

Ted K. Review

James I Deutsch

01 June 2023

Ted K. Dir. by Tony Stone. Prod. by Sharlto Copley, Matt Flanders, and Tony Stone. Heathen Films, Ten by Twelve Productions and Verisimilitude Films, in association with Hideout Pictures and In Your Face Entertainment. Distributed by Super Ltd, 2021. 120 mins. (<https://superltd.com/films/ted-k>)

Residents of Massachusetts may mistakenly assume that the subject of *Ted K* is their own former senator Edward “Ted” Kennedy. But residents of Montana should easily recognize the reference to Theodore “Ted” Kaczynski, who lived alone in a primitive ten-foot-by-twelve-foot cabin outside Lincoln, Montana, for twenty-five years until he was arrested by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) on April 3, 1996. During that time, Kaczynski mailed or delivered parcels containing homemade bombs that killed three and injured twenty-three others, including twelve passengers on a flight from Chicago to Washington, D.C. Because the initial targets were universities and airlines, the FBI gave the case the code name UNABOM—and eventually identified Kaczynski as the Unabomber.

Kaczynski managed to avoid detection for many years by sending bombs with untraceable parts to seemingly random individuals. However, after the *Washington Post* published his 35,000-word manifesto, “Industrial Society and Its Future,” on September 19, 1995, Kaczynski’s brother and sister-in-law recognized it as his work and notified law-enforcement officials. Since 1998, Kaczynski has been serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole.

This manifesto and the personal journals that Kaczynski kept in his cabin—many now part of the Ted Kaczynski Papers in the Special Collections Library at the University of Michigan (which happens to be where he received his Ph.D. in mathematics in 1967)—may provide the best clues to why Kaczynski committed his crimes. Accordingly, the makers of *Ted K* rely on frequent voice-overs, most coming verbatim from Kaczynski’s writings, to explain his thinking. For instance, the film’s first spoken words, “Modern technology is the worst thing that ever happened to the world and to promote its progress is nothing short of criminal,” concisely encapsulate Kaczynski’s viewpoint.

Many of the film’s other sounds also underscore the constant tensions and frustrations in Kaczynski’s life. He loved listening to orderly, rational classical music on a National Public Radio station in Helena. But he despised the sounds of modern technology—seemingly disorderly and irrational, emanating from snowmobiles, jet planes, and logging trucks, which he felt intruded on the solitude he had established for himself in rural Montana. In another early voice-over, Kaczynski complains about “nine evil jets” flying overhead and how their noise “destroys something wonderful” in the wilderness, “while in the city there is nothing for noises to destroy because one is living in a shit pile anyway.”

Later in the film, after firing his rifle in vain at noisy, whirling helicopters searching for oil deposits, Kaczynski fears the “desecration” that will result from the potential mineral extraction:

Where can I go now for peace and quiet? When I got back to camp, I cried, partly from frustration of missing [with his rifle], but mostly grief about what was happening to the country. It is *so* beautiful, but if they did find oil, disaster. Even if [they did] not find oil, the blast and helicopters ruin it.

The beauty of Montana, which Kaczynski values so highly, is another vital element of *Ted K*. An opening screen title boasts that the film “was made on the land where his [Kaczynski’s] cabin once stood.” Frequent shots of snow-covered trees and mountains, swirling clouds, colorful meadows, and abundant wildlife reinforce the idyllic landscapes that Kaczynski seeks but that he believes are increasingly disappearing due to “modern technology.”

The film’s most important element is Kaczynski himself, portrayed with palpable intensity by the South African actor Sharlto Copley, who may be best known for his starring role in *District 9* (2009), a science fiction film in which he displays some of that same intense, if not deranged, dedication. Although onscreen for nearly every minute of *Ted K*, Copley rarely appears in the same frame as another human being. For instance, when he talks on a payphone with his mother or brother, we neither see nor hear the person on the other end of the line. Whether running bare-chested up hills, climbing trees in the forest, riding his bicycle into town, or digging for potatoes in the earth, Copley’s performance is both mesmerizing and convincing. To its credit, the film portrays Kaczynski in a way that neither condones nor justifies his actions—which, as Kaczynski admits in one of his journals (and which the film uses verbatim as a voice-over)—are motivated by “simply personal revenge. I do not expect to accomplish anything by it.”

Certainly, the film has its drawbacks. The camera’s incessant circling for two solid minutes around a Lincoln telephone booth with Kaczynski inside asking his mother for money is both annoying and pointless. The invention of an imaginary female companion named Becky, with whom Kaczynski seems to share many interests, is both distracting and implausible. And listening for two-and-a-half minutes to Bobby Vinton sing “I’m Mister Lonely” while Kaczynski seems to struggle with personal demons, as if we do not already know that Kaczynski feels lonely, is embarrassing to watch.

Nevertheless, what works best about *Ted K* is its depiction of the protagonist’s isolation and growing anger at “industrial society and its future.” For two hours, viewers stay inside Kaczynski’s disturbed mind, fascinated by his voice-over monologues and sensing his growing frustration with the world around him. Perhaps with intended irony, the grim “Ted talks” in this film are the antithesis of technology, entertainment, and design, even as they may shed light on one of the most enigmatic figures of the late twentieth century.

The Ted K Archive

James I Deutsch
Ted K. Review
01 June 2023

Journal of American History, Volume 110, Issue 1, June 2023, Movie Reviews, Pages
185–186, <academic.oup.com/jah/article/110/1/185/7209394>

www.thetedkarchive.com