




Deconstructing True Crime, Reconstructing ‘Truth’: An Analysis of Netflix’s *Conversation with a Killer*: The Ted Bundy Tapes

Aadita Chauhan , Jasmine Alappat  and Para Raturi* 
 Sophia College for Women (Autonomous), Mumbai

*Correspondence: pararaturi24@gmail.com

Received: 16th February, 2024; Accepted: 15th April 2024; Published: 30th April, 2024

ABSTRACT

“Documentary films speak about actual situations or events and honour known facts; they do not introduce new, unverifiable ones. They speak directly about the historical world rather than allegorically” (Nichols, 1991, p. 28). However, a significant section of scholars has a very disapproving take on how documentaries monopolise on the idea of what is perceived as truth. Recently, documentaries about serial killers have gradually gained mainstream media attention. Much of the scholarly research in this area explores how they fetishise the figure of the killer, the ethical implications about representing forms of entertainment based on violence and debates about the creation of such media. Set against the backdrop of these widely analysed aspects of such documentaries, and departing from them, our paper analyses the processes through which truth is constructed in documentary films. The paper, therefore, focuses on the construction of such versions of the truth. This kind of exploration has other ideological implications as it aids us in deconstructing a metanarrative about such documentaries representing crime as an unfiltered non-ideological ‘truth.’ For this purpose, the paper employs an analysis of the documentary-series *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* available on the OTT platform of Netflix.

Keywords: Documentary, Serial Killer, Truth, Reality Construction

1. REPRESENTATION OF SERIAL KILLERS IN POPULAR MEDIA

“Much of what we know, or claim to know, about serial murder is based on misinformation and myth construction. As a result of the sensational nature of this form of murder, the aura surrounding it has assumed a life of its own as it filters throughout both the public and private sectors of society.”

-Eric Hickey, *Serial Murderers and Their Victims* (2006, p. 1)

The earliest examples of serial killers in media and television are illustrated by Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) and the film rendition of Thomas Harris’s thriller *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) is one of the most prevalent and popular examples of representation of a serial killer figure in literature. The serial killer figure is manifested in the character of the creature. Connelly (2010) in his paper “Representation of Serial Killers in Media” comments on *Frankenstein* as having elements of stark romanticisation of “the monstrous.” The creature justifies the crimes he committed as a product of external hurt and evil, mitigating the intensity of the crime and thereby garnering sympathy from the audience.

Over a period of time, the figure of the serial killer became an image influenced by the one representing it, and its story is retold at its benefit.

“The serial killer is primarily an aesthetic phenomenon; the crimes of real serial killers have been defined, re-imagined, and re-sold in a multitude of ways, from True Crime books and speculative fiction (factual fiction, like Emlyn Williams's account of the “Moors murderers” in the 1960s, *Beyond Belief*) to an abundance of films and television documentaries and frequently gory media coverage” (Connelly 2010, p.4).

The representation of the serial killer shifted as the 20th century came to an end. The idea that a serial killer might look like “one of us” expanded to include the idea that everyone has a tiny amount of the serial killer in them. Case studies now focus more on the lives of serial killers rather than the consequences of their crimes (Nasr 2022). As Lebanese researcher and content writer Gaëlle Abou Nasr (2022) has stated in her article, “Serial Killers and their Representation in Pop Culture” -

“The popular imagination's understanding of crime and criminality grew more universal as the twentieth century went on, moving away from cultural barriers. Narratives reflecting humanity's basic nature were extremely prevalent against the backdrop of two World Wars, economic catastrophe, gangsterism, and the emergence of the political extreme right” (Nasr 2022, para.5).

Considerations of taste and morality steadily lagged behind sensationalism in the second half of the 20th century as celebrity culture and the commercialisation of murder grew apace. There was more emphasis being put on which media production hub gets to tell their story, instead of how to get to the bottom of the growing problem. French journalist Robert Conrath has alluded that television rights to Jeffrey Dahmer's story were being negotiated within an hour of his house of slaughter being discovered in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1991. This describes the period's mainstream media fascination with serial murder (Dean & Gabilliet, 1996).

What pushes this fascination with serial killers off the edge is the recognition and empowerment that these perpetrators receive from their sensationalisation in popular media. This recognition not only makes their crimes subject to mainstream discourse but also validates it. Before his execution in 1994, John Wayne Gacy¹, an American serial killer who murdered and raped approximately 33 young men and boys in 1970's suburban Chicago, spoke in a phone conversation with the Knight-Tribune-

“There have been 11 hardcopy books about me, 31 paperbacks, two screenplays, one movie, one off-Broadway play, five songs, and over 5,000 articles” (Nasr, 2022, para.7).

Richard Ramirez, also known as Night Stalker was an American serial killer who was responsible for the death of at least 13 people in California from 1984-85. He was subjected to a considerable amount of sensationalism with numerous cults and fanbases. This empowered him so much as to label his own artworks, *Richard Ramirez: Night Stalker*, demonstrating how serial killers of this era became increasingly conscious of the authority of

¹ John Wayne Gacy was an American serial killer and sex offender who tortured and raped 33 young men and boys. He was known primarily for his get-up as a clown at children's hospitals, parties and charitable events (Wilkinson, 1994).

their brands. He reportedly had his own art dealer because the murderabilia² collectors were so high in demand for his artwork (Nasr 2022).

Apart from popular representation in movies, novels, and poetry, serial killers have found space in documentaries. Documentaries have become an increasingly predominant source of infotainment in the late 20th and 21st centuries.

Documentaries are a form of representation and recreation of past events. According to Lipkin (2011) in his work *Docudrama Performs the Past: Arenas of Argument in Films Based on True Stories* there are three characteristics of documentaries. Firstly, documentaries rely on narrating events based on settings revolving around noteworthy people and significant background elements. Secondly, documentaries offer us a performance of memory, as through the process of viewing these documentaries, the memory of the characters becomes ours. Thirdly, the commitment that documentaries have towards representing the truth in the real events, draws ethical concerns since they have the ability to shape public memory. Even the filmmaker's most objective point of view is inevitably clouded by their own beliefs, assumptions, desires and goals (Lipkin 2011). In other words, documentaries are an unsaid guarantee to narrating past events in actuality, which is often a misrepresentation of the 'truth'. The fictionalisation and dramatisation that occurs in most documentaries have blurred the lines between fiction and documentaries.

This paper seeks to analyse the ways in which the authority of the genre of Serial Killer Documentary is constructed, and its claim on the 'truth' over other forms of entertainment such as docudramas (a subgenre within documentaries), films, television shows, etc. For this purpose, in this paper, we will primarily look at the documentary *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* (Berlinger, 2019a) and how documentaries claim authority over other forms of filmmaking which are 'fictionalised' and therefore, do not transmit the truth in its absolute form, but actually narrativise it for their audience and entertainment.

2. EVOLUTION OF DOCUMENTARIES AND THE RISE OF THE 'SERIAL KILLER' GENRE

The history of documentaries as a kind of filmmaking dates back to the 1800s, when the cinematographe³ was invented. This led to the production of short films depicting everyday scenes, such as a normal day in the life of the average person, generally a factory worker, from various perspectives. In fact, the first films ever made were also documentaries, often referred to as 'actuality films,' that were one minute long and captured real or actual events.

The evolution of actuality films into newsreels, such as Dziga Vertov's 'Kino-Pravda' Newsreel Series (1992), led to the incorporation of politics and propaganda into documentary media. This increased with the rise of Hitler and his propagandist Nazi films, leading to politically commissioned films. The twenty-first century has seen a significant shift in the film industry, particularly for documentary films, due to technological advancements and increased accessibility on streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hotstar, YouTube, and TikTok. Parrot Analytics, a media tracking company, found that the documentary genre has become the fastest-growing segment in the streaming industry, with

² Murderabilia are objects or 'collectibles' that are related to a murder or perpetrators of murders, or even other violent crimes ("MURDERABILIA Definition and Meaning | Collins English Dictionary," 2024).

³ Cinématographe was one of the first motion-picture apparatuses, used as both camera and projector by the invention of Louis and Auguste Lumière, manufacturers of photographic materials in Lyon, France (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998).

the number of documentary series growing by 63% between January 2018 and March 2021 (Parrot Analytics).

To take a look at the works of documentary filmmaker Joe Berlinger, we see that while Serial Killer Documentaries such as the *Paradise Lost* (Berlinger, 1996) and *Brother's Keeper* (Berlinger, 1992) helped him maintain a respectable career, the current boom in the trend of Serial Killer Documentaries enabled him to create monumental hits such as Netflix 2019's *Conversation With a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* (Berlinger, 2019a) and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* (Berlinger, 2021), which had estimated 1.286 billion minutes viewed in its first week alone (Sayles, 2021). This increase of interest in the figure of the serial killer can also be attributed to the fact that the American definition of the serial murder predicament became so influential that British criminologist Keith Soothill (1993) apprehended the construction of a “worldwide serial killer epidemic.”⁴

Moreover, this growing interest was also reinforced by the commodification of serial killers in popular culture (Hier, 2019). We can link the commodification process to the portrayal of Serial Killers as an ‘aesthetic phenomenon.’ The representation of serial killers is constructed by the creator to attract viewers, this leads to the commodification of the serial killer as an image tailored to maximise audience appeal. True Crime Documentaries, podcasts, movies, novels, etc have led to the consolidation of this apparent growing enterprise that Brian Jarvis (2007) describes as “Monster Inc.”

Critics often are wary of the portrayal of serial killers in these documentaries because it is believed that “the truth often takes a back seat to dramatic flair” (Sayles, 2021, para.9). One of the other emerging threads of criticism reads the sub-genre of Serial Killer Documentaries as an exploitative force, wherein it reduces the status of the victim, survivors and eyewitnesses while simultaneously sensationalising the perpetrators. In this context, it becomes important to delve into how these documentaries are received and analysed in society.

The relationship between media and its reception in society is a complicated and dynamic one. Documentaries are subject to diverse interpretations due to the multitude of perspectives that they offer. A significant section of scholars has a very disapproving take on documentaries, especially their perceived monopolisation of what is real. It is crucial to consider how the performative aspects of documentaries shape the audience's memory of real-life events.

The genre of the documentary has been defined in varying ways throughout the years, the most popular one being John Grierson's “the creative treatment of actuality” (Grierson, 1946). An elaboration of a similar idea that grounds this paper's understanding of the genre of the documentary can be seen in Jean Louis Comolli's work. According to him, a documentary film represents a dynamic interplay between fact and fiction, where each element constantly interacts and shapes the other, undergoing continuous change and mutual transformation. Comolli emphasises that a documentary isn't merely a static record of the past; rather, it is inherently influenced by manipulation (Comolli, 2015).

The cognitive theory of documentary perceives their formal construction and portrayal of ‘real’ events as affecting the attitudes, beliefs and thinking of the consumer (Bondebjerg, 2014). The representation gets inherently embedded into the thought process of the viewer

⁴ “The serial killer epidemic”, coined by Keith Soothill, refers to the mass phenomenon of serial killing that originated in Britain and was popularised in the 1970s and 80s via forms of popular media (Grover & Soothill, 1999).

and may show up in their own behaviour and prejudices. We, as viewers, tread a dangerous line with the idea that whatever is presented in documentary forms will, in fact, be adhering to the real, authentic trajectory and actuality of events.

Academic Mallorie M. Latora (2020) states that the whole idea of longevity of a particular documentary allows viewers to explore the depths of the different characters and perceive the nature of events from their perspectives. Consequently, it enables the viewer to develop a certain amount of empathy towards the character, even if the character, in the cases of Serial Killer Documentaries, is a cold-blooded serial killer who has committed the most unspeakable and gory crimes towards their victims. This is a byproduct of how a documentary assists in building an almost intimate and exclusive understanding of the perpetrator, which otherwise the viewer would garner by just reading a newspaper article on the crimes committed by the serial killer.

Furthermore, by the consumption of such content, the viewer feels elevated to the status of a 'pseudo expert' (Murley, 2006), as now they believe that they possess a higher degree of knowledge about the subject. Therefore, here the whole concept of relatability seeps in wherein the once 'scary monster' serial killer is actually a misunderstood soul that the viewers might grow to love over a period of time.

Academic discourse also raises concerns about the rights of the filmmakers overlapping with an individual's right to privacy. Recent literature regarding documentaries and ethics essentially determines two central ethical problems in this regard: Firstly, even though the creators of the documentaries have the liberty to indulge in artistic expression, the problem of "participant consent" (Butchart, 2006) arises, which refers to the protection of rights of the participant in the process of their representation in the documentary. In the specific context of serial killer documentaries, it just so happens that the consent of the victims and survivors of the perpetrators is absent or unenthusiastic (Khlystova-Gowda, 2022). Secondly, despite the fact that the creators do have the freedom to represent people in a certain way, they are still obligated to be socially responsible. Contemporary ethical discourse especially now is trying to subvert the assumption of neutrality of documentary in its visual representation (Butchart, 2006).

One must also examine the ethics and accuracy that go into the process of documentation. Wayne Booth (1961)⁵ introduced the term "unreliable narrator" in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* wherein the unreliable narrator doesn't act in accordance with the norms of the work. In other words, the narrator deviates from the crux of the matter that the implied narrator is trying to convey, thus misleading the audience. This narrator compromises the reader's grasp on the diegetic reality they believe to be viewing (Otway, 2015). This can be seen in serial killer documentaries where the killer is often the narrator of the documentary, like in *Memories of a Murderer: The Nilsen Tapes* (Harte, 2021) where Dennis Nilsen⁶ himself narrates his life and the crimes he's committed. This concept of seeing things from 'their' perspective aids in the creation of a highly influenced understanding of real-life events.

While consuming a documentary with even our most 'objective' lens, it will inescapably be tainted by our root belief systems, preconceived notions, assumptions, and our underlying

⁵ Wayne C. Booth, an American critic and teacher in association with Chicago School of literary criticism (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998b).

⁶ Dennis Andrew Nilsen was a Scottish serial killer and necrophile who murdered twelve young men and boys in London between 1978 and 1983. Nilsen wrote an autobiography and recorded audiotapes, which were explored in Netflix's *Memories of a Murderer: The Nilsen Tapes* (Bellotti, 2021).

desires. So even if there is a concrete, material reality upon which our existence depends, we can only apprehend it through mental representations that at best represent reality and that are largely the product of social creation (Eitzen, 1995). American film critic and theoretician Bill Nichols (1991) in his book, *Representing Reality* elaborates on how the question of power being circulated in discourse cannot truly be understood without knowing how the discourse is perceived and interpreted by the audience.

There is a gap in research done on how this genre of documentaries claims to be an authentic representation of the life and crimes of a serial killer. Perhaps, it is because documentaries have claims both on 'real life' and 'truth' that separates them and puts them higher in comparison to fiction. We, however, propose that documentaries are constructed by rarely visible but highly impactful patterns that are woven into their narratives. By understanding the tropes and patterns these documentaries use, we can deconstruct the authority over truth that documentaries hold within mass media.

3. THE TROPE OF THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes (2019a), a documentary directed by Joe Berlinger, covers over 100 hours of recorded conversations between Ted Bundy and journalist Stephen Michaud before Bundy's death. Ted Bundy, whose full name is Theodore Robert Bundy (November 24, 1946 - January 24, 1989) is known for the murder and sexual assault of over thirty women between 1974 and 1978 and was convicted and executed through the electric chair in Florida on January 24, 1989.

The proliferation of violent crime coverage in newspapers, news broadcasts, and other media outlets serves to inform and instill fear among the general public regarding the external world. Mark Seltzer characterises this phenomenon as constituting a "wound culture," wherein public fascination gravitates towards instances of shock, trauma, and bodily injury. This cultural predisposition towards trauma, etymologically derived from the Greek word for wound, is manifest in American society's embrace of what Seltzer terms "the atrocity exhibition," wherein individuals flaunt their personal traumas as markers of identity or fashion accessories (Seltzer, 2013). Concurrently, the evolution of crime discourse in the nineteenth century precipitated a conceptual shift from the focus on criminal acts to the characterisation of perpetrators, thereby contributing to the emergence of the modern serial killer archetype. Media coverage surrounding serial killers, marked by extensive volume and scope, has effectively perpetuated their notoriety, transforming serial killing from mere criminality into a recognised career path. The media's role in perpetuating a market for death, characterised by the proliferation of serial killer narratives and memorabilia, has facilitated the elevation of serial killers to the status of celebrities in contemporary American society

The documentary attempts to draw subtle connections between the behaviour of the killer in his personal life and that of the nature of crimes he committed. It speculates about how the earliest sign of his temperament and dangerous behavioural patterns of violence and pathological lying can be seen in his childhood. This can be seen primarily in the first episode of the series which covers Bundy's childhood and university days, through the medium of his voice recordings and recent interviews with his friends. Throughout the span of the four episodes, Bundy, who narrated most of the documentary, was also the protagonist of the documentaries. The documentaries, apart from being about him, also gave him the platform to comment on his crimes. This is paradoxical because, not only were his crimes narrated by him (the protagonist) but he was also allotted the space to narrativise his version of the truth in his own words, along with the people who witnessed this in his life.

The narration of Bundy in his own voice, represented an idealised version of his childhood which was in stark contrast to the accounts that the people in his life shared. Bundy elaborates on how normal his childhood was by sharing anecdotes about his adventures with his companions and how he was good at academics and participated in sports. In contrast to this, his childhood friend Sandi Holt comments on how he did not “fit in” (Berlinger, 2019b, 00:17:26-00:17:28) with the rest of his peers despite his Christian and seemingly healthy upbringing. “He had a temper” (Berlinger, 2019b, 00:17:43-00:17:45) she says and points out his aggressive behaviour towards other children. Sandi also counters many of Bundy’s statements and firmly denies any accuracy in his words. The shifting narrative from Bundy’s truth to Sandi’s makes us question the legitimacy of his word throughout the documentaries and even makes him out to be somewhat of an unreliable narrator.

A similar pattern can be seen in *Memories of a Murderer: The Nilsen Tapes* by Michael Harte, where Dennis Nilsen is the primary narrator of the film. Nilsen reads a passage from an article that begins the documentary, which implies that the killer (Nilsen) makes light of his crimes by equating himself with Hannibal Lector from the movie *The Silence of the Lambs*—an implication stemming from a rumour that Nilsen's jail cell is covered in a poster of the fictional character. Reading further, the article goes on to disparage Nilsen by claiming he is "just waiting for his crimes to be immortalised in film" (Harte, 2021, 00:01:54-00:1:57), which is ironic given that the film consciously includes showing the audience this exact moment. In his recordings, Nilsen disputes this charge, labelling it "pure fiction" (Harte, 2021, 00:02:20-00:02:32) and completely discounts the article's veracity. This is a powerful sequence because Nilsen repeatedly states throughout the documentary that he has nothing to lose by hiding the truth. The fact that Nilsen admitted to killing fifteen young men and boys as soon as authorities discovered proof of only one of his crimes serves to support his case.

Like Bundy’s tapes, this documentary too constantly makes the viewer question- ‘Who is telling us the truth? The media, the criminal, or the people being interviewed for these documentaries?’ This tactic of presenting the audience with multiple versions of the truth, distorts the audience’s general perception of serial killers and is reflected in the inconsistency of the number of victims reported on various news and media platforms.

4. DRAMATIC RE-ENACTMENTS

Another device which documentaries employ is the usage of dramatised re-enactments which are meant to represent an event that occurred in the past. This representational footage is seen throughout the three documentaries; in episode 1 of the Bundy tapes, there is a scene of two actors representing Bundy and his then girlfriend, Diane Edwards driving down a highway. This was shot and edited with a vintage and film reel-like style to give the illusion of romantic old Hollywood cinema. These scenes are a visibly romanticised version of what has taken place in actuality. Additionally, in Berlinger’s sister documentary, *Conversations with a Killer: The John Wayne Gacy Tapes* (2022a), multiple scenes are shot in ways that incite feelings of suspense and fear. On the surface, cinematographic devices like zoom-ins and haunting background music seem harmless. But on further examination, these tactics tend to dramatise and fictionalise the sombre reality of the occurred crime. For instance, in the second episode of the Bundy tapes, the discovery of the deceased victims’ remains (usually skulls) were repeatedly shown in an aestheticised fashion through the employment of editing tools like pacing heartbeats and increased change of frames per minute. Similarly, in the *Conversations with a Killer: The John Wayne Gacy Tapes* (2022a), there was an unusual amount of footage that focused on the decayed carcasses of his victims. This style of direction can be analysed as a tool used to creatively re-structure an otherwise accurate representation of events into a dramatic and thus fictionalised narrative.

A contradiction that can be noted in the portrayal of these serial killers in both the documentaries, is the simultaneous representation of the killers as a psychopath/sociopath along with their reassuring humanisation. The Ted Bundy Tapes, which repeatedly featured interviewees accusing Bundy of being a psychopath and a sociopath before any official diagnosis, are one example of a documentary that tends to either misuse and mislabel psychiatric disorders or trivialise mental illness. Stephen Michaud in episode 3, minute 12:36 says that- “To understand how he thought, you have to be able to project yourself into a sociopath’s brain”. TV and News Anchor, Ward Lucas, in episode 3, minute 16:03 of the documentary states- “He was a vicious killer, a psychopath.” He was eventually diagnosed with manic-depressive bipolar disorder by Doctor Dorothy Lewis, the psychiatrist appointed for this case, as shown in episode 4, minute 53:40.

Similarly, in the documentary series *Conversations with a Killer: The John Gacy Tapes*, Gacy was described as a narcissist and a psychopath several times with even his defense attorney, Sam Amirante calling him a “neurotic psychopathic” after Gacy’s psychological evaluation as shown in episode 3, minute 29:20 of the documentary. This damaging narrative that has been consistently followed throughout media involving serial killers perpetuates the belief that all serial killers are sociopaths/psychopaths. Its consequences include waves of mass media producing misinformation with articles like *5 Surefire Signs You're Dealing With A Psychopath* (Morin, 2016) and *10 Signs That Prove You Might Be A Psychopath* (Anand, 2017).

A disturbing element that the Bundy tapes repeatedly stuck to was that of humanising the serial killer. Throughout the documentary, Berlinger included positive and reassuring characteristics about Bundy from his friends, family, lawyers and even the judge of his homicide case of ‘79 with words like “Handsome”, “articulate” and “intelligent” (Berlinger, 2019b, 00:05:24-00:05:33) casually thrown around to describe the killer. His dangerous and manipulative behaviour, while criticised, was also acknowledged and even complimented because of how slyly he managed to get away with his crimes. Friends from his past when interviewed, spoke about the Ted they knew before he was arrested and convicted of his murders with co-worker Marlin Lee Vortman saying, “He was a very nice person. He was the kind of guy you’d want your sister to marry” (Berlinger, 2019b, 00:26:16). Another friend, Michael Preece remarks, “He was a handsome young man that seemed to have his life in order” (Berlinger, 2019c, 00:17:54), describing Bundy as an avid churchgoer and expressing disbelief after finding out about his wrongdoings.

The John Gacy tapes reveal that Gacy's perceived status as an upstanding citizen and the support he received from white Democrats were key factors in his repeated evasion of justice. Even his own counsel, Sam Amirante, who learned of his conviction much later—as seen in episode 1, minute 44:54 of the show—was unaware that he had been found guilty of Sodomy in the neighbourhood in which he was residing. Even after he was convicted of Sodomy in 1968, Gacy turned into a popular figure at the reformatory centre he was admitted to as part of his sentence. Ray Cornell, a fellow inmate, described his mass-recruiting people into the ‘Jaycees,’ a notable civic organisation stating, “This is an example of the man’s abilities and talent” Cornell also spoke of the duality he sees in John Gacy’s nature (Berlinger, 2022b, 00:48:01-00:48:15), highlighting the potential for framing someone who would normally be perceived as a murderer into someone one could harbour empathy for.

In context of the Bundy Tapes, despite the killers’ friends and acquaintances having said these words in good faith, Berlinger including them in this documentary crafts an overall image of Bundy that is more of an intelligent person who has committed mass murder, than a mass murderer who slyly committed crime. Michaud describes the moment when his relationship with Bundy changed from him being “just another goddamn reporter” to “being the conduit for Ted being able to finally tell this story” (Berlinger, 2019b, 00:05:35).

Additionally, the image of Bundy in society was observed to undergo a transformation from a murder suspect to someone so popularised as to be given celebrity-like status. As American Studies student and researcher Yara Kass-Gergi has put in her paper, “Killer Personalities: Serial Killers as Celebrities in Contemporary American Culture,”

“In a culture defined by celebrity, serial killers like Bundy, Dahmer, and Gacy are among the biggest stars of all, recognized by the vast majority of Americans” (Kass-Gergi, 2020c, p.13).

This celebrity status can be attributed to the fact that his trial was one of the first to be nationally televised and recorded. This made his attention-grabbing persona accessible to everyone watching the news and attracted many to his conventional good looks and intelligent displays – characteristics which at the time, were not usually attributed to a serial killer⁷. Furthermore, through the documentary *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes*, we observe how not only his victims, but women at large are represented to be naive and vulnerable. During Bundy’s homicide trial in 1979, women from all over the state gathered and attended his everyday court sessions. When asked why, they reportedly said that they found him fascinating, despite the terror that came with it (Berlinger, 2019e, 00:21:30-00:22:01) Some even asked his lawyer, Margaret Wood to slip notes from them and to give them to Ted (Berlinger, 2019e, 00:21:34). The media portrayal of Bundy till date grabs the attention of young women globally with fanfiction, fan clubs on social media and pornography genres dedicated to him.

Reducing the victims to the status of those who have no tangible identity of their own and are merely limited to the crime that was committed towards them is also noticed throughout the course of the documentary, as Berlinger gives less attention to the individual’s history and instead provides a quick summary of their life. For instance, when Lynda Healy is introduced, we notice how her identity is metamorphosed from that of a young college student with aspirations to being constantly labelled as Bundy’s “victim number one.” On that account, victimhood is the only lens through which victims are represented.

5. GENDERED PREYS AND PREDATORS

The documentary reduces the identity of women to that of victims. For example, by showing a Seattle news anchor asking girls to avoid the alleys and to always travel in groups of two or three, there is an implication of shifting the responsibility of the crime to the victim. Similarly, the employment of the stylistic choices made by the creators of the documentaries also materialises these implications. For example, in the context of Bundy’s commentary regarding how he chooses his victims, the creators insert a series of clips of women in the documentary by using the technique of zooming in on different parts of the women’s body such as the breasts and bottom of skirts and dresses. This visual stylistic choice objectifies women and can be analysed from the framework given by film critic and feminist theorist Laura Mulvey who states in her essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975)

“Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between looks on either side of the screen” (p.11).

⁷ According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, attributes of a serial killer include lack of remorse or guilt, the need of control, predatory behaviour, impulsivity and sensation seeking (*Serial Murder*, 2016).

Mulvey highlights the fetishisation of female characters observed in cinema and talks about how cinema goes beyond a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness (Mulvey, 1975). She asserts that the viewer's understanding of a film is deeply influenced by the gaze of the camera, which happens to be a male one. Moreover, due to the fragmented nature of the representation of the female, the authority of the male figure is maintained. Therefore, this very stylistic choice not only objectifies women but also implies that due to the existence of predators, women are the ones who actually need to be careful of their actions and behaviour, not the perpetrator. This, once again, reinforces a victim-blaming attitude and distracts the viewer from the crimes committed by Bundy, even if they do so momentarily.

Therefore, when it reduces the status of the women who were subjected to Bundy's crimes, it alters the truth by erasing their identities and instead focusing on Bundy's 'charming personality'. This is very harmful because it blurs the line between documentaries, a genre that is supposed to illustrate the truth, and a more fictionalised genre of media representation.

6. SERIAL KILLER DOCUMENTARIES AND AUDIENCE RECEPTION

A huge role is also played by the audience/viewer/recipient of the documentary. They are the people to whom the reception of the content of the documentary ultimately falls upon. Here the work of Stuart Hall (1973) "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse" becomes extremely relevant as it explains how a society decodes a certain text or, in other words, assigns meaning to a text that is encoded with a certain message. Hall (1973) comments that "It is this set of decoded meanings which 'have an effect,' influence, entertain, instruct, or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences" (p.3).

Due to Bundy's personality, looks, intelligence and socio-political background he was subjected to certain privileges by the legal system. However, the choices made by the documentary throughout the course of four episodes reinforce the privilege, rather than criticising it. The first being the way in which the documentary contributes to the representation of Bundy's privilege, by continuously focusing on his personality and physical appearance. For instance, the very first episode named as the "Handsome Devil" is entirely about his childhood which represents Ted Bundy in a positive light. The first episode portrays him in a favourable manner, describing him as a person with an 'All-American Childhood' (Nield, 2020). He went to the church, was a part of the boy-scouts and was constantly surrounded by an affectionate group of family and friends. The documentary takes a step further and also reveals Bundy's aspirations to become a lawyer or a politician. The documentary directs his ultimate identity away from the fact that he is a serial killer, and affords him the opportunity to be remembered as a very intelligent and charming individual.

Secondly, the documentary further reinforces his privilege by choosing to show the amount of leeway Bundy received during his trial and when he was in custody. This contrasts to the ground reality of other criminals who were always given very limited freedom when in custody. One of the incidents which really displays his privilege was when his wife (not his wife when these instances occurred) would visit him in prison and they would have sexual intercourse without having access to judicial conjugal rights. She also gave birth to their daughter while he was on death row (Berlinger, 2019e, 00:43:50-00:44:22). In episode three, Bundy's successful escape has been described, when he managed to escape from the second story of the courthouse because he was left alone and unsupervised in the library. While the documentary does give us perspectives of Charles Leidner, the defense attorney for the Campbell's case and Ward Lucas, a television radio reporter, both of whom criticise the security measures. However, both of them criticise the sheriff's departments but ignore the larger conversation of privilege due to which this happened in the first place.

7. UNDERSTANDING HOW DOCUMENTARIES CONSTRUCT REALITIES

It can be very hard to conclude who and what to believe in today's media-saturated environment. Documentary practitioners are continually challenged by questions about the nature of documentary 'truth;' from examining the conventions of documentary realism to renegotiating the terms of documentary's truth contract with its audience. This is due to the blurring of the lines between documentary and fiction, within the aesthetics of contemporary filmmaking.

The presence of an unreliable narrator compromises the reader's grasp of the diegetic reality that they believe to be viewing. The concept of an unreliable narrator becomes even more complex when applied to documentary as it stirs up sensitive questions about truth, lies, and power embedded in authorship (Otway, 2015). The presence of an unreliable narrator challenges the documentary's claim to truth, especially when they are of compromised credibility. We have observed this in our analysis of the documentaries above, where a serial killer- a convict and someone even clinically diagnosed as a pathological liar- narrates their story to us.

The truth attached to documentary filmmaking is a highly inconsistent and an unpredictable concept. It is difficult to apply the label of 'truth' to documentary texts without having the knowledge of out-of-footage, real-time events. As stated by John Ellis (2021), if we wish to understand the relationship between truth and documentary, we must use two linked approaches- "the application of genre theory, and an overall understanding of documentary footage as evidence of particular events" (p.140). According to Ellis (2021), these approaches provide us with a philosophical set-up that concentrates on the idea of 'evidence' rather than 'observation' (p.140). Ellis (2021) introduces the conflict of truth in documentaries by stating that "the truthfulness of documentaries is decided in the conflict between these knowledge and beliefs, which are differentially held by groups and individuals" (p.141).

Documentary as a genre of filmmaking and the technique of fiction have an unstable relationship, especially when we notice how filmmakers employ various fiction techniques to capture the many moments in history. Documentaries use 'elision of time' which essentially means that there is no difference between a fictional edit and a factual edit of an instance. This is because, as the creator of the documentary, the filmmaker wants to employ the most accessible way in which an action can be presented. These techniques of filmmaking are no longer accepted to be truthful. Furthermore, there is a greater employment of fictional techniques in the construction of evidence in the form of text presented in the documentary.

Therefore, all these factors play a pertinent role in constructing a reality that is represented by the documentary. This is because, 'documentary' as a genre, attempts to give the viewer an understanding of a specific topic, by getting into the intricacies of it. For instance, the *Conversations with a Killer: Ted Bundy Tapes (2019a)*, gives the viewer a case study of Ted Bundy through his recorded tapes and the interviews of the people involved with his case. This gives the viewer an insight into what happened during that period of time. However, it is problematised when the lines blur between fiction and reality. This is because the moment a camera enters any sort of realm, a certain degree of fictionalisation becomes inevitable. Fictionalisation is one of the many ways in which the documentary creates a constructed reality for the viewer, by conveying what the documentary believes to be the truth.

The best approach to understanding the idea of documentary truth is to think of it as the truth we uncover in the way we mentally organise our perceptions. The idea that a film text contains an inherent truth is eroding, as the theoretical understanding of documentaries shifts more and more in favour of "how texts are read" (Jordan, 2003).

Bill Nichols, an American film critic and theoretician, suggests what makes documentaries more ‘real’ than fiction. According to Nichols, in documentary footage “some quality of the moment persists outside the grip of textual organisation” (Nichols, 1991, p.231). The ability of the photographic image to instill a belief in the presence of what is portrayed, beyond its filmic depiction is therefore a determinant in how we understand documentary.

In conclusion, our study aligns with Williams’ purport of documentaries as “not as an essence of truth but as a set of strategies designed to choose from among a horizon of relative and contingent truths” (Williams, 1993, p.14). The observations made through the analysis of the primary text, *Conversations with a Killer: Ted Bundy Tapes (2019)*, enable us to conclude that documentaries are encoded to project a constructed reality of the events to the viewers. This constructed reality observed in the documentary represents the creator’s understanding of the truth and not the factual truth. Therefore, for a documentary to claim authority as a text that represents the ‘true nature of events’ is inconsistent with the choices it makes to represent the ‘factual’ information that it gathers.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- Anand, H. (2017, January 29). *10 signs that prove you might be a psychopath*. MensXP. <https://www.mensxp.com/special-features/today/30193-10-signs-that-prove-you-might-be-a-psychopath.html>.
- Bellotti, A. (2021, August 23). *Killer Dennis Nilsen bathed with corpses and flushed body parts down the toilet*. The Mirror. <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/killer-dennis-nilsen-bathed-corpse-24819540>
- Berlinger, J. (Director). (1992, September 9). *Brother’s Keeper*. American Playhouse, Creative THinking International Ltd, Hand To Mouth Productions.
- Berlinger, J. (Director). (1996, June 10). *Paradise Lost*. Creative Thinking International Ltd.
- Berlinger, J. (Director). (2019a). *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes*.
- Berlinger, J. (Director). (2019b). Handsome Devil (season 1, episode 1). Elastic, Gigantic Studios, Outpost Digital, RadicalMedia.
- Berlinger, J. (Director). (2019c). One of Us (season 1, episode 2). Elastic, Gigantic Studios, Outpost Digital, RadicalMedia.
- Berlinger, J. (Director). (2019e). Burn Bundy Burn (season 1, episode 4). Elastic, Gigantic Studios, Outpost Digital, RadicalMedia.
- Berlinger, J. (Director). (2021, February 10). *Crime scene: Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*. Third Eye Motion Pictures.
- Berlinger, J. (Director). (2022a). *Conversations with a Killer: The John Wayne Gacy Tapes*.
- Berlinger, J. (Director). (2022b, April 20). The Life of the Party (season 1, episode 1). <https://www.netflix.com/search?q=gacy&jbv=81298614>
- Bondebjerg, I. (2014). Documentary and Cognitive Theory: narrative, emotion and memory. *Media and Communication*, 2(1), 13–22. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v2i1.17>
- Booth, W. C. (1961). *The rhetoric of fiction*. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA00497536>
- Butchart, G. C. (2006). On Ethics and Documentary: A real and Actual truth. *Communication Theory*, 16(4), 427–452. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2006.00279.x>

- Comolli, J. (2015). Cinema against Spectacle: Technique and ideology revisited. In Amsterdam University Press eBooks. <https://doi.org/10.5117/9789089645548>
- Connelly, J. (2010). *The representations of serial killers* [PhD Dissertation, University of Stirling]. <https://dspace.stir.ac.uk/bitstream/1893/3438/1/The%20Representations%20of%20Serial%20Killers.pdf>
- Dean, J. R., & Gabilliet, J. (1996). *European Readings of American Popular Culture*. Praeger.
- Documentaries become fastest-growing streaming genre.* (n.d.). Parrot Analytics. <https://www.parrotanalytics.com/press/documentaries-become-fastest-growing-streaming-genre-2/>
- Eitzen, D. S. (1995). When is a documentary?: Documentary as a mode of reception. *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, 35(1), 81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1225809>
- Ellis, J. (2021). How documentaries mark themselves out from fiction: a genre-based approach. *Studies in Documentary Film*, 15(2), 140–150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17503280.2021.1923144>
- Grover, C., & Soothill, K. (1999). British serial killing: towards a structural explanation. *ResearchGate*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242186725_British_serial_killing_towards_a_structural_explanation
- Grierson, J., & Hardy, F. (1946). Grierson on documentary. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA30835751>
- Hall, S. (1973). *Encoding and decoding in the television discourse*.
- Harris, T. (1991). *The Silence of the Lambs*. Strong Heart Productions.
- Harte, M. (Director). (2021). *Memories of a Murderer: The Nilsen Tapes*.
- Hickey, E. W. (2006). *Serial Murderers and their victims*. Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Hier, S. P. (2019). Almost famous: Peter Woodcock, media framing, and obscurity in the cultural construction of a serial killer. *Crime, Media, Culture*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659019874171>
- Hitchcock, A. (Director). (1960). *Psycho*. Universal Pictures, Paramount Pictures.
- Jarvis, B. (2007). Monsters Inc.: Serial killers and consumer culture. *Crime, Media, Culture*, 3(3), 326–344. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659007082469>
- Jordan, R. (2003). *The Gap: Documentary Truth between Reality and Perception*. <https://offscreen.com/view/documentary#fn-9-a>
- Kass-Gergi, Y. (2020c). Killer Personalities: Serial killers as celebrities in contemporary American culture. <https://doi.org/10.14418/wes01.1.855>
- Khlystova-Gowda, K. (2022, November 29). *Glorification of Serial killers: How the law fails to protect families of the victims*. Cardozo AELJ. <https://cardozoaelj.com/2022/11/29/glorification-of-serial-killers-how-the-law-fails-to-protect-families-of-the-victims/>
- Latora, M. M. (2020). *Netflix and Kill: A Framing and Uses and Gratifications Comparative analysis of Serial killer representations in the media*. <https://doi.org/10.30707/etd2020.1606247535.292018av>
- Lipkin, S. N. (2011). *Docudrama performs the past: Arenas of Argument in Films Based on True Stories*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Morin, A. (2016, January 30). 5 Surefire signs you're dealing with a psychopath. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/amymorin/2016/01/30/5-surefire-signs-youre-dealing-with-a-psychopath/>

- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6–18. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>
- MURDERABILIA definition and meaning | Collins English Dictionary. (2024). In *Collins Dictionaries*. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/murderabilia>
- Murley, J. (2006). Natural born celebrities: serial killers in American culture. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 39(5), 912–914. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2006.00320.x>
- Nasr, G. A. (2022, February 5). Serial Killers and their Representation in Pop Culture. *Arcadia*. <https://www.byarcadia.org/post/serial-killers-and-their-representation-in-pop-culture>
- Nichols, B. (1991). *Representing reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Indiana University Press.
- Nield, M. (2020). *Charming Child-Snatchers: Forming the Bogeyman in The Pied Piper, Peter Pan, and The Ted Bundy Tapes*[Theses and Dissertations, Brigham Young University]. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=9433&context=etd>
- Otway. (2015). The unreliable narrator in documentary. *Journal of Film and Video*, 67(3–4), 3–23. <https://doi.org/10.5406/jfilmvideo.67.3-4.0003>
- Sayles, J. (2021, July 9). We're watching more true crime than ever. Is that a problem? *The Ringer*. <https://www.theringer.com/tv/2021/7/9/22567381/true-crime-documentaries-boom-bubble-netflix-hbo>
- Seltzer, M. (2013). *Serial killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*. Routledge.
- Shelley, M. (1818). *Frankenstein*. In *Oxford University Press eBooks*.
- Soothill, K. (1993). The serial killer industry. *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry*, 4(2), 344. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585189308407983>
- The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. (1998, July 20). *Cinematographe | Inventors, Description, & Facts*. Encyclopaedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/technology/Cinematographe>
- The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. (1998b, July 20). *Wayne C. Booth | Rhetorical Criticism, Narrative Theory & Chicago School*. Encyclopaedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Wayne-C-Booth>
- Wilkinson, A. (1994, April 11). Conversations with a Killer. *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1994/04/18/conversations-with-a-killer>
- Williams, L. (1993). Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary. *Film Quarterly*, 46(3), 9–21. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1212899>

How to cite this article: Chauhan, A., Alappat, J. & Raturi, P. (2024). Deconstructing True Crime, Reconstructing 'Truth': An Analysis of Netflix's *Conversation with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes*. *Vantage: Journal of Thematic Analysis*, 5(1), 34-47

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52253/vjta.2024.v05i01.05>

© The Author(s) 2024.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) which permits its use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.