The Changing Portrayals of Serial Killers in Popular Culture

How 'My Friend Dahmer' and 'Extremely Wicked, 'Shockingly Evil and Vile' Invite to Sympathy for Serial Killers

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Abstract

The biographical films *My Friend Dahmer* (2017) and *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* (2019) have both been praised for their unique approaches to the serial murder subgenre yet have also been criticized for seemingly downplaying the severity of the crimes of the serial killer protagonists; they were especially critiqued for encouraging the spectators to sympathize with Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy, whom the films' protagonists are based on. Through close textual analysis, this thesis examines how the films' narrative structure and cinematic techniques are utilized to facilitate a sympathetic, pro-, attitude for characters who are adaptations of two of the most recognized names in American serial killer history. A premise for the thesis is therefore that sympathy is elicited from the spectators towards the characters, and it explores the affective relationship between the spectators and the characters from the perspective of cognitive film theory. Cinematic representations of factual serial killers have a long history of being portrayed as monstrous and evil, while fictional representations have become pop-cultural antiheroes; all of which have resulted in a serial killer celebrity culture. The thesis examines how the two films in question manage to distinguish themselves from the plethora of serial killer representations in popular culture. It argues that the dehumanization of the protagonists is removed, and that they are re-introduced with recognizable, relatable, human, qualities. In addition to a humanization of the serial killers, it argues that the films exclude a disavowal for the spectators, which results in the films functioning as a starting point for contemplation of the long history of serial killer celebrity culture and the ethics of this evolution.

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Chapter 1.
Introduction

1.1 Serial Killer Celebrity Culture

Violence and stardom are the two factors that scholar David Schmid recognizes as the very definition of American modernity; violence due to its prevalence in news- and entertainment media, and stardom due to Hollywood and celebrity culture; In his book *Natural Born Celebrities* (2005) he argues that representative of their convergence, is the serial killer (105). Though serial murder is a rare occurrence today, there is an overwhelming presence in entertainment media of some of history's most notorious serial killers. In contemporary popular culture, the serial killer is omnipresent; he or she, factual and fictional alike, is a staple figure in film and television, true crime, music, podcasts, discussion boards, and more.

Serial killers' vast prevalence in popular culture indicates a great public fascination for individuals capable of committing the most horrendous acts of transgression. Whereas there has existed for a long time a subculture that delves into the collection of handiwork, artwork, and various other serial killer-related artifacts, the sale of murderabilia, i.e., serial murder memorabilia, was banned on eBay in 2001 as a way of keeping serial killer adoration away from mainstream public and culture (Bond, 2016). But the public fascination with serial killers is perpetual; today, infamous names such as John Wayne Gacy, Richard Ramirez, Jeffrey Dahmer, and Ted Bundy, to name a few, exist on t-shirts, greeting cards, coffee mugs, and other miscellaneous artifacts in form of images, quotes, puns, and more, confirming their iconic status and prominence in popular culture. The fascination with serial killers is no longer limited to the subculture of serial killer-fandom but holds a significant place in mainstream popular culture, and the serial killer has been transformed from its lived reality as a murderous individual preying on members of society to having reached mythical, legendary, status.

Film serves a pivotal role among the many elements that have contributed to generating serial killer stardom. Due to film's impact on the evolution of celebrity culture, a "system unparalleled in both its reach and profitability" (Schmid, 2005:107), film, especially Hollywood productions, has long served as a fundamental means to facilitate serial killer celebrities. Schmid's argument of violence and stardom underscoring American popular culture and modernity is evident through its celebrity culture and by being a culture greatly fascinated by, and engulfed in, violence and death through news- and entertainment media. What Schmid describes is

indicative of what scholar Mark Seltzer (1998) terms a *wound culture*. Seltzer defines wound culture as "the public fascination with torn and open bodies ... a public culture in which addictive violence has become a collective spectacle" (1). It is clear that central to the concept of a wound culture is the role of violent criminals, those who are at the forefront of providing the culture with what he describes to be "atrocity exhibitions" (21), i.e., the overwhelming number of representations of violence found in news- and entertainment media, and to which Seltzer declares that serial killers are "the superstars" (2).

Criminals are not strangers to being at the heart of sensationalized news- and entertainment media or of achieving fame. Outlaws from the old West and gangsters from the 1920s-30s are just some that have throughout history been appointed public enemies and have today become household names and been represented in film, true crime, and other parts of popular culture; not to mention perhaps the most famous serial killer in history, Jack the Ripper. Serial killers are however, not celebrated in a similar manner as the criminals mentioned above who are generally portrayed in roles of admiration, e.g., train- and bank robbers justifying their crimes as due to inadequate governments causing them financial troubles. Depictions of serial killers have rather been argued to serve as outputs for people's morbid fascination, but also anxieties, about death and the individuals who commit murder (Schmid, 2005, Bonn, 2014), while another argument is that there is a mutual fear and slight admiration for such individuals that exist outside the restrains of laws and societal conventions (Beck, 2014).

Celebrification is defined as "the process by which ordinary people or public figures are transformed into celebrities" (Driesness, 2012:643), or "that which does not belong to the realm of popular culture in the first place, acquires a media form" (Jerslev, 2014:173).

David Schmid (2005) locates the origins of the celebrification of serial killers to what he refers to as a "serial killer panic" (15) in the 1980s. The serial killer panic was shaped by news media's and law enforcement's dissemination of information about a new category of immediately threatening criminals in the US, and that their crimes were publicized to have rapidly increased to the point of having reached "epidemic proportions" (15). This resulted in immense cultural and social visibility of serial killers, to which news- and entertainment media sensationalized their stories to attract large audiences. Schmid argues that the celebrification of serial killers is representative of the "collapse of the difference between fame and notoriety" (9), that is, when the requirement for people to have talent or other virtuous accomplishments to become celebrities diminished, and that pure visibility through substantial attention was enough to achieve a celebrity status.

Criminologist Scott Bonn provides an extensive account of the popularity of serial killers and media's role in having shaped them as celebrities and icons in popular culture in his study *Why We Love Serial Killers* (2014). Bonn asserts that there exists a public curiosity to understand the mind and motives of those who commit the most violent crimes, crimes that are so incomprehensible and seeming utterly contrary to human nature. News- and entertainment media both facilitate and fulfils this morbid fascination for serial killers, however, Bonn argues that the horrific reality of serial murder has long been obscured in the media in favor of being presented in "sensationalized and stylized terms" (33), referring to the tendency of various media outlets presenting serial killers as *evil* and *monsters* and thus denying their human qualities but adding supernatural properties (203-204), which has resulted in a blur between reality and fiction and transforming serial killers into celebrity monsters.

1.2 Serial Killers in Cinema

Cinematic narratives about serial killers are usually centered on their extraordinary crimes given that their crimes are the very thing that defines them and has brought them to stardom, thus rarely in the portrayals of infamous serial killers are their crimes ever downplayed. However, in 2017 and 2019, two films were released that received criticism for that very reason. Portraying the lives of serial killers Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy, *My Friend Dahmer* (Meyers, 2017) and *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* (Berlinger, 2019) were both critiqued for omitting the violence, murders, and other genre conventions one would expect from films about two of the most notorious figures in American serial killer history.

Jeffrey Dahmer was sentenced to numerous life terms in 1992 for the murder and dismemberment of fifteen men, but admitted to murdering a total of seventeen as well as engaging in necrophilia and cannibalism; Ted Bundy is often referred to as America's first celebrity serial killer due to the extraordinary circumstances surrounding his trials; he was sentenced to death for the rape and murder of three women but admitted to having murdered over thirty women throughout the 1970s and was eventually executed in 1989. Neither *My Friend Dahmer* nor *Extremely Wicked*, however, were centered around the crimes of the protagonists, as described above, which resulted in what many critics meant provoked an unnecessary attitude of sympathy for the characters based on factual serial killers.

Especially the trailer for *Extremely Wicked* sparked fire in the ongoing debate about the celebrification/romanticization of serial killers and was particularly criticized for appearing to be an exciting, romantic, thriller with Ted Bundy "starring" as the "kooky heartthrob" (Shure,

2019); of the films itself, Alissa Wilkinson (2019) called the film "morally wrongheaded" in her review due to what could have been a sympathetic portrayal Bundy's girlfriend, who is a central secondary character in the film, was instead centered on Bundy himself. *My Friend Dahmer* was likewise condemned for unnecessary continuing the celebrification/glamorizing of Jeffrey Dahmer; depicting Dahmer's high school years, the film was described as a "teen pic" and a "deadpan comedy" (Edelstein, 2017), and Steve Rose, writing for *The Guardian*, wrote that by its very existence the film "adds to the legend" (2018) and keeps Dahmer's gruesome crimes alive and well even without explicitly depicting them.

However, the films did not wholly receive negative reviews. *My Friend Dahmer* received for the most part positive critical reviews and was applauded for its earnest depiction of a subject often sensationalized (Gleiberman, 2017, Hardisty, 2019). By not being centered around Dahmer's crimes, many critics argued that the film presented a more humanized and authentic, but also tragic, portrayal of Dahmer's adolescence. Similarly, *Extremely Wicked* received praise for being a unique approach to telling the story of Ted Bundy as the film was considered a more authentic portrayal of Bundy's human side and due to the film focusing on who he was *outside* of his crimes (Gleiberman, 2019).

Still, discourse about the glamorization/romanticization of real-life serial killers is typically grounded in the ethics of keeping continuous cultural visibility of the killer through various media representations, and the ethics of repeatedly producing texts that show little regard for the killer's victims and their remaining families. By excluding depictions of the very elements that defined the notoriety of Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy, the two films in question proved controversial by appearing to be downplaying the severity of the killers' crimes and caused discussion of the ethics of aligning the spectators to side with, and sympathize with, two of the most recognized names in serial killer history. In his review, Chris Nashawaty said of *My Friend Dahmer* that "I took offense to being asked to sympathize with ... someone who would grow up to rape, murder, dismember, and cannibalize 17 young men" (2017), questioning why such an interpretation needed to be made in the first place; while Peter Bradshaw, in his review of *Extremely Wicked*, asked why such a portrayal at all was necessary, that is, its withholding of the "psychotically murderous and misogynistic activity" (2019) that characterized the very case of the real Ted Bundy.

Most of the criticism derived from the fact that the spectators were apparently encouraged to feel sympathy for the films' protagonists, which proved morally questionable when the protagonists were based on factual serial killers who shocked the world with their extreme

violent transgressions and human depravity. By moderating the violence and excluding depictions of the protagonists as murderous individuals - that is, the very elements that defined the people that they are based on and elements that are considered conventions of the serial murder subgenre, it appears that the two films present new, or different, approaches to cinematic representation of serial killers. With the prevalence of factual serial killers represented in popular culture, information about the killer's upbringing, motives, m.o., and all the details surrounding their crimes are well-known to those who are fans of the genre; could it be that the two films in question indicate a forthcoming tendency within the genre such as that of downplaying the killers' crimes to heighten their human qualities?

As mentioned, cinematic representations of serial killers are often not the target for the spectators' sympathies but have rather long served the role of the antagonist and the place for fear, disgust, but also fascination, to transpire. Recent years have, however, seen a rise in narratives including fictional serial killer protagonist who are increasingly humanized and who obtain the roles of antiheroes. *Dexter's* Dexter Morgan and *Hannibal's* Hannibal Lecter are a few that have become pop-cultural icons; by virtue of Morgan's vigilantism and Lecter's intellect and sophistication, these serial killers obtain the spectators' admiration in their thrilling, but nonetheless fictional, transgressions. As the critique of *My Friend Dahmer* and *Extremely Wicked* suggest, is there a market for portraying *factual* serial killers as authentic and humane, and worthy of the spectators' sympathies, and if yes – then why?

1.3 Objects of Analysis

The case studies in this thesis consist of two biographical films portraying fictionalized renditions of the lives of two of the most notorious serial killers in American history. Released two years a part, both films were critiqued for unnecessarily evoking sympathy for protagonists based on factual serial killers, which sparked fire in the debate of the necessity and ethics of such portrayals in popular culture. Both films deny a narrative centered around the killer's crimes, but due to the extensive prevalence of the cases of Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy in film and other parts of popular culture, an assumption that the spectators are familiar with the subject matter function as a premise for the narratives. The films relate to a long history of serial killer celebrification and cinematic representations but based on the critique that the films received it appears that they introduce a shift in how serial killers are portrayed in film; it is this shift that this thesis seeks to examine.

1.3.1 My Friend Dahmer

Directed by Marc Meyers, *My Friend Dahmer* (2017) is a biographical drama adaptation of John 'Derf' Backderf's 2012 graphic novel of the same name, based on Backderf's own experience of being friends with Jeffrey Dahmer during their high school years. The protagonist is rarely referred to by his full name, Jeffrey, but rather frequently as Jeff; this thesis will keep this distinction between the names as a way to keep a clear separation when discussing the cinematic *Jeff* and the factual *Jeffrey Dahmer.*

My Friend Dahmer follows Jeff Dahmer, played by former Disney Channel star Ross Lynch, in his adolescence in a small town in Ohio in the 1970s before he commits any of his infamous murders, and the film therefore declines a sensationalist approach that many cinematic renditions of Jeffrey Dahmer's extraordinary case have applied beforehand. Rather, the film is a slow-burn account of Jeff as a shy young man coping with relatable teenage struggles of attempting to fit in with his peers, of making friends, and coming to terms with his sexuality, all the while dealing with his parents' deteriorating marriage. Welcomed into the friend-group of three boys, one of them being 'Derf', Jeff serves as somewhat of a mascot for their teenage mischief, yet he never fully forms a genuine, close, relationship with his friends; his friends notice Jeff's increasing drinking habit, but do not attempt to understand the reasons behind it. Reasons, as the spectators come to know, have to do with Jeff's home situation, his self-awareness of not quite fitting in, and of his homosexuality. Taking place up until his graduation from high school and ending right before he commences his serial murders, the film unfolds as a prequel to Jeffrey Dahmer's notoriety, meant to elucidate the social- and familial circumstances and emotional struggles that in time would be interpreted as origins for his horrendous crimes.

1.3.2 Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile

Directed by Joe Berlinger, best known for his achievements as director of true crime documentaries, *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* (2019) is a biographical crime film based on the memoir *The Phantom Prince: My Life with Ted Bundy* written by Bundy's former girlfriend Elizabeth Kendall. As with *My Friend Dahmer*, a distinction will be kept between the cinematic *Ted* and the factual *Ted Bundy*.

Extremely Wicked takes place throughout the 1970-1980s from when Ted first meets his girlfriend Liz, up until he is sentenced to death. Rather than having constructed the narrative around depicting Ted Bundy's crimes, Berlinger tells the story initially from Liz' point of view

and portrays Ted's prolonged fight with law enforcement to prove his innocence when being suspected of a series of kidnappings, assaults, and murders. Ted, played by Hollywood actor Zac Efron, appears as quite an innocent man who, by merely unlucky circumstances, happened to become the target of law enforcement for them to publicize their efficiency and maintain the public's trust of keeping social order by capturing the perpetrator of said crimes; much of the film therefore takes place at various courtrooms, depicting Ted's confusion and disbelief over being unduly detained.

The film does not commit to telling the story wholly from Liz's point of view, however, and gradually crosses over to Ted's. Ted is affable, ambitious, and unprejudiced, and his relationship with single-mother Liz is initially loving and trustworthy; as the narrative plays out, the story becomes just as much about Ted's efforts of not losing Liz as his persistence in proving his innocence, as she gradually grows a mistrust of him and is increasingly weary of his ordeals. Ted's desperation is for example presented through him twice escaping incarceration, both for the purpose of evading being unjustly sentenced but also to not let Liz accumulate disbelief towards him. The film shies away from depicting Ted as a murderous individual, focusing rather on his despair in battling with law enforcement and regaining his relationship and family-life with Liz; as much as Extremely Wicked is a crime story, the film has got a backdrop by a romantic narrative which resulted in it receiving mixed critical reviews.

1.4 Research Question

The vast amount of criticism that *My Friend Dahmer* and *Extremely Wicked* received for provoking sympathy for their protagonists, while simultaneously being praised for introducing unique perspectives to the serial killer subgenre, is indicative that the two portrayals diverge from how the serial killer- character has conventionally been portrayed in cinema. That sympathy is elicited for the protagonists' function as an implied premise for this thesis which seeks to find an answer to how the two protagonists in question are portrayed, and asks the question:

What makes the protagonists in My Friend Dahmer and Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile diverge from the conventional serial killer portrayed in film/TV?

The thesis furthermore aims to examine how the narratives of the two films are structured that allows for a pro-attitude towards characters that are based on factual serial killers, characters that conventionally have been presented as the epitome of human depravity. By examining what methods that the films use to elicit emotions of care, concern, and understanding, or a pro-

attitude, for the protagonists can provide the foundation needed to understand how the characters in their entirety are portrayed. To answer the main research question, a sub-question is therefore added:

How do the films' narrative structure and cinematic techniques generate sympathy and character engagement for the protagonists in My Friend Dahmer and Extremely Wicked?

1.5 Method

This thesis asks how two chosen texts belonging to the serial killer subgenre distinguishes themselves from the plethora of cinematic representations of serial killers. The aim is to answer the research question by relating narrative structure and cinematic techniques to character engagement, which is why to best answer the research question is to do a close textual analysis. A textual analysis provides for an in-depth examination of the individual cinematic elements that when discussed as a whole will determine how the characters in the chosen texts are portrayed, how the texts elicit character engagement, and how this distinguishes them from other texts of same genre. The texts will be analyzed chronologically, meaning that they are individually reviewed from start to finish. As a premise for the thesis is that sympathy is elicited for the characters, the aim of analyzing the texts chronologically is to locate elements that influence the spectators' emotional engagement for the characters.

A qualitative textual analysis is significant when researching how the meaning of a text is communicated, as its purpose is to identify the functions of a text's structure and content and how they relate to a larger structure. The analysis will be supported by concepts and theories derived from cognitive film theory, which will be elaborated in the thesis' theoretical framework, which is relevant to comprehend how the spectators make sense of what is presented in a text.

1.6 Thesis Structure

This thesis argues that the two objects of analysis differ from other texts of the same subgenre, that is, who include the same type of character; to distinguish how the two case studies differ from other texts regarding representations of serial killers it is necessary to identify what constitutes the conventions of the serial killer- character and of the subgenre. Chapter 3 will be exploring the development of the genre which will place the topic of the thesis, and the serial killer character, in a historical perspective. Key elements will be genre conventions and character representations, and how these have been developed since the formation of the genre;

this will provide a cultural framework to contextualize, and subsequently differentiate, the case studies. The chapter will specifically mention two texts that represent significant movements within the genre, *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Dexter*, as the former introduced imperative conventions of the serial killer subgenre and the latter introduced a crucial shift in the portrayal of the serial killer- character. True crime will additionally be mentioned due to serial murder being a prevalent topic within the genre, and lastly serial killer biopics and their position as intersecting reality/true crime and fiction.

Chapter 4 and 5, consecutively, will be the analysis of *My Friend Dahmer* and *Extremely Wicked*. The aim of the analyses is to examine what narrative techniques the films utilize that, as argued, elicit a sympathetic, positive, attitude for the protagonists, and to provide material that will be further discussed in the subsequent chapter. The center of the analyses will be character engagement, sympathy, and narrative. Elements such as sound, lighting, and camera movements are significant in the analysis of *My Friend Dahmer*, while the analysis of *Extremely Wicked* relies heavier on elements such as intertextuality, soundtrack, and criterial prefocusing. Murray Smith's structure of sympathy will serve as a foundation for both analyses as it is an essential model to examine how the filmmakers elicit sympathy for the characters and how this contributes to generate character engagement.

Chapter 6 will be a discussion of the analyses in view of the cultural framework presented in Chapter 3. The discussion will take into consideration how earlier texts portrayed their protagonist serial killers, as well as mention a few earlier portrayals of the same characters, to be used as comparatives.

Chapter 2.
Theoretical Framework

2.1 Theories on Serial Murder Cinema

A significant part of this thesis consists of reviewing and identifying the serial murder subgenre's historical development and conventions, and sees it as necessary to briefly introduce a few key theorists regarding the subject. The proliferation and popularity of serial murder as a subject in film, and the rise of the serial killer as a celebrity, has received a great deal of academic scrutiny. Scholar David Schmid's *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture* (2005) is a pivotal text regarding the cultural prominence of both the factual and fictional serial killer. Schmid details on how American popular culture, especially film and the Hollywood star system, have fostered the celebrification of serial killers, as mentioned in the introduction. He proposes the notion of *disavowal* as a noteworthy argument for why spectators enjoy narratives about serial murder and as an argument for the enormous popularity of such texts. By disavowal he means that texts about serial murder generally provide their spectators the chance to disavow their enjoyment and moral complicity when watching narratives about serial murder and representations of graphic violence, typically by presenting a narrative that the violent transgressions derive from something beyond human nature or by having the transgressor terminated (113-114).

In *Pyscho Paths: Tracking the Serial Killer Through Contemporary American Film and Fiction*, scholar Philip L. Simpson (2000) examines serial killer representations in a range of films and novels to establish its influences and conventions, and to provide an insight into the cultural anxieties that underpin the proliferation of the character. Simpson argues that serial killer representations in popular media, i.e., the serial murder subgenre, is linked to Gothic traditions which transpires through the genre's associations to the supernatural and in terms of expressing social and cultural anxieties. Both Schmid and Simpson, as well as a few other scholars such as Mark Seltzer (1998) and Philip Jenkins (1994), recognize that the distinction between factual and fictional serial killers in popular media are blurred, i.e., that factual elements and fictional conventions have become interlaced. Schmid's and Simpson's studies provide an essential backdrop for understanding the cultural landscape of which the thesis' case studies have emerged and proliferated.

2.2 Cognitive Film Theory

Whereas the concept of *identificatio*n is commonly used by film theorists and critics to explain why a spectator responds emotionally to a fictional character, the term has been challenged due to its ambiguity. The term has come to mean a variety of things such as liking or admiring a character, sharing or relating to a similar experience as the character, or sharing similar feelings as the character (Tobòn, 2019); it is typically implied that the spectator imagines themselves in the position of the character and therefore experiences the same as the character does in the narrative. Film philosopher Noëll Carroll (2013) is critical of the term identification because it suggests that the spectator share identical thoughts and emotions as the character and that this is unattainable due to the spectator being an observer of the narrative, not a participant, and will naturally have a different experience than that of the character. Carl Plantinga (2009a) shares Carroll's view and asserts that identification is a misleading term due to it disregarding the spectators' external experience of the narrative, which he describes as:

> The external part involves an assessment of the character's broader situation, incorporating information at times unavailable to the character, and incorporating the character's assessment of and response to his or her situation (104).

He states that for spectators to be emotionally responsive with a fictional character is by a combination of an external part and an internal part; in which the internal part is similar to the concept of identification as described above, but which is not adequate as single-handedly being the key component for the spectator's affective relationship with the character, but that the relationship is furthermore dependent on an external part consisting of understanding the context of the situation.

Character engagement is a term more frequently used by cognitive film theorists, such as Carroll and Plantinga, when discussing the relationship between a spectator and a character. Cognitive film theory saw its beginnings in the 1980s as an opposition to screen theory which was the typical approach to analyzing film and spectatorship. Screen theory made use of a psychoanalytic approach to analyzing spectatorship, for example as by the concept of identification, and contended that the spectator is a passive observer of film, focusing on the spectator's subconscious drives and instincts as central to the spectator's response to film and characters, and disregarded the impact of emotions (Plantinga, 2009a). For cognitive film theorists, however, emotion and affect are key elements for the cinematic experience. Cognitive film theory postulates the viewer as an active spectator, who not only perceives moving images

and sounds but who rationally comprehends and makes meaning of the narrative (Bruun Vaage, 2016).

To pinpoint the distinction between identification and character engagement, Murray Smith (1994) makes use of Richard Wollheims concepts of central and acentral imagination. Central imagining refers to imagining experiencing an occurrence one sees on screen from the inside, that is, experiencing the mental state and events of the character as ones own, which in screen theory is converted to identification and empathy. Acentral imagining refers to observing the narrative and imagining what the character must feel in the various events, but not experiencing it as identical to the character (35-39). Thus, Smith maintains that the spectator experiences *engagement* with fictional characters rather than *identification*.

Carroll (2013) is one of many cognitive film theorists that argues that the relationship between spectators and characters are more complex than merely being a manner of identification (41). He suggests that a pro-attitude for the character is the greatest component by which spectators become affectively involved in a character's experience, i.e., character engagement. Sympathy is defined as an emotional state of care, concern, and understanding, directed towards other people, and is inherently a supportive response, or a pro-attitude, towards others. Being a responsive emotion means that for a sympathetic attitude to occur, the spectator must comprehend and assess a character's actions in relation to the narrative and respond accordingly with a feeling *for* (or in the case of antipathy, *against*) the character, which can be manifested through feelings such as compassion, admiration, or concern for the character's well-being. Carroll terms this process *assimilation* and argues that this is a more accurate description of the relationship between the spectator and the character. The spectator is able to imagine how the situation is experienced for the character, i.e., assimilate to the situation, but does not internally experience the character's emotions themselves. A foundation for assimilating to a character's situation is to understand the *context* of the situation and to "have a sense of why the protagonist's response is appropriate or intelligible to the situation" (Carroll, 1990:95).

Criterial prefocusing is what Carroll terms the combination of devices that filmmakers use to evoke emotions within the spectator, primarily sympathy. That is, it is a process to evoke emotions that are intended by the filmmakers; by having e.g., narrative events and character traits foregrounded, the narrative predisposes the spectators to experience a certain emotional relationship with a character and this way establishes character engagement. Narrative structure and dialogue are two significant modes of criterial prefocusing as they serve to bring attention to the elements that the filmmakers intend to have the spectator focus on. These elements are

underscored by editing, camera movements, sound, and other cinematic techniques, which serves to heighten noteworthy aspects of the narrative that will eventually evoke reactions and emotions.

Carroll (2013) furthermore notes that "emotional attachment is secured primarily by moral considerations" (100), meaning that a fundamental component for evoking a sympathetic attitude for a fictional character is for the character to be morally favourable. For this to occur, an assessment of the character's qualities must be made by the spectators, and qualities that renders a character morally favourable can be brought forth by criterial prefocusing. For example, one element that morally favours a character is how the character acts towards other, more vulnerable, characters, such as children or elders; that is, if the character acts solicitous towards them it generally results in a positive evaluation, or if they act with the intention of causing them harm it results in a negative evaluation. It is when a character proves morally favourable that a sympathetic attitude is generally elicited, resulting in feelings such as anger or annoyance when the character is unjustly treated, or joy and exhilaration when the character achieves their goals. Accordingly, it is elements of criterial prefocusing combined with moral evaluation of the character, that Carroll suggests are what mobilizes a sympathetic attitude for the character (86-91).

As illustrated, sympathy is a responsive emotion and for sympathy to occur the spectator must comprehend the narrative and the context of occurring events, as well as morally assess the character. This describes what is an essential aspect of cognitive film theory, in the words of Bruun Vaage (2016), that "the spectator actively makes sense of films, and that her response to film is rationally motivated" (4), that is to say, how and why filmmakers make the spectators respond emotionally to fictional characters.

Murray Smith's *Engaging Characters* (1995) is a comprehensive study of the spectators' engagement with fictional characters which likewise concerns the emotional responses that arises from spectators towards characters. Smith, like Carroll and Plantinga, is sceptic of the term identification due to it inherently disregards a relationship between the spectator and character at a multiple level, and he suggests therefore a more methodical approach to achieving character engagement. His study offers a framework for analysis consisting of how character representation and narrative structure facilitate an emotional response from the spectator, arranged in a model that he terms the *structure of sympathy*.

Smith's structure of sympathy consists of three levels of engagement, named recognition, alignment, and allegiance; all of which are reliant on each other and together make out the primary process which must take place for a spectator's affective relationship with a character to occur. *Recognition* refers to the level where spectators construct and perceive characters as individuated human agents. This level describes in general a rapid and automatic process of recognizing exterior traits of the character – body, face, and voice; when these traits persist throughout the narrative, unless they are intentionally obscured by the filmmakers, *re-identification* of their traits secures them as continuous human agents in addition to being individuated (113-116).

The second level, *alignment*, is made up of two subordinate elements: subjective access and spatio-temporal attachment. Spatio-temporal attachment concerns to what degree the film attaches the spectators to the character throughout the narrative. Subjective access depends upon to what regard the film communicates the character's thoughts and feelings to the spectators, meaning the access that the spectators have of the character's state of mind. Alignment thus refers to the depth of knowledge one has about the character's mind, and to what range the narrative attaches the spectators to the character in terms of the narrative's time and space. Smith further maintains that alignment is obtained by a range of cinematic techniques; for example, point-of-view and eyeline-match shots function to communicate what the character is looking at and perceiving in their own mind, while music and sound are effective in communicating a character's mood and mental state.

The final level, *allegiance*, refers to the process where spectators morally evaluate a character and which results in either a sympathetic- or antipathetic, pro-, or con-, attitude towards the character. Whereas recognition and alignment only entail for the spectator to understand the character as a human agent and their state of mind, in other words, elements that are easily provided by the filmmakers, allegiance depends upon the spectator's own process of evaluating the character and subsequently to emotionally respond. Summarized in the words of Margrethe Bruun Vaage (2016), allegiance is "a moral evaluation and an emotional output" (5), meaning that the spectator reacts emotionally in a way which is suitable after morally assessing the character in relation to the narrative. Relating this to Noël Carroll's arguments, this is the level where the concept of criterial prefocusing would come into play to ensure that the outcome of the spectator's assessment of the character is what the filmmakers *intended* it to be.

Smith argues that for a moral evaluation of a character in a fiction to occur the spectators must comprehend the film's moral structure, or its internal system of values. A character is evaluated

based on their virtues and choice of action in relation to the other characters in the narrative, and if the character in question is the one with preferable qualities, the spectator is easier inclined to become allied with them, i.e., to side with the character, and to take on a sympathetic, supportive, attitude for them (188-189).

Carl Plantinga (2009a) furthermore stresses that "the implied premise of much of cognitive theory has been that spectators are motivated by curiosity, suspense, anticipation, and other narrative emotions" (22), in what he terms cognitive play, or cognitive pleasure. It is natural to consider the mystery or crime film as incorporating much cognitive play as they typically include all of the elements mentioned above, but Plantinga asserts that cognitive play occur in numerous genres through each texts narrative structure. Thus, another noteworthy concept presented by Smith in relation to character engagement and cognitive play, is the primacy effect. The phenomenon of primacy effect Smith borrows from David Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985) and is a term that stems from cognitive psychology. In psychology, the primacy effect refers to the notion that information provided at first, such as a character's first impressions, tend to be remembered better than information provided, and impressions made, later; also, a first impression of a person tend to influence subsequent evaluation of that person (*APA Dictionary of Psychology,* [no date]). The primacy effect in film, Smith contends, is crucial to the beginnings of film as it function to shape how the spectator experience the rest of the narrative. Introductions in film, for example, establish information that in most instances will persist throughout the narrative, such as character traits, in the words of Bordwell (1985): "a character initially described as virtuous will tend to be described so even in the face of some contrary evidence" (28). Primacy effect furthermore leads to anticipation, meaning that based on information provided at the beginning of a film, it primes the spectator to expect certain elements to unfold throughout the narrative, thus shaping the spectators' expectations of what is to come. The primacy effect is therefore a way to spark the spectators' curiosity of the narrative and is a way for the filmmakers to ensure that the spectators engage with the narrative, or in other words a way to facilitate cognitive play.

As demonstrated in the theories of Smith and Carroll, an essential element to ensure character engagement is by a positive moral evaluation of the character, in which the filmmakers can influence by using a series of narrative structures and techniques. However, Margrethe Bruun Vaage (2016), in her study on spectators allying with cinematic antiheroes, challenges Smith's and Carroll's arguments of moral evaluation by suggesting that spectators bypass *rational* moral evaluation of characters in a fiction, but that their evaluation of a character is subject to being

influenced by intuitions or emotions which are, as mentioned above, likewise affected by narrative structure and techniques (1-7). The prevalence and popularity of antiheroes in film and television suggest that spectators are indeed not rational in their generally positive attitude towards such characters, but Bruun Vaage furthermore suggest that the fictionality of antiheroes is a significant aspect of facilitating a positive attitude for them.

Chapter 3.
Contextualizing Serial Murder in Popular Culture

3.1 An American Context

In a report published by the U.S Department of Justice, the Federal Bureau of Investigation defines a serial killer as an individual who murders three or more victims at separate events (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2008), and reportedly, the United States holds over seventy percent of the world's reported serial killers (Vronsky, 2004). David Schmid (2005) recognizes that the iconic status of the serial killer in American culture arose with their heightened attention in the 1980s due to news media's increasingly sensationalized stories about crime combined with their attempt to provide a name to the dangerous "faceless predator" responsible for rising murders, which was a subject that dominated news-media's crime reporting at the time (13-14).

When the handsome, charismatic, and educated Ted Bundy stood trial for kidnapping, sexual assault, and murder of multiple women throughout the 1970s, it was a media spectacle and the first trial in US history to be televised. Bundy denied the charges against him at first and was adamant of his innocence, he even acted as his own defense attorney during parts of his trial which allowed him, among other things, to cross-examine witnesses himself. Additionally, his behavior at the trial was described as unpredictable, exemplified by him unexpectedly proposing and subsequently marrying his girlfriend while she was on the witness stand. The combination of such horrific crimes with such a confident, charming, and eloquent suspect resulted in an unprecedented interest in the case, and the trial was also televised internationally. Ted Bundy made the prevalence of the newfound crime of serial murder have a face, which turned out to be a completely ordinary one; his personality traits and good looks are what gained him the trust of his victims, and he eventually admitted to murdering over thirty women. Almost ten years after his trial, his execution in 1989 likewise received massive media attention.

Unlike Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer was not a wanted man at the time of his arrest in 1991 despite having a criminal record and unknowingly to the police having killed seventeen men. He who would likely become his eighteenth victim managed to escape from Dahmer's apartment and brought two police officers back with him after claiming he had been attacked, and there they did the gruesome discovery of numerous preserved body parts. Through Dahmer's readily confession it was revealed that part of his misdeeds consisted of necrophilia and cannibalism, and he was eventually convicted of the rape and murder of multiple men which

he had carried out since the late 1970s. Dahmer's case, like Bundy's, was a media sensation due to the extraordinary conditions of his crimes, providing him the nickname the Milwaukee Cannibal.

The arrest and trial of Dahmer happened around the same time as the release of *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991), a film that within popular culture also became a sensation. Seeing as the antihero of the film, Hannibal Lecter, likewise was as a serial killer and cannibal, Dahmer unsurprisingly obtained the status of being the real-life Hannibal Lecter, to which Grixti (1995) noted that Dahmer, as a result, was likewise situated by the media as an "ambiguous monster-hero" (1). Similarly, in addition to having escaped imprisonment multiple times and having abducted women in broad daylight, Bundy, like Lecter, had aided the police in investigating other serial murder cases while imprisoned, all of which provided him the status of somewhat of an expert on the matter or as some kind of criminal mastermind. The combination Bundy and Dahmer appearing as completely ordinary men but who committed such horrendous crimes, while being ascribed such iconic statuses by the media, resulted in an enormous "admiration and condemnation" due to the "puzzling relationship between normality and abnormality" (Schmid, 2005:212), and to which Philip Jenkins noted that since the early 1990s "the distinction between historical serial killers and their cinematic counterparts is dissolving" (cited in Jarvis, 2007:328).

Despite their deaths thirty years ago, Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer remain household names as two of the most notorious serial killers in American history. As illustrated, their cases were sensational and attracted enormous media attention worldwide, resulting in numerous representations in documentaries, true crime, and fiction, and their cases are the epitome of America's celebrification of serial killers (other recognizable names in the celebrification of serial killers include e.g., John Wayne Gacy, Edmund Kemper, Richard Ramirez, and Dennis Rader). The massive attention and attraction to serial murder cases in the US, combined with the cultural prominence of the serial killer- character in the aftermath of *The Silence of the Lambs,* caused the serial killer to be recognized as an "American original, a romantic icon, like the cowboy" (Achenbach, 1991), or as "American as apple pie" (Ressler in Tithecott, 1997:4).

As this thesis is about the cinematic portrayals of two serial killer- characters, this chapter will introduce a cultural framework to contextualize the case studies and to trace the development of the character. Both fictional and non-fictional adaptations will be discussed as it will come to be known an interlacing of the two has dominated the serial murder subgenre. A few international depictions will be briefly mentioned to elucidate the introduction of the serial

killer as a character in cinema but will otherwise not be elaborated in-depth. Since the topic of the case studies is two cinematic portrayals of Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer discussion will remain within a North American context to limit the scope of the thesis.

3.2 Early Portrayals and Introduction of the Character

Though the term "serial killer" and its official definition was not defined until the late 1970s and had not become a widespread term until the 1980s, several films released prior to that still include what today would be described as a serial killer-character. *Peeping Tom* (Powell, 1960), *The Boston Strangler* (Fleischer, 1968) and *10 Rilington Place* (Fleischer, 1971) are a few that fall under that category, but Fritz Lang's *M* (1931), however, is frequently recognized as the very earliest depiction of a serial killer, and is acclaimed for its portrayal of a mentally troubled killer of children who is tormented by his compulsion to kill (Kauffman, 2004, Andrew, 2019). More than a few films by Alfred Hitchcock, such as *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) and *Frenzy* (1972) also include a serial killer- character, but Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) might especially come to mind to be one of the most critically acclaimed earlier films laying a foundation for a serial killer- character in cinema. A man so traumatized in his childhood due to abuse from his mother, which resulted in a mental disorder and him murdering multiple women, yet outwardly appearing friendly and ordinary, were traits of the character that would persist in future depictions of serial killers. Like *M*, *Psycho* was acclaimed for portraying a killer with psychological complexities, but especially for bringing psychological depth into the horror genre. What is more, the success of *Psycho* introduced a new horror character: the madman-killer, which led to a proliferation of the character and whom was to become a staple villain in horror to come.

Influenced by the introduction of the madman-killer in *Psycho*, the horror genre in the mid 1970s-1980s were dominated by the inclusion of a villain sharing characteristics with the serial killer-character. Such characteristics consisted of killers being abused in their childhood, being sexually repressed, or suffering from mental illness; but the films would lack the psychological depth that *Psycho* introduced. While the villains in films such as *Halloween* (Carpenter, 1978) and *Friday the 13th* (Cunningham, 1980) are today often considered as franchise-serial killers (Hills and Schneider, 2007), and the villain in *A Nightmare in Elm's Street* (Craven, 1984) is frequently considered as a supernatural serial killer, these films established conventions and tropes that were to be defined as *slasher* films. With emphasis on depicting graphic murders and jump-scares, and narratives frequently revolving around a masked killer terrorizing

teenager, these films distinctly follow a different format than what generally classifies a text belonging to the serial killer subgenre (which will be discussed later). Though not attributing psychological complexities to the killer, these films were significant in perpetuating the psycho-killer as a cinematic phenomenon and as a recognizable horror character.

3.3 The Influence of The Silence of the Lambs

Whereas *M* and *Psycho* might have laid the blueprints for the serial killer film (Andrew, 2019), the film adaptation of Thomas Harris's novel *The Silence of the Lambs* gave rise to the genre and character's immense popularity after its release in 1991. Philip L. Simpson (2000) claims Harris to be the creator of the formula for modern film and television's depiction of serial killers; and various academics, such as David Schmid (2005) and Mark Seltzer (1998), and their work regarding the popularization of serial killers, all recognize that both the Harris's novel and Jonathan Demme's adaptation paved the way for the proliferation of serial killer representations in popular media. As the film adaptation is one of the few that have ever won the five major Academy Awards (*Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor in a Leading Role, Best Actress in a Leading Role,* and *Best Writing and Screenplay*), its success, in the words of Daniel O'Brien, "helped pave the way for a new horror sub-genre, the high-class serial killer movie" (cited in Schmid, 2005:111).

The Silence of the Lambs follows FBI trainee Clarice Starling as she assists in the investigation and the apprehending of the serial killer known as Buffalo Bill, who abducts women, skins them, and then dumps them in various rivers across the US. She is given the task of creating a profile of the killer by receiving help by former psychiatrist, and convicted killer and cannibal, Hannibal Lecter. Lecter knows the identity of Buffalo Bill but is in no hurry to reveal it to the FBI, and through a series of intense conversations between Lecter and Starling he instead provides her with riddle-like clues in exchange for personal information about Starling herself. The narrative goes on to center around an intense race against time as the daughter of a Senator goes missing and is believed to be the next victim of Buffalo Bill.

As O'Brien, Carol Clover (1992) recognizes *The Silence of the Lambs* as a "high slasher" (233), while Yvonne Tasker (2002) names it a "high-profile horror movie" (34-41). But, though elements of horror were included, such as a deranged killer and imagery of decaying bodies, the emphasis was not to display gruesome deaths and the terrorization of innocent people, nor was it specifically aimed at a teenage audience as slasher films typically were. The film further separated itself from low-budget slasher/horror films in the US in 1970s-80s by combining the

horror genre with a detective narrative, and where the emphasis was for law enforcement to understand the psychology behind the killer in order to capture them. The film thus elevated American horror films from being dominated by low-budget, teen slashers, to prestige. The film's commercial success and its critical acclaim resulted in a turning point for films that portrayed a serial killer- character; while the majority of such films in the decades before, i.e., slashers, were highly criticized, *The Silence of the Lambs* launched the serial killer- character into a respectable genre.

3.3.1 The Serial Killer(s) and Gothic Associations

There are two different kinds of serial killer- characters present in *The Silence of the Lambs*. The narrative revolves around the hunt for its antagonist Buffalo Bill, or Jame Gumb as is later revealed to be his true identity. Gumb has been denied gender reassignment surgery and is therefore killing women for their skin to make his own "skin-suit" and is by Yvonne Tasker (2002:35) defined as a misfit-killer, meaning that he is someone who struggles to fit into society and social groups. The character can be interpreted as a continuation of the sexually repressed, dysfunctional, madman-killer introduced in *Psycho*. As Norman Bates, the character of Jame Gumb was also inspired by real-life killer Ed Gein who made furniture and keepsakes out of his victims' bodies and skin but was additionally inspired by Ted Bundy who lured women to his aid by wearing a fake cast on his arm as well as Gary Heidnik who kept his female victims in a pit in the basement of his house.

Hannibal Lecter, the second killer in the film, is quite the opposite to that of Buffalo Bill. Lecter was a successful psychiatrist before he was imprisoned and appears highly intellectual, along with being well-spoken and well-mannered. His profession, his fondness of classical music, and being talented at drawing depict him as sophisticated and as an otherwise well-functioning member of society compared to Jame Gumb. While earlier depictions of serial killers tended to portray them as misfit/madmen-killers, included in *The Silence of the Lambs* by its portrayal of Jame Gumb, the films also introduced a new kind of portrayal of the serial killer through its depiction of Hannibal Lecter as intellectual, cunning, and powerful.

Simpson (2000) draws comparisons to vampire narratives in his description of the myth-making process of the pop cultural serial killer, i.e., the serial killer as a dangerous, insatiable, Other who will forever prey on humans, or a "human/monster hybrid" (3-7), which is manifested in Lecter through his gentlemanly and sophisticated manners combined with his desire to consume humans; while Tasker (2019) describes Lecter as a "seductive variety of [the] mad scientist"

(8) due to him being presented as somewhat of a criminal mastermind, both of which are characteristics derived from Gothic traditions and function create a suspenseful and mysterious atmosphere surrounding the character.

Simpsons elaborates on the association to Gothic traditions to contemporary serial killers in general, by sustaining Gothic conventions to be one of the defining influences on fictional serial killer narratives (the other being detective fiction). Among elements of Gothic that appear in serial killer narratives he mentions a plot revolving around a threatening villain (or monster) and extreme violence inflicted on people; and he, as well as other academics such as Grixti (1995), stresses that the serial killer- character in popular culture is the human incarnation of the Gothic monster, something which was embodied in the character Hannibal Lecter, and is a characteristic that remained with the fictional serial killer after *The Silence of the Lambs*.

Though *The Silence of the Lambs* in no way encompasses supernatural elements, there is a mythical atmosphere surrounding Hannibal Lecter. A narrative event that accentuates this occur when Lecter's fellow inmate and cell-neighbor, Miggs, have died by swallowing his own tongue, to which it is later revealed that it was Lecter who influenced him to do; by being able to persuade someone into killing themselves simply by speaking to them demonstrate how influential and alluring Lecter is, nearing a resemblance to having supernatural abilities. Likewise, when Starling is visiting Lecter for the first time, he is introduced by the director of the psychiatric prison where Lecter is held, in this descriptive manner: *"Oh, he's a monster. Pure psychopath. So rare to capture one alive"*, as Chilton is describing Lecter almost with a hint of pride in his voice as if having captured a rare animal; A similar instance occurs when a detective Murray asks about Lecter, *"is it true what they're saying, he's some kinda vampire?"* To which Starling replies, *"they don't have a name for what he is"*. Despite being wholly human, Lecter thus exhibits characteristics of being superhuman, and otherwise holds several admirable qualities such as being cultivated, sharp-witted, and eloquent. Gumb, however, is presented as brutal, chaotic, and an immediate danger, and the narrative establishes a feeling of aversion towards him through his inconceivably cruel motive along with the knowledge that he is a danger that must be stopped urgently.

Such characteristics rendered Lecter the preferable character/villain when compared to Gumb, and which launched the serial killer as a new kind of pop-cultural antihero characterized by his simultaneously frightening and alluring qualities. His characteristics of being cunning, clever, and mysterious separated him from earlier portrayals of serial killers who were generally characterized by brutality, crudeness, and mentally disturbed as presented by Gumb. Despite

being a cannibalistic killer, this portrayal resulted in an admiration and fascination for the fictional serial killer and made Hannibal 'the cannibal' Lecter, a serial killer and cannibal, an American cultural icon.

3.4 Narratives and Genre Conventions

As the success of *The Silence of the Lambs* resulted in a proliferation of narratives about serial killers, numerous films and television programs made use of elements introduced in the film, forming persistent conventions and tropes to be recognized as a serial killer subgenre. A detective narrative became a prominent feature of such films, which usually centers around a series of murders where a detective, typically one or more FBI agents, sets out to catch the killer before they strike again. As the detective narrative is structured around an investigation, physical evidence and other clues must be analyzed in order to reach an explanation and subsequent capture or murder of the killer. A distinctive feature introduced in *The Silence of the Lambs* was that of psychological/criminal profiling as the most important and useful means to identify and catch the killer. Philip Jenkins (1994) asserts that "the idea of the detective as mind-hunter, employing scientific crime-fighting skills well beyond the normal level of police procedure" (73) originated in Thomas Harris's novel *Red Dragon*, but truly flourished as a narrative trait after the success of the film adaptation of *The Silence of The Lambs*. The spectators of a detective narrative usually perceive the story alongside the detective, and often the narrative is set out to be an intellectual cat-and-mouse chase between the detectives and the killer where the detective must understand the killer's mindset to eventually outsmart them; This is where the suspense of a detective narrative arises and where Alluè (2002) claims much of the enjoyment from serial murder entertainment derives from. Notable films utilizing this narrative include *Seven* (Fincher, 1995), *Copycat* (Amiel, 1995), *The Bone Collector* (Noyce, 1999), and long-running television programs such as *CSI*: *Crime Scene Investigation* (Zuiker, 2000-2015) and *Criminal Minds* (Davis, 2005-2020), to name a few, and whose popularity perpetuated these genre tropes.

Another notable category of films regarding serial killers is the biopic. Such films usually depict the killer's upbringing, family- and social-life, their crimes, and a possible apprehension, and is a dramatized rendition of the life of a non-fictional serial killer rather than being the informative style of a documentary. Elements of law enforcement might be included, but the killer is often the protagonist rather than the detective(s), but as in a detective narrative the biopic usually ends with the killer being caught. Such films range from commercially successful

and critically acclaimed, such as *Monster* (Jenkins, 2003) and *Dahmer* (Jacobson, 2002), to numerous low-budget films about some of the most recognizable names in American serial killer history, such as *Ed Gein* (Parello, 2000) *Ted Bundy* (Bright, 2002), and *Gacy* (Saunders, 2003). Whereas the hunt for a threatening serial killer and figuring out what their next move is by attempting to understand their mind is generally what drives the detective narrative forward, the biopic provides personal look into the life of the killer by portraying them in the period they committed their crimes or what brought them to become killers.

As illustrated, prior to *The Silence of the Lambs*, films about serial killers tended to focus on the mental struggles of the killer and the causes that led them to do what they do. These elements persisted, but as previously mentioned *The Silence of the Lambs* introduced another serial killer, the criminal mastermind, and a narrative that focused on the intellectual capacities necessary to capture the killer. As Schmid notes:

> Rather than attempting to understand the social and psychological forces that produced serial murder, and what the actual incidence of this crime was, the popular cultural media instead contended themselves with focusing on the drama of the serial killer's apprehension, conviction, and imprisonment/death (91)

In general, the serial killer subgenre is a crossing of genres and apply elements from crime, thrillers, horror, dramas, and the biopic. In contrast, the slasher film, though in many ways including a serial killer- type character, is exceedingly a low-budget subgenre of horror films as the emphasis is typically on fear through its graphic depictions of violence rather than the inclusion of a gripping plot and thematic complexity, a distinctly human serial killer, and/or an investigation that must be resolved.

3.5 The Character

What collectively characterizes the serial killer representation in popular culture is an individual who methodically murders multiple people over a longer period of time, aside from that, the character takes on a variety of different forms, traits, and motives. Whereas killers appear in numerous genres, the serial killer's motives for murder are often presented as psychologically complex and inexplicable for ordinary people, and generally require a deep dive into their mindset to reveal their complex motives behind their actions which is why criminal profiling by the expert detective is typically presented as the greatest method to apprehend them. The serial killer is therefore distinguished from other characters who kill due to "[their] pathology extends beyond acting out of anger or hate or greed and murdering, say, a family member or a

bank teller" (Logan, 2017), that is, the acts of a serial killer is presented to fulfil some sort of mental compulsion or emotional urge.

Crime films- and television series often include depictions of a serial killer with great intellect, and whose motives is often presented to be mission-based to display some sort of symbolism, exemplified in films such as *Se7en* where John Doe constructs elaborate murders to remind and punish the world of its apathy for the seven deadly sins, or in *Horsemen* (Åkerlund, 2009) where the murders are done to represent a coming revolution. Some narratives portray this type of killer as someone who toys with law enforcement by communicating with the police, the media, or a detective through providing clues either at the crime scene or by contacting them throughout the investigation. Such portrayals are often inspired by factual events of serial killers, such as the Zodiac killer who in the late 1960s sent coded messages, and the BTK- killer who in the 1970s-1980s phoned and wrote letters, to various media outlets and police. Tasker (2019) outlines the portrayal of this type of serial killer as someone who is "capable of intricate planning or perhaps simple animal cunning" (95), to which Brian Gibson (2013) asserts results in a narrative defined by "an overwhelming presence—of evil, of fiendish violence, of insanity, of roving bloodlust, of chaos" (121). It can be argued that such portrayals perpetuate the myth of the serial killer as an intellectual, evil, supervillain.

Another key portrayal of the serial killer is someone with an urge to kill or is simply killing for their own enjoyment. These are often portrayed as ordinary people leading seemingly normal lives, such as the mild-mannered postman Vann Siegert in *The Minus Man* (Fancher, 1999) or the successful family- and businessman Earl Brooks in *Mr. Brooks* (Evans, 2007). Their motives are often revealed to be of sexual nature and/or due to abuse or trauma in their childhood which has led them to experience an overpowering urge to kill. These characters inhabit a mask of normality, meaning that anyone can hide their abnormality in a normal appearance, and which furthermore is an element perpetuated in true crime narratives.

Common for all, despite different motives and presentations, is depicting the killer as essentially violent by either depicting them commit elaborate acts of murder or by portraying them as inherently violent individuals. Many such portrayals, in both biopics and true crime, often elicit some degree of sympathy for the killer's tragic upbringing or life story, but due to the inclusion of portraying them as violent towards other people, the spectators are rarely encouraged to side with the killer.

3.6 True Crime and Obscuring Fact and Fiction

As the number of films and television programs regarding serial killers increased after the release of *The Silence of the Lambs*, serial killing as a subject in true crime also proliferated. Sarah Hodgkinson (2016), in her critical review of the portrayal of serial killing in popular culture, summarizes the majority of narratives provided by true crime as:

> A sensational, and simplified stereotype of the organized 'evil' psychopathic killer who kills randomly without motivation, but who … can be easily apprehended using the credible science of profiling, restoring our faith in the powers of law enforcement (284)

Hodgkinson describes a similar portrayal that proliferated in fictional serial killer narratives after the release of *The Silence of the Lambs*, which indicate that elements in true crime regarding serial killers often interlace with those in fiction. Schmid (2005) justifies this interlacing of elements due to the fact that serial killers in reality do not appear as the gothic, evil, monster portrayed in fiction, but instead appear rather ordinary (typically with a family life or a normal job), to which true crime nevertheless tend to draw on gothic structures as a way to sensationalize their stories to create a more captivating narrative.

One such element common in both true crime and fiction is the killer showing deviation already as a child or having a traumatic childhood experience that would catalyst them into their murderous behavior. Schmid describes this inclusion in true crime as a "search that frequently involves looking back at perfectly ordinary events and recasting them as sinister premonitions of what is to come" (ibid., p.177), meaning that it is a method used to portray the killer as distinctly different from ordinary people already as early as childhood; an element Cynthia Freeland calls "standard and clichéd" (2002:179), but which is generally accepted in popular culture to be a legitimate explanation for the actions of a serial killer.

Grixti (1995) and Alluè furthermore recognizes that serial killing "belongs to the realms of both reality and fiction" (2002:7), while Jarvis (2007) asserts that "the distinction between historical serial killers and their cinematic counterparts is dissolving" (328); this is exemplified by how true crime narratives are meant to portray the reality of serial killer cases but still incorporate elements from fictional narratives, and that many fictional depictions of serial killers are influenced by real people and events. *The Silence of the Lambs* portrayed two types of serial killers: the chaotic madman inspired by a combination of factual killers, and the vampiric-like, evil genius, killer, distinctly fictional and inspired by Gothic traditions. The serial murder genre in the aftermath of *The Silence of the Lambs*, however, has not kept this distinctive separation

between two types of serial killer- characters, but, as encapsulated in the quotes above, it has rather seen a fusing of the two, or merely a lesser distinction between the two.

News- and entertainment media alike has played a significant role in the merging of fact and fiction about serial killers. In his analysis about news media's extensive use of supernatural terms in their description of real-life serial killers (in particular, the use of the words "monster", "evil", and "devil"), Scott Bonn (2016) remarks that they "blur the distinction between reality and fiction and ... turn killers into stylized and cartoonish super predators" (211), resulting in serial killers and other cinematic 'predators' being interchangeable to the public, i.e., equally frightening and equally entertaining, all of which has resulted in perpetuating the myth about serial killers and them being elevated to "celebrity monsters" (ibid., 211). Summarized, the myth of serial killers, in the words of Danesi (2016), remains a "composite image—an amalgam of Freddy Krueger, the Ripper, Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, Hannibal Lecter—that does not differentiate between fact and fiction" (44).

3.6.1 Two Biopics

As previously mentioned, depictions of Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer exist in a variety of texts. A closer look at two biopics will reveal how earlier representations of the two characters typically were portrayed by using conventions of the subgenre.

Set in 1974, when Ted Bundy attended law-school, taking place up until his execution, the film *Ted Bundy* (Bright, 2002) starts off with an establishing shot of protagonist Ted talking to himself in the mirror one morning. A three-sided mirror triples the character as he is practicing smiling and on introducing himself; but in between polite sentences of "*my name is Ted, how are ya*", he makes animal sounds and grimaces as well as panting and hissing. Thus, from the very beginning the film introduces Ted as someone who is not quite right in his mind and needs to practice acting normal, which accentuates him as an unhinged individual with animalistic behavior. The three-sided mirror likewise enhances the many sides of Ted Bundy's personality which are portrayed in the film through his relationship with his girlfriend Lee and appearing kindhearted while working at an emergency hotline, but also being sexually aggressive and raping and murdering multiple women.

In a similar manner, the film *The Secret Life: Jeffrey Dahmer* (Bowen, 1993) start off by having protagonist Jeffrey introduce himself in a voice-over saying that *"I have to wonder whether or not there is an evil force in the world and whether or not I have been influenced by it"*, referring to what the film goes on to portray which is him drugging, murdering, and dismembering

multiple men, which establishes the character from the very beginning as someone depraved and malicious and attributes those traits as due to an evil force. The film includes Jeffrey reminiscing his childhood as being defined by fighting and punishment, which taps into the notion that his childhood and current estranged relationship with both his parents are cause for his actions. Similarly, it is briefly mentioned in *Ted Bundy* that Ted is troubled by the fact that he was illegitimately conceived and not aware that the person he believed to be his sister was really his mother, as a cue at what might have caused him to become a serial killer.

However, both characters appear reasonably ordinary in their everyday lives; Ted is polite and charismatic, and Jeffrey is well-mannered and helpful while living with his grandmother. But depictions of Ted as unhinged, as in the introduction, continue throughout the film, for example through him talking to and putting makeup on a woman's decapitated head that he keeps in his apartment. As for Jeffrey, his murders as due to an evil force is further exemplified through a random priest hindering Jeffrey to pursue what would likely be a next victim, signifying that the impact of an evil force can be stopped by a religious figure. Connotations are thus constantly made to the monstrous and evil, and the narratives continually emphasize the characters as disturbed and malicious.

As most of serial killer biopics, both films depict graphic violence as the protagonists are committing crimes. Furthermore, as many true crime narratives they tap into notions that the characters are products of their pasts and briefly attributes their choice of actions as due to their upbringing, but neither film deeply examine those notions and rather focuses on depicting their depravity, emphasizing that only a monster or an evil Other could perform such atrocious acts. These two examples illustrate how biopics, true crime, and documentaries tend to visualize what is typically described as a monstrous evil residing within those who to all appearances seem completely normal, i.e., a method to visualize the killer's abnormality when the mask of normality slips; whereas Ted's animalistic behavior in the scene in the mirror function to visualize his presumably beastly true self, Jeffrey's thoughts in a voice-over visualizes his association with an evil Other.

3.7 *Dexter,* Transforming the Serial Killer

As *The Silence of the Lambs* had launched the serial killer to become a staple character in popular culture, the portrayal of the killer had since been generally characterized as an someone with great intellect able to toy with law enforcement or being ascribed as an evil Other hiding a 'monster within'. In some instances, they were admired by the audience for to their cunning,

cleverness, and capability to reside outside the laws of society, while other texts provided a fascinating insight into the world of the killer, eliciting partial sympathy for their protagonist serial killers but never full allegiance with their motive and actions.

The premiere of the Showtime television series *Dexter* (Manos, 2006) in 2006 introduced yet another shift in the presentation of the serial killer in popular culture. Based on the book series *Darkly, Dreaming, Dexter* (2004) by author Jeff Lindsay, *Dexter* follows the life and crimes of its protagonist Dexter Morgan as he is a blood-splatter analyst at the Miami police department by day and a serial killer by night. To all appearances, Dexter is a polite and friendly individual who acts as a loving stepfather for his girlfriend's two children and who only has a sister as his remaining family and, but he is also whom the news media in the series have nicknamed the *Bay Harbor Butcher*. As Dexter works at the police department, he takes it upon himself to only murder other criminals who have somehow escaped the justice system and who are most likely to continue their transgressions. Though he appears as a vigilante, it is emphasized in the series that Dexter kills because he as got an overwhelming urge to do so since he was a child, and that the moral framework of his choice of victims was set by his foster father, Harry, who was the only one who knew about his urges, to turn his immoral urges into a service for the society.

Though introducing a new portrayal of the serial killer, the series still incorporated several tropes from serial killer fiction: Dexter's urge to kill is presented as an inevitable result of a traumatic event in his childhood, he carries out elaborate and meticulous murder rituals, and he keeps trophies from his victims in form of a box containing blood slides. The series furthermore incorporates an association to monstrosity by having Dexter calling himself a 'very neat monster' and at various times makes associations to his own so-called monstrosity. Dexter is thus a morally ambiguous character, and the series blurred the lines between portraying its protagonist as a serial killer enjoying the act of killing while simultaneously drawing comparisons to a superhero; Dexter is given the nickname *The Dark Defender* by the media when they learn that his victims are all criminals, and Dexter himself says in a voiceover: *"I never really got the whole superhero thing, but lately it seems we have a lot in common; tragic beginning, secret identities, part-human, part-mutant"* (2.5). Santaularia (2010) notes that it is this ambiguity that made *Dexter* so appealing to audiences, and she refers to Robin Nelson's definition on what makes quality television: television that, among other aspects, "elicit shock of new insight" by, as *Dexter* does, "presenting characters who breach moral, as well as generic, boundaries, and who sit awkwardly between heroic and villainous roles" (Nelson cited in Santalauria, 2010:62). Though including several tropes of the subgenre, the elements of a serial

killer as a Gothic villain, mentally disturbed, or murdering as means of a greater symbolic meaning were removed. James Manos jr., the developer of the series, elaborates on the appeal of *Dexter* by saying that much of it lies in Dexter's "childlike innocence and curiosity about [the world] because he is trying to fit in" (cited in Howard, 2010:16), which make for an ironic, fascinating, and innovative portrayal of the serial killer, and which encourages spectators to taking a liking to him.

3.7.1 Disavowal and Moral Evaluation

Schmid (2005) recognizes that a common trait in serial killer texts is to provide the spectators means to disavow their enjoyment and enthusiasm for violent and immoral characters; the character is usually equated with an evil Other or is caught or killed at the end, which allows the spectators to "enjoy the fame of serial killers within a moralistic framework that relieves them from pursuing the implications of that enjoyment" (114); for instance, the biopic *Ted Bundy* ends with Bundy being executed, while *The Secret Life of Jeffrey Dahmer* ends with Dahmer's arrest. In contrast to earlier serial killer narratives, *Dexter* invited its viewers to be wholly allied with the killer and not, for instance, a detective, despite depictions of him committing violent transgressions. As Dexter only targets other criminals, it is Dexter himself that takes on the role of restoring the social order, and as a result, the disavowal that the spectators experience is the elimination of criminals driven by far worse motives than Dexter, and not by eliminating the central serial killer- character itself.

Smith (1995) identifies an internal system of values as a key element in allying the spectators with a character, meaning that when a character is morally evaluated in comparison to the other characters, and is subsequently disclosed as the morally *preferable* one, this facilitates an allegiance with the character and their motives (188). As such, it is Dexter's moral framework in choice of victims that renders him the "acceptable", or preferable, killer when compared to the others in the series. Allegiance furthermore arises from having the spectators aligned with the character, meaning in what regard they are spatio-temporally attached to and have subjective access to a character. Films such as *The Secret Life of Jeffrey Dahmer*, *The Minus Man,* and *Monster* (Jenkins, 2003) all attach the spectators to their protagonist serial killers and provide subjective access in form of voice-overs, but full allegiance is lost due to the spectators not being allied with the character's motives and actions, i.e., they fall short in the moral evaluation. Dexter, furthermore, as mentioned previously, provides a fascinating and slightly humorous

insight into a serial killer's curiosity about the world of "normal" people and about his efforts in fitting in, which make him a likeable, arguably even a relatable, character.

These aspects are part of what enabled the series to successfully ally its spectators to Dexter Morgan, despite having incorporated several tropes of serial killer fiction and portraying its protagonist as a murderous individual, and the series became representative of what Hantke (2010) identified as "the transformation of the serial killer from feared object of evil to hero and subject of sympathy" (129).

3.8 Chapter Summary & Serial Murder in Contemporary Popular Culture

Despite a noticeable decline in the presence and apprehension of real-life serial killers, contemporary serial killers do exist but receive less sensationalized, "breaking news", coverage by the news media, and do not obtain similar celebrity statuses, or media frenzies, as serial killers from, what Vronsky (2021) summarizes as, the "golden age" of serial murder, meaning the 1970s-1990s when the term became familiarized.

Still, serial murder is a ubiquitous subject of contemporary popular culture and serial killers from the golden age have become household names. Whereas news- and entertainment media, and the success of *The Silence of the Lambs*, had established the serial killer to be either a monstrous, evil, Other, or a criminal mastermind, *Dexter* had popularized a humanization of the serial killer- character, that is, introducing them as someone who is less Gothic monster or evil genius, and more "like us". While the serial killer subgenre has surpassed its prime of producing Hollywood blockbusters (Simpson, 2010), "audiences have become so familiar with these stories that their conventions have become part of the cultural landscape" (Simpson, 2010:122), and while the serial killer as a Gothic monster is one approach to explain such incomprehensible and atrocious acts committed by seemingly ordinary people, the last decade has since seen a more humanized approach to the portrayal of serial killers as was introduced in *Dexter*. This has in the past decade been perpetuated by a boom in the true crime genre, which will be briefly elucidated below in order to complete the chapter in a contemporary context.

Often referred to having been initiated by the huge successes of the podcast *Serial* (Koening, 2014), revisiting the murder of Hae Min Lee and noted as "the most popular broadcast in history" by *Time* magazine (Dockterman, 2015), and the HBO series *The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst* (Jaercki, 2015), praised by being "so hard-boiled you could be watching a Coen Brothers movie" (Collins, 2015), about Durst's suspected involvement in a series of

murders and a kidnapping, being entertained by true crime became a mainstream pastime due to their compelling, serialized, narratives and by being steeped with cliffhangers (McCann, 2015, Dockterman, 2015). *Netflix,* likewise, premiered its first true crime original title, *Making a Murderer* (Ricciardi & Demos), in 2015, and has since seen an increase of over fifty true crime originals, many of which deal with cases from the golden age of serial killers.

By making a portrayal of the serial killer more humanized means making it more realistic, and as mentioned earlier, the archetypal serial killer is indeed an ordinary-looking person; the idea of an ordinary person committing extraordinary violence is fascinating to many people, something which is confirmed by the massive market for serial killer media. While sensationalized stories about serial killers have declined, as a result, "the serial killer true-crime genre is falling back into nostalgia for the old reliable and familiar epidemic era 'celebrity serial killers'" (Vronsky, 2021:371). In addition to depicting their crimes, a part of serial killer entertainment has been to focus on their psychology, particularly through the representations of criminal profilers attempting to understand their minds in order to capture them, but Philip L. Simpson (2010) noted since the introduction of the tv-series *Dexter* that:

> Serial killer cinema in the United States has been undergoing a transformation over the past ten years to ensure its continued relevancy in the twenty-first century ... toward heightening the degree of sympathetic bond between audiences and the lethal protagonists depicted on-screen (122).

It can be argued that embodying the ever-prevalent fascination with serial killers is the Netflix-series *Mindhunter* that premiered in 2017. Directed by David Fincher, *Mindhunter* is an adaptation of the book *Mindhunters: Inside the FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit* based on special agent John Douglas's development of psychological profiling techniques and coinage of the term 'serial killer', and the series include numerous portrayals of so-called celebrity serial killers from the golden era. As the plot revolves around the protagonist FBI agents having in-depth conversations with captured serial killers in order to understand their psyche, the killers' crimes are not depicted but are described in detail from the killers' point of view. Based on factual events, portraying the (today) well-known serial killers already imprisoned, letting them speak their own minds, does not remove the focus to be about their crimes but places a larger emphasis on their mindset and of comprehending the reasons for their actions; It can thus be understood that a premise for the series is that the spectators are familiar with the serial killers that are presented, and that they now want to go *beyond* learning every detail about the killer's crimes but want to learn every detail about their minds.

Chapter 4.
Analysis of *My Friend Dahmer*

Twenty-three years after the death of Jeffrey Dahmer, *My Friend Dahmer* presents a coming-of-age story about the awkward teenager Jeff Dahmer set in Ohio before he committed any of the crimes that would earn him the nickname the Milwaukee Cannibal. The aim of this chapter is to identify and analyze how the film elicits character engagement and a pro-attitude for its protagonist; Murray Smith's concept of the structure of sympathy is central to the analysis, and also make use of concepts derived from Noël Carroll.

4.1 Recognition and Alignment

After a black screen with yellow writing introduces the title *My Friend Dahme*r, the first shot of the narrative is located underneath a moving vehicle with the words *"based on a true story"* superimposed. Cut to a low angle shot that positions the camera as if it is laying on the side of a road and with an unidentifiable object laying out of focus in front of it; the road ahead and the green trees surrounding it are in focus, and a school bus drives by. As the bus drives by, the camera pulls focus, making the surroundings blurry and the unidentified object revealed to be a dead animal. The shot cuts to a close-up shot of the side of the bus, where a teenaged boy with large glasses and blonde hair is peaking out of the window, his eyes are tracking the roadkill as the bus passes. This is the first introduction to the narrative's protagonist, Jeff Dahmer.

The following scene inside the bus presents a familiar setting of any teen-film as the camera slowly pans across people chatting, laughing, and listening to music. It is however dimly lit, and a melancholic piano melody is heard over the diegetic rock music played from the bus's radio. The camera eventually lands on Jeff who sits by himself staring out of the window, seeming distant from the rest of his schoolmates. The melancholic melody appears to emphasize Jeff's emotional state, as his facial expression too appears somewhat melancholic. As the bus drives by a jogger, a point-of-view shot aligns the spectators with Jeff and therefore sees the jogger through his eyes, tracking him just like he did with the roadkill. The shot of the jogger is partly covered by the bus-seats in front of Jeff, as it would be in Jeff's field of vision, and along with a handheld, slightly shaky, camera, it is as if the spectators too were sitting on the moving bus.

The first scenes in a film are significant due to it establishes first impressions of a character and elicit certain expectations of the narrative, known as the primacy effect (Smith, 1995, Bordwell, 1984). Positioning Jeff by himself, appearing distant from his fellow schoolmates, is the first indication that he might not be very social character; this impression is accentuated by the dim lighting and the melancholy score. The point-of-view shot aligns the spectators to perceive the surroundings as Jeff does, and thus provides access into Jeff's subjectivity, i.e., the spectators perceive what he perceives. Evidently, Jeff is more interested in the roadkill and the jogger than what is going on around him inside the bus. In accordance with the primacy effect, the narrative has elicited a curiosity of how these elements will come into play later in the narrative, and the first impression of Jeff will likely persist throughout the narrative.

Jeff's fixation with the roadkill becomes apparent, and clarified, in a subsequent scene as two boys approach him outside his house while he is carrying a dead cat. The boys are intrigued, but sceptic, but Jeff seems eager in showing them what he will do to the cat which is revealed to be to dissolve it in acid. His eager is not conveyed by facial expression but by the way he speaks with enthusiasm and trying to convince the boys that it is not as odd as it sounds, indicating that he might be somewhat nervous to speak with others but is still interested in connecting with the boys. He leads the boys to a shed behind his house where it is established that he performs his hobby of dissolving dead animals in acid, and his interest in the roadkill from the earlier scene is clarified. The shed is poorly lit, and the camera pans over several jars with fluids containing unidentifiable dead animals; Jeff is eagerly speaking of how interesting it can be to see *"what's on the inside"* of animals, but the boys, however, are neither impressed nor convinced. The scene ends with the boys running away in disgust calling Jeff a freak, leaving him alone yet again and establishing how Jeff is perceived by others, somewhat odd and unusual to be exact.

Cut to a somewhat hectic dinner-scene with Jeff and his family, where multiple characters are talking simultaneously. Jeff asks his father if he can get a stronger acid to use for his hobby, but his father, Lionel, leads the conversation into the topic that Jeff should join various clubs at school; though Jeff points out that he is in the school band, his father remains adamant by saying that *"new things lead to new opportunities for friends, and friends are our connection to this world"*, and though he is speaking with good intentions Jeff looks defeated. Lionel's choice of words is a further indication that Jeff might not have many friends or is not a very social person, and the scene ends with a shot of Jeff with the same melancholic facial expression as in the scene on the bus. This scene also introduces his mother, Joyce, as somewhat unstable as she

becomes irrationally angry at them for pointing out that the meat she served for dinner was raw. Furthermore, she forces Jeff to give up his favorite part of the meat to his younger brother, Dave, for no apparent reason to which Jeff, again, looks defeated and melancholic. On a side note, as the meat turns out to be raw, Joyce declaring *"new house rule: we eat our mistakes",* is a subtle cue to Jeffrey Dahmer's cannibalism; though in the scene this merely presented as a defense mechanism from Joyce instead of admitting to her mistake, this caters to the spectators with prior knowledge of Jeffrey Dahmer.

As Murray Smith (1995) asserts, the level of recognition in the structure of sympathy is often considered a rather obvious process due to it referring to the spectators' perception of the character but without moral evaluation, i.e., that the spectators comprehend the character as an individuated human agent. Nonetheless, the first level is necessary for character engagement to eventually occur. Jeff's exterior traits have now been introduced: he has got medium length blond hair parted on one side, large glasses, and is tall and slightly hunchbacked. His desires have been introduced through showing keenness regarding his hobby, and though he shows little facial expressions some are present when expressing worry at the dinner table or when laughing with his mother; still, his facial expression does not change when he is reprimanded by the bus driver for standing in the bus, nor when he is convincing the two boys to come check out his shed, which function to convey his timidness.

Persisting character traits are part of a re-identification process, according to Smith, meaning traits that are introduced at the beginning of the film that remains consistent throughout the narrative (113). Jeff's shyness and his interest in dead animals, alongside his physical attributes, will prove to be continuous throughout the film and which establishes continuity and provides the spectators with a recognizable character. This does not mean, however, that the character cannot undergo changes.

4.1.1 Spatio-Temporal Attachment and Subjective Access

The majority of the film follows the spatio-temporal path of Jeff, meaning that he is the one that the spectators are attached to throughout the narrative. Various scenes introduce the spectators to how Jeff appears at school; there are various tracking shots of him walking by himself through the halls, and scenes where he sits by himself in class and in the cafeteria; at one point, a classmate refuses to sit next to him, which re-establishes how Jeff is perceived by his peers: odd, unusual, and that he is not particularly popular.

While eating lunch in the cafeteria, Jeff, sitting by himself, is accidentally positioned between two events that gain attention: on one side of where Jeff is sitting, a girl is standing on a chair and speaking to the crowd, while on the other side a boy is being bullied to the amusement of the crowd, both events naturally attract attention to Jeff as well. He looks uncomfortable by involuntarily being at the center of attention, and therefore leaves the cafeteria. As it already has been established, Jeff is a rather shy character, and it is therefore understandable that he would want to avoid a situation like that. What follows is a jump cut to Jeff walking into his shed, as was introduced earlier, where he performs his hobby. This cut is important as it establishes the shed to be a safe space for Jeff, in other words, he leaves an uncomfortable situation and directly walk into what has been introduced as a place where he can safely indulge in his hobby without being watched or judged by anyone, it signifies a comfort zone.

Subjective access refers to the notion of how much of Jeff's inner state is communicated to the spectators, and which is provided by use of cinematic techniques such as framing and sounds, as mentioned previously, but additionally through a range of narrative events that results in reactions from Jeff. A brief scene depicts Jeff expressing deep concern for his mother as she is frantically looking for her medication, and he suggests for her to go to the doctor which reveals his worry for his mother and a wish for to become healthy. Through the point of view shot in the scene at the bus, it was revealed that Jeff's attention was fixed at a jogger passing by; point of view and eyeline-match shots are useful techniques to provide subjective access into Jeff as it provides access to what he is paying attention to. Later in the narrative a similar event will take place that likewise function to subjective access: a scene set in a parking lot depict Jeff and a few of his forthcoming friends when the jogger in question appears, one of his friends happen to know the jogger, who is revealed to be a doctor. While the friend and the jogger are talking, instead of portraying a shot-reverse-shot between the people in conversation, the camera is positioned on top of Jeff's shoulder with focus strictly on the jogger, thus inviting the spectators to align with Jeff and are given access to where his mind is at. As Jeff realizes that the jogger runs by his house on a weekly basis, as few brief scenes are distributed throughout the narrative that depict Jeff either sitting or standing on the side of the road watching the jogger as he runs by; eyeline-matches reveal him looking at the jogger as well as his eyes tracking him, thus establishing the jogger to be of large interest to Jeff.

4.2 Allegiance

In a scene depicting a hefty argument between Jeff's parents it is revealed that his mother has spent some time at a psychiatric hospital and that the argument is regarding her going back to work, something Lionel is adamant she should not. In a tracking shot of Jeff and his brother walking past their parents as they argue, Dave asks worryingly *"are they gonna hit each other?"* ¸ to which Jeff reassures and comforts him, placing his hand on Dave's shoulders, and says that *"no, they just argue".* An act like this, that is, Jeff's thoughtful, calm, and comforting behavior towards a minor character, Noël Carroll emphasizes is an important technique to portray the morality of a character. Especially he remarks behavior towards "physically and socially weaker characters" (Smith, 1995:190), such as children or elderly, and in this case Jeff's younger brother, which function to elicit a positive evaluation of Jeff from the spectators. Here, he is representing actions, emotions, and values that are likely shared, or desired, by the spectators.

In a subsequent scene, Lionel is worried about Jeff's lack of friends and attempts to approach his wife to discuss the matter, yet Joyce lies careless in bed while smoking a cigarette; Lionel is visibly irritated and the scene cuts to him aggressively dragging a garbage can out to Jeff's shed. Jeff is surprised, and for a brief moment seems pleasantly surprised of seeing his father, conveyed through the tone of his voice. In the dinner scene at the beginning of the film, it was revealed that it was Lionel who had provided Jeff with the acid that he uses for his hobby, which can be taken to mean that at some point Lionel was not opposed to Jeff's hobby and was perhaps even encouraging him to pursue his area of interest. Now, however, Lionel starts throwing away Jeff's jars, shattering them, and declaring that *"you need to get out of your shell, yeah, something more normal"*. Jeff physically tries to stop him and seems desperate and distressed. Though he has not conveyed much facial expression so far in the narrative, he now conveys a clear expression of sadness and distress as he keeps his eyes to the ground when continuing to be scolded by his father. Jeff's voice breaks as he proclaims that he is in the school band, in an what is understood as an unsuccessful attempt to convince his father that he is doing something which his father would consider to be 'normal'. This event makes it apparent that Lionel is getting his frustration and annoyance about his wife's indifference and carelessness, along with his concerns about Jeff's social life, out on Jeff. The scene ends with the shed being demolished; thus, Lionel has robbed Jeff of what has been established as his safe space and comfort zone.

The spectators' knowledge of Jeff's great interest in his hobby and therefore of the importance of the shed, elicit antipathy and resentment towards Lionel who has now deprived this from Jeff. Also, as Jeff's character traits have been thoroughly established and is recognized as timid, reserved, and fairly socially awkward, being forced out of his comfort zone in order to be social arguably elicit a sense of sympathy for Jeff. This establishes a moral structure within the film, what Smith (1995) terms an internal system of values. The film's moral structure eases an allegiance with Jeff, as they "evaluate the character as representing a morally desirable set of traits, in relation to other characters within the fiction" (188). Through the events described above, Jeff's father takes on the role as an adverse character, while Jeff, due to his solicitous behavior towards his brother, is rendered the morally preferable character.

Shortly after, there is a scene of Jeff alone in his room. The colors are dim which is caused by the walls being dark green and the room not having many sources of light; Jeff is standing on the far-left side, staring vacantly out of the window. The dim lighting and the absence of sounds accentuates a sense of loneliness and melancholy, i.e., the emotions that were introduced in the very first scene of the film. As he has now been deprived of his hobby and his safe space, these emotional effects advance a sense of emptiness, longing, and perhaps even loss. Lionel enters the room and apologizes for what he did, explaining his actions by saying that he sees things in Jeff that he does not like about himself, and that he wants him to have friends in ways that he himself did not; He is slightly struggling to find his words and seems nervous and regretful for what he did. He provides Jeff with a set of dumbbells as a gift, as a way of providing him something else to focus on. The scene arguably attempts to redeem Lionel from being perceived as antipathetic by the spectators, but due to now being allied with Jeff the emotions towards him still stand and it does not change the internal system of values. In a following, brief, scene Jeff is training with the dumbbells, and though his face does not express enjoyment from the activity, it informs the spectators that Jeff is respectful by by doing as his father wishes. Respecting his father provides Jeff with another morally desirable trait which function to maintain the internal system of values.

4.3 Establishing Sympathy

After the events with the shed, i.e., the film's conflict, interest in how Jeff will resolve the issue is elicited. Back at school Jeff is asked a question by the teacher but does not know the answer; he replies quietly but must repeat himself, to which he repeatedly replies, *"I don't know"*, making the other students chuckle. While this is occurring, there is a slow zoom-in on Jeff's

face. Though he does not show much facial expression, his eyes are wandering around the room as a reaction to the students laughing, realizing that they find him entertaining. He replies one final time, but this time with a change of voice and a spasm, making his classmates laugh out loud. The zoom-in on his face is continuous and the scene ends with rare, little, smile on Jeff's face, conveying an expression of being slightly surprised and pleased with himself for making the other students laugh; as the narrative have made known, this is likely unusual for Jeff.

Shortly after, a brief scene depicts Jeff queuing up to audition for the school's musical but abruptly leaves when his name is called, which establishes that he is attempting to fulfill his father's wish by joining social clubs, clubs that his father would consider to be 'normal' but seems to be slightly nervous to do so. A tracking shot follows Jeff through the halls of the school who eventually stops in the middle of the hall with several students surrounding him. Jeff looks around for a brief moment before starting to make loud noises, tossing his arms around, emptying out his backpack and throwing papers around, and attracting the attention of the other students. He eventually ends up lying on the floor imitating spasms while a crowd has gathered around him, looking somewhat surprised but entertained, and are laughing loudly.

Jeff's out-of-character behavior proves to be effective. In a subsequent scene Jeff is depicted sitting alone in the cafeteria, when a boy, Derf, approaches him and asks if he wants to join him and his two friends at their table. Jeff does not respond verbally but gets up and walks with the boy. As they approach the table the boys imitate the spasms that Jeff was doing earlier, not to mock him but to praise him. Due to what they consider a genius prank performed by Jeff, the boys express their admiration, and Derf suggests they should form a 'Dahmer fan club'. Jeff looks confused at first, expressed by his eyes glancing nervously around like they did in the classroom earlier. But his confused expression ends with a rare, large smile, and when Derf, who is revealed to an excellent drawer, shows a drawing he did of Jeff, and the camera is focused on Jeff's face who once again looks surprised but also pleased. For Jeff who has been pushed out of his comfort zone and pressured by his father to make friends, this is understood to must feel like a success, and the scene ends with a zoom-in on Jeff's face with a rare expression of happiness. A couple of subsequent scenes now show Jeff alongside his new group of friends, all imitating spasms at various locations at school, laughing and enjoying themselves.

As the spectators are aware of Jeff's situation at home, i.e., his parents' arguments, and receiving pressures from his father to make friends, they are predisposed to react emotionally when seeing him successfully fulfilling his father's wish, what Noël Carroll (2013) terms criterial prefocusing of the narrative. As the narrative have established Jeff to be a shy character

who previously avoided a situation that placed him at the enter of attention, it is out-of-character for Jeff to behave a way that would obtain this much attention. But his choice of action is nonetheless understandable due to a similar event taking place in the classroom earlier, though at much smaller scale, which makes it understandable that he would want to continue along those lines due to receiving pressure from his father.

For the spectators to identify with Jeff, there would have to be, as Carroll (1990) asserts, "symmetrical relations of identity between [their] emotions" (96), meaning that the emotions of the spectator would be identical to Jeff's, but which in the tradition of cognitive theory arguably does not occur. A clearer example of this, i.e., that the term identification between the spectators and Jeff is not sufficient, appears a few scenes later. A scene shows Jeff catching a fish while he is out fishing with his new friends and his friends tell him to throw the fish back into the water. As Jeff sits down with a small knife to cut the fish loose from the line, he instead stabs the fish multiple times while his friends look surprised and repulsed. Jeff expressing *"I just wanted to see what its insides looked like"* makes it apparent that he feels a yearning for his hobby, and that he grasped the opportunity with the dead fish to experience a brief moment of his hobby again (though arguably bit more brutally than what his hobby used to be). Because of the narrative structure, the spectators are aware of what led Jeff to act this way, but arguably they do not share his exact emotions and urge to stab the fish; thus, the spectators have sympathetic reactions rather than empathetic, and assimilate to the situation based on what they already have comprehended from the narrative.

By two separate events of Jeff bringing his friends home, sympathy for Jeff is strengthened. The first scene occurs immediately after the first prank at school. *"Mom, I have good news. I have friends coming over",* Jeff says enthusiastically as he enters the house, indicating that he is happy with his achievement and wants to tell his parents. His happiness, however, is short-termed when he finds his mother frantically looking for her medication. There is a brief argument between him and his mother where he worryingly asks her to go back to the doctor, while she responds with anger. He hurries out the door to his friends, his face looking strict and stressed, and suggest for them to hang out outside instead of letting them inside the house. He does not get to show off his achievement and get possible praise from his parents, rather he seems embarrassed of letting his friends see his mother like that.

In the second scene, he brings his friend Derf to hangout at his house. As they enter, Jeff approaches Lionel and says, *"I joined a lot of new clubs, I think you'd be proud"*, in what is understood as another attempt go get acknowledgement and praise for his achievements. Before

Lionel gets to answer, however, Joyce enters and starts arguing with him about something as trivial as a misplaced briefcase. Jeff and Derf sit down in the living room and starts chatting, but his parents' quarrel escalates and grabs the attention of the boys. Jeff sighs and his head slightly sinks, looking defeated and embarrassed. Joyce even pulls Derf into the argument while Lionel tells her to leave the kids alone. Jeff apologizes to Derf for his parents' behavior, they both look slightly uncomfortable, and the scene ends with Derf leaving. Both scenes have got joyous beginnings with rare moments of Jeff expressing happiness, proudness even, but ends with rejection from his parents, embarrassment, and disappointment. They furthermore function to strengthen the internal system of values; whereas his father had been the primary character eliciting antipathy, his mother now joins, while the spectators remain with their sympathetic attitude towards Jeff.

On a side note, though so far not portraying Jeff as how the spectators are accustomed to perceiving serial killers, i.e., as a murderous individual, the narrative is premised on the fact that the spectators are aware of the story of Jeffrey Dahmer, which become clear through a few scenes. One scene depicts Jeff standing at the site where the shed was demolished where he is picking up leftover animal bones, twirling them around in his hand, and stroking them. This is a subtle hint at the reality of Dahmer and his interest in bones (though his interest included human bones). For the narrative, however, this is conveyed as a reaction of sadness of losing his hobby and of the place where he felt the most comfortable, and as a longing back to way things were; thus, the narrative renders this as harmless.

A second scene depict Jeff hiding in the bushes while spying on the jogger as he passes by; an ominous score, Jeff's breathing, and the jogger's footsteps are the only sounds. The camera cuts between slow-motion of the jogger, and a zoom-in on Jeff's face with a concentrated facial expression. For those who are unaware of the story of Jeffrey Dahmer, this is presented as merely an increasing obsession over the jogger on the verge of being unnatural, but which can be rendered understandable by him having more time to focus on the jogger due to the loss his hobby; But for those who *are* aware, this scene function as another cue for the reality of Jeffrey Dahmer seeking out men as his victims. As the jogger disappears out of sight, the ominous score is gradually changed replaced with a brighter score, as well as diegetic sounds of birds chirping can be heard. Jeff drops his concentrated facial expression and scratches his head, as if he snaps out of a trance-like state. This scene makes it clear to the spectator just how strongly he feels the attraction towards the jogger. Had it not been for the criterial prefocusing of certain

events that renders Jeff's actions in these scenes understandable, they would likely function to obscure the allegiance with Jeff.

4.3.1 Jeff's Troubled Mindset

After yet another fight between Jeff's parents, Jeff is briefly uttering some comforting words to his mother before joining his father on the porch; him comforting his mother maintains his virtuous qualities as introduced earlier. While attempting to support his father, they both seem lost for words and have quite sad facial expressions, and the scene ends with Jeff stealing a bottle of liquor from Lionel. These solicitous acts of attempting to comfort both his parents indicate that he wants to help them yet perhaps feels incapable to do so, thus seeking some sort of comfort from alcohol. Though multiple scenes throughout the narrative so far have depicted Jeff seemingly happy as he is smiling and laughing with his new group of friends while performing pranks and hanging out, his behavior undergoes a slight change from this point in the film. This change arguably indicates how he might be torn between being happy of having achieved his father's wish yet being negatively affected by his home situation due to his parents' deteriorating marriage.

Jeff turns up drunk at school and resumes picking up roadkill, and brief scene depict Jeff alone in the woods at dark while dissecting the animal. The absence of non-diegetic music or a musical score, and with a handheld camera movement, it is a brief, but gloomy spectacle. The scene signifies that the urge to continue with his former hobby is still very much present and though having obtained a group of friends he has not lost his interest in what is on the insides of animals. As his situation at home have continued to worsen, his actions might be understood to serve as a way to hold on to, and seek back to, his safe space and comfort zone.

However, Jeff and his friends are approached by the school's drug dealer, Lloyd, who shows them his new pocketknife. He slits his hand while laughing and starts to suck his own blood, and the boys look disgusted and walk away, except Jeff. Jeff stands still with his eyes locked on Lloyd, while the camera zooms in on his face; he does not convey much facial expression, but his demeanor reveals an interest in what he is seeing. (For the spectators who are familiar with the story of Jeffrey Dahmer, Jeff's demeanor and the zoom-in on his face hints at his future of cannibalism.) Derf warns Dahmer to stay away from Lloyd, as he is a *"complete psycho"*. Yet, the scene cuts to Jeff walking in the woods followed by Lloyd, who asks, *"so where's that spot?"*, revealing that it was Jeff that invited Lloyd to the woods, thus ignoring Derf's warning. Lloyd mentions that he is hoping they find an animal, so it is natural to assume that Jeff saw

this “psycho”, who was willing to cut himself with a knife, and thought that he might be interested in joining him in his hobby of dissecting animals. Jeff has not introduced his other friends to his hobby, which is understood to be due to Jeff’s own awareness that his hobby is considered somewhat odd by other people, as illustrated by the two boys at the beginning calling him a freak, and due to his friends’ reactions when he stabbed the fish. But as soon as Lloyd brings out a gun from his backpack, Jeff looks confused and scared, and the scene ends with Jeff walking away, indicating that Jeff is not a violent character.

This scene can be interpreted as an indication that though Jeff have finally found a group of friends, he still feels somewhat misplaced as they do not wholly share the same interests. In a few other scenes, the boys’ conversations, when not discussing their pranks, consists mostly of girls; additionally, a couple of scenes show Jeff interrupting Derf while speaking to a girl, as if he did not want the girl to grab Derf’s attention away from himself, or which simply indicates that Jeff does not share, or understand, the boys’ interest in girls.

Eventually, Jeff’s father moves out of the house and into a motel as a result of the disagreements with his wife. His mother asks Jeff if he wants somebody to talk to, referring to a professional, but Jeff does not reply yet his facial expression clearly convey sadness. Though he does not answer his mother, the scene cuts to Jeff at the jogger/doctor’s office. Jeff seems eager, which indicates that he booked an appointment out of his interest to come closer to the jogger rather than due to the suggestion of speaking to a professional. However, it becomes clear that he has thought about his mother’s question as Jeff starts by asking the doctor if he does surgery, to which he replies that he does not, then Jeff continues by asking *“what about what’s on a patient’s mind?”*. As it has been established throughout the narrative, Jeff is not a very verbally or emotionally expressive character, but by him asking the latter question indicates that he is self-aware, i.e., that he is aware it would do him well to speak to someone professionally, just as he is aware that his interest in dissecting animals is somewhat unusual. Due to the allegiance with Jeff, scenes conveying his self-awareness arguably result in sympathetic emotions of pity and compassion for him.

It is after the scene at the doctor that it becomes clear to the spectators that Jeff is struggling with his sexual orientation. After the doctor/jogger has given Jeff a hernia exam, the scene jump-cuts to a scene of Jeff masturbating in his room, then it cuts again to a scene of Jeff alone in the woods after dark, violently slamming a branch against a tree while increasingly shouting in aggression. Like the scene where he is dissecting the roadkill alone in the woods, there is no music or score, and the camera is handheld. Use of backlight make Jeff’s silhouette contrast the

dim, blue, sky, and the scene makes it clear that Jeff appears to be releasing bottled up emotions and frustrations about his sexuality that he does not express elsewhere.

In a subsequent scene, Jeff hanging out with his three friends at one of their houses. His friends are sitting on a sofa, laughing, smoking marihuana, and talking about girls. Jeff, however, is sitting by himself on a stool behind them with his head held down, he has got his back towards them and is not included in their conversation. This contrast earlier scenes of Jeff and his friends where they were all laughing and enjoying themselves, Jeff included, but Jeff's position in this frame rather conveys a sense of solitude. The scene generates an understanding that even though Jeff is physically present with a group of people, he remains the odd one out; he seems to be out of place and unable, or perhaps reluctant, to take part in boys' interests. As the boys' conversation turns to the topic of friends, however, Jeff says *"I wish I had a best friend"* quietly, but loud enough so that the boys are startled. The boys' reaction, and Derf remarking *"Jesus Dahmer, I forgot you were here"*, underpins the notion that Jeff remains on the outside of the friend-group. Saying out loud that he wishes he had a best friend firstly indicates that he wishes he had someone to connect with and likely share his own interest with the way the boys are sharing theirs, and secondly, this is the first time that he truly verbally expresses his thoughts and emotions; thus, though he is sitting there with a group of friends, the framing of the scene and Jeff's statement instead function to accentuate his solitude.

The connotations provided in the previous scene are strengthened even further in a subsequent scene. Earlier in the narrative, as part of a prank from Jeff and his friends, Jeff snuck into various school photos being taken for the yearbook. Now, as the photos have been developed, there is scene of the boys being told-off by a teacher who goes on to cross out Jeff's face in the photos with a black marker. As the scene comes to an end, there is a slow zoom-in on one of the photos which ends with a close-up shot of Jeff's crossed out face amongst a group of people. This brief, but noteworthy scene, accentuates the connotation from the previous scene that Jeff remains an outsider and does not quite fit in with his peers.

As mentioned earlier, the narrative has ensured allegiance between the spectators and Jeff through recognition, alignment, and by the narrative's moral structure. Consequently, being allied, and thus having adopted a pro-attitude for Jeff, result in emotional reactions from the spectators when witnessing his achievements and defeats. The scenes described above all function to accentuate Jeff's inner state, which have come to be understood as struggling with his sexuality and feelings of not quite fitting in even though he has obtained a group of friends; additionally, it has been asserted that Jeff is self-aware of his distinctiveness. These are

sentiments that exude sadness, which arguably results in the spectators reacting with a feeling of being sad *for* Jeff or reacting with other sympathetic emotions such as pity or compassion for Jeff and his unfortunate situation. From here on in the narrative, however, Jeff's behavior becomes increasingly worrisome.

In a following scene Jeff in the woods again, this time during the day and carrying a dog on a leash. No explanation as to where the dog came from or whose it is are provided, but a brief scene beforehand shows Jeff getting a package of sausages from the fridge before leaving the house, so it is safe to assume that he used the sausages as bait to get a hold of the dog. In the woods, he sits down in front of the dog with a serious look on his face, and he brings out a small knife from his pocket while holding the dog steady with his other hand. Jeff is breathing swiftly, and his motions are abrupt, and he is slightly fumbling while retrieving the knife from his pocket, which conveys that he is stressed or nervous. A deep, booming, score appears, which heightens an ominous atmosphere, and with the exception of the scene with the fish, this is the first time Jeff is portrayed capturing a living being with what can be understood as an intention of killing it. However, Jeff lowers the knife, lowers his head, and chases the dog away. The score fades, and Jeff remains alone in the woods pacing with his hand to his head before falling on his knees.

Putting his hand to his head indicate that Jeff is feeling frustrated or distressed, and combined with releasing the dog indicate that he is aware that what he was about to do was morally wrong. Whereas the scene started by introducing what could have been a display of Jeff killing the dog, instead ends by portraying Jeff maintaining a sense of morality yet reveals that his emotional state is increasingly deteriorating. It is safe to assume that the spectators do not approve Jeff's choice of action in attempting to kill a dog, yet in accordance with the primacy effect, his immoral behavior does not impair the first impression of him as the morally preferable character; as such, the first impressions of Jeff impact how the spectators assess his subsequent actions. Due to criterially prefocusing certain narrative elements, for example through establishing that Jeff does not quite connect with his friends and is emotionally weary due to his home situation, and that he longs for his hobby which was understood as his comfort-zone, results in comprehending Jeff's choice of action with the dog as an act of desperation and not due to pure immorality. Such an extreme act of desperation, combined with Jeff's self-awareness of his declining morals, do not disrupt the allegiance with Jeff but rather elicit sympathetic feelings of pity and concern, and a wish for him to improve.

In a parking lot outside of a motel, Joyce is parking with Jeff and his brother to meet Lionel. The meeting is to discuss something in Joyce and Lionel's divorce papers, but immediately turn into an argument. Their argument escalates and turn physical, even so that a random bypasser tries to intervene, while Jeff and his brother are watching from the car. The scene ends with the camera focused on Jeff whose head is slightly tilted down, his eyebrows are lowered, and his mouth is slightly downturned, expressions that convey both sadness and anger. The same deep, booming, score as in the scene with the dog emerges and emphasizes that Jeff is clearly negatively affected by the event.

The score continues into the next scene where Jeff is alone in his dimly lit room, pacing back and forth, and breathing heavily. He is sniffling slightly, indicating that he might have been crying, and he repeats the words *"Okay. All right"* to himself in a confirmative tone of voice. His tone of voice can be interpreted to be a way to accept his parents' behavior in the previous scene or to calm himself down. However, Jeff stops pacing and looks down at his bed. There, the jogger is lying motionless with his eyes open, thus apparently dead. Jeff lies down on the bed next to him and embraces him, and gradually his heavy breathing slows down and the ominous score sound fades away. The scene ends with an overhead shot of Jeff lying on the bed alone, revealing that the jogger was only part of his imagination yet indicating that the thought of embracing the jogger, albeit deceased, is what ultimately calmed and comforted Jeff. Whereas the shed and his hobby has previously been presented as the only place of comfort for Jeff, this scene indicate that this can be replaced by visions of the jogger being in Jeff's possession. Thus, the perception of the jogger as merely a love interest can now be perceived rather as a sinister obsession that function to accentuate the severity of Jeff's declining morals and emotional state.

4.4 The Culmination of a Troubled Mind

It becomes clear that Jeff has drifted further away from his friends, as the narrative now dedicates more time to depict his friends expressing their worry about Jeff to each other and discussing his oddity, and as Jeff is depicted visibly inebriated at school. However, his friends persuade him to perform one final prank to earn some money from their schoolmates and as a way of "going out in style", to which Jeff agrees. The prank takes place at a mall filled with people, and not only are Jeff's friends there to cheer him on, but several other schoolmates as well. Earlier in the narrative, Jeff has been depicted as quite happy while performing pranks with his friends, now however, he is drunk, his eyebrows are constantly lowered and there is

no smile on his face, and he appears quite careless. As the prank ensues, Jeff starts imitating spasms in the middle of the crowded mall, people are startled, and some are curiously observing while others try to avoid him; his friends are watching in amazement from the sideline while laughing.

This goes on for a few seconds before an ominous score emerges and become louder than the diegetic sounds. Jeff switches between lying on the floor while spasming and approaching people inappropriately, he also enters a dining area and starts throwing food around before being kicked out. All the while, his friends are watching yet their laughs are fading. The camera lingers on Derf's face, whose expression has shifted from smiling from amusement to expressing worry; this brief moment of the camera focused on Derf's worried facial expression reveals that he realizes that the prank has gone to far and that Jeff is emotionally troubled, i.e., elements that his friends have overlooked so far. The ominous score is eventually accompanied by slow and light piano chords, signaling the fact that Jeff's troubled mind has now reached its tipping point.

Jeff continues to walk around imitating spasms for a while, while his friends leave. The camera eventually starts rapidly circling around Jeff in a medium close-up shot; Jeff looks rather sad as his eyebrows are lowered and his mouth is downturned, and by eventually putting his hands to his head. The ominous score initially provided a sinister and an alarming feel to the scene, but the piano notes introduced a sense of somber and sadness. Jeff frequently shouts the words *"Club!"* and *"Here I am!"* with an ironic tone of voice, which underpins the notion that he has lost connection with his friends while also providing the impression that he does not longer enjoy doing these pranks and is tired of doing them for his friends' entertainment. He looks unhappy and worn out, and alongside the aspects mentioned above, this arguably heightens the feeling of pity for Jeff. The non-diegetic sounds stop abruptly, and Jeff finds his way back to his friends, who instead of praising him for his prank look bothered and avoid making eye contact, indicating that the prank went too far.

A few more scenes confirm the portrayal of Jeff as gradually drifting away from his friends, that situation at home is worsening, and that he is still struggles emotionally. After learning that his parents' divorce is final, another scene portrays Jeff releasing his frustration in the woods, this time in daylight and by aggressively banging a baseball-bat against a tree, while screaming, until the bat breaks. Indications that he attempts to remain in touch with his friends occur by him taking a girl as a date to their prom, yet he ends up leaving the girl and his friends in favor of eating fast-food in his car by himself. A following scene depict Jeff's final day at school

before graduation. Various students are leaving the parking lot, including Jeff's friends, all cheering and looking happy. As the students walk out of the frame, Jeff is revealed standing alone by the entrance to the school, not participating in the cheering alongside his schoolmates, but once again positioned behind his friends and which confirms his social position as an outsider.

The scene cuts to Jeff returning home after this final day of high school. As he walks into their driveway, he meets his mother and his brother who are hurriedly packing their car, and he learns that Dave and their mother are moving to their grandmother. Jeff says that they are going to miss his graduation, to witch his mother, seeming indifferent, replies with *"Your dad's gonna be there, we can't be in the same room, you know that"*, while casually patting him on his shoulder; she tries to give Jeff a hug that he rejects, instead he keeps his stare locked on his mother. Joyce is cheerful and seems to take no notice of Jeff's disappointment, and merely shouts a quick goodbye at Jeff as they are leaving the driveway. As Jeff enters the house, he has a visible frown on his face, he briefly checks the mail but starts pacing around the house for a bit. Then, he throws and kicks some furniture around before falling on his knees to the floor, and with one hand to his head he starts to cry; his glasses fall off, and he lies down on the floor while continue crying. The absence of any music, only Jeff's crying to be heard, make this an impactful scene where Jeff seems to be letting out his built-up emotions and frustrations, but this time portrayed in great misery and not aggressivity as previously illustrated. It seems as if his mother's final act of neglect and abandonment functioned as a trigger for Jeff to break down emotionally, and it is a sad scene which function to elicit pity and compassion from the spectators. Jeff goes on to graduate with only his father present at the ceremony.

4.5. Obscuring Allegiance

In a following scene taking place in the evening, Jeff is out walking when he is picked up by Derf who drives by. They small talk for a bit about going to college, yet the conversation seems strained. Derf looks anxiously at Jeff and an eyeline-match show him noticing Jeff's fingernails have blood on them; while asking if Jeff is okay, his eyes linger on him though they do not keep eye contact, implying Derf's worry and unease about Jeff. Jeff, answering a simple "*yes"* with a jovial tone of voice, also lingers his eyes on Derf while Derf does not meet his eyes, which suggests that Jeff's true answer is the opposite of what he said. This scene aligns the spectators with Derf for the first time and which causes some tension to the scene as Derf's uneasiness is conveyed by his facial expressions, dim lighting, and camera shots; yet it is not an unfriendly

conversation. Now having the house to himself as his mother has moved out and his father is still staying in a motel, Jeff invites Derf over. The house is dark as they enter, and as Derf enters first Jeff walks up behind him until he is quite close; he does not speak, his head is slightly tilted, and his eyebrows are lowered, which in the dark room generate somewhat of an intimidating image. Derf is startled by Jeff hovering so close behind him and makes up an excuse to leave. As he leaves, Jeff follows behind and picks up a baseball-bat on the way, lifting it above his head and seeming ready to strike Derf. Tension arises as Derf does not notice Jeff while walking over to his car; yet Jeff lowers the bat before Derf notices, and the scenes ends with Derf driving away. This scene function to convey that Jeff's morals and emotional state have now very much deteriorated, and his choice of action in what is understood as a wish to assault Derf cannot be explained by rationality, thus allegiance becomes somewhat obscured.

In the final minutes of the film, Jeff is driving in his car while listening to the radio. He passes a shirtless hitchhiker along the road and stops; he contemplates for a couple of seconds before backing up. The hitchhiker approaches the car window and Jeff greets him with a big smile on his face. They briefly make small talk and Jeff pulls out a can of beer and asks if he wants to *"party some more"*, his tone of voice is the most cheerful and sociable so far in the narrative. Jeff's unusual large grin and cheerful voice stand in contrast to his consistent, and somewhat shy, behavior throughout the narrative so far, which is why it seems as if he is putting on an act. They introduce each other, and the hitchhikers name is Steven Hicks. As Steven enters the car, the camera zooms-in on Jeff with a slight smile on his face and seeming content. As they drive away, the shot fades to black with words superimposed informing the spectators that Steven Hicks was never seen again, that he became Jeff's first victim.

4.6 Chapter Summary

Analyzing the film in light of Smith's structure of sympathy proves sufficient in elucidating elements that generate a pro-attitude for its protagonist. The film's moral orientation establishes Jeff as the morally preferable character, and there is a range of narrative and cinematic elements that one must consider before positioning Jeff as preferable in the film's internal system of values. The film's non-diegetic score, primarily consisting of dark and somber tones, creates an overall mood of melancholy; combining this with introductory shots of Jeff sitting by himself in silence while his schoolmates chatter around him, transfer the sensation of melancholy onto Jeff; This sensation is strengthened through close-up shots of Jeff without much facial expressions and continuous shots that enhance Jeff's solitude.

Jeff's shed, the place where he conducts his hobby, is a vital part of the narrative progression. It becomes apparent that the shed is important to Jeff by various occasions where the shed is established as the place where he seeks comfort and protection from uncomfortable situations. It is through Jeff's father, Lionel's, destruction of the shed that conflict arises; now, Jeff has lost his safe-space and his hobby and must attempt to fulfil his father's wish of being more social, something which the narrative structure has revealed is not going to be his strong suit.

The allegiance with Jeff is, for the most part, consistent throughout the film. Though elements are included that hints at the reality of Jeffrey Dahmer (twirling bones in his hand, imagining cuddling the deceased jogger), this does not disrupt the sympathy that is already evoked because these hints are not acted upon and are rendered harmless by the narrative's structure. Moreover, Jeff does not act destructive or violent towards the other characters, on the contrary, the narrative continuously present adversity towards Jeff; he becomes aware that he does not really have a place in his friend-group meaning that he is failing at fulfilling his father's wish, his parents are getting a divorce and his father moves out of the house, and his mother continuous neglect. These elements function to heighten sympathetic emotions of pity and compassion towards Jeff. These emotions are accentuated at the film's climax at the mall, yet the allegiance with Jeff is somewhat obscured towards the end of the narrative when Jeff expresses increasingly, unredeemable, choice of actions.

Chapter 5.
Analysis of
Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile

Premiering on Netflix in 2019, *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile,* brought the life and crimes of Ted Bundy, one of America's most infamous serial killers, to the limelight once more, precisely thirty years after his execution. Set in the late 1960s to the late 1980s, *Extremely Wicked* does not focus on depicting Ted committing serial murders but is a story of what appears as an innocent man's battle with law enforcement as he is accused of a series of horrific murders and attempted kidnappings. As the film is partially told from his girlfriend Liz's point of view, emphasis is put on their relationship as well as a focus on how the events taking place affects her and their relationship. Through concepts obtained from the theories of Murray Smith and Noël Carroll, this chapter aims to scrutinize and identify elements that serves to elicit a pro-attitude for the films' protagonist, Ted.

5.1 Introducing Ted

"Few people have the imagination of reality", a quote by Goethe appearing on a black screen is the entry into *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile*. Followed is a series of establishing shots outside a prison, which cuts to a woman in a visitation room; she is frowning while her head is held down, indicating her worry or anxiety. In comes the prisoner she is visiting in an orange jumpsuit and handcuffs. His eyes light up to display excitement as he sees her, while hers remain anxious and analytical.

Jump cut to an establishing shot zooming in on a college-bar with the words *"Seattle 1969"* superimposed and upbeat rock music playing. As the camera pans across the inside of the bar, several women are turning their heads, smiling flirtatiously, and looking straight at the camera; it appears as a point-of-view shot yet not revealing whose point of view it is. The woman, Liz, is having drinks with a friend while talking about dating. Due to being a single mother and merely working as a secretary, Liz expresses her concern that no one will want to date her. Her friend points out that a man has been staring at her all night; as Liz turns around to look, the camera pulls focus and reveals a man staring and smiling at her from across the room; revealed to be the same man she is visiting at the prison.

Cut back to the scene at the prison. The visiting room is abruptly silent, grey, and dimly lit, and stand in stark contrast to the warm colors, liveliness, and cheerful music in the scene at the bar. Liz says to the prisoner, who still appears eager, in a serious voice that she is not there to catch up, to which the scene cuts back to the bar. There, Liz is approached by the man staring at her, who introduces himself as Ted, and they flirt. The scenes at the bar and at the prison cut back and forth, and a brief shot at the prison show Liz on the brink of tears. At the bar again, Liz and Ted are slow dancing in between a crowd of people on the dancefloor, while a diegetic love song is playing. They kiss, the music fades, and the camera swiftly zooms in on them from a medium shot to a close-up shot; non-diegetic upbeat music starts playing and the kiss continues in slow-motion.

The scenes described above demonstrate the primacy effect, which in accordance with Murray Smith (1995) function to elicit curiosity from the spectators as a way for them to engage with the narrative. The cross-cutting between the two settings juxtapose the lively, flirty, and warm representation of the past where Liz and Ted first meet, to the cold and harsh present-day which is represented at the prison. As follows, this elicits curiosity about what will happen in the film that lands Ted in prison and will turn his and Liz's seemingly warm and happy past into an apparent cold and hostile present, or, and an interest in how the romance narrative and the crime narrative will correlate, as well as an anticipation for these questions to be answered.

5.2 Recognition and Alignment

The film continues while set in the past, and from there on it keeps a linear structure preceding the scene at the prison. Stopping at Liz's front door after their night at the bar, Liz and Ted are being flirtatious when Liz's babysitter exits the house which reveals to Ted that Liz has got a child. Liz seems embarrassed while keeping her eyes to the ground, and says that she understands if Ted wants to leave, thus insinuating her concern expressed earlier that no one would want to date her due to being a single mother. Ted, however, looks at her inquisitively, and asks *"why would I wanna do that?"* Ted disregarding Liz's concern and seeming genuinely surprised at her suggestion, assign his character values of fairness and benevolence, and he appears unprejudiced at her being a single mother. Liz smiles and they both enter the house. They gaze at each other but do not speak much, and a soft piano score is introduced which accentuates the building romance between them, and they spend the night together simply lying on the bed while embracing each other.

As Liz wakes up the following morning, Ted is not in the room and neither is her daughter, Molly. The camera is handheld making the shot slightly shaky, which adds a dramatic effect as she hurries out of the room on the lookout for them. She hears Molly laughing in the kitchen, enters and sees Ted making breakfast while wearing her apron and while Molly is happily eating breakfast. Liz sighs in surprise and relief as Ted pours her a cup of coffee. Non-diegetic, calm guitar strumming is introduced, and children can be heard playing in the distant. The colors are bright, warm, and soft as the sun shines through the windows. Liz sits down at the kitchen table and Ted compliments and kisses her. The music and the lighting bring forth an idyllic atmosphere and elicits sensations of bliss and ease, which transforms the dramatic effect of the handheld camera motion into a picturesque scenery. A close-up shot focuses on Liz for a moment as she is smiling while observing Ted, seemingly staring at him in wonder, indicating that she is happy with his presence and that her initial concern about her dating life is not necessarily something to be concerned about after all. The sound of the guitar continues into the next sequence, which is a montage of home video recordings displaying various clips of Liz, Molly, and Ted in familiar settings such as birthdays and on Christmas mornings and where they are all smiling and laughing; this demonstrate that time passes, and that Ted has become an essential part of Liz and Molly's life.

To be spatio-temporally attached to a character, meaning the character that the narrative is attached to for the majority of the film, and to have some degree of subjective access into a character's mindset make up the level of alignment in Murray Smith's (1995) structure of sympathy. As evident in the scenes described above, the introduction of film has aligned the spectators primarily to Liz, that is it has focused on depicting her emotions and desires rather than Ted's even though the film is a chronicle of Ted's life. When disregarding the scene at the prison, Ted has merely been presented as the charming man approaching Liz at a bar and whom she ends up falling in love with and welcomes into her family. But Ted's attributes and exterior traits have been introduced: he has got brown hair and is well-dressed, and it is reasonable to assume that the point-of-view shot in the scene at the bar was Ted's point-of-view which establishes him s a generally attractive man considering several women turned their heads at him and acted flirtatious towards him. These are key features to recognizing a character as an individuated human agent in accordance with the level of recognition*;* and combined with the level of alignment, which will be considered below, they are significant in facilitating character engagement (113-118).

Bearing in mind the film's cultural backdrop of the 1960s-1970s, having Ted be unprejudiced about Liz's situation as a single mother as well as embracing her child as his own, situates him as an open-minded and progressive man. Wearing an apron, cooking, and taking care of Liz's child the morning after they meet demonstrate his stance on the shifting male gender roles that occurred at that time, and is presumably a contributing factor to Liz's instant attraction to Ted considering she was worried about her dating life while being a single working mother. The soft lighting, the gentle guitar strumming, and the idyllic atmosphere in the scene at the kitchen function to intensify Liz's first impression and overall perception of Ted. As a result of having the spectators aligned with Liz for the introduction of the film, they are introduced to Ted from Liz's point of view. As part of the primacy effect, Buckland (2009) points out that the first impression of a character predetermines the spectators' perception and interpretation of that character's actions in the following narrative, meaning that the traits applied to Ted, as described above, will likely be a consistent part of how the spectators perceive Ted and how they judge his actions throughout the narrative unless the narrative purposely aims to alter the first impression (66-68).

As the montage of home video recordings continues, the voice of a news reporter is added on top of the sound of the guitar saying that *"young women are being attacked and murdered with alarming regularity"*. News clips from various crime scenes now appear in between friendly home videos, and the sound of the guitar slowly fades while an ominous ambient score emerges. The news reporter mentions that a possible suspect was seen with a Volkswagen while the home video simultaneously shows Ted helping Molly on a bicycle where a similar car is visible in the background. Once again, the juxtaposition of these clips, i.e., the loving home videos and the alarming news clips, lead to speculation of how they will correlate and play out; however, due to awareness of Ted ending up in prison, it hints at him being the perpetrator. The sequence ends with a close-up of a police sketch looking vaguely like Ted, and the voice-over informs that the police department have been *"flooded with phone calls"* from people who report seeing the suspect.

5.2.1 Change of Alignment

The shot of the police sketch fades and introduces a scene of Ted driving in a Volkswagen at night while listening to rock music when he is pulled over by the police for ignoring two stop signs. *"Utah 1975"* is superimposed, informing that six years have now passed since Ted and Liz met. Ted is compliant as the police officer asks for his information and excuses himself for

not seeing the car due to being blinded by the headlights. He politely answers the officer when he asks what he is doing in Utah, to which Ted replies that he is a law student at the university, while he unsolicited goes on to inform and elaborate on his relationship with Liz and that she lives in Seattle. Ted appears confident, considering the circumstances, and is well-spoken, and with a slight smile on his face he says that he is planning to propose to Liz and is saving up to buy a ring, which can be understood as an attempt to be excused from being fined by the officer. As Ted is speaking, the officer shines his flashlight inside of Ted's car and centers briefly on a bag containing ropes and various other items; he then shines the light in Ted's face, who looks optimistic, but the shot cuts to Ted being put in handcuffs.

Jump cut to Liz's house. The camera pans over a row of framed family pictures that all include Ted, further ascertaining him now as an established family-man. Ted enters cheerfully and is carrying a suitcase which make it clear that he is away for long periods of time while he attends university. Liz, however, approaches Ted and slaps him across the face, and angrily she shows Ted his mugshot in the newspaper, asking how many stop-signs he ignored. Ted goes on to explain to her what happened, i.e., the events in the previous scene, to which the scene cuts to flashbacks of what happened in the aftermath of his arrest. In the flashbacks he is questioned about the belongings in his bag, he appears in a police lineup where he is selected by a witness, and he appears in a court trial where he is charged with kidnapping and attempted assault, but posts bail which is why he could return home. As the judge reads the verdict in the flashback, there is an extreme close-up shot of Ted's face as his eyes are wide open in surprise, his gaze is locked forward which convey a sense of shock and anger, as well as a realization of the severity of the event. Liz remains angry, to which Ted says, *"you don't actually believe this garbage?"*, and trivializes the incident and comforts her. Molly enters and is happy to see Ted, and the two of them play around and hugs. The scene ends with a shot of Liz smiling and Molly's laughter to be heard which re-establishes the blissful family-life. The spectators, alongside Liz, receive all the information about the event from Ted's perspective, and just as Liz, the spectators are given no reason not to believe Ted at this point in the film.

In the scenes described above Ted is portrayed outside of Liz's direct point of view for the first time, which brings forward a change of alignment with the characters. It is apparent from the introduction of the film, however, that the spatio-temporal attachment will not be exclusive to Ted as it was to Jeff in *My Friend Dahmer*. The scenes described above illustrate that there has been a gradual increase in the attachment of the spectators to Ted, yet it becomes clear that the attachment it will remain divided between Ted and Liz throughout the film.

Additionally, it has been established that Ted is a highly verbal- and facially expressive character; emotions such as happiness and affection when he is in the presence of Liz and Molly, but also concern and apprehension when he is faced with challenges are clearly conveyed. His emotional expressivity likewise contrasts Jeff who was neither very vocally, nor facially, expressive character. Apparent in how Ted addresses the police officer, traits are added to Ted of being highly confident and charismatic, which similarly contrasts Jeff who was an overall shy and withdrawn character, and which arguably function to complement his first impression. In addition, Ted appearing confident in the situation with the police officer as well as trivializing the incident to Liz provide him with a casual and untroubled personality. As with his exterior traits, these qualities will likely be persistent throughout the narrative unless there is intended contrary evidence.

5.3 Criterial Prefocusing

In the following scene the whole family is at a diner, when Ted reveals that he must spend the night at the law library preparing for his upcoming trial. He says that *"I gotta make sure that I'm the most prepared attorney in the courtroom"* while shrugging, which indicate that he is willing to work hard to prove his innocence, but also as if to say that there is not much he can do about the situation. Liz proceeds to ask how come the witness picked Ted out of the police lineup, and Ted replies while moving closer and lowering his tone of voice, that his lawyer found out that the police had shown the witness a picture of him twice beforehand. He adds *"that's not even the worst part"*, saying that the police already were in possession of his name and that someone must have given it to them, thus insinuating that someone is out to get him. Ted does not answer when Liz asks who would want to do that to him, but instead points to a car parked outside of the diner and says that it has been following him, followed by *"either I'm going crazy, or I'm being set up".*

Ted's claim of being set-up is confirmed in the subsequent scene: he is settled down at the library when another student recognizes him from his mugshot in the newspaper and tells the security guard who proceeds to escort Ted out of the library, while Ted maintains to the guard that the whole ordeal is ridiculous. Outside, a car engine starts, and an ominous score is introduced as Ted notices that it is the same car as was parked outside of the diner; the score reinforces a sensation of something unpleasant and puzzling going on. A similar sensation can be read form Ted's inquisitive facial expression and demeanor as he approaches the car, but the car swiftly drives away while Ted shouts *"who are you? … who sent you?"* This scene function

to give credibility to Ted's claim of being followed and set up. From this moment, the narrative is attached to Ted to a far greater extent than to Liz for the remainder of the film.

To give clarification of the circumstances surrounding Ted, Ted's lawyer says that several girls have disappeared throughout the state and that the police released a sketch based on witness descriptions. Ted is frowning and narrowing his eyes throughout the conversation, indicating concern and frustration; he continues the reasoning himself, saying that he had the same car as the suspect and that his friends teased him about his resemblance to the sketch, ending with *"but geez, nobody was serious"*, in a tone of disbelief. His lawyer proceeds by saying that someone must have been serious due to his name ending up on the suspect list, and Ted sighs in perplexity. At the trial, the same witness who selected Ted from the lineup is telling her recollection of what happened when she was assaulted, and points to Ted when asked if her assailant is present in the courtroom. Liz is present as well, and her and Ted give each other nervous looks. Ted's lawyer, however, goes on to ask if the witness was ever shown a picture of Ted prior to the lineup and had said that *"It looked something like him, but I really couldn't say for sure"*, to which the witness confirms. Ted is frowning and with one hand on his chin he is listening with interest. It is further revealed that the witness was also given information about the car beforehand and establishes therefore that the law enforcement intended for her to identify Ted, which confirms that someone is out to get him, but no explanation is given as to why. Ted and his lawyer both look satisfied and confident, a bright musical score is introduced which ends the scene with what is a seeming success for Ted, though no verdict has been given yet.

Additionally, the scene at the library work in a similar matter: showing Ted in a scene without Liz's or his lawyer's presence, while being determined that he is being followed function to uphold his claim about being set up. As of yet, there has been no depiction of Ted being mistaken about his claim of being set up, as well as no reason have been provided for the spectators to not interpret Ted to be trustworthy and truthful.

A demonstration of Ted and Liz's close relationship and affection for each other appear in two following scenes. In the first scene they are on the lookout to buy a dog and are talking about future plans of buying a house; once again, Ted trivializes the court trial, and they both speak of it as something that will come to an end quickly. There is a close-up shot of the two of them as they are talking and promising to never leave each other, which enhances their intimacy and the strong emotions they have for each other. The second scene display them a night at home as they are drinking, flirting, dancing and being silly together. The lighting is

warm and upbeat diegetic soul/funk music make it an overall amusing and inviting scene that displays their close relationship. Incidentally, for a brief moment the camera focuses on Ted's hand as it lays on Liz's neck; as with *My Friend Dahmer*, a premise for the film is that the spectators are aware of the story of Ted Bundy which is why this brief shot can be interpreted as a subtle cue of him as a killer who often strangled his victims. Yet, within the story world, due to the shot's subtlety, the shot passes as merely being a sign of his affection for Liz and is rendered harmless.

The scene cuts to Ted's trial where he is finally receiving the verdict, and to their surprise the judge finds Ted guilty of the crimes. His lawyer sighs in disappointment, and Liz is teary eyed while Ted's eyes are wide open in surprise; the camera is handheld and shaky, which intensifies the shock and add a sense of disorder. A dramatic score is introduced which enhances the emotions felt in the scene as Ted hugs Liz, who is crying, before being put in handcuffs and taken to Utah State Prison.

By previously having depicted Ted and Liz in romantic and intimate moments, planning their future together and showing scenes of their blissful family-life, is a technique of what Carroll (2013) refers to as criterial prefocusing. This means that certain events and character traits, as mentioned above, are accentuated to elicit intended reactions and emotions from the spectators in upcoming scenes, such as the trial as described above. The first impression of Ted provided him with favorable character traits, and the scenes of Ted and Liz together, prompt a pro-attitude towards Ted and his relationship with Liz. Due to criterial prefocusing, this arguably results in a reaction of surprise when Ted is sentenced and an emotion of compassion when the character's shock and distress is conveyed, which can be understood as the intention of the filmmakers.

5.4 Allegiance

As previously mentioned, the scenes that display affection between Ted and Liz function to predispose the spectators to feel certain emotions intended by the filmmakers, that is to say, that the scenes described above are foregrounded with the specific intention to elicit emotions of surprise and compassion as Ted is convicted; subsequently, this is where allegiance with Ted ensues. Allegiance is the third level of engagement with a character in Smith's structure of sympathy and refers to the spectator's moral evaluation of the character, which as a result will lead the spectators either to be allied with, or disapprove of, that character depending on positive or negative moral evaluation. Recognition and alignment are necessary to construct and

evaluate a character, while criterial prefocusing, as established in the scenes described above, function to facilitate the allegiance with Ted.

Ted's traits, being confident, charismatic, family-oriented, and progressive, are all largely positive traits that can be appreciated by the spectators and which renders him a likable character. Whereas *My Friend Dahmer* had distinctly antagonistic characters (Lionel and Joyce) which resulted in Jeff being the morally preferable character within the film, there are no specific characters here that can be considered the antagonists. Rather, it is the supposed unfair justice system and an unknown someone that are out-to-get Ted that generates the narrative's moral structure and renders Ted the preferable character. Thus, the outcome of alignment with Ted, i.e., presenting him having desirable traits and providing subjective access in form of expressivity, and combined with criterial prefocusing are what inclines an allegiance with him. Numerous events strengthen the allegiance with Ted even further, as will be illustrated below.

After being sentenced, Ted enters prison with his head held high; he is well-dressed and takes his time to properly fold his clothes as he must remove them, but his confidence quickly fades. Over the phone, Liz asks if it is scary in there, and Ted's comforting words and the confidence in his voice as he says no, do not match the images in the following sequence: conveyed through facial expressions and demeanor, Ted appears rather terrified as he is having a physical check, as he is bumped into by other inmates who are larger in size than him, and when he is put alone in his cell. Like the scene at the trial, the camera is handheld to indicate disorder and to add a sense of uneasiness; yet Ted repeats to Liz that *"everything is going to be fine"*. It is clearly that his intention is to not upset Liz, and instead of revealing his true experience to her he shows consideration to her feelings, which acquires him the qualities of being considerate and selfless and strengthens the current positive evaluation of him.

In prison, Ted is seen working with documents regarding his case when he is approached by a man asking if he has ever been to Colorado, to which Ted, looking somewhat annoyed, does not provide a clear yes or no answer, and ends with *"let me get back to plotting my escape here"*. In a subsequent conversation between Ted and his lawyer afterwards, Ted learns that the man was a homicide detective who already knew that Ted had been to Colorado and based on Ted's unclear answer assumed that he was replying "*no"* and thus lying, providing him with reason to extradite Ted to Colorado for murder. Ted's facial expression convey his distress and he insists to his lawyer that he was not lying as he has been to Colorado many times, and seems stunned at the accusation as he exclaims *"when is it a crime to go to Colorado?"*, to which his lawyer replies that *"since homicide detectives in surrounding states started looking for*

commonalities in their open cases", and ends with an emphasis on, *"and found ways to make you fit"*.

The emphasis at the end yet again adds credibility to Ted's claim of being set-up and that his lawyer believes the same, which function to strengthen Ted's credibility and therefore allegiance. His lawyer, however, is not licensed in Colorado and can therefore not work with Ted anymore. Thus, the scene ends with his lawyer leaving, while Ted is left alone shouting his name in desperation while his facial expressions, combined with his behavior, convey an intense sense of despair. Based on Carroll's (2013) account of character engagement, spectators experience narratives *externally*, meaning that in the scenes described above they do not share Ted's identical emotions but rather adopt a feeling *for* him, i.e., sympathy for the situation he finds himself and in the distress he must be experiencing.

5.5 Soundtrack and Intertextuality

An establishing shot with *"Colorado 1977"* superimposed tells us that two years have passed, and that Ted is now in jail in Colorado. A brief scene shows Liz and her friend discussing Ted's case, where her friend attempts to convince Liz to be more skeptical of Ted's innocence considering the evidence against him, but Liz remains adamant that it is all a mistake and keeps refuting her friend's arguments. Yet, the scene with a shot of Liz crying in the bathtub, demonstrating how much the case affects her.

In the following scene Ted and Liz speak on the phone. Ted is in a library at a courthouse, rolling around in an office chair without handcuffs, wearing his own clothes and appears cheerful and somewhat carefree while saying that he has been made co-counsel of his case, which provides him with the benefits of a lawyer and that he can put his law-degree to use. Liz appears weary and hungover, but Ted insists on telling her about a book he is reading, *Papillon*, and eagerly tells her about the plot of a man who is wrongfully convicted of a crime and sentenced to life in prison but who never loses hope; insinuating that the book should be a symbol for him and Liz to never lose hope. Whereas Liz appears exhausted and worried, Ted seems optimistic and confident, perhaps appearing somewhat too cheerful considering his circumstances but which nonetheless matches his general carefree persona. Ted is clearly associating his own case to the plot of *Papillon* as a way to make Liz believe he is innocent and that the whole case is a set-up as he has claimed all along.

But Ted's confidence this time too is shut down when in a pre-trial the prosecution discusses the death penalty, which will be important later in the narrative, and he is to be held without

bail until the trial. Ted facial expression conveys shock at first, but which changes to anger as he is somewhat reluctantly removed from the court in handcuffs while slow motion adds a dramatic effect. Unlike the scene at his first trial, there is no dramatic score this time, but a rock ballad is introduced whose lyrics ironically repeats *"oh what a lucky man he was"*, to which the lyrics arguably enhance a portrayal of Ted as merely an unlucky, innocent, man who is targeted as the perpetrator of these crimes without knowing why or by who. As he is taken into the hallway, the slow motion draws attention to Ted noticing something off camera, and an eyeline-match shows him looking at an open window in the room next door where he previously phoned Liz.

On a side note, Ted's new lawyer is named Dumas, which can be interpreted as a reference to author Alexandre Dumas, whose one of many well-known works include *The Count of Monte Cristo.* Like *Papillon*, *The Count of Monte Cristo* is a story about a wrongfully imprisoned man who manages to escape, making the reference of its author another way of associating Ted's case to grand stories of wrongfully convicted men with successful prison breaks, and to stories of hope and justice. Considering Ted's choice of words in an earlier scene, *"plotting my escape"*, and if him mentioning *Papillon* to Liz is a means of influencing her perception of his case, the reference to Dumas might similarly be a method used by the filmmakers to influence the spectators (specifically those who might not be familiar of the actual case) to perceive the film as another story about a wrongfully convicted hero who fights a flawed justice system. The outcome of making these references through intertextuality is arguably that they predispose the spectators to anticipate a similar storyline and outcome, while the music transfers the content of lyrics onto Ted, and which can be understood as elements of criterial prefocusing. This suggestion is supported in a series of following scenes described below.

The music continues into the next sequence. In another phone call with Ted, Liz is lying on her bed in her dark bedroom, seeming emotionally drained, and saying that she cannot cope with another trial. A subsequent shot shows Ted attempting to phone Liz from prison, but she does not answer, to which the song lyrics now function to enhance the notion that Ted's unfortunate situation possibly will lose him the support from his girlfriend. A brief shot shows Ted holding on to his copy of *Papillon* which signifies that Liz is perhaps losing hope, but that Ted is not losing his, and additionally it implies that it provides him with ideas of escape. It cuts to a medium long shot of Ted standing in his cell with his hands to his hips, indicating that he is ready to take some sort of action, and with the plot of *Papillon* in mind it insinuates that he is planning a prison break. The sequence continues by showing Ted practicing jumping and

landing from his bunk bed, unsuccessfully trying to phone Liz multiple times, and an emphasis is put on him growing a beard which will come into play later in the narrative. He conducts a television interview from prison, now with a full beard, where he is adamantly stating his innocence. When asked if he is angry about the situation he replies *"I get angry. And indignant"*, claiming his case to be unfair treatment from the justice system and asserting that if *"the police keep their heads in the sand ... then people are going to continue showing up dead or missing"*. The reactions and emotions that Ted have expressed so far, i.e., distress, anger, indignation, are presented as rational due to the adversity he has experienced. No elements have been provided to perceive Ted as dishonest, so the spectators arguably continue to be allied with him; through the music and intertextuality, allegiance and character engagement, have been strengthened, which results in a strengthening of the sympathetic attitude elicited for Ted.

5.5.1 Soundtrack and Prison Break

In the following trial, Ted, now clean shaven, seems anxious and is fidgety as he is adjusting his clothes and is pulling at his collar. During recess, he asks to use the phone in the room next door to phone Liz, which he is permitted due to being co-counsellor. An ominous score is emerges while a deputy watches over Ted from the doorway as he dials the phone number. The spectators can hear a dial tone, but Ted pretends to speak on the phone so that the deputy leaves the doorway, yet he stays in an area where he can keep an eye on Ted while he is simultaneously flirting with someone from the courtroom audience; Ted keeps an eye on the deputy as well. The camera switches to handheld and is increasingly shaky, while framing the shot to be perceived from the position of the deputy Ted is seen hanging up the phone, though the deputy does not notice this. As Ted hurriedly opens a window, the ominous music fades and rock music is introduced. He sits for a moment on the windowsill, breathing heavily, and looking back to see if the deputy is watching him, before jumping out of the window on to the ground outside. The jump appears in slow motion which heightens the sense of risk while the music generates a sense of thrill; the landing, and Ted limping away, is handheld and chaotic. The music continues through various shots of Ted running down the street with a panicked facial expression, yet generating a exciting spectacle. He runs into a side street where he undresses and reveals a new outfit underneath his existing one so that he can reappear on the main street transformed; as the beard he had while appearing on television is gone, he is just about unrecognizable to the public, and has successfully fulfilled his escape plan.

Whereas the ominous score in the scene described above elicited a sensation that something threatening was about to happen, the rock music arguably introduced a sense of thrill to the scene. Thus, Ted's escape is presented in a thrilling, exciting, and risky manner. Also, having depicted Ted trying to phone Liz from prison where she does not answer, cross-cut with scenes of Liz increasingly exhausted and insecure of Ted's case, had suggested another, arguably understandable, reason for Ted to escape. The reason is highlighted through the lyrics of the song playing during his risky escape, *"listen mister can't you see I got to get back to my baby again",* which underpins the notion that his escape is also a desperate attempt to reconnect with Liz. Arguably, the way that Ted's escape is presented supports the thriller/romance narrative by accompanying a suspenseful scene with a rock song, combined with the notion that he is escaping to be with his loved one. Had the ominous score continued throughout the scene rather than introducing the rock music, it would have presented itself as more of a tense and alarming scene, while removing the romance narrative would have made it solely a crime narrative which is a conventional genre for the subject of serial murder.

In comparison, the soundtrack in *My Friend Dahmer* consists of a score only, or no sound at all except for diegetic sounds, and no pre-existing non-diegetic music is included such as in *Extremely Wicked*. In *My Friend Dahmer*, the absence of any music in for example the scene where Lionel destroys Jeff's shed function to heighten a sense of reality and harshness, while the score in various other scenes, which is characteristically a melancholy or ominous sound, function to reveal Jeff's emotional state and persona to be similar; the score combined with a withdrawn character who does not convey much facial expressions suggests a somber and angsty emotional state. In contrast, a few scenes depict Ted driving in his car listening to music and tapping along to the beat, which convey an overall happier and more carefree emotional state and persona. Though an ominous film score is present in *Extremely Wicked* as well, as mentioned previously, such as in various scenes taking place in court, but which in that case function to heighten the emotional affect and severity that the case has on Ted and Liz. The inclusion of non-diegetic rock music while escaping, as previously mentioned, changes the mood in the scene from alarming to thrilling, and having made connotations to grand stories of prison escape earlier, the music arguably heightens the notion that Ted will achieve his own ambitious and thrilling grand story of prison escape.

5.6 Obscuring Allegiance

Yet, Ted's freedom is short-lived as it cuts to Ted being imprisoned once again. Liz visits Ted in prison and their intimacy is once again portrayed through close-up shots of them talking, though Liz looks anxious. Ted gives Liz his copy of *Papillon* and continues to speak of never losing hope while trying to comfort her. He insists that he escaped for the main reason being that he could be with her, as was conveyed through criterial prefocusing and music. Liz, on the brink of tears, says that she cannot do this anymore, to which Ted reacts with distress and tries to convince her to stay with him; a soft and gentle score is introduced which accentuates both their suffering and Ted's distress. Liz, in tears, gives Ted a drawing made by Molly before she leaves, and the scene ends with a close-up shot of Ted crying while looking at the drawing. While the score continues to intensify a sensation of heartbreak and sadness in the scene, the close-up shot heightens Ted's emotions.

The score continues intro the next scene which cuts to a close-up shot of Ted as he is lying in bed. An eyeline-match show him looking at the drawing from Molly that he has hung up in the ceiling; the shot maintains the conveying of Ted's emotional state introduced in the previous scene, and reveals where his mind is at, i.e., he is thinking about the associations that the drawing elicit. Ted's caring behavior towards Molly earlier in the narrative has likewise functioned to strengthen the allegiance with him in a similar manner as it did with Jeff and his behavior towards his younger brother in *My Friend Dahmer*, i.e., their thoughtful behavior towards minor characters eases a positive evaluation of the character (Smith, 1995:190). The inclusion of the drawing, and that he hangs it up straight above his bed, reminds the spectators of this positive evaluation.

The dramatic score fades and another rock song is introduced, and another sequence of Ted planning his escape begins. As in the previous sequence, he is trying to contact Liz without any luck; writing her a letter while his voice-over reads: *"there are many things I can live without, but you are not one of them"*, and the narrative that it is his desperation regarding Liz that motivates him to escape continues. In between shots of Ted planning his escape there are scenes showing Liz becoming acquainted with a male colleague, which suggests that while Ted is desperately attempting to contact her, she is gradually letting Ted go, and provides the spectators with a justification of Ted's reason to be planning an escape

Ted manages to escape once more, this time by cutting a hole through the ceiling of his cell, but instead of contacting Liz as the narrative continually has prompted the viewers to believe

was his purpose, it cuts to two weeks later where Ted is at a nightclub. Disco music is playing, and Ted is drinking, flirting, and dancing with two sorority girls. As Ted had previously expressed such a sorrow and desperation of possibly losing Liz and Molly, this is out-of-character behavior and arguably complicates the alignment and allegiance with him. It complicates alignment since what has previously been presented as access into Ted's subjectivity, i.e., what he has outwardly expressed is his thoughts and desires, now has been revealed to perhaps be untrue, which as a result complicates the allegiance.

The shot of him dancing with the girls fades along with the music, and the voice of a new reporter speaks of two women murdered at a sorority house; while images of the crime scenes are shown, the news reporter speaks in detail of the horrific crimes. When asked what kind of person he thinks they are dealing with, Capt. Burl Peacock of Tallahassee Police Department, in a interview from archive footage, says *"I'd think we've got a very disturbed and sick individual"*. The clip jump cuts to Ted driving in his car listening to disco music and tapping his fingers along with the beat, seeming carefree and happy. The jump cut implies that Ted is the individual referred to in the interview, but the description of being "disturbed and sick" juxtaposes Ted's normal and jovial behavior. Considering that Ted is on the run and acted out-of-character by clubbing and flirting with other women instead of seeking out Liz, his seemingly carefree behavior now sows doubt of his reliability. Once more, he is pulled over by a police officer and his mood quickly changes from carefree to stressed; with a serious look on his face he looks in the rear-view mirror and instantly smiles as if he is preparing to present himself a certain way not to reveal that he is a fugitive, or as if he is putting on a mask of his charming personality. The scene is eerily similar to the first scene where he was pulled over by the police; at that time, he excused himself by saying that *"I couldn't make your car"*, while he now says that *"I couldn't make out your headlights"*. Instead of complying this time however, he knocks out the officer and runs away. Whereas the film so far has presented Ted in such away that has made his assertiveness about his innocence somewhat believable, the scenes described above discredit his character and serves to distort recognition and alignment for the spectators which then results in sowing doubt of Ted's credibility.

Imprisoned once again, Ted's trial is nationally televised. Liz watches the trial from her home and as the voice of the prosecutor speaks in detail of the crimes Ted is put on trial for, the camera zooms in on Liz watching attentively; it ends with a close-up shot of her on the brink of tears while an ominous score enters which conveys Liz's shocking realization of the severity of the horrific crimes that Ted might be guilty of. At the start of the trial, as Liz

watches, Ted makes the courtroom audience, the press, and the jury laugh while appearing charming and confident. His carefree and charming personality juxtaposed with the information provided of the crimes he is accused of, add meaning to the zoom-in on Liz's face to be a realization of how Ted now is winning over the audience with his allure and charm just as he won over her from the very beginning, i.e., a realization of Ted's real persona.

5.7 Allegiance is Removed – or is it?

While in prison, Ted becomes romantically involved with his former friend, Carole-Ann, who is portrayed visiting him various times in prison and who appears infatuated with him. Carole-Ann adamantly believes that Ted is innocent and functions as an advocate for him while speaking to various media outlets. Simultaneously, various scenes show Liz following the trial on television with her male colleague present at her house, suggesting that they too are gradually becoming romantically involved. The character of Carole-Ann has not been much present until now, and there are similarities of how Ted acts with her and how he acted with Liz earlier in the narrative. As with Liz, he insists on his innocence and that someone is out to get him, this time that he is used for *"political gain"*, and as with Liz, he insists on the fact that he will get out and continues to plan his and Carole-Ann's future together. By having Ted replicating some of his earlier statements reveals, or confirms, to the spectators that he has been somewhat faking his personality and manipulating Liz, and that he is now manipulating Carole-Ann in the same manner, which altogether maintains the decline of the allegiance with Ted. On the other hand, this might be perceived as if Ted is seeking comfort and support from Carole-Ann due to Liz not being there for him, which is perhaps not entirely unnatural for someone in his situation; that being so, the narrative has still not explicitly revealed whether he is in fact guilty and manipulative, it has merely been suggested but not confirmed.

As Ted is now on trial for the murder of two women and three other murder attempts, most of the final act of the film takes place in court. Ted is highly involved and verbal in court, exemplified by one point disagreeing with his lawyer who refuses to object to a statement, so Ted takes the stand himself, something in which he frequently continues to do. As he has been portrayed throughout the film, he persists his charming and confident personality, adamant of his innocence and that he is being persecuted by the state. The actual trial of Ted Bundy was, as previously mentioned, nationally televised, and various events that took place are re-enacted here, such as Ted agreeing to a plea bargain with his counsel but to their surprise refusing the bargain while in court, leading to his lawyer resigning. Due to being a former law student, he

is allowed, once again, to be co-counsel, allowing him to continue taking the stand and examining witnesses himself; he manages to make the audience, the majority of whom are young women, laugh and even cheer for him; and finally, he proposes to Carole-Ann while she is testifying. Though he is now in a relationship with Carole-Ann, and it is later revealed that she is expecting his baby, Ted continues his attempts to contact Liz on the phone at various times, implying that he has never really his feeling for her go.

A brief scene depicts Liz thinking back on the time she and Ted were drinking, dancing, and laughing together, a scene described in this earlier in this analysis as "amusing and inviting", and that it functioned to display their intimacy. As she is thinking about it, the images are about the same as earlier, but the music has changed from upbeat soul/funk to an ominous score, which once again represents Liz's realization of the possible reality of Ted being guilty. Ted standing over Liz and looking admirable at her in a romantic setting functioned as a display of affection; but due to the gradual decline of allegiance with Ted combined with the ominous score, changes it from a display of affection to a display of murderous lust, and raises questions such as if he ever wanted to murder Liz, or why did he not?

In his closing statement at the trial, Ted insists that the detectives picked him as a suspect and made him fit the evidence rather than focusing on catching the actual perpetrator. But the jury is not convinced, and Ted is found guilty on all charges and is sentenced to death. As the judge repeats the verdict, the camera zooms-in on Ted's face while a slight ominous yet simultaneously emotive score is introduced. Ted's eyebrows are narrowed, and his face is tense, and his voice slightly breaks while he is making an intense final statement asserting his innocence. The camera lands in an extreme close-up shot and Ted's eyes are filled with tears, which conveys and intensifies his shock and feeling of unjust treatment. Though the court has found him guilty, the narrative has still not explicitly revealed that he is but has rather raised questions of whether he is in fact guilty or not; this final performance in the courtroom arguably works in favor of feeling pity and sympathetic for him by those who might still believe his innocence, after all, the allegiance has been on a decline but has not been entirely eliminated.

Cut to 1989, ten years later, and the film arrives at the scene from the very beginning: Liz visiting Ted in prison. The scene is repeated as it was: Ted is excited to see Liz while she is anxious and inquisitive. Liz calmly asks Ted to tell her the truth, but Ted still insists on his innocence. Liz goes on to tell him that it was her that gave his name to the police in 1974, which reveals that all the distress she has displayed has also been due to a feeing of guilt of possibly having ruined an innocent man's life. She expresses how tormented she has been through all

these years and overwhelms him with questions if he is guilty, to which he repeatedly answers no; he even raises his voice in frustration and is on the brink of tears, seeming genuinely anguished and pained. Liz shows him a crime scene photo of a decapitated body, asking what happened to the woman's head; Ted, teary eyed, starts writing a word in the condensation on the window while scenes from a flashback interjects; there is a build up of a sharp, dramatic score and an increasing sound of something being sawed. In the flashback, Ted, with a fake cast on his arm, hits a girl on her head with a crowbar and drags her into the woods at dark, while the word on the window is revealed to spell *hacksaw*. Though only revealing what happened to the one woman, this certainly implies that he is guilty of all the crimes he has been charged for. It is difficult to say whether his tears are tears of regret of his crimes, regret that he got caught, or simply a weariness of lying all these years; but ultimately Ted relieves Liz of the guilt she has been feeling by confirming that she did not send an innocent man to prison.

The narrative neither confirms nor refutes whether Ted's affection for Liz was fabricated, but what is presented as an act of kindness towards her by relieving her of her guilt arguably leans towards the former. The film ends with a text superimposed informing that Ted confessed to over thirty murders the day before his execution, as well as a list of names of his victims. While the credits are running, clips from factual interviews with Ted Bundy, from court, and various news media are displayed, many of which were re-enacted in the film.

5.8 Chapter Summary

The film's initial alignment with Liz introduces the spectators to Ted form her point of view. She perceives him as a progressive, charismatic, and affectionate man, and these are traits that remains with Ted throughout the narrative due to the primacy effect. For the first two acts of the film, as Ted experiences the adversity of being falsely accused, there are no scenes to suggest that he is dishonest; rather, scenes are included that confirm his claims, which gives Ted credibility and provides him with the quality of being trustworthy. Ted's positive character traits combined with the narrative events mentioned above, results in a positive moral evaluation of Ted which eases an allegiance with the character.

In accordance with criterial prefocusing, narrative events that portray Ted in a positive and credible manner are foregrounded with the intention to bring forth sympathetic reactions from the spectators when Ted experiences adversity in subsequent scenes. Through the film's soundtrack and intertextuality, associations to grand stories of unjust treatment and prison break are transferred onto the narrative which establishes an overall thrilling impression of the story.

In the third act, it is gradually hinted at that Ted might be guilty and his out of character behavior weakens his credibility, but the primacy effect makes the first impression of Ted persist even so, and as allegiance somewhat falters it is not completely removed due to it not being explicitly revealed that he is in fact guilty. At the film's finale when Ted reveals to Liz that he is the perpetrator, the scene is structured as such that it can be interpreted that Ted's confession is an act of kindness towards Liz, i.e., relieving her of her pain and suffering. The film thus ends while eliciting questions if Ted's affection for Liz was truthful or not, but does not provide an answer.

Chapter 6.
The Changing Face of Pop-Culture's Serial Killer

By having textually analyzed *My Friend Dahmer* and *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile*, the aim of this chapter is to discuss how the texts' individual elements function to portray their protagonists in their entirety, and to discuss if and how the films diverge from the conventions of the serial murder subgenre. The texts will be compared with each other as well as to earlier adaptations of the same individuals, and a few earlier texts portraying serial killer protagonist will be included to use as comparatives.

6.1 My Friend Dahmer

6.1.1 Genre Conventions

My Friend Dahmer is not completely detached from the conventions of the serial murder subgenre. As the film is an adaptation of Jeffrey Dahmer's teenage years, it falls under the category of serial killer texts that look at the killer's childhood/adolescence in attempting to provide causes that would lead them to grow up becoming serial killers, i.e., typically searching for a specific source for their immoral behavior. This is akin to both fictional and true crime narratives and is something which David Schmid (2005) describes to be a "search that frequently involves looking back at perfectly ordinary events and recasting them as sinister premonitions of what is to come" (177). This occur in various texts about Jeffrey Dahmer: In the documentary series *The World's Most Evil Killers* (2017) Dahmer's parents' constant arguing and neglection of Jeff is referred to as a root cause for his deviation; while in *Mind of a Monster: Jeffrey Dahmer* (Holt, 2020), in contrast, it is emphasized that Jeff in fact had a good relationship with his parents and that they were an overall happy family, but eventually Dahmer's difficulty in coping with his parents ensuing divorce is presented as the catalyst for his future behavior. Jeff's parents' deteriorating marriage is, however, likewise an important element in *My Friend Dahmer* but is, however, not presented as the *one* source of his deviant behavior, rather it is presented as just one of a series of circumstances that negatively affects Jeff.

A popular trope often seen in fictional texts regarding serial killers is their childhood cruelty toward animals as early reactions to their insatiable urge to kill. This stems from early research into if childhood characteristics could indicate future violent behavior (Wright and Hensley,

2003), and appear in many popular serial murder texts, such as *Dexter* (Manos, 2006-2013). In *My Friend Dahmer*, Jeff is portrayed as having an interest in biology and therefore dissects roadkill, but rather than presenting this as Jeff having an insatiable and uncontrollable urge to kill his interest in the insides of animals is merely presented as a hobby based on his interest in biology. It is briefly mentioned in the film that his father, who worked as a chemist, provided Jeff with the acid for him to dissolve animals, and though his hobby might be considered rare it is not inherently worrisome; in fact, it might be interpreted as an interest he shared with his father due to his father being a chemist. However, Jeff continuing to dissect roadkill after being refused by his father to do so (as his father felt he spent too much time with his hobby and should rather be more social with his schoolmates), is masked as a reaction from Jeff after being prevented to carry out his beloved hobby and accordingly having his comfort zone removed. In contrast, the serial killer protagonist in *Dexter* is portrayed as killing animals as a child because he wants to do so and cannot control himself, and which is presented as an urge that is triggered by a traumatic event as a toddler; this urge to kill animals is the first indication of concern by Dexter's foster father that Dexter will someday advance to killing people, as if that is an inevitable outcome when a child commits animal cruelty. *My Friend Dahmer*, however, refuses a portrayal of Jeff as someone with an uncontrollable urge to kill animals but it is rather presented as Jeff longing back to his hobby; his hobby is understood to be his safe space and comfort zone, thus it is something which is rendered comprehensible to the spectators rather than being presented as an urge to kill.

6.1.2 A Serial Killer's Point of View

Though the film does not present one specific traumatic event that catalysts Jeff into becoming a serial killer, neither is his dissection of roadkill presented as a fundamental concern for his future, in many ways *My Friend Dahmer* still follows similar patterns as various other earlier portrayals of serial killers, but what it arguably introduces is a higher degree of sympathy for its protagonist. The film invites the spectators to observe narrative from Jeff's point of view, which in and of itself is not a new phenomenon. *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (McNaughton, 1986), *Monster* (Jenkins, 2003), and *Dexter*, to name a few, all have serial killer protagonists who the spectators are aligned with and present stories from their point of view. Let's examine how these examples include alignment with their protagonists and to what degree of allegiance and sympathy they encourage.

Loosely based on real life killer Henry Lee Lucas, the plot of *Henry* revolves around its title character meeting up with his friend Otis and together they carry out a random murder spree. Seemingly killing out of boredom and with impunity, the film is extremely graphic in its depictions of brutal murders and sexual assaults, and it invites to no allegiance between its spectators and protagonist. Neither is there an antagonistic force to weigh against Henry's depraved actions or to push the narrative forward, which results in not much of a stimulating plot and no emotional engagement (Hantke, 2001). Henry briefly mentions that he was abused as a child in what appears as a small attempt to provide an explanation as to why he has become a brutal murderer, i.e., the trope of childhood trauma, but with the amount of human depravity he displays the narrative falls short in eliciting any kind of understanding or sympathy.

Whereas *Henry* seems to offer nothing but shock through its hollow plot and extreme violence, *Monster* takes on a different approach in its portrayal of Aileen Wuornos, a prostitute who killed her clients and who is often referred to as America's first female serial killer. Starting out as a love story, the film portrays Aileen living a rough life on the streets when she meets Selby, whom she becomes romantically involved with. Through a voice-over the film provides some insight into Aileen's mind, and the spectators learn about her rough upbringing and the fact that she was planning on committing suicide, but that her relationship with Selby is what saved her. After being brutally assaulted by one of her clients, Aileen murders him in self-defense; she then goes on attempting to straighten out her life so she can provide for her and Selby. *Monster* presents an overall tragic story, and sympathy is elicited at the protagonist simply being born into an unfortunate lifestyle and experiencing nothing but adversity, something which the voice-over arguably inclines the spectators to feel by providing subjective access which eases allegiance with the character. However, Aileen returns to prostitution with the intention of robbing and killing her clients. Her intentional murders are presented as desperate acts for survival, and a small attempt at justification is made as they are presented as if she is preventing other women from the possibility of being assaulted; but it becomes clear that she is heavily traumatized by her own assaults and child abuse, and that she releases her anger and trauma on her clients, including clients who have no intention of hurting her. The voice-over is not present during scenes of murder and only speaks of her unfortunate upbringing and lifestyle, and thus the film "attempts to draw a link between the violence of poverty and the violence of someone's behavior" (Seal, 2008:291). Though providing somewhat of an understanding for its protagonists' actions, their actions remain shocking and immoral, which restricts any allegiance

with the protagonist. Rather, sympathy is elicited for the unfortunate situation that she finds herself in and cannot break away from, but not for the protagonist herself.

Unlike *Henry* and *Monster*, *Dexter* presents an entirely fictional character, and neither the plot nor the protagonist is in any way rooted in reality, but the series nonetheless offer interesting perspectives in the pop-cultural portrayals of serial killers as the series is said to "represent a turning point in the willingness of Americans to embrace the serial killer" (Howard, 2010:132). Dexter Morgan, the serial killer protagonist as previously mentioned, is portrayed as having an insatiable urge to kill due to the traumatic event in his childhood of witnessing his mother's murder but was taught at an early age by his foster father, Harry, that killing is wrong. Aware that Dexter would not be able to control his urge to kill, Harry developed a set of guidelines for Dexter to follow, referred to as the *Code of Harry*, which included that he only kills other criminals, typically those who have evaded the justice system; this way, Dexter could satisfy his desire to kill while simultaneously, in a way, serve the public. The series then follow Dexter working as a blood-spatter analyst for the Miami Police Department, while hunting down and murdering evaded criminals in his spare time, thus his murders are somewhat justified by having him follow the Code of Harry and by having a moral framework underpin the series.

Whereas *Henry* portrayed a perspective of a wholly malevolent and remorseless killer, *Monster* portrayed somewhat of a reasoning for Aileen's behavior as well as eliciting some degree of sympathy for the unfortunate situation she found herself in; neither, however, generate full allegiance with their protagonists. *Dexter* then brought the fascinating perspective of a serial killer's thought process by including a voice-over that provided full subjective access into Dexter's mind. The combination of the series slightly blurring the lines between a superhero and a serial killer (e.g., Dexter is also referred to as the *Dark Defender* by the news media in the series) as he only targets other criminals, and by otherwise having Dexter be a rather likeable and candid character, the series invites to full allegiance with its protagonist serial killer.

In her discussion of ethics in fictional serial killer narratives, Sonia Alluè (2002) examines the aspect of when the serial killer is not caught at the end, referring specifically to when killer and cannibal Hannibal Lecter goes free at the end of *The Silence of the Lambs*. She says that by having the other serial killer in the film, Buffalo Bill, shot dead at the end is enough for the spectators to achieve a satisfactory ending, as Buffalo Bill represents the deranged killer while Hannibal Lecter represents the cunning and collected killer (14-17), or. the killer with favorable and likeable traits. A similar view can be applied to *Dexter* seeing that Dexter's victims represent the deranged killers who would have continued to kill innocent people, while Dexter

himself is the cunning and collected one; and though Dexter admits that he is faking his emotions, he still acts with kindness and respect towards the people in his life. Though it is emphasized that Dexter kills because he has got an urge to do so and not because he specifically wants to rid the streets of dangerous criminals; and that he meticulously follows the Code of Harry meticulously so that he does not get caught and not because he wants to be a vigilante; these aspects become somewhat inferior in the moral evaluation of Dexter when paralleled with the internal system of values, i.e. out of all the killers in the series, Dexter is the preferable one, and the spectators achieves fulfillment by having the other criminals receive punishment. This fulfilment does not appear in neither *Henry* nor *Monster*, as their protagonists' murderous acts are ranked crueler than their victims' actions.

6.1.3 Sympathy, pity, understanding

The protruding differences in the narrative of *My Friend Dahmer* and earlier depictions is, firstly, its exclusion of depicting its protagonist committing murder, and secondly, the manner in which it invites its spectators to a greater inclination of sympathy, pity, and understanding for a serial killer- character based on the life of a factual serial killer. The latter will be discussed below, and this is where the structure of sympathy comes into play.

To briefly recap, to recognize the character as a human agent, to be temporally aligned with and have a certain degree of subjective access to the character, and finally to be allied with the character make up the structure of sympathy, and their combination, according to Murray Smith (1995), elicits a sympathetic, pro-attitude towards the character. Though the three elements (recognition, alignment, allegiance) are reliant on each other, allegiance is the essential element for generating character engagement and eliciting sympathy, and which occurs through multiple elements. Within the film's internal system of values, or mora structure, Jeff is the morally preferable one; this is established through his compassionate behavior towards his younger brother and his mother, and by positioning his father in the antagonistic role of destroying the place where Jeff feels the most safe and comfortable; in other words, the film's moral structure established how Jeff morally compares and behaves towards other characters. The result of this is a supportive attitude for Jeff's goals of wanting to make his father happy and to make friends, which in turn results in a sympathetic attitude when he faces difficulties such as not truly connecting with his new friends and being heavily affected by his parents deteriorating marriage.

But Jeff undergoes more adversity than what was just mentioned as he is coming to terms with his homosexuality, inhabits a self-awareness of not quite fitting in with his peers, as well as an awareness of his own increasingly sinister mental state. Jeff is not a very verbally or facially expressive character and does not express his troubled mentality to the others characters (the exception is when he is at the doctor and briefly asks him about what is on a person's mind, in what can be understood as an attempt to ease his thoughts, but is an attempt that falls short), but that he struggles with those aspects of his life is illustrated through jump cutting to scenes of Jeff being alone in the woods at dark while letting out his frustrations through aggressively slamming a branch against a tree, as well as resorting to alcoholism and ultimately collapsing in tears on the living-room floor.

Though Jeff's mental state and behavior are increasingly worrisome throughout the film, it does not weaken the allegiance between the spectators and Jeff, as it partially does for Ted in *Extremely Wicked*. This occurs in *Extremely Wicked* due to Ted's slightly out of character behavior towards the end of the film as he says one thing but does another, thus disrupting the positive judgement of him. Jeff's worrisome behavior, however, is presented as a result of various circumstances that has got a negative impact on him, and him being a vulnerable and withdrawn teenager who does not know how to deal with this, results in sympathetic emotions of pity and compassion rather than disapproval.

By stating that "assimilation is access to a viewpoint without sharing the same psychological state as the character" (Caroll in Privett & Kreul, 2001), Nöel Carroll dismisses the term *identification* between spectators and characters in film as he claims that they cannot experience the exact same emotions. Rather, that the spectator can assimilate to the situation taking place on screen and respond accordingly is a more suitable phrase regarding the emotional relationship between the spectator and the character. *My Friend Dahmer* is constantly providing reason to why Jeff acts the way he does, for example that faking spasms to gain attention from his schoolmates is an attempt to make friends and thus to fulfil his father's wish; that he continues to dissect roadkill as a way to hold on to his hobby and his safe-space which he was deprived of; and that he starts drinking because he does not know how to cope with his home situation, his sexuality, and his self-awareness of his declining mental state. Regarding Carroll's statement, the spectator arguably does not replicate Jeff's emotions during these actions, but due to the narrative structure having made these emotions and actions *understandable* (i.e., Jeff's emotions are emphasized by e.g., camera positions and lack of non-diegetic music), the spectators are able to assimilate to the situations and respond emotionally. Thus, as the narrative

discounts a portrayal of Jeff as a murderous individual the spectators are not inherently inclined by the narrative to feel aversion towards him, and this way the film successfully invites the spectators to take on a sympathetic attitude to Jeff's tragic events. To reiterate, the protagonist in *Henry* is presented as nothing other than a malicious killer, which provides no reason for the spectators to feel sympathy for him or become allied with his intentions; for Aileen in *Monster*, sympathy is elicited for her tragic life story, but she too is ultimately presented as a vindictive killer, which then disrupts the sympathy and allegiance. Allying with and having a sympathetic attitude for Dexter Morgan is encouraged in *Dexter*, but which bears the backdrop of a moral framework. Dexter, like Jeff, is the preferable character within the series internal system of values, but the difference is that whereas *Dexter* allies its spectators to a fictional, vigilante, serial killer, *My Friend Dahmer* successfully allies its spectators to a character based on a factual individual recognized as one of US history's most notorious serial killers. It can be argued that this is due to the spectators circumventing a rational evaluation of Jeff, as Margrethe Bruun Vaage (2016) suggests in her study on the popularity of antiheroes, and that the spectators perceive Jeff as an abstract character due to not being primarily portrayed as a murderer, but rather as an ordinary teenager.

6.2 Extremely Wicked

Extremely Wicked takes on a different approach than *My Friend Dahmer* in making its spectators sympathize for its protagonist serial killer. Whereas *My Friend Dahmer* invites the spectators to feel a high degree of sympathy and pity in its depiction of Jeff's increasing and profound emotional and mental trouble, *Extremely Wicked* encourages its spectators to take on a supportive role for Ted and to be allied with him in his fight for what is presented as unjust treatment from the authorities, while striving to not lose his girlfriend along the way.

Extremely Wicked invites the spectators to perceive Ted from the point of view of how his closest relations would have perceived him at the time. A known matter of the case of Ted Bundy was his charismatic personality and being generally regarded as a handsome and courteous man, which is appropriately conveyed in the film through his behavior and is what made numerous people at the time doubtful of him being the perpetrator (also portrayed in the film are the many women who became his fans and who showed up at his trial to support him). Instead of this phenomenon being re-told as it would in true crime or a documentary, the filmmakers of *Extremely Wicked* attempt to make the spectators experience this themselves, and which transpires through several aspects that will be discussed below.

As in *My Friend Dahmer*, the structure of sympathy is present, however, the initial alignment is with Liz, which makes the first impression of Ted formed from her point of view. Her being a single working mother in the late 1960s worried about her status, seemingly strikes luck when she meets the open-minded and respectful Ted. The scene of them in the kitchen, bathed in sunlight and accompanied by soft guitar strumming while the sound of children playing is heard in the distance, enhances her experience of luck and bliss, and establishes an idyllic environment. This is understood as a form of criterial prefocusing, which is when "filmmakers foreground certain events and actions in the presentation of the narrative ... that are likely to elicit an emotional response" (Coplan, 2009:106). The emotional response elicited is arguably joy on behalf of Liz, and as Ted is portrayed with nothing but desirable traits, the spectators are predisposed to taking a liking to him. After the initial positive evaluation of Ted, the alignment and allegiance shift from Liz to Ted while his character traits persist. As *My Friend Dahmer*, there is an internal system of values; the law enforcement who keep accusing Ted of a series of crimes seemingly without any evidence function as the antagonistic force to which Ted's traits and behavior are paralleled against, and where Ted is rendered the preferable one. As with Jeff, this elicits a sympathetic, pro-, attitude for Ted and the spectators become allied with his goals of proving his innocence. Events such as Ted attempting to confront a car following him, and his lawyer confirming Ted's claim of being set-up, further demonstrate criterial prefocusing as these scenes function to sustain the allegiance with Ted by providing him with traits of being trustworthy, and of evoking intended reactions from the spectators when Ted subsequently experiences adversity.

Extremely Wicked does not rely on the structure of sympathy as much as *My Friend Dahmer*. For instance, the latter provides considerably more insight into the mind of Jeff through subjective access, and if the former were to provide just as much subjective access into Ted it would disrupt the intention of the film; the film is manipulating the spectators just as Ted manipulates Liz and those around him, meaning that the spectators are not supposed to know what Ted truly is thinking and feeling. *Extremely Wicked* thus relies heavier on other elements to elicit sympathy and a supportive attitude for Ted; these elements are, as mentioned briefly above, means of criterial prefocusing such as narrative structure and intertextuality.

6.2.1 Narrative structure

A frequently used narrative style of serial killer cinema is a detective narrative, where law enforcement, typically FBI agents, are on the mission to capture a killer before they strike again.

David Bordwell (1985) recognizes two approaches to the detective narrative: the first approach is a narrative where the spectators know nothing more than the detective(s) and deciphers the mystery alongside them, such as in David Fincher's *Se7en* (1995) where the spectators are only given information alongside detectives Somerset and Miller as they are attempting to capture the film's serial killer; while the narrative in the second approach provides the spectators with just a little more information than the detective(s), which for example occur in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991) where the spectators are given the information about how Buffalo Bill's latest victim was captured, how she is being treated, and the look of her captor, while the detectives are still piecing the puzzle that will eventually lead to this information.

Earlier cinematic adaptations of the case of Ted Bundy generally fall into the latter category of a detective narrative, demonstrated here by two examples: In *The Deliberate Stranger* (Chomsky, 1986), a two-part television film based on the novel by Richard W. Larsen, Ted is portrayed as leading a seemingly normal life with his girlfriend, family, and friends, as well as attending law school and being an aspiring politician. Yet, the film simultaneously depicts Ted approaching and flirting with various girls, and subsequently attacking and killing them. All the while, the overarching storyline of the film is the investigation of a series of missing girls and thus three detectives attempting to solve the cases are secondary protagonists; the film also portrays some of the families of the missing girls and a journalist contributing to the investigation. *The Stranger Beside Me* (Shapiro, 2003), a cinematic adaptation of Ann Rule's biographical true crime novel about her friendship with Ted Bundy while she was unaware of his true nature, uses a similar narrative approach as *Extremely Wicked* by telling the story from Ann's point of view. Ann, being a former police officer, takes the role of a detective as she works with her former colleagues in investigating a series of missing girls in order for her to write a crime novel. Here, the film portrays Ted working with politics and having a series of relationships, while simultaneously depicting him seeking out, attacking, and killing girls.

Both films capture the charm of Ted, his likeable personality, and overall friendly behavior towards the other characters, but also depict Ted's m.o. of having a fake cast on his arm to use as an excuse to receive help from young girls before kidnapping them. In these depictions, Ted thus has got desirable traits, as he does in *Extremely Wicked*, but allegiance is disrupted by explicitly depicting him as the perpetrator. As *The Deliberate Stranger* include secondary protagonists in form of the detectives, and Ann Rule is the protagonist in *The Stranger Beside Me* while Ted is a supporting character, and due to depicting Ted committing crimes from start to finish (both films' opening scenes portray this) the secondary protagonists become the

preferable characters within the internal system of values and the one the spectators are allied with.

Though a series of crimes are central in *Extremely Wicked* as Ted is a suspect, their investigation is not the main storyline nor is a detective the protagonist. Though the allegiance with Ted slightly falters towards the end of the narrative due to his out-of-character behavior, it is not revealed until the film's finale that he is the culprit and therefore the allegiance is never fully eliminated until then. This can be understood as due to the primacy effect and of having the spectators firstly allied with Liz, i.e., that the spectators' first impression of Ted was Liz's first impression of Ted, and as she became infatuated with him, he was naturally portrayed in a positive manner. In accordance with the primacy effect, "a character initially described as virtuous will tend to be described so even in the face of some contrary evidence" (Bordwell, 1984:28), meaning that the first impression of Ted is difficult to alter.

6.2.2 Intertextuality

As earlier films are made with the intention to portray Ted as a murderer from the very beginning, *Extremely Wicked* succeeds in sowing doubt of his culpability by firstly, as *My Friend Dahmer*, not including depictions of Ted committing any crimes; secondly, as illustrated, by successfully allying the spectators to Ted and Liz, and thirdly, by incorporating elements of intertextuality.

Intertextuality occurs in the film through the frequent referencing of the novel *Papillon* and the more subtle mentioning of the name Dumas, which refers to author Alexandre Dumas whose one many seminal works include *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Both novels are considered modern classics and share grand plots of wrongly convicted men (the former for murder, the latter for treason) who manage to escape from their imprisonments. While the brief mentioning of Dumas might bring forth a subtle association for those who are aware of the name, the plot of *Papillon* is explicitly described through Ted explaining it to Liz; the book functions as a beacon of hope for Ted and inspires him to fight for his innocence and to escape from prison. As Ted uses the book as a way to manipulate Liz into believing that he is wrongly accused, the filmmakers transfer *Papillon's* notions (and the implied connotations from the name Dumas) of wrongful conviction and prison break onto *Extremely Wicked*, which shape the spectator's perception of the story and predisposes them to anticipate a similar outcome. Thus, *Extremely Wicked* separates itself from previous portrayals of the same subject matter by not fully utilizing the detective narrative but rather makes use of narrative traits from stories of wrongful

convictions and fights for justice, as well as elements from romance narratives due to the emphasis on his relationship with Liz. Elements of law enforcement are also included, but not by portraying a detective that the spectator's side with, but rather as the antagonistic force that Ted must fight. By not including depictions of Ted committing murder, and by inviting the spectators to sympathize and side with Ted, the spectators are not, as with *My Friend Dahmer*, inherently inclined to feel averse towards Ted within the narrative.

6.2.3 Soundtrack

Whereas the film's score serves to heighten the emotions and to set an overall tone in a scene, the soundtrack has got an additional narrative function. Consisting of rock/funk/disco music from the 1960s-1980s, the soundtrack firstly functions to transport the spectators to that time period. Secondly, the connotations that the filmmakers want to evoke, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, are arguably further shaped, and strengthened, by the song lyrics. As said in the analysis, the lyrics "oh, what a lucky man he was" ironically contrasts the actions in the scene where Ted is convicted and thus implies the opposite of the lyrics: that he is simply an *unlucky* man who is not to blame for the accusations. While the lyrics "got to get back to my baby again" during Ted's first escape from prison strengthens the narrative that his escape is solely a desperate attempt to not lose his girlfriend and family life. The lyrics are thus transferred onto the scenes that they accompany and implicitly shape the audience's perception of the actions taking place, and with it comes a heightening of the connotations that the filmmakers want to evoke, i.e. that Ted is wrongly accused and risks losing his family, which is why he takes such drastic actions.

Contrasting *Extremely Wicked, My Friend Dahmer* include only an instrumental score and no non-diegetic, pre-existing, music. The effect of this is that the score adds significance to the story to a greater extent than in *Extremely Wicked*; since the film itself is a more profound and psychological look into Jeff's psyche, the score connects the visuals and the actions in a scene to Jeff's emotions and mentality. Due to the score being quite deep and somber, it implies that Jeff's mentality is the same, and due to Jeff not being a very outspoken character the score plays a key part in conveying his emotions to the spectators. There are scenes in *My Friend Dahmer* that include no score at all, but which nonetheless are just as impactful as they emphasize the sincerity and realness of the story; an example of this are the scenes where Jeff releases his anger and frustration in the woods and the only sounds stem from the ambience of the woods and the sound of Jeff slamming a branch/baseball-bat at a tree while screaming in enragement,

which then generates a quite raw and gloomy perception of the scene. In contrast, the pre-existing music in *Extremely Wicked* serves to generate a more or less entertaining and thrilling perception of certain scenes. The first time Ted escapes from prison, for example, the rock music adds a sense of thrill to the scene and make it a rather captivating spectacle, whereas those sensations are not meant to be elicited in *My Friend Dahmer*.

6.2.4 Genre Conventions

As mentioned previously, true crime narratives tend to look at the serial killer's childhood to look for clues that are indicative of their immoral and violent behavior as adults. David Schmid (2005) elaborates on this statement by saying that this is due to the fact that serial killers in fact look quite ordinary and do not appear as the supernatural monster they are often described as, thus events from their childhoods are maneuvered in order to still generate fascinating stories and to provide motives for their behavior that would be recognizable for the spectators. Consequently, true crime narratives often suggest that serial killers are able to appear so ordinary because they hide behind a mask of sanity (177-178), i.e., they are excellent in pretending and upholding ordinary traits. Exemplified in *Dexter*, the mask of sanity appears as Dexter admits in his voice-over that he rarely experiences the emotions he displays and struggles to have emotional connections to other people, but that he has learned to mimic them and therefore appears completely ordinary. Arguably, a biographical film about Ted Bundy cannot go without depicting him as wearing the mask of sanity as he can be said to be the very embodiment of the concept: typically described as being intelligent, ambitious, caring, and charismatic, but also as being possessed by a monster within.

When the film finally arrives at the scene from the beginning, that is when Liz visits Ted in prison, Liz receives her answer to the question if Ted is guilty or not; but as Ted confirms his culpability, he is not portrayed as a wholly dehumanized individual that takes great pleasure in his offenses, instead, he seems just as pained as Liz. In fact, the scene portrays it as if Ted releases Liz from her misery after her desperate pleading, which can be interpreted as an act of kindness towards her, i.e., that he cannot bear to see her in such despair, so he grants her wish. Thus, the film brings into question whether his love for Liz was indeed truthful and if his dedication to their family life was genuine, or if he faked it all to maintain his mask of sanity. This inclusion at the very end of the film suggests that Ted, like Jeff, is capable of ordinary emotions without faking them, and contrasts earlier portrayals of the two individuals.

Earlier portrayals of serial killers in general, factual, and fictionalized alike, and pre-*Dexter*, usually portrayed them as an evil Other, a Gothic monster, or criminal mastermind. *Dexter* played a significant role in transforming the serial killer into a humanized character, portraying an individual with a family, and having relatable struggles of finding one's place in society, which encouraged a sympathetic attitude from the spectators. The narratives of *My Friend Dahmer* and *Extremely Wicked* arguably perpetuate those elements that were introduced in *Dexter*, i.e., encouraging a sympathetic attitude toward the two protagonists by attributing them human, relatable, and likable traits. Furthermore, the two films perpetuate the element of not having the serial killers as the narratives' antagonists; whereas Dexter Morgan was deemed the "acceptable" killer due to only targeting *other* criminals with far worse motives than him, Jeff and Ted become the preferable characters in their narratives' internal system of values. A major difference between the case studies and *Dexter*, however, is that they are based on factual serial killers whereas Dexter Morgan is a wholly fictional character. Thus, having Jeff and Ted be the preferable characters relies heavily on one element: excluding depictions of them committing murder.

6.3 Excluding Depictions of Murder

Mentioned briefly in each analysis is that neither *My Friend Dahmer* nor *Extremely Wicked* portray their protagonists as murderers until the films' finale and that neither film centers on the crimes of the individuals that the characters are based on, though *Extremely Wicked* include archive images of crimes scenes. Yet, due to the prevalence of the stories of Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy in popular media, that the spectators are familiar with the subject matter was understood as an indicated premise for both films.

Mentioned previously in this chapter are earlier cinematic depictions of Ted Bundy that do not refuse a portrayal of Bundy as the perpetrator and include depictions of his violent transgressions; similarly, earlier cinematic adaptations of Jeffrey Dahmer do not reject a portrayal of him as a murderer. *Dahmer* (Jacobson, 2002) depicts an adult Jeffrey Dahmer before he is arrested for his crimes; while including some flashbacks to his adolescence and a portrayal of his relationship with his father, the film focuses primarily on his way of befriending young men that eventually become his victims; In *Raising Jeffrey Dahmer* (Ambler, 2006), Lionel Dahmer is the protagonist and the narrative revolves around the aftermath of Jeffrey's arrest where Lionel contemplates Jeffrey's childhood looking for traits or behavior that he

should have taken as warning signs for Jeffrey's future actions; both films depict Dahmer committing murder.

A few moments in *My Friend Dahmer* and *Extremely Wicked* do, however, cater to those who are aware of the realities of Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy, as the former include hints of Dahmer's cannibalism and the latter of Bundy's use of strangulation. Yet, these elements are rendered harmless when both films' narrative structures reject, for the most part, portrayals of the characters as killers. This does not mean that the films *conceal* the characters as killers, but that they rather introduce the characters from perspectives not previously portrayed, and thus introduce a new approach to telling the stories that are well-known to the spectators. For *Extremely Wicked,* the approach appears to be to tell the story of Ted Bundy through the perception of his closest relation before it was made known that he was a serial killer, and not through the lens of criminal profiling or the point of view of news- and other entertainment media. For My Friend Dahmer, the approach seems to be to portray Jeffrey Dahmer with the utmost humanity and not through the sensationalized lens of news- other and entertainment media; and that this results in both films portraying humanized and somewhat relatable serial killer- characters. The exclusion of explicitly portraying the characters as killers is thus a prominent element that facilitates character engagement, and which needs to be discussed further.

Brown and Abbott (2010:212-213) make an interesting remark on an element that they argue upholds the spectators' sympathy for the protagonist in *Dexter*, which is that there are, similar to *My Friend Dahmer* and *Extremely Wicked,* no explicit depictions of Dexter murdering his victims. That is, his victims are bound to tables with plastic wrap, there are sounds of power tools, blood is streaming, and body parts are pictured as Dexter is dismembering them; but images of the act of murder are always somehow concealed from view. They relate this to a scene where Harry, Dexter's stepfather and the one who raised him to abide by a code of ethics, witnesses Dexter committing murder and reacts by vomiting in shock of the realization of Dexter's actions, arguing that if the audience were to witness direct depictions of murder, similar to Harry, they would react in disgust and sympathy would be disrupted, which can thus be understood as a narrative strategy to uphold sympathy for its protagonist. As illustrated, *My Friend Dahmer* and *Extremely Wicked* use a similar strategy, that by not including explicit depictions of their protagonists committing murder better facilitates a sympathetic attitude from the spectators towards the characters.

When discussing moral evaluation of a character, Noël Carroll (2013) suggests that there are certain acts performed by a character that will almost universally lead to moral condemnation, which is for the character in question to perform intentional pain, harm, or suffering on other vulnerable characters (94). By their very definition, serial killers are characters that do precisely that, but removing this element undeniably better enables a positive evaluation to occur, whereas the inclusion of images of murder likely would result in negative evaluation and disrupt character engagement and allegiance.

However, at the very end of *Extremely Wicked* it is revealed that Ted is indeed the culprit and a scene displays him attacking and killing a woman; similarly, a scene near the end of *My Friend Dahme*r depicts Jeff approaching his friend Derf from behind with a baseball bat in what is understood as an intention to attack him, but which he ends up not carrying through. Though the intention of removing explicit depictions of murder is presumably so that the spectators are easier inclined to take on a sympathetic and supportive attitude for the characters and lead to a positive moral evaluation, these final depictions of the protagonists committing/almost committing murder arguably remind the spectators of the reality of the individuals that the characters are based on, and most likely they eliminate any moral questioning the spectators' might have had about them during the films.

While referring to pop-cultural portrayals of serial killers, Schmid (2010) writes that

> The most successful forms of serial killer- related popular culture give audiences a way to disavow their involvement and [engagement] with serial killer characters; indeed, such disavowal is key to the success of pop culture (135)

He refers specifically to the violent imagery that is usually included in films about serial killers, and that a disavowal, i.e., to deny the spectators any personal responsibility of enjoying films about- and depictions of, serial murder, occurs through having the violence "ascribed to an evil Other" (ibid., 136), or by having the killer caught or murdered at the end. *Dexter*, as mentioned in Chapter 3, introduced a disavowal through the series' moral framework, i.e., by having Dexter distinctly follow a set of rules allowing him only to take the life of those that in the series perform arguably more gruesome crimes and killings than himself, which rendered him the preferable killer and a type of vigilante. Schmid (2005) further argues that by including such elements of disavowal as mentioned above, serial killer representations remove any uncomfortable affects and "[let the audience] enjoy the fame of serial killers within a moralistic framework that relieves them of pursuing the implications of that enjoyment" (114).

But *My Friend Dahmer* and *Extremely Wicked* do not include elements of disavowal, that is, violent transgressions cannot be ascribed to an "evil Other" because violent transgressions are not part of the narrative structures' until the very end. On the contrary, the endings rather *remind* the spectators of the transgressions done by the individuals that the characters are based on, and no disavowal is offered for the affective relationship elicited between the spectators and the characters; resulting in the endings rather being a reminder that the spectators have had a pro-attitude and have been sympathizing with characters based on two of the most notorious serial killers in US history.

Due to the long history of serial killer representations in popular culture, and of Jeffery Dahmer and Ted Bundy as household names, a premise for both films was understood to be that the spectators were familiar with the subject matter. Arguably, rather than a disavowal allowing the spectators to experience enjoyment after watching two films about factual serial killers, it can be argued that the films *cause* an uncomfortable feeling of complicity rather than removing it, thus resulting an experience of discomfort or awkwardness. Thus, in accordance with arguments made by Margrethe Bruun Vaage (2016), the endings likely lead to the spectators experiencing a "reality check" (xvii), i.e., even though there is a likelihood that the spectators are familiar with the subject matter, the filmmakers are still able to ensure a pro-attitude for the characters due to Bruun Vaage's suggestion that spectators bypass *rational* moral evaluation of the characters, but that the final scenes function to re-activate the rational evaluation. Arguably, both films introduce a new approach to the serial murder subgenre by successfully generating a pro- attitude for characters based on factual serial killers, but by not including elements of disavowal, as illustrated above, it can be argued that they lead to a contemplation of the ethics of serial killer celebrity culture that the spectators eagerly participate in.

6.4 Chapter Summary

My Friend Dahmer distinguishes itself from other earlier serial killer representations by first and foremost not portraying the protagonist as a killer, but rather as a shy, arguably even relatable, teenager. Though the film maintains some of the tropes of the serial murder subgenre and include subtle hint of the reality of the individual that the character is based on, the film's narrative structure alters them to be perceived as harmless. A high degree of sympathetic emotions of pity and compassion is elicited for Ted, as well as a rational comprehension of the reasons behind his actions.

Similarly, *Extremely Wicked* does not portray its protagonist first and foremost as a serial killer, but as a desperate man's fight for justice. This distinguishes the film from earlier adaptations of Ted Bundy whose tendency has been to portray him as animalistic and violent. Though revealed at the film's finale that Ted is the culprit, the narrative is structured in such a way that Ted's affection for Liz is presented as truthful, which provides Ted with humanized qualities even after his reveal as a murderous individual.

The most prominent aspect that differentiates both films from earlier serial killer representations, in addition to excluding depictions of murderous protagonists, is their exclusion of disavowal for the spectators. The spectators are not given the opportunity to remove their complicity of enjoying and being affectively engaged in adaptations of Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy. The films' finales thus instead function as reminders, or reality checks, that they have been affectively involved with characters based on factual serial killers, which can be interpreted to result in a contemplation of the long history of serial killer celebrity culture and the ethics of this evolution.

Chapter 7.
Conclusion

7.1 Character Engagement and Sympathy

The initial premise for this thesis was that the films elicited an attitude of sympathy from the spectators towards the protagonists, and asked in a sub-question how the films' narrative structure and cinematic techniques generates this attitude. Sympathy is a result from character engagement and of the affective relationship established between the spectator and the characters. For the films to ensure that sympathy, i.e., a pro-attitude, for the characters is elicited, spectators must become allied with the characters in question; to examine how this transpires, the thesis primarily made use of theories and concepts derived from Murray Smith and Noëll Carroll.

In Smith's structure of sympathy, taking on a pro-attitude and being allied with a character presents itself through the level of *allegiance*. Allegiance with the characters firstly depend upon recognizing the characters as individuated and continuous human agents, something both films provide by having Jeff and Ted hold consistent and recognizable character traits. Secondly, the films must ensure alignment with the characters through spatio-temporal attachment and subjective access. By virtue of Jeff and Ted being the films' protagonists, spatio-temporal attachment come about rather straightforwardly as the films primarily attaches the spectators to the protagonists in terms of the narratives' time and space. Subjective access, i.e., access to the characters' state of mind, depends upon a range of cinematic techniques to fully convey the characters *inner* states; here, the two films differentiate.

Though point-of-view and eyeline-match shots provided access to what Jeff perceives, the use of sound proved especially significant in *My Friend Dahmer* to convey Jeff's moods. Jeff is a withdrawn character and not very verbal- nor facially expressive, which is why sound is what provides primary access into his mind and emotional state. As the film does not include pre-existing music, the use of a deep, somber, and sometimes ominous atmospheric score is what generated a perception of Jeff's moods to be of the same kind, i.e., somber, and gradually ominous. Camera framing and color schemes additionally proved meaningful to enhance Jeff's inner states. At the beginning of the film, Jeff is positioned either alone in the frame or is positioned separately from other characters in the same frame, and is in one event made fun of; combine this with the deep and somber score, and his state of mind is conveyed as lonesome

and melancholic. Even as he eventually maintains a group of friends, the camera framing persists throughout the narrative, conveying his solitude even in the presence of friends. It is in scenes of Jeff doing is hobby that his mind appears to be at ease, which is conveyed through warm lighting which contrasts the often cold and dim lighting in the other scenes.

Unlike Jeff, Ted is a highly expressive character who speaks his mind, but access to his inner states is aided by eyeline-match shots to give access to what he perceives and extreme close-up shots in moments of distress to convey how intensely he experiences his emotions. However, subjective access serves a higher significance to *My Friend Dahmer* than to *Extremely Wicked*, due to the film being a more profound and dramatic portrayal of Jeff's psyche; by Jeff not being very expressive, sound plays a key part in conveying his emotions and inner states to the spectators, which in turn function to ally the spectators to Jeff. *Extremely Wicked* do not rely on subjective access as much to ally its spectators to Ted; due to Ted being revealed as guilty in the film's final scene it changes the perception of his character and exposes him as a deceitful, if the film were to provide subjective access to Ted in a similar manner as *My Friend Dahmer*, it would disrupt the intention of the film and therefore the film does not provide as much subjective access to Ted.

In accordance with the primacy effect, how Jeff and Ted are introduced and perceived at the beginning of each film is how they are, for the most part, perceived for the remainder of the narratives; meaning that Jeff perceived as a withdrawn, timid, and lonesome character, and Ted as a cheerful, progressive, and a passionate character, are consistent throughout the narratives. Narrative events that subsequently occur, and choice of action from the characters, are thus evaluated in light of these character traits, or first impressions, of the characters. Additionally, the primacy effect function to engage the spectators to the narratives by creating a set of anticipations of what is to come. As such, when conflict arises in *My Friend Dahmer* due to Jeff's father destroying the place where Jeff appears to be the most comfortable and safe, and forces Jeff out of his comfort-zone, it triggers an interest to find out how this withdrawn, timid, and lonesome character will manage. The juxtaposed scenes at the beginning of *Extremely Wicked*, i.e., scenes of Ted imprisoned cross-cut with romantic scenes set in the past, elicit a curiosity of how the crime narrative and the romance narrative will correlate; conflict arises when Ted is arrested for his resemblance to a perpetrator of a series of crimes which sets expectations that the narrative will now go on to provide answers to how and why Ted ends up in prison and how it will affect his relationship with Liz.

As presented in the theories of Smith and Carroll, a positive moral evaluation is fundamental to ensure character engagement. The films use different approaches, or narrative structures, to acquire positive moral evaluation of the characters. For *My Friend Dahmer*, the film's moral structure, or internal system of values, is essential. The few scenes showing Jeff taking care of his younger brother acquires him the qualities of being kind and caring, while Jeff's parents obtain the roles of the antagonists due to his mother's neglect and his father forcing him out of his comfort zone; this renders Jeff the morally favorable character of the film and as a result evokes a pro- attitude for him. The narrative has thus allied the spectators to Jeff and has established his character traits as somewhat timid and withdrawn; after the narrative's inciting conflict, Jeff is put in a series of situations that the spectators likely comprehend as situations that must be uncomfortable for him due to his timidness, which elicits a sympathetic attitude for him.

Extremely Wicked relies on criterial prefocusing to portray Ted in a favorable manner. By foregrounding certain events and character traits, criterial prefocusing ensures that the spectators experience the narrative and perceive Ted the way the filmmakers intend them to. By including scenes where Ted's claims of being set-up is confirmed provides him the quality of being truthful, and scenes depicting his and Liz's romantic relationship portrays him as affectionate, all of which predisposes the spectators to react emotionally in support of Ted when he is subsequently arrested and seemingly unjustly treated. The film furthermore uses intertextuality to transfer notions of being wrongfully imprisoned onto Ted while the use of pre-existing rock/funk music heightens the sense of thrill and excitement to certain scenes, which combined serves to convey the story of Ted as similar to grand stories of unjust treatment, prison break, and romance. While sympathetic emotions of pity and compassion for Jeff persist throughout *My Friend Dahmer*, allegiance with Ted somewhat falters towards the end of *Extremely Wicked.* This occurs in the third act by Ted's behavior starting to deviate from before, thus obscuring his established character traits; yet, due to the primacy effect, the first impression and initial allegiance with Ted is not completely eliminated.

7.2 What is New?

Both Jeff and Ted are presented with traits that are recognizable, reasonable, and favourable when compared to the other characters; though both characters' morality somewhat diminishes towards the end of the films (disregarding the final scenes which will be discussed below), the primacy effect ensures that the first impression of the characters persists for the majority of the

narratives. A range of other elements ensures that the spectators become allied with, and adopts a pro-attitude, for them. Sympathy, mentioned in the theoretical framework, is a responsive emotion, the feeling of pity for Jeff and the feeling of injustice for Ted stems from the spectators having a supportive, pro-, attitude towards them as the filmmakers intended. The thesis has thus illustrated how the films' narrative structure and cinematic techniques influence how the spectators perceive and evaluate the characters and the storylines. This brings the thesis to the main research question: What makes the protagonists in *My Friend Dahmer* and *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile* diverge from the conventional serial killer portrayed in film/TV?

The case of Jeffrey Dahmer has been sensationalized in news- and entertainment media for almost three decades. Nicknamed the Milwaukee Cannibal and the Milwaukee Monster, cinematic adaptations have continuously fostered a narrative focused on Dahmer's monstrosity and presented him as the personification of human evil, ascribing him near supernatural-like qualities due to the shocking and incomprehensible reality of his crimes. *My Friend Dahmer* is a toned-down rendition of Jeffrey Dahmer and portrays its protagonist first and foremost as a shy teenager put in a series of uncomfortable and unfortunate, but not unrealistic, circumstances, some even relatable. The film presents an insight to how social and familial adversity affects the reserved Jeff, who lacks basic social skills and emotional expressivity to communicate how he feels or to seek support from the adults around him. The feeling of pity elicited for Jeff is strengthened due to his self-awareness, i.e., he is portrayed as aware that his hobby is objectively considered somewhat unusual, and he is aware of his own declining mentality and that it affects his morals. To understand the psyche and mind of serial killers is as a topic present in many versions of popular media, but arguably not to the extent as it is in *My Friend Dahmer* where the filmmakers invite the spectators to perceive the narrative with a high degree of sympathy for its self-aware protagonist serial killer.

Many pop-cultural renditions of serial killers attempt to provide causes to why they become killers by looking at their childhood and upbringing in the longstanding discussion of nature versus nurture. Though included in the film is Jeff's seemingly innate desire to dissect animals, by the narrative's structure this is presented as an urge to carry on with his hobby and therefore as a way to maintain his comfort zone, which renders his desire *understandable* though not necessarily justifiable. The narrative leads to a few "if only" questions: if only his father had not denied him his hobby, if only the adults in his life had paid more attention to him, or if only he had sought help when he had the chance - would he still ended up as a serial killer? Thus,

the film does not provide an answer to the question of nature versus nurture regarding Jeffrey Dahmer but invites to further discussion on the subject.

The case of Ted Bundy was extraordinary at the time due to the seeming impossibility of that charismatic law-student could be responsible for a series of shocking crimes, and by his trial being the first US trial to ever be nationally televised. Clips from the trial are readily available online making it possible to observe the trial as it was and perceive Bundy as he was portrayed in the media at the time; the case remains extraordinary to this day and extensive adaptations exist in popular media. *Extremely Wicked* presents a narrative where the spectators are invited to perceive Ted through the lens of his closest relation, Liz, rather than perceiving him as a monstrous Other as earlier adaptations tended to do.

Though Ted's credibility somewhat falters towards the end of the film, it does not entirely eliminate the allegiance already established. The final scene, when Ted admits to Liz that he is in fact guilty, is presented in such a way that his confession can be perceived as an act of kindness towards Liz, i.e., that he cannot bear to see her in pain and is therefore relieving her of her suffering. As *My Friend Dahmer*, *Extremely Wicked* thus elicits a series of questions by the film's finale; was Ted's love for Liz in fact genuine, and as someone continually described in news- and entertainment media as a monster, was he in fact capable of experiencing authentic and conventional human emotions? The film does not provide answers to these questions, but as *My Friend Dahmer*, it invites to further discussion on the subject.

The narratives of *My Friend Dahmer* and *Extremely Wicked* are distinguished from conventional serial killer representations by the exclusion of depicting the characters committing murder. This thesis argues that an additional greater difference between conventional representations of serial killers in film, is that the two films portray their serial killer- characters as inhabiting moral integrity for the majority of the narratives, which is what elicits positive moral judgement from the spectators towards the characters. As a result, both films present narratives focused purely on the normality of the two serial killers rather than their abnormality, and therefore denies any associations to Otherness or supernaturality as previous renditions of serial killers tended to include; in other words, they remove the distortion of human and monster.

Serial killers, as illustrated, have a long history of being dehumanized in news- and entertainment media's representations, but which changed with the introduction of *Dexter*. Philip L. Simpsons (2010) wrote that patterns emerged of a new kind of portrayal of the

cinematic serial killer in the US since the early 2000s, and that *Dexter* represented an "apex of sort" (124) regarding increasing humanization and sympathy for serial killers. *Dexter* certainly introduced and established those aspects in pop-cultural representations of serial killers, but arguably *My Friend Dahmer* and *Extremely Wicked* advance those aspects. Unlike *Dexter* who was wholly fictional, the two films introduced a humanized portrayal, allegiance, and sympathy, for characters based on *factual* serial killers; as mentioned in the introduction, this is where the criticism that the films received were located. Furthermore, *Dexter* introduced a vigilante serial killer, someone who only targeted other and arguably worse murderers than himself, and whose sympathy stemmed from the killer's moral code. Naturally, there are no aspects of vigilantism in *My Friend Dahmer* and *Extremely Wicked* due to being adaptations of factual serial killers, thus the sympathy must derive from somewhere else and which the thesis has located by answering the sub-question.

Yet, this thesis argues that another significant element distinguishes the two films from other serial killer renditions. As discussed in Chapter 6, the two films do not offer elements of disavowal for the spectators. Disavowal, what David Schmid (2005) argues plays a central role in making films about serial killers agreeable, refers to the removal of the spectator's complicity in the disputed subject of serial murder entertainment, and a removal of guilt when watching and enjoying narratives about serial killers (typically through attributing the violence to an evil Other or having the killer caught/killed at the end). This thesis suggests that due to both films exclude elements of disavowal for the spectators, but in their final scenes include elements that remind them of the murderous realities of the characters, result in a sense of discomfort. To rephrase, the final scenes act as uncomfortable reminders of the gruesome acts of transgression conducted by the individuals that the characters are based on, and whom the spectators have been siding with and sympathizing with; then, the films offer no form of disavowal for the spectators' involvement, nor any removal of their guilt, of having been allied with the serial killers. Simpson (2000, 2010) furthermore asserts that spectators have always to some degree been positioned to sympathize with cinematic representations of serial killers through, for example., presenting their traumatic upbringing or presenting them as social outcasts, while David Schmid (2005) contends that spectators have always been disavowed any responsibility in enjoying serial killer narratives. *My Friend Dahmer* and *Extremely Wicked*, however, amplify the sympathy elicited for the serial killers and exclude any disavowal.

As the subject of serial murder has risen in popularity the last three decades and is a prevalent topic in film and other parts of popular culture, spectators have long been immersed in every

detail of serial killers' lives and crimes. *My Friend Dahmer* and *Extremely Wicked,* whose premise is that the spectators are familiar with the subject matter, are able to emerge because of the long history of serial killer representations in news-, entertainment-, and other parts of popular media.

To surpass previous representations and narratives about serial killers, and for it to progress as a genre, new perspectives and trends must be introduced. This thesis argues that *My Friend Dahmer* and *Extremely Wicked* both challenge the conventions of the serial murder subgenre and of the serial killer- character. Rather than experiencing stories about serial killers through a detailed depiction of their crimes, through portraying the killer as an evil Other, or through the lens of criminal profiling, *My Friend Dahmer* and *Extremely Wicked* introduce new approaches to the subgenre located in their portrayals of the serial killers. Summarized, these approaches include portraying the serial killer- protagonists as progressively humanized, eliciting sympathy for the characters to a larger degree than previous renditions, and by excluding any sense of disavowal for the spectators. If the films are to be interpreted to indicate a shift in the serial murder genre, the shift might be to now present narratives about serial killers where the spectators do not experience the topic of serial murder centered around a killer's crimes, but rather to experience it beyond the lens of their crimes; exemplified here by either inside of the killer's mind, as in *My Friend Dahmer*, or inside their personal relationships, as seen in *Extremely Wicked*.

7.3 Limitations and Further Research

In a media studies perspective, it has been interesting to examine how media's long history of serial killer representations have evolved to the ones presented in this thesis. However, due to consisting of qualitative textual analysis the thesis cannot generalize all present or forthcoming texts regarding the subject of serial murder, and therefore cannot make the definite claim that there might be a forthcoming trend within the subgenre. But the thesis can function to contribute to further research on the subject matter. As argued, the films in question represent a pinnacle in a sense of humanizing factual serial killers. Researching popular culture can provide significant insight into our society and culture, and studying film can shed light on changing social norms and opinions, power structures, and moral attitudes. Thus, further research might be held on a cultural level to understand why such portrayals have arose or is needed, to which this thesis can be considered a starting point.

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10 Rilington Place (1971) Directed by Richard Fleischer, UK

Copycat (1995) Directed by Jon Amiel, USA

Criminal Minds (2005-2020) Directed by Jeff Davies, USA/Canada

CSI: Crime Scene Investigation (2000-2015) Directed By Anthony E. Zuiker, USA/Canada

Dahmer (2002) Directed by David Jacobson, USA

Dexter (2006-2013) Created by James Manor jr., USA

Ed Gein (2000) Directed by Chuch Parello, USA/UK

Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile (2019) Directed by Joe Berlinger, USA [Netflix]

Frenzy (1972) Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, UK

Friday the 13th (1980) Directed by Sean S. Cunningham, USA

Gacy (2003) Directed by Clive Saunders, USA

Halloween (1978) Directed by John Carpenter, USA

Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer (1986) Directed by John McNaughton, USA

Horsemen (2009) Directed by Jonas Åkerlund, USA

M (1931) Directed by Fritz Lang, Germany

Making a Murderer (2015) Directed by Moira Demos and Laura Ricciardi, USA

Mindhunter (2017) Directed by David Fincher, USA

Mind of a Monster: Jeffrey Dahmer (2020) S01.E04, Directed by Chris Holt, USA

Monster (2003) Directed by Patty Jenkins, USA/Germany

Mr. Brooks (2007) Directed by Bruce A. Evans, USA

My Friend Dahmer (2017) Directed by Marc Meyers, USA [SF Anytime]

Nightmare on Elm's Street (1984) Directed by Wes Craven, USA

Peeping Tom (1960) Directed by Michael Powell, UK

Pyscho (1960) Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, UK

Raising Jeffrey Dahmer (2006) Directed by Rich Ambler, USA

Se7en (1995) Directed by David Fincher, USA

Serial (2014) Hosted by Sarah Koening, USA

Shadow of a Doubt (1943) Alfred Hitchcock, UK

Ted Bundy (2002) Directed by Matthew Bright, UK/USA

The Bone Collector (1999) Directed by Philip Noyce, USA

The Boston Strangler (1958) Directed by Richard Fleischer, USA

The Deliberate Stranger (1986) Directed by Marvin J. Chomsky, USA

The Minus Man (1999) Directed by Hampton Fancher, USA

The Secret Life: Jeffrey Dahmer (1993) Directed by David R. Bowen, USA

The Silence of The Lambs (1991) Directed by Jonathan Demme, USA

The Stranger Beside Me (2003) Directed by Paul Shapiro, USA/Canada

World's Most Evil Killers (2017) S01.E06. "Jeffrey Dahmer" Directed by Lloyd Thompson and Nick Mavroidakis, USA