



Netflix and Kill: The Problem with Romanticizing Serial Killers



Screenshot: [Twitter.com](https://twitter.com/netflix)

On January 26, the trailer for the new Ted Bundy biopic “Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile” was released to major excitement. The film stars popular actor Zac Efron as Bundy, a notorious American serial killer, and model Lily Collins as Bundy’s girlfriend, Lisa Kloepfer. The serial killer is infamous for committing a series of horrific acts, including murder, involving anywhere between 30 to 100 women in the 1970s. The trailer features the two in love and arguing about if the allegations against Bundy are

true; Kloepfer is portrayed as conflicted because of her feelings toward Bundy, but she’s also portrayed as wanting to protect herself and her young daughter from Bundy’s lies and violent tendencies.

While some eagerly await the movie’s release, others worry that the new biopic glamorizes and unjustifiably humanizes the killer Ted Bundy. Making matters complex, some aspects emphasized by the narrative do have traces in the real trial involving Bundy. He was not treated like other serial killers such as Charles Manson or John Wayne Gacy, and there was not the same overwhelming call for the death penalty as with other killers. Some young women, Bundy’s targeted victim type, even attended Bundy’s trial and showed support for him, perhaps because he seemed mysterious and attractive; such “fans” ignored the fact that he murdered and mutilated the bodies of women their age. With these facts in place, Suzanne Moore explains how romanticizing the egregious serial killer Bundy in the new biopic might be dangerous for women and how it could demean what it means to be a victim; she worries that the film portrays and potentially evokes “Hybristophilia,” which is “the name given to the sexual arousal that comes from a partner who has committed a crime: the fantasy that you are special enough to give the love that would stop such a man doing the things he does.” Bundy, however, never stopped committing his real life crimes, even after he started dating his girlfriends, including Kloepfer. Dramatizing this hope of redemption and attractiveness might only give him more attention, and demean the real suffering of those he hurt.

But such attention is exactly what Bundy would have wanted. In the biopic trailer, Bundy is portrayed as enthralled by the fact he is “bigger than the Disney World.” Discourse that humanizes or compliments Bundy seemed to only inflate Bundy’s ego, and to continue to add insulted those who were attacked by him. In 1978, Florida University student Kathy Kleiner Rubin was attacked by Bundy in her sorority house. She is the first of Bundy’s surviving victims to speak up about the troubling realizations the new Netflix movie is causing. But many were shocked by her statement, as she actually encouraged those to see the movie: “It’s not really glorifying him, but it’s showing him and when they (the characters in the film) do



say positive and wonderful things about him ... that's what they saw, that's what Bundy wanted you to see" (Bonner, 2019). She believes that the movie's supposedly accurate portrayal will help women "be more aware of their surroundings and be cautious." Director Joe Berlinger states the biopic does not "romanticize" or "glorify" Bundy's actions, but rather focuses on the relationship between him and Kloepfer as the murderer's heinous acts are catching up to him. Berlinger defends his work by revealing that the movie assumes the perspective of Kloepfer, so it will naturally foreground the complex thoughts that she is feeling about Bundy leading up to his arrest and trial (Obenson, 2019). Berlinger's defense brings up an interesting point about the artistic freedom in the film industry. When making a movie based on true events, filmmakers can change or select different perspectives on an event, emphasizing different points of view and different ways characters are affected. Films that do this can add to the diversity of stories and storylines we are exposed to, showing the complexities in important historical events.

This is precisely the case for the variety of stories being told about Ted Bundy's crimes. A week prior to the trailer's release, a four-part documentary series on Bundy was released by Netflix titled "Conversations with a Killer: the Ted Bundy Tapes." This docuseries was also directed by Berlinger. This series does the complete opposite of "Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile": "This documentary explicitly details the serial killers gruesome attacks, not how his groupies felt about him" (Harvilla, 2019). With both of these films, Berlinger wanted to show different ways of looking back on the serial killer 30 years after his execution, but concerns remain about the ways of telling this story that might seemingly prioritize Bundy's looks and charm over his gut-wrenching actions. Some critics might be tempted to observe that Berlinger was able to make "Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile" in a light that did not romanticize the mysterious killer like his other film, one that cast popular actors adored for their looks and that used a thrilling plot to drive a movie effectively about murdering and manipulating women.

Perhaps "Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile" makes up for the choices made in "Conversations with a Killer: the Ted Bundy Tapes," but the separation of visions may also do more harm than good for Berlinger in providing separable visions that inform and entertain in different ways on this serial killer. What are the ethical implications of related, but separate, artifacts that make very different choices in dealing with heinous acts and infamous individuals?

Discussion Questions:

1. What values are in conflict with the controversy over the dramatized Ted Bundy biopic?
2. Do you believe that casting a popular actor and heartthrob as a serial killer presents any problems? How should the directors have handled the casting and scripting of such a criminal?



3. Does the existence of the documentary excuse the biopic's actions, or simply magnify the worries over those casting and writing choices?
4. What general principles should directors and writers follow when creating films based upon atrocious criminals such as Ted Bundy?

Further Information:

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