



Good Gore

Claire Sellwood unwraps the history of forensic violence on TV

television

The popular success of the forensic crime genre has often raised eyebrows, not least because some of the most graphic contributions to the genre have come from women.

Dr Melissa Hardie, lecturer in Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney, says this phenomenon is difficult to explain. But as popular genre fiction relies on promotion and sales for success and distribution, “It might be that women are good ‘faces,’ literally and metaphorically, from the promotion point-of-view,” Hardie says. The truth is, however, that it’s as deep a mystery as those that appear on our screens.

Patricia Cornwell’s 1990 novel *Post-mortem* is recognised as one of the earliest examples of forensic crime drama, incorporating details of autopsies witnessed by the author in real life. Similarly, Val McDermid’s Tony Hill novels generated controversy for their “excessive” violence, as did Lynda La Plante’s books featuring anti-heroine Detective Inspector Jane Tennison.

The popularity of forensic crime novels led to the creation of the many high-rating forensic crime dramas we see on television today. Audiences are now accustomed to seeing elaborately gory crime scenarios presented as entertainment. Actress Helen Mirren reignited her career in 1991 as DI Tennison and for more than a decade successfully rode the wave of TV violence. Forensic television drama rose to international prominence in 2000, with the success of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, and later spin-off shows *CSI: Miami* and *CSI: New York*. This franchise is credited with revitalising television drama and lifting flat-lining primetime ratings.

CSI focuses on the scientific inquiry aspect of criminal investigation. Forensic investigators trawl crime scenes and lab coat-clad scientists study blood-spatter patterns.

Instead of uniformed police or plainclothes detectives, the heroes are technicians and forensic psychologists. *CSI*’s success revealed the public’s interest, resulting in a flood of similar shows – *NCIS*, *Wire In The Blood*, *Bones*, *Dexter*, *Waking The Dead* – the list goes on.

Dr Natalya Lusty, lecturer on visual violence at the University, believes the popularity of these dramas is the result of the unrealistic treatment of death in our lives. “Our attraction to screen violence and cruelty . . . reflects in part the removal of death from our lives,” she says. “With the decline of our confrontation with real death we have witnessed an escalation of our obsession with virtual violence and death.”

Forensic television dramas often attract controversy for their depiction of violence based closely on real-life crimes. This is clearly visible in their tendency to dwell on investigations inspired by genuine serial killer cases. Sarah Groenewegen, a former police analyst and police inspector who has worked alongside forensic investigators, sees forensic television as a continuum of the “serial killer obsession that kicked off with the movie *The Silence Of The Lambs*.”

The serial killer has long been popular culture’s villain-of-choice, from Jack the Ripper onwards. Dr Hawley Crippen, who was hanged in 1910 for poisoning and dismembering his wife, was an infamous celebrity in his day. Ted Bundy, Peter Sutcliffe (the so-called “Yorkshire Ripper”) and Jeffrey Dahmer provoke continued interest decades after their crimes.

Groenewegen believes basing television drama on reality makes the subject matter more vivid, more spectacular, “sicker”. But she is wary of suggesting there is more violence on television today. “There’s certainly a difference in the depiction of violence,” she says. “The

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flash imagery and slickness of production values can give the impression of a more violent approach . . . but it doesn't mean there wasn't blood and guts shown in the past."

Developments in CGI (computer generated imagery) special effects and make-up artistry have heightened the reality of on-screen violence. Corpses become central characters and body parts are common set pieces. The buzz of a bone-saw and the splattering of blood are all rendered flawlessly. These improved technical effects have made the depiction of violence more graphic, but visual violence has long formed an integral part of television entertainment.

Dr Melissa Hardie also thinks there hasn't necessarily been an increase in violence on television. "I think what has changed has been a capacity to, or interest in, representing damaged bodies," she says. Instead of a wholesale escalation of violence, what has shifted is the voyeuristic quality of our interest in death and dying.

Words like "corruption" and "desensitisation" feature prominently in debates about television violence affecting viewers. However, Groenewegen believes most viewers understand what they're watching is fiction. "I think that there will be those who will 'get off' on the violence and cruelty, but most people would take it for what it is – fantasy," she says. She says arguments about television violence causing desensitisation or inspiring real-life violent acts are too simplistic for the complexities of human nature.

Lusty also believes forensic dramas are not necessarily harmful to television viewers. "In some ways they allow viewers to express what are often culturally repressed emotions around death and dying: fear, anger, grief, disgust, sadness," she says. Lusty also thinks these programs allow viewers to confront unfamiliar aspects of society. "Screen violence and genres such as forensic crime drama allow us to explore the conflict that we know exists in the real world, even if we don't have first hand experience of it," she explains. Forensic crime dramas fill the gap in our knowledge, our half-formed picture, of the darker sides of humanity.

Paradoxically, forensic television dramas can provide a level of comfort to audiences. They suggest the infallible ability of scientists to solve violent crimes, all in a reassuringly sanitised lab.

Lusty believes forensic dramas allow us to confront violence and death in the safe surroundings of home, the confines of the television screen and within a soothingly resolved episode-length narrative. "It may be that we use this form of entertainment to master our anxieties about death and dying," she says.

Similarly, forensic style gore is tolerated and legitimised by virtue of being displayed in the name of investigation or committed by forensic experts. "Putting an investigative frame on violence is a structure of reassurance; it suggests that disorder can be framed, limited, managed," Hardie explains.

Humour and eccentric characters play a similar role in allowing viewers to confront visual violence, while also distancing them from it. Forensic drama leads are some of the most socially maladjusted and quirky characters on television. They often emulate the original *CSI* main-



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man, Gil Grissom (William Petersen) who is depicted as awkward and asocial, a modern-day misfit.

The leading man and forensic expert in *Wire In The Blood*, Tony Hill (Robson Green), is a similarly romantic character: a maverick, socially inept and slightly disturbed. Tony substitutes scruffy pants for the ubiquitous white lab-coat and carries his personal belongings in a blue plastic bag – like a forensic psychologist hobo. Lusty believes characters like Grissom and Hill are compelling to audiences. "They represent the complexity of all individuals . . . rather than relying on stereotypes of good and bad," she says.

The complex heroes of the forensic crime drama are not just men. Forensic television shows are well known for featuring powerful, well-rounded, female characters. A forerunner of this was *Prime Suspect's* Jane Tennison, who faced sexism in a male dominated field. More recently, *Bones* stars a female forensic anthropologist, Temperance Brennan (Emily Deschanel), whose social awkwardness and intimidating intelligence is reminiscent of Grissom.

A new wave of forensic dramas has been heralded by the genre-bending series, *Dexter*, which blurs traditional genre tropes. Dexter Morgan (Michael C. Hall) is a forensics blood-spatter expert, who also has an urge to kill. Hardie believes *Dexter* is an interesting contribution to the genre. "The first season was fascinating in the way it twinned investigation and perpetration," she explains. *Dexter* radically re-thinks the forensics drama criminal. Archetypically the forensic drama killer is a shadowy creature, whose face we barely see and whose off-screen presence is profoundly felt. In contrast, Dexter is the program's epicentre, our eyes, our ears and even our thoughts, granting us access to the plot. "[*Dexter*] takes the investigation of 'evil' one step further by also humanising that evil," says Lusty.

Forensics dramas such as *CSI* and *Wire In The Blood* have survived a long time in television industry terms. But the formula needs to be refreshed to keep audiences watching. *Dexter* represents the latest development in television crime drama. It continues the shift away from traditional cop shows, towards more "realistic" representation of criminal violence and investigation. Ironically, this is most obvious in the most venerable crime series on the box: *The Bill*. After 25 years and countless crimes and cops and predictions of its imminent demise, it has reinvented itself yet again with young stars and, now, a mouthy forensics expert, too. Plus ça change! **SAM**

Above left: Robson Green in *Wire in the Blood*, courtesy Seven Network; above, Helen Mirren in *Prime Suspect* and Crime Scene Examiner (Jason Barnett) in *The Bill*, courtesy ABC TV