

EDITORIAL

Imagining the post-forensic landscape: the crime drama on transnational television

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Crime, as seen on TV

Since the airing of the final episode of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* in 2015, reports of the end of forensic television have been widely circulating. These follow the relatively recent cancellation of other long-running episodic crime dramas such as NBC's *Law and Order* (1990–2010). These resonant closures happened with the concomitant rise in the visibility (and critical acclaim) of elaborately plotted, so-called 'quality television' crime shows such as HBO's *The Wire* (2002–2008) and *True Detective* (2014–present), and the upsurge in online distribution platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime and Hulu Plus.¹ Crime stories are changing but remain ever-present on old and new media landscapes – as exemplified by the Netflix series *Making a Murderer* (2015–present) and the widely-followed podcast *Serial* (2014–present).

Do these seismic shifts and 'end-of-era' cancellations – suggest significant alterations in the television crime drama? Do they represent changes to the structure of the traditional narrative television series? Are they, perhaps, testament to a decline in network broadcast television? These large questions represent starting points from which we began our inquiries into the television crime drama, culminating in two events held at Oxford Brookes University. The first, held on 14 September 2013, brought together academics (from film and television studies, linguistics and cultural studies) with industry practitioners (agents, television directors) for a series of panels discussing recent changes to crime television.² The study day looked back at the established elements of the crime genre, including its continued reliance on the aesthetics of action and sensation – the subject of Yvonne Tasker's keynote session and her article in this issue. The majority of the day's papers circulated around a particular change in the Anglo-American televisual landscape: its shift towards the transnational, from

co-productions like *Bron/The Bridge* (DR/STV, 2011–present) to the influx of Nordic Noir programming produced and set in Scandinavia. With a unique perspective from inside the writer’s room at the Danish television network DR, Eva Novrup Redvall spoke to the unified creative vision behind DR’s *Forbrydelsen/The Killing* (2007–2012) and the telling differences between the show’s domestic and international receptions. On the one hand, British audiences read the sub-titled show as it appeared on BBC Four as a type of foreign language ‘art’ programming, whereas Danish audiences took it as the next in a series of Sunday night offerings from DR.

At the time of our second event in October of 2015, a new breed of noir-inflected European programmes (inspired by the successes of the Nordic Noirs) were firmly entrenched on Anglo-American television. Shows such as *Broadchurch* (ITV, 2013–present), *Sherlock* (BBC 2010-present), *The Fall* (BBC, 2013–present), *Y Gwyll/Hinterland* (S4C, 2013–present), and *Top of the Lake* (Sundance Channel/BBC, 2013–present) have earned large audiences and critical acclaim, often (as Sofia Bull argues in this issue) with showrunners making public announcements about how their shows are significantly different from forensic drama series like *CSI*. This almost ritual denunciation of all things forensic seems to point to a pattern of decline in the sub-genre. The scope and nature of that decline was the foundation of the second event on crime television held at Oxford Brookes and built around the final episode of *CSI* and its impact on crime television and popular culture. The series of interdisciplinary workshops revealed that despite the influx of the Nordic and, as Glen Creeber has termed them, ‘Celtic Noir’ (2015, 27) American episodic crime shows are still enjoying good health and exhibit a unique forensic visual style deeply indebted to *CSI*. Inasmuch as there have been profound changes in the way that crime TV is produced and consumed, traditional broadcast crime dramas, such as *The Blacklist* (NBC, 2013–present)

and *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011–present), reveal a continuity that should not be overlooked. Thus, the decline of forensic crime programming intersects with a continuity (of action, forensic imagery, and broadcast formatting) and with a reinvigoration through the European noirs.

After the end

We would argue that endings are inbuilt in the crime genre – in its investigative structure, in the characterisation of its weary detectives and in its singular ability to renew itself. With its forensic gaze and thematics of loss, the crime genre is uniquely adaptable in the face of the shifts occurring in the television landscape and, furthermore, capitalises on an ‘end-of-empire’ quality. The crime drama is always about loss, about what happened after the end (reconstructing, excavating, exhuming, archiving). The urban world of the police procedural has always been in decline and has always already fallen into disrepair, from the unnamed mean streets of *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981–1987) to the ‘Sin City’ of *CSI*’s Las Vegas. The crime-solving team, from Starsky and Hutch to Holmes and Watson, tenuously guard the line between urban risk and nostalgic rationalist civilisation. However, their successes are always tactical, never strategic triumphs, and theirs are ultimately Pyrrhic victories. There are always going to be more corpses – it is built into the very fabric of the genre. We content that through its dual filters of loss and reconstruction, contemporary crime dramas employ a singularly effective post-apocalyptic mode of address – offering audiences the simultaneous confirmation of their belief that the world is broken and reconfirmation that flawed but moral men and women might be able to figure out the truth about what happened.

Celtic/Nordic Noirs represent both a moment of generic renewal and the refinement of the crime genre's post-apocalyptic potential. In many cases these noirs use landscape (urban, suburban, wild or rural) to set human conflicts against a larger, more contemplative perspective, as Les Roberts picks up on in his article in this issue. Generally these noirs focus on a single crime through a longer story arc, allowing for a more affective and in-depth treatment of the repercussions of violence. This attenuated sense of grief often provides the main spectacle for the noirs, de-centring the kinetic chases and spectacles of data that mark the action or forensic focused shows. A key aim of this issue is to consider the shifting pleasures offered in the crime worlds of transnational crime programming. The featured articles purport to analyse these pleasures within the contexts of their production and broadcast histories and to consider the specificities of the televisual medium – its long form serial structures, its unique visualisation of place and landscape, its affective economy of loss and violence.

This issue

This special issue is gathered around a loose chronology, following the non-linear evolution of the crime genre – from the action series of the 1970s through the forensic turn and culminating with interrogations into the aesthetics and production contexts of Celtic and Nordic Noir. This issue is focused on two areas of inquiry; simply put, we look to the contemporary crime drama to see what has stayed the same and what has changed, at times even dramatically. Building from this we aim to consider these temporally informed forces (retrofit and innovation) in combination/conversation with one another. Whilst we resist the tempting but ultimately superficial idea that that crime genre has a stable and unchanging core, we argue that crime television has an uncanny ability to move forward by looking

backwards – thus we begin with Yvonne Tasker’s arguments around the continuity of action and sensation in crime programmes.

Tasker proposes five key narrative and aesthetic modes of crime television: realist, surveillance, forensic, Gothic, and action. The last category is the focus of Tasker’s argument that programmes such as *NCIS* (CBS, 2003–present) and *The Blacklist* (NBC, 2013–present) can be read as examples of a long-standing type of ‘television of attractions’ that has been regrettably overlooked by scholars. Tasker’s article does valuable work in putting contemporary crime shows in the context of the history of mainstream American crime television, spending time establishing the importance of early action-focused crime shows such as *Starsky & Hutch* (ABC, 1975–1979) and *Hawaii Five-0* (CBS, 1968–1980) and highlighting the influence of a forensic aesthetic, with its emphasis on dynamic visuals and the dual spectacles of violence and data.

While the action crime show capitalises on associations with the forensic, Sofia Bull argues that the showrunners behind BBC’s *Sherlock* worked diligently to distance themselves from that mode of crime television in order to insist on their show’s artistic merit. This is played out through the characterisation of Sherlock Holmes (as master reasoner) in relation to the bumbling, resentful, and/or infantile forensic experts on the show (such as Philip Anderson and Molly Hooper). Like Tasker’s piece, Bull’s work is concerned with putting *Sherlock* into its televisual context at the tail end of the forensic turn in popular culture. Central to Bull’s argument, and to this issue more widely, is the assertion that ‘the television industry simultaneously renews and recycles generic elements in a continuous quest to appear both current and familiar.’ This ‘retrofuturism,’ as Bull labels it, is at the heart of new forensic dramas, such as *CSI: Cyber* (CBS 2015–present) and the Nordic and Celtic Noirs.

Eva Novrup Redvall focuses her study on a different kind of transnational practice: the mutual influence and affection between the UK (and its tradition of crime programming of the Agatha Christie type) and Denmark (with its moodier noirs). In particular, she focuses on the 100th episode of the long running programme *Midsomer Murders*, which is set in Copenhagen and clearly exploits the obsession in Britain with all (televisual) things Nordic. Redvall also highlights the tremendous popularity of *Midsomer Murders* with Danish audiences, pointing to its significantly high viewing figures even in syndication. In taking a close look at the production context of the 100th episode (entitled ‘The Killings of Copenhagen’) Redvall juxtaposes the critical acclaim of the Nordic Noirs with transnational appeal of Britain’s ‘comfy crime’ series such as *Midsomer Murders*.

As Les Robert’s article insists, one of the features that distinguish the more critically acclaimed Nordic and Celtic Noirs from their ‘comfy’ counterparts is the complex use of landscape. Roberts argues that Celtic Noirs employ landscape as a central character in their stories of crime. Concentrating on three British case studies – *Broadchurch*, *Hinterland* and *Southcliffe* (Channel 4, 2013–present) – and using a methodology informed by human geography, Roberts builds a theory of televisual landscape by ‘refracting’ Martin Lefebvre’s views of landscape and space through Henri Lefebvre’s spatial frameworks. The result is a consideration of place (and space) as distinct from generic and narrative concerns, revealing the limits of the use of landscape as setting (as in *Broadchurch*) and the possibilities of the landscape as space/place in *Hinterland* and *Southcliffe*.

While Roberts’ study of landscape concerns those elements beyond narrative and genre, the issue’s final article by Rosanne Welch focuses the lens of inquiry on just those aspects of the

crime drama. Her article examines the varied use of parents as characters (or, rather, character types) in crime dramas, particularly as transmitters for cultural specificity and heritage (in terms of culture and of indigenous crime genre traditions). In programmes such as *Il commissario Montalbano/Inspector Montalbano* (RAI, 1999–present), *Murdoch Mysteries* (City/CBC, 2008–present) and *Inspector Morse* (ITV, 1987–2000) parents become representatives of traditional national culture – often used in a transnational frame to ‘explain’ heritage to the younger generation on screen, and to the audiences watching programmes consumed on global television screens. These parent characters can be read as the embodiment of the central concerns of this special issue – from the retrofuturism of crime traditions to the increasing importance of transnational reception and production.

And now back to your regularly scheduled programming?

Despite the often dystopian imagery of the contemporary crime series, we are not facing a crime television apocalypse. Rumours of the death of broadcast television are exaggerated. Quite the contrary, broadcast television is a thriving and perhaps even over-crowded marketplace: FX CEO John Landgraf insists that scripted television has reached a peak or maximum saturation point (Schneider, 2015). The crime drama remains a critical and popular success within this landscape. While the crime series may be unlikely to experience a rapid decline, complex transnational co-productions and new platforms of distribution are having a measurable effect on the way people make and experience television dramas. The crime genre, we argue, is an exceptionally useful case study on which to build an interrogation of these changes.

Editorial note - Specific episodes of television programmes will be referenced in text with their season and episode numbers as follows: Season One, episode Four will be indicated as (S01EP04).

References

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Notes

¹ For discussions on the phenomenon of ‘quality television’ and complex serial television see Jason Mittell’s *Complex TV* (2015) and Janet McCabe and Kim Akass’ edited collection, *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond* (2007).

² For details about the two events held at Oxford Brookes University, please see the information available here:
<http://arts.brookes.ac.uk/events/items/140913-crime-drama-symposium.html> and
[https://www.brookes.ac.uk/About-Brookes/Events/The-End-of-an-Era--15-Years-of-CSI--Crime-Scene-Investigation-and-Forensic-TV\(1\)/](https://www.brookes.ac.uk/About-Brookes/Events/The-End-of-an-Era--15-Years-of-CSI--Crime-Scene-Investigation-and-Forensic-TV(1)/).