

# The Trace of Absence: An Examination of The Discourse that Replaces the Black Dahlia

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## ABSTRACT

The Black Dahlia murder case was one of the most infamous homicides in American history. However, it is memorable not only for the violent nature of the crime but also for the intrigues, theories and speculations it is enveloped in. Following the murder in 1947, it has been connected with several other serial killing and homicidal incidents related to female victims—an examination of this entire network brings to mind the idea of the Derridean “trace” as the haunting of an absence: the trace of absence left behind by the murders is something that seems to threaten the presence of social stability and identity. The severed and mutilated bodies of female victims in these infamous and notable murder cases function as a metaphor for this trace.

Following her murder, Elizabeth Short’s (the Black Dahlia) absence, i.e. not only the absence of her living body but also the absence of her voice and her life-story, was filled in by media speculations and fictional representations. This paper will attempt to examine these representations in the light of Guy Dubord’s theory of the “spectacle” with a Derridean pun on the words “spectre” and “spectacle”. The speculations relating to the Black Dahlia has been reproduced over the years in the form of spectacles for mass consumption- in the end we find that, as Baudrillard mentions in *Simulacra and Simulation*, we are dealing with a vast structure of simulation where at the center the truth is absent. This vast “simulacra” of speculation is a

reflection of the mental constructs of the agents reproducing these speculations. Hence, this paper shall also try to examine the gender, political, economic and sociological structure of America during the time period of the Black Dahlia murder. A helpful anchor that this paper shall focus on is James Ellroy's 1987 neo noir crime novel *The Black Dahlia*, and in doing so this paper will try to value an individual's subjective and personal views and motivations behind framing his representation of the murder as opposed to that of the American media as a whole. In the end we find that the Black Dahlia (Elizabeth Short) haunts the American consciousness through these speculations and representations which can be seen as her spectres.

## PART I

### THE MURDER OF ELIZABETH SHORT: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

On the morning of 15 January, 1947, the Los Angeles Police Department received a call from a woman reporting the discovery of a body. Elizabeth Short's body was found posed in a lot in South Norton Avenue halfway between West 39th and Coliseum Streets in the Leimert Park area of Los Angeles ". . . a middle-class, residential neighborhood west of downtown in LAPD's University Division."<sup>1</sup>

The body had been severed at the waist. The lower half of the body was positioned at some distance from the upper. Her intestines were carefully tucked under her buttocks. Her body had been exsanguinated. Her arms were raised over her head at 45 degree angles and her feet were spread apart.<sup>2</sup> Her body was spread-eagled. There were lacerations on her face. Her face had been slashed from ear to ear to give the semblance of a wide grin.<sup>3</sup> A portion of her left thigh was gouged out, and her right

breast was badly mutilated. One could see the “exposed internal areas” of her body. There was a 4 inch cut in the abdomen and the pubic area had lacerations as well.<sup>4</sup>



Picture 1: Elizabeth Short's body<sup>5</sup>

This Paper aims to study the discourse surrounding this brutal incident in order to track the changing structure of the human consciousness, from the 1940s to the current time, in the way it views the female body.

No sperm deposits were found on the body of Elizabeth Short. However, the spectators of this incidents viewed it as a murder of a sexual nature on account of the lacerations made on the genital regions: the damaged genitals as a signifier standing for vengeance upon female sexuality.

History has shown a curious conjunction of vulnerable women with death and sexualisation, from the legendary tales of Jack the Ripper to modern music like Plan B's 'Suzanne' which is based on a true story: both are concerned with the violation and dismemberment of prostitutes. Most cases of murder and violence such as the Cleveland Torso Killings, the Lipstick Murders and the Black Dahlia murder are events caused by the positioning of socially and economically vulnerable figures at the juncture

of certain social and historical factors such as their social class and their position in history.<sup>6</sup>

In the case of the Black Dahlia, the myriad connections between Hollywood, the media, the underworld and the police meant that struggling actresses and actors, especially from economically challenged backgrounds or belonging to racial minorities were more vulnerable. This is something that plagues the Entertainment Industries, among others, even today as seen in the immunity that the established and powerful like Harvey Weinstein had enjoyed for decades. It is therefore relevant to examine the effect of the discourse produced by these socio-political apparatuses.

At the time these murders took place, the concept of serial killers and research regarding the same was starkly lacking. The importance of the perception of the masses regarding criminal acts can be realized in the following examination, by Philip L. Simpson, of how important legislations and legal concepts came into being on account of the sensationalisation of murders in media reports and popular culture.

“What is indisputable is that “serial killer” as both term and concept did not become widely known until the 1980s. This escalation of attention to serial murder was driven by media and complicit state and federal law enforcement agencies and other groups with a vested interest in garnering public support (and thus resources) for their various political and social reform agendas. Serial killing’s media-whipped perception as a social scourge, as well as different agencies’ and researchers’ differences of opinion as to how to even define serial murder, resulted in the United States Congress legally defining serial killings as a “series of three or more killings . . . having common characteristics such as to suggest the reasonable possibility that the crimes were committed by the same actor or actors” in the Protection of Children from Sexual Predator

Act of 1998 (quoted in Bonn, 2014, p. 7). This definition was the end product of two decades' worth of enormous publicity given to serial murder in the United States. Jenkins argues that groups as ideologically and politically diverse as feminists, homosexual rights advocates, black rights activists, traditional conservatives, religious fundamentalists, and others found the serial killer useful as a social threat to mold public opinion into support for a given cause that, it is argued, would greatly reduce the threat (2009, pp. 3-4)."<sup>7, 8</sup>

While the discourse produced around the missing story of the Black Dahlia and her missing killer was, much like the Los Angeles of Ellroy's novel, a series of leads which ultimately left the investigators with the feeling of being misled, at the same time, it also led to positive impacts on legislation, mainly a stricter stance against media interference during investigation and against police inaction towards the victimization of women and children at the time.<sup>9, 10</sup>

Nevertheless, the societal views and the interests and motives of various groups came to influence the nature of the investigation as well as its results thus leading to a "differing" from and a "deferring" of the real matter of the case.<sup>11</sup> The real incident itself became an absence and through all the instances of differing and deferring, all that could be traced was this absence of the real story.

Take for instance the interfering inclusion of Joseph De Rivers, a doctor of questionable credibility, who had joined the Black Dahlia murder investigation as "Criminal Psychiatrist and Sexologist, and Consultant Alienist to the Superior Courts". He is known to have forced a false confession out of Leslie Dillon, a Miami bellhop and a suspect in the murder of Elizabeth Short.<sup>12</sup> When the matter finally came to the notice of the Law, the Grand Jury Report of 1949, as stated by John Gilmore, had this to say: "The alarming increase in the number of unsolved murders and

other major crimes reflects ineffectiveness in law enforcement agencies and the Courts, that should not be tolerated . . . in some cases jurisdictional disputes and jealousies among law enforcement agencies . . . where one or more departments were involved, there seems to have manifested a lack of cooperation in presenting evidence . . . and a reluctance to investigate or prosecute.”<sup>13</sup>

Another notable instance of police corruption is the fact that William Heirens, who confessed to the murder of Suzanne Degnan, one of the Lipstick Murder incidents, had later claimed that he was tortured into confessing about the same.<sup>14</sup>

Steven Hodel, the son of George Hodel, one of the prime suspects in the Black Dahlia case, also believed that there must have been a massive cover up on the part of the police, especially when it comes to his father’s hand in the murder of Elizabeth Short.<sup>15</sup>

While the press abrogated the role of investigators with the self-proclaimed purpose of solving the case before the LAPD, what often stands out is their role in sidetracking the murder investigation from its right course, especially given their penchant to put their hands on evidence before the police could do so, and sensationalizing the murder and the victim’s identity and background.<sup>16, 17</sup>

Much of James Ellroy’s novel captures this Postmodern-like crisis of being lost among an influx of meaning with the nagging suspicion of greater powers at play.

Born into a cold war world, a Los Angeles of underworld leg breakers, racial hatred, and balkanized neighborhoods, of endless highways whose on–and off ramps weave circles around the city, of Hollywood production studios, their stage fronts and movie set facades fabricating fantastic yet hollow worlds, he reflects in his writing the disorder, both

personal and societal, that has spun around him throughout his life. This would seem to locate Ellroy directly in the vein of postmodern writers of the late twentieth century.<sup>18</sup>

Peter Schmidt points out that Ellroy is an author grounded in modernism given his attempt to use the form of the detective fiction to find order out of chaos—to solve the unsolvable. But as Tani once said, the solution, although still present, is ambiguous and partially unfulfilling,” thus tipping the balance back towards postmodern uncertainty. (24)<sup>19, 20</sup>

The interconnections between the art and the film industry and the Black Dahlia incident is evident in the not so surprising coincidence that the murder of Elizabeth Short, closely followed by the Lipstick Murders, took place at the same time that the genre of film noir was flourishing. The Film Noir genre is known for its cynicism and the hard-boiled language of the 1940s, inspired by the post-war depression and the economic and social crisis of the time.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, there is a definite aesthetic appeal to it given its curious mixture of the theme of crime with the aesthetics of suaveness and style. The aesthetic discourse, primarily in the form of Brian de Palma’s film and James Ellroy’s novel on the murder, reflects this blend.

## PART II

### THE DISCOURSE SURROUNDING THE BLACK DAHLIA

The portrayal of Elizabeth Short in media and film as well as through other cultural modes is a strong reflection of the mental structures and ideological biases of the various sections of society. The Los Angeles Examiner, for instance, claimed that she wore a tight skirt and sheer blouse when she was last seen in Biltmore Hotel.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, her attire was something relatively

sober according to the police. The fact that Elizabeth Short reportedly aspired to be an actress and was a sociable person who was often seen at night spots and bars was sensationalized and exaggerated into her being an “adventuress” who “prowled Hollywood Boulevard” for men.<sup>23</sup> James Ellroy’s portrayal of the media is captured with the accuracy of Art:

It was dawn. I walked out to the porch and picked up the morning Herald. The headline was “Hunt Boyfriends in Torture Killing,” a portrait photo of Elizabeth Short centered directly below it. It was captioned, “The Black Dahlia,” followed by, “Authorities today were searching into the love life of 22-year-old Elizabeth Short, victim of the ‘Werewolf Murder,’ whose romances had changed her, according to friends, from an innocent girl to a black-clad, man-crazy delinquent known as the Black Dahlia.”<sup>24</sup>



Picture 2: The Black Dahlia <sup>25</sup>

The press simply pandered to certain set stereotypes and lore that have embedded themselves in the human mind. Elizabeth Short's murder was transformed into the cautionary tale of the young woman who had breached a certain threshold. Ironically, that is exactly what the story of Elizabeth's murder is, and so is the murder of Suzanne Degnan, and the victims in the Lipstick Murders and the Ripper murders. They are all cautionary tales telling us about what happens when a young woman or any person lower in the social ladder breaches a certain social position he or she is assigned to.

But it was not just the press that was guilty of reducing reality to stereotypes to help its sales. While Art has the ability to grasp a moment in time and make us feel it in all its dimensions, the expression of Art, after all, relies on props provided by power structures already at play, including that of capitalistic forces in this era. As a result, while Art tries to express the truth of its object, it might slip into appropriating the narrative of its object in service to Capitalism. In doing so, it often robs the object of its very essence.<sup>26</sup> Let us take the case of James Ellroy's novel *The Black Dahlia*. Here, Elizabeth Short's murder became connected in his mind to the murder of his own mother on account of the similarity of circumstances. Let us examine the following words spoken by him:

The year flew by. I lived with one dead woman and a dozen bad men. Betty Short ruled me. I built her character from diverse strains of male desire and tried to portray the male world that sanctioned her death. I wrote the last page and wept. I dedicated the book to my mother. I knew I could link Jean and Betty and strike 24 karat gold. I financed my own book tour. I took the link public. I made *The Black Dahlia* a national bestseller.

I told the Jean Ellroy—Dahlia story ten dozen times. I

reduced it to sound bites and vulgarized it in the name of accessibility. I went at it with precise dispassion. I portrayed myself as a man formed by two murdered women and a man who now lived on a plane above such matters. My media performances were commanding at first glance and glib upon reappraisal. They exploited my mother's desecration and allowed me to cut her memory down to manageable proportions.<sup>27, 28</sup>

One can imagine how intimate the death of his mother was to Ellroy, made all the more raw by the connection his imagination obsessively made with the gruesome murder of Elizabeth Short. He, more than anyone else, should understandably have a right to the expression of his pain for the loss of his mother through Art. Yet, he found himself in the trap of the power position society placed him in as a writer with the ability to command words and earn a living by selling his story through sound bites and pixels to the media and the entire institution of Capitalism.

Ellroy, while benefiting from his power position, found himself reluctantly implicated in the patriarchal structure that posed a challenge to his desire to do justice to the memory and experience of Elizabeth Short and his mother. This struggle is mirrored in Dwight "Bucky" Bleichert, the protagonist of the novel. While Katherine Farrimond and Jessica Wren Butler have successfully brought out the gender politics concerning the eponymous female character, the gender anxiety of the male protagonist and male novelist could have been given more emphasis.<sup>29, 30</sup>

Nevertheless, their analysis is very helpful for our understanding of the role assigned to the Black Dahlia's image by society:

. . . it is more productive to consider the Black Dahlia case

in terms of its cultural presence as a form of spectral myth that permeates contemporary understandings of classic-era Hollywood and in terms of how the case speaks to the ways in which visual culture is compulsively drawn and re-drawn to the juncture of sex and death as embodied by Short.<sup>31</sup>

Farrimond examines how Elizabeth, in the Brian de Palma film *The Black Dahlia*, which was based on Ellroy's novel, is transformed through the iconography of the movie into a symbol of the tragic doomed starlet. The film adheres to the Film Noir style of the 1940s: the style, dress and appearance of the murder victim in the found footage of her screen tests, in accordance to the style of the 1930s and 40s, instead of merely rendering a realistic representation of how Short, as an individual, must have dressed and appeared, serves to transform the image of Elizabeth Short into a vintage icon representing the classic, elegant, feminine style of her time. Once again we are dealing with the transformation of a real event and individual into folklore and a legend: a symbol. The problem in doing so is that it divests from the event from the rawness and gruesome reality of the female experience of being physically threatened and violated in the worst way possible.<sup>32</sup> The rawness of the dead woman's experience is viewed and is made beautiful and distant through the perfection of Art.

Farrimond also points out that unlike the actual grim photographs of the dead body of Elizabeth Short, the body shown in the movie and especially in the movie poster has been sanitized through make up and careful removal of the more brutal details of the real picture.

The victimization of women gradually becomes muddled with the portrayal of the female victim as potent and destructive. Farrimond notes the reversal by which men are depicted to be the victim of women.<sup>33</sup> Bucky Bleichert and Lee Blanchard are

two detectives who have been assigned the case of the Black Dahlia and whose career as well as their relationship with the third tier of their small friendship, Kay Lake, deteriorates in the course of the novel.

Because our partnership was nothing but a bungling road to the Dahlia. And in the end, she was to own the two of us completely.<sup>34</sup>

Obsessed with the investigation behind the murder of the Black Dahlia, Blanchard loses his life under tragic circumstances while Bucky's strange sexual fascination with the Dahlia leads to the deterioration of his relationship with Kay Lake.<sup>35</sup> Despite the novel's purported aim to help Ellroy resolve his experience of his mother's murder, the patriarchal and capitalistic structures of 1980s America rears its head in the novel in this touch of victim blaming. And yet, simultaneously, the victim's appearance as dangerous seems to have a touch of vengeance to it.

While Farrimond points out how Elizabeth is a passive figure on whom culture ascribes various images, especially that of danger, one must also point out how, in a way, this gives Elizabeth Short a certain power over culture.

Norman Brian's observation in his book *Dead Women Talking* shall help us gain a clearer view of the matter at hand:

. . . in American literature, the dead talk more often than we might expect—especially women. They appear in works by such classic American writers as Edgar Allan Poe, Emily Dickinson, Henry James, and William Faulkner, as well as in more recent work by Toni Morrison, Tony Kushner, and Alice Walker, among many others. . . . In doing so, they raise questions about gender and voice,

sexual violence and non-normative sexuality, class privilege and cross-class contact, reparations for past racial injustices, and the immigrant's fraught relationship with national identity, among other pressing concerns.<sup>36</sup>

Betty Short may not have been a vengeful person but the desire, from a feminist standpoint, to see her as a vengeful figure is certainly there. Ellroy's portrayal of her as such might be reflective of him being caught up between his fear, as a cog in the wheel of patriarchy, of retribution in the hands of the murder victim and his "desire" for greater agency on the part of the person who reminds him of his mother. ["I built her character from diverse strains of male desire"].

Taking forward the idea of the female victim's depiction as a dangerous figure one should reflect on the cause behind this cultural compulsion to do so. Why is it that women and vulnerable figures, who have been brutalized, at times take hold of a community's imagination as a figure who threatens the community? One has simply to think of the Korean lore of the Bongcheon-Dong ghost or the lore of the Bloody Mary or even a movie like *The Autopsy of Jane Doe*.

Often such victims resurrect to threaten the community as a whole. The violence, irrespective of whether it is committed by a group or a person, is treated as a symptom of the socio-political nexus as a whole.

For instance, from the late 1900s there has been increasing speculation into how society forms the serial killer.<sup>37</sup> The article "Serial Killers Shaped by Society, Study Claims" points out how media has often helped shape the serial killer.

He (Kevin Haggerty) also points out what he calls the media's "unnatural" fascination with serial killers, which

began with the Jack the Ripper murders in 1888 and hasn't waned.

The symbiotic relationship between serial killers and the media, where serial killers provide stories and the media provide killers the notoriety many crave, is a distinctly modern phenomenon, says Haggerty.

Rethinking the ways in which the media discusses these murderers may be one avenue that society can explore to combat such brutal behavior.

Therefore, a careful examination of the media and aesthetic sensationalisation of cases like the Black Dahlia is necessary from a sociological point of view. Indeed, murders like these are often characterized by the murderer's desire to achieve notoriety and infamy—a task in which it is aided by the press and police. It is no surprise therefore that the Jack the Ripper murders, the Zodiac Killer murders and the case of the Black Dahlia have one important common factor among many others—letters and packages sent to the police and press. Copycat Murders are a symptom of the negative side of media sensationalisation.

COPYCAT KILLINGS add another knot to the tangle—these are murders committed in a way that was already established by a previous murder committed by another person. Some credit the year 1912 with the birth of this class of killer. Intense media coverage of the *Jack the Ripper murders* spawned a multitude of similar crimes, and the term “copycat effect” came into being.

Modern criminologists have long been aware of the potential for media exposure to lead to copycat killings. As the media has

grown, other forms of entertainment—especially movies and video games—have come under fire for allegedly leading to copycats basing crimes on what they see on the screen.<sup>38</sup>

There is similarly a high possibility that the Lipstick Murders were inspired by the Black Dahlia Murder given how the words “Fuck You B.D.” were written on the torso of one of the victims, Jeanne French, with her own lipstick.<sup>39</sup>

In the case of the Black Dahlia, at least, the thought process of the murderer seems to be a direct function of the thought process of the society. The fact that Elizabeth’s body showed notable damage in the genital areas and that she was posed spread-eagled and nude on the grass in Leimart Park near the sidewalk with the obvious motive of discovery shows that the self-styled ‘Black Dahlia Avenger’ was avenging himself on her sexuality. The community seeks to punish women for their sexuality. The Avenger’s focus on her sexual nature mirrors the American society’s intense curiosity about her sexual history. The very fact that the newspapers, in order to cash in on the mentality of the people, portrayed Elizabeth as a prostitute right after the public came to know of the discovery of the butchered body reenacts the community’s desire to see female sexuality punished. An interesting term that was used regarding the Black Dahlia in a movie loosely based on the murder, *True Confessions*, is “virgin tramp”.<sup>40</sup> We seem to be incapable of viewing women beyond the lens of the “virgin tramp” dichotomy.<sup>41</sup>

The figure of the Black Dahlia has an interesting similarity to the movie *Autopsy of Jane Doe*, directed by André Øvredal, and William Golding’s *The Lord of the Flies*. Where the latter is concerned, the brutalized sow is simultaneously a victim of a symbolic rape as well as a manifestation of the Lord of the Flies—a symbol of of the Flies—a symbol of fascination with blood thirst and violence.<sup>42</sup> Similar to the sow head, the autopsy photos of Elizabeth’s body are actually frightening and seem to function

in the same manner as the “Lord of the Flies”. It’s not surprising that Steve Hodel, being convinced that his father Dr. George Hodel murdered Elizabeth, draws a connection between the dead body and his father’s obsession with the culture of Sade and the figure of the minotaur as well as his close association with Man Ray, an artist who according to Steve was a dedicated sadist obsessed with the idea of the torture and humiliation of women. Steve Hodel examines the similarity between the crime scene photos of the posture of Short’s severed upper torso and Man Ray’s artistic work *Minotaur* as well as the similarity between the Glasgow smile that was carved on Elizabeth Short’s face with Man Ray’s *Les Amoureux*.

He states:

The positioning of Elizabeth’s arms precisely duplicates the position of the subject’s arms in Man Ray’s photograph! In this precise posing of the arms, the killer had replicated the horns just as Man Ray intended them in his original photograph. But there’s more. The excised piece of flesh



Picture 3a: Elizabeth Short crime scene<sup>43</sup>

Picture 3b: Man Ray’s *Les Amoureux* and *Minotaur*.<sup>43</sup>

below Elizabeth's left breast imitates the shadow below the victim's breasts in the Man Ray photograph. I offer as evidence exhibits 35a and 35b.

Man Ray's Minotaur and the Black Dahlia crime scene photo don't just depict the victim of the monster but moreover the hands of the victims are posed in a manner to suggest the beast as well—it is the mark of the beast on the victim as well as human society's strange confusion of the victim with the beast.

“Homicide is a union that never dies,” Hansen would say. “A bond is formed that finds the two subjects in a set of circumstances that're tighter than a marriage wedding—tied together into infinity. Nobody needs it being busted up from the outside.”<sup>44</sup>

This shows how aesthetic sensationalisation, too, can have an impact on the violence in society and how it can in fact be used as a justification for the same, similar to the case of Marquis de Sade whose very act of violence against the bodies of the helpless makes him a literary and aesthetic genius.

Similar to the Black Dahlia in the film and the novel, in the movie *The Autopsy of Jane Doe*, the unidentified female victim remains a passive yet dangerous figure on the coroner's dissection table.<sup>45</sup>

“We also wanted to do a movie where hopefully the thing that you are most scared of the entire time hardly ever moves” states screenwriter Richard Naing.<sup>46</sup> Through the autopsy procedure they eventually learn that the victim had been subjected to violence of a communal and ritualistic nature. They finally establish that Jane Doe was a Salem Witch Hunt Victim. As they proceed with the autopsy, uncanny and frightening occurrences happen in the morgue, victimizing the coroner and his son.

“What if the ritual, performed on an innocent, accidentally created the very thing we are trying to destroy”, says the coroner, Tommy Tilden, to his son.

One might wish or fear a similar transformation in Elizabeth Short.

The change in ideological beliefs can be seen in the narration placed on the murdered body and the absent story of Elizabeth Short. As opposed to how the newspapers and novels of the time portrayed Elizabeth Short, she is now recognized as a victim of circumstances who was really searching for a father figure.<sup>47</sup> On account of the abandonment of Cleo Short, her mother Phoebe Short raised her daughters, in extreme difficulty, into independent women. This independence is seen in Elizabeth as she tried to make her way to Los Angeles, but it also left her vulnerable, as a woman with no economic security and lack of connections, to the darker sides of American society. Books and articles, especially of John Gilmore and Steve Hodel, take care to note that she liked attracting male attention, not in order to sleep with them, but primarily in order to manage dinner and the rent money. This perspective is influenced by the feminist and subaltern ideology of the 21st century which aim to uncover the patriarchal forces that coax vulnerable figures into social positions and situations they do not wish to have.

However, at the end of the day, we don't have the truth or the event as it happened. If we undo and unlearn an ideological bias, we can do so only from the perspective of another ideological bias and hence we can never really draw a complete or precise picture of Elizabeth Short.

What we have instead is a Baudrillardian simulation caused by an influx of information and meaning where the truth itself is missing or rather the simulation is the truth. There is a “precession of simulacra” here where the signifiers precede the signified.<sup>48</sup> The event of the murder is preceded by the mirror of

readymade stereotypes and ideologies through which we view the event and which also reflects back upon us our own thought structures. All that we have is the “trace” the Black Dahlia has left behind. The Derridean trace is the negation and the “not-I” that haunts and critiques language through the absence of that which is stated by language.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, the discourse surrounding the Black Dahlia is haunted by the “trace” of the absence of that which is stated in that discourse. It’s an absence of the meaning and the event as it was that underlies that discourse, haunting it from the inside, as well as leading to the proliferation of discourse in the form of internet articles, conspiracy theories and research papers. As Lacan would argue, the symbolic order is a presence constructed around an absence, the absence being the “real” or “the thing” which the symbolic order aims to neutralize or “kill”. “Thus the symbol first manifests itself as the killing of the thing, and this death results in the endless perpetuation of the subject’s desire”,<sup>50</sup> in this case, the “male desire” Ellroy speaks about.

## PART III

### GENDER ISSUES

Jessica Wren Butler makes a pertinent point that the female characters in James Ellroy’s *The Black Dahlia* are an array of stereotypes that are pitted against each other. Kay Lake is the ideal housewife while Betty Short is the *femme fatale* figure. Madeline is willing to be anything the male desire wishes her to be.<sup>51</sup> She essentially needs a male figure to lean against, whether that is her step-father and paramour, Emmett Sprague—a typical Hollywood gangster-lord-business-man figure or whether that is Bucky Bleichert, a tough detective. However, although Butler is correct in pointing out that the text presents male anxiety concerning living up to certain standards of maleness

set by the tough patriarchal world of Los Angeles, one must also point out the fact that Ellroy also shows Bucky's gender struggles in portraying his latent desire to withdraw himself from his complicity in "the male world that sanctioned her death" and his drastic failure towards the end when he lowers himself down to fantasizing about Elizabeth Short. He tries to have sex with a prostitute in a room filled with Short's pictures and is obsessed with Madeline as she is Short's lookalike.

Being made in charge of the responsibility of bringing justice to the murderer of the dead girl, he finds himself on the other side victimizing the dead girl himself, just like the corrupt forces inside the institution of the LAPD. Ellroy, at least in some sense, seems to be undercutting his own manmade female stereotypes as towards the end of the novel Bucky comes to realize the sad history and the compelling circumstances that forced Elizabeth, in the fictionalized world of the novel [not in real life] to submit to prostitution. After the events of the novel have passed Bucky is left with a sense of identification with Elizabeth Short:

I never knew her in life. She exists for me through others, in evidence of the ways her death drove them. Working backward, seeking only facts, I reconstructed her as a sad little girl and a whore, at best a could-have-been—a tag that might equally apply to me.<sup>52</sup>

Nevertheless, as Adrian Howe points out, mainstream texts often show the tendency to "erase" men as the perpetrators of violence against women.<sup>53</sup> In *The Black Dahlia* too, as Farrimond has shown, the issue of male violence is momentarily sidelined through the figure of Madeline Sprague. Madeline and Elizabeth taken together, form an interesting conjunction of mirroring, sex and death. Like the old lore of the sighting of one's doppelganger leading to one's death, Madeline is

indirectly responsible for causing Elizabeth's death. Whether her sexual intercourse with Elizabeth was consensual on the part of Elizabeth or not is a contestable issue as we aren't sure of how willingly Elizabeth entered the world of prostitution in the fictional space of the novel given the economic circumstances which must have forced her.

Elizabeth's death is ironically shown to have been caused by figures that are as pathetic and incomplete as her. Ramona Sprague is as mentally damaged as Georgie is physically damaged and deranged. Both of them are in a way incomplete in terms of their sexuality. Ramona's femininity has been damaged by Emmett's philandering and Georgie's masculinity hurt by his lack of importance and strength and by Emmett's act of disfiguring his face. Perhaps the novelist is undercutting our expectations regarding the figure of the murderer by indicating that the murderer might have been a pawn in the hands of more powerful forces at play—here represented by Emmett—the strongest patriarchal figure in the novel.

## PART IV

### THE SPECTRE AND THE SPECTACLE OF CONSUMERISM

At the final leg of the analysis I would like to view the Black Dahlia murder from the perspective of two concepts: Derrida's idea of haunting and the creation of spectres through film, media and technology and Guy Debord's theory of mass media as the "spectacle" and it's "most glaring superficial manifestation".

In Ken McCullen's film, *Ghost Dance*, Derrida says "Cinema is the Art of allowing ghosts to come back". He further states that "the modern technology of images like cinematography and telecommunication enhances the power of ghosts and their ability to haunt us."<sup>54</sup>

Hence, both Debord and Derrida are in a way speaking about the same phenomenon. When we recreate Elizabeth Short through film and mass media, we are creating a specter that comes back to haunt us. Mass media is after all a prop of capitalistic forces. Capitalism, through mass production, helps bring within our reach objects otherwise unattainable. However, while making an object readily available to the masses it often brings down the value and essence of the object.

This is similar to the experience of Ellroy who felt the value and essence of his absent mother cheapening in direct proportion to the proliferation of sound bites and television pixels carrying his experience and novel to the public and the masses. In the end, what we deal with is the object without its essence— an empty shell: a specter. By the word ‘spectacle’ Guy Debord means a social condition where production has become the only goal: “In the spectacle—the visual reflection of the ruling economic order—goals are nothing, development is everything. The spectacle aims at nothing other than itself . . . It is nothing other than the economy developing for itself. It is at once a faithful reflection of the production of things and a distorting objectification of the producers.”<sup>55</sup>

For Debord the proliferation of discourse in mass media is an end in itself and it is the only reality that surrounds us. The resurrection of the Black Dahlia can be seen from the viewpoint at the juncture of these two theories. We can view Elizabeth Short’s screen tests in the 2006 movie *The Black Dahlia* from two perspectives. As Farrimond has established, it lessens the immediacy of her gruesome experience through *objectification*, *fetishism* and *reification* of her as a cultural icon [to use Marxist terminology]. On the other hand, we can view her, from a Derridean perspective, in her potential as a specter that comes back to haunt human thought and culture through film and art as a legend.

## CONCLUSION

Elizabeth Short, herself, was a shifting and non-stable figure whose location and identity was never static and always moving. She would often go hungry but she rarely ever failed to dress appropriately or make the right impression. She would spend hours on the way she looked. Like the veil or the geisha's makeup in the *Memoirs of a Geisha*, her make-up, although a symptom of the patriarchal world she lived in, also functioned as a cover and an armour that hid from the world her vulnerability or at least graced her vulnerability with a charm and elegance that invited the concern of others. John Gilmore's account, though questionable in many respects, does draw attention to her figure as somewhat lost and vulnerable. However, it serves us better to remember that she is a "could-have-been" to quote Ellroy's *The Black Dahlia*.

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