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Cold Comfort: Emotion, Television Detection Dramas, and Cold Case

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Emotions: A Cultural Studies Reader

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E. Deidre Pribram

COLD COMFORT: EMOTION, TELEVISION DETECTION DRAMAS, AND *COLD CASE*

Equilibrium of comfort

TO SPEAK ABOUT emotions is to attempt to address a notoriously challenging and vast category of cultural existence, akin to undertaking an analysis of “the body” or “reason.” But as contemporary work in cultural studies and poststructuralism has shown, undertaking explorations of the body and reason are extremely pressing and productive areas of critical inquiry. Culturalist approaches to emotions, however, have only recently begun to emerge as a distinct area of investigation. A useful entry point into the complexities of emotion as a sociocultural category is Raymond Williams’ concept, *structure of feeling*.

Williams developed the notion of structure of feeling to describe the emotional relations of a specific time period and cultural location. He understood structure of feeling as an articulation most readily accessible in the literature of a period, both high art and popular fiction, but which indicated a more general cultural “possession” or presence (chapter 1: 44). Describing structure of feeling as the “felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time,” he was pointing to occurrences that are culturally shared or widely felt, not solely individual emotional responses (36). The emphasis on “felt” is important; Williams was describing something “of feeling much more than of thought – a pattern of impulses, restraints, tones” (44). In place of the “official consciousness of an epoch – codified in its doctrines and legislation,” he was attempting to bring into historical and theoretical discourse the experiential results of living within a specific social and cultural context (44).

Williams drew a distinction between the knowledge which can be derived from an era’s institutions and social structures versus an understanding of its emotional relations (41). That is, structure of feeling attempts to account for the emotional repercussions, usually unacknowledged, of what it means to live in a particular time and place. In *The Long Revolution*, originally published in 1961, Williams goes to significant lengths to distinguish “structure of feeling” from “social character,” a distinction he upholds a number of years later, in 1979, when commenting on the earlier work (46). In Williams’ analysis, social character is “the abstract of a dominant group” (38), representing “the official or received thought of a time” (46). Social character refers to the prescribed ideas and values of a social

group at a specific historical moment. In contrast, structure of feeling deals “not only with the public ideals but with their omissions and consequences, as lived,” that is, experiences that exist beyond or in addition to the articulated beliefs and values of a specific society or social group (39). The concept is necessary, Williams felt, because the stated public ideals overlook as much as they pinpoint. One interpretation of structure of feeling, then, has to do with that which is overlooked or disregarded.

In Williams’ estimation, what is disregarded has to do largely with the ways public ideals are experienced or felt by people, how they are “lived.” He describes such disregarded lived experiences as omissions when they are unacknowledged, unaccounted for, or otherwise rendered invisible. He calls them consequences because they are the repercussions, the *affects*, of what it means to live out the beliefs and values of one’s era. They are, in other words, “real” – experienced, felt – whether they are adequately acknowledged by a society or not. The development of the notion of structure of feeling makes possible the identification of such lived omissions and consequences which are myriad, complex, and dispersed across the social landscape. Their identification, in turn, holds out the prospect of making some sense of these largely unacknowledged or inadequately explained aspects of existence.

Taking the cue from Williams, we can turn to the television detective drama to consider the “public ideals” that they promote and, more to the point here, the structures of feeling that might exist side by side with that “official or received thought.” Following Williams’ arguments, the stated ideals of an era are necessarily accompanied by their own “omissions and consequences, as lived.” Such omissions and consequences, as the counterpart of the public ideals of an epoch, help signal a contemporary structure of feeling. The representation of stated ideals requires the constraint of associated structures of feeling which, otherwise, might threaten the validity of the received thought. And although such structures of feeling may not be overtly apparent, their traces, their omissions and consequences, remain detectable.

More specifically, I want to argue that the police drama, *Cold Case*, one of the five detective programs currently airing in the U.S. under the imprimatur of executive producer Jerry Bruckheimer, introduces “emotional content” into the generic mix. The structure of feeling that it makes apparent focuses on the issue of loss, most notably the consequences of the loss of life, a theme common to most police dramas. However, *Cold Case*, in introducing the emotional repercussions of such losses, concurrently makes clear the inadequacy of discourses of “justice,” including the detection genre, in either explaining or containing those emotional losses. In doing so, it strains at the boundaries of its own genre, unsettling an equilibrium of comfort normally established in the detective drama through the circumscribing of emotion.

Signatures and styles

Executive producer Jerry Bruckheimer’s remarkably successful run of detective shows includes *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*; *CSI: Miami*; *CSI: New York*; *Without a Trace*; and *Cold Case*. In a television landscape crowded with police and legal dramas, in order to succeed, each show must develop its own “brand,” its signature preoccupations and stylistic approach. Each additional entry into the field is pressured to play on, and perhaps expand, some variation of the well-known but still highly competitive television detection genre.

CSI: Crime Scene Investigation, the flagship show of the Bruckheimer collection, promotes the virtues of science, technology, reason, logic, and precision – “the evidence doesn’t lie.” In contrast, *Cold Case* delves more deeply into the world of emotions, an attribute not lost on

viewers or critics. “*Cold Case* is rare among procedural detective dramas for examining not just the evidence, but also the emotional fallout of unsolved mysteries” (Roush, 67). The concern here is what does such “emotional fallout” point to or tell us? If we trace the show’s emotional tendencies, what do they suggest about the place of emotion in popular representation?

Cold Case’s signature technique of characters aging before our eyes or suddenly shedding their years speaks to the pathos of age, mutability, and loss. Set in Philadelphia, *Cold Case*’s distinguishing visual style is the transformation of characters from who they were “then” to whom they are now. Over the course of an episode, we see individual characters swing, almost effortlessly, over time, moving from past to present, aging and becoming younger again. This visual approach is accomplished through precisely choreographed cinematography and editing, and the careful match-casting of “before and after” versions of individual characters. The actors selected, in addition to other requirements, must be believable as older and younger renditions of each other. While past and present variations on a character must resemble each other, they also clearly are intended to differ. The older incarnation is meant to demonstrate the effects – the ravages – of time and events on that individual’s person and life.

If *Cold Case*’s stylistic approach focuses on the pathos of aging, and the investigation of mutability in life, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*’s signature visual technique revolves around the striking fast motion effects shots that delve into flesh, tunneling past the victim’s organs, bones, and muscles in order to determine what caused his or her death. *CSI* takes us on a very literal “internal journey” into character. The *body* is emphasized, the physical human remains laid out on a slab, ready to be autopsied and probed, each component closely inspected and minutely tested, in an effort to force to the surface bits and pieces of evidence.

In place of *CSI*’s emphasis on the science and technology of crime-solving – the reassuring certainty and solidity of a *body* of evidence – *Cold Case* stresses stories about human transformation over time. In the words of series’ creator, Meredith Stiehm, the show treats “time as a character” (qtd. in Levin, 2E). How *Cold Case* plays on a familiar genre to attain its emotion-centric variation, and what light this sheds on the concept of structure of feeling, is the focus of this particular police genre investigation.

Incarnations

In an episode titled “Volunteers,” set in 1969 and 2004, the series’ first season, we open in the past on a young white woman (Maggie Grace), wearing a skirt, cardigan and pearls, and walking along a deserted street.¹ A beat-up yellow station wagon pulls up next to her, and a young white woman (Amber Nicole Benson) and a young black man (Garland Whitt) get out. They are dressed in hippie-identified clothing of the era: she in striped bell bottoms, a fringed poncho, and a peace symbol on a leather strap around her neck; he in bell-bottom jeans, a white cotton Madras shirt, and wooden love beads. The two arrivals grab the young woman, blindfold her, and place her in the backseat of the car, in what appears to be a kidnapping in progress. We see close-ups of money changing hands between the abducted woman and the African-American man. The scene is interrupted repeatedly by a change to still shots in black and white as somebody – another person surreptitiously present – takes photos of the events we are witnessing. We abruptly dissolve to the hippie twosome, lying next to each other on the ground, dead, blood visibly oozing from the young man’s head.

Cut to 2004: two skeletons are found in the concrete foundations of a recently-razed building. Some remnants of clothing are found with them, including a necklace in the shape

of a peace sign suspended on a leather strap. The two victims are identified as Julia Hoffman, 22, and Gerard Gary, 23, who disappeared together in June of 1969.

As the show cuts back and forth between scenes from 2004 and 1969, the show's lead detective, Lilly Rush (Kathryn Morris), and her partner, Scotty Valens (Danny Pino), interview people from Julia's and Gerard's past. It transpires that the two were involved in a then illegal activity – helping women obtain safe abortions. Julia and Gerard were co-workers, not lovers, as the detectives initially assumed; volunteers in an underground organization named Jane, a group that existed in actuality, from 1967 to 1973, until abortion was legalized (Rosen, 54).

The detectives learn that FBI files exist on the organization Jane. Included in those files are several months of photos of Gerard and Julia, tracking them in their illegal, volunteer work. The photos were taken by an unnamed FBI informant – the source of the black and white still images at the show's opening – up to and concluding with the day Gerard and Julia escort Renee, the scared, 17 year old woman, with whom we first see the volunteers on the day the two disappear.

In the course of their investigation, one of the people the detectives interview is Adam Clarke (Chris Sarandon, Riley Schmidt), now a successful motivational author and speaker. In 1969, he was Julia's boyfriend, as well as a high-profile leader of the anti-war movement. He has told the detectives he explained away Julia's sudden disappearance at the time by assuming she ran away to Canada with Gerard. Ultimately, though, they realize that Adam Clarke, motivational speaker and previous anti-war leader, is both FBI informant and murderer. Discovered by Julia and Gerard as he takes their photos surreptitiously on the day of Renee's abortion, he is exposed as the informant. If – when – they tell others, Adam's credibility and leadership position in the movement would disappear. As Lilly puts it, "Adam Clarke, 60s babe magnet, star of the anti-war movement – and FBI informant." Instead, Gerard and Julia disappear.

When Lilly and Scotty take Adam into custody in 2004, he describes Julia and Gerard as "heroic." Quietly and anonymously, they were helping women, putting themselves at risk of discovery and arrest for what they believed in, while Adam took public and high-profile credit for the cause he was privately betraying. We feel the anger of injustice because Adam's actions sprang from hypocrisy and self-preservation, not heroism. He turns FBI informant after he is arrested for drugs, rather than face a prison sentence. He kills Julia and Gerard rather than lose his public position and place in history. "I was a leader in the revolution. We were living like it meant something. I loved that life. Couldn't stand to give it up."

The episode arouses our anger over politics and ethics. Concurrently, it also points to the injustices of *time*. For the greatest, the most galling injustice the show visually and viscerally depicts is that Adam is given the opportunity to age, while Julia and Gerard do not. We see Adam both in his early 20s and mid-to-late 50s. We see other characters from 1969 make a similar physical transition over time. But Julia and Gerard are forever frozen at 22 and 23. No later versions of them exist. What is lost – stolen from them – is the opportunity to age. Lilly observes that, "Adam gets 35 years to have a life till his luck runs out." The 35 years in which Adam gets "to have a life" are in addition to the 22 and 23 years of Julia's and Gerard's existences, more time than either of the victims had in their entirety.

Coda

Cold Case episodes come to a close by following a recurring coda. Typically, they start with a shot of the newly-uncovered murderer being handcuffed and taken away. But this sequence – the arrest of the guilty party, normally the finale in the detective show genre –

marks, in *Cold Case*, only the beginning of the end. Once the suspect is taken into custody, a choreographed sequence ensues, set to music of the era,² involving final glimpses of the various people affected by that week's murder – family members, friends, past lovers – in both their older and younger guises. Usually the coda ends with a final exchange of looks between Lilly and the murder victim, who suddenly appears reincarnated in the present, apparently only visible to Lilly.

The reincarnated individuals are often portrayed smiling as if to suggest that despite their murders they are at peace, and they are at peace, in part, because they are satisfied with the result of Lilly's investigation, satisfied that justice in their case has finally been realized. The coda and the final exchange of looks between victims and detective are meant to offer us something of a "happy ending." By resolving their cases and establishing their previously unknown fates, Lilly and her colleagues have rendered a service to the victims.

The coda replaces the gunplay, chase sequence, or other culminating action of the traditional police drama. *Cold Case*'s climactic "action" takes the form of emotional denouement. The 1969 episode elaborates even further on the usual coda by utilizing the black and white still photos taken by Adam over three months and discovered in the FBI files. In this episode, Julia and Gerard appear to Lilly, not in the final shots of the coda but near its beginning, just after Lilly guides an arrested Adam into the back of the police car. Lilly glances up and, across the street, sees Gerard and Julia in their 1969 personas, suddenly visible to Lilly in 2004.

Julia and Gerard look towards Lilly, both smiling, Gerard's arm around Julia's shoulder. This visual dissolves to black and white images of Gerard and Julia helping unidentified women. The coda continues with various *Cold Case* detectives passing the still photos on to people Julia and Gerard were close to or positively affected in the past. Finally it ends with Lilly putting the case files back in storage, no longer needed as the case is now solved. But before she does so, Lilly saves one of the photos of Gerard and Julia for herself, a suggestion that this somehow keeps Gerard and Julia alive, that they've affected her too, that what they did is not forgotten.

The inclusion of the black and white still photos prolongs this episode's coda to a complex exchange between Julia and Gerard, and all of the other characters – those from their past lives and those from the detective squad – with whom they have interacted. The effect of this expanded coda is to reinforce Gerard's and Julia's political commitment and to reaffirm how many other lives they have touched for the better.

In recreating scenes from the past, and by having dead victims reincarnate in the present, *Cold Case* manages to keep its victims at the dramatic forefront to a greater degree than most shows in the genre. Rather than being featured primarily as cadavers whose physical circumstances in coming to be that way hold the potential solution to the mystery, *Cold Case* attempts to deal more directly with the victims as living personalities. *CSI*'s emphasis on the body is replaced, in *Cold Case*, by a greater focus on the circumstances of the characters' lived existences: their activities and their relationships. This proves to be both a source of the series' distinction from its competitors and its "problem" as exemplar of the crime genre.

The *Cold Case* "problem"

Narrative concerns in detective dramas are generally based upon a tradition of socially-sanctioned discourses of justice: the preservation of established law and order. The hero/detective is a representative of the institutions of juridical protection; his/her function is to

instate and reinstate “justice,” by acting on behalf of victims of crime and as agents for society at large.

Toby Miller notes that recent years have seen “a proliferation of police, detective and crime drama with endless variations and reworkings of a basic formula in which society is protected and the status quo maintained by the forces of law and order” (19). Within the framework of this classic formula, “detection has meant the identification and defeat of wrongdoers, by applying reason to explain events that are irregular and socially undesirable” (18).

Miller’s emphasis on the proliferation of police and detective programs and the prominence they place on the reinstatement of law and order is echoed by Elayne Rapping. Rapping argues that an array of social issues, once located in other public or community venues, increasingly have been “criminalized” in order to bring them within the jurisdiction of legal discourses (136). This has been paralleled by an expansion in television police and legal shows, both fiction and documentary, accompanied by a broadening in the narrative/ideological terrain taken to be their purview. The result is the tendency to view “virtually everything in public and private life as a matter of crime and punishment” (264). According to Miller, then, the representation of discourses of law and order is a common and unabated generic pattern. Further, following Rapping, mediated juridical discourses can be linked to a dominant, and growing, cultural paradigm.

Susanna Lee points out that “[t]he detective series genre has always represented both the desire for reassurance and the simultaneous sense of the impossibility of that reassurance” (81). The habitual re-imposition of social order is a double-edged, uneasy narrative foundation because it can only ever be temporary. Social equilibrium and the accompanying reassurance it provides must always be reinstated because it is always threatened, in both narrative and cultural terms. Such reassurance can not be sought – or promised – once and for all. This would account, in part, for the genre’s proliferation: renewal and repetition are fundamental to its terms of existence. Although the attempt to reassure always contains its own impossibility, the genre is defined on the premise and promise of its continual – and in Rapping’s terms, expanding – attempts at reassertion. Such momentary or imaginary respites, in the face of ongoing perceived threats, equate successful resolution with provisional comfort, to be performed again and again in subsequent cases.

In the traditional detective series formula, in order to provide such comfort, “solving the crime” and “bringing to justice” are conventionally interchangeable concepts and terms. The dramatic and emotional satisfaction of the case being solved rests precisely in the criminal being held culpable for the crime, and in the knowledge that the injustice committed against the (usually innocent) victim is being redressed. Of course, following Lee, the equivalency of “case solved” and “justice served,” while a staple of generic expectation, is simultaneously part of generic fantasy. Ideologically reassuring to audiences, it provides us with the detective genre version of a happy ending, an ending which only succeeds if it is constantly reenacted.

The “problem” for *Cold Case* is that in reincarnating murder victims, in re-embodiment them by visualizing the past in the present in order to keep their stories and their characters at the forefront, we also are reminded persistently of their *absence*. Like Julia and Gerard, they reappear in the coda, smiling as if to suggest that they are satisfied with the results of Lilly’s investigation, satisfied that in their cases justice has finally been realized. But the impression we are left with most forcefully is of their nonexistence. The most visually compelling effect of the *Cold Case* “brand” is to reaffirm that the victims are indeed frozen in the past, that they do not have incarnations in the present.

While all of the other characters from their era, including the murderer, have two versions, played by two actors, the victims have only one – outdated, past tense. In the highly

competitive conditions for police, crime, and detective dramas in today's televisual marketplace, *Cold Case* has developed its own signature variation of a well-known generic formula. The issue of mutability for the characters who age over time creates a nostalgic longing, a certain poignant sadness that the series can play on. However, the narrative dilemma for the program resides in the characters who do not age.

The show's visual techniques make manifest the loss of these characters' present days, what would have been their futures. Ultimately, the most striking effect of the dead victims' appearances in the present-day is not to affirm the restitution of justice in their cases but to give us visual proof that they are lost, condemned to a life never lived. This is a level of injustice that cannot be redressed by the detective genre or by the discourses of justice the detective genre relies upon. Often, we are not left with the feeling of justice served. Instead, what we cannot erase about the final glimpses of the victims is the sense of loss, of waste, that their lives stopped where they did, while other lives – those of their family and friends, the killers', Lilly's, and ours – continue.

The resolution of a *Cold Case* episode is then, at best, a bittersweet moment, a moment more bitter with the loss of the victim's future than sweet with the notion of justice served through the better-late-than-never capture of the perpetrator. In other words, the "problem" with the *Cold Case* formula is that while the case is invariably solved on a weekly basis, the series tends to decouple the generic connection between the resolution of the case and the reassuring re-imposition of justice. It dislocates the familiar equivalency of "case solved" and "justice served."

In Williams' terms, the equivalency of case solved and justice served are the stated ideals of our era. However, experiential omissions and consequences are the inevitable counterpart of those public ideas. The motif of loss is not, of course, new to the detective drama: such shows are generally constructed around the loss of life. Of the five Bruckheimer detective series, for instance, four usually feature a weekly murder to be solved.³ Loss of life, loss of safety and security, are staples of the detection genres. How to endure and potentially rectify the personal toll of such losses is one of the forms of reassurance we desire from the genre.

The significant difference with *Cold Case* lies in the way it forefronts the omissions and consequences of such loss. Whether intended by the series' producers or not, one of the effects of the show's signature formula is that the emotional repercussions connected to loss tend to outweigh the reassurances of stability and the continuity of public ideals, in Williams' terms. Rather than stressing the efficacy of the policies and practices of generic justice in ameliorating social ills, in providing comfort to the victims and their loved ones, *Cold Case* lingers amid the weightiness of the losses themselves. The structure of feeling that it isolates describes the "felt sense" of the anxiety and despair that cannot be comforted by notions of justice served.

Television detectives frequently point out that what they do is for the sake of victims and their loved ones. It is also a staple of police shows to have victims of crime or their surviving representatives thank detectives for their work; gratitude and relief are extended, thereby positioning the legal process as a healing process. And so, Horatio Cane (David Caruso) on *CSI: Miami* insists that one of his team members continue the painstaking process of developing and analyzing forensic evidence although, due to other circumstances, they already know the case cannot be brought to trial. Horatio refuses to explain his reasons for continuing the investigation to his highly frustrated lab technician who sees the additional work as a waste of time and resources. Instead, Horatio *shows* his younger assistant his motives when he uses the forensic evidence from the investigation to explain to a victim's family members what precisely happened to their loved one, positioning the facticity of evidence as a source of comfort. On *CSI: New York*, when the friend of a just-murdered young woman wonders aloud what she should tell the victim's family, Mac Taylor (Gary Sinise),

suggests she let the family know that they – New York’s CSI team – are doing everything they can to find those responsible for the crime, the most consoling words he knows.

In a 1998 article on British detective dramas, Charlotte Brunson pinpoints a “structure of anxiety” in certain programs of the mid-1980s to mid-1990s. The structure of anxiety which she identifies as a common thread linking several police dramas of the era is formulated around sociopolitical concerns. Specifically, she finds these shows are “socially expressive” (242) in their concern with contemporary issues such as: who can police? (which segments of society have the right to serve as forces of justice); and who is accountable for policing practices? (including or especially acts of excess or misconduct).

My concern, like Brunson’s, focuses on a structure of anxiety evident in certain detective dramas. However, I am attempting to pinpoint a structure of anxiety of an entirely different origin. In place of the sociopolitical events she identifies, my interest lies in the socioemotional implications of crime, and the inefficacy of policing forces and notions of justice in redressing those anxieties. These are two different approaches to narrative interpretation; however, one need not preclude the other. Specific instances of the detective drama are capable of, and do, encompass the social in both its political and emotional manifestations.

Cold Case is the only Bruckheimer detective drama with a female lead, but given the emotional terrain that I’m arguing the show emphasizes, the departure from a male-headed ensemble cast isn’t surprising. Long-standing cultural associations between women and emotion make a female lead investigator not only plausible, but likely, for the series’ subject matter.⁴ The question I am primarily concerned with here is what occurs when emotional knowledges and experiences are “allowed in” to a genre which traditionally has been thought to circumscribe such discourses, as in the example of *CSI* with its emphasis on science, rationality, and facticity? However, the emotion question is not neatly separable from gender concerns in that, historically, the vast majority of lead and supporting detectives in detection dramas have been male, and the application of reason to explain events, in Miller’s words, has been coded as masculine. Moreover, detection dramas as masculine genres have been presumed to bracket out emotional discourses.

In an article on the British detective series, *Cracker*, Glen Creeber argues that the lead character, Fitz, is a compelling incorporation of the traditional “old sleuth” and the “new man.” As old sleuth, Fitz fits the “masculine archetype” of the hard-boiled detective, one component of which is his professional unemotional quality (171). He is “rugged, quick-witted and the embodiment of cool masculine power . . . relying almost wholly on reason to understand and decode the world around him” (171, 173). In his considerable professional skills, if not in his more disastrous personal life, Fitz is a controlled individual, driven by reason, not emotionality.

Similarly, Jason Mittel describes the 1950s series, *Dragnet*, as an ideologically conservative but seminal text in the establishment of the police drama that would follow in subsequent decades (124, 127). Among its specific techniques, the flat and monotone acting style filtered out “most emotional nuances and dramatic pauses,” prioritizing “*systemic over emotional realism*” (137; italics in original). Here, emotional detachment is equated with the successful operation of the criminal justice system in a binary structuration in which chaos, crime, and emotions are located, together, outside the realm of reason, justice, and correct police procedure. Lead detective, Joe Friday is “detached, objective, reliable” with “no visible flaws, biases, or even emotions,” again equating elements like flaws and biases with emotions (141, 140).

That the masculine attributes of detective genres bracket emotions is a debatable but fairly widespread contention. It is at least accurate to say that traditional detection genres deal *uncomfortably* with emotions, which is not, of course, equivalent to their absence. However, to the extent that masculine detective dramas circumscribe emotional discourses,

what then occurs when a show like *Cold Case*, an exemplar of the genre, re-inserts emotional content explicitly into the generic mix? What are the implications for the genre and for the study of emotion?

Cold comfort

“Revenge,” an episode set in 1998 and 2005, tells the story of a 9 year old boy, Kyle Bream (Cayden Boyd).⁵ We first see Kyle at the mall, shopping for back-to-school clothes with his parents, Tina and Ken Bream (Bridgid Brannagh, Brent Sexton). Some banter is exchanged among the family about Kyle’s desire to look good in order to impress a particular girl who will be in his in-coming class.

His father, Ken, picks out several shirts Kyle likes, although his mother complains that they’re expensive at “twenty-five bucks a pop.” But to her son’s delight, she agrees to let him get at least one. Kyle asks to go to the dressing room on his own to try on the shirts. In keeping with the series’ opening formula, this is the last time the Breams see their son alive. Kyle has been kidnapped and sold to a pedophile. One month later, Kyle’s body washes up on shore at a local harbor, the boy having drowned.

“Revenge” is a graphic episode. It is not sexually graphic: we are told about, not shown, any acts of sexual molestation. Nor is the episode graphic in terms of violence; Kyle drowns off-camera. It is, however, emotionally graphic. The episode dwells on this 9 year old boy’s feelings of terror, abandonment, and despair during the time he is held captive, in the month between his disappearance and the discovery of his body.

Manipulated by his pedophile captor, Rudy Tanner (Vincent Angell), Kyle comes to believe that his parents have purposefully abandoned him. They have not come to get him because he is too expensive, demanding things like back-to-school shirts at “twenty-five dollars a pop.” In other words, in Kyle’s mind and heart, the kidnapping and his new “home” with Rudy are his own fault. Psychologically and emotionally manipulated by his captor – not too difficult to accomplish with a scared and depressed 9 year old boy – Kyle is led to believe he himself is responsible for the turn of events in his life.

Worse, Kyle begins to feel that he owes allegiance, obedience, and gratitude to his new guardian/molester for taking him in – “rescuing” him – when even his own parents no longer wanted him. Kyle’s state of mind, his deepening despair and increasing dependence on Rudy, are developed over five difficult to watch scenes, culminating in Kyle’s growing acceptance of Rudy’s caresses and the new “home” he is being offered.

We may well be better prepared to look at blood and guts – the *body* of evidence – than to be faced with the emotionally horrific, such as the terror of an abducted, sexually molested child, in the weeks, days, and final hours before his death. In this regard, Kyle’s story turns on a cruel irony. In the few minutes before his death, Kyle learns, through a newspaper account, that his parents have not abandoned him, but instead have been diligently and anxiously searching for him.

But Kyle’s moment of happiness and hope is fleeting. He is shown the newspaper account by Rudy’s then 13 year old son and previous sexual molestation victim, Archie (Andrew Michaelson, Jesse Head). Jealous of his father’s ardent attention towards Kyle, and diminished interest in his own no-longer-boyish self, Archie uses the newspaper account to lure Kyle to his death.

Archie entices Kyle into the cold, deep water by reassuring him that his parents are waiting for him just across the harbor, knowing full well that Kyle cannot possibly survive the swim. Drawn by the false hope of being reunited with his parents, Kyle, against his own fears and better judgment, sets off into the water.

The mystery to be solved in the “Revenge” episode of *Cold Case* is to determine who is responsible for Kyle Bream’s death. However, en route to solving the week’s primary mystery, the detectives manage to settle another cold case. A few months after Kyle’s body is discovered in 1998, Rudy Tanner, his pedophile captor, is found shot to death. Positioned as something of a subplot to the main mystery of Kyle’s death, the discovery of Rudy’s killer is more dramatically affecting than the revelation that Archie, himself a victim of sexual molestation as a child, is Kyle’s murderer.

Following Kyle’s death, his parents, Tina and Ken, track down their son’s abductor/buyer through a child pornography site Rudy is running. The site includes sexual images of Kyle, as well as other young boys. When the Breams locate Rudy, it is, as Tina explains, “time to make things right.” Ken finds Rudy and shoots him. The problem is, as Tina further explains, “It didn’t help, though [relieve the pain. Kyle’s] still gone.” Here, neither legal justice (Archie’s arrest) nor personal justice (Rudy’s death) – “revenge” in the episode’s terms – eases the pain or provides relief.

Nor is there any sense of relief in the show’s customary coda. In this episode, Lilly stands at the harbor where Kyle’s body was found. Kyle suddenly reappears, walking towards Lilly, his somber face filling the frame. We cut to a shot of Lilly smiling slightly at him, then back to a wide shot of a still-unsmiling Kyle as he turns around, walking back along the pier. His image dissolves into thin air, into the past, before he reaches the water. The sequence ends on a shot of Lilly turning and walking away in the other direction.

There is no happy ending here, no sense of satisfaction for a job well done. In its place, we are left with something akin to an acknowledgment of overwhelming powerlessness in the ability to protect those most deserving of protection. Instead of concluding with comfort, relief, or a sense of victory, the outcome is discomfort as we are forced to acknowledge the futility of “justice,” whether legal or personal, as remedy for some of the most painful events in life.

Apparently intended to offset this effect, the episode doesn’t end here, but returns to a parallel subplot that has been woven throughout the episode. It concerns Lieutenant John Stillman (John Finn) and his now-adult daughter Janie (Melinda Page Hamilton), a new mother herself. Eighteen years previously, Janie was raped by an acquaintance. Scared and ashamed at the time, she refused to press charges or otherwise let her father pursue the matter, leaving the Lieutenant powerless to do anything. Now, years later, the rapist reappears in her neighborhood, working as a bartender at a local restaurant she frequents. When the Lieutenant learns of this, he goes to the restaurant and threatens the rapist, forcing him to quit his job and disappear from his daughter’s neighborhood.

The final scene of “Revenge,” following the exchange of looks between Lilly and Kyle, takes place at the baptism of the Lieutenant’s grandchild. The Lieutenant holds his infant grandson while his daughter stands next to him, smiling. The episode ends here, on the suggestion that, if many years after the fact and perhaps only in half-measure, the Lieutenant has managed to protect his daughter after all.

Bracketing emotion

In her article on the long-running series, *Law and Order*, Susanna Lee argues that the program frequently acknowledges the policing and legal systems’ inefficacy in providing reasonable standards of juridical order, particularly in the wake of events such as September 11, 2001. Instead of reassuring us of the competency with which they carry out their social and ideological functions, the detectives and district attorneys of *Law and Order* offer us *psychic* reassurance.

Before, the position of strength to which one returned was the triumph of good over bad, detective over criminal, social order over social chaos. Now, I argue the resolution presented by the crime drama is psychic rather than conceptual or social. On screen in *Law and Order* is a fiction of human rather than social response to trauma – a microcosmic mise-en-scène of personal resistance to trauma and violence. (88)

In this view, the central concern of the series has shifted from reassuring us about the re-imposition of a social and moral equilibrium to concentrating on providing a model of personal (“human”) psychic and emotional equilibrium.

The position of strength of the *Law and Order* characters resides in their emotional “detachment and evenness,” their “steadiness of tone” and impassive qualities in the face of the relentless violence and disorder that they encounter (83). Their hallmark is their ability to return to the scenes of the crime, week after week, without demoralization or defeat. In this argument, it is precisely their stoicism in keeping violence and disorder from affecting the commitment with which they perform their jobs that signals the characters’ professionalism. The audience relates to the *Law and Order* characters via the wish that, faced with similar circumstances, we will be able to respond with comparable composure. The characters represent models of behavior for the audience who, when confronted with the specter of violence themselves, hopes that “the actual experience . . . could really be the same as watching it on television,” at least as it is portrayed by the *Law and Order* professionals (87).

It may well be an overstatement to suggest that a series such as *Law and Order* has given up the ghost of social and “conceptual” faith in the juridical system. However, more to the point here is that the mission of the detective drama remains one of providing reassurance, albeit in this argument, a reassurance that has shifted from offering up ideological and moral solutions for social ills to ways of coping with them psychically. If we cannot hold back the forces that threaten social stability, then at least we can confront them with equanimity and professionalism.

Although Lee’s account does provide a rare exploration of the emotional aspects of police and legal dramas, her analysis raises several issues. First, widely-felt psychic disturbances have cultural and ideological origins and meanings. They are modes of social, as well as personal, organization, determined in and through specific cultural contexts. Lee’s investigation does not explain how such psychic trauma originates and flourishes, nor does it consider the reasons such trauma takes on its particular manifestations as, I believe, the notion of structures of feeling begins to do. Psychic and “human” considerations need not be opposed to or preclude social and conceptual factors. Instead, analyzing the cultural and ideological aspects of emotional manifestations holds out the potential for a richer, more productive understanding of “the personal.”

Second, it is difficult to see how Lee’s explanation of *Law and Order*’s emotional empathy through distanciation as a contemporary technique of dealing with new-found forms of violence and trauma, takes us much beyond older generic modes and models. Here, I refer to the emotional detachment and stoicism that exemplifies traditional generic masculine and rational codes of behavior, both contemporary (*Cracker*) and historical (*Dragnet*), as outlined earlier by Creeber and Mittel. It would be as reasonable to suggest, in the face of arguably altering cultural conditions, that what the characters in *Law and Order* represent is generic *continuity* through their calm, efficient professionalism.

Third, Lee’s argument is based on the idea that the genre remains predicated on a successful resolution of reassurance. Although the terms of the resolution have shifted, from reassurances about the security of social circumstances to our capability in personally coping with threatening and painful social conditions, the genre is still predicated on an outcome

that provides some measure of comfort. However, what then occurs in the instance of *Cold Case*, a series that I argue is often unable to provide a resolution that either comforts or reassures, given the specific ways it has developed the genre's traditions? In *Cold Case*, we see an instance in which the detection genre faces increasing difficulty in offering up the fantasy of reassurance, either social/ideological or psychic.

I am arguing that analyzing *Cold Case* in terms of how it represents emotion causes us to re-evaluate the efficacy of the genre's professional codes and practices, including its detectives' demeanors of empathetic professionalism. Following such an interpretation, the show is as likely to foreground how little comfort or amelioration its characters can provide, either systemically or emotionally. As 9 year old Kyle's mother recognized, when it was "time to make things right," neither revenge nor legal justice provide relief. There is no exchange of smiles in the coda between detective and reincarnated victim in Kyle's case – only the inadequate consolation of a job technically, professionally, well done.

In "Violence, Mourning, Politics," Judith Butler suggests that there is something to be gained from lingering in the company of grief and dwelling with loss.

When grieving is something to be feared, our fears can give rise to the impulse to resolve it quickly, to banish it in the name of an action invested with the power to restore the loss or return the world to a former order, or to reinvigorate a fantasy that the world formerly was orderly. (chapter 24: 392)

In detection dramas, the impulse to action takes the form of solving the case, apprehending the perpetrator, and holding him or her culpable for the crime. This set of interrelated actions is meant to restore the loss suffered and return the world to its assumed former order, thereby providing reassurance. In this scenario, detectives are invested with the narrative power to comfort because their actions are understood to banish the grief that accompanies loss and the fears associated with social instability.

However, as Butler reminds us, the notion that the world formerly – or ever – was an orderly place is a fantasy. The narrative fantasies of the detection genre and the discourses of justice the genre relies upon are predicated, not upon dwelling with loss, but on excising it as entirely and expeditiously as possible.

Conclusion

One of the traditional functions of the detective genre has been to uphold and reaffirm the public ideal of "justice," the ability of concepts of law and order to contain and subdue other levels of existence, such as disturbing emotions around personal loss and sorrow. A troubling aspect of social reality like emotionality, with which we are often poorly equipped to deal, becomes "resolved" by other discourses, in the instance of the police procedural, by the capture and punishment of undesirable social elements and the reinstatement of social equilibrium. Through this process, troubling emotions are meant to dissipate.

Yet, in many instances of the genre, attempts are made to excise emotions from the text because they exceed the ideological safeguards of concepts such as the redemptive, equalizing power of juridical discourses. This suggests a contradiction within the genre, betraying uncertainty about how to manage the emotional terrain it is designed to evoke. To what degree and in which ways can grief and anger be aired in order for the narrative to fulfill its generic purpose of calming those emotions and reclaiming a former imagined order? Conversely, to what extent should emotions surrounding loss be circumscribed – or in wishful

terms, banished – to avoid difficulty in realigning them with ideological concepts of comfort achieved through justice served?

The ways emotions are represented in popular narrative forms is a potentially rich area of analysis that, surprisingly, has received little attention in film and television studies, despite the fact that emotion is a core element to the processes of storytelling. In cases in which characters are depicted or interpreted as relying “almost wholly on reason” and emotional detachment, we might start by asking how, precisely, do such texts circumscribe emotion and, in order to achieve that end, what attendant issues must be minimized, overlooked, or completely negated?

As we have seen in the example of *Cold Case*, not all instances of the genre bracket emotion. However, in bringing emotions to the fore, the series risks making apparent certain structures of feeling that it is often one of the common practices of its genre to keep submerged. One of the traditional functions of the law and order genres, in Raymond Williams’ terms, is their representation of the “public ideal” that prevailing notions of justice offer a social equilibrium between crime and its victims, that the legal system is the hero that can comfort and console. The stated ideal is that “justice” avenges loss: it makes otherwise senseless loss somehow bearable and, in the process, it realigns people and events, returning social forces to the comfort of equilibrium.

However, analysis based on the textual representation of specific emotions offers an alternate interpretation in which we see that contemporary generic discourses of law and order often are inadequate in the face of the acute emotional loss and sorrow depicted. Analysis of the representation of emotion is a site of opportunity where it becomes possible to view discourses of justice, and the generic narratives based on those discourses, as deficient in explaining or redressing the omissions and consequences we live.

Notes

- 1 “Volunteers” first aired on March 7, 2004. The episode was written by Jan Oxenberg and directed by Allison Anders.
- 2 The series routinely employs period music in an evocative manner. The codas are usually visually enacted against an appropriate background song. In the 1969 episode, the coda unfolds to *Get Together* by The Youngbloods (“C’mon people now, smile on your brother”).
- 3 *Without a Trace* is somewhat different. Based on the FBI’s missing persons unit, the cases are more often than not lost and found, although the threat of loss of life remains.
- 4 As if self-consciously aware of this, the show’s producers initially depicted Lilly Rush as largely hopeless in her own emotional personal and social life, living alone with a number of disfigured cats, yet brilliant at understanding the emotional and psychological motivations of witnesses and perpetrators in her professional life. Additionally, the program surrounds her with male colleagues who are unusually emotionally responsive, for instance, her partner Scotty spent the first season displaying great compassion for his schizophrenic girlfriend.
- 5 “Revenge” first aired on March 13, 2005, in *Cold Case*’s second season. It was written by Dan Dworkin and Jay Beattie, and directed by David Von Ancken.

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