

# Ted K review – queasy inner life of the monkish, unhappy Unabomber

Sharlto Copley excels behind a straggly beard in this portrait of the serial terror-bomber, on a mission against modern technology

Peter Bradshaw

1 Mar 2021

Tony Stone's Ted K is an eerily plausible and unsettlingly mesmerizing realisation of the inner world of Ted Kaczynski: that is, the private life of the "Unabomber", America's most notorious domestic terrorist who, working largely from his primitive cabin in the Montana wilderness, killed three people and injured 22 more in a mail-bombing campaign lasting from 1978 to 1995, ostensibly in pursuit of an eco-fundamentalist crusade against all modern technology.

Staggeringly, his campaign induced the Washington Post in 1995 to publish his rambling manifesto in return for a promised cessation of bombing. Something which had seemed like a catastrophic capitulation to terror turned out to be a smart move against it, when Kaczynski's estranged brother recognised his writing and alerted the authorities. As ever with true-crime movies like this, good or bad, there is a strange, transgressive and slightly nauseous undertow to the viewing experience, knowing that the real protagonist is still alive, behind bars, the shadowy original author of everything on screen, but certainly not invited to participate in any promotional Zoom Q&A — though perhaps one day permitted to see the film himself.

The South African actor Sharlto Copley plays Ted: a fierce, gaunt, angry man, whose sharp and rather distinguished features are mostly blurred by a straggly beard. He is a former brilliant mathematician and college professor who turned away from academe in favour of a radical hermit existence. Stone films a queasily black-comic scene in which Ted makes a furious phone call to his mother from one of the pre-internet, pre-smartphone telephone booths of the era, ranting that she had ruined his emotional and sexual life by pushing him academically too early, and that he has still never got beyond first base with a woman — "rubbing tongues". "Well, who else am I supposed to tell this to?" he screams at her. (One answer might be his estranged brother David, but the topic of conversation there is not sex but money, and how David should lend him some.)

Otherwise, we see Ted making a few dollars here and there with menial jobs, including at one of the hated logging companies, where he gets fired for making sneerily sexist comments to the female manager. He also one stage, bizarrely, has a job tutoring a local teenage kid in mathematics, and appears conscientious and good at it.

But Copley and Stone show how Kaczynski is driven by hate and revenge. He spends some of his time in creepy serial-killer home-invader mode, breaking into the luxury cabin of vacationers who wreck the environment with their noisy snowmobiles, on a mission to destroy these devilish means of transport with his axe. But Kaczynski has no desire for face-to-face violence. He just has a monkish vocation for building bombs (as a scientist, he would have had the brainpower for the job, and if he used that notorious instruction manual, *The Anarchist's Cookbook*, it isn't mentioned here.) The movie spends long stretches of time alongside Kaczynski he roams the forests of his

mind, or haunts the desolate roadways and back-alleys, smugly awaiting a detonation. He smiles really just once: on hearing of the Washington Post's capitulation to his demands.

Kaczynski affects an interest in Joseph Conrad (presumably the novel *The Secret Agent*) and uses Conrad as an alias sometimes. But in literary terms, he is closer to the vengeful Christie Malry in BS Johnson's novel — or perhaps the lonely, driven Lee Harvey Oswald in Don DeLillo's *Libra*. We see how Kaczynski has become part of the nation's popular culture: on magazine covers and news programmes in the form of the police-artist sketch of a figure in sunglasses and hoodie — for a delirious moment he is of equal status as OJ Simpson being chased in his white Ford Bronco, a weird harbinger of celebrity culture. It is a riveting, dreamlike evocation of this man's tortured, unhappy life, whose transient successes bring him no pleasure of any kind.

Premieres at the Berlin film festival.

The Ted K Archive

Peter Bradshaw

Ted K review – queasy inner life of the monkish, unhappy Unabomber  
Sharlto Copley excels behind a straggly beard in this portrait of the serial  
terror-bomber, on a mission against modern technology

1 Mar 2021

<[theguardian.com/film/2021/mar/01/ted-k-review-queasy-inner-life-of-the-unabomber-berlin-film-festival](https://theguardian.com/film/2021/mar/01/ted-k-review-queasy-inner-life-of-the-unabomber-berlin-film-festival)>

**[www.thetedkarchive.com](http://www.thetedkarchive.com)**