The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing: Unmasking the Allure of Serial Killer Culture

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America in the 1970s was a time period that gave birth to a time of letting loose and having fun. The ideas of disco dancing and rollerblading were at an all-time high. People truly embodied the bell-bottom pants' free-flow spirit, which also meant traveling. Music festivals and concerts were a main attraction, and the concept of being a groupie was gaining mass popularity. From trekking from concert to festival to concert again, people would hitch a ride with others. The idea of hitchhiking and staying with strangers also became widely accepted by groupies. The idea that somebody would have ill intentions when letting you hitch a ride to the next concert was out of sight and out of mind. This was until the concept of a "serial murderer" came to be. The Ted Bundy trial halted some of this fun, free-flowing culture and had people glued to their televisions. Bundy's trial was one of the first mass-televised cases for people to watch. It was clear that an easygoing chapter of American history had turned gruesome.

From the rise of disco and bell-bottom jeans to hippies, the 1970s had it all, but more sinister things happened behind the scenes. The 1970s were marked by friendliness and travel, leading to new experiences and destinations. During an all-time high of hitchhiking, when more sinister thoughts began to brew. The cliche of the danger of hitchhiking came from serial killers who were popularized in the 1970s. Due to the nature of the culture, letting loose and doing things that might not be considered safe now were considered normal back then. This was the perfect concoction that began the storm of serial killers throughout America. In America during this period, some of the world's most infamous serial killers came to fame: Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, and John Wayne Gacy. These killers set the precedent for what we know and understand serial killers to be to this day.

Since the 1970s, serial killers have risen to even greater fame. This is thanks to the creation of social media. With the rise of social media comes access to information that is

otherwise hard to come by. But one can't help but wonder, "Would serial killers be so popular if the media didn't glamorize them?" This thesis aims to explain how serial killers come to be created, and. It also aims to answer the larger question of the meaning behind the obsession with serial killers and whether the media exacerbates this.

THE PSYCHOLOGY BEHIND THE MADNESS

When we think of the classic movie "psychopath" some may think of *The Shining* when Jack was chasing Wendy around the house and trying to kill her. However, what does it actually mean to be psychotic? Being psychotic often means that you are in a state of psychosis, which is "a collection of symptoms that affect the mind, where there has been some loss of contact with reality. During an episode of psychosis, a person's thoughts and perceptions are disrupted, and they may have difficulty recognizing what is real and what is not" ("Understanding Psychosis"). For some, psychosis is a state of mind that involves them disconnecting from reality. Oftentimes, people see serial killers and think that they are habitual creeps, but this is not always true. In most cases, the most successful serial killers are the ones who lead a normal life throughout the day and turn to darkness at night.

For example, when people found out John Wayne Gacy had killed 33 boys, it "shocked his suburban Chicago community, where he was known for his sociability and his performance as a clown at charitable events and children's parties" ("John Wayne Gacy"). This is not the only case where serial killers would use their normal personalities to help disguise their actions. Ted Bundy was known for using "his charm and faked disability to convince his victims to help him carry books or unload objects from his car. He was also known to impersonate authority figures, such as police officers and firefighters, to gain victims' trust before he attacked" ("Ted Bundy"). Like a double-edged sword, this calm demeanor came naturally for some people but not so much

for others. For Dahmer, he had to go through an abnormal routine before he could commit any crimes. The way he would do it seems straight out of a horror movie. Dahmer would turn on the *Exorcist III* and would religiously watch it before he would kill his victims. Proven in court, "the man Dahmer tried to kill — who ended up escaping and persuading skeptical police to go to Dahmer's terrible-smelling apartment — testified at Dahmer's trial in 1992 that Dahmer did, indeed, force him to watch *The Exorcist III*" (Molloy).

Where does it all come from? Does psychosis become a part of the equation after the first kill, or is it before that? For many, "psychosis often begins in young adulthood when a person is in their late teens to mid-20s." This data correlates to when most killers "begin" their career. This is not the case for all killers; some may "experience a psychotic episode at younger and older ages and as a part of many disorders and illnesses" ("Understanding Psychosis"). Most serial killers possess some type of personality disorder. Specifically, In his trial, Jeffrey Dahmer was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder and schizotypal personality disorder, which led to the subsequent diagnosis of psychotic disorder (Restore Mental Health). But psychologists and serial killer fanatics wondered why he was this way. These people asked about the underlying cause of his illness and his actions, but the conclusion was that "there is no one cause of psychosis. Psychosis appears to result from a complex combination of genetic risk, differences in brain development, and exposure to stressors or trauma. Psychosis may be a symptom of a mental illness, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or severe depression" ("Understanding Psychosis").

When it comes to psychotic episodes and serial killers, it is not black and white. The answers to our questions lay within the gray areas. Scott Bonn, an author of books on serial killers, says, "Not all psychopaths are serial killers, and not all serial killers are psychopaths.

Being a psychopath alone does not make one a serial killer. Something else has to happen." He is saying that you are not necessarily born into being a serial killer, but something else contributes to that factor. What is most challenging about identifying the characteristics of a serial killer is that all of their cases are unique. It is challenging to find a common denominator that ties all serial killers together. Dr. Katharine Ramsland, a professor of forensic psychology, says that "if you study one case, you can identify the influences, but you can't generalize from that one to all others. You might find some things in common across many cases, such as abuse or head injuries, but it won't be true of all serial killers" (Elassar). This is what causes people to be enamored by the subject; it is the possibility that you could be sitting next to a serial killer or even dating one, and you would have no idea.

Is becoming a serial killer a work of nurture or nature? Can you *create* a serial killer? Criminal profilers and psychiatrists have asked this question for years. There is not a simple answer to this question. Oftentimes, there are connections between serial killers' childhoods that could lead them to have homicidal tendencies later in life. Such as head injuries and mental and physical abuse, but Dr. Katherine Ramsland, professor of forensic psychology and criminal justice at DeSales University, says having these things happen to them "won't be true of all serial killers" (Elassar). Author of *Why We Love Serial Killers,* Scott Bonn, says, "There can be a correlation between childhood trauma, but it's not enough to turn somebody into a serial killer. Numerous factors become a perfect storm that turns a person into a serial killer" (Elassar). The majority of the factors that criminologists examine for determining a serial killer are external. What draws apart one serial killer from another is what goes on in their brain.

Dr. Louis Schlesinger, professor of forensic psychology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, conveys that "there's a very strong neurobiological component to serial sexual murder

because the sexual instinct is biologically determined.". This brings in the different motives of serial killers. Sometimes, these killers have a motive beyond death. Going back to their adolescent years, most serial killers do not get much attention from their love interests. This can channel into deep anger and embarrassment, which can be released in the form of violence and sexual acts against their victims. These killers do this for various reasons, but it mostly boils down to sexual gratification. Scott Bonn remarks, "It becomes like a fantasy loop that plays over and over in their minds throughout adolescence and into early adulthood.". Later in life, these fantasies turn into "sexual urges, sexuality, and arousal [and become] intertwined and twisted with harming things and sadism and blood and an obsession with hurting and death." This draws the connection to their formative years when many expressed acts of violence against their peers. In *Conversations with a Killer: The Jeffrey Dahmer Tapes,* a documentary about Ted Bundy's life, it is said he had a "fondness for digging holes in the ground, putting stakes inside, then covering them with vegetation" (Elassar).

A HISTORY OF SIGNIFICANT SERIAL KILLERS

Most of the infamous serial killers of the 1970s were not always so-called "monsters" from the start. In many cases, they were the kids who sat silently in the back of the class and were often considered social outcasts. To understand the stories of the world's most infamous serial killers, one has to take a step back and examine the facts. The facts often get lost in the theatrics when watching shows about Dahmer, Bundy, or Gacy. It is important to recognize the factual stories of these killers in order to understand why and how they are glorified in the media. For example, most people see Ted Bundy as someone who was charming and handsome, but it was not always like that for him. As a child, Bundy was a social outcast who lacked friends and a stable household (Picotti). This completely changes one's view of a person. If I told you that for

the first twenty-two years of his life, Bundy thought his mother was his sister, would your opinion also change?

Ted Bundy was treated as a social outcast as a child, and yet Bundy's childhood behavior sometimes went beyond social awkwardness. Bundy did not lead a normal life; he claimed in his confession to have led an "uneventful childhood," but this was very much the opposite. A fellow Boy Scout remembered Bundy once coming from behind to hit him over the head with a stick. Oftentimes, since people like Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy were not accepted into the social groups, they would use violence as a way of overpowering and controlling the more socially regular kids. The vibrant nature of the 70s did not seem to fit the social mold of most of the infamous killers of that time. This made them feel ostracized and alone, which often led them to indulge in their own abnormal, violent fantasies. Most of the time, these killers would often exhibit abnormal behavior that resulted in the killing of small animals, exploring their fascination with death, and taunting children younger than them. This is precisely what Ted Bundy did. When he was younger, he would kill small animals and also torture children; as he got older, this violent behavior morphed into stealing, as well. He would steal ski equipment and forge lift tickets in order to ski. These petty crimes evolved into more serious crimes that included his becoming a peeping Tom (Picotti).

These came off his record when he turned 18; he went to college and graduated in 1972 with a promising future in law. This was all shortly thrown away when he attacked his first victim, Karen Sparks, on January 4, 1974. He beat her brutally and left her for dead. Karen Sparks is one of very few of Bundy's victims to survive; although she did not leave unscathed, she suffered brain damage after the attack. Not even a month later, Bundy would murder his first victim, Lynda Ann Healy, on February 1, 1974. Similar to Karen Sparks, Lynda Ann Healy was

also an undergraduate student at the University of Washington. This was the beginning of a string of murders, which ended up totaling around 30 women (Ott). After this, Bundy would go on to move between three different states, get apprehended and convicted of first-degree murder, escape prison, travel from Colorado to Florida, kill two more women, and injure three more all before he was permanently detained. These are the actions of a deranged man, and it is his childhood experiences and violent tendencies that may have lent themselves to his actions as an adult.

By day, he was a beloved figure who dressed as Pogo the Clown to entertain children at local events. But by night, he transformed into something far more sinister, weaving a tale of terror that would forever scar the Midwest. John Wayne Gacy is the definition of someone living a double life. For most of his adult life, he seemed unassuming and actually lived what people thought was an accomplished life. He was a businessman who ran "a successful construction business, earning more than $250,000 per year" and managed to live comfortably in the suburbs of Chicago. In his community, he was known for being respectful, kind-hearted, and welcoming. But his actions don't go unexplained.

Gacy didn't always have a picture-perfect life. His father named him after Hollywood star John Wayne when he was born. His father had high expectations for him, but Gacy always fell short. His relationship with his father was not healthy. His father drank profusely and often called Gacy a "sissy," which was humiliating. Gacy relied on his mother for his affection and would often cause his parents to fight. His father's addiction caused him to beat Gacy and even his mother. This had to do with Gacy's homosexuality; his father was unaware of his sexuality, but after Gacy's arrest, his mother said "[his father] would have killed him" if he ever knew. On top of having a poor relationship with his father, Gacy was also sexually assaulted multiple times

when he was a child, once by a female when he was five and another by his father's male friend when he was eight. This trauma could have been a factor in his violent outbreaks, where he would target young boys and torture and kill them. This is just one more example of a killer whose childhood trauma could be the root cause of his later actions as an adult and goes to show that benevolent appearances can be deceiving.

Do you think that saying "Oh, fiddlesticks!" after being convicted of one of the most gruesome serial killings is acceptable? Me neither, but luckily, that never happened. Although Dahmer did love to play with "fiddlesticks" when he was younger, you wouldn't believe what they were made of. People like Bundy and Dahmer often felt out of control in their life. Most of the time, this stemmed from home issues and an abusive parent. Jeffrey Dahmer had an eventful childhood. Joyce Dahmer, his mother, struggled heavily with depression and attempted suicide. His father was absent most of his childhood due to work. His parents argued often, and their marriage ended in a messy divorce. This caused a lot of stress in Dahmer's life, but this strife is not what caused him to become a cannibalistic serial killer. Most of the time, what lies within the mind showcases this nature. Oftentimes, it comes out in odd hobbies. For instance, Dahmer has always had a fascination with roadkill. He would collect dead animals off the side of the road and use medical-grade chemicals to melt the flesh and tissue off the bones. Dahmer loved this, and it would later make an appearance in his trial when he used corrosive chemicals to melt the flesh off his victims (Janos). When he was a child, his father would use this as a bonding activity; with his father's medical background, they bonded over learning the bone structure of the animals and understanding the chemical compounds that melt the tissues of the animals. Dahmer loved doing this so much that his family even called the bones he would collect his "fiddlesticks," and he enjoyed playing with them. Even though it would make perfect sense, this

fascination is not what turned Dahmer into a serial killer. Although it is a beaming red flag, his reasons for murder go deeper.

According to Carl Wahlstrom, a forensic psychiatrist who interviewed and evaluated Dahmer and served as an expert witness in his trial, Dahmer has an "off the chart" libido. This is what drove him to kill, not necessarily stemming from his desire for a sexual relationship but an overwhelming obsession that he could not look away from. When Dahmer was young, he had an uncontrollable obsession with a male jogger in his neighborhood, which led to an incurable lust for this man. He eventually moved on from this obsession, but he did not forget about it. He committed the first of his infamous murders at the age of eighteen with a victim similar to his younger obsession, Steven Hicks, a jogger in his neighborhood. Dahmer picked Hicks up and took him to his house, where when Hicks tried to leave, he was beaten to death with a dumbbell and then strangled. More than anything, Dahmer wanted someone to be with him all the time and essentially to be his slave. Since Dahmer had a lack of control in his informative years, control was all that he wanted, and this was one of his strongest motives for killing. Surprisingly enough, Dahmer never had the objective to kill in the beginning. He only acted violently toward Hicks when he tried to leave his house; this is because Dahmer felt like the situation was out of his control. He could not believe he was interacting with a man he was so obsessed with, and when he tried to leave, he could not handle it. Oftentimes, it is an acute set-off that drives a serial killer to have a psychotic break and kill. There is a level of psychosis that lies within all serial killers. Normally, psychosis is marked by a level of disconnection from reality and a level of paranoia. When the symptoms of psychosis reach a certain level, it causes a psychotic break which in Dahmer's case caused him to kill Steven Hicks, his first of seventeen victims ("Understanding Psychosis").

A CULTURAL FASCINATION WITH SERIAL KILLERS

The copious amounts of views rack up on serial killer shows and documentaries not only because of the actors playing them but also because of an actual obsession with these people. People are naturally drawn to serial killers even in "television shows like *The Fall*, movies like *The Perfume*, and songs like 'The Ripper' by Judas Priest, which provide evidence of a widespread fascination with serial killers. Serial killers have operated throughout history and around the world. Even though the majority of the people do not kill, the general public seems to have a fascination with serial killing" (Sharma 5). People begin to treat these serial killers as celebrities, which is where a lot of their glorification comes from. People often only think this deep of an obsession revolves around heartthrob celebrities, but people are obsessed with serial killers to the same extent, sometimes even more. What is even more interesting is that this is sometimes a motivator to kill more serial killers. "Serial killers are not immune to the appeals of celebrity. As Egger (2002) has demonstrated in his analysis of seven of the most notorious American serial killers, the majority 'seemed to enjoy their celebrity status and thrive on the attention they received.' Hence the complaint of a serial killer to local police is telling: 'How many times do I have to kill before I get a name in the paper or some national attention?' (Braudy, 1986)" (Haggerty and Ellerbrok). Sometimes, it is just the fifteen minutes of fame that these people want. Even if it is infamous fame, it is still attention that is being directed toward them.

People are obsessed with serial killers, and not just in the collector's item sense. People are physically attracted to these people. Ted Bundy even "received over five hundred proposals for marriage at the time of his arrest.". Women threw themselves at this charismatic killer. That is not even half of it; California serial killer Richard Ramirez, who was known for carving

pentagrams into people's chests "started a mini-riot on the Phil Donahue show when four women who were in love with him began cat-fighting live on TV (Donahue 10)." Serial killers are not just impacting people's lives in the present with riots and letters, they are also inspiring works of fiction and novels to be written. Sadist Charles Manson, who brainwashed college students into killing, "has inspired over fifty books" (Conrath 151). People would go as far as to "[send] lewd photos, serving as a prime example of how serial killers are placed on a pedestal — especially if the media deems them conventionally attractive" (Lagarto).

Serial killers are not just glorified in popular culture but also in real life. Hearing these girls gush over Ted Bundy and Richard Ramirez almost makes them seem better than they are. People get so wrapped up in their looks and tend to avoid their actions. This is harmful because it not only directs the wrong attention to the serial killers but also directs attention away from the victims and their mourning families. Glorifying these monsters creates a false sense of admiration, giving these people a pedestal they do not deserve. Boosting serial killers not only promotes the production of more works surrounding serial killers, but it also can drive serial killers to kill more often or even for people to become serial killers.

In today's social media, attention is the most valuable currency among people. Anybody will do just about anything for a couple thousand likes and shares. When dormant serial killers see the fame that convicted serial killers are gaining, it makes them jealous, and it drives them to kill.

Just like celebrity crushes or hoarders, everything has its extremes, even murder enthusiasts. These people collect items related to crime scenes and they call it murderabilia. Murderabilia is defined as "articles of clothing, personal possessions, and locks of hair belonging to murderers" (Yuko). In more specific terms, the idea behind murderabilia is characterized by a

hardcore hobby, an obsession with serial killers, and a dive into the darkness of the human psyche. The act of partaking in the phenomenon of murderabilia is a "sick hobby of a deviant minority" (327). In other words, some people tend to dive too deeply into the world of murderabilia, almost to a sick level. Much interest behind murderabilia refers to serial killer stars such as Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy. Murderabilia is crucial because it serves as a way to venture deeper into the human mind and explore interests people do not often want to discuss. Without murderabilia, the serial killer industry would not be as mainstream as it is today. Brian Jarvis provides that "murderabilia ranges from serial killer art (paintings, drawings, sculpture, letters, poetry), to body parts (a lock of hair or nail clippings) from crime scene materials to kitsch merchandising" (Jarvis 327). Murderabilia consumers delight in purchasing T-shirts and mugs of serial killers, but it goes much deeper than that. Extremists even go as far as to purchase the belongings of serial killers, such as paintings, glasses, articles of clothing, and even locks of hair.

Misrepresenting serial killers is not only harmful to our minds but also could potentially be dangerous to people's lives. A phenomenon called "copycat killings" has arisen from the profuse glorification and popularization of serial killers. These people "don't want to "be known specifically as copycat killers, per se. They just want celebrity, and they get their ideas from the media" (Janos). People are driven to kill just for the attention.

One of the primary identifiers of serial killers early on is their struggles with women or relationships. After seeing all these serial killers receive photos and love letters in prison, the copycat killers see that as an avenue for attention. For example, the infamous and never-captured Zodiac Killer had a copycat killer named Eddie Seda. The Zodiac killer's signature was his taunting letters and ciphers that he sent to news outlets and the police. Eddie Seda did the same

thing. He killed people in New York and taunted the police and media while he did it. If we chose to treat serial killers like the terrible people they are, would we have people like Eddie Seda? People who only kill for the attention or out of admiration for the original serial killer? Some of these copycat killers seem to be off the hook already, like killer Michael Madison, who was obsessed with the Clevland Strangler and copied his strategy. He even watched "YouTube videos [of the Cleveland strangler] and [cried] in sympathy with the perpetrator" (Janos). It still begs the question, "What if we did not glorify serial killers?" would these people be alive? Is the glorification and monetization of serial killers what sends these other people off the hook and drives them to kill? The Cleveland Strangler is not even a headline serial killer. However, people say, "Madison 'idolized' Sowell [the Cleveland Strangler] and saw him as a model for the murders he would commit" (Janos). He not only modeled his serial killer career off of Sowell but even disposed of his victims' bodies just miles away from where Sowell did. Copycat killers are an extremist form of the love that people have for serial killers. Still, most copycat killers' research is done through popular culture outlets such as magazines and TV shows (Janos).

That is not to say that all serial killer shows and movies inaccurately depict the lives and actions of serial killers, but "even if a show accurately depicts events, the entertainment industry has a tremendous influence on society – thus making it crucial for creators to ensure their content is not glamorizing criminals. The idealization of serial killers is dangerous, as it encourages the idea that grotesque murders committed by killers are worthy of stardom" (Lagarto). Either way, we are giving these killers a platform to showcase their crimes. Whether or not we include the bloody details does not affect how people view them. Even if documentaries decide to show the gorey facts, it is still a platform and one that they do not deserve.

Women have historically been attracted to the "bad boy" in their favorite movies or TV shows. One notable example is Ian Somerhalder's Damon Salvatore in *The Vampire Diaries*. In a more serious sense, Ted Bundy "played" this character for women in the 1970s, but he was much worse than a fictional vampire. He was a real-life serial killer, and it was said that he "received over five hundred proposals for marriage at the time of his arrest" (Conrath 151). Women were obsessed with his charming nature and still are today. Where does this obsession come from? Is this idolization of bad people something that is biologically intertwined in our minds, or is this behavior taught through social media and public fascination? There has even been a term coined for this idea; it is called Hybristophilia, and it is "a condition where sexual arousal is linked to a partner who acts out against society via outrage and crime." There are multiple reasons why women are attracted to this demographic of men. One prominent reason why is how they portray themselves. Serial killers are often very smooth and present themselves readily, which causes them to be very manipulative and misleading. They are good at "creating the image they wish to project and convincing others of its 'reality,' despite evidence to the contrary. They can be very good at playing different roles, with one being a nice, seemingly safe and trustworthy person" (Vatomsky). This sense of security that they are so good at portraying causes women to fall for them, not much unlike their victims.

On top of their charming personalities, the media has a role in how we view the so-called "bad boy." When serial killers appear in the media:

> The photos of these men may [appear] on a daily basis in various media outlets. So, the women may be acting on a conscious or unconscious desire for secondary fame. Also, serial killers can be charismatic, smart or cunning, risk-takers, and focused—all qualities which could explain their ability to attract and trap so many victims in the first place. [Those qualities can be] appealing in a partner as well. (Vatomsky)

The media only exploits these criminals for their redeeming traits, leading women to glorify these men and sometimes even look past their actions. One of the most gruesome serial killers,

Jeffrey Dahmer, received "over fifty fan letters a week [while in prison], mostly from women" (Conrath 151). However, it is not only the media's persuasion that attracts women to these men; it is also a concern for science.

It specifically has to do with the attraction to thrill, "attraction to deviance, which can trigger in the brain the release of the neurotransmitter norepinephrine, which itself increases arousal and attention; in other words, the deviance of the relationship can be felt positively" (Vatomsky). Sometimes the thrill that women get from unpredictable men causes them to mistake that emotion for "butterflies" or a feeling of attraction. The phenomenon of women being attracted to serial killers is a complex and multifaceted issue that cannot be reduced to a single explanation. While it has to do with science, it also concerns societal standards, and often, "women's broader fascination with serial killers may be related to gendered romantic projections of fascination, fear, and anger, but also an attempt to understand what cannot be understood in a rational or statistical way: why serial killers target women for their own gratification" (Johnson 7). While some theories suggest psychological factors such as a desire for power or control, others emphasize societal influences and the romanticization of violence in popular culture. Regardless of the reasons, it is crucial to recognize the dangers of glamorizing or normalizing such behaviors and to promote healthier and more respectful relationships built on mutual trust, understanding, and empathy.

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS

Has it always been popular to incorporate violence in films? Well, yes and no. Violence has always been present to a degree in film, but not how we know it today. In some of the nascent stages of popular cinema, violence was present, but it was not so much violence as it was the *suggestion* of violence. In Alfred Hitchcock's famous 1960 film *Psycho,* there is a 45-second

scene that left people scared to take a shower, and for some, it was even too violent to watch. But when you watch the movie, there is no violence shown: it is simply the shadow of the killer on the shower curtain and blood splatter all over the bathroom. Since then, violence in film has completely changed with the rise of certain directors such as Francis Ford Coppola, Quentin Tarantino, and Stanley Kubrick. From the mere suggestion through a shower curtain in *Psycho* to a full-blown bloody shootout in *The Godfather,* film violence has changed much (Banark).

The start of film dates back to the 1800s, with the first film being The *Roundhay Garden Scene* by Louis Le Prince in 1888 (Norman). Only in the early 20th century were there few restrictions on film. It was not until 1922 that William Hays founded the Motion Picture Distributors Association of America (MPAA). From this organization came many forms of censorship in film, particularly the Hays Code, created in 1930; this was a moral "code" for filmmakers to follow, and it also provided censorship guidelines ("Will H. Hays"). This era of working out rules and censorship for films was one of the most significant times for cinema in Hollywood history. The period from the early 1920s to the 1960s is known as the golden age of Hollywood and has produced timeless movies that people today still enjoy ("History of Ratings").

You would be surprised as to how these films are rated; most would think it is a rubric that must be followed to make every rating equal, but it isn't that simple. Instead of going about it objectively, the MPAA has taken a more subjective route. The movies are put to a board of parents who decide the rating based on their own opinion of the movie. A rating is assigned to the movie based on how much violence, sex, language, and/or drug use is involved. But is it fair to cast the belief of one group of people onto the whole world? Is this board of parents unbiased? How can they be impartial when it comes to their children? It turns out they are; however, most

people accuse the MPAA of being biased when assigning movie ratings. People are more prone to harsh censorship regarding children, especially their own ("Will H. Hays"). For example, a film was released in 2010 about the Holocaust that depicted graphic scenes of Jewish people during those horrific events. The director, Yael Horsonski, urged students to watch this film in order to show students what the Warsaw ghetto was like and to be utilized as a learning tool. However, when this film went through the vetting process, it received an R rating. The director did not see this as fair because a similar movie depicting similar concepts was given a lighter rating. People also thought this was unfair because Steven Spielberg released a depiction of the Holocaust that mirrored the same ideas as Horsonski's film but instead received a PG-13 rating. Most people thought Spielberg's film received a less severe rating because of his successful history as a director. This shows that it does not necessarily matter what is being shown but rather to whom it is being shown (Noah).

Violence is a storytelling technique that often enhances the viewers' experience. It keeps people on the edge of their seats, glued to the screen. Yet, it is heavily censored. Many directors say violence is artistically justified or necessary for narrative progression. Not only does it help the plot of movies, but it also keeps people coming to theaters and subscribing to streaming services. The masses love to see a heated fight between characters, and violent scenes are often discussed the most. Directors see this and use it to their advantage (Slocum). Violence is not only interesting for viewers to watch, but it also is great for the box office numbers. Violence sells, and the directors know this the best. In some instances, the film industry relies on violence for commercial success. Even though some try to censor violence, the audience demands the perpetuation of violent content to be a prevalent aspect of certain movies (Crockett).

People love to sit on the edge of their seats and have the hair on the back of their necks stand up. This especially happens at the end of a horror movie; the scariest thing is the "based on a true story" part at the end. The fact that things we think are "only in movies" is true in real life is what scares us the most. The directors have combined these two ideas and made copious movies about serial killers. But like everything in the movie industry, it is dramatized for the audience's sake. Which in most cases can lead away from the horrendous crimes and more toward scaring people. It distorts the stories of the killers for the sake of monetization.

The first word you think of when you hear the names Zac Efron and Ross Lynch is heartthrob. These child actors who gained their popularity through Disney movies such as High School Musical and Teen Beach Movie have solidified their social status as the jock or heartthrob. So, when you hear the headline that Ross Lynch is starring as Jeffrey Dahmer in Netflix's new feature film *My Friend Dahmer* and Zac Efron in *The Extremely Wicked Shockingly Evil and Vile,* a movie about infamous serial killer Ted Bundy, you are left in shock, and honestly intrigued. This draws people in, and often, the audience that watches the movie is more intrigued by the actor playing the role than the character they are playing. People flock to Netflix just to get another look at their celebrity crush, whether they are playing every girl's childhood crush, Troy Bolton, or depraved serial killer Ted Bundy. Statistics can prove this point: *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* "officially surpassed 1 billion hours viewed on Netflix" ("Dahmer - Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Show"). The show only lasting one season even "broke a Nielsen record as the seventh most viewed week for any streaming program in the US, and held the top spot on Nielsen's weekly streaming chart for three consecutive weeks ("Dahmer - Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Show"). This is all because people were thrown into a craze when they saw Evan Peters, the actor who played Dahmer in this series. His fame took off when

he played a school shooter in the Netflix series *American Horror Story*. People gushed over his character and began to obsess over him, such as dressing up as his character for Halloween and making edits and fan pages of him on social media. The obsession continues with a prospective show about the Menendez twins, who murdered their parents. According to Variety Magazine, Cooper Koch and Nicholas Alexander Chavez are cast as the Menendez twins (Hailu).

Serial killers are not just glorified through the heartthrob actors that play them but also through how they are portrayed. In the realm of serial killer movies and TV shows, serial killers' real stories are grossly glamorized. For example, the Ted Bundy movie starring Zac Efron strayed away from his hideous crimes and focused more on his appearance in court and his escape from prison. They portray Ted Bundy as a brilliant and charming character (which he was), but to the extent that he almost seems to take away from his vile acts of violence. There is a scene in the movie when he gets pulled over and somehow seems to talk his way out of his car, getting searched by charming the police. This happens in real life with "several people [having] contacted authorities to report Bundy as a potentially matching suspect. However, police consistently ruled him out based on his seemingly upstanding character and clean-cut appearance" ("Ted Bundy"). However, the movie glorified the situation to a point where people seemed to forget that he had murder weapons in his trunk. Ted Bundy presented himself as an intelligent and articulate person, even choosing to represent himself in court and study law while he was in prison, but what popular culture seems to gloss over is that his heightened sense of confidence is not that of pride but of narcissism. Ted Bundy was a narcissist, folks, but popular culture and viewers do not want to know that because it ruins his charming personality that people are oddly attracted to.

The film also focuses heavily on his escape from prison, making him look like a genius for escaping prison (as if no one had ever done that before). There are roughly twenty minutes of the film dedicated to showing him gaining strength in his legs to be able to jump out of the courthouse window. They set the scene and he was able to trick the guards to get some alone time, and he jumped. The movie depicts a miraculous escape into the woods when, in reality, he sprained his ankle, which was not very graceful. His escape actually led to a killing spree at Florida State University, which is left out of the movie (Caroline).

In conclusion, the media's glorification of serial killers such as Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, and John Wayne Gacy has more harmful circumstances than people may think. The glorified portrayal of these individuals risks creating a cultural fascination with their heinous acts. More importantly, attention paid to the killers takes away from their victims and their families. By focusing on the blood-curdling details of their crimes and the deep knit personalities of the killers, the media often neglects the victims' stories and the societal factors that contribute to such violence. When in reality, this glorification is overshadowing the critical need for a deeper understanding of the psychological and social issues underlying their actions. Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, and John Wayne Gacy have all been subject to intense media scrutiny. Their stories have been repeatedly dramatized in films, documentaries, and books, maintaining a cycle of infamy that fuels public curiosity and morbid fascination. This media coverage often prioritizes shock value and entertainment over responsible reporting and analysis, inadvertently contributing to a cult-like status for these criminals. To make the stories of serial killers more well-rounded, the media must change what they focus on in the storytelling aspect. This includes emphasizing the humanity and suffering of the victims, providing context for the killers' actions within societal frameworks, and avoiding glorified narratives that glamorize violence. A more

balanced and respectful approach can help prevent the glamorization of violence and contribute to a more accurate storyline, contextualizing the killers while honoring the victims and their families.

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