



**Issue 2: Mystery, the Unknown,  
Surprise**

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**A Brief Introduction on Mystery, the Unknown, Surprise**

**by Sean Scanlan**

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**Abstract:** *NANO* editor Sean Scanlan introduces the two articles for this special issue. In “Karr’s Kill Cult: Virtual Cults and Pseudo-Killing in the Digital Age,” Jeremy Biles and Brian Collins explore the edges of where cyber-crime threatens to turn real—and vice versa. Second, Jennifer Ballengee’s article “Death, Catastrophe, and the Significance of Tragedy,” examines two quite different works: *Oedipus at Colonus*, a fairly typical 5<sup>th</sup> century Greek tragedy, and Don DeLillo’s 9/11 novel *Falling Man*.

**Keywords:** Introduction, Criticism, Theory, Literature, DeLillo, Oedipus, Mystery, Unknown, Surprise

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NANO is pleased to update Issue 2 by publishing Jennifer Ballengee's note that compares *Oedipus at Colonus* with Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. Her comparison, titled "Death, Catastrophe, and the Significance of Tragedy," fits the category of mystery and unknown by examining the "tension between representation, memorial, and the catastrophe of death that emerges in the space of tragedy, as the problem arises in two quite different works: *Oedipus at Colonus*, a fairly typical 5<sup>th</sup> century Greek tragedy, and *Falling Man*, Don DeLillo's novel that, in its attempt to address the events of 9/11, reflects in form and subject matter many of Aristotle's terms of tragic representation." Though the two tragedies are highly performative, Ballengee's note instead meditates on the "supplementary relationship of gesture and speech" as they are enacted privately and publicly. Jennifer uses Jacques Derrida's ideas on rhetoric and trauma to explore how these works gain their tragic pressure in the spaces between seen and unseen, offstage and onstage, mimicry and memory, and known and unknown. This note, I think, forms an interesting foil to the note "Karr's Kill Cult," a pairing that heightens the need to critique and explore unsolved/unsolvable mysteries surrounding death and identity.

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In this age of globalization, this age of so many ways to know—and so many ways to know things so quickly—it is both satisfying and deeply unnerving to come upon things and events that are really hard to understand, things and events so shocking or strange or mysterious, that they seem Unknown. Perhaps even unknowable. The usual suspects of the mysterious are still out there: gravity, quarks, Easter Island. But what about those smaller mysteries that are closer to our everyday experiences? For example, what about unsolved crimes, identity changes, and the ways that new online media works? The first note of nano Issue 2 focuses on this second set of unknowns by looking at an unsolved murder and revealing a mystery that is confounding, creepy, and yet oddly compelling. In "Karr's Kill Cult: Virtual Cults and Pseudo-Killing in the Digital Age," Jeremy Biles and Brian Collins explore the edges of where cyber-crime threatens to turn real—and vice versa.

John Mark Karr falsely confessed to the 1996 JonBenét Ramsey murder. Soon after, Karr started an online sex-cult, changed his gender, changed his name to Alexis Reich, and, all the while, has continued both to evade and to covet attention. According to Biles and Collins, Karr has remade himself by utilizing the online world's potent and unnerving characteristic: instant gratification through lurid images and stories. His self-reconstruction has been made public through "Lei Sussurra, the blog that Karr maintains (without claiming or disavowing authorship)." Biles and Collins examine Karr's reconstructed identity and the way he is enmeshed with other cult leaders and serial killers. Not only is Karr a virtual cult leader, he is a virtual prophet, heralding a new form of subjectivity characterized by the interpenetration of reality and representation. In our increasingly technologized cultural sphere, it is difficult to know where the constructed Karr ends and his cyber-stalker persona begins. As Biles and Collins write: "Karr's

cultic campaign is so far being staged primarily in cyberspace, giving rise to questions about the connections among religion, cultic activity, and serial killing in the digital age.” And Biles and Collins conclude with an insight as sharp as it is unpleasant to consider: “[t]he virtual façade of Karr's world is a shadow or double of our own,” hinting at the problem that through criticism and critique, we might be furthering Karr’s aims—whatever those aims may be.

Zygmunt Bauman, a sociologist who theorizes present-day uncertainties, helps us to broaden the conversation to global dimensions. He writes carefully about Liquid Modernity, an age of great risks and unknowns, an age of dynamic, confusing information flows that have become a perfect environment for people like Karr to reimagine identity and desire. We live in a liquid-modern world, “with its cult of speed and acceleration, novelty, and change for the sake of changing,” says Bauman (21). Is change, or radical change, somewhere near the heart of Karr’s desire? How can we solve this mystery when the target moves so fast? Karr seems so radically free in his effort to remake himself that the public, law enforcement, and critics cannot keep up. These mysteries—what happened to JonBenét Ramsey and what happened (and what is happening) to John Mark Karr—have become new mysteries for a new cultural age.

#### Works Cited

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008. Print.