

Seattle University

ScholarWorks @ SeattleU

The Spectator Online

Newspapers

10-16-2024

2024-10-16 Crime, Punishment, and the Media: The Menendez Brothers Documentary Review [REVIEW & SPOILERS]

Naja Johnson
Seattle University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/spectator-online>

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Naja, "2024-10-16 Crime, Punishment, and the Media: The Menendez Brothers Documentary Review [REVIEW & SPOILERS]" (2024). *The Spectator Online*. 1333.
<https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/spectator-online/1333>

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Newspapers at ScholarWorks @ SeattleU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Spectator Online by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ SeattleU.



Crime, Punishment, and the Media: The Menendez Brothers Documentary Review [REVIEW & SPOILERS]

Naja Johnson, News Editor

The Menendez brothers, Erik and Lyle, first gained notoriety in the early '90s after being arrested for the double murder of their parents Jose and Kitty Menendez. After two heavily televised trials and a mistrial, the brothers were convicted of the murders and sent to separate prisons.

The story has been told numerous times through different narratives and maintained a lasting impact on the culture of true crime. A new documentary has offered a fresh and nuanced account of the events in question. For the first time in over 30 years, both brothers, along with several other key figures, give a recap of the notorious case.

The Netflix documentary, "The Menendez Brothers" directed by Alejandro Hartmann, is the second film on Netflix about the brothers. "Monsters: The Lyle & Erik Menendez Story" was released on Netflix a month prior. Recently, the case has gained significant traction in Hollywood and across social media.

The documentary aims to examine the fairness of the trials along with legal discrepancies that may have been overlooked. The documentary offers a recap of the previous events along with exclusive interviews from Lyle, Erik and other prominent players, including Lyle Menendez' Attorney Jill Lansing, former Prosecutor Pamela Bozanich, disgraced Psychiatrist William Vicary and other relatives from the Menendez family.

Journalist Robert Rand followed the trial from the beginning and worked on several other projects describing the case. He offered captivating insight into how the case was received by the public and the media at the time. Rand highlighted how following the development of the #MeToo Movement there has been a call to action to reexamine the case.

Various clips of courtroom footage derived from Court TV, including testimony from witnesses and statements from legal professionals, showcase a media spectacle surrounding the case. The documentary has an emphasis on how the vast media coverage may have impacted public perception of the case.



Image courtesy of Netflix.

The documentary opens with authorities arriving at the Beverly Hills mansion where Jose and Kitty Menendez were murdered. Testimonies from relatives including sister of Kitty Menendez, Joan VanderMolen, encapsulate the shock and utter horror of the crimes, particularly the manner in which the crimes were carried out. Initially, law enforcement suspected that the double murder may have been a mob hit.

Bozanich attested the Beverly Hills police department made several mistakes in how they concealed the crime scene and eliminated suspects. There was also the presumption that two “clean-cut” young men couldn’t have possibly carried out the murders. Those presumptions led to neither of the brothers being tested for gunshot residue. Erik Menendez said if the authorities had questioned him more that night he would have eventually confessed to them.

At first, the brothers were in the clear, but after the murders, the pair went on an elaborate shopping spree together totaling \$700,000. This would equate to roughly over \$1.5 million in today’s currency. Some of the purchases include a restaurant, three Rolexes and a \$50,000-a-year tennis coach. Lyle Menendez described the spending sprees as a “cover-up” to guise the pain and guilt he was feeling. The shopping spree is what put the brothers under the suspicion of the authorities. After the authorities tracked down where the guns were purchased in San Diego, the brothers were officially arrested.

Bozanich along with others addressed how the public at the time had an intense distrust in the legal system. Furthermore, it was widely believed that the rich were not punishable under the law to the same extent as everyone else. Overall, there was pressure to hold them accountable and the brothers were widely scorned in the eyes of the public.

Lawyers for the first trial, set in Van Nuys, Calif., included Leslie Abramson and Jill Lansing who faced off against prosecutor Pamela Bozanich. Bozanich entailed how the motive for the crime was the brothers’ greed and desperation to acquire their father’s \$14 million estate. Abramson and Lansing tell a different story that begins with history into the Menendez family turmoil. Bozanich described the defense as the “abuse excuse” and believes the abuse claim to be completely fabricated by the brothers.

They delve into the life of the ambitious Jose Menendez, a Cuban immigrant who built a formidable career in the U.S. after fleeing Cuba amid the rise of Fidel Castro. Next, the documentary examines Kitty Menendez who is described by prosecutors and other witnesses as emotionally unstable and suicidal at the time of the murders. The brothers describe their parents’ relationship as volatile and co-dependent, which influenced the family dynamic.

The writers delve into the allegations of child abuse, which are supported by family members and 55 witnesses, including experts. However, the first trial ended in a mistrial after the jury was not able to agree on if the brothers committed first-degree murder. The female jurors all believed that the brother’s actions were under the “imperfect defense” while the male jurors did not. Imperfect defense applies in a legal sense when someone kills under the reasonable belief that they are in danger of death or grave bodily injury.

The second trial is described as a completely alternative trial to the first. The judge ruled that the “abuse excuse” was no longer applicable since the brothers weren’t women, meaning they couldn’t use a defense similar to the “battered woman defense.” Jurors from the first trial observed that the second trial was entirely different from the first and some information was intentionally withheld from the jury.

After the second trial, the brothers were convicted and sent to separate prisons.

Recently, former member of the band Menudo Roy Rosselló came out and alleged that Jose Menendez sexually assaulted him. This serves as corroborating evidence as well as a letter Erik Menendez sent to a relative detailing the abuse he was suffering prior to the murders.

Awareness of sexual abuse and child maltreatment was staggeringly low in comparison to today’s atmosphere for victims. According to the University of New Hampshire, reports of child neglect have declined 20% since its peak in 1993.

With the new revelations and accounts, the documentary adds another perspective to the case. A hearing is scheduled for Nov. 29 for the district attorney to announce the next steps in the case amid the new evidence.