

The Unheard Voices and Privilege of a Killer: An Analysis of *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes*

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Introduction

Ted Bundy, one of America's most prolific serial killers, killed over 30 young women and girls over a four-year period and was eventually executed. Bundy began his killing spree in Seattle in 1974 by murdering Lynda Healy, a student at University of Washington. From Seattle, Bundy travelled to Oregon, California, Utah, Colorado, and Florida murdering and brutalizing at least 28 young women along the way and escaping jail twice. Finally, Bundy was caught after being pulled over at a traffic stop in Florida and was convicted for some of his crimes in July 1979. He was executed January 24, 1989 by electric chair and his infamous legacy lives on in different media forms.

Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes, directed by Joe Berlinger, is a four-part documentary series that first aired on Netflix in 2019. It focuses on Bundy's only interview while he was on death row, captured by journalist Stephen Michaud. This series chronologically details Bundy's life before, during, and after his crimes. Berlinger weaves together police reports, photographic evidence, Bundy's interview tapes, as well as testimonies from the victims' families and Bundy's former friends and family to paint a picture of who Bundy was and what crimes he committed during his sprees. Despite being well received by audience members (88% of Google viewers "liked" it), the series was disliked by critics (Google, 2021). For example, Mangan (2019), a TV critic for *The Guardian*, stated the documentary only utilizes personal testimony from Bundy about his "idyllic childhood" and his college years, rather than the details of his crimes, which should have been the true focus. In addition, Romano (2019), a TV critic for Vox, said that this documentary adds little to the conversation at all.

In this analysis of *Conversations with a Killer*, we explore representations of Bundy's victims and the depiction of Bundy himself. This paper will focus on how the documentary is an

example of white male privilege and gender inequality through its erasure of the victims' identities and perpetuation of a celebrity-like narrative of Bundy.

Literature Review

About 13% of news stories center on criminal activity, making crime essential for news outlets (Greer & Reiner, 2015). Although most news stories reporting on crime are meant to be informative, crime has become central to popular culture as well. As a result of the mass amounts of true crime media in the form of television shows, documentaries, and movies, the line between information and entertainment has effectively been blurred (Dowler et al., 2006). The public fascination with violent crime as entertainment has been coined by various media outlets as the "CSI Effect," a phenomenon where television shows, like *Criminal Minds* and *Law & Order*, attempt to portray violence and crime in a "realistic" and "scientific" way, but only serve to increase the dramatization of these violent crimes in order to garner attention from their viewers (Dowler et al., 2006).

Women are often the subject of true crime portrayals, more so than their male counterparts. Women are most often portrayed as victims, with media frequently shifting the blame for and responsibility of their victimization onto female victims while lessening the responsibility of the (usually male) perpetrator (Berns, 2001; Dowler et al., 2006). Men's violence is obscured, while women are blamed for putting themselves in harm's way (Berns, 2001). In media representation, women are portrayed as responsible for their own victimization, while men are alleviated of any responsibility for committing violence (Berns, 1999; 2001).

Representations of domestic violence have been studied across many mediums, including women's magazines, newspapers, and television news. The coverage of domestic violence

against women often reinforces negative stereotypes of women, presents domestic violence as a private problem in which women should stay silent, and perpetuates white masculinity- all which ultimately contributes to the perpetuation of this kind of crime (Bullock, 2007; Phillips & Griffin, 2015). In addition, when blame *is* put on men, as in the case of black athletes and domestic violence, it functions to distance the accountability from white masculinity, which, in turn, hurts both women and Black men (Enck-Wazner, 2009). Sexual violence and murder are also represented in problematic ways (Carll, 2003). Women as victims in true crime murders are often presented hypersexually, and the narratives tend to blame the woman, both when they are the victim and perpetrator (Carll, 2003; Phillips & Griffin, 2015).

Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes (2019) has received some scholarly attention. McCann (2020) argues the performance of “two Teds” -the normal guy and the serial rapist and killer- accentuates the duality of Bundy, which thus provides an ideological cover for performances of white western U.S. masculinity. McCabe (2021) argues the documentary critiques the typical mediated “handsome genius” narrative by acknowledging how the media created a space where Bundy’s white male privilege could thrive by creating this attractive image of him, yet viewers had mixed responses.

While both of these articles focus on the representation of Bundy throughout the documentary series, neither discuss how Bundy’s victims are portrayed. In this paper, we will explore how Bundy’s image of privilege is maintained in the documentary, how the documentary reduces the identities of the victims, and furthermore, how all women are situated as being potential victims.

Bundy's Victims are Identity-less

Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes depicts Ted Bundy's victims as identity-less through the reduction of their identities to merely victims as well as by only relaying the gruesome details of their murders and assaults. The first way the documentary strips Bundy's victims of their identities is by reducing them to their name and their name alone. Throughout the series, when his victims are named, they are named briefly, or their name is just put in as a caption under their photo on the screen. In addition, they are also addressed in terms of which number victim they are, in an attempt to differentiate the victim based on the timeline of his killings, rather than identifying them by their name and personal characteristics. During episode one, Ward Lucas, a local radio station reporter in Seattle, explains how his department began to number the women who had been disappearing in the Washington and Oregon areas instead of addressing them by their names. The women are not even given the decency and respect to be addressed by their names and are instead only referred to in regard to the order in which they went missing and were killed. The media and news clips chosen to be a part of this documentary addressed the victims solely as "coeds," "girls," or "women," not by their names. This works to objectify the victims, instead of giving them a unique identity.

Conversations with a Killer presents all of Bundy's victims with a singular defining characteristic: they are victims of his crimes. In episode one, the documentary characterizes the women as merely victims of Bundy, starting with his first victim, Lynda Healy. Her identity quickly shifts from a young college student at the University of Washington who was the weather person for a local radio station to Bundy's first victim. While the initial description is still vague, it gives insight into who Healy was and what her aspirations were. Yet, there is an immediate shift in the documentary where Healy is now only talked about in the context of

Bundy's crimes against her. Healy is referred to as "victim number one" on multiple occasions throughout the documentary. In addition, the newsclips chosen focus on the hours leading up to her crime and its aftermath, absolving Healy of an identity beyond Bundy's first victim. These serve to strip her of any personality or identity, and she is just reduced to a number in Ted Bundy's criminal rampage.

The documentary continues to reduce the women's identities through the use of specific photos. From the first minute in the documentary, a collage is displayed of all the victims' faces, shown in progression from Healey (victim number one) to Kimberly Leach (victim number 28). All that is shown is a glimpse of their pictures, quickly flipping through each woman's school yearbook photo on the screen. This pattern continues, with a slideshow of the same photos of the women twice more in episode one, three times in episode two, once in episode three, and twice in episode four. The documentary consistently uses the same photo of each victim no matter the context. While Bundy is afforded pictures in multiple contexts that showcase his personality, the victims are left with a single posed photo that does not accurately represent the women as individuals- all that matters is their new identity as a victim of Bundy.

In episode three, we see this reduction of identity once again with the murders of Margaret Bowman and Lisa Levy, two members of Chi Omega sorority at Florida State University (FSU). The documentary chooses to include newspaper clippings of the coverage surrounding the unsolved string of murders in the area. In a clipping titled, "Bundy Held in Florida; Suspect in Co-ed Killings," there are two small photos of Bowman and Levy embedded within the text with the moniker "clubbing victims." Not only are these women identified solely as Bundy's victims, but their identity is also minimized even further by being described only by the nature of the crime itself. This formula is seen throughout the documentary, where the victim

is named quickly, if at all, then the subject turns to Bundy and the crimes. The women's narratives detach any real personality that these women had, and their identity is dwindled down to just being a victim. One survivor of Bundy, Carol DaRonch, is given more time in the documentary, but her narrative is still within the confines of Bundy's narrative.

Carol DaRonch is one of the only survivors of Bundy's assaults. In DaRonch's interview in the second episode, she recollects her encounter with Bundy. She describes her attack and how she was able to survive, yet she is not given time to talk about anything besides the confines of the crime. Any and all questions that are asked of her relate to Bundy, and there is no attention brought to who she is as a person, how she feels now, and how she has been coping. Whereas in episode two she is described as "Utah resident," in episode three, "Bundy's survivor" is now written under her name. This strips DaRonch of who she is, and her personality is shrunken down to just a woman who survived Bundy. While she is able to have a narrative, unlike the other women, she is not allowed to expand her character. DaRonch is only given the space to relay the horrid story of her kidnapping and assault.

Lastly, the documentary depicts Bundy's victims as identity-less by focusing on the gruesome details of the murders. *Conversations with a Killer* is riddled with graphic and gory images of the various crime scenes. From his first murder of Healy, described in episode one, the documentary displays multiple images of the crime scene, including pictures of blood on her bed, pillow, and sheets. In episode three, the documentary talks about the murders of Bowman and Levy at the Chi Omega sorority house. Bowman's body is described as "beaten, strangled, sexually molested," while pictures of her bloody bed cover the screen. Levy's death is quickly described as "died without regaining consciousness," and pictures of the crime scene are shown. The graphic description of these murders alongside the photos emphasize the cruelty that was

involved in her death and work to separate the crime from the victim through the phenomenon of desensitization to crime scene photos.

In addition to the focus on these horrific details of the Chi Omega murders, the documentary includes even more jarring images at the crime scene of Cheryl Thomas. Directly after the Chi Omega murders, Bundy went to a duplex only six blocks away from his last crime scene and brutalized Thomas, a dance major at FSU. During the description of her attack, pictures of her bloody bed, clothes, and walls are shown. The images are accompanied by a voice over by Kenneth Katsaris, a sheriff in Leon County in Florida, who was the one to receive the calls about the Chi Omega murders as well as the attacks on Thomas. In episode three, he describes what he sees at the duplex as “a young lady, brutalized, beaten, [and] laying in a pool of blood.” He does not mention Thomas’s name, and instead the documentary chooses to print her name underneath a smiling photo of her, which is then immediately followed by the morbid pictures of her attack. The gruesome details of the murders emphasized in the documentary through the new clips and pictures shown only serve to further reduce the identities of the women so that Bundy’s narrative can be kept at the center– the added horrific details only add to his narrative and take away from the victims’.

The horrific graphic nature of images of the crime scenes in addition to the omission of the victims’ identities outside of their relation to Bundy enforces the fact that documentary presents them as just another number and statistic for violence against women. The focus in the documentary is Bundy and his narrative, not the 30+ women that were assaulted at his hands. *Conversations with a Killer* positions the women as secondary to a serial killer in a story where they should hold the most attention. This documentary could have used its platform to share

stories of the innocent victims, but instead, it chose to reduce their identities and highlight Bundy's.

All Women are Potential Victims

In addition to reducing the identities of Bundy's victims, *Conversations with a Killer* treats *all* women as potential victims. The documentary accomplishes this through the news clips included and stylistic choices made by Berlinger. The result of these decisions is that all women in this documentary, both victims and potential victims, are painted very differently than their male counterparts.

This documentary treats women as potential victims through the news clips it chooses to include. Beginning in episode one, after Healy and Georgeann Hawkins are reported missing from the Seattle area, a series of news clips are shown. These clips of Seattle area residents show them expressing their concern and fear of the disappearances coupled with multiple clips of police and detectives surrounding the area where the women went missing. Specifically, the documentary plays a newsclip where a Seattle news anchor asks "girls to stay out of the alleys" and "travel in groups of two or three and only use the front door." By explicitly addressing women, rather than all individuals in the Seattle area, the documentary positions women, and only women, as potential victims. The way that the documentary chooses to highlight clips that warn women has gendered implications; rather than focusing the efforts on finding the perpetrator of the crimes, news stations in the clips warn viewers, specifically women, of actions not to take in order to keep themselves out of harm's way.

There is a continued pattern throughout the documentary of the portrayal of women as victims or potential victims of Bundy. Again in episode one, a series of news clips are shown

after the string of disappearances and murders of young women in the Seattle and Washington area. Ward Lucas, a television and radio reporter who had worked for a local radio station in Seattle during the time of the disappearances and murders, mentions that hitchhiking was a very popular activity, with “many young men [and] young women hitchhiking on every street corner.” The clip that immediately follows is one of Pat Murphy, the lieutenant for the Seattle police department at the time, warning young women “to be overly cautious at this time.” Once again, women are told to be extremely wary and aware of their surroundings at all times, even though both men and women were hitchhiking, and, therefore, putting themselves in potential harm’s way—at least according to the police and local news. There is no talk of Bundy, the actual killer, and how local law enforcement is trying to identify and stop the killer from committing these crimes, but rather, the focus is on women as potential victims.

Episode three holds even more examples of this blatant characterization of women solely as potential victims. After the co-ed murders at FSU at the Chi Omega sorority house, which resulted in the deaths of Levy and Bowman, a news clip is played where the newscaster says that “frightened co-eds... walked to class in groups today” because of their fear of this mysterious murderer. In another news clip in the same episode, a local news station interviews a student at FSU who says that she is “scared all the time,” walks in groups, and locks her doors, something she “doesn’t usually do.” The documentary focuses on the ways in which women are responding to these crimes. Through the inclusion of clips that only show women scared and fearful for their lives, the documentary characterizes women as potential victims who are changing their behavior in order to try to lessen their chances of becoming a victim at the hands of Bundy.

While there is an abundance of clips focusing on women, either as victims or as potential ones, there is a complete lack of emphasis on men as potential victims, and especially on the

actual perpetrator, Bundy. Almost no attention is given in the news clips or in the documentary to how authorities are going to stop him from attacking and committing heinous crimes. By leaving out clips that focus on Bundy, the documentary positions women as the ones in control of their ultimate fate; they will either be safe or in danger because of the choices they make. The news clips chosen emphasize what women can do in order to stop a killer from murdering them, rather than stopping the killer from killing.

Finally, the documentary depicts all women as potential victims through specific stylistic choices. Episode two begins with a clip of Bundy talking in his interview tapes about how and why he chose his victims. He says he chose his victims because they were young and attractive women that he viewed as “possessions, beings which are subservient, more often than not, to males.” In addition, Bundy opens up about the sexual component of his crimes saying it is about “possession, control [and] violence” of women. While this audio clip of Bundy speaking plays, the documentary projects a series of video clips of women. The first four clips shown are videos of random women walking in the street; the camera zooms in on different parts of their body, starting with several clips of the bottom of skirts and dresses, followed by a tight shot of a woman’s breasts as she is crossing a busy street. The last clip in this section is another tight shot of a college student carrying books walking in the street and filmed from behind. In all of these clips, it is made obvious that the young women are unaware they are being filmed—they are all filmed from behind, with a tight zoom that resembles the effect of binoculars, almost as though they are being spied on. The clips in this section make it seem like any woman could be the subject of Bundy’s crimes, as well as objectify women, because of the close-up shots exploiting their bodies. The images and videos included are of random, everyday women partaking in

normal activities, further emphasizing that all women are portrayed as being potential victims of Bundy.

Through the news clips that recommend women to change their behavior and clips of women stating that they are fearful, the documentary presents all women as potential victims. The documentary chooses to tell the story of Bundy through a gendered lens; women as victims (or potential ones) are the main focus rather than the consequences of Bundy's crimes on himself. The only thing we are told about the women mentioned in this series is that they are victims, and the only thing we know about women in general is that they are seen as potential victims.

Bundy and White Male Privilege

While the women are presented as either victims or potential victims, the documentary spends a majority of the time focusing on Bundy. Viewers are given the opportunity to peek into Bundy's life growing up, while also getting a first-person analysis of his thoughts and feelings through the interview tapes. What sticks out in the narrative Bundy is given in this documentary is the consistent proof of his white male privilege. Through his personality and looks, privileges he was given through the legal system, and the choice of media clips, the documentary is an example of how white male privilege is being emphasized rather than criticized.

The first way the documentary contributes to white male privilege is through a focus on Bundy's personality and looks. Beginning in episode one, the documentary describes him in a positive light. It highlights his All-American childhood by saying he was a "normal boy" who went to church every day, was involved in Boy Scouts, and had a loving family and friends. The documentary describes his aspirations to be a lawyer or politician, which further emphasizes how

he was a clean-cut young man who seemingly did not fit the mold of the traditional serial killer. Throughout the documentary, he is described in both the media at the time and in present day interviews as a handsome, charming, well-mannered, smart, boy-next-door type of person. Characterizing Bundy in a positive light reveals his privilege—his ultimate identity is a serial killer, yet he is afforded the opportunity to be remembered as a charismatic and smart individual.

The documentary further perpetuates white male privilege by specifically choosing to highlight how much leeway he was given while in custody. While other murderers are chained up and have limited freedoms while on trial, Bundy was an exception due to his whiteness and male identity. In episode three, while Bundy is on trial for the murder of Caryn Campbell in Colorado, he was able to escape from the second story of the courthouse because he was left alone in the library, unsupervised by officers and not handcuffed. After this successful escape attempt, Bundy was a missing person running from the law for a total of six days, while still on trial for murder. The fact that Bundy was left alone, unattended in a courtroom while on trial for murder shows extreme privilege. He was trusted enough to have full access to the entirety of the courthouse where he was able to roam freely throughout the day and was able to do so without an officer with him at all times. His escape attempts were even seen as impressive by sheriffs and detectives, like Kathleen Chesney, a detective in King County, Washington at the time, who called his escapes “creative.” Bundy is treated like a celebrity who is immune to the consequences of his actions, which exemplifies the privilege that white men hold.

The documentary does make limited attempts to criticize the sheriff's department for allowing Bundy to escape; however, this does not erase the ways the documentary shows white male privilege. In episode three, Charles Leidner, the defense attorney for the Campbell case, criticizes the security levels of the courthouse, explaining he was shocked that a man on trial for

first-degree murder was allowed to run free. In addition, Ward Lucas, a television and radio reporter who had worked for a local radio station in Seattle, is also critical of the sheriff's department, saying how the entire situation of Bundy's escape was irresponsible on their part and should never have been able to happen in the first place. In both of these cases, however, the criticisms lie on the sheriff's department's handling of the case and not on the systematic structures in place that allowed Bundy to get away with the things he did. While it is important that the documentary included interviews of people criticizing how Bundy was treated, it does not address his inherent privilege as a white male or the structural racism and sexism present in our judicial system. That purposeful omission shifts the burden of responsibility onto a few lazy police officers as opposed to the systems of racism and sexism embedded within U.S. culture.

The documentary continues to be an example of Bundy's privilege through their choice of media clips. During Bundy's killing spree, the media was fascinated with him; he was consistently in headlines and there was (and is) a multitude of newspaper and television reports that discussed his crimes as well as his personal life, including his ambitions and goals. Due to the heightened interest in Bundy in the media, he developed a (mainly female) following. In episode four, a news clip shows interviews with multiple women who stated they were fascinated with Bundy rather than scared of him, and how thousands of women would flock to the prison where he was being held with hand-written letters to give to him. The addition of these clips that show a high level of fascination and almost a celebrity-like status of Bundy is an example of the privilege he exudes. The documentary continues to participate in a process in which white male privilege is highlighted, instead of actively worked against through the intentional inclusion of clips that paint Bundy as a desirable and attractive man who is misunderstood rather than deeply troubled and sick.

Bundy continues to be portrayed as misunderstood by the documentary, which heightens his privilege, a fact that is emphasized when Judge Cowart sentences him to death by electric chair. In his closing statements, Judge Cowart says,

It's a tragedy to see such a total waste, I think, of humanity that I have experienced in this court. You're a bright young man. You'd have made a good lawyer. I'd have loved to have you practice in front of me, but you went another way, partner. Take care of yourself. I don't have any animosity to you, I want you to know that.

The inclusion of Judge Cowart's sentiments towards Bundy stresses how even *he* thought of Bundy as a good person who just made a few wrong choices. Even while being put on death row for multiple first-degree murder charges, he is still given the benefit of the doubt that he is a good person deep down, just a few wrong turns were made. The documentary includes the entire clip of the Judge flattering Bundy and his character, instead of simply highlighting the sentence Bundy received for his abhorrent actions. By continuing to frame Bundy as a man that has everything going for him and who simply stumbled down the wrong path even up to the very end, this documentary is proof of white male privilege.

The narrative that Bundy is given in *Conversations with a Killer* is one that highlights the existence of white male privilege. He is positioned as a charming, interesting, and fascinating man. Even today, Bundy is still looked at as a celebrity of sorts, despite his confessions to his extensive list of crimes, a clear example of his white male privilege at play. This documentary spends considerable time contributing to the celebrity of Bundy, highlighting the existence of his privilege, even today, instead of using this opportunity to critique his white male privilege and focus on the victims.

Conclusion

Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes writes the women as identity-less throughout the series. It presents all of Bundy's victims with a singular defining characteristic: identity is completely reduced to being a victim of his crimes. The only information the documentary gives of the victims is their names—no other background information is relayed. It also continuously refers to them as a number relating to the order in which they were killed, which erases any part of their lives outside of the crimes committed against them. It constantly uses the same photo of each woman throughout the episodes, acting to freeze the victims in time and create them as one-dimensional individuals who are only in this story to serve Bundy's narrative.

Furthermore, this series positions all women as potential victims, treating women much differently than their male counterparts. The documentary includes advice specifically to women, such as to travel in groups, while no suggestions are given to men to change their behavior. The stylistic choices made by the documentary further objectify women with framing and close-up shots of women's bodies. This highlights the sexual component of Bundy's crimes and emphasizes that any woman could be killed at the hands of this serial killer. Continuing to focus on all women as potential victims shifts the focus away from Bundy in regard to the crimes he committed as well.

Finally, the docuseries itself is proof of the continued existence of white male privilege through its representation of Bundy. This is done through the characterization of Bundy as a fascinating, charismatic, and well-respected man, who does not fit the mold of a stereotypical serial killer. He is depicted like a celebrity—an individual who was given a lot of trust and leeway because of his charming and likeable status in the judicial system, as well as outside of it.

Conversations with a Killer had the opportunity to take the true crime genre in a different direction by giving a voice to the victims and condemning the privilege that killers like Ted Bundy are afforded within society and the justice system. Yet, the documentary perpetuates victim erasure and white male privilege in the events it highlights and the discourse surrounding Bundy's crimes. Representing women only as victims or as potential victims of these horrific crimes at the hands of men belittles their experiences of sexual assault and other violent crimes. These crimes against women are shown as commonplace, which desensitizes the viewers of these media sites (Berns, 1999; 2001).

The continued portrayal of serial killers (statistically white males) as celebrity figures perpetuates the ideals of white male privilege. As of the time of this writing, there are upwards of eight movies/documentaries that have been made showcasing Bundy and his crimes, with a movie in the works starring Chad Michael Murray as Bundy. Lists of these movies can be found on websites such as *Women's Health Magazine* and *Cosmopolitan*, sites stereotypically consumed by women. Time again, even after his death, Bundy is the star of movies, elevating him to a celebrity status. This further detaches him from his crimes and takes attention away from the victims who suffered at his hands. This documentary had over 30 possible stories to tell, and yet it decided to choose the one that has been told time and again, adding little to the overall conversation.

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