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Audience and Representation Analysis

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### Audience Representation & Crucial Ambivalence with Ted Bundy

Over the term, I have had the ability to study Ted Bundy through an academic and true-crime lens. I created my midterm paper studying why the films I chose did so well in the genre of true crime. As a refresher, “Conversations with a killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes,” and “Extremely wicked, shockingly evil and vile,” highlights the life of Ted Bundy through many different details. The studium with Ted Bundy is significant because of how many people he deceived with his mannerism, looks, and charm. Instead of studying the film as a whole like I previously did, we will be taking a look at what the films did for the audience and what that means in the world of true crime.

“Conversations with a killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes,” takes a look at real footage and interviews from the notorious and highly performed serial killer, Ted Bundy. “Extremely wicked, shockingly evil and vile” fictionalized the character of Ted Bundy in a mockumentary-style film. These films blew up through social media from 2019 to now, and have created a resurrection of the fandom over Ted Bundy. When studying the audience responses that these films created, I decided to look through my primary social media platforms for personal connections. The first being TikTok. When researching, I came across many snippets posted from the mockumentary that included conversations that were in the film. One of the snippets included a conversation where Ted Bundy is accused of killing many women, even a child, by his girlfriend. The comments to follow

look like: “They made Ted more likable,” “Ted Bundy is my favorite killer” “She was the only one he loved,” “I was rooting for him just because it's Efron.” In almost all of these comments, there is a similar theme of enjoying the story and essentially decriminalizing Bundy in audiences’ minds because of his attractive looks. The next platform I looked at was Instagram. The platform is different from Tiktok because it primarily focuses on images and hashtags, but is more known for the memes on the app. I found an abundance of hashtags about Bundy. These hashtags made a place for people to post about Bundy and see all the other posts. Under these sections, you will find memes that people have created. The memes mock Ted Bundy and share some of the victims. All of these posts include immense audience engagement that is found in the form of comments or likes. I observed that the most liked and engaged images were the ones of Ted Bundy, and the least were those of the victims. This can encapsulate the overall arching concept of how audiences play a distinct role in how a story can spread. If I connect this to real discussions that I have had, there have been times when my peers make remarks about Bundy that also share the story. I have heard gross comments from peers such as, “Ted Bundy was a dog” or “Ted Bundy was so hot.” Both of these comments in real conversations, keep the conversation of Ted Bundy and allow his fame to continue. Audience responses can be found through social media or even just a conversation, but they continue to share the story.

Rumors spread for many different reasons, but primarily for the brief feeling that a person can feel while sharing and for how easy it can be to circulate. Due to the publicity and success of these films, there have been many rumors to form around Ted Bundy. As a personal connection, I was told that the reason Chi Omega does not have a sleeping porch is because of Ted Bundy, and that was a universal rule. It was extremely

easy for this rumor to spread because there was a lack of information that I personally had. For the person spreading it, they may have heard it once and felt that it would increase their social status because they knew an interesting fact that others did not know, the novelty hypothesis. They could have missed the harm and did not believe they were spreading a rumor. The reason even such a small rumor like this can affect the world of true crime is because our society is still trained to revolve around Ted Bundy. A rumor like that keeps the notorious killer constant in our lives and minds and makes it seem as if the world has been shaped by him, leading to more fascination and praise around him. If we take a deeper look at the effects that this rumor could spread, think of it in terms of social media. If the girl who told me this were to make a post about the sleeping porch and its relation to Ted Bundy, then the people who saw that would only know that and believe it too. It would be incredibly easy to share and an entire rumor would play to what Ted Bundy has done. The audience engagement with the case of Ted Bundy also increased the humor around the story. The four A's: affordances, algorithms, attention economy, and assumptions all make misinformation so real. Through platforms like Tiktok and Instagram, the algorithm increases the chances of misinformation being more accessible and more people seeing it, causing it to spread more. When pictures and videos circulate of Ted Bundy, there is a common theme of what the comments may look like. "Ted Bundy could kill me and I would thank him," "With those looks he can't be that bad," and "Ted Bundy is a daddy." Although the commenters may have not seen the harm in those comments, they created an entire basis of humor surrounding the killer. When looking at appropriate incongruity, it is important to know that humor can stem from things that don't go together, but make sense and humor when they do. A serial killer and thanking him for murders do not

inherently fit together, but in this case, it creates humor. When another person sees these comments, it is easy for it to snowball and for an entire humor section to revolve around Ted Bundy. Humor depreciates the seriousness of the case and creates an entirely new genre for the murderer. Also, citizen detectives play a role in the capture of Ted Bundy. For example, Bundys pictures were posted in newspapers asking for people to help find him. In a sense, this is a citizen detective because citizens are asked to help locate him. Citizen detectives were important in this case and a positive thing because they led to his capture and exploited him for who he truly was. Without victims and people recognizing Bundy, there is a very likely chance that he may have committed more murders and even fled from being captured.

The ambivalence with audience engagement is extremely relevant in the case of Ted Bundy. In order to truly look at ambivalence, we need to know what it is. In lecture, we learn that ambivalence refers to strongly opposing, simultaneous truths. It can cause segregation with positive and negative sensationalism and also references to citizen sleuthing, which can be good and helpful but also detrimental. In my past paragraph, I mentioned the idea that audience engagement is creating a place where humor can be created. The ambivalence in that example is that yes the jokes can be funny and meant for play, but can be extremely dark and harmful for those not in the same position. I like to study ambivalence in that example by looking at what the victims may think when they see those jokes that praise Ted Bundy. A victim would be extremely saddened to see that her trauma has been a joke to those around. Another prime example comes down to who the comments and engagement primarily comes from. We can see that many of these comments come from women. Women make jokes about their bodies and urge to pursue Bundy, while that is directly the anti-feminist concept. With the comments that

women are making, it is much easier for others, including men, to subject women to be a mockery of Bundy's victims. One of the most important things that I learned was that women began protesting women's rights at the same time that Bundy was on a spree. People can see this as ambivalent because they reference the good of women protesting equality, but associate it with such a terrifying time for women at the same time. The final yet largest case of ambivalence that I noted, was the overall feelings towards Ted Bundy. As I have said and will continue to say, Ted Bundy is notorious because of his deceiving charm. Women can feel compelled and attached to Ted Bundy because they feel intrigued and deceived by his looks, but can fear him because of who he is. There are two very prevalent feelings, yet they are completely different. I can also relate to this ambivalence because I am fascinated by Bundy and want to learn more about him, but also fear him because I look like the victims he would prey on. There are many examples of ambivalence through the film itself and also audience engagement, but it is crucial to note that ambivalence can be as mute as a feeling, or as proclaimed as causing harm through a joke.

The creators of the series and mockumentary all share one similarity, their skin color and gender. The producer of both of these films is Joe Berlinger. He focuses on true crime and has set the groundwork for what a successful documentary may look like. He focuses on exploiting the social issues that are prevalent in cinematic matters. The writer and co-producer of the mockumentary is Michael Werwie. In an interview that Werwie had after winning an award for his work, he says the reason he landed on the idea was that, "It had been done many times before, but it had never been done from his point-of-view, without any violence in it, and that was what attracted me to the story." Just like any of the audience, the writer was attracted to the story of Ted Bundy. Instead

of the audience being attracted because of pure fascination, Werwie became fond of the idea of spreading it in a different light. He credits the development of the film to the audience's representation, "The common thread among everyone who knew him was that he had this facade that led you to believe that there was no possible way for this to be true." Berlinger's interest in Ted Bundy also came from disrupting the idea that white men are not threats and challenging society's suspicions. Berlinger quotes, "One is that he defies all expectations of what a serial killer should be, charming, good looking, white, so our culture teaches us that upwardly mobile white men are safe." Both of these main producers and writers that created successful films that came to life had the same desire to exploit and entertain the serial killer that was easy to dismiss for his facade and looks. Their demographic details are not too relevant in the story for it does not alter the way it is being told, but can also be something interesting to look at. As we learned in lecture, white people love stories about white people, and that is why the world thinks of serial killers as predominantly white.

"Conversations with a killer: The Ted Bundy Case" includes many people in the interviews and allows their voices to be heard. The documentary compiles real interviews that Ted Bundy had with judges, while also referencing family and friend perspectives. The series did incredibly well for the coverage of voices being heard. One of the most interesting episodes, or in my opinion, is the interview with Bundy and Stephen Michaud. Bundy agrees to be interviewed in hopes for his case to be re-examined, before execution. The reason this was so interesting was because Bundy continued to carry his character and facade. He became so popularized for his looks and mannerisms that persuaded people he was capable of no such thing. However, Michaud was eager to get the truth out and began a manipulation tactic. Watching a murderer go

through a tactic that would have him break his character became a fascinating facet in the film. Other interviews included college girls who were traumatized but fascinated with Bundy. These interviews allowed victims to be heard, as well as journalists. The overall docuseries allowed many voices to be heard from the series of interviews and trial footage. The mockumentary, “Extremely wicked, shockingly evil and vile,” also allows voices to be heard, but in a complex manner. Since the film does not include actual footage, they have to be interpreted and acted. One thing that I found extremely useful in the case was hearing the story from a different lens. The story is told from Liz Kendall’s perspective, Bundy’s girlfriend. It follows the love that the couple shared while Bundy went behind her back and hid an entirely separate life from her. Kendall had a daughter which Bundy helped raise which added an entirely different and heightened sense of drama. The story follows how Kendall was fooled by him, how he got caught, the emotional turmoil that would follow, and how she would treat Bundy later on. This film was important in studying how people closely related to Bundy were impacted by his murders.

On the other note, the lack of stories from Bundys’ daughters and close families did not allow them to be heard. Growing up knowing that your father was a notorious serial killer can cause extreme trauma in one’s life. In the mockumentary, the film shows the relationship between Bundy and her daughter, Molly. However, the film lacks at showing what Molly is feeling. The parents of Ted Bundy are also not heard from in detail, so the people who raised Bundy and who Bundy raised are not heard from. However, this can be because it is a breach of privacy. For one, the daughter has an entire life to live after Bundy. The publicity of her feelings and relationship with Bundy would cause her to live a life where she is known for one thing, him. This can be

extremely problematic and hard for a child to live through— so in my eyes, it is way better that she is not included. Also, after researching, I found out that her name and Liz's name has been changed. This allows them to hide from the constant connection to Bundy and to start their lives in a new way. Without Bundy's parents being interviewed, we do not get to see what may have shaped Bundy. We do not get to see the way he was raised or the signs his parents may have missed out on to lead Bundy to where he was. We only hear him talk about his family and life in the perfect manner he describes it, but what was it to them? On another note, every story being told is from a white person's eyes. I think it would be incredibly interesting to hear what Bundy was seen through a person of color's eyes. People of color have always been targeted as more dangerous and have been given unfair treatment and violence because of their skin. It would be incredibly interesting to see how because they have been framed, what they would think of him. To know that a mass amount of danger comes from a clean-cut white guy, what does that mean for them?

The documentary series and mockumentary differ in terms of who it may be fair to. The series is fair to journalists and publications at the time because it covers real footage that impacts the world of journalism today. It can also be fair to victims who escaped, such as Carol Deronch. She allows the capture of Bundy to take place because she could escape. It shows the phone call that aids the police in finding him. However, it can be extremely unfair to the family of Kimberly Leach. Leach was only 12 years old when she was abducted and murdered by Bundy during a school day. The family has to relive the pain and story of her, knowing that the last person she would see is Bundy. Her story is extremely heightened because of her age which increases the chances of it becoming dark humor, and published for the wrong reason. Her story will always be

remembered and her name will be at the forefront of his murders, making it hard for the family to escape the pain that Bundy created. Overall, the series is fair to the audience because they get to see it from many different lenses with real footage, but unfair to the families who have to relive the horror. The mockumentary is also fair to the audience for it allows them to see the story unravel in a cinematic and easy-to-follow way. However, the mockumentary can be unfair for Liz Kendall. Her every thought, move, and life is studied and exploited to create a story. There is extreme controversy with hiring two successful actors to play the role of Ted Bundy and Liz Kendall. This can be because it detaches emotion from what Liz Kendall felt. By having two major actors play the role, the audience can avoid thinking of who Liz Kendall actually is, and only focus on it from Lilly Collins. Her story is silenced and Collins is exaggerated. Zac Efron playing Bundy was extremely controversial because of how he is seen in society. For one, Efron is extremely popularized with young girls because of his attractive looks. People may only want to watch the film because it is Efron, which also decreases the significance and importance of the film. If I look at this through a deeper but broader lens, I can also argue that the film is unfair to all women. "Extremely wicked, shockingly evil," shows the story from a woman's eyes. It highlights the extreme emotion, manipulation, and fear that many women have feared. If I shift my eyes to think of a cruel man, or opposing member, I may find that Bundy is good and successful, while women could be dumb. In the wrong hands, the film can stereotype and group an entire population to be something they are not. Because the feelings and manipulation were shown on screen, any person could assume that all women are easy to deceive and full of emotions. This can be extremely unfair to not only Liz Kendall who faces extreme trauma, but also to an entire population of fearful women.

The chance to analyze true crime in the media has taught me many important lessons. When joining the class, I did not truly understand the correlation of true crime to the media. I believed they were completely different genres and that I had no experience with true crime. However, I was completely wrong. For one, I have watched many true-crime series similar to the Bundy case for the sole reason of fascination. I did not know at the time why I became fascinated, but the studium and punctum allowed me to finally understand. This class also is extremely important when studying journalism. There are many times when ethics will play a role in reporting stories. It is crucial to know the effects that words, phrases, and publicity can play in a story. To report fair, we have to study the effects that a victim's family can feel. I learned that in order to be fair, you need to look at everyone affected. I also learned to do that, you need to carefully phrase what you say. Finally, I learned that spending too much attention or focus on a story may cause the story to spiral and land in the hands of people who use it for the wrong reasons. Ethics and morals play a part in our everyday lives.

Understanding what part they play in the media can allow us to be fair journalists that care for the feelings of others, rather than just the attention. I have enjoyed every single lesson this course has offered. I have enjoyed Professor Phillips' engagement and her pride that she has in work. Seeing a shift of being clueless when joining the course, to feeling seen, has been a beautiful full-circle moment that reminds me of the excitement that school has to offer.

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