

Hunting Humans

by Darryl Wiggers

The recent tragedy at the University of Montreal has dramatically alerted Canadians to one of the most terrifying forms of criminality — mass murder.

Previous to this, the worst mass killing in Canada occurred in January 1975, when 13 people were herded into a storage room and killed in Montreal's Gargantua nightclub. One died from gunshot wounds, the others from asphyxiation when the building was set on fire. The incident was believed to have been an underworld contract murder.

Other forms of mass murder have also occurred in this country, most commonly the "annihilation of intimates" in which entire families are murdered by a member of their unit.

But besides the basic method of killing, almost all prior episodes of mass murder, as well as many other forms of violence, fail to compare with this most recent tragedy. Why?

The most obvious reason is that the majority of murder victims know their assailants. They include relatives, lovers, friends, co-workers or merely people who stand in the way of the killer's primary objective (usually financial or political gain).

The perpetrators of mass murder discussed here, on the other hand, sacrifice their lives in order to inflict terror and death on people they have never known.

This preference for strangers makes these murderers similar to serial killers — those who commit a series of murders over an extended period of time. The only notable difference is that serial killers prefer savouring the results of their murderous activities, from media reports which give them wide-spread attention and even celebrity status they would not have obtained in their previous careers.

When serial killers are finally captured, or allow themselves to be captured, they receive even greater attention from titillating books, magazine and newspaper articles and film and television "docu-dramas." Serial killer Ted Bundy, for

example, must have grinned from ear-to-ear when he learned that ABC's three-part mini-series about his exploits would star Hollywood heart-throb Mark Harmon.

Regardless, both types of multiple murderers share a significant characteristic, one that excludes them from most "common" criminals. These are alienated people who have failed to live up to their own ambitions and can no longer endure a life that they feel is beneath them. But they do not accept their status as being a result of their own failures, or inadequacies, nor do they accept that they might simply be victims of circumstance.

Instead, they blame a specific group that they believe to be responsible for their own misery. Thus, they nurture a hatred so powerful that a plan is eventually conceived to lash out at this particular class of people in the most shocking way possible — by slaying innocent people they deem to be representatives of their targeted class.

Curiously, since the Montreal tragedy, a new connection between serial and mass killers has appeared. Elliott Leyton, an anthropologist at Newfoundland's Memorial University and author of *Hunting Humans*, a 1986 book resulting from a four-year study of multiple murderers, points out that, "I have in my files no case of a mass killer singling out a gender until this tragedy." Yet, certain people mistakenly argue "that the majority of the assaults by multiple murderers are against women — but they are [only] half right. That is, the majority of assaults by serial killers, like Ted Bundy or Clifford Olsen, are definitely against women. They are absolutely correct there. But that is not true at all for mass killers. They are typically indifferent to the gender of their victims. They are just killing a social type they are angry at, regardless of its gender," writes Leyton.

One of the most explicit examples of this is the case of Mark Essex. Essex was a young black raised in a small, mid-western American town. As described in *Hunting Humans*, he was an average student who was remembered as a "smiling,

friendly boy who was always laughing and joking." At one point he even entertained the thought of becoming a minister.

But in January 1974 — five years after leaving home to join the Navy — Essex burst into a Howard Johnsons hotel in downtown New Orleans, a Ruger .44 magnum semi-automatic carbine in his hands. Assuredly, he remarked to the black employees, "Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt you black people. I want the whites."

Essex then shot several guests, including a young woman who knelt at his feet while cradling her young dead husband in her arms. He set fire to their rooms and subsequently generated a day-long siege that drew the attention of the fire department and over 600 policemen from Louisiana, Texas and Mississippi, as well as the FBI and other federal agents.

The ensuing firefight soon turned into a firing circus, with Essex on the roof, and a total of 26 state, local and federal enforcement agencies armed with everything from service revolvers to a U.S. Marine Air Reserve CH-46 armoured helicopter. When it was over, 10 people were dead, 22 wounded, and Essex lay dead with over 200 bullet holes in his body.

Although Marc Lepine did not care to go out in a blaze of gunfire and perverted glory — he seemed to prefer having his victims helplessly lined up against a wall awaiting execution — there are other details shared by these two examples that make them quite stereotypical of the growing menace of mass murder.

As Leyton says, mass murder "is almost a political act. That was really made explicit by Lepine in Montreal. It's personal protest. They pick a specific group that they feel is responsible for denying them their proper place in the social order. Most commonly, [they attack] anyone who is being 'uppity,' whether it is uppity blacks, or uppity Asians or uppity women. Whenever any group of people get off their knees and reject subservience, they are more likely

to attack that kind of response."

While this is a logical point when applied to Lepine, how does it compare with Essex?

For the most part, visible minorities and women do not fall into the category of mass murderers (or serial killers). According to Leyton's book, "They are usually white and male, and from the solid working class of lower-middle class. Most important, in their thoughts and behaviour, they are among the most class conscious people in America, obsessed with every nuance of status, class and power . . . but find themselves unable to maintain their social position. The gap between their expectations and their realities is so wide that they can only vent their rage upon the hated group in one brief suicidal purple explosion."

Essex is a unique case because he was reared in a small town that was largely immune to the racial tensions primarily raging in urban centres at the time. His initiation into the realities of a "white-dominated" world occurred during the draft and certain assignment to Vietnam, he enlisted in the Navy, where he was based in a "serene" environment on the San Diego Naval Training Centre.

However, Essex's ambitious future soon developed into a nightmare of racial abuse.

Throughout all this, Essex was gaining substantial experience as a dental assistant on the base; a training which likely influenced his decision to strive for a more ambitious career as a dentist. But this would never happen. Within a year, Essex was relieved of his four-year commitment to the Navy and discharged following a number of racial conflicts with white officers. His hatred of whites escalated.

Orleans and working as a vending machine repairman.

Less is known of Lepine's background. His suicide note stated that feminists had ruined his life, but there are presently no details to justify his judgement. What is known is that he was quite intelligent. After completing high school, Lepine enrolled in a junior college to study

science. He received high marks, was close to the top of the class, but inexplicably dropped out less than four months before graduation. He began a computer course in February 1988, but again dropped out the following year. Later, he took an evening course in chemistry. But at the time of the killings he was unemployed.

There are also indications Lepine had problems maintaining steady relationships with women, an interesting detail but still unremarkable when compared with the average young Canadian. From this perspective, what was so different about Lepine that made him react so violently?

Debra Pepler, a developmental psychologist at York's LaMarsh Research Programme on Violence and Conflict Resolution, feels that Lepine's eventual mental state was at least partially bred from his earlier home life; a painful upbringing involving child abuse, wife abuse and the eventual parental separation.

"We know that boys respond more negatively to divorce," said Pepler. "His father was abusive — both towards him and towards his mother — and there is some indication that children learn to model that behaviour. In the instance of Marc Lepine, I would be worried about him both modelling that kind of behaviour and adapting that kind of attitude; the attitude that women are inferior, that men have power over women and that men can be violent towards women."

Was Lepine sadistic? Some interesting observations came from those intimate with Lepine who described him as being shy and well-mannered. "Marc Lepine was not a monster," stated Isabelle Lah-aie, a former friend of Lepine's sister, in *Maclean's*, December 18, 1989. Lepine had no previous recorded history of violence, no history of mental disorder and no known previous violent outbursts of sexual hatred. "This is what surprises me in terms of the report on Lepine," admits Pepler.

But according to Leyton, outwardly pleasant appearances are not uncommon

among these killers. "The one characteristic that almost all of these people share, serial and mass killers, is that most of them are straight arrows," says Leyton. "They are conservative, charming [and] at worst, they are bores and braggarts. But they only present to the world the face they want to be seen in. Their emotional life goes on behind the mask."

As for Lepine's rejection from the military, Leyton describes it as "a very interesting thing. The military is not known for its fine distinctions about mental health so whoever did that made a really fascinating, intelligent and astute kind of forecast. But that is relatively unusual that these people are picked up in any way."

Perhaps the most shocking example of undetected deviance is the case of serial murderer Edmund Kemper.

Kemper killed his grandparents with a .22 calibre rifle at the age of 14. "I just wondered how it would feel to shoot Grandma," he was quoted as saying in *Hunting Humans*, and subsequently spent four years in a maximum security hospital. Within two years of his being paroled, at the age of 23, he had begun to kill again. This time, however, his victims were young female hitchhikers whom he would rape, kill, mutilate and occasionally perform necrophiliastic acts on their headless corpses — or the heads.

Following his third killing, Kemper was examined by two psychiatrists who agreed he was now "safe" to lead a normal, adult life. Kemper then drove his car out of the psychiatrists' parking lot — his juvenile record now "sealed" — with the head of his latest victim rolling around in the trunk.

Despite the fact that Kemper, like many serial killers, was not suspected of his hideous crimes until after his capture, was he clinically insane?

For most people, mental disease is a satisfying explanation for horrific behaviour. Yet, why do multiple murderers continually lack perceptible characteristics of mental disorder?

More significantly, why does our society, particularly within American borders, produce so many more of such

"sick" individuals than any other industrialized nation?

Up until the 1960s, Americans were rarely victims of more than one multiple murderer a decade — Canadians even less so. But by the 1980s, a new killer appeared virtually every month. According to Leyton, the U.S. Justice Department unofficially estimates there are as many as 100 multiple murderers presently within the borders of their country, and the rate still increases. Recognizing these figures, can these killers still be viewed as merely insane? Is mental sickness that much more of a problem today than it was a generation ago?

Ed Hooven, a York sociology professor who teaches a course on conformity and deviance, agrees that multiple murderers are less likely to be products of mental illness than representatives of "the cultural changes that have occurred in the last 20 years."

These changes, says Hooven, include the "redistribution of power," that is the advancement of various class groups, such as visible minorities and women, who have long been sufferers of a white, male-dominated society. Most of us have comfortably embraced these social and economic modifications. Others, unfortunately, "have apparently enormous difficulty adjusting to these changes and, in fact, refuse to accept them," says Hooven. Ultimately, they "lash out in that frustrated way that people normally do in much less extreme forms."

Admittedly, not all alienated men are transformed into vengeful killers. Likely this is because many possess at least some element of hope or comfort that makes their lives tolerable. But, it is not uncommon for mass murderers to strike a chord in certain individuals who might sympathize with their frustrations: such as the anonymous caller to an Ottawa radio talk show who said Lepine "was not alone," as well as the male UofT students who, in the spirit of sick humour, lit firecrackers outside a women's dormitory.

Few would dispute that these are careless and insensitive responses to a sad loss of human life, but no more horrifying

than the cheering section of several hundred blacks who formed on the streets during Essex's rampage. Each time he fired, the crowd moved forward a few paces, chanting, "Kill the pigs, kill the pigs," and, as Peter Hernon, a reporter at the scene wrote in his book, *A Terrible Thunder*, "As the tempo of the gunfire increased, these chants became louder, fiercer. Several empty bottles were thrown . . . Many of the blacks were drinking from bottles in brown sacks. 'Hang on baby,' one of them shouted. 'When it gets dark, we gonna help you.'" They never did.

Not surprisingly, many people felt the Essex shooting was part of some larger revolution. In fact, it was not until approximately 12 hours after Essex died that the authorities realized that he had acted alone. Until then, judging from the extent of the carnage, they firmly believed that there was a second sniper. Similarly, in the case of Lepine, fears were generated that a tragedy of such method and magnitude would soon be repeated, particularly since many people viewed the Montreal tragedy as representative of the types of physical and psychological abuse women have endured at the hands of men.

As Leyton would argue, however, Lepine's protest was personal and sexist, not progressive. By shooting defenceless women, he no more helped his fellow males than Essex helped his fellow blacks, or James Huberty — who burst into a MacDonald's restaurant in San Ysido, California in 1984 and killed 21 Hispanic men, women and children — helped his fellow whites.

It is more likely Lepine made his final commitment to kill simply because he could not come to terms with his failure to establish a lucrative career and, contrary to his vision of a male-dominated world, he despised those who were succeeding where he was not.

A major cause of this feeling of alienation, in Leyton's opinion, is that "we are not economic creatures. We are social creatures. The evolution of the human race has been the development of new

cont'd on page 12

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