

EXTREMELY INSENSITIVE, SHOCKINGLY MISLEADING AND DANGEROUS:  
EXPLORING THE IMPLICATIONS OF  
ROMANTICIZING SERIAL KILLERS IN FILM

by

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the consequences and implications of romanticizing and sexualizing serial killers as depicted in film. It discusses various film representations of many infamous killers, media responsibility, social media repercussions and predictions, and the paraphilia characterized by sexual interests in criminals, known as hybristophilia. By exploring this phenomenon, I present hypotheticals to the reader such as, are film portrayals of serial killers accurate or oversexualized due to the film industry? Will such depictions encourage hybristophilia over time, or have they in the past? Research for this project has been gathered from primary and secondary sources. These sources include inspirations primarily from director Joe Berlinger's *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile*. With influence from the 2019 award-winning film, this paper contends that the romanticization of serial killers as depicted in media is insensitive towards victims, misleading for viewers, and dangerous. Furthermore, it imposes detrimental effects on audience members on perceptions of love, tolerance of abuse and violence, and hybristophilia.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. Earliest Depictions of Serial Killers in Film

Our fascination with serial killers, as human beings, isn't a new one. However, according to an article in *Psychology Today* by Scott A. Bonn, Ph.D., the term "serial killer" is fairly modern. Prior to the 1970s, the general public and criminal justice system referred to what we now know as a serial killer, a mass murderer. The modern term is largely accepted to have been coined by Robert Ressler, an FBI agent, and profiler who was a co-founder of the Behavioral Analysis Unit. As composed by Bonn, Peter Vronsky's 2004 novel, *Serial Killers: The Method and Madness of Monsters*, accredits Special Agent Ressler with the coinage of the infamous term (Bonn, 2014).

The earliest film depiction of a serial killer was produced over a century ago. According to a 2017 AV Club article written by Ignatiy Vishnevetsky, a 1909 Portuguese film, *The Crimes of Diogo Alves*, is the first known depiction of a serial killer on film (Vishnevetsky, 2017). The 16-minute short film was directed by Lino Ferreira and João Freire Correia and is widely known for its release title, *Os Crimes de Diogo Alves* (IMDB). Naturally, a plethora of serial killer films has flooded the industry since. From Hitchcock's 1960 *Psycho* to Demme's 1991 *The Silence of the Lambs*, the film industry is far from lacking in saturation of films inspired by these real-life villains.

### B. American Serial Killers

Herman Webster Mudgett, publicly renowned as H. H. Holmes, was the first serial killer the United States was introduced to. Holmes tainted the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, luring in unsuspecting fairgoers and torturing them in a building just miles

off lot, commonly known as the “murder castle”. Films like *Murder Hotel* (2005) and *Madness in the White City* (2007) have since been produced, documenting Holmes’ crimes.

Plainfield, Wisconsin was plagued in the late 1950s by the treacherous affairs of Ed Gein. According to an article by contributor John Philip Jenkins for Britannica, Gein was notoriously known for grave robbing (Jenkins, 2021). His assortment of body parts collected from these escapades were subsequently made into hauntingly unsettling items like clothing and masks. Since his reign of terror in the fifties, Gein’s affairs have been the inspiration for some of the most renowned horror films of all time, including *Psycho* (1960), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* franchise, and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991).

In the late 1960s, California’s Bay Area lived in terror of an anonymous villain. The inspiration for many a film and novels, the Zodiac Killer chose the name for himself. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Zodiac Killer encoded a cryptic message sent to a local newspaper in 1969 revealing their identity (FBI, 2007). The letter followed an arbitrary trail of five gruesome murders between 1968 and 1969. Seemingly at large for decades, is it now alleged that the identity of the killer is Gary Francis Poste, an air force veteran. According to the New York Post, Poste lived a kind of double life. After the series of killings, he resided in Nevada for a time before being arrested in 2016 for domestic violence. The court ruled Poste mentally incompetent, and he was placed in a state institution. According to the Sun, Poste passed in 2018. His death certificate revealed his cause of death was sepsis, septic shock, dysphagia, and vascular dementia (Roback, 2021). Since his terror, the serial killer has inspired films such as *Zodiac*



(2007), *The Zodiac Killer* (1971), and even TV series, like a 2003-episode release of *Cold Case Files*.

Popularly known as the “Killer Clown”, John Wayne Gacy terrorized a neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois in the early sixties and late seventies. Tainted with an irony that’s now immensely unnerving, Gacy worked as a clown for events like children’s birthday parties. According to a Britannica entry by contributor John Philip Jenkins, Gacy murdered a total of 33 boys and young men throughout his reign of terror (Jenkins, 2022). Law enforcement exposed the remains of 29 of Gacy’s victims in his home, and four victims in a river nearby. Gacy pleaded innocent by reason of insanity, which was accepted by many court-ordered psychologists who diagnosed him as schizophrenic. However, the jury found Gacy guilty on account of all 33 murders, so he was therefore sentenced to death by lethal injection in 1994. As was anticipated, film production inspired by Gacy isn’t limited. Many films have been made regarding the killer clown, including but not limited to, *Dear Mr. Gacy* (2010) and *To Catch a Killer* (1992).

In the summer of 1985, Southern California was tormented by yet another monster. His name was Richard Ramirez, but he is perhaps most famously known as the Night Stalker. According to CBS News, Ramirez began his killing spree in 1984. He would end his tenure of horrors with an abhorrent track record of at least 14 murders and 11 counts of sexual assault and aggravation. A consequence for his actions, the court issued Ramirez a count of 19 death penalties. These did not come to fruition, however, when he died in prison in 2013. Numerous film depictions have been produced

commemorating his terror. From *The Night Stalker* (1972) to *American Horror Story: 1984* (2019), Richard Ramirez is a household name (Learish, 2021).

Perhaps one of America's most known serial killers is Jeffrey Dahmer. He's often referred to as the "Milwaukee Cannibal" or the "Milwaukee Monster", but at the time of his terrors, he was just Jeffrey, an awkward and lanky man who lacked social awareness. According to FBI records, it was almost midnight in July 1991 when Milwaukee law enforcement came across a half-naked young man stumbling on the street (FBI, 2017). The young man told law enforcement he'd been handcuffed and threatened with a knife in an apartment nearby. Upon investigation, law enforcement discovered multiple body parts belonging to a multitude of victims in Dahmer's apartment. Eleven victim remains were uncovered in his apartment, but Dahmer would go on to confess to the murder of over a dozen victims, whose corpses he tortured, dismembered, and disfigured. Though he was sentenced to life, Dahmer died in prison where another inmate beat him to death. Films about Dahmer have been produced for decades and continue to be. From documentary series like *Dahmer on Dahmer: A Serial Killer Speaks* (2017) to films such as *My Friend Dahmer* (2017), it's hard to believe that there's anything that dozens (if not more) productions have left unsaid. While each serial killer aforementioned were characterized by their own unique governance of horror, there was one left unnamed. One whose unspeakable acts were deemed by Florida's Judge Edward D. Cowart as "extremely wicked, shockingly evil and vile".

### **C. Bundy**

Ted Bundy is regarded as one of the United States' most notorious killers. His appalling acts and trail of treachery would go on to inspire dozens of films and more novels. He's been called "The Lady Killer", "The Campus Killer", even "The American Boogeyman". Perhaps it was Bundy's ironic charisma and unsettling stealth that characterizes him apart from the previously mentioned killers. Regardless of his haunting qualities, Ted Bundy is a globally recognized figure.

According to state records, Theodore "Ted" Robert Cowell was born on November 24, 1946, in Burlington, Vermont. He was born to his single (at the time) mother, Louise Cowell, thus, her son bore her surname. For the first few years of his life, Ted and his mother lived with her parents, his grandparents, Samuel and Eleanor. The identity of Ted's biological father was unbeknownst to both him and his mother.

When Ted was just four years old, he and his mother relocated to Tacoma, Washington. According to Katherine Ramsland, Ph.D., Ted's mother would remarry in May of 1951 to a man named Johnnie Bundy. As his stepfather, Johnnie would formally adopt his girlfriend's son, and Ted would bear a new surname that would soon be notorious (Ramsland, 2013).

According to John Philip Jenkins, a contributor for Britannica, Ted and his stepfather suffered a strained relationship. As a product of this, Ted was a frequent target for bullies as he grew up and endured a relatively difficult and lonely childhood. According to Ramsland's article for The Forensic Examiner, *The Many Sides of Ted Bundy*, Ted was mortified to discover that he was born a bastard child. This humiliation would provoke his motive to make something of himself.

Bundy enrolled in the University of Washington in the Fall of 1966 where he would declare his major in psychology. Shortly thereafter, however, he would take a short hiatus in his college career when his girlfriend at the time broke things off. In 1969, Bundy would resume his education at the University of Washington. From 1969 to 1973, he would progress in his education in undergraduate and eventually meet his long-term girlfriend, Liz Kendall. Bundy graduated with a degree in psychology from the University of Washington in the Spring of '73.

The world will never know if there were undocumented crimes committed by Bundy prior to the ones confirmed by law enforcement. Many sources will tell you that Bundy's first victim was an 18-year-old girl named Karen Sparks, but the literature to confirm this is unclear. Some speculate that Karen Sparks is simply a pseudonym that is referred to in Bundy literature by the name Joni Lenz. According to Ramsland, Ted Bundy brutally attacked Joni Lenz on January 5, 1974. Sources claim the story goes; Bundy broke into a Seattle apartment where Lenz was sleeping. He would go on to viciously attack and rape her with a bedpost. Lenz survived, despite significant brain damage that impaired her memory of the attack.

According to ABC News, it was the first of February in 1974 when Lynda Ann Healy became a victim of the killer (Yang, Gowen, Taudte et al, 2019). Healy was 21 years old at the time, attending the University of Washington, Bundy's alma mater. She was highly regarded in her Seattle community for her work on the radio, broadcasting weekday ski weather reports. Healy was abducted from her basement bedroom in the early morning of February 1. She would die from strangulation at his hand.

On March 12, 1974, Bundy would abduct 19-year-old Donna Gail Manson. She was an undergraduate student at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. Sources claim Donna was reported missing by her roommate, but not until six days after her initial disappearance.

In April of '74, an 18-year-old freshman at Central Washington University in Ellensburg would go missing. Her name was Susan Elaine Rancourt, and she was a studious, young blonde woman who planned to major in biology. Sources claim that Susan was targeted by Bundy as she was making her walk from a different campus building back to her dorm room. Bundy approached her in his trademark arm cast, pleading for help. It's theorized that Susan agreed to help Bundy load some books into his yellow Volkswagen Beetle, where he then hit her over the head with a crowbar.

Roberta Kathleen "Kathy" Parks was a mere twenty-years-old when her life would tragically be cut short by Bundy. She was attending Oregon State University in Corvallis, Oregon, and was abducted at the same location. She was then taken to Taylor Mountain in King County, Washington, where she was raped and murdered.

Just ten days apart, Bundy would commit two abductions in June 1974. On June 1, 22-year-old Brenda Ball was abducted from a bar in Burien, Washington, called the Flame Tavern. Just over a week later, Bundy abducted Georgeann Hawkins. According to an article written for the Green Valley News by Dan Shearer, it was in the early morning hours on June 11 when Georgeann's mother, Edie, got a call from her daughter's sorority sisters (Shearer, 2014). Edie reports that she knew "immediately" her daughter, Georgeann was missing when she got the call. Edie claimed she knew instantly that her daughter's disappearance was similar to that of a trail of the disappearances to other

young girls in the area. Shearer makes note that each girl in this hellish, nightmare of an abduction trail had similar characteristics. They all had long, middle-parted hair, and they were all approached by a man with a cast covering one of his limbs.

By the time mid-July rolled around in 1974, two more girls would go missing from Lake Sammamish State Park in King County, Washington. ABC News reports that onlookers described seeing both Janice Ott, 23, and Denise Naslund, 19, with a “handsome, young man” who said his name was Ted. Ramsland’s article displays a timeline of Bundy’s crimes, where portions of Ott’s body, Naslund’s, and Hawkins’ were discovered in Issaquah, Washington in September of 1974.

In the fall of 1974, Bundy enrolled in the University of Utah to study law. In the time span of October, three more girls would disappear. Nancy Wilcox was just 16 years old when Bundy would cut her life woefully short. She was attending high school in Holladay, Utah when she was abducted from her home to never be seen again. According to many online sources, credibility questionable, Wilcox was last seen riding around in a pale-colored Volkswagen Beetle. Her body would never be recovered. According to ABC, it was mere weeks following when 17-year-old Melissa Smith was abducted, raped, and strangled in Midvale, Utah. Her remains would be found seven days later in the Wasatch Mountains. On Halloween of ’74, Bundy abducted, raped, and murdered 17-year-old Laura Ann Aime. Her body would be recovered on Thanksgiving of the same year, nearly unrecognizable and naked in the Wasatch Mountains.

On the eighth of November 1974, Bundy was on the hunt. He disguised himself as a police officer at Fashion Place Mall in Murray, Utah. He planned to lure an unsuspecting young girl into his grasp. According to History, Carol DaRonch – a Salt

Lake City resident – was shopping when a suspected “policeman” asked her to follow him to his car. He claimed DaRonch’s car had been broken into, and he needed her to come with him to file a police report. This particular story, however, is known widely as Bundy’s “botched” abduction attempt. Though Carol did follow Bundy to his Volkswagen, she fought back when he attempted to bludgeon her with a crowbar, and she escaped (HISTORY, 2021).

Despite Carol’s courageous escape, Bundy’s hunt was far from over. Just a few hours from midnight on the same day, 17-year-old Debra “Debby” Jean Kent was abducted. According to sources, she couldn’t have been more than minutes from her home when Bundy attacked her in Bountiful, Utah. Debby’s body was never found.

A new year rolls around and in January of 1975 23-year-old Caryn Eileen Campbell went missing. Campbell is widely regarded as the first victim of Bundy’s Coloradoan trail. Caryn was staying at a hotel in Colorado when she was reportedly abducted by Bundy. Literature noting the exact location of Caryn’s abduction is unclear, but most sources claim the hotel was in Aspen or Snowmass. According to ABC News, Campbell’s body was recovered over a month later, within just three miles of the hotel she was staying at. She was beaten to death.

On March 1, 1975, Bundy was in Salt Lake City when four skulls were recovered on Taylor Mountain in King County, Washington. An autopsy would reveal that each one of the bodily remains exhibited signs of severe blunt force trauma to the head. The four skulls belonged to Lynda Ann Healy from Seattle (abducted in February 1974), Roberta Kathleen Parks, who was attending Oklahoma State University (abducted in May 1974), Susan Elaine Rancourt, who was attending Central Washington University (abducted in

May 1974), and Brenda Ball, who was abducted in June of 1974 from a bar in Burien, Washington.

According to the Colorado Bureau of Investigation, it was March 15, 1975, when Julie Cunningham went missing (Colorado Bureau of Investigation, 2022). Julie was a 26-year-old ski instructor in Vail, Colorado, which is where she was last seen. Her missing person's report claims she was leaving her Apollo Park apartment to visit a local restaurant, then never returned. Though Bundy would later confess to luring her to his vehicle and raping her, Julie's body would never be found. Bundy claimed to have buried Cunningham in Rifle, CO, but the Vail police department remained unsuccessful in recovering any part of her. Her case remains open to this day.

In early April 1975, 24-year-old Denise Lynn Oliverson was abducted in Grand Junction, Colorado. According to the CBI, Denise set out on a bike ride on April 6, 1974, planning to make a trip to her parents' house. The next day, her bicycle and her shoes were found underneath a bridge near her house, next to some railroad tracks. Denise's body would never be found, though Bundy would confess to her murder 15 years later. Her case is still open to this day.

Lynette Dawn Culver was just 12 years old when Bundy would rob her life from her. She was last seen in Pocatello, Idaho, where she was attending Alameda Junior High School. According to The Resource Center for Cold Case Missing Children's Cases, Lynette left her school for lunch but never came back. She was reportedly seen later that day on a bus from Hawthorne Junior High, but this was the last anyone saw or heard from Lynette (F.M., 2020). In 1989, Bundy would later confess to raping and murdering Lynette. He told law enforcement he abducted her, took her to a nearby Holiday Inn,



raped her, and drowned her in the hotel bathtub. He also claimed he dumped her body in a river known as Snake River in Hells Canyon. Lynette has never been found.

Susan Curtis was abducted by Bundy in June of 1975. She was 15 years old at the time, visiting Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. ABC News reports that Sue was visiting the campus in order to attend the Bountiful Orchard Youth Conference. Bundy would later confess to burying her by a highway near the university, but her body has never been found.

Shelley Kay Robertson was 23 years old when she disappeared without a trace from Golden, Colorado. According to the Families of Homicide Victims and Missing Persons, Shelley's body was found seven weeks after her abduction in a mineshaft near Georgetown, Colorado (Families of Homicide Victims & Missing Persons, n.d.).

23-year-old Nancy Baird was abducted from Layton, Utah, in June of 1975. According to Martin Ortiz, a writer at ABC 4, Baird was abducted from her workplace. She was a cashier at the Fina gas station in east Layton, where she vanished in about twenty minutes. Her body was never recovered.

Bundy's murdering spree would take a brief hiatus in August of '75. On August 16, Ted Bundy was arrested and taken into police custody after a highway patrol chase in Granger, Utah. Authorities searched Bundy's Volkswagen Beetle to discover burglary supplies, including handcuffs, masks, gloves, ropes, and a crowbar. Despite his suspicious possessions, Bundy was released on bail the very next day.

In February of 1976 17-year-old Debbie Smith was abducted in Salt Lake City, Utah. According to the South Florida Sun Sentinel, Debbie's body was found on April 1, 1976, near the Salt Lake City airport (Keller, 1989).

On March 1, 1976, Ted Bundy would be found guilty and charged with aggravated kidnapping and attempted criminal assault. According to ABC News, Carol DaRonch – the girl who got away in November of '74 – identified Bundy as her assaulter in a court line-up during her testimony. He was held in the Salt Lake County Jail where he faced up to 15 years incarcerated in a Utah state prison.

In June of 1976, Bundy was transferred from the Salt Lake County Jail to the state of Colorado to face murder charges brought upon him in the case of Caryn Campbell, who was murdered in 1975. By May of '77, Bundy would plead not guilty to the murder of Caryn Campbell.

It was June of 1977 when the unthinkable happened. Unattended and at large, Bundy escaped through a second-story window in the Pitkin County jailhouse. Because Bundy stood as his own defense in his cases, he was permitted access to the second-story law library in the building while in police custody. He was free for five whole days. According to ABC News, when he was captured, he was taken back into custody at a facility in Glenwood Springs, where he was then charged with felony theft, escape, and burglary.

Bundy served his sentence in Garfield County Jail in Glenwood Springs, Colorado. In December of '77, the unthinkable happened, *again*. He managed to escape his jail cell through a narrow opening of a light fixture in the ceiling of his room.

According to ABC News, Bundy was cunning and careful with his trail. To maintain his devilish flight, he didn't settle in one place for long. First, he boarded a flight from Colorado to Chicago, Illinois. He then traveled from Chicago to Ann Arbor,

Michigan by train. From Michigan, he reportedly drove a stolen car to Atlanta, Georgia. He finally settled in Tallahassee, Florida.

It was January 1978 when Bundy would strike yet again. Now residing in a Tallahassee apartment complex, he was not far from Florida State University. According to ABC News, at 3 am on January 15, Bundy broke into the Chi Omega sorority house. He then murdered 20-year-old Lisa Levy and 21-year-old Margaret Bowman by strangulation. The two women were grievously beaten. Two other Chi Omega sisters – Karen Ann Chandler and Kathy Kleiner – were severely injured but lived to tell their story.

Bundy fled the sorority house to commit another gruesome crime on the very same night. Just a few blocks from the university, Cheryl Thomas – a student – was sleeping soundly in her bed when Bundy broke into her apartment. Cheryl's pluck and valor enabled her to survive her attack, but Bundy escaped.

By February, Bundy was still on the run. It was the ninth of the month when 12-year-old Kimberly Diane Leach would have her life taken from under her. She was reportedly a student attending junior high in Lake City, Florida when she disappeared in the middle of the day. She was abducted and murdered. Kimberly was the last of Bundy's victims. Her body would be found in April of the same year near Suwannee River State Park, in Live Oak, Florida.

In mid-February 1978, Bundy was pulled over for reckless driving and suspicious activity. Authorities would soon identify the vehicle as stolen after running the car's plates. Bundy would be taken into police custody, but report to them a false name and identity. It only took two days for him to break, confessing his true identity.

Bundy would be charged in July 1978 for the murders of Chi Omega sisters, Margaret Bowman and Lisa Levy, and attempted murders of Cheryl Thomas, Karen Chandler, and Kathy Kleiner. He was found guilty on all accounts in July 1979.

A mere week and a day after being named guilty, Ted Bundy was sentenced to death for the murders of Lisa Levy and Margaret Bowman. In February 1980, he was also found guilty of the aggravated kidnapping and murder of Kimberly Leach. He was, again, sentenced to death for these charges.

Though death warrants were signed for the Chi Omega sisters much sooner, it took nine whole years for the governor of Florida to sign Bundy's final death warrant in the case of 12- year-old Kimberly Leach. ABC News reports that in his final days, Bundy confessed to a petrifying portfolio of crimes. He reportedly confessed to an FBI Special Agent that he had murdered over 30 women between 1973 and 1978 in the states of California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Utah, Colorado, and Florida.

Ted Bundy was executed by electric chair in Florida State Prison on January 24, 1989. He was pronounced dead at 7:16 am. He was 42 years old.

#### **D. Research Motivation**

Because we as humans have an innate interest in these monsters, it's no wonder why so many films center around serial killers. It's for entertainment, we say. Film and TV are the healthiest of outlets to show interest in something that you'd otherwise be ridiculed for liking, right? Not to mention, casting handsome men as serial killers doesn't hurt the box office gross openings. After all, wasn't the very essence of Hollywood built on the broadcasting and exploitation of beautiful people?

So why do we have this seemingly second-nature intrigue into some of the worst people in the history of mankind? Bestselling author, Scott A. Bonn, Ph.D., discusses this phenomenon extensively in his 2014 novel, *Why We Love Serial Killers: The Curious Appeal of the World's Most Savage Murderers*. Bonn's book explores the appeal that the public and mass media have so infamously dubbed upon these criminals. Bonn so ingeniously refers to highly publicized serial killers as "celebrity monsters". The mass media coverage (film, literature, TV, podcasts, social media) has given these killers yet another platform to gain further fame.

In an article written by Bonn for Psychology Today, he explores our captivation with serial killers (Bonn, 2017). According to Bonn, humans have an interest in serial killers for five reasons. Amongst these five include serial killers' rarity, the fact that they don't discriminate, their often-lengthy timeline, their subconscious and intrusive thoughts becoming known, and the adrenaline rush they provide to us, like a nonfiction horror story for adults. Most compellingly though, in my opinion, is the fact that Bonn recognizes the second-nature tendency we have to humanize a serial killer. Bonn argues that the serial killer cushions us with an outlet for our own gruesome urges that we bury deep down. As Freud would teach us, our id is our inner devil. It's where we hide our darkest compulsions, our animalistic urges that we'd never let become exposed. Perhaps an interest in serial killers lets us safely explore thoughts that we otherwise wouldn't dare.

While there's arguably nothing wrong with regarding the entertainment industry as a safe outlet, the line between safe and obsessive parasocial relationships is easily and often blurred. There's no handbook to tell us when an interest becomes an unhealthy

obsession or when fantasizing storybooks as real-life evolves into a poisonous and detrimental fixation. Depicting Hollywood's most handsome men as serial killers in the media turns this already delicate balance into one nearly non-existent.

Serial killers have long been romanticized. From Dahmer to Bundy, each killer undoubtedly had his own "fan club" which most would deem odd, characterized by society's severely unhinged. The media, however, is allowing for a new and deeper romanticization of serial killers. The killer-obsessed are no longer just society's ticking time-bombs, but they're our daughters, our sisters, our friends. Media representation of the world's most-hated serial killers as the handsome celebrities we've long known and loved is an exceedingly dangerous and slippery slope.

An article written by Mary Gonzalez for *The Odyssey* – entitled *We Need To Stop Romanticizing Serial Killers – They're Not Quirky, They're Psychopaths* – delves into the serious and misattributed effects a handsome man portrayed as a serial killer has on young girls. Gonzalez tells her readers that she's been a long-time fan of Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk's FX series, *American Horror Story*. In the pilot season, a conventionally handsome Evan Peters stars as Tate Langdon, a grungy high schooler who (spoiler alert) is a psychopath and mass murderer. Gonzalez's point is that her thirteen-year-old mind believed that this depiction of Tate was what was to be considered attractive. Gonzalez goes on to make note that with the over-saturation of serial killer movies in modern times, we, as consumers of media (with our own soapboxes via Twitter, Instagram, etc.), are contributing to the fetishization of these monsters (Gonzalez, 2019).

Though Bundy may have been considered 1970s conventionally handsome, the media portrayal of him as stars we feel like we know – *childhood* stars, even – is inevitably dangerous to young minds. Katherine Ramsland, Ph.D., sheds light on this phenomenon in an article written for Psychology Today called *Girls Who Love Ted Bundy*. Because he’s been portrayed as so handsome, so charismatic, so charming, many young girls believe they could’ve been the one to “fix” him. From Tumblr to Twitter to Tik Tok, there are armies of Ted Bundy-loving girls and women. Ramsland notes that this “hyper-fixation” of killers like Bundy comes from the way he’s been depicted on film and in media – “a handsome, articulate young man who could sometimes be gentle and caring” (Ramsland, 2019). Ramsland argues that some women see the inner child in Bundy, who begs for nurture and care. Film and TV undoubtedly shape young minds – it *shows* us what life is ‘supposed’ to be like. Ramsland continues noting that “some young women think it’s exciting or romantic to be raped, battered, or bruised”. Not only does this account demonstrate severe and indescribable disrespect to the victims of Bundy (who still have families alive today!), but it shows young people that love can be characterized through brutality, abuse, and violence.

The inspiration and motivation for writing this paper came from my own account of watching a Ted Bundy Netflix film. I couldn’t help but wonder, why is this Disney star (who I’ve known for a decade) portraying one of the coldest and sickest mass murderers of all time? Obviously, whatever gets views, does. But at some point, does Hollywood need to bear the responsibility of depicting serial killers as celebrities with whom we have dotting parasocial relationships?

Perhaps you wondered why I spent so much time on Bundy's crimes if my argument is essentially combating him (I mean, he is a serial killer). I want to make myself extremely clear, this is not a thesis about Ted Bundy. The purpose of this paper is to explicitly demonstrate how the media representation of these killers is tremendously dangerous. I spent so much page-real estate on his crimes to further drive home the point that Bundy was a *monster* – not anyone who should be romanticized or fantasized about. Regardless of the actor(s) who (have) portrayed him, this was him and this is what he did. Everyone knows who Ted Bundy is, but I'd be shocked if 10% of people could name even *one* of his (thirty) victims. I wanted to identify every one of his known victims, by name. They deserve that. Their families do. Bundy gained tremendous and unattainable notoriety for his crimes (which is a serial killer's goal), but his victims are more often than not, left forgotten. For the young girls who fetishize Bundy, perhaps a brief biography of these (very *real*) women and girls who lost their lives at his hand will further demand that he's not sexy, or charming, and he could not be "fixed". He is a serial killer, a monster, and depictions of him as anything other than just that are dangerous.

## **II. BODY**

### **A. *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile***

*Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* first premiered on January 26, 2019, at the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. According to IMDB, the commencement of the festival shared the exact anniversary of Bundy's execution by electric chair – 30 years to the day. Directed by Joe Berlinger, the film runs 110 minutes and is rated R. It was massively released to the Netflix streaming platform but was



additionally premiering in select theaters. The film has won a plethora of awards, including many amongst the Atlanta Film Festival, the Mammoth Film Festival, the Newport Beach Film Festival, and the Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting. The film itself, director, and actors were also nominees for many other awards.

According to the company, the film is meant to follow the chronological story of Bundy through the perspective of his girlfriend, Liz Kendall. Worth noting, Kendall is Elizabeth's pseudonym surname; her real name is Elizabeth Kloepfer, but she wrote her memoir under the name Elizabeth Kendall (and so, she is referred to as such in the film). Kendall remained Bundy's girlfriend for six years, throughout his trials, and executed a terrifyingly manipulated refusal to face the dark truth about her lover. The movie was majorly based on an autobiography memoir released by Kendall in December 1988 – accounting her real-life relationship with the killer – *The Phantom Prince: My Life with Ted Bundy*.

In the film, Bundy is portrayed by Zac Efron. Efron initially gained notoriety from the ever so popular Disney channel original movie franchise *High School Musical*. In the movies, Efron plays Troy Bolton, the main protagonist, high school basketball and musical theater star who inevitably falls in love with Gabriella (played by Vanessa Hudgens), the girl who every little girl wanted to be. He made guest-star appearances in other Disney channel series, like *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* and *The Disney Family Singalong* TV special. Not only was Efron made famous in the name of Disney, but he was also nominated in 2017 for People Magazine's "Sexiest Man Alive". The 35-year-old has been the main man and love interest in dozens of other films. He was Link Larkin in the film adaptation of *Hairspray*, he was the young love interest in *The Greatest*

*Showman*, and he starred in the 2017 film adaptation of *Baywatch*. He was even the star of a Nicholas Sparks film, *The Lucky One*. All to say, Zac Efron is a household name and has been a television heartthrob for girls around the globe since 2006.

So why would this American TV golden boy portray infamous serial killer Ted Bundy? When *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* premiered, there was undoubtedly controversy surrounding this very question. Director, Joe Berlinger, claims his casting decision was not without inspiration. According to an article written for The National News by James Mottram in 2019, Berlinger claimed, “simply because somebody looks and acts a certain way, it doesn’t mean they’re worthy of your trust” (Mottram, 2019). He goes on to describe that “there are hundreds of people who love Zac... they implicitly trust him because of how he looks... how he acts, because of who he is”. Berlinger also told Today Headline that he and Efron had “long talks about, ‘how do we tell this story without glorification?’” He made note that neither he, nor Efron, took the film lightly (TodayHeadline, 2021).

Senior Culture Writer, Zeba Blay, wrote a 2019 article in HuffPost entitled *Sexualizing Serial Killers Like Ted Bundy Has its Consequences*. In the article, Blay discusses a variety of shows and media that audiences know all too well. Blay eloquently notes the opposing sides to the controversy of casting a heartthrob as a nonfictional monster. She writes that while shows and movies like *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* try with all intentions to shed light on the monstrosities of mass murderers, their failure to do so is a microcosm of our broken system that allowed people like Ted Bundy to go unscathed in the first place. Blay writes, “no matter how hard they try, these projects inevitably fall into the precarious trap of perpetuating narratives about

‘fascinating’ serial killers even as they attempt to dismantle them” (Blay, 2019). Her argument, in summation, is this: even if films like this one have every intention to incriminate him, “the very existence of yet another Ted Bundy movie is a kind of romanticization, one with unwieldy results”.

Zena Bounsall, a Staff Writer for *Sonoma State Star*, wrote an article in February 2021 regarding yet another serial killer documentary film whose intentions went horribly astray. In her article about *The Nightstalker* – a docu-series about Richard Ramirez released by Netflix in 2021 – she attentively references *Extremely Wicked*. She notes that for Bundy to be played by Zac Efron, the choice was “distasteful... due to his positive reputation, paired with his reputable innocence and being a millennials sex symbol” (Bounsall, 2021). For the article, Bounsall interviewed Allison Wargo, a California native. Wargo claimed, “it was difficult to view him as a serial killer... [he was] incredibly sexualized, creating a huge fandom behind it making girls want a serial killer as a boyfriend. It was a hard role to be taken seriously.” Bounsall notes that the masses will always recall Efron as the *High School Musical* heartthrob, “which acts as a hurdle in viewing him as a bloodthirsty serial killer”. The article concludes with an attentive criticism of the film: it contains no graphic scenes that incriminate Bundy, allowing for speculations of innocence. This absence of actual murders by Bundy throughout the film does not “support the actions Bundy is being charged with, [making it] difficult to view a now-convicted killer in the negative light that they should be perceived in”. Bounsall concludes her article by arguing that the minds of children are extraordinarily malleable and impressionable. She writes that sexual and domestic violence should never be

romanticized, and “if society begins to desensitize the destruction of lives... Once brutality is normalized through publicity, it becomes real in private.”

Brian Lowry published a 2019 article for CNN Entertainment, titled *Zac Efron adds to Netflix’s Ted Bundy Queue in ‘Extremely Wicked’ Movie*. Lowry notes that though Efron certainly shares a resemblance with the killer, the portrayal of him “doesn’t elevate the material, necessarily, as much as it does add to the queasiness [of] watching it”. Lowry writes that though the film’s narrative is split between Bundy’s perspective and that of Liz Kendall, the film remains “unsettling... [and] the idea of him being ‘dreamy’ as one courtroom onlooker observes, is only exacerbated by having Efron play him” (Lowry, 2019).

Louisa Moore, a Film Critic for Screen Zealots – a film-critique online platform – wrote her own review on the film. Moore is a Top Critic approved for Rotten Tomatoes with an extensive and credible resume in film – including membership with the Las Vegas Film Critics Society, the Online Film & Television Association, and the Society of Professional Journalists. Moore’s review said, “We don’t need to see the kinder, gentler side of a deranged, savage serial killer” (Moore, 2022).

Rachel Leishman is an Assistant Editor for The Mary Sue, a “feminist community [with] intense passion [for] fan trends, social issues, [and] art”. For her critique on *Extremely Wicked* featured on Rotten Tomatoes, Leishman wrote, “We’re left with a movie that romanticizes the idea of Ted Bundy and does very little to honor his victims” (Leishman, 2019).

Matthew Lucas, a Film Critic for In Review Online wrote for Rotten Tomatoes, “Bundy was a master manipulator, and rather than unpack that, Berlinger [the director]

seems determined to spend two hours letting him manipulate from beyond the grave” (Lucas, 2019).

These aforementioned reviews – along with hundreds of others, unmentioned – sum up a sort of distaste for the way Bundy was portrayed by Efron. Ramin Setoodeh wrote an article for *Variety* where he interviewed Efron on his trajectory of the portrayal of Disney-hero to serial killer. Efron told *Variety*, *Extremely Wicked* “was really about a human being, somebody that perhaps I would have been friends with... [it’s] a love story from a very unique perspective” (Setoodeh, 2019). Perhaps a ‘love story’ portraying one of America’s most infamous serial killers played by an actor everyone already knows *and* loves, is in disdain. One would think that broadcasting the love story of a misogynistic rapist, murderer, and child molester, portrayed by the man who played Troy Bolton in *High School Musical*, would come off as misleading and insensitive.

*Extremely Wicked* is just that – a love story. Film Writer for The Digital Fix since 2017, Steven Sheehan, wrote for Rotten Tomatoes, “[*Extremely Wicked*] isn’t able to add anything new to the countless films, documentaries, TV shows and books that have already covered much of the same ground, with many doing so far more successfully” (Sheehan, 2020). Though the film may take on a never-before-seen perspective on the story of Bundy, it does so in a way that merely nicks the surface of his misogyny and brutality towards women. Was the ‘love story’ perspective in a film absolutely necessary, especially when Liz Kendall *herself* has an already published first-account memoir of her relationship with the killer?

Throughout the entire 110 minutes of the film, only ten whole seconds depict Bundy *actually* committing a crime. Prahlad Srihari is a Film and TV Critic for Firstpost,

a news, and media website based in India. Srihari wrote for Rotten Tomatoes, “*Extremely Wicked* does not showcase the misogynistic fury carefully hidden underneath Bundy’s suave law student I. It instead reduces its focus to his life just before his capture, his prison escapes, and the highly theatrical murder trials” (Srihari, 2020).

Additionally, at the bare minimum, sixteen seconds were left directly before the ending credits naming each of his known victims. However, a supplemental three minutes and 6 seconds at the conclusion of the film were left devoted to showing the real tapes of Bundy’s trial, as if the 110-minute running film wasn’t already enough time to culminate the serial killer. As if Bundy hadn’t already gained unattainable stardom for the horrors, he put a generation of women and their families through, the victims were left ‘honored’ with 16 seconds, 0.2% of the film’s time running. Flickering Myth is a leading United Kingdom entertainment blog that covers the latest in pop culture and media. Freelance journalist for the blog, Tom Beasley, wrote a review on *Extremely Wicked* which was featured on Rotten Tomatoes. Beasley wrote, “This is a movie that’s fascinated with Ted Bundy, and entirely uninterested in those whose lives he callously took away” (Beasley, 2019).

## **B. Media Responsibility**

Regardless of director Joe Berlinger’s claims that he and Efron had ‘long talks’ about telling Bundy’s story without glorification, his directorial motive and its trajectory were questionable. In a 2019 article for Bustle by Sage Young, Berlinger said, “if you actually watch the movie, the last thing we’re doing is glorifying him” (Young, 2019). On the contrary, however, he also makes note that he is aware of the hypocrisy he and

other filmmakers so often hold, where “at the end of the day, [they’re] making entertainment out of other people’s tragedy”. Still, Berlinger claims that “there should be no censoring of subject matter if it’s done responsibly”. He goes on to tell Bustle that there should be no subject filmmakers are told is off-limits. Berlinger says his perspective of storytelling on Bundy was a new one. That “there have been a lot of movies about Adolf Hitler and about the Holocaust, but if somebody were to have a new angle as a way of illuminating some aspect of the human condition or aspect of that particular story... I think telling filmmakers any subject matter is off-limits is a very slippery slope”. So... where *does* Hollywood’s responsibility take shape, if any? Berlinger claimed to Bustle that, “...even if it’s done irresponsibly, people have the right to tell any story they want to tell.”

Mackenzie Nagel from Kansas State University authored an article for *Odyssey* entitled *Is Hollywood Romanticizing Serial Killers?* In the article, Nagel addresses a plethora of other young actors who we’ve come to know and love in the parasocial scope, and how their portrayal of murderers affects our perception of them. The author writes, “...our childhood is a pivotal time in our development, and what we saw on television and in theaters was a big deal to us... now, it’s hard to separate the characteristics of Troy Bolton from that of Ted Bundy or think of the boisterous yet harmless twin Zack Martin [from *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody*] as a violent psychopath [in the 2017 film *Dismissed*]” (Nagel, 2019). The article goes on to discuss that when we as audience members are unable to disassociate actors with their character portrayals – say, Efron from Bundy – “there is a high possibility of false empathy... We take the desirable attributes of the actor and/or their former character [(Troy Bolton)], and then associate

them with their new character”. Casting beautiful people as the world’s most gruesome makes the door between education and glorification one made of glass. Where, in this delicate balance, should the media bear the responsibility of promoting these serial killers’ notoriety from beyond the grave or prison cell?

It’s no secret that true crime has flooded the media in saturation these past couple of years. Not only are we constantly exposed to real-life horror stories on news outlets and from the press, but we also now have access to true crime virtually anywhere. From top-streaming podcasts like *Crime Junkie*, *Morbid*, and *My Favorite Murder*, to the more than 35 Netflix original series and films on true crime, we’ve obviously told the media that we have an interest in these narratives. The favor toward this genre of media, though, lies within a juggling act. It’s as if we – as listeners, viewers, and audience members – more often than not seem to forget that these stories are not fictional. These anecdotes that we seek for a taste of entertainment on our road trip, or our retreat to relaxation after a long workday, regard the lives of *actual people*. People with friends, families, and jobs, like us. To take a moment and truly consider this phenomenon is rather daunting. These narratives that literally ruined lives – ate human beings up and spit them out – we binge as a form of entertainment. While some media forms do a respectable job of acknowledging victims and their families, others approach the topic rather insensitively. All of this to say, the large majority of true crime outlets highlight the perpetrator, rather than honor the victims. *Extremely Wicked* is no exception.

A 2019 article for The Washington Post by Steven Zeitchik, called *Does Netflix have a killer problem?* Takes a deep dive into media responsibility of true crime portrayals and reenactments. Zeitchik writes, “more than other entertainment outlets, a



number of Netflix’s hit shows spotlight gruesome violence, often committed against women” (Zeitchik, 2019). He also makes note that Netflix occupies the television screens of more than 60 million viewers in the United States alone. The author of the article spoke with Glenn Sparks, a Purdue University professor who studies the effects of media violence. Sparks tells Zeitchik “...if I worked at Netflix I might say, ‘Well, this is what people want.’ But that doesn’t mean it should be provided... research shows that escalating violence on-screen can make us more tolerant of it in real life”. In the same article, Zeitchik interviewed a Netflix spokesperson who said, “there’s a huge [genre] choice on Netflix... focusing on one genre to the exclusion of all these others simply doesn’t reflect the programming we offer.” However, the article goes on to discuss Netflix’s January 2018 earnings as told to CNBC by Chief Content Officer, Ted Sarandos. Sarandos says, “this quarter... [it’s] been incredibly exciting when you see a big number like ‘Bird Box’ and ‘You’... [that] taps into the global zeitgeist”. Both of these aforementioned pieces focus on fictional portrayals of a gruesome apocalypse and a misogynistic, stalker serial killer. If the ‘global zeitgeist’ defines a time period’s interests and beliefs, what does this say about the media, who holds all moral responsibility for the commentary, editorials, films, and anecdotes it exposes to the masses?

### **C. Plausible Repercussions**

Regarding the aftermath of an unnatural exposure to more media than any human was ever meant to consume, only time will tell. However, how are we – as viewers, audience members, consumers – to know where the line of ‘healthy’ consumption for entertainment purposes precariously muddies with our real lives? In a 2020 article for

The Boar entitled *True Crime: The Impact of the TV Genre on Society*, writer Alice Standen explores the causes and effects of such media exposure. Standen differentiates between real life and media representations of violence, noting how “regular exposure to violence means it’s less likely to provoke an emotional response... people can become disinhibited... [meaning] we are more likely to see brutality as a reasonable response” (Standen, 2020).

In a society that is already too familiar with domestic violence, additional exposure is more than concerning. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 1 in 4 women in the United States will experience sexual violence, physical violence, or other forms of abuse that arise safety concerns in her lifetime. Additionally, from 2016 to 2018, the amount of intimate partner violence victimization in the United States has increased by 42 percent. Devastatingly enough, 1 in every 5 US women are and will be victims of rape or attempted rape throughout her lifetime. The NCADV also notes that “1 in 2 female murder victims are killed by intimate partners” (NCADV).

Kaviya Vijayakumar, a psychology and biology student, drafted an article for Her Campus in October 2020 outlining *Why we Romanticize Serial Killers and Why it Needs to Stop*. Vijayakumar explains that there are many reasons we’re so drawn to watching these perpetrators in shows and movies – both fictitious and non – but there are inevitable consequences to this. The writer explains that allowing these killers, yet another soapbox is exactly what they want. Additionally, not only is this exposure encouraging to the killers, but it’s also detrimental to their victims. Rather than continually producing media that makes the serial killer the focal point, “the media should be focusing on the victims of violence”. Moreover, Vijayakumar makes it clear that romanticizing serial killers is

“dangerous to young females”. Today, girls are already abundantly told damaging anecdotes regarding male behavior. Those boys pick on them because they have a crush on them, and not to mention our colossal issue of society-driven victim-blaming. Vijayakumar writes, “women are made to believe that they can ‘fix’ their partners... [and] having men who are known for being conventionally good-looking playing these monsters encourages attraction to them” (Vijayakumar, 2020).

Tumblr is yet another social media platform for original and re-posters alike. The community is an ecosystem for sharing anything and everything, which certainly strays into rocky territory. Though it’s known for many things, Tumblr’s “True Crime community” is one that ranges from informed and self-proclaimed researchers to parasocially doting people who possess an ever-so-troubling enchantment with serial killers.

Reporter Kelly Weill for The Daily Beast published a 2019 article called *Inside the Tumblr Community Where Women Worship Killers*. Weill writes for a specific Tumblr user, Brein Basarich. Basarich was a 31-year-old dancer at a Florida strip club when she was arrested in 2019 for “posting threats of widespread carnage on her Tumblr page under the chilling username ‘taking-lives’”, according to The New York Post (Miller, 2019). Weill writes that “Basarich called mass murderer Dylann Roof ‘precious’ and ‘handsome’” (Weill, 2019). Additionally, “Basarich’s Tumblr was a monument to killers... she didn’t just romanticize them; she appeared to agree with some.” In the article, Weill interviewed Dave Cullen, author of *Columbine*, a 2009 New York Times bestselling novel that examines the killers behind the Columbine High School Massacre. Cullen tells Weill and The Daily Beast that Tumblr’s True Crime community is “similar

to the phenomenon on death row, where women want to marry [perpetrators] or visit them”. Weill writes that Cullen “theorized that the young women on Tumblr believed they could have helped reform the shooters, had they been in a relationship”.

According to the American Psychological Association dictionary, *hybristophilia* is defined as a “sexual interest in and attraction to those who commit crimes... in some cases, this may be directed toward people in prison for various types of criminal activities” (APA Dictionary of Psychology). In a 2016 article for Owlcation, the psychology of *hybristophilia* is shed light upon. The article notes famous examples of this fairly common paraphilia, in how “Doreen Lioy fell in love with Richard Ramirez”, the Night Stalker. Also, Carol Boone married Bundy during his trials and bore his child. A March 2022 article for World News noted an exemplification of these precedents, this time about Scott Peterson. 32 years old at the time, California-dwelling Peterson was convicted of murdering his pregnant wife, Laci, in 2004. World News claims that “San Quentin Prison [reported] that a few hours after Peterson arrived on death row, he received a proposal from a woman who wanted to be the next Ms. Peterson... the warden [said] his office received more than three dozen phone calls on Peterson’s first day at San Quentin from women pleading for his mailing address” (Verma, 2022).

MTV News Staff Writer, Abby Lee Hood, authored an article in 2019 called *TikTok Has a Ted Bundy Problem*. Hood writes about a Tik Tok ‘trend’, where “users have been pretending to put on makeup as they get ready for a ‘date’ with a known murderer, only to lay on the floor and be dragged off the screen as if they’ve been killed in the following frame”. Hood also notes that other users roleplay as Bundy himself, where they film at “an under-the-bed angle as if they’re hunting for their ‘victims’”. The

author elaborates that this ‘trend’ “may have been inspired by what felt like an overload of pop culture dedicated to exploring the crimes and notoriety of one of the most infamous serial killers in modern history... *Conversations With a Killer...* followed by the Zac Efron film *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile*” (Hood, 2019).

Tik Tok user, @themisspamelaj uses her platform to “make the true crime community a respectable place one day at a time”. Pamela J. is a criminal pre-law student who largely focuses on putting respect on the names of victims and placing a halt to the sexualization of serial killers. Her most viewed video on the platform reached a whopping 16.7 million users’ screens. In it, she is responding to a comment made by a user on another one of her posts. The user’s comment on the post reads, “I literally don’t care I’m absolutely in love with Ted Bundy”. Account owner, Pamela, acknowledged the commenter with a video opening with the phrase, “I can’t change your mind, but I will remind you”. The Tik Tok is a 15-second montage of both real crime scene photos and Bundy’s court trials. These gruesome, graphic stills exhibit snapshots of Bundy’s victims’ skulls, their bloody sheets, his infamous Volkswagen Beetle, and dental photos of the teeth he used to bite the flesh off the buttocks of 20-year-old Lisa Levy.

Throughout my research for this project, one of Pamela’s Tik Toks came upon my page while scrolling the app (social media, our watchful Big Brother). Her content and passion for promoting her platform inspired me. I reached out to Pamela, curious as to where her devotion to this topic originated. She told me, “I was an intern for multiple justice agencies [as] a victim’s advocate... I saw firsthand the disrespect these victims and their families received... the victims matter, the survivors matter” (P., 2021).

### III. Conclusion

#### A. Other Notable Works

Though it's remained the focus throughout this dissertation, *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* is (unfortunately) not the only mass-released, insensitive, and romanticized portrayal of a murderer to exist in the industry. Of course, there's always been violent reenactments of murderers, rapists, pedophiles, and serial killers onscreen. However, there's a sort of juggling act casting producers should play when casting actors and actresses (who've been previously portrayed as the opposite) in these vilified roles.

*You* was widely released on Netflix in September of 2018. The series is based on writer Caroline Kepnes' novel of the same title, followed by her books in the franchise, *Hidden Bodies*, then *Providence*. The series follows Joe Goldberg, a "dangerously charming, intensely obsessive young man [who] goes to extreme measures to insert himself into the lives of those he is transfixed by" (IMDB). According to an article from The U.S. Sun, Joe murdered a total of 11 people throughout the current three seasons (Salas-Rodriguez, 2021). Each of his victims was in one way or another, acting as an obstacle in his mind between him and the woman he was stalking and obsessing over. Not only is this series an obvious representation of a deeply issued and abusive individual with sociopathic and psychotic tendencies, the main man, Joe, is played by actor Penn Badgley. For those for whom that name doesn't ring a bell, Badgley played a character on the ever-so-loved teenage CW drama, *Gossip Girl*. For the five years it ran, Badgley portrayed Dan Humphrey on the series. He was the love interest of the main female protagonist in the show, Serena Van Der Woodsen – played by Blake Lively – who he ends up marrying. Both characters – Joe and Dan – are wallflower bookworm types who

are candidly charming and traditionally handsome— However alarmingly similar these two characters seem to be, Penn Badgley is (thankfully) immensely aware of the character he is meant to portray in *You*. In fact, the actor even took it upon himself in January of 2019 to address a Twitter user who was swooning over his character of Joe. When interviewing Badgley about the project, *People Magazine* explicitly noted that “Badgley refused to make Joe ‘less creepy’ in *You*”. According to *People’s* 2019 article, Badgley told writer Breanne Heldman that “in making [Joe] more palatable, [perhaps] we risk diluting the very thing that he needs to be, which is kind of a disgusting human being” (Heldman, 2019).

A Golden Globe Nominee for Best Drama TV Series, Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk’s *American Horror Story* is no stranger to the dark and demented. The FX series has run for over a decade with more than eleven seasons and has been renewed for a twelfth in 2023. While each season follows its own time period and character trajectories, *American Horror Story: 1984* received a great amount of backlash for its portrayal of Richard Ramirez, infamously known as the Night Stalker. A 2021 article in *Looper* by writer Kendra A. outlined the many reasons *Why Fans Have a Big Problem with Richard Ramirez in AHS: 1984*. Kendra writes that “even though this isn’t the first time *AHS* has based a character on a real-life serial killer, the way the show depicts Ramirez is insensitive”. The writer goes on to mention that many fans found the characterization of the Night Stalker as “sexy” and “cool” immensely distasteful. This is exceedingly because “this era wasn’t all that long ago... most of Ramirez’s survivors are still living today... the story should have been [more] fictionalized out of respect for all the people Ramirez actually killed, and the many survivors he tormented” (Kendra A., 2021).

## **B. Final Thoughts**

As demonstrated throughout this dissertation, the romanticization and sexualization of serial killers as presented in the media is nothing but harmful. As a product, devastating consequences will inevitably arise, and they already have. While doting and swooning over murderers has been a present phenomenon since Bundy and preceding him, social media access has widened the scope of this issue to make its way directly into our lives. From Tumblr to Tik Tok and Reddit to Facebook groups, these immensely unhealthy obsessions with humanity's worst have given users a place to join forces.

In a society where everyone carries a miniature computer in their pockets, babies have iPads, and minors are being groomed online daily, there comes a point in time where responsibility should be taken on the part of mass media to monitor its releases. This isn't to say that education on these subjects should be limited because I don't believe that's helpful. There should simply be a way to create media education about serial killers that don't portray the abuser and perpetrator in any sort of positive connotation. Our minds are malleable and absorbent sponges that intake stimuli and data and apply it in other circumstances. Casting Hollywood's most handsome and beloved stars as monsters who've maliciously robbed lives creates a uniquely dangerous narrative that lacks morale in every aspect of it. Who's to say this trope couldn't be applied by young people to their relationships if life imitates art after all?

As aforementioned, humans have long possessed an innate interest in serial killers that probably won't disappear any time soon. This intrigue is nothing to be ashamed of



but show business has undertaken a massive evolution since the first film about a serial killer was made. According to the FBI, more than 300 murder cases were committed by American serial killers over the past two centuries. Where I believe the documentation, memoirs, and articles of these happenings are both informative and of the utmost importance, I'm not so sure that dramatic reenactments of these events are appropriate. For the real families, whose lives were forever changed by these crimes, dramatic adaptations of such events can most definitely be distasteful, misleading, and insensitive. As for the more than thirty women who were abused by Ted Bundy, portraying him as a nominee for "Sexiest Man Alive" is significantly and undoubtedly harmful. Not only is this depiction so obviously distasteful and lacking in morals, but it also perhaps strays away from the validation and sensitivity these victims so deserve. To portray America's most infamous serial killer as a Disney star turned American heartthrob contradicts and refutes every instinct, we have, to incriminate Ted Bundy. The film industry and media – regardless of intentions – have wandered exponentially astray from what they should be focusing on. Perhaps a victim's advocate, psychologist, and domestic violence counselor should be contacted before harmful media – exploiting victims while glorifying their perpetrator – ever reaches TV screens. Present repercussions have been mentioned throughout this paper, but no one's to say what effect media like these will have on our psyche down the road. If we are already alarmed by the Tumblr and Tik Tok community of people who regard serial killers in a positive light, we should be unreservedly petrified of the inevitable evolution of this community in years to come.

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