

A Critical Analysis of the Ted Bundy Tapes

Bailey Boesen, Alli Henkelman, and Hannah Wright

Introduction

The Netflix docu-series, *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes*, is an attempt to get inside the mind of the infamous serial killer, Ted Bundy. Viewers are exposed to a different side of Bundy, whose raw third person portrayal allows for some derivative behind the “boy next door”. As the tapes roll, investigators fill in the blanks of Bundy’s tell-all. The old crime news castings and innocent home videos are unsettling when meddled together. Through the documentary, the 70’s are embodied in the aesthetic that it once was; unnerving and tumultuous. Discussed in this paper is how the portrayal of Bundy in, ‘*Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes*,’ unravels with the help of intimate detail and technique.

Artifact Description

The netflix series *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* created by Joe Berlinger shows a glimpse inside the mind of Ted Bundy. Throughout the series, the audience can hear Bundy talking in third person about what someone who committed the murders was thinking. Bundy was interviewed while on death row and this series releases those never-before-heard tapes of him while sharing the timeline of the murders he committed.

There is a wide range of viewers for this series. The audience of these tapes is for people who may want to learn more about this gruesome story and hear Ted Bundy himself explain what was going through the mind of the killer while he was doing the killing. This documentary series is definitely not for people who are sensitive to this material. The purpose of this documentary series is to further explain Ted Bundy’s case and to bring awareness to people about serial killers

and how deceiving they can be. This series is chilling and creepy and brings awareness to the idea that not everyone is who they say they are. When all of these murders were happening in the 70s, technology wasn't as advanced as it is today making it hard for people around the world to hear all the details of Ted Bundy's story, but his trial was the first ever trial to be televised because it gained national attention and everyone wanted to hear more about it. That shows the impact Ted Bundy left on the world and how brutal his murders were. These tapes help fully tell his story to those who may have been alive during his killing spree and even for those who were not yet born.

The series uses many different techniques to convey the gruesome details of his murders to the audience. There are many subtle techniques used, such as dark, eerie music and vintage footage from the 70s which helps set the serious mood of this case. The documentary also interviewed Bundy's mother, ex-wife, long-term girlfriend, former friends, and even a woman who was almost a victim. Interviewing and getting information from these people made the case seem even more real and chilling.

It is believed that while Bundy was talking in third person, he was talking about himself and even portraying his childhood in ways he wished to represent himself. Bundy told journalists that he had a normal childhood and had lots of friends yet a former friend of his discussed how Bundy never fit in and often got made fun of for having a speech impediment. These details help convey that Bundy was very deceiving and lied about a lot of things which strengthens the idea that serial killers are manipulative. The document focuses on Bundy's cases but can be related to other serial killers and how manipulative they were towards their victims.

Furthermore, these tapes highlighted that not all serial killers have the creepy, stereotypical look. Ted Bundy was an attractive and smart man; he was definitely not someone a person would think is a serial killer and rapist. Bundy also discussed in the tapes that he didn't feel guilty for the murders he committed. These chilling details were put in the documentary to help show that Bundy truly was an evil and vile killer.

The Ted Bundy tapes, in a way, started a trend. When these tapes came out, many people started talking about the Ted Bundy cases again and many other TV networks started to release documentaries about it. This documentary on Netflix led to the "reopening" of the Ted Bundy cases. His cases were not largely talked about in society for awhile until this documentary series came out which led to more people being intrigued about his cases again, TV networks showing documentaries, and the new movie *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* being released soon.

Critical Analysis of the Artifact

There are many elements of *The Ted Bundy Tapes* that are interesting and stand out to the team. First, we thought it was interesting how the theme of a tape recorder was used throughout the docu-series. The tape recordings of the interview between serial killer Ted Bundy and journalist Stephen Michaud was not the only thing that had to do with tape recorders, the whole series revolved around the idea of a tape recorder. For instance, when referring to a specific date during the show, a tape recorder with dates will spin past and set on a specific year, like how a tape recorder spins and stops when recording and stopping. The sounds that a tape recorder would make are also worked into the show. When clips are shown or a recording is playing, sounds of a recorder go along with it, including a click to start, a reeling-sound or squeaking

during the middle, and another click when the audio or video is done. Second, we thought that it was interesting how the music that was used in the background was deep and bassy-like. We could not put our finger on the type of music that was playing in the background, all we could tell is that the music was not just orchestral or tech-based, but a mixture of the two. The background music was never light or uplifting, but was deep and low during the episode. This can give off a creepy, thrilling, and scary and suspenseful vibe. Third, the fact that all interviews that were recently conducted for the show were all in natural light, within a dark office. We believe that this was done for dramatic effect to add to the dark and thrilling vibe of the show. All of the interviewees were also wearing dark professional clothing which added to the depth of surreal darkness of the show. Fourth, it was interesting how the producers used what we called “flashbacks”. With these, the show would play a specific tape from Ted’s interview and would portray vivid short clips and photos that would relate to what Ted was talking about, the time period the tape was recorded or the event that occurred. These short videos and photos would be rapidly showed one after another, we believe this was for a nostalgic and vivid effect, placing the viewer in the investigation and in the time period. Lastly, we found it interesting how the series, like the title indicates, revolves around the real interview tapes with Bundy. By using the real interview tapes with Bundy, a sense of realism is portrayed which again, puts the viewer inside the interview room with Bundy, making the audience an active member of the investigation.

There are many features of style that are utilized in this first episode of *The Ted Bundy Tapes*. The first style that was utilized in this episode was language. Language was used heavily through symbolism and allusions. With symbolism, the episode had many referenced to a tape

recorder, including tape recorder sounds, depicting tape recorders often, using a tape recorder for a timeline, and overall using tape recordings as the main focus of the show. Other symbols that were portrayed were old photos and videos of the time period (around the 1970's) to put the viewer in the time period when all of the murder events were happening. By doing this, the viewer was not only in the time period, but the viewer would also feel like they were part of the victims' families, friends, and included in the investigation of Ted with the illusion of being in the interview room with him while taping, and part of Ted's childhood through his family's home videos. Another style that was utilized was complexity. To explain, the message of the first episode (Ted's background/childhood and the victims' backgrounds/childhoods) was portrayed in a complex way, rather than in a simple fashion. It was complex because the episode would go back and forth when referencing a specific time period or event that occurred, and tie it back to a victim and how Ted connected with the victim. For example, when the interview tapes would be talking about his childhood, saying that he did not have a troubled one that would lead a person to believe that he was a killer, it would flash to his childhood, then start talking about a victim and how it connects to an aspect of his background. The message was never explicitly given to the audience member; the audience was more of a participant in linking Ted's life together through the pieces and information that was given to them throughout the episode. This docu-series also uses the styles of information and facts throughout the episode. Since the series is known as a docu-series, or a documentary that is cut into multiple episodes, that means that there has to be some truth and factual information in the episodes; and there is. The first episode, in addition to the other three, uses crime scene evidence, police and investigation reports, law documents, interviews with all involved in the case, and most importantly, Ted's interview tapes

to serve important facts and information that could not be made up. This is also what the show's credibility and reputation is built upon, raw facts and information about the investigation and murder cases that have not been brought to public light before. The last style that is used in this first episode is repetition. Repetition is used throughout the episode when talking about Ted and his successes. For instance, the episode repeats how people thought he was a good guy, and how successful he was, but they would use different people to repeat this message in varying ways (his friend would say that he was successful in one thing, then the interviewee would talk about his college accomplishments, and another person would list a different story). The features of style that I explained above overall helped to facilitate the purposes of *The Ted Bundy Tapes*. To explain, the purpose of this first episode was to give the audience a background in the investigation, Ted's life, and the victims' lives. By using language, complexity, fact, information, and repetition, the show was able to give off a nostalgic, thrilling, creepy, and unnerving experience to the audience while keeping the integrity of the show by using true and raw facts of the case.

Audiences that would respond positively to the artifact are those who are adults, interested in crime, and like unnerving or thrilling shows. I say that adults would respond positively because the show is rated TV-MA, or for mature audiences. Also, when Netflix released the show, they advised viewers to not watch alone because the content can be troubling at times. This also shows that the audience should be interested in crime because they will get the most satisfaction out of the docu-series while learning about Ted Bundy, his crimes, and the investigation overall. The audience should also like thrilling, unnerving, or creepy shows because *The Ted Bundy Tapes* are not for the faint of heart. This show, as stated before, is for

mature audiences--meaning there will be instances that are uncomfortable to some viewers, and is highly graphic in terms of raw audio from Ted Bundy himself, talking about his own crimes and why he committed them.

Audiences that would respond negatively to the tapes are those under 18, do not like scary/thrilling shows, and those who are sensitive to subjects that include murder and gore. People who are under 18 years of age could have a negative experience watching *The Ted Bundy Tapes* because the tapes are graphic in nature and have a rating of TV-MA, which indicates that the show is for mature audiences only. It is believed that those over 18 would be mature enough to handle such content, but even those who are older might have trouble with the content also. The audience also should have a taste for scary or thrilling shows because the tapes are known to be scary in nature, if the audience member is not a fan of creepy or scary shows, they should advise against watching this. Another audience that would respond negatively to this show are those who are sensitive to subjects like murder and gory content. This docu-series is full of murder references, murder and investigation details, graphic pictures and videos that show blood, and pictures of the victims themselves. If some have a hard time with graphic content, they should not watch the show. Another audience that would react negatively to the tapes are those who have experienced kidnapping, sexual assault, or other negative or violent actions that occur in this show. Since this show puts the viewer in the investigation and time period, this may cause or trigger emotional and mental harm as it may cause the viewer to remember their negative experiences.

There are many cultural values and norms embedded in *The Ted Bundy Tapes*. For one, it was referenced over and over during the first episode that no one would suspect Ted to be a killer

because of who he was. To explain, Ted seemed like a shy man, but he was known as good-looking, clean-cut, and an overall stand-up guy. Ted also went to college then headed to law school to pursue a career as a lawyer. All of these factors combined made people think that Ted would be the last person to label not only as a killer, but a serial killer. This indicated that society, especially American Society, has a pre-set image of what a killer looks like and what his life is like. This image is usually that a killer is creepy-looking, or is a little off, and did not do well in school or participates in illegal activity starting at a young age. Another assumption is that society would be able to label someone as a killer because of how they were raised or how they acted as a child. Because Ted had a normal childhood, came from a good family, was handsome and did well in school, he was not seen as someone who could kill others. Another social value that was portrayed was that women need to help others when they are asked to do so. This was portrayed in the episode when the investigators were talking about how Ted's victims would disappear. As witnesses would account, Ted would charm a lady that he was interested in to build trust, then ask them to help him move something by his car, or to move something into his car. The women would go with him, and they were never seen again. This aligns with American social values because when you are asked to help (especially when a woman is asked to help by a man) they are expected to do so without question. Lastly, another assumption that was broken in the docu-series was the fact that all the women who were killed were very responsible women. It is assumed that when a woman is kidnapped or murdered that they were acting reckless and irresponsible, and that their demeanor was the reason they got into that situation. However, it was the fact that they were caring and responsible that got them into trouble, overall falsifying the image of the typical murder victim.

The overall impact that *The Ted Bundy Tapes* serves is a great and thrilling one. This docu-series not only started a recent movement and re-examination on serial killers and how they are portrayed, but also shook many who viewed the series to the bone. However, the first episode to any series equates to the impact of a first impression. With this first episode, the viewer not only got the background into Ted's life and background, but also his victims' backgrounds and the investigators' look into the case. This episode also was an intense experience to which the viewer would feel like a participant in the investigation. This episode made the viewer feel like they were in the interview room with Ted while he was speaking into the recorder, with him while he played in the nearby creek when he was little, with him in high school, into college, and during his many relationships. The viewer would then feel a connection with Ted in some way, even though the viewer knows he is a killer. You then knew why everyone was surprised when they found out this handsome and intelligent man was a serial killer, because you knew that his background didn't make him different from any other Joe out there. Because of this knowledge, one might feel scared, unnerved, and uneasy that an ordinary-seeming guy could do such things, but this was the show is about. Additionally, the viewer is also sucked into the victims' lives, their childhood, their personality, and their later adult experiences before they were murdered. Because of this, the viewer is able to connect on an emotional level with all those that the show depicts. This episode not only gave factual backgrounds about Ted and his victims, but it also caused an attachment to them.

Conclusion

This examination of *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* goes beyond the direct observations of Bundy and his crimes. The viewer must closely examine the docu-series

for hidden messages tucked away within the storyline. The indirect observations are hidden within things such as the music, lighting, and even the messages that Bundy conveys within his tapes. Qualitative research requires an immersion of the researcher into the environment to develop experience. This task can be troublesome for the researcher, especially since they must remain objective for the sake of the research. Listening to the tapes is an attempt to gather qualitative research by tapping into the mind of a serial killer. Unlike studies such as William Foote's "Whyte's Street Corner Society Study", the man conducting the tapes with Bundy could not fully immerse himself. It would be nearly impossible since the complexities and unattainable terrain of Bundy's mind cannot come anywhere close to being understood. It is up to the viewer to develop the conceptual investigating and understanding that these tapes require. Prior to this, our group has only experienced quantitative research concerning the statistics gathered from our student/college technology feedback. The numbers for that research are obvious and easy to see. The viewers can note the amount of times Bundy's description of himself contradicts those of the individuals who knew him personally. Other patterns subtly mentioned in the series are the similarities between his victims, his murder strategy, and the timeline between his victims murders. This series challenges the viewer to notice these hidden themes and messages through the techniques and details used within the show.

The Netflix series, *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes*, is a closer examination of the infamous serial killer and his crimes. So, what is to be gathered from this series and from our examination of it? The depiction of Bundy is raw and shows how serial killers can be manipulative and charismatic. When the trials of Bundy's crimes were conducted, America was not shocked about the murders. Rather, they were deeply disturbed that a mad man

was hiding among them. He was not the typical serial killer. Bundy was an ideal citizen, the “boy next door”, and he was able to go unnoticed while these heinous acts were committed. The question is not, “how could this happen?” it is “how could WE allow this to happen?”.

References

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