

The Glamorization of Serial Killers in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* (2019)

More often than not, serial killers have been portrayed in cinema as cunning, mysterious, attractive, and intelligent characters that heighten the suspense of these dangerous individuals. In contemporary American society, serial killers are notably recognizable as any Hollywood celebrity.¹ This may be a positive in the world of publicity, where criminals are caught much quicker with the help of the public eye. However, this ability to be recognized as a serial killer has turned into the glamorization of criminals to the point where murderers are being idolized and considered “attractive,” diminishing their criminal behavior and the weight of a victim’s narrative.

Though the advancement in technology and social media within recent years has spread this romanticization like wildfire, other scholars have traced this back many decades. Numerous scholars claim this fascination began in the 1970s and 80s, yet society’s various responses to serial murder post-WWII prove otherwise—crime comics and emerging feminism challenged the conservatism of the 1950s.² This led to the progressive decades of the 1960s, serving as a platform for groundbreaking films. The 60s created frameworks for ongoing horror and crime cinema where the star is the serial killer, an example being the 1960 film *Psycho*.³ This reveals not only how corrupt and dark society’s idolization of serial killers is but additionally how long it has persisted. Two notable films, *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* (2019), offer valuable insight into the analysis of their unique portrayal

¹ Travaglione, Alayna. "A Golden Age Turned Red: America's Obsession with Serial Murder in the 1950s and 1960s." College of Charleston, 2021.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

of serial killers in cinema, proving that—fictional or not—films can easily manipulate the enemy into a glamorous individual to overlook their unlawful behavior.

Many responses to serial killers in film originate from society's fear and curiosity—we become fascinated with the darker aspects of humanity that cannot be fully grasped.⁴ This continues to ring true as the world still invests in the continuation and exposure of society's dark side. The public and media love to play detective when it comes to experts who have yet to figure out unexplained phenomena or cases, especially those that have gone cold for many decades. What makes films like *The Silence of the Lambs* or *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile (EWSEAV)* captivating and intriguing is the thrill of the violence and their ability to expand on storylines in ways news stories never could.⁵ The 1991 film, directed by Jonathan Demme and written by Ted Tally, *The Silence of the Lambs*—notably fictional—follows Clarice Starling, a young FBI trainee (Jodie Foster), who is hunting a serial killer named "Buffalo Bill" (Ted Levine) while receiving advice from Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins), another intelligent serial killer. On the more realistic side, the 2019 American biographical crime drama film *EWSEAV* portrays the life of serial killer Ted Bundy—entirely nonfictional. Whether it is intellectually or physically, these specific films utilize ways to glamorize the serial killers portrayed. They give a more intimate look at violence, taking advantage of the star power that comes with actors and actresses.⁶ By romanticizing the crimes through fictional and nonfictional

⁴ Travaglione, Alayna. "A Golden Age Turned Red: America's Obsession with Serial Murder in the 1950s and 1960s." College of Charleston, 2021.

⁵ Latora, Mallorie Margaret. "Netflix and Kill: A Framing and Uses and Gratifications Comparative Analysis of Serial Killer Representations in the Media." Illinois State University, 2020.

⁶Ibid.

depictions, it is easier for society to downplay the seriousness of the committed acts. Casting conventionally attractive actors to play these roles only worsens the issue.⁷

Throughout criminal history, it is quite rare to read or watch a killer with an incredibly low IQ. It is more common to view an individual who is beyond the average person in terms of intelligence, a prime reason why Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* is so highly regarded. Serial killer films tend to mobilize cinematic structures by the presence of film stars playing killers, meaning that an audience is encouraged to feel that the personality of the film star is overlaid with the public's fascination with the psyche of a killer.⁸ This shows how deeply glamorized a killer is due to the identity pairing of the actor and the killer, merging of the two. This can lead to a surreal level of imbalance: the audience knows an actor is playing the role of a criminal—and at times even portraying a real individual. Having an actor closely mimic the movements and personalities of real-life serial killers (as seen in *EWSEAV*) enhances the glamorization of the original killer due to the impressive acting and *different* portrayal despite filmmakers attempting to go for an *accurate* portrayal. Mainstream Hollywood films about serial murder usually attempt to control the potentially dangerous aspects of identification by giving their viewers a way to deny responsibility and their involvement with the serial killer characters.⁹

An example of this is *The Silence of the Lambs*, where the most idolized character is the one with the most intelligence—even the other characters respect Hannibal Lecter because of his sophisticated mind. After the success of *The Silence of the Lambs*, the fame of serial killers

⁷ Karkoff, Sarah. "The Romanticization of Crime: Can Hot People Get Away with Anything?" The Observer. Case Western Reserve University, October 2022.

⁸ Schmid, David. *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

⁹ Ibid.

became an accepted part of contemporary American culture.¹⁰ Social media has only contributed to this matter, where people go to extreme lengths to justify their romanticization of killers. However, this glamorization has been around for decades, as mentioned earlier. It is the success of *Silence* that gives its audience the disavowal of Buffalo Bill's death, which in turn allows the audience to disavow any identification it may have formed with the killers, positioning Hannibal Lecter to be the more acceptable killer in the film simply because he is more educated and witty (and received a sequel).¹¹

On the other hand, casting an A-list celebrity to play a real-life serial killer has a higher probability of capturing the attention of film viewers. For decades and still to this day, Hollywood's essence was built on the broadcasting and exploitation of beautiful people.¹² Due to the prior glamorization of Zac Efron in films such as *High School Musical* and *Baywatch*, the actor is automatically set up to be glamorized, no matter what role he plays. The more unique roles he gets cast in, the more versatile he will be as an actor and thus more desired in and out of the film industry. In terms of *EWSEAV*, the fixation of killers such as Ted Bundy comes from the way he's been depicted in film—an attractive, articulate man who at times is gentle and caring.¹³ Though this portrayal of Bundy is perhaps accurate—as most serial killers are cunning and charismatic—it is hard to say whether or not the glamorization would still be the same if one had cast a B or C-list celebrity. It is more likely that (especially in our digital age) nearly anyone can be glamorized into an attractive individual, despite playing a killer. As it seems in our society, it

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Strutz, Kenady "Extremely Insensitive, Shockingly Misleading And Dangerous: Exploring The Implications of Romanticizing Serial Killers In Film." Texas State University, 2022.

¹³ Ibid.

is the mind of a serial killer that appears to intrigue the audience; the looks just make it easier to justify.

In *EWSEAV*, the majority of the film portrays Bundy as a non-violent man, one who cares for his family and maintains innocence throughout the narrative. It isn't until the end that it becomes clear that he is, in fact, guilty of committing these heinous crimes.¹⁴ Omitting any scenes of criminal acts and violence from the beginning of the film allows a deeper justification behind the killer and further allows the audience to build up the glamor. The storyline opens with the outside of a prison and then switches to Liz (Lily Collins) talking to Bundy (Zac Efron) through a glass visitation booth. The scene cuts to a young Liz capturing the gaze of Ted at a bar, where they end up talking and dancing together, to then having him spend the night at her house.¹⁵ These bar and dance scenes emphasize the romanticization of Efron's character as Bundy because of the nature of Bundy and Liz's interaction—one that is romantic—making it easier for the audience to sustain the glamorization through the crimes.

Though the film portrays a part of a killer's life and the deceptiveness that typically is seen within criminals, *EWSEAV* still diminishes Bundy's crimes by not showing any aspect of his violent behavior until the very last twelve minutes. The majority of the movie depicts his crimes—though not stating that it's *him* committing them—in a series of montages or flashbacks of old footage, showing Bundy behaving normally while the news broadcasts the murders in the background.¹⁶ This is strategically done, showing how deceptive and innocent a killer can appear. Yet by not pairing Efron's character directly with the crime, there is still room for the glamorization of his character. While the film sometimes presents Bundy in a contradictory light,

¹⁴ Latora, Mallorie Margaret. "Netflix and Kill: A Framing and Uses and Gratifications Comparative Analysis of Serial Killer Representations in the Media." Illinois State University, 2020.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

his general representation is as a man loved by Liz.¹⁷ Additionally, there are at least three main instances where Bundy is referred to as a “smooth-talking man” either by a news report or by Carole Ann.¹⁸ At one point, the Florida judge tells Bundy he is dressed nicely. These scenes condition the audience to pair Efron with the “smooth-talking man,” enabling the portrayal of his charisma and thus contributing to the glamorization of the killer.

Though it seems quite difficult—due to society’s advancing technologies—to decrease or even eliminate the romanticization of killers in film, there could be ways to reframe the way an audience receives a film of that kind. The final scene in *EWSEAV* is Liz leaving the parking lot while the text of the real story is displayed along with a list of Bundy’s real victims. As the credits roll, real footage of him begins to play, including a clip of him saying he wasn’t guilty. The last sentence heard in the film is a recording of Bundy saying, “Murderers do not come out in the dark with long teeth and saliva dripping off their chin. People don’t realize that there are killers among them. People they liked, loved, lived with, worked with, and admired could the next day turn out to be the most demonic people imaginable.”¹⁹ By using nonfiction stories and including real footage of the murderer’s crimes throughout the entirety of the film, this realism can serve as a barrier to the potential glamorization of serial killers. It is a reality many face, despite some wanting to twist the twisted.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Berlinger, Joe. *Extremely Wicked Shockingly, Evil And Vile*. Netflix, 2019.

¹⁹ Ibid.

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