

Remediating the “Yorkshire Ripper” Event in the Era of Feminist True Crime

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On 10 March 2021 the phrase “Yorkshire Ripper” was listed as “trending” in the UK on the social media platform Twitter in response to breaking news that Sarah Everard, a 33-year-old British woman who had gone missing in south London a week earlier, had been found murdered in the English county of Kent. Parallels were being drawn in many of the users’ posts between these current events and the notorious serial killings and attempted killings of women in the north of England from 1975-1980 that came to be known in popular parlance as the ‘Yorkshire Ripper’ murders.ⁱ

But why – and how – was this case a reference point for Twitter users some forty years later? In line with Tanya Horeck’s incisive contention that “true crime as a genre lends itself to the attention economies of ‘24/7 capitalism’ (Srnicek 2016) and its solicitation of ‘active’ user or viewer engagement through participatory media technologies,” (2019, p. 7) the link between Everard’s murder and the ‘Yorkshire Ripper’ case also transpired to have been responsive to a true crime documentary released just a few weeks earlier in the UK on the streaming service Netflix. For example, in response to the rapid online recirculation of a *My London* news article reporting that women in the Clapham area had been told by police “not [to] go out alone” (Phillips, 2021), one Twitter user wrote: “Watched the Yorkshire Ripper documentary on Netflix recently, all happened before my time. Nothing ever changes.” (10 March, 2021) Many other users took to the platform to express similar sentiments, for instance: “Just finished watching the Yorkshire Ripper doc on Netflix... That was forty years ago and wtf has changed?” (10 March, 2021), “Watched Yorkshire Ripper

doc on Netflix and the women were raging about being told to stay in. Fast forward forty years and nothing has changed.” (10 March, 2021)

Explicit parallels were thus being drawn, particularly between the victim-blaming rhetoric and discourse that underpinned the entreaties of police (and others) both thenⁱⁱ and nowⁱⁱⁱ for women not to walk out alone at night. And the impetus for the drawing of these parallels had been, for many Twitter users, their recent viewing of the four-part Raw TV productions documentary series *The Ripper*,^{iv} which had dropped on Netflix UK on 16 December 2020. By 24 December 2020, *The Ripper* had become the streaming platform’s second most viewed title in the country at that time.^v

By coincidence, the notorious perpetrator of the misogynist crimes detailed and discussed in *The Ripper* had died just a few weeks earlier, on 13 November 2020. This ensured that his crimes once again became front-page news in the UK, and gave rise to renewed interest in the events of the case and to renewed remembrance of the victims and survivors in mainstream media. For example, on 14 November, the front page of the (relatively) left-leaning tabloid *The Daily Mirror* devoted itself to remembrance of the thirteen women known to have been killed in the case with a full-page gallery of their portraits, accompanied by the headline “Now Rest in Peace” (2021). It pushed all other news items (e.g. the one concerning the highly anticipated exit from 10 Downing Street of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s adviser Dominic Cummings, which was that day’s other big national story) to the internal pages of the paper. *The Ripper* therefore dropped into a context of heightened renewed interest in its subject matter.

Using a range of documentary techniques, including the judiciously edited compilation of archive footage, and interviews with a range of parties still living who had been connected to the case, *The Ripper* goes to lengths to shine a light on the victim-blaming that characterised the official discourse which presented itself as advice to women from the

authorities about how to stay safe while the perpetrator remained at large. It was the second such ostensibly feminist revisionist remediation of the events and contexts of the Yorkshire Ripper case in television documentary in as many years. Much like the BBC's *The Yorkshire Ripper Files: A Very British Crime Story* (2019), *The Ripper* highlights some of the feminist stakes of remembering the events and contexts of this case, forty years on from the apprehension of the perpetrator. And it does so in ways that enable its unambiguous relevance to the continuing problem of men's violence against women to be easily discerned by viewers. This chapter thus addresses the legacy of the Yorkshire Ripper case in contemporary media culture, focussing on texts and contexts surrounding *The Ripper*, and arguing for its status as a symptomatic example of what Horeck terms "feminist true crime" (2019).

In addition to riding the wave of the 2010s true crime boom, another factor contributing to this plethora of cultural remediations and remembering of the Yorkshire Ripper case and its social and cultural ripples has been the cognate and contemporaneous wave of new historicisations of second wave feminism and the women's liberation movement, in the UK (Jolly, 2019) and beyond (Bruley and Forster, 2016). As Karen Boyle writes, "there has been a flourishing of scholarship on feminist activism from the 1970s and 1980s" (2019, p. 10), and increasingly this has come to include and encompass scholarship on those strands of the UK movement that were most directly concerned with combatting men's violence against women (Rees, 2010; Wattis, 2018; Hague, 2021).

Media scholar Heather McIntosh expounds and illustrates some of the defining aspects of what she describes as "ethical and meaningful" (ostensibly feminist) intersections of documentary and gendered violence that push back against problematic stereotypes in the history of the media's treatment of this subject matter (2015, p. 2). She does this by pointing to things like "privileging the points of view of survivors and resisting elements and modes

that can be experienced as re-victimizing” as symptomatic examples of how such ethical and meaningful treatments can be achieved (2015, p. 2). Elsewhere, in the same volume, Lisa Cuklanz correspondingly points to “debunking rape myths” as a means by which documentary films that deal with gendered violence “can be easily understood as feminist on the level of overt argumentation” (2015, p. 31).

With specific regard to the true crime genre in the “digital streaming era,” Horeck goes further than this, delineating the features of what she describes as “a feminist version of true crime” which “captures the social, collective, and intersectional dimensions of crime” (Ibid., p. 169) and “maintains focus on the victims and the wider societal structures at work that allow such violence to occur,” (Ibid., p. 170) – violence that is “enabled by systems of power. And is, therefore, not attributable to the actions of individual ‘bad men’” (Ibid., pp. 170-171). In this way it is indirectly a core concern of feminist true crime to debunk so-called “Ripper myths”, and to dismantle the spurious notion of the exceptionality of the “sexual murderer” (Cameron and Frazer, 1987). Rather, as Horeck continues, “The critical impetus [of feminist true crime is] to humanize the forgotten and ignored victims of violent crime,” (p. 172) in “an approach to [the genre] that keeps the female victims in the center of the story” (p. 174).

Feminist true crime thus intervenes in some of the the tendencies towards the celebrification of perpetrators and the elevation of serial sexual murderers of women to the status of ostensible folk heroes. This is something that Rebecca Frost calls the media’s “enduring formula for notoriety,” (2020, front matter) and it has often been noted as characteristic of reportage and cultural commentary on the “Yorkshire Ripper” event both at the time (Rickford, 1980), but also since, in the form of cultural remembering and re-mediations of the kind undertaken in documentaries like *The Yorkshire Ripper Files* and *The Ripper*.

A recent uptick in interest in remembering the “Yorkshire Ripper” event has manifested in a number of ways, including in the form of a cluster of cultural remediations of it that emerged in mainstream media and culture across 2019-20, at the end of a decade that has seen a major cross-media surge of interest in the true crime genre (Horeck, 2019; Mellins and Moore, 2021). Prior to *The Ripper*, the principal texts that have comprised this cluster are as follows. In academic publishing, Louise Wattis’s feminist sociological, criminological and cultural feminist account of the case and its socio-cultural impacts *Revisiting the Yorkshire Ripper Murders* (2018). In commercial book publishing, prolific true crime author Carol Ann Lee’s *Somebody’s Mother, Somebody’s Daughter* (July 2019).^{vi} Liza Williams’ BAFTA-winning documentary mini-series *The Yorkshire Ripper Files*, which was first shown on BBC television over three consecutive nights in March 2019. Olivia Hirst and David Byrne’s play *The Incident Room* (2020), which played to sell-out audiences and strong reviews at the Edinburgh Festival in August 2019: - set in Millgarth police station in Leeds as the investigation into the Yorkshire Ripper murders is carried out, the play unfolds largely through the highly empathetic point of view of long-suffering and perennially overlooked female police detective Megan Winterburn.

This cluster of texts therefore emerged across the final years of the 2010s on the back of an explosion of interest in the true crime genre, but also in tandem with renewed attention being paid in the context of fourth wave feminism, and in the aftermath of the virality of the #MeToo movement and associated phenomena, to the ongoing need to challenge and combat rape culture. All share a common interest in elevating the voices and viewpoints of women in different ways, centring: those women who either survived or lost their lives to the actions of the perpetrator of the crimes depicted; those who played material parts in the investigation of these events; those who are turned to as voices of authority and expert interviewees; and

those who were key members of the creative personnel involved in the production in question.

Taken together, these true crime cultural productions on the Yorkshire Ripper event are thus noteworthy for their clear feminist pushback against the tendency to mythologise sexual murderers and emphasise their actions, experiences, and psychologies at the expense of the viewpoints and voices of victims and survivors, or their representatives. In these ways, identifiable commonalities across each of the texts that comprise the cluster sketched out above enable a reading that corresponds with Horeck's conceptualisation of feminist true crime.

There are various points across all four episodes of *The Ripper* when the series goes to lengths to contextualise the events of the case in relation to the social backdrop against which they unfolded. In particular it makes a point of highlighting social phenomena including, firstly, diminishing industry in the north of England as a result of globalization in manufacture and engineering, with the resulting implication that the nature and tenor of everyday life for working people in that region at the time had changed for the worse. And, secondly, the racially diverse makeup of the population of the Leeds suburb of Chapeltown (where a number of the murders and attacks took place), depicting and acknowledging the racist victimisation that the residents experienced, often at the hands of the police, and the correspondingly strained relations between the local population and the authorities, with the reluctance of rightly mistrustful residents to assist police in their enquiries during the investigations (for more on this, see Mackay 2015).^{vii} This is most candidly confronted in episode one, "Once Upon a Time in Yorkshire," which vividly recalls social historian Judith Walkowitz's invocation of what she describes as "the specters of imperial and domestic industrial decline" in her explanation of "the Ripper Story's capacity to play out an elaborate repertoire of contemporary anxieties" (1992, p. 4). Archive footage of Chapeltown street

scenes featuring local residents of colour going about their daily lives is edited to a voice-over narration explaining the socio-economic decline of the area which, thanks to the affluence afforded by previously thriving industry, was once thought of as “the Highgate of Leeds” (in reference to an area of north London that was characterised at the time by the wealth of its residents, the opulence of its homes and, significantly, by its whiteness). In an archival interview, an expert then speaks of high unemployment and low living standards before the viewpoint shifts to that of present-day interviewee Andrew Laptew, a junior police officer involved in the investigation at the time. Laptew brings the racial makeup of Chapeltown to the fore, explaining that it “was mostly a black community” as archival material depicts white police patrolling streets in which black children play. He speaks of racist police targeting of black social clubs while archive audio juxtaposed with corresponding visuals depict excessive policing of the area, making clear the extent to which poor relations between police and residents impeded the effectiveness of investigations. Laptew states directly that black residents of Chapeltown “were being victimised” and thus attributes the reluctance of residents to help police with murder enquiries to racism evinced by members of West Yorkshire Police. Archive audio describes Chapeltown as “A decaying Victorian suburb with a slum problem, a high immigrant population and a large number of prostitutes” before Laptew explains that it had become the city’s “main red-light area.” Later, a montage of archival material depicts textile mills thriving earlier in the century before present-day audio with *Yorkshire Post* journalist Tony Harney offers context that “Yorkshire from the Second World War onwards... was the powerhouse of England. Trains were built... in Leeds. Bradford [was] the textile capital of the world,” and footage depicts operational mills and machines. “The mills never stopped running, 24 hours a day,” Harney explains, “There was vast wealth. By the ‘70s, a decline was beginning. Heavy engineering started to fall apart because of foreign imports. It was obvious they were not going to stagger on a lot

longer,” and archive footage now depicts inoperative mills, abandoned former workplaces, and increasingly populous job centres. Wealth leaves Leeds along with the decline of industry and a picture is painted of a central Westminster government indifferent to the economic plight of the newly post-industrial north. In this way, the documentary attributes the vulnerability of women in the night-time economy of 1970s Leeds in part to a combination of industrial decline, and the racism that accompanied post-war migration of people of colour to a now disenfranchised Chapeltown.

With respect to the feminist true crime remit to elevate the voices of women, and like *The Yorkshire Ripper Files* had done the year before, *The Ripper* also employs carefully juxtaposed and edited pieces of archive footage, in a bid to make clear the extent of the involvement of women in the investigation of the case. Shown mostly in behind-the-scenes capacities, carrying out the administrative and clerical leg work that was required to keep the wheels of the investigative operation moving, it makes a point of including and privileging the voices, viewpoints and recollections of several of these women. Archive audio and visuals highlight that the “team of 270 men” on the investigation in fact included many women. Among them, were police detective Elaine Benson and forensic scientist Angela Gallop, both of whom speak candidly and in detail in their interview segments about their experiences working on the investigation, including as women in male-dominated professions. Gallop, for example, was the first woman to join the investigation’s forensic science team whereupon she was “received with a large dose of scepticism” by her male colleagues. In doing so, *The Ripper* intervenes in the widely held (and with good reason) truism that the investigation of the Yorkshire Ripper murders and attacks was, as journalist Joan Smith avers in an interview segment in episode 3 of *The Yorkshire Ripper Files*, “a conversation among men. About dead women.” Interviewed the following year for *The Ripper*, Smith expounds upon this statement, throwing down the gauntlet for feminist

interventions in these narrativisations to elevate the voices of women, to the effect that the cultural narrative of the Yorkshire Ripper event “is a story about a man killing women, and the people who are investigating it are all men, and virtually all the people who are writing about it and reporting it are all men. So where do women get a voice in this?”^{viii}

Using equally judiciously assembled archive material and interviews, *The Ripper* also shines a light on the victim-blaming rhetoric which characterised the official discourse that presented itself as advice to women from the authorities (i.e. the police, and the mainstream news media) about how to stay safe while the perpetrator remained at large. This manifested in the policing, both discursive and literal, of women’s behaviours and movements in the form of, for example, calls for a night-time curfew on women, and the negatively judgmental censure of those who walked alone in public after dark. Episode 1 includes archival news material in which a reporter states that Jayne MacDonald, a 16-year-old girl who was killed in June 1977 was likely mistaken for a sex worker by the perpetrator “because she was walking home alone late at night.” Episode 3 features newsreel footage of West Yorkshire Police Chief Constable Ronald Gregory issuing instructive advice to women “that they must not walk out at night alone,” and Assistant Chief Constable George Oldfield who was in charge of the investigation, issuing an instruction to women via the mainstream media: “don’t travel out alone.” In each case the implication is clear – that in the eyes of the police, the mainstream media and the patriarchal world at large, women who walk outside alone, especially at night, invite male violence and are therefore complicit in the misogynist crimes of their attackers.

Notwithstanding the extent to which *The Ripper* concerns itself with highlighting and demonstrating the extent to which the oppression and terrorisation of women during this event extended well beyond the actions of the perpetrator himself to heavily inflect the ways in which his crimes were investigated, the series is equally invested in conveying to

audiences some of the things that many women at the time did to push back against their experiences of this egregious victim-blaming. Much of episode 3 “Reclaim the Night” is devoted to depicting the ways in which many women were moved by the events of the Yorkshire Ripper case, to join activist feminist protests, and to engage in various kinds of anti-violence activism that included organised street marches, anti-misogynist graffiti, sit-ins, boycotts, and over time, even arson. Indeed, this investment informs the series’ approach to the core subject matter throughout this episode, which directly and outspokenly concerns itself with interrogating the gender politics of the Yorkshire Ripper event and the way it galvanised the feminism of many women, some of whom had heretofore been otherwise uninvolved in the women’s liberation movement.

The Ripper thus goes to lengths to highlight some of the feminist stakes in remembering the events and contexts of this case forty years on from its conclusion. As if to draw a line under this, and echoing the strikingly similar ending to *The Yorkshire Ripper Files*, it employs the use of a gallery montage of images to close the final episode ‘Out of the Shadows,’ depicting each of the faces of the murdered women. As journalist Christa Ackroyd opines that “If we can do anything, it’s to push [the perpetrator] back into the shadows and to bring out the women,” a still photographic image of each of the murdered women is seen in turn against a black background, with each image presented sequentially in the chronological order that their bodies were found. In this way the closing moments pull focus on the identities and subjectivities of these women, and away from those of the man who killed them simply because they were women (Hollway, 1981).

The success and impact of *The Ripper* is in some ways indicative of the ongoing hold that the Yorkshire Ripper event and its contexts continue to have on the imagination of the UK populous. In the afterword to *Somebody’s Mother, Somebody’s Daughter*, Lee reflects that “It seems incredible that almost [at her time of writing] forty years later, the Yorkshire

Ripper case should remain relevant in terms of the issues it raises” (2019, p. 300). However, she goes on to observe, “stories of sexual violence and abuse towards women have dominated the headlines during the writing of this book” (2019, p. 300). At that time and since, the high-profile nature of revelatory phenomena in the digital landscape of contemporary media such as #MeToo, has elevated the ongoing need to combat violence against women to raised levels of cultural consciousness, moving some of the issues and debates arising from feminist anti-violence campaigning into the mass mediated mainstream spheres of cultural commentary in ways heretofore unseen.

With further regard to the feminist potentialities of ostensibly victim and survivor centred true crime of the kind that *The Ripper* sets out to be, it is also significant that both this series and *The Yorkshire Ripper Files* give voice to and provide a platform for the experiences of survivors Tracey Browne and Mo Lea, both of whom survived brutal attacks in 1975 and 1980 respectively. This marks a shift in focus away from what is recognised in the UK context (and especially in the visual discourse of this particular case) to be the well-worn true crime gallery-of-the-dead trope, notwithstanding the efforts made by feminist remediations like this one to subvert the meanings of this trope in ways that re-centre the subjects of these galleries rather than accepting their voicelessness as a *fait accompli*. Moreover, having centred the voices and experiences of survivors like Lea and Browne alongside those of some of the victims’ loved ones (in this case Wilma McCann’s son Richard, and Emily Jackson’s son Neil) space is made for the voices of survivors as well as those of victim-adjacent parties whose lives were likewise negatively impacted by the trauma of violence against women. When true crime gives a platform for such parties to speak their experiences and/or to represent those who did not survive to speak for themselves, it changes the feminist stakes and potentialities of a genre that is often seen as complicit in the perpetuation of patriarchal narratives of female victimhood, via strategies and tactics that

interoperate to silence the voices of those affected by violence against women while elevating the cultural profiles of those who enact it.

The ways that recent remediations of the “Yorkshire Ripper” event have resonated with both contemporary feminism, and present-day campaigning against violence against women such as that seen in the aftermath of the disappearance and death of Sarah Everard are, as elaborated at the outset of this chapter, extremely clear. Twitter users responding to Netflix’s *The Ripper* in March 2021 are not the only social and cultural commentators to have drawn this parallel with contemporary events. In her history of the movement to combat domestic violence, Professor Emerita of Violence Against Women Gill Hague (2021) sketches a historical outline of the 1970s and 1980s Reclaim the Night marches and their status as a manifestation of women’s outrage over the “Yorkshire Ripper” event. Hague likens this to “new activism,” which she notes has given rise to “large-scale vigils called ‘Reclaim these Streets,’” and which ensued after the disappearance, rape and murder of Sarah Everard (2021, p. 89). The social problems of sexual murder and men’s violence against women remain clear and present, and the need to combat these problems continues to be urgent. The extent to which feminist interventions into how the urgency of these problems are communicated through the media have the potential to make a meaningful impact, whether via feminist cultural remembering of the kind undertaken in texts like *The Ripper*, via news reportage of current events like the disappearance of Sarah Everard, or via social media discourse of the kind referenced at the outset that brings these things together, remains to be seen.

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ⁱ The epithet "Yorkshire Ripper" has been offset in inverted commas in this chapter in recognition of the part that it has played in the perpetuation of sensationalising and misogynist "Ripper myths" (see Brownmiller 1975; Walkowitz 1992), and in the celebrification and elevation to folk hero status of the perpetrator (Rickford 1980; Frost 2020). Its usage continues to be controversial due to its traumatising impact on survivors and loved ones of victims and survivors. For example, in a condemnation of the decision to alter the title of the 2020 Netflix documentary series *Once Upon a Time in Yorkshire* to *The Ripper* a group of survivors and family members wrote in an open letter that "The moniker 'the Yorkshire Ripper' has traumatised us and our families for the past four decades... It glorifies the violence of [the perpetrator] and grants him a celebrity status that he does not deserve... The repeated use of this phrase is irresponsible, insensitive and insulting to our families and our mothers' and grandmothers' legacies." (Al-Othman 2020). In this chapter I use the phrase "'Yorkshire Ripper' event" to refer to the events and contexts pertaining to the case and in recognition of its cultural profile which made a nationwide impact beyond that which it had on the directly affected localities. I do this to try to strike a balance between respecting the continuing traumas of the victims and survivors and acknowledging the historical reality that prominent use of this epithet has been central to its place in debates about media, culture and misogyny that are pertinent to the concerns of this chapter.

ⁱⁱ “I could only say to them [women] that they must not walk out at night alone,” Chief Constable Ronald Gregory, West Yorkshire Police, *The Ripper*, Episode 3 ‘Reclaim the Night’.

ⁱⁱⁱ Reportedly, there was widespread “Anger after police [told] women ‘not to go out alone’ in [the] wake of Sarah Everard’s disappearance.” (Cruse, 2021)

^{iv} Several members of the production team behind *The Ripper*, both above-the-line and below-the-line, were approached with a view to participating in this research. All declined.

^v With thanks to Dr Lawrence Napper for alerting me to this at the time.

^{vi} It is also noteworthy that seemingly responsive to renewed interest in the genre and subject matter, Gordon Burn’s 1984 biographical treatise on the perpetrator, *Somebody’s Husband, Somebody’s Son: The Story of Peter Sutcliffe*, was republished by Faber & Faber in July 2019 under the slightly revised title, *Somebody’s Husband, Somebody’s Son: The Story of the Yorkshire Ripper* (2019).

^{vii} The series does not allude to particular examples with this level of specificity, but the case of David Oluwale stands out as a contextually significant local flashpoint event here. Oluwale was an extremely socially vulnerable black Briton, whose death by drowning in the river Aire in Leeds in 1969 followed a sustained campaign of racist harassment and brutality against him by Leeds police (Aspden, 2007).

^{viii} Simple content analysis of the use of interviewees in *The Ripper* reveals that to a certain extent cultural remediations of the Yorkshire Ripper event such as this one continue to constitute conversations among men about dead women insofar as there are almost twice as many men included as talking heads versus women: 23 to 12 across the four episodes (with multiple uses of the same interviewee eliminated from the count *within* individual episodes, but not *across* them – so if an interviewee features several times within an episode they are counted once, but are counted again if they appear in another episode). That being the case, it is noteworthy that in episode 3 ‘Reclaim the Night’ which is explicitly concerned with the gender politics of the case and its cultural reverberations, gender balance in the ratio of women to men interviewed has been achieved (4 to 4). This said, while revealing in some respects (e.g. of the extent to which the cultural narratives of this event continue to be shaped by the contributions made by men’s voices), these numbers cannot capture the complexities and nuances of the feminist meanings produced by this text in edits, assemblages and other textual devices that interoperate to intervene in some of the heretofore dominant misogynist cultural narratives and truisms about the ‘Yorkshire Ripper’ event and its investigation.