ART REVIEW

From Trauma to Entertainment: An Examination of Netflix's *Dahmer—Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* Series

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> How much money does it take to make a man happy? Just one more dollar.
>
> John D. Rockefeller

With the rise of Netflix, Disney+, Apple TV, and Amazon Prime, the media landscape has become much more competitive and diversified in terms of TV offerings. On-demand services have also benefited greatly from COVID-19 lock-downs, ushering in a new generation of blockbuster series (e.g., *Stranger Things*, *Squid Game*, *Succession*) and motion pictures (e.g., *Coda*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*) that now dominate the market in terms of both earnings and critical accolades (BBC News 2022; Apple 2022; Gumuchian 2023). However, this success has bred more demand for gripping tales and shocking twists, turning some new productions increasingly gory and sexually explicit. A recent example of this is Netflix's *Dahmer —Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*, a true-crime series focusing on one of the most famous US serial killers, who murdered and dismembered seventeen victims between 1978 and 1991.

Directed by Ryan Murphy (*American Horror Story*, *Pose*), the series delves into the life and evolution of Jeffrey Dahmer, providing a chilling, detailed, and often empathetic depiction of a deeply disturbed individual. *Monster* capitalizes on strengths of the true crime by producing a convincing combination of historical facts and artistic license, one that shocks viewers and caters well to their "morbid curiosity" (Scrivner 2021). Thus the pilot episode lays out in excruciating detail the elaborate entrapment of a young Black man by the vicious and deceptive Dahmer. Although the man's lucky escape and Dahmer's subsequent arrest provide some relief for viewers, the palpable ghastliness is impossible to ignore.

This technique is deployed again in the second episode, when Dahmer offers to buy alcohol for fourteen-year-old Konerak Sinthasomphone, then lures him to his apart-ment. There he drugs and lobotomizes him as part of his "zombie experiments." Although a glimmer of hope presents itself when a groggy Sinthasomphone manages to escape and runs into one of Jeffrey's neighbors (Glenda Cleveland), this is callously shut down when gullible police officers return him to the killer's apartment, where he later dies because of more skull drilling and acid drops. Masterfully, the episode's

ending credits relay the real 1991 recording of the phone call between Cleveland and a Milwaukee police officer, discussing Sinthasomphone's case.

Also true to the genre, the nail-biting tension is present throughout the episodes, from the necrophilia fantasies Dahmer shares with cops during his interview to the confrontational "sandwich scene" with Glenda, the trophy human head in his father's memorabilia box, and the eerie parallel of a cosmic alignment that saw Dahmer getting baptized in jail on the same day (May 10, 1994) as a solar eclipse and the execution of John Wayne Gacy (another infamous American serial killer).

The series manages to build a convincing, multilayered psychological portrait of Dahmer that factors in his upbringing (trauma, loneliness), a difficult family situation (absent father and a mother with mental health issues), and serendipitous circumstances (e.g., killing his first victim because of his rejection of Dahmer's advances, access to sedatives while in the army, a lucky release from prison after sexual assault charges) that shaped his life and the choices he made. However, what makes this series different is that it offers a glimpse (albeit much less than the focus on Dahmer's persona) into his victims, their families, and the fallout of his killing spree. Thus Cleveland's point of view is the focus of episode 7, whereas episodes 8–10 depict some of the testimonies and actions undertaken by the victims' families to ensure that their stories were heard during Dahmer's trial and that they received compensation for their losses.

Overall, *Monster* is a masterpiece of true-crime storytelling. The acting is exceptional, from Evan Peters's indelible depiction of Dahmer to superb performances by Richard Jenkins (his father) and Niecy Nash (as Cleveland). Attention to detail is ubiquitous, from a production design that recreates so vividly the atmosphere of the 1970s and 1980s (through costumes, props, and archival footage) to the accompanying soundtrack (for which Nick Cave and Warren Ellis found the perfect haunting tones to match the dread of the show). Although it is certainly not an easy piece to watch, *Monster* focuses on the psychology of its main character, complemented by an immersive experience of its development across time. As such, it is an impressive and provocative examination of the dark loci of the human psyche that spur gruesome actions and individuals.

Notwithstanding these merits, the series (and, broadly, the true-crime genre) remains subject to important ethical criticism. First is significant concern about exploiting real-life tragedies for entertainment purposes and the mechanisms through which this exploitation operates, that is, by humanizing deranged characters, desensitizing violence, and blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction (Greer and Jewkes 2005; Dowler and Zawilski 2007; Biber, Doyle, and Rossmanith 2013). Ethics scholars should therefore focus more on examining issues related to privacy, exploitation, and accurate portrayals of events and characters while emphasizing humanity and avoiding glorification (Wright 2020).

Second, the disparity between commercial and moral considerations behind the show is brazen. Netflix's commercial intuition was certainly on point, as most of the public was instantly captivated by the show's gory nature,[1] despite harsh initial

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[1] Within the first two months of its release, the show reached 1 billion hours viewed.

reviews[2] (Framke 2022). Following the series' rising popularity, critical reception has shifted too,[3] culminating with some notable wins at the People's Choice Awards (Bingeworthy Show of the Year), the Critics' Choice Movie Awards (Best Supporting Actress), and the Golden Globes (Best Actor in a Limited Series, Anthology, or TV Motion Picture). However, most facts suggest that the show was commissioned purely on financial considerations. For instance, the subject is clearly not novel: IMDb.com lists at least six prior movies focused on Dahmer, the latest one being from 2017.[4] Yes, we can always shuffle vignettes and artistic approaches, but do we really need these many screen depictions of a serial killer?

Netflix's pretext for producing the show is anchored in ethical rationales, such as providing a voice for Dahmer's victims or cautioning about the system inefficiencies that allowed him to elude law enforcement for more than a decade. Nevertheless, these objectives are not prioritized in the production itself, which follows the genre's usual pattern of violence, voyeurism, and extreme titillation. Moreover, this moral disconnect is substantiated by Netflix's large and growing portfolio of true-crime and docuseries centered on serial killers (e.g., Ted Bundy, Peter Sutcliffe, Dennis Nilsen, Yoo Young-Chul, Charles Sobhraj), begging the questions of where to draw the line and how much is enough (really?) in terms of covering traumatic events and deranged characters for commercial and entertainment purposes.

Third, a common fallacy of true crime is the way it relates to the victims' families (Williams 2020). Despite building on real-life events, the producers of *Monster* have not acquired the consent of any of the victims' families (ironically, these issues are highlighted in one of the episodes, which focuses on the trial and families' struggle for compensation), raising further concerns about the series' true objectives (Strause 2022). These families have suffered silently and, after being traumatized by the gruesome deaths of their loved ones, they truly deserve some peace and quiet. Yet, any new series will reopen these deep psychological wounds, and sadly, only for the financial gain of big media companies, raising further doubt about the ethicality of their actions (Biber, Doyle, and Rossmanith 2013).

Finally, the social and cultural legacies of such violent shows are yet to be uncovered. This paucity warrants new scholarly examinations of standards and consequences through the lens of ethics (Wright 2020). To this point, *Monster* has stirred substantial controversy and polarization on social media,[5] driven by certain individuals' actions to romanticize and devilify Jeffrey Dahmer,[6] conversations around violence against LGBTQ+ and racial minorities, and Netflix's own insensitive marketing choices emphasizing gruesome aspects of the show (Netflix 2022).

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[2] Rotten Tomatoes listed a 57 percent approval rating with an average of 6.3 out of 10, based on twenty-eight critic reviews.

[3] Its IMDb.com score is 7.9 out of 10.0, based on 145,000 reviews (as of September 2023).

[4] See https://www.imdb.com/title/tt13207736/.

[5] Users have been deeply divided on the show, with comments that range from "deranged," "repulsive," and "deeply disturbing" to "solid work," "captivating," and "binge watching."

[6] Several TikTok users edited various clips from the show to mimic a romantic comedy in which Dahmer and his victim Anthony Hughes were depicted as a nice couple. Although these videos have since been removed from the platform, they amassed nearly 250,000 views.

Moreover, it is important to consider the potential impact of true-crime media on individuals who are already predisposed to violence, as they often trigger copy-cat behaviors. Murderers and criminals have often cited movies or fictional novels as inspiration (Jenkins 1994; Warwick 2006; Bort, Schonfeld, and Ziv 2017), and popularization of serial killers via extensive series or documentaries can only reinforce such drifts toward societal fringes (Phegley 2017).

In conclusion, while a success in terms of box-office and critical acclaim, *Monster* reignites important ethical considerations about true-crime media that include the exploitation of real-life tragedies, the negative externalities of glorification of violence, and the traumatic impact on victims' families. True-crime media production must be approached with a deep sense of responsibility and consideration for all those affected by the tragic events depicted.

Acknowledgments

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