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The Allure and Effects of the True Crime Genre

The True Crime genre is a booming industry with new series, films, and documentaries to watch all the time. Viewers of the true crime drama are drawn to it for more than just entertainment, they look for survival skills and a way to understand how someone becomes a killer or criminal. However, even though it is a great source of entertainment, the media's use of drama and advertising techniques causes people to have a warped sense of the criminal justice system and lose touch with the reality of these cases. Dramatization is a large part of the media and entertainment, and we see more of it than we even realize. The drama of what we watch and read is often what draws us in, but the effects can be incredibly detrimental.

Most of the true crime genre tells the stories of cases that involve extremely violent crimes. The cases that become the most popular are the ones that deal with the most horrifying topics of rape and murder (Vicary and Fraley 81). For the most part the cases usually involve a male perpetrator and a female victim. There are several series and films that deal with a female perpetrator, but the genre as a whole is generally dominated by the male on female crime. The genre can also be broken down into different categories of crimes such as Unsolved crimes, serial killers, crimes involving famous people, and murders that had a large news following. The crimes are also not limited to one gender versus the other, there are also stories of men killing

men, women killing women, children being abducted and killed, and the most horrifying people who kill their whole families. No matter what the case involves, each of the stories are always more violent than the last, more disturbing, and always very emotional. The question though is why are we so interested in watching and reading all of the gory details of these cases?

Due to the violence and aggression involved in the stories, one might assume that men would be more drawn to the genre. Men are viewed as the more aggressive sex, so this assumption seems to make sense. However, there is an apparent paradox surrounding the situation, “despite being the less violent sex, women may be more drawn to accounts of true crime than are men” (Vicary and Fraley 81). Through a series of studies detailed by Amanda M. Vicary and R. Chris Fraley, they determined that when it comes to stories of violence that women were more likely to choose the true crime genre than men (Vicary and Fraley 83). In further studies also detailed in this writing, they explore “the hypothesis that women may be drawn to true crime stories more so than are men because those stories may confer valuable information about avoiding or surviving violent crime” (Vicary and Fraley 83). This suggestion does not take away from the entertainment aspect of watching or reading anything in the true crime genre, but it definitely plays a part in the reasons that women are drawn to it in the first place. In order to avoid being the victim of a deadly crime, a lot of people feel that by watching or reading true crime they can figure out what the victims didn’t do. This way if they were in the same situation they would be able to get away, “as true crime books sometimes contain successful defense tactics and escape tricks used by surviving victims, these books can offer insight into how one can achieve this goal” (Vicary and Fraley 83). To solidify the theory that women were attracted to stories where they could gain survival skills, the fifth study conducted by Vicary and Fraley

tested whether women were more drawn to cases involving a female victim (Vicary and Fraley 84). Their findings supported the claim, being that the women were more likely than the men to pick the true crime book that involved female victims (Vicary and Fraley 85). An example of a docuseries that would provide a lot of survival skills would be *Conversations with a Killer: the Ted Bundy Tapes*. People watching the series learn the ruse that he used to lure girls in, the way that he went undetected for so long, and about a victim who managed to escape named Carol DeRonch. This series like many others also deals with the psychological speculation as to why someone would commit these crimes, which is another draw towards these stories. In the fourth study included in the writing by Vicary and Fraley, they found that both men and women were significantly drawn more to the books which contained the killers motives. Understanding the motives behind the crimes gives the audience the answer of why someone would do something so horrible. These findings point to the fact that viewers are not looking for the violence or the gore of the crime, but the deeper lessons it has to offer.

People who are considered “normal” are drawn to understanding how the minds of killers work because they can not rationalize it in their own minds. Many of the killers who are depicted in these books, series, and documentaries are people who experienced a lot of childhood trauma, and/or suffer from some sort of predisposed mental condition such as schizophrenia or antisocial personality disorder which leads them to becoming a killer. In the article written by Katie Jones, she unpacks the book and netflix series based on the book both called *Mindhunter*, in relation to the sensationalism of the killer and repression of the victims. The book *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit*, tells the story of the creation of the Behavioral Science Unit of the FBI. The idea which led to the creation of the unit was that if you

could understand what led the person to the crime then you could trace the crime back to the killer. Basically they studied previous killers, which led them to categorizing them as serial killers, and they were able to categorize different types of serial killers. The product was that by studying the way in which the victims were killed, disposed of, and what they looked like, the agents could create a “profile” or basic idea of what the killer would be like in order to narrow their suspect pool (Douglas and Olshacker 13-15). This unit went on to inspire a fictional show called *Criminal Minds* which uses the same strategies only on completely fictionalized cases. Jones describes the draw to this book and series saying:

“As a nostalgic series, *Mindhunter* seems to fulfil a wish for a time in which murder could be explained and contained: the repetitive return to the theories (whether or not one subscribes to them) which “explain” the acts in terms of childhood experience, sexual repression, or monstrous mothers imply an epistemological fantasy of understanding – of “knowing why” or attaining closure.” (Jones)

This is the biggest question that anyone asks when something terrible happens, why? Looking into the motives that lead killers to kill gives an answer to that it explains the things that we can not understand ourselves.

However, Jones suggests that while we are looking for answers as to why they did it, we make these killers into celebrities while the victims are made to look weak. This can be clearly seen across the board with examples like Richard Ramirez, Jeffery Dahmer, Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, and Wayne Williams. These are serial killers that almost everyone is aware of and some people know a lot about, but people know virtually nothing about their victims besides the general description of the type of person they killed. Most everyone couldn't name a victim of

one of these killers off the top of their head. The victims of these men are women, children, gay men, and other people who continuously live in fear, and:

“due to depictions of serial killers as predominantly white and male, they ‘uphold the dominant order of male supremacy and [are] not an aberration but rather an extreme form of the social control of women through fear and terror.’” (Jones).

Wayne Williams is the focus of the second season of *Mindhunter* the series as we watch Holden Ford (Johnathan Groff) and Bill Tench (Holt McCallany) help the Atlanta police look for the man killing African American children. The characters which are depicted by Groff and McCallany are meant to represent John Douglas and Robert K. Ressler, Douglas being the author of *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit*, and both are the two real life FBI agents who started the Behavioral Science Unit. Holden is presented with the case by the woman who was working at the front desk of the hotel he was staying in for a different case. She tells him about the large number of African American children who are going missing and being murdered, and the police aren't even bothering to investigate. Holden gets involved even with backlash from the Atlanta Police department, and through this storyline “*Mindhunter* shows how these murders were ignored by the police, and contrasts this with the reaction to the murder of a white child in a middle class community” (Jones; 2.5-2.7). The season takes place in the time between 1979 to 1981, and issues like this are still relevant today. The dismissal of loss shown towards the black community is still a huge problem in today's society. Jones suggests “that the serial killer genre brings the audience into an accentuated world of circularity and repetition” (Jones). Meaning that the serial killer subgenre within the true crime genre highlights the real life problems of vulnerable groups being targeted and minority groups being silenced or ignored.

Therefore, people are drawn to watch the True Crime genre in order to understand more of what happens in the world. Whether that is to understand the psychology of how someone becomes a killer, to understand how the crimes are solved, or to learn survival skills. There is an incredible amount of information that can be taken away from watching or reading these stories, such as the audience being made more aware of deeper societal problems. However, those who can identify with the victims are left more scared of their vulnerability than they were before. The next question that is raised is, how much of what we learn about the world from these works is misled by the media tactics used for entertainment?

Everything that is shown to us has some level of dramatization to it including the everyday news. People are drawn in and entertained by drama, as proven by things such as tabloid journalism like TMZ or Entertainment Tonight. It makes complete sense that in order to attract viewers and keep them interested the creators of true crime films and series would increase or even create more drama. The two most recent and highly anticipated docuseries to be released on Netflix were *Night Stalker: the Hunt for a Serial Killer* and *Crime Scene: the Vanishing at Hotel Cecil*. Starting off with the trailers, it is the first thing that we are shown the minute that we click on the title, and the dramatics are in high swing. In the *Night Stalker* trailer we are shown images of Los Angeles in the 1980's looking gorgeous and people having fun, then an image of the skyline at night literally being turned upside down. Then as we hear interviews from people who worked on the case and people who had interacted with the killer, we are shown overly dramatic images that are meant to leave us uneasy and intrigued. Ones which stand out are the image of a door knob being turned slightly as we are being told how he would break into homes, and the bug swimming helplessly at the top of the pool unable to fly out as a woman tells us how she knew someone was in her house. They also emphasize how he didn't have a

victim type, he would just kill anyone and this was something they hadn't seen before. As explained by Katie Jones, people want to know why, and including this aspect in the trailer alone makes people want to watch it. The entire series goes on to use this same level of drama especially in their stock footage that they use over the people talking. Next comes the *Hotel Cecil* trailer, and as if they could not get more dramatic than the last, the second line spoken goes “is there a room here that maybe somebody hasn’t died in?” They also establish the connection between Richard Ramirez, the Night Stalker, and the Hotel Cecil by saying he would come in covered in blood and no one had a problem with that. These are absolutely shocking things to hear as a viewer which leave you with more and more questions of why. They actually go so far as to call it “Hotel Death,” the shock that comes with a statement like this creates incredible drama. This all before they introduce the actual case where Elisa Lam went missing and was found in a water tank, and the case is still unsolved. There is also an element to watching unsolved crimes in which people believe that they will see something in the information that will help them solve what the investigators could not. Again in the *Hotel Cecil* docuseries their use of stock footage creates a lot of the drama, especially with the videos taken by the people who were being interviewed when they stayed there. The use of video blog style footage makes you feel like you are there taking the video and creates further suspense, but also when the footage doesn’t come from a professional camera it makes it like there is no way they could add movie magic to create scarier images. All of this takes it further than just telling the story it creates significant dramatic entertainment. The Cecil Hotel also inspired the fifth season of *American Horror Story* called *Hotel*. Watching the docuseries it is clear that they use some very similar angles when panning around the outside of the building. Anyone who watched both series would probably recognize the images, and this creates further drama surrounding the legend of the

hotel. The biggest form of drama created in this series is the amount of speculation around the Elisa Lam case happening because of the claim that the building itself is cursed. These are just two effective examples of the general amount of dramatics that are used across the board in the true crime genre.

Another example of a story that is heavily affected by the dramatization in the media is the FX series *The People v. O.J. Simpson: American Crime Story*. This series promises a look behind closed doors at the murder trial of O.J. Simpson, an incredibly popular and televised case from 1994. It follows and emphasizes the tampering and manipulation used by the defense to try and get O.J. Simpson off, and the inadequacy of the prosecutors. A prime example of the dramatization of the situations is the scene where we see O.J. Simpson's lawyer completely changing the decor in his house to create a different image of who he is (1.5). They take down scandalous photos of women, and replace them with photos of him and his mother and wholesome art. This is just one example of the things they did that manipulated the and tampered with evidence. The conversations are very obviously dramaticized versions of assumed conversations being that no one actually heard them take place. The acting, images created in each scene, fabricated conversations, and exaggerated story lines come together to create this completely dramatic and almost unbelievable version of real life.

This form of dramatization plays directly into the theory presented by Megan Boorsma that “without being informed, outside of the narrative or dramatization, true crime may be harming America's perception of the criminal justice system to an unmerited extent” (Boorsma 211). The amount of manipulation shown by the lawyers in this series could give people the false idea that all lawyers are able to do this and get away with it. This causes a major distrust in the

court system, and questions the reality of the right we have as citizens to a fair trial. Boorsma explains that media coverage of crimes and their further punishments are sensationalized on the news itself, and therefore retellings in the true crime genre are taken even further from the truth. Most people don't get formally taught how the criminal justice system works in its entirety.

Therefore:

considering the fact that "a majority of people in the United States receive much of their impressions and knowledge of the criminal justice system through the media" and entertainment television in particular, the recent booming popularity of true crime makes the genre a pervasive force in shaping the public's perception of the criminal justice system. (Boorsma 213-214)

Of course it is important to be able to identify the flaws of the systems which we are under, but the confusion comes when the only understanding of the system you are criticizing comes from a borderline fictionalized source. Boorsma admits that there is virtually no research done on the direct correlation between the public perception of the criminal justice system and intake of the true crime genre. Therefore, without a solid study to base conclusions off of there can only be speculation of possible effects from analysis of the narratives displayed. In *The People v. O.J. Simpson: American Crime Story* the narrative that is displayed shows the lawyers being incredibly evil, and also adds another emotional element by including the effects that eight months in isolation had on the jurors. In the episode jurors are shown reaching their breaking points after being entirely isolated for much longer than they were originally told (1.8). Boorsma even references the FX series and how it is a great example of how true crime can fuel a public lack of knowledge and misunderstanding of the legal system saying, "FX's *The People v. O.J.* never fully discusses the details of the differing burdens of proof but still indicates that Simpson

was held liable in a subsequent civil case brought against him by the Goldman's" (Boorsma 222).

The conclusion that Boorsma comes to is that:

while true crime does expose flaws that exist in the criminal justice system-such as wrongful convictions, issues with police discretion, and prejudice-one of the biggest concerns is how the genre can misinform the public by enticing emotional responses to these issues. (Boorsma 224)

It is the dramatizations that provoke emotional responses in order to raise the entertainment value of the production, but the entertainment is ultimately hurting the knowledge of the audience. To combat this there could be some sort of warning in the beginning that states it is a dramatic version of actual events, so the viewer knows that not everything is entirely correct. However, this would not work for a strictly documentary style film or series as opposed to an actor recreation of the story. Documentaries are supposed to be solid truth, so dealing with the dramatics and the emotional elements is very tricky. The only help would be to push the public to do further research beyond the things that they watch to get a better understanding of how the entire system works.

A popular way in which emotion is enticed and buzz surrounding the release of a production is created, is the use of stunt casting in recreations of true stories. Stunt casting is the use of popular celebrities to draw in a bigger audience of people who might not normally watch that specific thing. The viewers have emotional attachments to these celebrities which can cause them to watch these films and series with prior opinions attached to the characters because of the face presenting them. For example, the star studded cast in *The People v. O.J. Simpson: American Crime Story*, and Zac Efron as Ted Bundy in *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile*. Casting David Schwimmer, Sarah Paulson, Cuba Gooding Jr., and John Travolta draws in a

large and diverse crowd. With such a large number of viewers, it is almost certain that a lot of viewers will have their opinions either swayed or created about the court system from this telling. High ratings are an amazing thing in television and entertainment, but the effects presented by Boorsma may need to be taken into consideration. The more concerning example is the casting of Zac Efron, a well known heartthrob, as famous serial killer Ted Bundy. There was a lot of backlash when the casting was first revealed about the message that this would send to viewers. People who grew up watching the *High School Musical* series are now watching the same face that once told them to break the status quo and follow their dreams portray an incredibly dangerous serial killer. People who wouldn't normally watch true crime and those who love the genre had a lot of the same reactions. They wanted to root for him even though they knew he was evil because of the actor portraying him. This reaction is concerning being that the story is about an actual real life person who committed these horrible crimes. Stunt casting creates another negative effect not highlighted by Boorsma in her article. While the audience is taking the portrayal of the investigations and trials as an understanding of how the criminal justice system works, they are also taken away from the reality of the case itself. This takes away from the severity of what actually happened to these victims, and how dangerous the criminals were.

People will always be drawn to true crime, and the idea that they can find ways to protect themselves by seeing “what the victims did wrong.” This gives the viewer a sense of security that if they were to be in this type of situation, they would be able to escape. It also offers answers to the question we start asking from the moment we can speak, “why?” As people we are always looking for an explanation to the world around us, and these films, series, and books offer the answers as to why people commit crimes, something we usually can not understand.

Overall, the negative effects caused by the tactics of the media do not take away from the entertainment of the genre, but require that viewers keep in touch with the realities of the situations through further research.

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