

FILM REVIEWS

My Friend Dahmer, dir. by Marc Meyers (FilmRise, 2017)

When Jeffrey Lionel Dahmer was arrested in 1991, the ensuing media furore surrounding his case quickly cast him as America's greatest fear – a quiet loner who had, from 1978 to 1991, murdered seventeen men and boys. Mostly queer men of colour, his victims were drugged, raped, murdered, and mutilated, with their body parts preserved and kept within Dahmer's filthy Milwaukee apartment.¹ The American fascination with Dahmer has shown no signs of subsiding over the years; Dahmer's own father published a memoir, *A Father's Story*, in 1994; Jeremy Renner portrayed him in the 2002 feature film *Dahmer*; and online forums such as Reddit and Websleuths are filled with recent discussions from true-crime fans about his case.

Twenty-six years on from Dahmer's arrest (and twenty-three years on from his death in prison in 1994), another addition to the ever-growing collection of 'murderabilia' surrounding Dahmer has arrived in the form of Marc Meyers' *My Friend Dahmer*, adapted from the 2012 graphic novel by John 'Derf' Backderf. The film concerns Backderf's friendship with Dahmer during their high-school years, leading up to Dahmer's first murder in 1978, and traces Dahmer's troubled adolescence in an attempt to 'understand' his development into one of America's most notorious serial killers. As the true-crime genre continues to boom across all media forms, this new film may well serve as a welcome addition to Dahmer lore for true-crime fans. However, a closer inspection reveals a hollow centre at the heart of this depiction of the 'birth' of a serial killer.

Marc Meyers, in his role as both director and writer, has created a visually rich film. 1970s Ohio is depicted here as unsettling in its contrasts; grey roads and American functionalist buildings cut through the lush, green forests surrounding Dahmer's childhood home. There has also been some attempt to recreate panels from the original source material, and there are some powerful images of Dahmer (portrayed here by Ross Lynch) as he shuffles between home, school, and his garden shed where he keeps the preserved roadkill animal corpses. The camera lingers on Dahmer, creating a kind of eerie iconography; the face and body of the killer transform on screen, as he struggles with his sexuality and troubled family life. This transformation is a reminder of the images of Dahmer broadcast around the

¹ See Brian Masters, *The Shrine of Jeffrey Dahmer* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993).

world as his crimes were discovered, images that depicted him as a closeted ‘freak’ hiding a dark secret that became harder and harder to conceal. Dahmer’s famous mug-shot photograph was used to further a narrative of monstrosity hiding under normality; a handsome man driven to gruesome murder. Meyers has clearly taken this image into account, as the camera frequently centres Dahmer’s body within the frame and, therefore, the action.

The cinematic images of Dahmer are, however, ultimately superficial – a recreation of an iconic image rather than the creation of a living, breathing character. Backderf’s novel portrays Dahmer’s descent into murderousness through its development of the grotesque drawn image, as his face becomes increasingly agape and contorted, his eyes shadowed and concealed behind his glasses as he descends further into anger and isolation. By contrast, Meyers’ film relies on prolonged shots of an emotionless Dahmer and a clumsily placed sentimental score to signify character progression. Stiff, wooden dialogue and awkward direction of the actors serve to magnify this problem; scenes between Dahmer and his father seem more like well-rehearsed readings than convincing performances, and conversations between ostensible teenagers smack of being written by a middle-aged man. *My Friend Dahmer* has been marketed as a glimpse into the ‘normality’ of the infamous serial killer, but the unnatural feel of the film overall destroys any familiarity that Meyers may have been hoping to create.

The film does, however, become more ‘natural’ in tone whenever the action moves to the Dahmer household. Dahmer’s home itself is clearly understood by Meyers to be the ‘breeding ground’ for the serial killer, a jumping-off point into madness and murder. The domestic space is portrayed as dark, claustrophobic, and oppressive, a place where his mother (in a standout performance by Anne Heche) criticises, argues, pops pills – a place from which his father is conspicuously absent as an emotional presence. Nevertheless, it remains unclear as to how Dahmer’s character progresses throughout the film; the domestic space seems to function here as both start- and end-point to Dahmer’s murderousness. While it has been argued that the original graphic novel can be considered a *Bildungsroman*, there is no such sense of a journey within *My Friend Dahmer*.² We begin with a lonely, isolated teenager, and we end with a lonely, isolated teenager; we do not see Dahmer’s ‘leap’ into murder, nor (bar a couple of gruesome scenes) do we get any real sense of a build-up towards it. David Schmid has previously written about the role of suspense within the true-crime genre. He notes that, although violence ‘does not necessarily assume a central place in the [true-crime]

² See Harriet Earle, ‘*My Friend Dahmer*: The Comic as *Bildungsroman*’, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 5.4 (2014), 429-40.

narrative', the *promise* of violence is ever present, and the audience expects some end to the suspense, some sort of climax wherein that violence is eventually realised or understood.³ Crass as it may sound, there is no 'payoff' in *My Friend Dahmer*, and the film suffers for it. Meyers seems so intent to avoid accusations of exploitation or of aestheticising violence that the narrative feels circular and stilted as a result.

My Friend Dahmer has made some brave choices. Unfortunately, it has not made the right ones, nor enough of them. The decision to have Dahmer almost murder a central character towards the end of the film feels more schlock-horror than character drama, and the addition of a new character who seems 'crazier' and socially worse off than Dahmer is half baked; it's unclear what point Meyers is trying to make with him. Towards the end of the film, one scene stands out as emblematic of *My Friend Dahmer*'s limitations. Staying at a hotel for a school concert, Dahmer shares a room with an African-American student (Dontez James), noted to be the only student in Dahmer's high school who isn't 'white'. As he lies on the bed, Dahmer stares at the boy's prone body and asks, pointedly, '[a]re your insides the same as my insides?'. Although Dahmer would, of course, later mutilate his victims and observe their insides, the effect is somewhat problematic; the scene offers a nod and a smirk to camera that serves to erase, rather than amplify, the magnitude of the murders of so many men of colour. Clearly, Meyers has intended this moment to be a disturbing foreshadowing, offering a frisson of dread to cut through the film and point to the murderousness to come. However, it's a clumsy handling of what could have been a horrific foretelling; as James lies on the bed, an object of Dahmer's gaze, he becomes objectified, existing only as a marginalised body onto which the audience can project their knowledge of Dahmer's later crimes without witnessing the actual violence done towards his later victims. The student's body exists, therefore, as a signifier rather than a person, a representation of a body or type rather than a human victim who has suffered.

Given the wider context of Dahmer's treatment in the media through true crime novels, television, and documentary, this erasure of the victimised body becomes even more problematic – one is reminded, for example, of Anne E. Schwartz's treatment of Dahmer's victims; her descriptions of their brutal murders are followed by a listing of their criminal records.⁴ This is a voyeuristic treatment of a body victimised by the voyeur, and thus the audience become voyeurs themselves, complicit in a re-victimisation of the black body. And, despite what some of its critics might say, such voyeurism is not a prerequisite of the true-

³ David Schmid, *Violence in American Popular Culture* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2015), p. 223.

⁴ See Anne E. Schwartz, *The Man Who Could Not Kill Enough* (Secaucus: Carol Publishing, 1992).

crime genre, particularly as the new true-crime trend continues to boom; the recent documentary series *The Keepers* (2017) and Alexandria Marzano-Lesnevich's novel *The Fact of a Body* (2017) are just two examples of true crime that focus on providing dignity and respect for the victim.⁵ Where *My Friend Dahmer* might have been a sensitive analysis of what it means to become a murderer, it instead becomes yet another exercise in erasure that ultimately leaves a bad taste in the mouth.

Here lies the problem with *My Friend Dahmer*: it is a surface-level examination of an endlessly complex and fascinating case, a visually arresting but emotionally vacuous portrayal of one of America's most notorious men – a film that could have been a worthwhile addition to Dahmer's story, but which ultimately feels like a cash grab.

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⁵ 'The convening of the public around scenes of mass-mediated violence has come to make up a wound culture: the public fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and open psyches, a public gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound' (Mark Seltzer, *True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity* (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2007). p.48).