

The Art of Murder (London, Jan–May 10)

Ricarda Vidal

Seminar in Visual Culture 2010: The Art of Murder

Institute of Germanic & Romance Studies, Room ST 275
(School of Advanced Study, Stewart House, 32 Russell Square,
WC1B 5DN London)

This series of seminars acts as a forum for practicing artists, researchers, curators, students, and others interested in visual culture who are invited to present, discuss and explore a given theme within the broad field of Visual Culture. In 2010, the theme of the seminar is "The Art of Murder." Artists and writers have always been fascinated with the violence of murder and the thrill and sensationalism that comes with it. Many examine it in critical, theoretical or creative forms of expression exploring the hidden fears and desires inherent in breaking the most sacred taboo, the destruction, and thereby for some the renewal, of life itself. Thomas de Quincey considered "murder as one of the fine arts", and the murderer as artist, in his eponymous satirical article from 1827. W.H. Auden calls murder "negative creation"; and like the classical rebel-poet/artist Auden's murderer is "the rebel who claims the right to be omnipotent." According to legend George Bataille dallied in a more dangerous fashion with the artistic act of murder. Today, artworks by serial killer John Wayne Gacy fetch up to \$15,000 at auction. In the Washington-based Museum of Crime and Punishment one can admire art and craft made by Charles Manson and an online search will provide opportunities to purchase one of his sock puppets. Marcus Harvey's portrait of child-murderess Myra Hindley, which was created from the hand-prints of children, attracted much criticism, but it also drew the crowds. When crime writer Patricia Cornwell cut up a painting by Walter Sickert in her quest to prove that Sickert was Jack the Ripper, the art-world was outraged. However, whether we believe Cornwell's theory or not, Sickert's paintings suddenly acquired a new fascination. This cross-disciplinary seminar series "The Art of Murder" sets out to explore visual representations of actual murder in fine art, theatre, film and literature, as well as our relationship with artefacts and artworks created by criminals.

Participation is free and open to all, but please email me at ricarda.vidal@sas.ac.uk to reserve a seat.

Programme:

Wednesday 27 Jan. 2010, 6.30pm - 8.00pm

Ricarda Vidal, "A brief introduction to murder"

From de Quincey to Orwell and Bataille writers have been concerned with what constitutes a "good murder" and artists from antiquity to now have been concerned with how best to visualise it. This talk endeavours to give an overview of the history of our infatuation with murder and its aesthetics and thus to lay the groundwork for the various presentations in the "Art of Murder" seminar series.

Geraldine Swayne, "On Painting Murder"

I've made a lot of work about murders, not because I necessarily want to make pictures of the act but because I am interested in the atmosphere of murder scenes; the way terror distorts reality and the moment when the soul leaves the body. I became interested in murder as a child and still hold childish supernatural beliefs about murder being a crime against nature, (and hence the universe), changing murderers into monsters and turning blossom to ash. The resonance of murders, (particularly of young women), passes through me like a kind of medium. When I paint a murderer, what I am asking is: once you've killed, have you committed another murder on your own soul; and if you have, can I see it in your eyes

Simon Bacon, "The Two Faces of the Murderous Gaze"

The Dark Doubling of Sherlock Holmes and Count Dracula as Seen in "An Experiment on a Bird in an Air Pump" by Wright of Derby and "Triptych May-June 1973" by Francis Bacon Wright of Derby's painting was produced over a hundred years before the creation of our two protagonists and Francis Bacon's seventy years later but both example the murderous gaze implicit in their modus operandi's. Sherlock Holmes can be seen as the light of Enlightenment reason uncovering the traces and motivations of the most devious and diabolical murderers but his cold scientific gaze is not just his own; in the act of discovery he re-opens the wounds of the victim to public gaze and consideration. Dark acts are no longer discrete and individual but become public property in the light of collective scrutiny. Similarly Wright of Derby's "An Experiment on a Bird in an Air Pump" (1767-68) shows light being brought forth from darkness; an attentive audience is invited to watch the death-throes of an unwitting victim all in the interests of science. Dracula, even more so than Moriarty, is Holmes' "dark double". His deathly project is hidden and nefarious, guided not by intellect

but emotions; his lust is for life not scientific stultification. His murders deflect the public gaze rather than wallow in it, an act that is personal rather than social. Bacon's "Triptych May-June 1973" (1973) reveals the fleshy nature of demise, solitary and engulfed in predatory shadows. The artist's brush slashes and cuts to the bone; in paint no one can hear you scream. Revealed here are the two sides of the murderous gaze one dissects the other detects. One deals in light and the other dark; one finds death in life the other life in death; I'll leave you to decide which is which.

Wednesday 24 Feb. 2010, 6.30pm - 8.00pm

Roger Cook,
Murder, Myth and Martyrdom: the Death of Pier Paolo Pasolini
Leila Peacock,
"Dis-moi ce que tu manges..." – The Cannibal's Cookbook

Wednesday 24 March 2010, 6.30pm - 8.00pm

Brittain Bright,
"The Aesthetic of the Crime Scene Photograph"
Julia Banwell,
"True Crime: Looking at Violent Death in Mexican Visual Culture"

Wednesday 26 May 2010, 6.30pm - 8.00pm

Sarah Sparkes,
"Never Afraid - Murder at Crimes Town"
Lisa Downing,
"Monochrome Mirror: Representing Dennis Nilsen"

For more information please see: <http://igrs.sas.ac.uk/index.php?id=434>

Reference:

ANN: The Art of Murder (London, Jan-May 10). In: ArtHist.net, Jan 21, 2010 (accessed Jun 7, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/32217>>.