

Investigating True Crime Television

“From Informative Murder Porn to O.J. Docu/Drama: Cultural Status and True Crime TV”

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In the opening scene of *South Park*'s 2013 episode “Informative Murder Porn,” one of the show’s marginal character gives a class presentation that describes “a plague of smut on our cable boxes.” Shows like A&E’s *Cold Case Files* and Investigation Discovery’s *Southern Fried Homicide* are characterized as “vile and despicable trash ... that use graphic sex, and innuendo, to make spousal murder more titillating.” The presentation concludes with a question: “How long before one of our daddies dresses up in lingerie and bashes Mommy's head in with a brick?” In contrast, earlier this year, two True Crime programs dealing with spousal murder were widely celebrated as important and necessary contributions to the ongoing conversation about race in America. Describing the first season of FX’s anthology drama *American Crime Story: The People v. O.J. Simpson* for the *New Yorker*, critic Emily Nussbaum (2016) observes that the series is not “crude or cartoonish but ideologically and emotionally nuanced, with each episode providing a shift in perspective, as if turning a daisy wheel of empathy.” Mary McNamara (2016) of the *Los Angeles Times* lavishes similar praise on ESPN’s five-part documentary series *O.J.: Made in America*, “Historically meticulous, thematically compelling and deeply human ... a masterwork of scholarship, journalism and cinematic art.” Although any attempt to account for the multiple types of programs that fit into a broad genre will leave some disappointed, such disparate characterizations of True Crime TV reflect the need to situate these programs within the discursive contexts of television’s cultural legitimation.

Since its launch nearly twenty years ago, the cable channel Investigation Discovery has demonstrated the ongoing popularity of True Crime stories. Yet, cultural elites like television critics and media scholars have paid relatively little attention to the genre. Some of this inattention is likely related to the themes highlighted by *South Park*'s satire. Like traditional critiques of mass culture as exploitative, sensational, and trivial, the imagined audience for informative murder porn is hyper-suggestible and unable to resist low-brow content. Based on the critical responses to legitimated True Crime programs, it seems a radically different audience has emerged. These viewers want ideological and emotional nuance. They are drawn to scholarship, journalism, and art. In such ways, True Crime TV is now an exercise in distinction where the matters of taste that appear to be personal and aesthetic function to conceal and reproduce established social hierarchies. Beyond patterns of preference and aversion, taste is also a form of cultural knowledge that precedes appreciation. To express like, hate, or indifference of something, one must first be aware of it. Yet, appreciation does not flow directly from this awareness. One still needs specific knowledge to interpret shows and to make meaningful taste judgments. And like the knowledge needed to appreciate opera, fine art, or any high-status cultural forms, the knowledge needed to watch legitimated television is not randomly distributed among viewers.

The cultural significance of contemporary television, as Newman and Levine (2012) have convincingly argued, cannot be separated from the discourses that elevate some kinds of television at the expense of others. As television scholars, we can think about *Made in America* as a documentary in the tradition of Errol Morris’ *The Thin Blue Line* (1988). We can think about *American Crime Story* as a fictionalized depiction ripped from the (historical) headlines. We can think about *Cold Case Files* and *Southern Fried Homicide* as reality TV. But in so doing, it is necessary to remember that the cultural hierarchies that give such classifications meaning are hardly neutral. They are part of the social processes of

cultural legitimation that use distinction to separate higher and lower classes of consumers: informative murder porn for them and O.J. docu/drama for us. As such, it seems inappropriate to conceptualize True Crime TV in terms of the genre's capacity to compel audiences to respond with social action. To argue otherwise denies the social elements of taste while simultaneously implying that texts can be cleanly separated from those who engage with them.