

## 8 Better the Devil You Know

### Nostalgia for the Captured Killer in Netflix's *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes*

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#### INTRODUCTION

Two days before his execution, convicted killer Ted Bundy confessed to the murder of over 30 young women in the Pacific North West of America and in the state of Florida. In an effort to buy another stay of execution, Bundy finally admitted his guilt and gave further details of his heinous crimes. Despite the horrors committed by the man, Bundy remains mythical and legendary in the world of true crime. In the 2019 Netflix four-part docu-series *Conversations with A Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes*, recordings of Bundy himself are gathered alongside real news footage, courtroom footage, and police reports from the investigation, man hunt, and subsequent trial and execution. This chapter explores the nostalgia contained within the series for a simpler time when America knew who its killers were; a nostalgia driven by the events of September 11, 2001, which caused a shift in the American collective psyche. The US apparently faced a new danger after 9/11, one that was large scale, organized, and capable of mass murder on an unprecedented level. The serial killer by comparison, as a ubiquitously American figure, represents a simpler threat from a simpler time when evil had a single and knowable face. This chapter considers Bundy's actions and the police investigation as it is presented in *Conversations with A Killer* through the conceit of the sepia tinted footage, the analogue tape recorder motif, and the 1970s synthesizer musical score. With an almost fond look back at Bundy, *Conversations with A Killer* offers viewers a safe vision of America, an America where devils are known, caught, and brought to justice, and the crime story has a resolution. The so called "war on terror" has yet to see a resolution, despite the killing of Osama Bin Laden in 2011, who was for many Americans, the single face to blame for the atrocities of 9/11. The celebrations of Bin Laden's death mirror the celebrations of Bundy's death, with chanting, drinking, and the waving of placards in the streets. *Conversations with A Killer* offers no new information on Bundy; instead, the series fulfills the need for content that presents an America well able to capture and punish those that do harm to US citizens.

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True crime has seen an explosion in mainstream popularity in recent years. Netflix has extensively added to its library of true crime documentaries like those seen on HBO and Lifetime, and there has been a notable increase in true crime podcasts and social media pages dedicated to this content. There are several iconic accounts of serial killers in literature; for example, Michelle McNamara's personal pursuit of Joseph DeAngelo, the Golden State Killer, in *I'll Be Gone In The Dark* (2018) and Ann Rule's account of knowing and working alongside Ted Bundy in *The Stranger Beside Me* (1980), which were both featured on the *New York Times* best-seller list. With a strong presence across all tiers of television, the serial killer is a cornerstone of popular entertainment. Scholars have long puzzled over why this kind of barbarity makes such a prevalent subject for TV content. Philip Simpson suggests that the serial killer narrative and the public reaction to him "suits the narrative conventions of folklore." Simpson goes on to speculate upon why the popularity of the serial killer has increased in recent years by pointing to their "legendary status [developed by and in] the technocratic era primarily through television."<sup>1</sup> Agreeing with Simpson, Cavander Gray and Lisa Bond-Maupin suggest that serial killer television content supplies the fear and the tension of a good TV drama and at the same time reassurance through the representation of the murderer as "other," deviant, and importantly, caught.<sup>2</sup> Such content goes into as much detail as it can, poring over crime scene photos, locations, and evidence. Such detail on the forensics says Stella Bruzzi, is an "almost fetishistic, fixation on evidence."<sup>3</sup> The presentation of such detail is "evidence verité," with "real" footage of victims, crime scenes, arrests and even confessions shown to the audience as it is shown and used as evidence in court, effectively placing the viewer in a position of investigator or prosecutor (Silbey, quoted in Bruzzi<sup>4</sup>).

Victoria Smith argues that on television the serial killer has entered fictional drama and become a "conflation [with the] superhero [which is] a sign of current American culture in its depiction of a reaction to powerlessness in the face of nameless/faceless terror."<sup>5</sup> Discussing *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006–2013), Smith is implying the acceptance into US culture of the serial killer, a figure who has become inevitable and in turn, inflated to audience fascination and even admiration. *Conversations with a Killer* and the pattern of similar content, as referenced by Norman Denzin,<sup>6</sup> offers valuable insight into why a culture has such a fixation on serial murder. With such a frequency of real murder on television and in keeping with the theme of this collection, Douglas Kellner explores the media spectacle witnessed by millions on 9/11 and how it "took over TV programming for the [following] three days."<sup>7</sup> Bundy's trial was the first to be televised in such a way with the jury verdict interrupting regular scheduled programming. Bundy however, had a conclusion to his story and his media spectacle. Kellner tells us that the spectacle and subsequent fear after 9/11 meant that American citizens could "not be certain how the drama would end or if order would be restored."<sup>8</sup>

## NETFLIX AND THE SERIAL KILLER INDUSTRY

*Conversations with A Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* presents the actions of convicted serial murderer Ted Bundy through his own recorded words and the remembrances of those tasked to find him, defend him, prosecute and execute him. Between 1974 and 1978, Bundy snatched and brutally murdered over 30 women across a number of States: Washington, Idaho, Utah, Colorado, and Florida. In 1976, Bundy was arrested for the kidnapping of Carol DaRonch and sent to prison in Utah. After further detective work, police charged Bundy with the murder of Caryn Campbell and he was transferred to a state prison in Aspen, Colorado to await his trial. Bundy elected to represent himself and was allowed to walk freely around the law library. When under the supposed watch of Colorado deputies, Bundy leapt from a second-floor window and ran off into the mountains. Six days later, Bundy was caught and returned to jail. During this period, Bundy lost weight enough to be able to escape again through a narrow duct, and then made his way to Florida. In February 1978, Bundy broke into the Florida State University Chi Omega sorority house and viciously attacked four female co-eds, killing Margaret Bowman and Lisa Levy. Four weeks later, Bundy kidnapped and killed 12-year-old Kimberly Leach. Bundy was eventually arrested in 1979 and sentenced to death in the electric chair. Bundy awaited his fate on Death Row until 1989, when despite appeals and the exchange of detailed confessions for stays of execution, Bundy received his sentence by the State of Florida. On January 24, 1989 at Florida State Prison, Bundy was executed while crowds gathered outside the fences with beers, placards, pins, and homemade commemorative T-shirts.

This is a story familiar to many, yet this and most of the other big names of true crime and the serial killer industry, have their stories told and repeatedly retold across various media. Books, TV series, *Dateline* episodes, movies, podcasts, and now full season docuseries on Netflix have all covered the story of the despicable Ted Bundy. *Conversations with A Killer* brings no new evidence to the table, nor does it tell us much about who his victims were. It barely touches upon the most loathsome aspects of his crimes: the rapes, the torture, and the necrophilia. Instead, *Conversations with a Killer* presents Bundy as an enigma—as a puzzle to be solved—and most worryingly, as a figure to be in awe of. *Conversations with a Killer* presents a nostalgic look at the 1970s and the actions of a serial murderer. Chief Content Officer of Netflix, Ted Sarandos said if “somebody has a great take on something that is hugely familiar,” then such content with repetition and cultural references, familiar characters and monsters serves the Netflix algorithm and strategy of recommendations.<sup>9</sup> The full season drop of the retelling of a known story further perpetuates the temporal duality of true crime. The series is available all at once on demand, rather than unfolding over a number of weeks, supporting the presentation of the serial killer in a “simultaneous existence as a re-enactment of events

that have concluded and an enactment of those events as if they have not happened yet.”<sup>10</sup>

## FALSE NOSTALGIA

The Netflix interface allows the viewer to skip the title sequence, which in theory could make the title sequence of Netflix content insignificant. However, in recent years, titles have seen a resurgence that have made some worthy of acknowledgement and according to Patrick Clair, the titles designer for *True Detective* (HBO, 2014–2019), “worth watching again and again.”<sup>11</sup> Netflix has other series with noteworthy titles: *Stranger Things* (2016–), *Bloodline* (2015–2017), and *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (Netflix, 2015–2019); all of which command repeated viewing instead of hitting that skip button. *Conversations with a Killer* features titles that both align the show with its general feeling of nostalgia for the 1970s and more harrowingly, aligns Bundy’s words with his claim that pornography was to blame for his crimes. Creator of the titles Lisa Bolan stated that Bundy’s “warped sense of self [...] inspired the idea of using a clear cassette tape as a lens through which we see from his point of view the real Ted.”<sup>12</sup> The real Ted, as we see throughout *Conversations with a Killer*, was arrogant, deluded, and entirely lacking in remorse. The title sequence steeps Bundy’s crimes in a warm nostalgia and the presentation of pictures of his victims alongside softcore pornographic images supports Bundy’s later claims that pornography was to blame for making him commit serial murder of women. In short, the titles move the blame away from Bundy.

The music on the titles and throughout the series features synthesizer brass and strings, with timbres and reverb synonymous with 1970s and 1980s sounds. The titles open with the pressing of record on a tape deck, close-up and fetishized, with slow paced synths mixed with the echoing of Bundy’s words over sepia tinted images of his past and images of a wholesome childhood. A softcore yet highly sexualized image of a model appears, immediately followed with the faces of Denise Naslund and Georgann Hawkins, and then a headline about a missing girl. Next, more pornographic images of women, still with the slow, dreamy synth mixed with Bundy’s words, before the tape counter clicks over from 74 to 75, the years when Bundy committed many of his crimes. The pace picks up and images of Bundy, a skull, print headlines, and his car move underneath the clear tape in collage with more pornographic images of women. The image of Brenda Ball joins Naslund and Hawkins, in a collection of images of Bundy’s car, crowbar, and maps of where he killed. This merging of victim and pornography simplifies before we have even been (re)told the story what happened and why. Starting with a gentle look at Bundy’s early years, the pornographic image is presented to us before the first image of a victim. That this comes first clearly adds support to Bundy’s ridiculous and

insulting excuse that pornography was to blame. The nostalgia for such a time as presented on these titles, through the tint and the tone, is reflected throughout the series for a simpler time when evil made sense.

*Conversations with a Killer* offers a vehicle in which to “wallow, wince and withstand” Bundy’s past<sup>13</sup>, and by not offering any new information, the retelling of this harrowing story further perpetuates both the man as misplaced myth and encourages a feeling of nostalgia—“a bittersweet emotion [...] tinged with regret.”<sup>14</sup> The regret felt by the viewer and those tasked with catching Bundy arises in the despair over what Bundy got away with, and for so long. A despair that, as I shall explore later, turns to awe. Bundy’s active years of serial murder in the late 1970s are presented with stock footage of the locations of his crimes overlaid with Bundy’s recorded words from the tapes. Episode 1, “Handsome Devil,” takes us to Lake Sammamish, Washington State, where Bundy abducted two women on the same day, Denise Naslund and Janice Ott. We take a journey through the sunny park on July 14, 1974. The footage flickers and gently clicks as the reel moves through the projector. We can see the sprocket holes on the left-hand side of the sepia tinted and scratched film stock. Young people lie in the sun, have picnics, play sports, dance, waterski, and swim, while the Rainer Goodtime Band plays chirpy upbeat music to accompany the wholesome activities. We are presented with a false image of the 1970s, a “decade remembered as one of freedom and self-expression” when in fact, the decade was angry, turbulent<sup>15</sup> and “one of judgement and repression.”<sup>16</sup> When Bundy shattered the picture-perfect day at Lake Sammamish, the score changes accordingly. The gentle whirring of the projector gives way to a rising synth string as the young folks mill around while police cars appear and posters declaring the girls missing are posted around the park. Bundy, it seems, has broken this peaceful idyll, this wholesome image of the 1970s.

This 1970s, however, is fabricated for a manufactured nostalgia—it is a “marketable commodity.” The outlook formed by every generation is “formed by events occurring when that generation is most impressionable [...] a feeling of being or having been integrated into a time imparts a sense of belonging and purpose.”<sup>17</sup> *Conversations with a Killer* collects together those that interviewed, chased, tried, defended, prosecuted, and even escaped from Bundy to recount his story. Seeing that the docuseries presents us with nothing new, one might ask: Why tell the story again? We have already seen that the crime story suits television’s structures and that *Conversations with a Killer* wallows in the murky tale, but for those that were directly involved, why revisit such horrors? Nostalgia while being bittersweet also invokes a sense of being whole, of belonging. The various police and reporters, even witnesses, belong to Bundy. In the 1970s and in the subsequent trials in the 1980s, Bundy gave them purpose and was the basis of key events in their lives when they were young and impressionable. Many of those involved with Bundy were in the early and formative

years of their lives or their careers: Ward Lucas was a young TV reporter; Kathleen McChesney was a young detective; Margaret Good was a young idealistic defense attorney for Bundy; and Polly Nelson was only a junior associate at her law firm with no experience in criminal law or the process of appeals before she secured three stays of execution for Bundy when he was on Death Row. However, as much as their nostalgia for the 1970s is tinged with murder and regret, they, or rather those that wanted it so, can look back at the Bundy tale with some degree of satisfaction and control as the State delivered the ultimate punishment and executed Bundy in 1989. This end to the tale provides a sense of control and importantly for this discussion of the place of the serial killer in a world post-9/11, a keen sense of closure. Bundy's story and reign of terror is most definitely over. Nostalgia for those involved in the Bundy case, and for those that seek out this same story to be told over and over again, is based in the need for the comfort and reassurance in a story of good versus evil where good triumphs over evil. In an America post-9/11, perceived evil is a constant and ever-present threat with little to no closure. The captured serial killer (Bundy, Gacy, Dahmer, Wuornos) is an iconic image of "Americana" and "folksiness [...] even a perverse kind of nostalgic fondness" for a time when the enemy was a single and simple figure.<sup>18</sup>

## AMERICA'S MONSTERS

America has a long and "proud" history of the serial killer. That the figure of the serial murderer is so linked with the USA is not a symptom of an anti-American rhetoric, but rather of a "misplaced sense of national pride."<sup>19</sup> America aligns itself with the serial killer and their "achievements." David Schmid explains:

I propose that we [America] acknowledge that the serial killer is as quintessentially American figure as the cowboy, and we should acknowledge this fact not least because the intrinsic Americanness of the serial killer has been a feature of writing about serial murder since the time of Jack the Ripper [many claimed that the Ripper was an American man visiting London], some sixty years before the category of 'serial murder' even came into being. In the words of a 1994 *National Enquirer* headline: Serial Killers are as American as Apple Pie.<sup>20</sup>

The single, white, lone killer is a threat that America can both deal with and understand. Conspiracy theories aside, America loves a simple tale with a closed ending. Lee Harvey Oswald: assassin, one man, shot dead in an act of revenge by another lone man, Jack Ruby. John Wayne Gacy: serial murderer, arrested, confessed, and executed by the state. Timothy McVeigh: domestic terrorist acting alone, arrested, and executed by the state. Ted Bundy: serial rapist and murderer eventually caught, imprisoned,

and executed by the state. America understands and can cope with the single killer—the “lone nut”—for these figures meet their comeuppance at the hands of either good old-fashioned romanticized revenge (in the case of Oswald) or righteous American justice at the hands of the state. The foreign terrorist with a cell of organized support is both highly complex and, importantly for this discussion, is “other.” *Conversations with a Killer* then, feeds the need for nostalgia for an America when killers were American, white, and acting alone, and successfully brought to justice. The events of 9/11 demonstrated to the citizens of the US in no uncertain terms that there were complex and organized groups outside of US borders that were “committed to wreaking maximum destruction on the US and it was not certain how the drama would end or if order would be restored.”<sup>21</sup> When America catches and punishes a serial killer, the order is restored. When America was attacked on 9/11, the lack of closure (still to this day) leaves any sense of American peace and justice entirely unbalanced. That large scale terrorism causes such unease and fear of the “other,” the all-American serial killer tale, with a closed ending, provides solace and supports feelings of security and pride in America and her competence and strength.

## PRIDE IN BUNDY

*Conversations with a Killer* does little to honor the women who were murdered or attacked by Bundy. Instead, the series and those that recount their stories speak more of being in awe of the killer. Bundy is variously described as “enigma” (interviewer Hugh Aynesworth), as a “mystery” to be solved (Utah State prison psychologist Al Carlisle), and as “significant” (Ward Lucas, TV news reporter). Kathleen McChesney describes him as “creative,” and in Episode 3, “Not My Turn to Watch Him,” Sheriff Ken Kitsaves wears an expression of wonder as he recounts the high number of murdered women across so many states, a number possibly in the triple digits. Kitsaves later recalls how he realized when Bundy’s identity was finally understood, after he was arrested for the Chi Omega murders, that “somebody very special [was] being held.” Kitsaves also shows pride in himself and his team when they finally get the imprint of Bundy’s teeth as hard evidence that it was Bundy who savagely bit the FSU co-eds during the attack—Kitsaves is proud that he outmaneuvered the extraordinary Bundy. For *Conversations* and those that are featured in it, Bundy is superhuman and Bundy is the star. Indeed, for the serial killer industry more broadly, Peter Vronsky identified the shift from the serial murderer as a repellant monster to a superhuman star with the vast media coverage of Bundy and his trials.<sup>22</sup> James Alan Fox agrees, explaining that the modern image of such killers goes to great extents to paint them as unusually and remarkably handsome, charming, and mesmerizing.<sup>23</sup> In Episode 2, even the title points to this sense of awe and pride in the serial killer: “One of Us.” This episode recounts when Bundy began to talk of the “entity” inside him; how

on the outside, Bundy did not appear to be a monster, he appeared safe and pleasant. That the dark side of Bundy was described by Ted himself and perpetuated by the interviewers further endorses Bundy as superhuman, as something else, something to wonder at and about, and crucially, as one of us—as an American.

At the end of Episode 1, “Handsome Devil,” interviewer Stephen Michaud has an idea to get Bundy to talk. Sitting in a room with the murderer in 1981, Michaud tells us of his frustration that the taped sessions were getting nowhere, with Bundy refusing to talk candidly about the crimes of which he has been convicted. Michaud has a flash of insight and appeals to Bundy’s egotistical nature—the Bundy who thinks he is smarter than everyone else. If Bundy won’t comment personally on the crimes, then perhaps, Michaud suggests, Bundy could speculate on what the perpetrator *might* have done. Michaud convinces Bundy to talk about the crimes in the third person; Michaud has in his own description, “unlocked Ted.” He has unlocked and got one over on the great genius serial killer. Bundy, however, does not realize he has been tricked so to speak; instead, he is overcome by the opportunity to talk about himself—albeit in the third person—for hundreds of hours, but also to present himself as a mastermind of the behavior of others. Bundy did study psychology for a while and like most of his academic pursuits, he failed at this one too. But such was his ego that even with a cursory semester studying the human condition Bundy felt he was an expert, *the* expert, on the subject.

We have already seen that Bundy was described using words of awe and wonder: Bundy the enigma, Bundy the mystery. With the smallest of actions Bundy’s moves were heralded as genius, despite such actions being simple and obvious. He changed the side his hair was parted on for a police lineup, grew facial hair, shaved facial hair. When the heat got too much in Washington State, he moved across state lines to avoid arrest. Hardly the actions of a genius, but by holding Bundy up in this way the discourse around the man and his crimes and the attempts to solve and catch him always stayed in the favor of the authorities. The police and the FBI remain on top because Bundy was such a genius it is therefore not their fault that they took so long to catch him and then fail on two occasions to keep hold of him. The reputation of the authorities stays intact. In Episode 3, “Not My Turn to Watch Him,” the title of the episode alone points to the shifting of blame even inside the police department. Bundy was left alone, unshackled, by an open window. Later, Bundy escaped from his cell and to fool the guard, he piled books under his bedclothes. Throughout *Conversations with a Killer*, the onus is put not on the ineptitude of the police and the problems exacerbated by state forces refusing to share information, but instead on Bundy’s brilliance—how Bundy is always one step ahead. Carol DaRonch, who escaped Bundy’s kidnapping attempt, shows the only infurination in the amount of time it was taking to catch him. She recalls wondering in frustration in August 1975, “Why can’t they find this man?”

The law enforcement agents are always left unblemished; they are the folk heroes to Bundy as the folk devil. Throughout *Conversations with a Killer*, detectives and police sheriffs, lawyers and the press, “insert themselves into the narrative and offer unchallenged expert testimonies as to the pursuit of the individual killer, the narrative of serial murder and the best methods by which to fight it.”<sup>24</sup> In the docuseries, Bundy still is held up as a genius and the failings of the police are never under scrutiny, which leaves the reputation of the authorities intact. This rhetoric of omitting scrutiny repeats itself throughout American history and in its culture. With no discussion of the errors made during the Bundy saga, the same happens again in post-9/11 discourse. The discussion remains wholly one sided: the terrorist is the one to do harm, he is the one who commits evil; with a distinct lack of discussion in mainstream media about US foreign policy and who trained and armed Osama Bin Laden. What I explore next is how the cultural reaction to the crimes of the serial killer mirror the cultural discourse around the events of 9/11 and the desire for American punishment.

## AMERICA’S JUSTICE

So far in this chapter, I have referred to pre and post 9/11 and in doing this a line has been marked in American history that denotes the events of 9/11 as a moment of extreme cultural shift—it created a definite before and a definite after. While culturally the events of that day stand out like a sheet of flame in the living memories of the American people, this idea that there was a USA before 9/11 and a different USA after 9/11 is part of the more general cultural amnesia that blankets America with regards to a steady repeating pattern of violence in the country’s history. Long before 9/11, the US was a nation with experience in bloody violence. Not just in its aforementioned ‘proud’ history of serial murder, but in the historical development of the nation. Schmid states that it is possible to “overestimate the extent to which the United States has changed since 9/11.”<sup>25</sup> He goes on to explain that the US has always experienced violence and while there was never so much violence all at once as the grim death toll from 9/11, we must be careful not to

[i]mply that prior to the attacks America existed in a state of unsullied innocence [as] it is to ignore both the participation of the United States in similar acts in other countries [and] the defining role that violence has played in the foundation and continued development of the country.<sup>26</sup>

We must be aware of the continuity of the US before and after 9/11 in order to understand what the cultural and political impacts of that day have been. And in doing so, we can see that there are patterns of behavior that can be observed in people before and after 9/11 and in relation to the serial killer and in relation to the presented and perceived man responsible for the attacks, Osama Bin Laden. When Bundy was proven guilty and

convicted of murder in the single digits (he was sentenced to death for the murder of Margaret Bowman, Lisa Levy, and Kimberley Leach, though he eventually confessed to over 30 murders), there were plenty of Americans who screamed for blood. When Bin Laden was found to be responsible for the death of 2,977 Americans on 9/11, the people of America again demanded justice. Even though the 9/11 attacks were coordinated, complex, organized, and committed by a number of people, it was the head of Bin Laden that America wanted. America likes a single, simple, understandable villain. Whether that villain is a serial killer making his or her way across the United States killing a person or two at a time, or a man held up as the epitome of evil who has a personal vendetta against America and all it stands for, American culture demands a face, a name, a person against whom revenge might be sought. In the serial killer narrative, one that is decades old where “so much of a callus had grown over [the] collective psyche,” the gory details give way to a story of American justice.<sup>27</sup> The evil was identified, caught, tried, and justice was delivered in the electric chair. The serial killer when caught, “satisfies our demand for retribution, even revenge.”<sup>28</sup> The seeking out and killing of Bin Laden also related to a thirst for revenge, yet despite his execution at the hands of the American military, that story of America versus international terrorism has yet to find an ending. The serial killer narrative then, such as presented in *Conversations with a Killer* where the only person at fault is Bundy himself and certainly not the authorities, allows a look back at past glories where the great USA chased, caught, and eliminated the evil enemy.

In response to 9/11, the US government quickly rolled out the Patriot Act to develop and strengthen anti-terrorism legislation to allegedly help in the fight against terrorism (according to then President George W. Bush) and to find the man responsible for 9/11, Osama Bin Laden. For those that might find that this act rather than defend against future terror attacks instead crushed the civil liberties of ordinary Americans, narratives like *Conversations with a Killer* serve as cautionary tales to support such paranoia and state control. Just as 9/11 was used for scare tactics and assaults on freedoms,<sup>29</sup> during the 70s and 80s the serial killer was used to expand the powers of the FBI.<sup>30</sup> The country needs such powers, the authorities claim, because otherwise the serial killers and the terrorists will get you. The actions of killers like Bundy and Bin Laden are “used for tactics to advance its [the administration in power] political agenda [and] curtailment of social progression.”<sup>31</sup>

*Conversations with a Killer* provides a story with an end. Bundy is executed and the authorities (FBI and police) learned from him. The story contains a beginning with Bundy’s childhood recollections, which I would also label as false nostalgia as he remembers his early years in a different way to those who were around him. It has a middle to the tale: the murders, the chase, and the arrest. It has a twist in the story as Bundy escapes and

escapes again, before finishing up with his conviction and eventual execution. The story is all wrapped up and has a distinct sense of closure. For America and the events of 9/11, closure was entirely wrapped up in revenge, in the “blood-revenge” sought by the catching and killing of Bin Laden. Kellner observes that the entire “country [was] craving blood-revenge and the head of Bin Laden.”<sup>32</sup> The absolute and reductionist binary that the discourse is built on allows the citizens of America to distance themselves away from such monsters, be that the serial killer or the terrorist. To make oneself good while labelling the enemy as evil is an “exercise in binary reductionism and projection of all traits of aggression and wickedness onto the other while constituting oneself as good and pure.”<sup>33</sup> In this model, America and her authoritative powers are good and serial killers and terrorists are evil. Such a strong binary alongside a deep-seated need and belief in American justice leaves a bloodlust in the hearts of the citizens—a bloodlust that can either further support the application of the death penalty or continued war and assault on the Middle East.<sup>34</sup>

Such an absolute and reductionist binary between them and us, good and evil, America and “other,” means that the serial killer as an all-American figure feeds the pride and solace that can be found in the repeated depiction of the serial killer tale. “The reassertion of the quintessential ‘Americanness’ of the serial killer facilitated the reinforcement of the terrorist as foreign other.”<sup>35</sup> In *Conversations with a Killer*, this reinforcement comes from the nostalgia for the 1970s and a simpler, wholesome yet entirely fabricated time, and from the catching and punishing of a man who tried to disrupt such halcyon days. America takes pride in capturing its serial killers and stories such as Bundy’s provide a “perverse comfort in consuming repetitions of familiar serial killers rather than hav[ing] to grapple with the fears raised by the terrorist.”<sup>36</sup> The terrorist “other,” Bin Laden and all that he represents, is complex and daunting. Why would anyone hate the great States of America so much? This points to the cultural amnesia as described above. The tale of Ted Bundy then provides refuge—familiarity in a distinct and iconic American figure. Bundy is reassuring, or rather his capture and execution provide reassurance, as through him the image of civilization and goodness can be maintained. Bundy killed and maimed, but he was captured and good triumphed, and the score was settled. Despite the finding and killing of Bin Laden, is the score settled? The man might be dead, but the problems remain.

The need for the killing of the villain is reflected in the popularity of the contemporary retelling of serial killer narratives. Like a campfire story, these tales offer reassurance to America. There is a clear and obvious lens focused on the serial killers of the previous decades and their names allow the viewer to return to the good old days when evil had an American face and the complexity of modern day global foreign policy did not disturb the waters, in the manufactured version of the 1970s.

## CELEBRATIONS IN THE STREETS

Through the manufacturing of an idyllic 1970s and the cultural line in the sand drawn after 9/11, we can observe the construction of the image of America. We can also use this to see the USA as a whole, and not pre and post 9/11, but rather observe the continuum of a country at ease with violence—so long as the violence is committed in the name of American justice. We have seen already that America is comfortable with a single face of evil, one that can be caught and duly punished. We can also see that despite being forty years apart, when justice is delivered in the form of the execution, America celebrates and develops its ego and sense of righteousness.<sup>37</sup> At Bundy's execution, outside the fences of Florida State Prison, crowds gathered to drink, chant, and sing in their glee over the death of the convicted killer. When President Obama addressed the nation to confirm the killing of Bin Laden, impromptu gatherings occurred around Ground Zero in New York and outside the White House in Washington Square. Most interestingly, the same chant was shouted at both rallies, a common gloating song sung at baseball games when a pitcher is removed: "Nah nah, nah nah, hey hey hey, goodbye." At both gatherings, this chant was led and enjoyed by the many college students in attendance.<sup>38</sup> Talking about the celebrations of Bin Laden's death, Alexis Madrigal noted that the people were there to "celebrate a victory in our ten years war on one man."<sup>39</sup> Those that gathered for the death-watch on Bundy were also celebrating a ten-year war against one man. Bundy was finally arrested in 1979 but was not put to death until 1989. In that ten-year period, various appeals against the death penalty were submitted and denied, but no court was going to stop Bundy's execution—the public wanted revenge. Bundy's execution drew the largest death-watch crowd since Florida resumed executions in 1976 and revelers were certain in the penalty being administered. One man interviewed on the scene, Luke Daniel, who personally knew Margaret Bowman and Lisa Levy said, "I believe there should be an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. I want to see justice carried out."<sup>40</sup>

The celebrations of Bundy's execution as presented in *Conversations with a Killer* and the impromptu rallies that bubbled up upon the announcement of Bin Laden's death demand that we examine the line between justice and revenge. I have already examined bloodlust and the need for evil to have a single punishable face, but when does lawful justice spill over into the desire for revenge? Mario Gollwitzer et al. explain that the killing of Bin Laden essentially represented revenge for those that died during the 9/11 attacks. The public reaction to Bin Laden's death (and Bundy's execution) allows us to question the psychological dynamics of revenge. When might revenge ever actually be satisfying? Revenge is surely only sweet for those who were personally involved. Not intending to be flippant, but those directly involved with what Bundy and Bin Laden did are sadly no longer with us. Instead, "revenge aims at sending a message - 'don't mess with me.'"<sup>41</sup> It

brings a loose sense of closure and a conviction that it will deter other terrorists and other serial murderers. The revenge for the victims of Bundy as we have already seen in the demands for “a tooth for a tooth” is a vicarious revenge; it is “enacted by others representing the victims.”<sup>42</sup> At Bundy’s death-watch, many of the crowd were from Florida State University, others were just fans of justice, revenge, and punishment being carried out. The same crowd breakdown occurred in New York and Washington Square: many of them were college kids and many were regular people—“patriots” proud to be American. This vicarious revenge again points to how America is at ease with its own violence. The method of state-sanction capital punishment using the electric chair is far from humane. The condemned is strapped into the chair and the electrodes are placed on the skin on the legs and the head. The theory goes that the first jolt renders the person unconscious and the second jolt mortally injures the internal organs. The theory also goes that this should be relatively pain-free. But according to Anthony Galvin’s study of the history of capital punishment, the actual electric chairs themselves have not been updated since their introduction in the 1800s. Galvin tells of horrific reports of death chambers filled with the stench of burning flesh and even some convicts setting alight during the electrocution.<sup>43</sup> If we are considering justice and revenge, then such a barbaric method of executing felons needs examination.

The barbarity of electrocution might be part of its appeal [...] What is the purpose of capital punishment? Is it to kill with clinical efficiency so as to give victims and their loved ones some sense of justice and closure? Or is it also to make the condemned suffer?<sup>44</sup>

This notion of wanting the criminal to suffer can be clearly seen in Episode 4, “Burn Bundy Burn,” with the celebrations at the Florida State Prison. Amongst the crowd, many carried signs with slogans such as: “Florida Wants Revenge”; “Hey Ted This Buzz is for You”; “UF Says FU Bundy”; “Hey Ted Be Sure to File An Appeal In HELL”; “Crank Up Old Sparky”; “Its Fry Day Ted.” T-shirts with “Burn Bundy Burn” were being hustled out of the back of cars and pick-up trucks. All of these people were asserting their status and were celebrating the “consequences delivered.”<sup>45</sup>

The celebration of Bundy’s execution shown at the end of Episode 4 are instances that are repeated in America’s cultural history, demonstrating the continuum that we should always consider when examining the US as a country before and after the events of 9/11. Crowds gathered again, for example, to celebrate the execution by lethal injection of John Wayne Gacy, another serial murderer with over 30 bodies stored under his house. These instances of justice, or revenge carried out, represent closure—a closed chapter in history. It enhances feelings of safety and reaffirms the power status of certain groups—white Americans and the authorities that govern them. In *Conversations with a Killer*, “execution of the killer is depicted as a triumph of detective work over not only evil but an overly bureaucratic system of American jurisprudence.”<sup>46</sup> *Conversations with a Killer* perpetuates

the confidence of the law enforcers and rejoices in the catching and killing of Bundy despite the many mistakes made. Forty years later, America rejoices in the killing of Bin Laden despite the carnage left in the Middle East during the so called “war on terror.” The closure was short lived as just two years later the Boston bombings demonstrated quite clearly that the “war on terror” was not won. Despite celebrations of closure and the closing of chapters, order has not been restored in either situation. There have been more serial killers since Ted Bundy: Jeffrey Dahmer, Richard Ramirez, Henry Lee Lucas and Ottis Toole, Aileen Wuornos, and Richard Chase, to name but a few. And in recent years, America under the lead of Trump has continued with its fear and “othering” of Muslims. In 2017 Trump lobbied for restrictions on travel into America from a number of Islamic countries.<sup>47</sup> There is no final chapter it seems in America’s violent history book.

## CONCLUSION

*Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* presents Bundy as man and myth. Enough time has passed that the barbarity of his crimes has given way to awe and almost admiration, and his actions are presented through a nostalgic lens in this four-part docuseries that looks back at a time when evil had one face that could be caught and brought to justice. The crime documentary series presents a temporal duality to the events and there is comfort in a tale well-known and repeated. The title sequence to *Conversations with a Killer* paints an idyllic vision of the 1970s and in a problematic design move, images of the victims are interspersed with images of softcore pornography. The docuseries ignores the mistakes made by the law enforcement authorities and by the end focuses on the successful completion of the death penalty, demonstrating the control and competence of the US—a presentation of America much needed in the recent years of turmoil and political upheaval. The serial killer is quintessentially American and this brings about a perverse pride in Bundy and his ilk—a comfort in the known and white American killer. This pride in and awe of Bundy overtakes any real examining of the faults made by the police during his active years. Bundy was so good, *Conversations with a Killer* tells us, that the law enforcers that eventually got him did an amazing job, offering again comfort and reassurance in the competency of the state. The public reaction to Bundy, his crimes, trial, and execution can be examined as part of a wider exploration of the violent history of the US and we should consider the United States as a continuum and not pre and post 9/11. Violence has always been a part of the nation and the public reaction is largely the same. America has always demanded revenge under a thin veil of justice, further served by a reductionist binary of good versus evil, us and them. The cultural behavior repeats itself and despite the celebrating of another evil man dead (Bundy or Bin Laden), the violence in America continues.

NOTES

1. Simpson, "America's Scariest Home Videos," 103.
2. Cavander and Bond-Maupin, "Fear and Loathing on Reality Television," 305–17.
3. Bruzzi, "Making a Genre," 249–80.
4. Ibid.
5. Smith, "Our Serial Killers," 390–400.
6. Denzin, "Many Faces of Emotionality," 17–30.
7. Kellner, "Media Manipulation," 41–64.
8. Ibid.
9. Butler, "Is Netflix Doing Nostalgia Better."
10. Bruzzi, "Making a Genre," 249–80.
11. Miller, "Discovery."
12. Ibid.
13. Harvilla, "Ted Bundy Tapes."
14. Breeden and Carroll, "Punk, Pot, and Promiscuity," 100.
15. The 1970s were indeed turbulent in America. 1973 oil embargoes led to fuel shortages. 1974 saw the Watergate scandal. That same year saw a major power cut in New York. And in 1978, over 900 people died at Jonestown. 1979 saw a nuclear disaster in Pennsylvania and American Airlines Flight 191 crashed leaving 271 dead. The 1970s also saw many active serial killers: The Manson Family, Son of Sam, the Hillside Strangler, John Wayne Gacy, and of course, Ted Bundy.
16. Breeden and Carroll, "Punk, Pot, and Promiscuity," 102.
17. Ibid.
18. Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities*, 257.
19. Ibid., 44.
20. Ibid., 21–2.
21. Kellner, "Media Manipulation," 43.
22. Vronsky, *Serial Killers*.
23. Fox and Levin, *Extreme Killing*.
24. Simpson, "America's Scariest Home Videos," 110.
25. Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities*, 243.
26. Ibid., 244.
27. Mangan, "Conversations With A Killer."
28. Smith, "Our Serial Killers," 17.
29. Kellner, "Media Manipulation."
30. Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities*.
31. Kellner, "Media Manipulation," 47.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 48.
34. Ibid.
35. Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities*, 246.
36. Ibid., 247.
37. There are many who lobby against the death penalty in the United States, but for the purposes of this analysis, I want to concentrate on the those that are either pro death penalty or are compelled to celebrate when a convicted felon or wanted terrorist is killed at the hands of the state or military.
38. Kirchmeier, *Imprisoned by the Past*. Madrigal, "Outside the White House."
39. Madrigal, "Outside the White House."
40. Ibid.
41. Gollwitzer et al., "Vicarious Revenge," 604–16.
42. Ibid., 604.

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