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Amplification Analysis

4/24/2023

Ted Bundy: The sensationalist Story & the Dangerous Risk of Imitation

Ted Bundy, the notorious serial killer that preyed on young college girls. In 2019, Netflix released the documentary, “Conversations with a killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes.” The film takes a deeper look into the case of Ted Bundy through real footage and recordings, depicting what it was like to be a woman living in the time and who Ted Bundy actually was. Another medium that I looked at was the mockumentary, “Extremely wicked, shockingly evil and vile.” This was another film framing the character of Ted Bundy, focusing on how he was portrayed in the media and how he got away with what he did. I chose both of these films because they covered an array of different idiosyncratic details and character development that allows the audience to see more of who Ted Bundy is. Both of the films focused on different details of the story—one being the development of Ted Bundy and the other focusing more on the trials. In terms of the studium, both of these films encapsulate the power Ted Bundy had over the media. He follows what inherently looks good. The studium is the basis of what people feel compelled and attracted to as a whole, or what makes sense to them. Ted Bundy is a pure example of the studium. He deceived many people because he mastered the power of his appearance, conversation, and ego. He carried a presence that made his PHD reliable, and convinced even his wife that he could not be capable of such things. Since so many people were manipulated, he studium in his play was extremely powerful. Also, society praises clean-cut white men— which is why it seemed so hard to believe that he was capable of such gore. With regards to the punctum, I am a college woman living in

the Pacific Northwest, where Ted Bundy lurked. I live in a sorority house, a place where most of his victims live, and I live on the second floor at the end of the hall, where he could escape. This feeling, the disturbance and fear makes me feel compelled by him. I see men walk these halls yet I am so trusting, that without hesitation, I could have probably been one of Bundy's victims. The punctum relates to me because of the fear yet excitement that his case brings. It hits so close to home because if I lived here 20 years ago, I would be one of the victims. Yet the hope that it doesn't happen again, is what keeps me fascinated in his case. There are many qualities that the Ted Bundy stories share with centuries-old true crime. The main being people's desire to learn about gore and the audience that loved it the most. More women consumed the Bundy story than men, which illustrates the history of women enjoying gore more. Not only were women fascinated with Ted Bundy, but some were even fans, "Each day of his trial, women — referred to as "groupies" — would show up to the courtroom with their hair parted in the middle and wearing hoop earrings, on the assumption that this was the style worn by his victims" (Commons, 1). True crime in past centuries demonstrates the fascination that women have for gore, and not only were more women intrigued by the case, but they were captivated enough to become fond of the infamous killer.

The story of Ted Bundy and how it's depicted in the media is a prime example of sensationalism. In lecture, sensationalism "focuses on idiosyncratic, gratuitous details and often includes irrelevant details to inflame sympathies or anger." Sensationalist stories focus on monsters, some can be obvious and some can be hidden among us. Ted Bundy is the exact representation of what a monster who is hidden among us looks like. The idiosyncratic details like; he was a PHD student, charming, and etc. The details that built Ted Bundy to be one of the most brutal serial killers, would also be the reason that

he would escape for so long and be recognized by his charm. True crime as a whole seeks to instill emotions from the audience. By exaggerating headlines, exploiting images, and over detailing crime, the audience feels an emotional attachment to the crime– which is why true crime is still a relevant theme in today's society. In order for a sensationalist story to be relatively positive, it needs to invoke change. It needs to help something and spread change or understanding. In contrast, a negative sensationalist story focuses on details that do nothing but try to justify what the murderer did, without pure cause. The film, “Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile” casted extremely well known characters. Zac Efron and Lilly Collins starred in the film which plays a large role in the success. The rhetorical strategies that go to make a story sensationalist include: “exaggerated headlines, inflamed rhetoric, startling imagery, compelling music, recognizable characters (especially victims and villains) and repetitive story lines” (week 2 lecture). The idiosyncratic details included in the film are his past, his relationships, and his career that portray him make the story negative. The media focused on his positives, trying to justify what he did– which is why fans and praise surrounded his name. His story and the details became so publicized that future villains would study some of the traits he had. Not only was it negative in that aspect, but because of the publicity around the case, many young girls, including myself, would live in fear that another Ted Bundy would appear on their college campus. However, “Conversations with a killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes,” shows a positive sensationalist story. By shifting the narrative of the story to focus on the harm he produced and how he got caught, less aspects of amplification risks are present. The difference between the two films is how the media views them. One focuses more on how Bundy can be ‘relatable’ while the other serves to provide more information on the trials and his conversations.

In the case of Ted Bundy, every single amplification risk that we studied is at large. The first one being the contagion effect. The contagion effect is essentially the belief that hearing or publicizing one case will eventually lead to another similar one. We see this especially in mass shootings. With Bundy, his publication and the praise that he received while being such a notorious killer, persuades other villains to want to feel the same attention he had. The details that future killers hear about Bundy make them want to copy and do the same, leading to a contagious spiral of more murders. Recently, reports have compared the University of Idaho murders to be similar to Ted Bundy's sorority sprees. Matt Hogan, a retired criminal investigator said, "Bundy had knowledge of the victims in the house, and it was a sort of frenzied attack with extreme violence" (Fox News). The similarity in cases and the brutal violence that occurred to young sorority girls demonstrates the contagion theory and its effects. The contagion effect is very similar to the risk of imitation. The risk of imitation highlights that those who feel similar to the villain may carry out similar attributes when they learn about them. The risk of imitation is extremely surreal in this case and the documentaries both encapsulate that. People who may feel similar to Bundy can watch the documentary and learn about his voice recordings, his appearance, his personal life, and his mannerisms that made him so well known. Highlighting Bundy's murder count and "success" can make him seem competent to the public eye. When his character is so well covered by the media, it may be incredibly easy for an individual to follow and imitate. As I was researching I came across the term *hybristophilia*, or the explanation of "those who are sexually aroused by the object of their affection's wrong-doing" (Medium.com). This term exemplifies the fan behavior that serial killers might have and how imitation can occur. People feel compelled and related to the murderer, gaining attraction even feeling

the desire to complete the same harm. This term also plays a role in framing a dark anti-hero. In both of the films, Ted Bundy has a historical background and is portrayed as a normal human being which is why the audience can feel connected to him.

Anti-heros lack traits that traditional heroes may carry, but they have traits to balance out their crimes and make them relatable. Ted Bundy lacks the heroic traits, but does have many traditional traits that audience members may relate to. Finally, the risk of causing trauma. In the mockumentary, Ted Bundy has a family. In real life, his daughter and former wife changed both of their names. With the publicization of their names and lives, they risk an immense amount of trauma carrying the same name. For victims' families, replaying and seeing how the victim may have been 'trapped' under Bundys act is traumatic. They have to relive the feeling of knowing what happened to their child and see it portrayed on a television show. Any single person involved in the Ted Bundy case will feel a sense of trauma because of the weight of the story. Those related to Bundy will feel trauma from watching his relationships grow and how he carried through with more than 30 murders. Those close to Bundy will feel guilt and trauma for not doing something sooner, and those related to him will feel disgust and shame for having relation to him. It is extremely common in every case for those connected to the villain to feel trauma for not doing something earlier. Reliving what happened through a series can only worsen the trauma. Both of the films may try to eliminate anti-heroes and the risk of imitation by highlighting what Bundy did, but the act of creating realistic films off of them make it worse. I do not think the films were necessary, but only make the risk worse because future murderers can watch the films to imitate and the victims' families have to feel the pain and sorrow all over. Yes, the film does a good job at amplifying the story, but I think they cause more harm than good. Amplifying a story like this only

makes people live in fear, relive trauma, and even cause potential similarities in cases to come. I personally think mockumentary may be enjoyable for the public eye, but does not serve to be an ethically responsible way of eliminating mass murders.

### **Citations**

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