,950 is] a lot of money, really, for a piece of tin – but there's that history behind that. [...] And I got conned. This is what put me off buying stuff online. I bought that [Zyklon B canister] fifteen years ago. And the image that was on the internet was a proper, but that is – that's just a – it's a con. It's just a bloody tin. It was freshly painted when I had it, but that cost me nineteen hundred and fifty pound (Jake)*

He highlights that the ‘tin’ arrived, fifteen years ago, ‘freshly painted’ – adding insult to injury, the item is a *modern* reproduction that is absent of aura and entirely devoid of historical importance. Jake points out that the item does not have any historical value, a quality that Baudrillard cites as integral to antiques. The item is still hand crafted – but it lacks the aura of originality. After this unfortunate experience, Jake focuses on offline connections with criminals and associated contacts that are deemed much more reliable.

*I think I’ve dealt with them [online outlets] once or twice in the past when I first started collecting. Then I found that people were actually contacting me from prisons from around the world, Charles Manson got in touch, Richard Ramirez (Jake)*

It is these long-standing connections with famous criminals such as Charles Manson, and an enduring reputation for utmost discretion, that Jake cites as allowing him to avoid using the less reliable online outlets. An apparently well-rehearsed comment from Sarah, who is in a similarly well-connected position after decades collecting, expresses the same sentiment through a common colloquialism:

*Everyone has a skeleton in their closet, and they come out of the woodwork sometimes to donate, or sell it to us (Sarah)*

Sarah and other reputable collectors are able to authenticate items by procuring them directly from their source. She expresses a distaste for online communication, and a similar scepticism as Jake towards the authenticity of items bought online. Individuals appear from nowhere to be immortalised inside prestigious collections. These individuals are often criminals themselves, and even procuring directly from them does not always preclude reproduction. The question of the cultivation of authenticity and aura becomes more complicated with the revelation that even some handmade, original serial killer art are made on a kind of Fordist production line – which will be dealt with in the following section.

### **(3) Producing Aura**

The most infamous piece of serial killer art is American murderer John Wayne Gacy’s self portrait of ‘Pogo the Clown’ – his alter ego that he would dress as principally when entertaining children among other things. In mostly red, blue and white Gacy holds one hand aloft, waving out of the picture. On his head, a floppy clown hat with three baubles hanging down one side. In his other hand, he clutches a bunch of several balloons. The balloons change colour depending on the edition, sometimes incorporating green or yellow, or

sometimes a simple variation on the same tri-colour scheme of the rest of the painting. In the background, a row of dark green fir threes usually hides below a cloudless blue sky. On his torso, a red badge reads 'I'm Pogo the Clown', but the paintings are signed J. W. Gacy in the bottom corner. His eyes always appear to be looking down toward his signature. Asking prices for pictures in good condition range between \$2,500 to \$15,000 USD.

*We used to be his West Coast art representatives, to sell his paintings. At one point I had nine Pogo the Clowns (Sarah)*

Sarah had close contact with Gacy during her letter writing phase. These items are not as original and exclusive as buyers are led to believe, however. Sarah would routinely have several in her possession, at one point having nine *Pogo the Clowns* among other pictures. Authentic, original works of 'art' are not exempted from the dissolution of aura. It appears that Gacy, along with other criminal artists, would exploit the conveniences of the assembly line to satisfy market demands.

According to Sarah, Gacy would line up canvases in his cell in a miniature assembly line. He would first trace the matching outlines of the clowns. Then he would paint a single colour at a time across all the pictures, completing them simultaneously in the fastest and most efficient way possible. Sarah remarks that this practice predated the law prohibiting criminals from profiting from their crimes, denouncing Gacy's system as a money-oriented practice, manufacturing 'authenticity' and 'history' into objects that are produced with profit in mind.

For Baudrillard, a marginal item (antique/object that possesses 'authenticity'), must operate outside of the conventional system of objects. It can have monetary value, as antique objects do, but this conventionally stems from its history or rarity, not modernity or abundance (Baudrillard, 1968). This item is not truly marginal. It possesses a sort of aura coming from the hand of Gacy himself but not in a pure sense of a one-off without reproduction. Mass production is observed as seeping into murderabilia in even those items with the highest perception of authenticity; hand produced; artwork; from a notable criminal.

Notoriety of criminal can be double edged, though, with items linked to celebrity characters or individuals who lack 'murderousness' needing to be clarified and defended by collectors – and with certain, celebrified characters being derided as having produced and approximated value through media exposure, and not legitimately through death and killing. Closeness to murder or death is a reliable indicator of value – despite the enduring popularity

of transgressive characters that have not killed, or are not known for murder, ‘Robin Hood’ type characters, as Seal (2009) has argued. Jake feels the need to repeatedly caveat and defend the legitimacy of his personal interest in English criminal Charles Bronson against the fact that he has not actually been responsible for the death of a person.

*Charles Bronson, who’s obviously not a murderer (Jake)*

*But then again, he’s [Charles Bronson] not a killer (Jake)*

Jake discusses British gangster Charles Bronson as though he does not qualify to be collected due to this lack of murderousness. He then goes on to discuss the complexity of Bronson’s crimes, his stints in and out of prison, his various changes of name, and persistent media coverage that has labelled him ‘the most violent criminal in Britain’. Justification of interest in this manner, by highlighting the narrative qualities of Bronson’s life and crimes, emphasises the importance of the qualities of famousness and celebrity in murderabilia. Jake injects markers of authenticity in consumption, such as brand and celebrity qualities, to negate the lack of aura that follows the absence of murder.

Jake wanted to supplement his temporary murderabilia exhibit with a display of popular illegal narcotics that he believed would be educational as well as provide a genuine experience of criminal objects. Yet, this alternate approach to murderabilia – objects that are criminalised rather than objects from criminals – was prohibited by law. Jake describes his frustration at not being granted a permit to obtain and display illegal narcotics despite his intention to keep them safe:

*I wanted to put drugs on display. Proper drugs, not these made up things that they [the police] take on tour [for educational purposes]. I made enquiries like, ‘would you mind if I just put different substances on display?’ But then I’d be done for possession. [...] I’d like to do a complete run of drugs – it’s got to be real for me to display it, I can’t put something on display that’s not authentic (Jake)*

The police use substances that look like, but are not, illegal narcotics for educational purposes. But again, Jake refers to the qualities of reality and authenticity. It is not enough to utilise representations of narcotics that could evoke the same or a similar reaction. Real drugs, he argues, would be ‘hard hitting’, and fake narcotics are not ‘proper’, the implication being that they lack an appropriateness and an accuracy in his collection of true death and crime. His objects are valued for the aesthetic of authenticity and not for the educational purpose that a representation could satisfy. Jake needs the ‘complete run’ of narcotics and

here, he evokes the same rhetoric that underlines all collecting: ‘just one object no longer suffices: the fulfilment of the project of possession always means a succession or even a complete series of objects’ (Baudrillard, 1968:92). For the collection of objects to be thought of as authentic, it must hold water as a complete set without any gaps or omissions.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Through the subsections; owning aura; procuring aura; and producing aura, I have presented data to suggest that alongside money and an established societal fascination with death (Foltyn 2008; Khapaeva 2017), value in murderabilia is courted through traditional antique, aesthetic notions of authenticity and an affront to mechanical reproduction, and collectors’ experiences of collecting can be framed as a search for ‘authentic’ death and dying that is tied closely to the aesthetics of antique objects as well as death itself.

A phenomenon that Khapaeva (2017:52) has called the ‘aestheticization of death’, referring in the first instance to the increasing personalisation of funeral rituals, is relevant for our analysis of murderabilia. Alongside ‘Dark Tourism’ and to a certain extent, Halloween celebrations as well, Khapaeva cites murderabilia as being part of a broader cultural change in attitude towards ‘death, humans and immortality’ (54) – as well as a state of disarray and confusion around what death really means. Whilst accurate, this focus on societal attitude changing obscures the emphasis participants place on modes of production that they wish wholeheartedly to remain the same. For Khapaeva, murderabilia is seen as somewhat participatory, an opportunity for people to live vicariously closer to a criminal event or violent death. This idea is often applied to film memorabilia (Geraghty 2014), or to serial killer art: ‘buying and claiming ownership of the artwork can become a way of participating in the transgression – even if only on an imaginary plane (Vidal 2015:123). Whereas death ‘fashion’ – like the huge rise in skull imagery on clothing (Foltyn 2008) – is seen as pure commodification of a vehement desire for death.

But Knox (2003) has described serial killing as an extreme version of collecting – Jarvis (2007) has done the same in reverse – there is traction in thinking about both from a consumptive perspective, as being driven in part by a Post-Fordist desire for personalisation and conspicuous consumption that is enacted or accessed by certain modes of production. Both fashion and murderabilia can be thought of from a consumptive perspective, through the modern logic of branding, nostalgia and antique.

For Hallam and Hockey (2001:27), memories – when thinking about and commemorating the dead – are imaginings that are ‘fused, metaphorically with material objects which possess distinct structures and boundaries’. The authors refer mainly to shrines and other physical memorial, ‘sites of memory’, that try to ‘keep alive’ a deceased person. They also refer to clothing or personal possessions from the deceased as being ‘highly problematic and distressing foci of memories’ (110) for relatives. But for those collectors who showed a desire to own aura, this cultural fusing of memory into objects represented an ability to get closer to death. Just as Benjamin (1936) has described a desire for aura as one driven by ‘getting closer to things’ – participants courted auratic remnants like DNA and handwriting as markers of pride and value in their collections.

Things play a crucial role in upholding the past (Olsen 2010), so when talking about procuring aura, collectors emphasised notions of authentication and provenance associated with antique, auratic items. In the antique object ‘the connotation of naturalness can be subtle, but the connotation of historicalness is always glaring’ (Baudrillard 1968:78) – for Baudrillard, the function of antique items is to signify the exoticism of the past. Antiques are not afunctional or solely decorative, but authenticating markers of the past. In this way and through their desire for provenance, participants demonstrated a drive for what Baudrillard calls ‘atmospheric value’: an allegiance with originality and consumptive aura in death.

When it comes to those who attempt to produce aura into their collections, Berger (1972:32/33) can help us understand the drive towards approximating it:

What the modern means of reproduction have done is to destroy the authority of art and to remove it [...] yet very few people are aware of what has happened because the means of reproduction are used nearly all the time to promote the illusion that nothing has changed.

In producing aura, the techniques developed to create the illusion that the means of production were authentic were shown – in production line painting and in the importance of completeness in collection. In these instances, murderabilia is reduced to that of a spectacle that tells a story of auratic production. Benjamin argues that death has been ‘pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living’ and is therefore ‘the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell’ (Benjamin, 1970:94). Participants employed narrative devices that are used to embed a sense of consumptive aura where it might be lacking. They



spoke of the importance of hand-craft, even where originality is missing – which reframes the object towards ‘having passed through the hands of someone the marks of whose labour are still inscribed thereupon’ (Baudrillard 1968:81).

Both antiques and the practice of collecting are seen by Baudrillard as narcissistically regressive in that they are an attempt to suppress time and produce an ‘imaginary mastery of birth and death’ (1968:78). Baudrillard (1998) cites the importance of the *range* or the *collection* that has permeated out of antique purchasing into everyday conspicuous consumption – positioning the collection as a mode of completion and authentication in purchasing. Baudrillard himself acknowledges an inbuilt contradiction here, which is that a drive towards a complete-run of collectables negates a counter drive to experience marginal personalisation of purchasing experience. Although, with the inclusion of transgression as a spectacle, murderabilia collectors can strive for both simultaneously – for example, Jake’s complete run of deadly narcotics.

This obsession for authenticity has been consistently applied to other areas, like tourism and dark tourism. Cohen (1988) argued that the *perception* of authenticity – through various value markers such as location – is more important than an authentic experience itself. In murderabilia collections these markers of authenticity are present in their materiality and in those values that judge material worth outside of the sphere of death. This is not dissimilar to research in Dark Tourism, where Stone (2006) has argued that the qualities making the ‘darkest’ of spaces are educational orientation, geographical accuracy and a lack of overt commercialisation (Stone 2006). Our participants have demonstrated an inadvertent allegiance to all three of these – defending their collections as ‘thanatology’, having a small room dedicated solely to creating an immersive experience of the Manson Family, or launching serial defences of the commercial aspects of murderabilia and reiterating the artistic, cultural and historic importance of their death artefacts. On collections more specifically, Root (1996:81) draws further parallels with tourism:

Collectors are much like the tourists who want to experience an authentic ceremony and feel cheated by a noticeably inauthentic event or performance. Consumers want their purchases to be authentic, and tourists want their experiences to be real, even though at some level it must be clear to all concerned that this is not the case, that a genuine, pristine, authentic tradition is an impossible dream in a market driven by capital.

Collectors acknowledged the economic investment potential of their items, but launched lengthy defences of the genuineness, pristine quality and authentic criminality of their death items as they fought an inexorable dilution of aura through capital, celebrity characters, mechanically reproduced products, cheats, fakes and scams. Root reiterates the diminishing supply of what Baudrillard called ‘marginal objects’ – items that ‘appear to run counter to the requirements of functional calculation, and answer to other kinds of demands such as witness, memory, nostalgia or escapism’ (Baudrillard, 1968:77). I have positioned murderabilia as a way of accessing death and criminality through this consumer capitalist logic of authentic production, distribution and authentication.

‘The concept of authenticity plays an important role in how we reason about objects’ (Newman & Smith, 2016) – and Gilks (2016) has argued that exhibitions of celebrities’ personal possessions, in their contrast to the mediated image of celebrity that we most commonly experience in the tabloid press, have the ability to authenticate or discredit narratives of the celebrities themselves. We have witnessed this commitment to authentication-by-object throughout these murderabilia collections – with participants repeatedly privileging historical association with famous criminals as a method of restating the authenticity of their stories.

Participants’ relationships with crime and death were, as one would expect, far from objective, favouring celebrated, branded (Denham, 2016), well-known characters, and collections were filtered through a ubiquitous interest in the most infamous and mediated criminals. Collectors wished to transgress mechanised modes of production and cultural homogenisation as a way of accessing what felt like authentic crime and death, rather than to consume objectively the most transgressive criminal characters – following Baudrillard’s argument that ‘the mere fact that a particular object belonged to a famous or powerful individual may confer value on it’ (1968:81). I argue that desire for closeness to death and an ‘authentic’ experience of crime in murderabilia collecting is consumed through these auratic, nostalgic modes of production.

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