

CHAPTER I

## MAN IS THE MOST DANGEROUS ANIMAL OF ALL

### A Philosophical Gaze into the Writings of the Zodiac Killer



*Battle not with monsters, lest ye become a monster, and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.*

Friedrich Nietzsche<sup>1</sup>

### Who is the Zodiac Killer?

Killers are not always caught. For those who remember December 1968, you might recall getting ready for a holiday party, looking forward to the end of a semester, or thinking about what you would accomplish in the year that would bring us Woodstock and a moon landing. For those who lived in Northern California during that time, you most likely did not think that December would be the beginning of an 11-month haunting. For in that month, a killer, who would later be called *Zodiac*, was preparing himself to begin collecting slaves for the afterlife. Those of us who do not remember December 1968, or who did not live in Northern California at that time, are probably familiar with the image of Zodiac wearing a black-hooded executioner outfit adorned with the marksman symbol that has become his logo. So, although Zodiac has not been caught, most of us have already met him.

Zodiac's murders and letters have become the subject of multiple films, books, song lyrics, and websites. For example, the Zodiac Killer's slayings

have served as foundations to many films since the 1970s, including *Dirty Harry*. Of the many books written about Zodiac, Robert Graysmith's *Zodiac* has been one of the most impressive accounts of Zodiac's horrific deeds. Graysmith was a cartoonist for the *San Francisco Chronicle* at the time Zodiac first struck, thereby giving him access to Zodiac's letters as they arrived. The Zodiac Killer has also found his way into the underground music scene with bands such as Macabre, Balzac, and Machine Head using Zodiac's letters and killings as inspiration for such lyrics as "The best part of it is that when I die I will be reborn in paradise / And those I have killed will become my slaves."<sup>2</sup> The discussion boards on [www.zodiackiller.com](http://www.zodiackiller.com)<sup>3</sup> further indicate Zodiac's popularity.

What is it then about a person who claims to have killed 37 people (only seven have been confirmed) that makes him so intriguing? Are we, at our core, all murderers who find comfort in the demise of our fellow species? I don't believe this is the case, but I do believe that there is something interesting about us humans insofar as we are drawn to the macabre. This is made evident by the ways in which many murderers such as Bundy, Dahmer, and Gacy have reached near-celebrity status. They have even become the topic of philosophical discussion, as this very volume illustrates. Perhaps we are attracted by things which exhibit the power to unfetter themselves from societal norms. If anything will give us a clue as to why we are drawn to such abominable acts as those conducted by murderers, it will be the letters, paintings, and impressions left by them.

Zodiac is no exception here. His letters to the press show his desire to be recognized, and his taunts to the police further demonstrate his cockiness. By looking at a small sample of Zodiac's writings and his ciphers (of which three of the four have not been translated), we can gain entry into the world of a murderer, and perhaps gain further access to the reasons why we are drawn to such a killer.

## Peek-A-Boo: You Are Doomed!

At first glance, such an investigation would seem answerable by the works of psychology. It seems plausible that by looking into the psychological background of each of the individuals who are drawn to the macabre, and whatever overlapping features we find, those will likely be the key features of the *macabre-interest*. But this doesn't seem to account for the overwhelming interest in the macabre. Horror films make their way to



the screen each Halloween, entire genres of music dedicate themselves to images of the grotesque, and the horror novel has yet to see its end. So a psychological account of our “interest” seems hardly sufficient. In other words, a psychological account can tell us something about the individuals who are drawn to the macabre, but it doesn’t give us a complete picture as to why the macabre has such a strong following.

So if psychology is inadequate for the task of identifying the underlying tenets of macabre fanaticism, then what method will suffice? I propose that we adapt a *phenomenological* method for better understanding the impact macabre artifacts have upon us to then better understand why we are drawn to such objects. To briefly summarize, phenomenology is the philosophical study of phenomena – that is, appearances, or how things seem to us. Phenomenologists study how things look, feel, sound, smell, and taste; they explore how the world appears to us. Phenomenology concerns itself with experiences as they’re being experienced by the person experiencing them – from the *first person perspective*. A phenomenological analysis of emotions, for example, involves an account of how emotions are experienced by a person as she experiences them.

Take, for instance, the emotion of fear, which is appropriate for the subject of this essay. When a person experiences fear she may experience a sense of fleeting, as if the world disappears except for the cause of the fear. She may find herself only experiencing her body as an object for a threat to be directed at. For this reason she feels stripped of any ability to make decisions insofar as she only sees herself as an object exposed to the threat imposed by the other.

Think of a time when you truly experienced fear. Perhaps you were a child who heard a strange noise at your window, or maybe you were a parent who lost your child in a mall. For the child, the only thing that existed was the noise at the window and the feeling that whatever was causing the noise wanted to harm you. One of your parents may have come into your room and tried to comfort you. But the way that your parent might have comforted you was by turning on the light and showing you what was causing the noise. Maybe it was rain or a branch hitting the window, and you came to understand that neither rain nor a branch has the intent of harming you. So you began to feel safe. But up until the moment of understanding that it was only rain or a branch causing the noise, you did not experience yourself as a person in your home. Instead, your home seemed to have disappeared and you could only think about the noise at the window and whether or not the cause of the noise would harm you.



For the parent who has lost a child in a shopping mall, the place where you lost the child seemed to disappear. You could only focus on the idea that your child was in danger, and you desperately tried to think of ways to rescue your child. Throughout this process, the stores within the mall no longer appeared as places to enjoy the day. The stores, instead, seemed to transform into dark hideaways for strangers to harbor children. Each patron became a stranger capable of stealing children, and more importantly was capable of having taken your child. The mall and its patrons remain as threats to you until you see that your child is safe. If you don't see your child again, then the world will have forever changed for you.

The phenomenological approach is in stark contrast to what contemporary philosophers take to be an *analytic* approach. When applying the analytic method to an emotion such as fear, the emotion is analyzed from the *third person perspective* by attempting to understand the objective features of fear that others would be able to observe. The emotion fear would first be understood as a concept to which a definition is ascribed. By formulating a definition of fear, the philosopher is then able to provide a framework for understanding what fear is in light of the events that evoke fear. The aim of providing an analysis of the concept of fear is to then understand how fear functions in the world beyond our experiences. Analytic philosophers might go on to identify the emotional state of fear with chemical reactions occurring within the brain, and so they might discuss a *neurophysiological* account, discussing the chemical processes that transpire when a person experiences fear.

By approaching fear using these methods, we are able to do many things, such as provide medications for overly fearful people, and shape reactions to fear into responses that can intelligently protect us if we are in danger. These approaches, however, fall short of providing a complete picture of what it is like to experience fear from the perspective of the person experiencing fear. By obtaining a complete picture of what it is like to experience fear we can better understand our attraction to macabre figures such as the Zodiac Killer.

The phenomenological approach, however, is not a novel approach to experiences. Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80) provides a similar analysis. In his book *Being and Nothingness* Sartre considers what it is like to experience being looked at by another person. For Sartre, the way that we see ourselves is commonly determined by the way that others interpret us. For example, if we are warmly welcomed by friends in a café, we see ourselves as a person who is not a threat and, perhaps, is even enjoyable. On the other hand, if we enter a café and people scream “Oh my God!”



while pointing at us in horror, we would not feel comfortable and may even begin to question what is wrong with us – thereby scrutinizing ourselves as a potential threat, or at least as someone who is not welcomed.

Sartre, however, points out that eyes alone do not determine how we experience a look from another person. The look may be experienced even when eyes are not present. For example, if we take an evening walk and a light appears in the window of a house, we no longer feel alone in the night. Instead, we may come to feel that the appearance of the light is similar to the opening of someone's eye. This is analogous to experiencing the waking of a person – at one moment the person was asleep and unaware of our actions, and suddenly she becomes awake and aware of our presence. When the person was asleep we experience her as an object of our perception, and we experience ourselves as someone who perceives the person as someone who is asleep. But we are turned into the object of her perception when she awakens; even if she has not yet opened her eyes, we know that she could turn and see us and we experience ourselves as an object – as something potentially watched. In a similar fashion, when the light is turned on in the window of the house that we pass by, we experience ourselves as someone who is seen because we *can* be seen, even if no one looks out at us. Sounds are also capable of producing the experience of being seen. When sitting in a park, the snap of a twig from behind us may give us the feeling that a person is there. Since a person is someone capable of seeing us, we then experience ourselves as something that is seen.

These occurrences of experiencing ourselves as a thing which is seen allow us to experience ourselves as others perceive us. Not only do these incidents allow us to realize that we are visual objects, but we are also presented with the opportunity to realize that we are bodies. A body is an object that is physical insofar as it occupies space, and along with being physical comes the opportunity to be physically altered. Among the ways in which a body, such as ours, may be physically altered includes the possibility of being physically harmed. From this discovery it follows that to experience ourselves as things which are seen is to experience ourselves as things which are vulnerable to another person.

To be vulnerable is to have our options limited by the person, or the idea of a person, that causes the experience of being seen. This is not to say that we are no longer free to make any choice, but instead, the choices that we are able to make are restricted by whatever produces the experience of being seen. If we are sitting in a park and we hear the snap of a twig from behind us, we are no longer free to do anything we wish.



Unseen, we might do wickedly private things, make socially unacceptable gestures, express vulgarities and more, with no self-awareness or self-condemnation. However, just because a noise has occurred, it does not necessarily mean that a person is there to see us, or that we are threatened. The sound could have been produced by a bird gathering a twig. We do not know if it was a bird or a person who broke the twig. Because we do not know, Sartre suggests we still experience ourselves as someone who is seen because there remains the lingering possibility that a person did produce the sound.

Other people and the idea of other people aren't the only factors in determining which choices are available to us; many of them are determined by what Sartre calls our *facticity*. Facticity is the way the world is and the way that we actually are in the world that determines how our choices will appear to us. Some other components of our facticity are the language, culture, and environment within which we are born. For example, a person who is born into a modern culture that has English as its dominant language will find that her available choices are radically different than a person who is born in a tribal culture with a different language.

So what does being seen and facticity have to do with the Zodiac Killer? First, Zodiac was an actual threat. He is confirmed to have killed seven people and has claimed responsibility for the deaths of 30 others. For those people living in the Vallejo area during the late 1960s, a sound behind you not only meant that there was possibly a person behind you. There was the added possibility that there was a person behind you and that person was the Zodiac Killer. Second, Zodiac has not been caught and remains unidentified. So there is the more important possibility that even those who you do see and are seen by are potentially the Zodiac Killer. So, like the sounds in the park and the light in the window, Zodiac remains unseen, yet he has given clues to how he sees us. Through his letters we have come to realize that we are in danger and that while Zodiac remains free, it is a permanent feature of the world that we are in danger. By analogy, it seems that Zodiac's letters are like the crackling of a bush from behind us – revealing to us that we are bodies which are susceptible to the dangers that he introduces into the world. We are seen by him, and through his letters we understand that we are seen no longer as persons living in the world, but are transformed into objects for him to collect. It is this transformation that determines which choices are available to us.

There seems to be a greater issue at hand. Zodiac seems to believe that he is in control of a game. The rules of his game stem from a belief that humans are inadequate for this world, but are worthy of serving him in



another one. This essay is by no means an attempt to justify Zodiac's game, but is an effort to provide a phenomenological account of the ways in which Zodiac's letters and killings change our experience of the world and ourselves by attempting to understand the way that Zodiac sees us.

## This is the Zodiac Speaking

The murders, horrific as they may be, are not what make Zodiac unique. It is his letters. Not since Jack the Ripper (about 1888) has a murderer communicated so flippantly with the authorities. Among the 18 letters known to be from Zodiac (there may have been more), there were four ciphers. All four of the ciphers are composed of symbols found in Greek, English, Morse code, weather, astrology, and navy semaphore, and the one translated cipher contains a disturbing and perverse message. Unfortunately, the case was closed in 2002 by Lt. John Hennessey of the San Francisco Police Department and three ciphers remain untranslated. It is possible that these three contain Zodiac's identity.

Those who have been alive during Zodiac's entire reign have been transformed into many things: objects which are protected by the law, participants in a twisted game, and mere cattle who must wander the fields hoping that today is not the day of slaughter. Zodiac has given himself the role of a rancher deciding who will survive. We must accept our vulnerability. To do otherwise is to deny ourselves knowledge of who we really are.

### *Summer slaughter*

The first letter was sent to the *San Francisco Chronicle* on August 1, 1969 – more than eight months after the first killings. In the letter, Zodiac gives descriptions of the bodies and ammunition used in the murders that only the police and the killer would know. Along with the letter was a cipher in which Zodiac provides his motives for the murders.

The letter aims to separate Zodiac from anyone who might claim responsibility for the deaths of David Faraday and Betty Lou Jensen (both killed on December 20, 1968) and Darlene Ferrin (killed on July 4, 1969). Zodiac demands in the letter for the cipher to be printed on the front page of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. If his demands were not met, he would go on a killing spree that would only end with the deaths



of 12 people. The letter to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, however, was not the only one. The *San Francisco Examiner* and the *Vallejo Times-Herald* both received letters and ciphers. All three letters were nearly identical in content, but the ciphers were different. The ciphers delivered to the newspapers were not three separate messages, but were individual parts of the same message. Zodiac used a different number of stamps on each of the envelopes to determine the sequence of the ciphers. After 20 hours, Donald and Betty Harden (a couple in Salinas) solved the ciphers. This is the message that emerged from the strange symbols:

I LIKE KILLING PEOPLE BECAUSE IT IS SO MUCH FUN IT IS MORE FUN THAN KILLING WILD GAME IN THE FORREST [sic] BECAUSE MAN IS THE MOST DANDEROUE [sic] ANIMAL OF ALL TO KILL SOMETHING GIVE [sic] ME THE MOST THRILLING EXPERIENCE IT IS EVEN BETTER THAN GETTING YOUR ROCKS OFF WITH A GIRL THE BEST PART OF IT IS THAT WHEN I DIE I WILL BE REBORN IN PARADICE [sic] AND THEI [sic] HAVE KILLED WILL BECOME MY SLAVES I WILL NOT GIVE YOU MY NAME BECAUSE YOU WILL TRY TO SLOI [sic] DOWN OR STOP MY COLLECTING OF SLAVES FOR MY AFTERLIFE EBEORIETEMETHHPITI [sic]

The last letters are thought to be an anagram for Zodiac's real name. When being exposed for the first time to this letter, we come to realize that Zodiac is on a task that will not end until it is complete. His mission being the collecting of slaves for the afterlife changes our experience of the world. We no longer see ourselves as being primary decision makers who have the ability to determine our individual fates. Instead, we are confronted with the possibility that our own fate is determined by another person who wishes to pursue us – we are the hunted. We are also viewed as slaves for the afterlife. No longer do we purely experience ourselves as free beings capable of living the life of someone who is not hunted, but instead we must accept the possibility that we are seen through a sniper's scope. Along with the shift in the experience of ourselves, our impression of the world has also changed. The world is no longer simply a place for us to reside and create within, but has also become a place in which a hunter lurks waiting to take our lives.

In addition to the change in our experience of the world, Zodiac has also changed our interpretation of the afterlife. In general, the idea of an afterlife leads people to conduct strange rituals in this life to ensure that the afterlife will surpass this one. Most people believe that this life is temporary, and for those who believe in an afterlife of some sort, the afterlife is permanent and unchanging. The Zodiac seems to be no





different in this regard. Most people, however, do not believe that the afterlife is an arena in which they serve another human. Zodiac's letter changes the idea of a peaceful eternity to one that is fraught with the demands of a killer.

More interestingly, Zodiac does not explain why he believes humans to be the most dangerous animal of all. Zodiac seems to justify the hunting of humans on the grounds that humans are dangerous. But why would dangerous animals be servants? Does Zodiac serve a god who rewards Zodiac for removing dangerous animals from the earth by giving him slaves? But why does Zodiac only kill humans who most of us would not consider to be very dangerous? Perhaps we are not convinced by Zodiac's letter that we are the most dangerous animal, but he does lead us to reflect on what constitutes a dangerous animal and question whether or not we are the most dangerous one.

Moreover, this seems to be a game for which Zodiac creates rules and determines who will die. Is awareness of his game enough for us to experience ourselves as pieces for him to collect? Although Zodiac's letter on its own is not enough for us to experience ourselves as pawns for sacrifice, Zodiac's demands indicate that if we are to win then we need to realize the way in which Zodiac sees us. The appearance of Zodiac's first letter, however, does change how the authorities perceive the common citizen. No longer do the authorities experience themselves as protecting citizens from everyday miscreants, but realize they have a role in preventing harm by acknowledging Zodiac's game as such.

Before the results of the cipher were printed in the papers, Zodiac sent a second letter on August 7, 1969. It was the first time that he referred to himself as Zodiac by beginning the letter with the common dictum "This is the Zodiac speaking." But why *Zodiac*? It was later discovered a large component of the symbols used by Zodiac were part of a thirteenth-century alphabet called the *Zodiac Alphabet*, thereby serving as further evidence that Zodiac delved into occult subject matter.

### *Buttons*

Zodiac is not only mysterious in his method of communicating with the police and press. His demands became stranger than merely making demands for his letters to be printed in the papers. He began demanding that people wear buttons bearing the marksman symbol. No one wore the buttons and Zodiac wrote a letter on July 26, 1970 describing his frustration and intentions:



This is the Zodiac speaking Being that you will not wear some nice ☩ buttons, how about wearing some nasty ☩ buttons. Or any type of ☩ buttons that you can think up. If you do not wear any type of ☩ buttons I shall (on top of everything else) torture all 13 of my slaves that I have wateing [sic] for me in Paradice [sic]. Some I shall tie over ant hills and watch them scream and twitch and squirm. Other shall have pine splinters driven under their nails and then burned. Others shall be placed in cages and fed salt beef until they are gorged then I shall listen to their pleass [sic] for water and I shall laugh at them. Others will ...

The list goes on for five pages. It is the second longest of the Zodiac letters and contains no cipher. In this letter Zodiac claims to have collected at least 13 slaves so far, although only seven murders had been directly linked to him. If he is correct in stating that he has killed 13 people so far, then this letter demonstrates the inadequacy of the law officials to closely watch Zodiac's actions. If Zodiac is lying about the number of people that he has killed, then he at least causes the authorities to second-guess their efforts. Either way, this seemingly simple statement causes distress among those who are attempting to capture Zodiac.

This letter goes further by revealing to us our facticity as the audience for Zodiac's letters. Zodiac reveals to us that we must confront the choice to wear buttons or not. To choose not to choose is still to opt not to wear buttons. To do so, according to Zodiac, is to doom those who have already died to a torturous fate. How should this realization make us feel? By deciding not to wear buttons we inadvertently become killers. But this doesn't seem right. To be a killer seems to require some sort of intention behind the killing. But if we become aware of an action that does contribute to someone's death, shouldn't we be held somewhat culpable for the person's death? If not, then it would seem that we need to redefine what it means to be a killer. If so, then Zodiac presents us with the choice of being a killer or not. To not confront this choice is to deny the way the world is insofar as Zodiac presents it.

### *The last known letter*

On April 24, 1978 the *San Francisco Chronicle* received what would be the last letter from Zodiac. He writes that although there was a 54-month gap from his last letter, he never left. What Zodiac does in this letter is suggest that he is now in complete control, and that the world is his game for us to play out. He writes:



Dear Editor

This is the Zodiac speaking I am back with you. Tell herb [sic] caen [sic] I am here, I have always been here. That city pig toschi [sic] is good but I am smarter and beter [sic] he will get tired then leave me alone. I am waiting for a good movie about me. who [sic] will play me. I am now in control of all things.

Yours truly:

⊕ – guess

SFPD – O

The score card at the bottom of the letter disconcertingly suggests two things. First, police records of the number of deaths tied directly to Zodiac are inadequate. Second, the San Francisco Police Department has made no significant advancements in apprehending Zodiac.

Throughout the timeline of these three letters, Zodiac reveals how he sees us and the world. We are no longer individual persons capable of determining our own fate, but are slaves for collecting. But we are also capable of contributing to the deaths of others even when we don't act. Is this what Zodiac means by "man is the most dangerous animal of all"? More importantly, although Zodiac does present opportunities to lessen the frequency and severity of his killings, there really is no escape from his game. For this reason, as the third letter above suggests, Zodiac has won.

Zodiac, however, is more than another serial killer in the world. Very few serial killers have taken the initiative to explain their motives, and to moreover explain the rules that they abide by. In doing so, Zodiac offers us insight into the world as he perceives it. But he also offers insight into what the world is like so that we may become aware of what type of creatures we are and what choices are available to creatures such as ourselves.

## Conclusion

To sum up the discussion, this essay has applied a phenomenological approach to Zodiac's letters. Although both psychology and analytic philosophy offer valuable insights as to the nature and motives behind Zodiac's letters, they are both incapable of accounting for the experience



had by individuals reading his letters. The phenomenological approach accounts for the experiences a person has when she realizes that she is hunted and is a potential contributor to the deaths of others. It also provides an account of the experiences of realizing that the world has shifted into a place where serial killers like Zodiac exist, and that the afterlife might not be so serene.

Overall, this approach has been an attempt to understand the impact that macabre artifacts such as Zodiac's letters have upon us to better understand why we are drawn to such objects. By understanding the way that Zodiac's letters are able to alter the experiences of the world and ourselves, we can begin to see ourselves in a similar light to how he sees us. Through this lens, we can see ourselves as vulnerable objects. To see ourselves in this way provides an additional interpretation for understanding ourselves – even if it is an unpleasant one. By analogy, then, other macabre artifacts provide us with an opportunity to see ourselves the way that others might see us. To see ourselves as such is to begin to understand ourselves as we truly are.

## NOTES

- 1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), aphorism 146.
- 2 Macabre, "Zodiac," *Sinister Slaughter*, Nuclear Blast Records, 1993.
- 3 Accessed September 25, 2009.

