

# Jack the Ripper and the commodification of sexual violence

November 24 2017, by Caroline Jones

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More men are [victims of murder](#) than women in the UK. Yet the media reporting and fictional representations of murder have a tendency to suggest otherwise. Numerous novels, TV shows and films centre around the hunt for the killer of the usually young, usually attractive, usually white, and usually female murder victim.

In real life cases – where the victim fits this demographic – photos are gleaned from Facebook, bikini shots if possible, to provoke a reaction from the public. The Sun, for example, recently revisited the 2005 [murder](#) of aspiring model Sally Ann Bowman [complete with multiple photos](#) of the young, blonde victim. This is a modern twist on an old story.

At least as far back as 1888, photographs and pictorial representations based on [victims of Jack the Ripper](#) were used by the police and the media to create "the Ripper narrative". Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the discovery of the body of Annie Chapman, believed to be the Ripper's second victim, sightseers paid [a penny to view the corpse](#) and refreshments were provided by fruit sellers who set up around the scene. This use of a crime scene as a tourist attraction was nothing unusual at the time, but does mark the beginning of a ["ripper" tourism industry](#) that continues today.

At the time of the Whitechapel murders, police photography was in its infancy and mainly used for identification purposes. So while photos of the cadavers of the previous victims were being shown to members of

the public in an attempt to find out just who these women were, they were not in the public domain as such. Much of the police archive relating to the Ripper case has been lost. It seems that it was the Ripper's supposed fifth and probable final victim [Mary Kelly](#) who was the first and only one of his victims to be photographed at the scene.

Then in 1899 the Kelly photos were published in Alexandre Lacassagne's [Vacher l'Eventreur et les Crimes Sadiques](#). Subsequently, several photos and images of the victims were put on display at Scotland Yard's [notorious Black Museum](#) until at least the 1960s.

## **Murder as amusement**

Nowadays, photographs of all the victim's bodies are in permanent use in places such as the controversial Jack the Ripper museum in Whitechapel, where they are candlelit and displayed individually with a short description in the "mortuary room". They come with content warnings for visitors on the door. Perhaps more controversially, the photographs are used in the mainstream "dark entertainment factory", [The London Dungeon](#).

Here, in the family amusement venue, there are not only no warnings but no acknowledgement that these photographs are actual images of the mutilated corpses of real women. In a venue that merges fact with fiction in the name of entertainment, participants may very well be completely unaware of this.

It isn't hard to find the images on the internet, where they are available on a range of websites – including most of those advertising the many Jack the Ripper walking tours available seven nights a week in Whitechapel. Images of the victims – including those of Kelly's body in situ – and those outside of the canonical five are used without warning to illustrate the history of the Ripper.

The images are also used on the tours where guides hold them up at the various sites the bodies were discovered, perhaps in order to distract from the reality that these places no longer bear any resemblance to the gas lit, cobbled streets promised on the various websites.

These are all examples of the blatant commodification of murder. These photographs feed on society's apparent repulsion towards sexual violence while also being entertained by it. The use of these particular images is central to this in most of the attractions. But perhaps more shocking is how the images are marginalised and demeaned by the failure to acknowledge them for what they are.

By the nature of the photographs, the women featured have had no agency over their use and their approval cannot be sought. Today, media reports featuring [smiling photographs of the victims](#) juxtaposed with [crime scenes](#) is expected in the aftermath of any murder.

Raising questions of ethics is a little late for Mary Ann Nichols, Annie Chapman, Elizabeth Stride, Catherine Eddowes and Mary Jane Kelly. They never had control of their own images and their own stories. They are not just murder victims anymore. They are also [victims](#) of the Ripper's fame and have been forced into helping prolong his dark legend.

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