

**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 lockdowns, 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 both in terms of earnings and critical accolades (BBC News, 2022; Apple, 2022; Reuters, 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 17 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 the viewers and caters so well to their ‘morbid curiosity’ (Scrivner, 2021). Thus, the pilot episode lays out in excruciating details the elaborate entrapment of a young Black man by the vicious and deceptive Dahmer. While his lucky escape and the subsequent arrest of Dahmer 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 the 14-year-old Konerak Sinthasomphone and then lures him to his apartment. Here, he drugs and lobotomizes him as part of his ‘zombie experiments’. While a glimmer of hope presents itself when a groggy Konerak manages to escape and runs into one of Jeffrey’s neighbours (Ms. 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 Glenda and a Milwaukee police officer discussing Konerak’s case.

Also true to the genre, the nail-biting tension is present throughout the episodes, from the necrophilia fantasies he shares with the cops during his interview, to the confrontational ‘sandwich scene’ with Glenda, the trophy human head in his father’s memorabilia box, or 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, multi-layered psychological portrait of Dahmer that factors in his upbringing (trauma, loneliness), difficult family situation (absent father and a mother with mental health issues), as well as serendipitous circumstances (e.g., killing his first victim due to rejection of his advances, access to sedatives while in the army, lucky release from prison after sexual assault charges) that have 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, Glenda Cleveland’s point of view is the focus of episode 7, while episodes 8 through 10 depict some of the testimonies and actions undertaken by the victims’ families to ensure that their stories are heard during Dahmer’s trial and that they receive compensation for their loss.

Overall, *Monster* is a masterpiece of true crime storytelling. Acting is exceptional: from Evan Peters's indelible depiction of Dahmer to superb performances by Richard Jenkins (his father) and Niecy Nash (as Glenda). Attention to detail is ubiquitous: from a production design that recreates so vividly the atmosphere of the 1970s and 80s (through costumes, props, and archival footage) to the accompanying soundtrack (where Nick Cave and Warren Ellis found the perfect haunting tones to match the dread of the show). While 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, 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. Firstly, there is significant concern about the exploitation of real-life tragedies for entertainment purposes and the mechanisms through which it does so, i.e., 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 portrayal of events and characters while emphasizing humanity and avoiding glorification (Wright, 2020).

Secondly, 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<sup>1</sup> and despite harsh initial reviews<sup>2</sup> (Variety, 2022). Following its rising popularity, critical reception has shifted too<sup>3</sup>, culminating with some notable wins in the People's Choice Awards (The binge-worthy show of the year), Critics Choice Awards (Best supporting actress), and the Golden Globes (Best actor in a limited series,

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<sup>1</sup> Within the first two months of its release, the show has reached 1 billion hours viewed.

<sup>2</sup> Rotten Tomatoes listed a 57% approval rating with an average of 6.3 out of 10, based on 28 critic reviews.

<sup>3</sup> Its imdb.com score is 7.9 out of 10.0 based on 145,000 reviews (as of September 2023).

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, latest one being from 2017. Yes, we can always shuffle vignettes and artistic approaches, but do we really need these many screen depictions for 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's inefficiencies which allowed him to elude law enforcement for more than a decade. Nevertheless, these objectives are not prioritized in the production itself, which essentially follows the genre's usual pattern of violence, voyeurism, and extreme titillation. Moreover, this moral disconnect is also substantiated by Netflix's large and growing portfolio of true crime and docuseries centred on serial killers (e.g., Ted Bundy, Peter Sutcliffe, Dennis Nilsen, Yoo Young-Chul, or Charles Sobhraj). Which begs the question of where we draw the line, and how much is enough (really?) in terms of covering traumatic events and deranged characters for commercial purposes.

Thirdly, a common fallacy of true crime is the way it relates to the victims' families (Williams, 2019). 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 that focuses on the trial and families' struggle for compensation), raising further concerns about its true objectives (Hollywood Reporter, 2022). These families have suffered silently and after being traumatized by the gruesome deaths of their loved ones would much deserve some peace and quiet. Yet, any new series will re-open these deep psychological wounds, and sadly, only for financial gains of big media companies, raising further doubts about the ethicality of their actions (Biber et al., 2013).

Finally, the social and cultural legacies of such violent shows are yet to be uncovered. This paucity warrants new scholarly examinations of its standards and consequences through

the lens of ethics (Wright, 2020). To this point, “*Monster*” has stirred substantial controversy and polarization in social media<sup>4</sup>, driven by actions of certain individuals to romanticize and de-vilify Jeffrey Dahmer’s actions<sup>5</sup>, conversations around violence against LGBTQ+ and racial minorities, as well as Netflix’s own insensitive marketing choices emphasizing some gruesome aspects of the show (@netflix, 21 Sep 2022). Moreover, it is important to consider the potential impact of true crime media on individuals that are already predisposed to violence, as they often trigger copy-cat behaviours. Murderers and criminals have often cited movies or fictional novels as inspiration (Jenkins, 1994; Warwick, 2006; Newsweek, 2017), and popularization of serial killers via extensive series or documentaries can only reinforce such drifts towards 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. The production of true crime media must be approached with a deep sense of responsibility and consideration for all those affected by the tragic events depicted.

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<sup>4</sup> Users have been deeply divided on the show, with comments that range between “deranged”, “repulsive” or “deeply disturbing” to “solid work”, “captivating” or “binge watching”.

<sup>5</sup> Several TikTok users have edited various clips from the show to mimic a romantic comedy where Dahmer and his victim Anthony Hughes were depicted as a nice couple. While these videos have been since removed from the platform, they have been amassed nearly 250,000 views.

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