

Investigating True Crime Television

“True Crime Television Storytelling and Genre”

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The recent proliferation of nonfiction, true crime storytelling across television and new media refocuses attention on this long-standing mode of programming. While featuring similar subject matter, this type of television storytelling spans a broad range of programs with different outcomes, purposes, and goals. How should the programs be classified and studied? How can we best account for the multiple types of programs that fall under this larger generic umbrella, ones that incorporate disparate elements such as reenactments, witness testimony, and/or conspiracy theories? Do they need to be separated, based on whether they feature solved or unsolved cases, for example? In thinking through true crime programs as a genre, I have started to divide, preliminarily, programs based around some basic attributes. In one category exist programs such as the long running television show *Forensic Files* (1996-) and the more recent Investigation Discovery program *Lt. Joe Kenda: Homicide Hunter* (2011-), both of which recreate previously solved cases using reenactments, voice over narration, and talking head interview commentary. In the case of *Forensic Files*, the show explicitly highlights how modern investigatory tools aided detectives in solving difficult cases, seemingly in line with the trajectory chronicled in Kathleen Battles’ book *Calling All Cars*. Battles describes the attempts to professionalize the police force in the United States in the 1930s through several means, one of which was the collaboration between the FBI and radio producers that led to the creation of radio programs such as *Gangbusters*, which depicted competent, successful police officers capturing criminals and keeping citizens safe. While similarly presenting solved cases, *Lt. Joe Kenda: Homicide Hunter* seems to have a different focus. Instead of highlighting the competence of American police forces in general, this program instead follows in the tradition of *Sherlock Holmes*,

celebrating the crime-solving acumen of Joe Kenda, a now-retired detective with the Colorado Springs Police Department. While highlighting the cooperation between Detective Kenda and his fellow officers in service of solving cases, the show nonetheless uses Kenda's entertaining and engaging storytelling abilities to put him at the center of the criminal stories.

Another type of true crime programming presents evidence in ongoing, unsolved criminal cases. Programs such as *America's Most Wanted* (1988-2012), *Disappeared* (2009-2016), and *The Hunt* (2014-) use interviews, reenactments, news footage, home video, and photographs in order to attract the attention of viewers who might have information to help solve them. Richard Kilborn labels this type of true crime "collaborational," in that it crowd-sources criminal justice by imploring the audience to invest time and energy into these cases and to share any information they might have with police (2003, 68). If we consider true crime television storytelling to fit into our current conception of reality television, then it has some interesting connections to Laurie Ouellette and James Hay's argument in their book *Better Living Through Reality TV*. They discuss how reality television serves within a broad conception of public service programming as "do-good" television that aids needy families (2008, 5). Does this type of true crime programming function as "do good" or public service programming by spotlighting miscarriages of justice perpetrated by the US legal system?

The overwhelming success of the podcast *Serial* (2014-) and the Netflix series *Making a Murderer* (2015-) has brought attention to a third type of true crime program, what might be termed the "reinvestigation" program. In the tradition of the films *The Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris, 1988) and *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills* (1996), these programs present criminal cases that are framed as flawed, again inviting listeners and viewers to reinvestigate the validity of the original evidence and subsequent criminal trials.

My interest in “collaborational” and “reinvestigation” true crime television programs always brings me to a question that Jane Gaines ponders at the beginning of her article “Political Mimesis”: “Did Documentary Film Ever Produce Social Change?” (1999, 84). In this regard, does true crime television need to affect change, or can it exist solely as entertainment? And finally, how can we understand these programs in terms of their capacity to compel audiences to respond with social action based on evidence presented?

References

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