

DINNER AND A MURDER, ANYONE?: AN EXPLORATION OF REALITY CRIME IN  
AMERICAN PRIME TIME TELEVISION

by

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(Under the Direction of Nathaniel Kohn)

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the appeal of realty crime TV, specifically *The New Detectives: Case Studies in Forensic Science*. An examination of the programming genres that preceded the show and how they collectively contribute to the creation of *The New Detectives* was conducted in order to provide an accurate description of the program and its most significant elements. This part of the research culminates from previous research and literature regarding film and television images and popular culture, the understanding of media messages, and the sociology of death in American society. An autoethnographic study yields first hand accounts of *The New Detectives* viewing experience. This historical research and ethnography contradict the common assumption that murder and death themes are in opposition to a viewer's ability to experience pleasure and entertainment while watching such programming.

INDEX WORDS: Autoethnography, Death, Murder, Reality television, Realism, Voyeurism

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## Introduction

Local TV's long-time belief that if a story bleeds, it leads has spread to prime time TV. Dead bodies – or those made to look dead - are becoming the stars of prime time TV shows like *CSI* and *Six Feet Under*. These shows are not the first of their kind. This trend, giving the lead roles to the dead, started in the 1980s with shows like *Quincy* and was later adopted on the cable networks as well. The cable networks have led the way in exploring the topic of death and dead bodies through programs like *FBI Files*, *Cold Case Files* and *The New Detectives: Case Studies in Forensic Science* on Discovery Channel.

Discovery Channel's *The New Detectives: Case Studies in Forensic Science* brings travesty to the forefront through its re-enactments of crime and murder. To the dismay of many, watching stories of murder has become something of a spectator sport. Perhaps it is the irony of death and murder that makes the series successful. Death, and unfortunately murder, occurs everyday, but remains one of the last taboos of TV besides explicit nudity. A national interest in these shows brings with it inquires about the state of the national psyche. It sparks a debate between those who think the country's fascination with death is morbid and death-seeking and others who believe that a fascination with death is and always has been universal and healthy.

*The New Detectives* has placed death into an entertainment framework appealing to viewers' tastes for farfetched drama. Television is understood as a medium whose fabrications and exaggerations often outweigh its accuracy. But, with the emergence of reality crime TV, a more advanced challenge presents itself. How real can a reality crime program be when it is presented through a medium that is so hyperreal in nature? Although murder is a concrete act that can be illustrated on screen, death is a more abstract concept that can be presented in ways

that are not necessarily accurate. It is difficult to do much better in the way of presenting death since it is something that audiences are eager to explore, yet want to avoid the actual experience at all costs. Watching stories of true murders is as close as we can get without being present for the real thing. And little credibility is given to those who claim to have experienced death and return from it to talk about it. In essence, death-related programming is easily and freely manipulated since viewers have little or no experience to dispute it.

I will use Discovery Channel's *The New Detectives* as a prototype for exploration of the genre and its most satisfying characteristics. I began my study with an examination of the elements of different program genres that lend themselves to the creation of *The New Detectives*. The second chapter will be an exploration of my own thoughts and feelings as I watch *The New Detectives*. I will explore how episodes appeal to the human psyche and the story telling process. As another resource of human thoughts and feelings toward this program, I will monitor the message board on Discovery Channel's website for fans of *The New Detectives*. This will provide insight into other people's feelings about the show and allow opportunity to compare them to my own. This research is intended to provide insight into the television industry's choice of programming and production techniques and the factors of the human psyche that make crime TV viewers crave the sagas of murderous death. This work is a map of the viewer's interest as it meanders from the detective work toward the dead body itself and ends up inside his or her own psyche.

## Chapter 1

### SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING BORROWED, SOMETHING NEW: AN OVERVIEW OF THE MARRIAGE OF MEDIA GENRES

“Truth becomes fiction when the fiction’s true; Real becomes not-real where the unreal’s real.”

--- Cao Xuequin, *The Story of the Stone*

Post-modern television has given way to a blurring of genres. Television networks are moving toward a heterogeneous approach to program development. Daytime drama series have added vampires and wizards to their roster of characters, and velvet-voiced narrators tell the stories of murder with just the right blend of sarcasm and solemnity in popular crime series. As viewers, we are accustomed to certain elements that function as indicators of seriousness, humor, sorrow, or other moods. But, when there is a breakdown of genre barriers, our perceptions of what is fiction, what is funny, and what is fallible are changed.

*The New Detectives: Case Studies in Forensic Science* comes to mind when exploring the new breed of programs that result not only from a breakdown of genre barriers, but also from a deliberate marriage of textual elements that together conspire to confuse the viewer into being entertained. *The New Detectives* is a show about actual murder cases that have been solved through advances in forensic technology. It is like a reality TV show without all the real culprits or *Unsolved Mysteries* meets *60 Minutes*. A description of the show is almost too difficult for words. I am reminded of part of a recent conversation I had with my mother about the show:

“It’s about real murder cases but these are re-enactments.”



“Oh, so these aren’t the real people,” she said. “They’re all actors?”

“No. Not all of them. The police officers are role playing too,” I said.

“So the police officers are actors?”

“No. The police officers are *acting*,” I tried to explain.

“I thought you said this was real,” she said.

“Well, it’s true, but this isn’t real.”

“Oh.”

Hence, an important point to remember when watching *The New Detectives*; these are true stories, but what we are seeing is not real. If it were real, there would be no storyteller amongst us.

The success of the *New Detectives* can be attributed to more than just entertaining crime. It is a mixture of reality crime TV, a TV news magazine, prime time drama, and a psycho-thriller movie. The show survives as a sort of sign of the times. It incorporates elements such as sex, politics, psychological appeal, humor, class and hegemony, and hyper reality. These factors, when combined give birth to *The New Detectives* and then orphan it because it does not fit in perfectly anywhere.

### **Reality Crime Programs in the U.S.**

The late 1980s introduced a new reality TV genre with shows like *Cops*, *America’s Most Wanted*, and *Unsolved Mysteries*. These shows portrayed private citizens, who have probably never been to Hollywood, sharing their stories of accidental tragedies, victimizing crime, and bad luck with the public. The reality show genre was supposed to seem less contrived, although many would argue otherwise. Reality crime helped bring true crime to the forefront. I join Gitlin (1986) in supposing that these shows have flourished because we have abandoned any

hope of improving the human condition. Rather, we embrace the human condition – albeit ailing - so much so that we look to our own societal ills for entertainment.

Reality-based crime programming is a joint venture between media producers and law enforcement agencies. The producers of *Cops* need permission to ride in patrol cars and film the police interaction with the citizens featured on the show. In order to get entertaining details about an arrest or an otherwise private legal case, cooperation between media and police is absolutely necessary. In exchange for this inside privilege, producers of reality programs cannot or will not exercise critical or defamatory judgment of law enforcement agencies. These shows use their alliances with law enforcement agencies to establish authority while serving to maintain a reverence for law enforcement in society. The producers of reality crime shows identify with the police, viewing their role as exciting and vital in the fight against crime. The television reality crime programs generally reflected a conservative, supposedly dominant, ideology that supports crime laws (Fishman & Cavender, 1998).

Partnering with law enforcement, however, did not keep these “reality” programs from regularly incorporating murder and death into their themes in a sensational way. Reality TV has been blamed as the perpetrator of dysfunction in our society. However, it has also been a major player in upholding law and demonstrating the consequences for breakers of the law – especially murderers. American TV viewers enjoy watching tales of greed and foul play unfold on the screen and then debating on what should become of the guilty. The TV industry has wasted no time producing more reality. The genre has grown to be more dramatic and sensational.

The 1987 airing of *Unsolved Mysteries* ushered in a new era of reality crime television in the United States. In 1988, the Fox network followed with *America's Most Wanted*. Although these shows came twenty years after their European predecessors, they became instant hits in the

United States. *America's Most Wanted* and *Unsolved Mysteries* combined the drama of 1940s film, sensation of a daytime soap opera, and the straight-forward realism of a hard newscast. These shows also borrowed from various 1950s crime shows such as *Dragnet* and *The Untouchables* which relied on actual cases and used location shooting and police jargon to create a sense of realism (Fishman & Cavender, 1998). Shows from the 1960s and 1970s like *The FBI*, *Police Story* and *Crime Stoppers* also lent some elements to reality crime shows. *Crime Stoppers* depicted dramatizations of crime, usually murder, and ended the show with a plea to the public to help the police solve the crime. *America's Most Wanted* and *Unsolved Mysteries* spawned a new generation of crime shows, including *True Stories of the Highway Patrol*, *Untold Stories of the FBI*, and *Rescue 911*.

Part of the appeal of shows that feature real homicide cases is that they allow us viewers to look into those life experiences that do not color our own day-to-day lives. The average person does not kill someone and then have a TV show or movie made about him. Nor is it likely that someone who is not involved in law enforcement will participate in a murder investigation. For some, reality TV serves somewhat as a model - however substandard - to which their own behaviors and life circumstances can be compared. Viewers can use other people's supposedly "real life" situations as a way to delight in their otherwise uneventful, monotonous lives. Reality crime TV can relieve one of the stresses brought on by wanting more "spice" in one's life while being reminded that it isn't his or her own life that is in danger.

The "thank God that's not me" response is what draws viewers to the shows. It is a way for viewers to know that their lives are better than someone else's; there are others more miserable than they are. They get to watch other people in dangerous or compromising

situations and learn about other cultures or subcultures that they have no access to otherwise.

The shows are like televised tabloid magazines.

The packaging becomes the space where sense is made of the chaotic events depicted in the individual segments – the use of the image resides in the voyeuristic impact of a “thank God that’s not me” response but is disguised by the direct to camera address used as a sign of televisual authority. (Dovey, 2000, p.93)

People’s intimate and unfortunate life events such as murder and death are fodder for reality crime programs. They are exploited for the purpose of bringing pleasure to their viewing audience. Reality TV is the ultimate example of the simulacrum in which the insistence upon realism is in direct proportion to the disappearance of realness. Being able to have the experience of losing one’s self in the show is a sign that reality TV has visually connected its viewers to the subject matter being presented (Dovey, 2000).

The term “Reality TV” has been used to describe a range of program contents. The genre is characterized by a common form of recording called “on the wing.” Reality programs attempt to simulate real-life crime events through dramatized reconstruction and re-enactments. These re-enactments are edited into a sensationally packaged television program which can be promoted on the strength of its reality credentials. However, Jon Dovey (2000) challenges the credibility of reality programs:

The audience can sometimes be maneuvered into eavesdropping positions and allowed to witness events in ways which pander to less desirable traits in human nature; this embodies the worst kind of lowest common denominator broadcasting. Contemporary popular media are the product of a market-led political economy and therefore culturally suspect. (Dovey, 2000, p.83)

In addition to being regarded as a credible source for information about crime, the reality genre offers a number of possible pleasures including amusement and suspense. Perhaps the height of this pleasure is in the scopophilic experience of watching a reality show. The real

pleasure is in looking. Reality shows continue to find willing subjects because scopophilia provides a two-way pleasure. There is pleasure in being watched as well as in watching (Easthope, 1993).

What is seen on the screen is so manifestly shown. But the mass of mainstream film, and the conventions within which it has consciously evolved, portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy. (Easthope, 1993, p.114)

Although the reality programs are there to be seen, the “narrative conventions” make the viewers feel as if they are secretly looking in on a private world. “The camera has become the “eye of power” and its gaze, now interiorized, is turned inward on our most sacred ... secrets. These secrets, once revealed unlock the key to our being, for they tell us who we are” (Easthope, 1993, p.112).

Participants in the reality television shows have long captured viewers with their confessions to America. However, these engaging testimonials called reality programming are challenged when their jealous sibling, the hard news industry, challenges its “realness.”

## **Newscasts**

The ways in which murderous crime is imagined and experienced are shaped by socially dominant ideas about crime. In the past, news shows almost single-handedly perpetuated these hegemonic ideas throughout society. A large portion of the audience may perceive reality crime shows as the news, but the genre of reality crime is far from journalism. Although reality crime shows and traditional news shows borrow from one another, reality crime shows are not held to the same ethics as journalism. Production techniques that have often been frowned upon in news programs are the same techniques that make the reality television shows attractive. For example, using music or dramatic camera angles to heighten the tension of the scene may have been

considered too cinematic for a credible news cast. Some of these techniques have found a new home in local television news programs. News shows are reality programming too; perhaps its oldest form. However, elaborate production techniques are often seen as degrading to the professional standards of true journalism and even as a violation of the rules of journalistic objectivity. Reality shows borrow from hard news programs to establish credibility:

Television reality – Our reality, even our criteria for what counts as real, are mediated through television, which claims to present an unmediated picture of reality, have made of us what Raymond Williams calls a dramatized society. Reality programs reality claims are based on dramatized events. Not news broadcasts, they establish the reality of their presentations with techniques that suggest the news. (Fishman & Cavender, 1998, p.89)

Newspaper and television crime reporting are not entirely different from the production of reality crime shows. They too need to cooperate with the police as sources for their first-hand knowledge of crime and for details about a case. They are dependent on law enforcement, cover crime through the eyes of the police, and see their role as one of aiding law enforcement just as reality crime programming does.

Historically, hard news programs have led in the race for credibility and authority in crime reporting. News programs have anchors that speak in an authoritative manner while looking directly into the camera lens. This authoritative glare is one we as viewers have grown to associate with truth and accuracy (Fishman & Cavender, 1998). Since the inception of reality crime programming in the United States, the traditional signs and symbols have wavered from time to time. Reality crime shows have distinguished-looking hosts who speak directly to the camera and interview law enforcement agents who are involved in the crime being reported. The work of average citizens is also threatening the hard news industry's lead in the race for authority. Regular citizens have found outlets in reality crime shows for displaying video

accounts of crime that they have captured on personal video cameras. Of course every citizen is not held in the same regard as known news anchors in terms of credibility. However, if a citizen captures crime on camera that can be clearly seen, viewers will most likely take it as true and real. That which can be seen overrides some perceived authority established through nothing more than production techniques and conservative reporting styles.

Although the news industry claims objectivity in its best reporting, news casts shape societal ideals of serious crime through their choice of stories to report and stories to ignore. For example, a well-known person's death might make the evening news, but anybody's murder can be the leading story. Murder is serious by nature and hard news programs tend to report murder in a serious manner. Serious news reporting can create the illusion that there is an absence of grief when in fact it is very present among the victim's family members. The reporter is not *feeling*. He or she is merely "teaching" and it is the viewer's job to "understand" (Carroll, 1999). The distancing that occurs in "serious" reporting may aid in establishing credibility, but it lacks the element of humanness that reality programs have when crimes are re-enacted and passionate hosts encourage viewers to help because it is the right thing to do.

Another way hard news casts promote hegemonic ideas about murder crimes is in its depiction of women as victims. Socially dominant ideas about the nature, qualities, and conduct of men and women are largely established and upheld through news reporting. The gendered content of representations of death and the ways in which textual and visual images of death are employed in modern gender politics tend to reinforce dominant notions about women being weaker and more vulnerable than men. Women, men, and their relations which emphasize male strength and predatory tendencies are commonly associated with images of death and murder in the mainstream hard news casts (Field, Hockey & Small, 1997). Hard news media play on the

perceived male-female dualism to make stories of greed, jealousy, and ultimately death, even more sensational.

Many of the elements of hard news casts have become the socially accepted signs of truth and accuracy. The no-frills production, direct style of addressing the viewers, and access to law enforcement officers who have first-hand information all have proven valuable elements to shows that want to establish or just create the illusion of credibility. Producers of reality crime TV shows and fictional crime drama shows have borrowed heavily from production styles of hard news in their quests for creating the reality.

### **Fictional Crime Drama**

Genres are defined by formulaic plots and characterizations that yield predictability in cultural production. Genres, as it has been made obvious in this chapter, are not exclusive of one another. Reality crime programs combine newscasts, crime drama, and even elements of the horror genre. Typically, they consist of simple plots in which villains commit a mysterious crime like murder and the hero - a cop - who solves the mystery. They feature symbolic themes: evil threatens but good intervenes and in the denouement, triumphs over evil (Fishman & Cavender, 1998).

We represent and perceive the world through symbols. The crime drama genre heavily represents the media's symbolic predominance. Dramatized crime representations have become a means of symbolically reinforcing moral sentiments toward crime. The crime genre depicts moralistic plots in which the villain(s) becomes the symbol of social malaise and disorder, which are a threat to the established moral laws. Their defeat is resolution to the plot's tension, reassuring members of society that the moral boundaries are still intact (Fishman & Cavender, 1998).



Murder mystery shows like *Murder, She Wrote* and *Columbo* illustrated all the elements of the fictional crime drama genre at its height. These shows' plots were fiction and everybody knew it. Fiction was the feature that gave us permission as viewers to discuss it and even laugh about it openly. These crime dramas attracted an audience that enjoyed the vicarious experience of suspense. Fiction crime shows enable viewers to do more than just watch and wonder. Fictional crime TV fits into society not only as a way for the public to vicariously police the police. It also has become a social consortium, spawning its own sort of subculture.

Attending TV-show-themed viewing parties became a popular pastime throughout the 1980s and continues on today. I have been invited to a few *CSI* dinner parties and I remember my parents going to *Hillstreet Blues* dinner parties. These parties were another excuse for gatherings. They were conversation starters and icebreakers. Viewers could – and some still can – quote their favorite criminals and detectives. These shows divided viewers into cheering teams the way wrestling does with its villains vs. good guys. They were the working person's soap opera. It became its own subculture prompting the organization of clubs for people with interest in disciplines like forensic science and homicidal psychology. This subculture socialization has expanded into cyberspace. Thanks to the presentation of dramatized fiction crime shows, the internet hosts sleuth organizations and websites devoted entirely to interests in murder and death and the aesthetic possibilities of the two.

Fiction crime dramas have the challenge of achieving a balance between documentary and drama. Television can establish a documentary or newscast-like realism when characters directly address the camera and the audience. However, dramatic characters do not address the camera. Cameral tricks and angles are more elaborate in fictional crime drama letting us know they aren't real and probably are not true either. Lighting and camera work such as freeze frame

and slow motion shots are used to evoke a sense of intense emotional reality in dramatized crime. The producers have to tell the story through creative videography.

The storyteller's "most powerful effects come when he [or she] convinces us that what is particular, integrated and different in a cultural practice (film making, ethnography, postmodern theory) is part of a cultural plot that makes coherent sense of all cultural practices as a totality; not a totality that is there, waiting for us to acknowledge its presence, but a totality fashioned when the storyteller convinces us to see it her way. (Lentricchia as quoted in Dentin, 1991, p.156)

Fictional crime drama presents a dualism of reality and fantasy. Reality crime drama attempts to capture actual lived experiences and functions on the premise that nothing is hidden, all the while transposing the signs and symbols of what is real with those of what is fantasy. Fictional crime drama, in typical hyper real fashion, provides for the audience an exaggerated version of factual aspects of our culture. In the age of reality and voyeuristic inspired programming, serious crime has been somewhat of a "necessary evil" (Denzin, 1991).

The dramatization of fictional crime has given the "voyeur's place" a more fantastic appeal as opposed to the perverse, self-destructive activity that it has been believed to be. Such programming gives us permission to peek in on other people's lives with the reassurance that everyone else is peeking it too. Dramatic crime fiction is a non-threatening way to present disturbing truths about society:

... truth too often masquerades as a fiction which covers up corrupt, illegal, or immoral activities. As the seeker of truth, the postmodern voyeur sees what others cannot, or will not, see. His or her perverse desire to look is inevitable, connected to a valued end. (Denzin, 1991, p.155)

While reality crime TV does not create the plots, the shows' producers choose cases that rival their fictional counterparts in sensational value. Dramatized fictional crime shows incorporate elements of sex and romantic relationships among characters into their themes.

Likewise, reality crime TV and hard news shows capitalize on cases that involve love affairs gone wrong, especially those that pertain to a man killing his wife or girlfriend. Fictional crime shows allow different aspects of the characters' personal lives to play out on screen.

The fictional police dramas are sometimes more “real” because they give you that context. You get a much more subtle understanding of character instead of just the action. In an era when reality TV blurs the line between nonfiction and fiction by recreating events, what people see on [fictional television dramas] gets closer to the truth – especially since the events they stage are often taken from the news. (Dovey, 2000, p.96)

Dramatic television fiction works to convey realism in its portrayal of life-like tragedies. It invites viewers to partake in a multidimensional odyssey of hyper real images and then returns them to everyday life, leaving them to make sense of what was real and what was just true.

## **Film**

A series of crime films called police procedurals emerged from the mid-1940s into the 1950s. Police procedurals were semi-documentary thrillers that were based on FBI and police files or newspaper accounts of actual crimes. Films like *The House on 92 Street* (1945), *The Naked City* (1945) and *Dragnet* (1947) simulated newsreels and World War II documentaries. Filmmakers began to leave the Hollywood sound stage in favor of location in order to achieve the realism of the documentary look (Fishman & Cavender, 1998). More recently, the producers of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) abandoned the sound stage and penned their very own fictitious “true-to-life” story to accompany their film in pursuit of the realism effect.

A movie's primary and most lucrative purpose is entertainment. But in order for a movie to be entertaining it must be “different from real life” (Black, 2002, p.2).

...contemporary theorists reject “the notion that film is a slice of reality” but “nevertheless agree that in its standard uses, film imparts a realistic effect to its viewers,” this is no more than “a psychological effect” whereby “film gives the impression of

reality” narrating itself; film causes an illusion of reality; or film appears natural. (Carroll as quoted in Black, 2002, p.3)

Attempting to perfect this realistic effect encourages more graphic depictions of violence and therefore the “distinction between real and fake violence is becoming ever less clear” (Black, 2002, p.3).

Movies are the fantasy medium that have followed TV’s lead in presenting the real in a raw immediacy. Cinema verité uses the pretense of documentary to dramatize events or fabricate a story in order to present a deeper truth, just as reality TV documents actual events that are intrinsically dramatic, sensational, and voyeuristic. These movies are produced to appear to depict stories and the people in them in an unscripted, objective manner. Joel Black (2002) challenges the accuracy of reality TV: “The fact that the phrase reality TV has largely replaced cinema verité is itself revealing; in contrast to the immediacy of television, movies only offer a staged (after)image of reality, reality as an effect” (p.16).

A less explored, but more gruesome attempt for filmmakers to create a cinema verité is the exploration of the snuff film myth. Just the idea alone of a killer making a visual record of his crime and then watching it later is both horrifying and exciting at the same time. The existence of a thriving snuff film genre has not been proven, but fictional films strive to pull them from their mythic status and bring them to life as indelible illusions of reality in viewers’ minds. Filmmakers incorporate simulated snuff scenes in their movies which include prostheses, fake blood, and production techniques that suggest home-video-quality filming to appeal to people’s suspicions that there is actually someone who indulges in snuff films. Black (2002) writes: “Snuff films lead an elusive, phantom existence that can’t be verified, yet they tantalize

and terrify us with the prospect that, supposing that they do exist, they depict a reality so horrific that it can't be publicly shown" (p.157).

Films that simulate snuff films or document the making of snuff films not only toy with the "ambiguous reality" of snuff films, but they have taken horror to new heights (Black, 2002). Their films depict violence and push toward realism assuring horror and slasher movies a mainstay in mainstream cinema. The horror film genre itself breathed into existence its own subgenres known in popular media culture as scream movies and psycho-thrillers. Horror films present the viewer with a dilemma that is impossible to reconcile; should he look away to avoid further fright or make sure he sees the most awesome slaying ever to be shown on the big screen?

Depictions of death in film, however, are not always frightening or saddening. The horror film genre has been known to provide some comic relief at times. The pairing of subject matter that is traditionally deemed serious, as death and murder are, with elements of pleasure like sex and humor has given way to comedy films whose lead character is dead (*Weekend at Bernie's*, 1989) or a bumbling fool of a killer who cannot control his own deadly movements (*Idle Hands*, 1999). "Humorous death" sounds like an oxymoron. But humor, like sadness, is a mental state. Both are directed. They must be directed at objects, real or imagined (Carrol, 1999). Hegland (1992) writes that humor is not just a part of us, but that it *is* us, and death is one of several ways that seriousness tries to push its way into our lives:

Humor doesn't humanize us; it is us. Serious is a jealous sibling. Serious is racism, sexism, Saturday Night Specials, AIDS, poverty and death. Serious demands our undivided attention. Humorous, the rascal, sneaks up behind us, pops a balloon and forces us to jump back from our somber human condition and to, momentarily, together, transcend it. (p.383)

Films with themes of death can incorporate the scream factor in a number of ways. The audience screams can be shrieks of horror or hoots of laughter. Either way, film uniquely personifies abstract experiences like death and makes it appeal in some way to every type of human being, from the meekest to the meanest.

The serious/humorous dualism is false. Serious and Humorous are not separate and distinct; they are different manifestations of the same creative force. Neither has primacy nor is one “easy” and the other “hard.” Second, while Serious and Humorous communicate differently, both can communicate matters of importance. (Hegland, 1992, 378)

### **A Genre is Born: *The New Detectives: Case Studies in Forensic Science***

*The New Detectives*, which first aired in 1996 on Discovery Channel, emerged from an interest in telling the stories of men and women who use forensic science to bring murderers to trial and justice to victims’ families. The show employs researchers to find cases via court records, newspapers, forensic science publications, and communication with law enforcement agents. The gathered information is then carefully reviewed, selected, and assembled in a way that allows *The New Detectives* to portray the cases in a way that is most accurate and favorable to the participating law enforcement agencies.

Although the premise of the show is based on real life, the show includes only episodes that contain some or all of the elements of extramarital sexual affairs, politics, and economic hegemony. The term “reality-based TV” is more fitting for *The New Detectives* than “reality TV” is. The dramatic re-enactments turn true events into fictitious, reality-like vignettes. TV, like film, has the ability to utilize visual and aural components to create a hyper reality. *The New Detectives* does just that when it tells true stories using false players and fictitious recreations to suggest realness.

*The New Detectives* interviews the actual detectives involved in the case to establish credibility. However, those same detectives sometimes engage in role playing opposite actors who look very similar to the real victims and perpetrators. The show is breaking the laws of consistency to which we are accustomed where either everyone is clearly acting, or everyone is pretending not to be acting at all.

Baudrillard (2001) writes: “The contract of signification – that kind of social contract between things and their signs – itself seems broken, like the political contract, with the result that we find it increasingly hard to represent the world to ourselves and decipher its meaning” (p.107). *The New Detectives* show itself rebels against decipherment. *The New Detectives* breaks what Baudrillard calls the “contract of signification.” In the case of *The New Detectives*, the signs and the signified are of particular importance since the show’s purpose is to project informative images of death and murderous situations. Rebellion against decipherment is a fascinating concept when it is discussed strictly in terms of entertainment. But it could take a turn for the worst when it is paired with programming that viewers use to educate themselves about something that none of us could experience in life. In this case, it’s being the subject of forensics investigations and having the particulars of your body revealed to the masses in its death.

*The New Detectives* appeals especially to our voyeuristic selves. It justifies and dignifies voyeuristic urges on the viewer’s behalf. *The New Detectives* is sometimes filmed from the perpetrator’s point of view during the re-enactment of the crime events to create voyeuristic experiences through the killer’s eyes. At other times, the show takes on a behind-the-scenes approach which makes the viewers feel as if they are watching from a hiding place behind a two-way mirror in the police station. In fact, the only time the voyeuristic fix is broken is when the

detectives' talking heads are staring directly at you as they recount their versions of the stories. This destroys the satisfaction, pleasure, and privilege of the "invisible guest" (Easthope, 1993, p.123). *The New Detectives* is the voyeur who is being watched as he is watching. The presence of voyeurism is vital to a society to learn the truths about itself. The voyeur is any of us: "In its ordinariness this type passes amongst us, unseen, but always seeing, feeling, and learning secrets" (Denzin, 1991, p.156). From either point of view, the voyeur is left to make sense of what he is seeing. However, Baudrillard (2001) argues that it is this search for meaning that is misleading: "It is the very imagining of meaning that is sick. We do not watch the TV, the TV watches us. We do not play the game, the game plays us" (p.107).

In fact, we must interpret hyperrealism inversely; today, reality itself is hyper realistic. The secret of surrealism was that the most banal reality could become surreal, but only at privileged moments, which still derived from art and the imaginary. Now the whole of everyday political, social, historical, economic reality is incorporated into the simulative dimension of hyperrealism; we already live out the "aesthetic" hallucination of reality. The old saying "reality is stranger than fiction" has been surpassed. There is no longer a fiction that life can confront, even in order to surpass it; reality has passed over into the play of reality. (Baudrillard, 1993, p.146)

Death, however, does have a place in people's everyday life - specifically, in other people's everyday lives. It is a reality of everyday life that is taken for granted as reality. Death needs no additional verification beyond its simple presence. It is a self-evident and compelling "facticity" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p.23).

With all the images of hyper reality and reality, death and humor, and fear and calm, the audience has to make sense of watching television. A distinction must be made between comprehension and interpretation (Livingstone, 1998). Viewers may process the information consciously, but the interpretations may remain in the subconscious mind; and thus, create a plethora of emotions as a reaction to somber images.



Instead of erasing what is disturbing, programs like *The New Detectives* repeat it and simulate it repeatedly. These simulations and re-enactments serve as reminders of people who are permanently absent while entertaining the audience with the aestheticization of pain and death. These shows tap into the viewers' subconscious and evoke *real* feelings of sadness, fright, anxiety, etc. Consequently, when a program does so successfully, viewers are afraid because these images have transcended the realm of fabricated external images and entered the consciousness of the viewers (Olalquiaga, 1992).

Contrary to popular Hollywood depiction of murder, most murderers are not mysterious strangers (Kastenbaum, 2002). This is but one example of many distortions of reality that contribute to our social construct of reality about death. *The New Detectives* uses its re-enactments of murderers killing their own family members to dispel this killer-stranger myth. Baudrillard (1993) maintains that the simulation of reality has blurred the lines between what is simulation and what is real:

There is no real, there is no imaginary except at a certain distance. What happens when this distance, including that between the real and the imaginary, tends to abolish itself, to be reabsorbed on behalf of the model? Today, it is the real that has become the alibi of the model, in a world controlled by the principle of simulation. (p.146)

Everyday life is made up of prearranged activities (Berger, 1966). The experience and representation of death is not always contained within existing social frameworks (Kastenbaum, 2002). Rather, it occurs within a mixture of both the existing social frameworks and the perceived social frameworks contrived through the mass media.

There are three different looks associated with cinema: that of the camera as it records the profilmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion. The conventions of narrative film deny the first two and subordinate them to the third, the conscious aim being always to eliminate intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience.

Without these two absences (the material existence of the recording process, the critical reading of the spectator), fictional drama cannot achieve reality, obviousness and truth. (Easthope, 1993, p.123)

One of the elements of *The New Detectives* that makes the illusion seem less contrived is camera technique. The camera man runs making the footage shaky. This is to remind the viewer that this is not planned, and they just happened to be on location at the most opportune time. Once again, what is graphic and documentary is not necessarily real or true. Simulation threatens the dualism of “true” and “false,” and “real” and “imaginary”(Baudrillard, 1993). Baudrillard (1993) writes: “[Reality TV’s] claim of realism is not achieved by stripping the imagery of all mediation to somehow reveal an unadulterated “reality” – an impossible feat. In fact, it tends to require more mediation to assert that these images are real” (p.168).

Media messages do not affect all people in the same way all the time. Certain televised images may result in increased fear among viewers, but this is generally in relation to the outside world. The manner in which TV occurrences translate into fear in viewers is as complex. People discuss reality TV crime as well as they do fictional crime, but with more pity. Viewers obviously find real crime entertaining, but are afraid to admit to experiencing any enjoyment in watching it.

The willingness to express pity more readily than enjoyment is demonstrated on the online message board that Discovery Channel has created especially for fans of *The New Detectives* on its web site, [www.discovery.com](http://www.discovery.com). The site contains several message boards where viewers post messages. Some of the comments are inquiries about forensic science and the murder cases featured on the show. However, many of the comments are letters of remembrance and sympathy for the victims. For example, one viewer wrote of having been schoolmates with one of the victims and of how sorry she was to hear the news of her death. Then, in the same

posting, she expresses her awe of the way the murder was committed and how unreal and movie-like she found the story as it was presented on *The New Detectives*. The expression of sympathy – not just in one posting, but in several – seems more like a segue to writing about what is really a fascination for the murder itself.

Perhaps the frequent pairing of sympathy and amazement in the messages is some sort of shared trait amongst the viewers who post messages on the site. While everyone can read all the postings, becoming a member of the web site is requisite for being able to post messages. This web site membership, however, goes beyond a password and username. It is a meeting place for fanatics of reality murder TV to gather under the guise of forensic sleuths. This web site is not the first of its kind, but its very existence is testament to the emergence of a subculture.

Television subgenres inevitably provoke the formation of subcultures. And whether or not these subgenres are promoted via other media or media does not matter; they still exist. While this “death” subculture may be considered a social perversion in some circles, *The New Detectives’* web site is a venue that welcomes and normalizes those who are interested.

*The New Detectives* brings together strangers in the name of murder and provides a mainstream platform for conversation that might otherwise be considered too morbid for “regular” people. In essence, this subculture is no different from any of its wrestling, hip-hop, or rave counterparts. The avid viewers of this program enjoy exploring aspects of deadly crime and death as they are absent from their real lives. The same is true for those who indulge in the hyper real lifestyles that the rave and hip-hop cultures dangle in front of them. And like any other subculture, members of the death/ murder subculture are attracted to it for different reasons. Since programs like *The New Detectives* are basically compilations of other genres, it is

difficult to tell whether the fans who participate on the web site are interested in murder, death, science, or all of the aforementioned.

From the mixing of representations of death and the realities of death comes a mixing of program genres that depict death. Genre mixing has influenced how we as viewers deal with death and the presentation of murder. Programming about real murder cases merges the public and private spheres of life. The shows have common thematic features that draw upon deeper “reflexes” within American political culture. These reflexes are most likely responses to the show’s content instead of to actual trends within crime, policing, and justice in the United States (Fishman & Cavender, 1998). Their objective is to shift the mood from the actual, which may be overall safe, to the perceived, which is danger. Consequently, mass media perpetuate “fear of the world out there” (Heath & Gilbert, 1996, p.380). Immersion in the TV world sometimes translates into heightened fear among viewers. It may be apprehension that leads the viewer to seek out crime drama as some sort of calming mechanism.

Although depictions of death can evoke familiar feelings and thoughts, the experience of death itself is foreign. Death is the final episode of life, but not a part of everyday life. Robert Kastenbaum (2000) supports the idea that fascination with death is normal, but may be repressed. He also suggests it is normal to have death thoughts but not to be attracted to images of death; especially those of violent death (2000). If this is true, what do I make of myself and the rest of the viewing population that enjoys *The New Detectives* each week on Discovery Channel? Perceptions of death are influenced by the situational context. If there is no corpse or dying person in the room, then we presume that we are not in danger. Generally, these are the conditions when we are watching television. Perhaps wanting to see dying people die or murderers kill is desirable simply because the images are restricted to the television screen and

have no real presence to the audience at the time of viewing. *The New Detectives* is a vessel through which viewers escape to another real world.

## Chapter 2

### REAL LIVE DEATH: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF *THE NEW DETECTIVES*

#### VIEWING EXPERIENCE

“Man can and should encounter death *consciously*, and this is what distinguishes man from the animals.”

--- Edgar Herzog, *Psyche and Death*

Media, by altering the environment, evoke in us unique ratios of sense perceptions. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act – the way we perceive the world (McLuhan & Fiore, 1996, p.41).

#### **Introduction: Methods**

In this chapter, I seek to discover my own fascination with *The New Detectives*. I am creating a performative autoethnographical text in the hope of capturing my own feelings and thoughts as they occur during my viewing of the program. This text is intended to be illustrative of when and how I experience different emotions throughout the program and allow readers to share in the experience. The goals of this chapter are to give a candid account of my viewing experience, demonstrate the effects of *The New Detectives* episode on the human psyche, and facilitate the discovery of the dynamics of the human personality as it relates to murder and the media.

I want this autoethnographical text to be an open platform that invites the reader to make the same self-inquiries that I make in my writing. This chapter is confessional in nature and seeks to introduce the reader to a plethora of feelings toward murder and the murderer that go beyond the expected sorrow, pity, or anger. The text will document my stream of consciousness

in order to demonstrate how I, as a viewer, visit the spectrum of human emotion from one end to the other. In this text, I am exploring the factors that contribute to my being gratified upon viewing the show. Also, I seek to understand why the feelings that I express in this work are associated with escapism as opposed to being considered typical, realistic feelings toward murder. Chapter two is an inventory of my own feelings toward murder as it is presented in this particular media outlet. Through this performative autoethnographical writing and the exploration of *The New Detectives*, I expose the reader to my thoughts and feelings and to the possibility that they may share some of them.

### **Watching Reality: A Performative Autoethnographical Text**

I stare directly into the two tone blue screen. The preview images of what is “coming up next” summon a motley gamut of emotions at once. Excitement, fright, amusement, disgust, anxiety, and anger – all of which threaten to cancel one another – come together perfectly to create in me a positive state of borderline obsession. *Positive* in that it leaves little to be desired. Positive because I can’t stop searching for a show that evokes similar feelings between weekly episodes. I constantly seek it. It is finally time again.

I’m getting ready. I turn off the lights. No snacks, though. I can’t hear when I’m chewing. I’m ready now. But before the show starts, the narrator warns: “This program contains re-enactments of real people and real events. This program is intended for mature audiences. Viewer discretion is advised.”

I assume I am mature enough. What does “mature audiences” mean? Will there be naked people or people having sex? Is the audience supposed to be mature enough not to actually copy the murder techniques from the show? Maybe I have to be mature because they

are going to show a dead body. I hope that's what it is. Other than at a funeral, I've never seen a dead body.

I say aloud, "why don't they ever just show the real body?" Just as I whine those words, I scold myself for even thinking them. Since when can I, an otherwise compassionate, sympathetic human being, participate in the cult that is the viewing audience of murder mystery programming without taking into account the grief that these victims' families experience? I cannot. I do momentarily, but the "natural human emotions" follow, although they are delayed. I believe that I too have succumbed to the callousness that allows one to view – not witness – murder or a dead body with the same sterile amazement that one gets from seeing a rabbit being pulled out of a hat or a person touching the tip of their nose with their tongue. I make the distinction between viewing and witnessing because the latter is accompanied by its own set of conditions. Witnessing implies being present and having first hand knowledge of an event. It is precisely the absence of witnessing accounts of death and murder that trigger and support my addiction to such televised images. Or, perhaps the truth is quite the contrary of the aforementioned theory. Maybe I'm just genetically predisposed to wanting to see a dead body. I am the granddaughter and of a woman who collects obituaries and attends funerals of people whom she does not know. And, I am the daughter of a woman who reads only the sections of the newspaper called "Living" and "Obituaries" and prefaces every speech with "when I'm dead and gone."

I suppose the show's editorial taste would deem it less than appropriate to show actual police footage of a dead body. Instead, I get a glimpse of a bloody arm and some matted hair. I believe as Olalquiaga (1992) suggests: "... only a confrontation with the bizarre and grotesque enables the recovery of a sense of awe for death that is long lost to our culture" (p.61).



I seek in this show an opportunity to reflect on my existing ideas of what death is. I don't mean the spiritual or fantastic death where the body gets new clothes and a makeover before it is sent to meet its soul in a designated heaven. I want the images to depict the coldness of the dead body that it describes so vividly in its narrations. I keep my fingers crossed, but I'm not so lucky. Kearl (1989) explains:

Such shows, however, are rare. The emotions and fears they evoke are too great, their exhibition too "real" for the comfort of their escapist viewers, to garner the viewer ratings required to subsidize their production. (p.387)

As a matter of fact, I have never seen anyone die. I have known people who are now dead, but I was not present when they were dying. That is the ironical thing about dying; we all do at some point, but many of us never see someone else die. However, it is not death, but *unlawful* death that lures me to this show.

Apart from rare firsthand experiences with mortality, the death lesions of modern individuals are primarily received from television, cinema, newspapers, and the arts. No longer directly exposed to natural death, people generally learn only of atypical death, as only they qualify as being either newsworthy or entertaining. (Kearl, 1989. p.379)

The narrator's voice calls me back to attention:

In North Carolina, a tragic accident is blamed for the death of a 45-year-old woman. But a routine investigation raises more questions than answers. And police soon learn that things aren't as they appear to be. For some killers, murder can be a profitable business. And when a victim has been targeted for death, homicide investigations must look beyond the obvious to uncover a murder for hire. (*The New Detectives*, 2002)

Indeed murder *can* be a profitable business. The television networks can vouch for it. Rare is television programming in which death does not function as a central motif or plot (Kearl, 1989). And rarely does a conversation around the water cooler not begin with "hey did you hear about the guy who killed..." or "so, who shot J.R. anyway?"

The medium, exhibited to be larger than life and designed to be publicly viewed, must be attention-getting to hold the interest of large numbers of people, and it is death, not grief, that commands attention. To continue holding interest, cinema must constantly outdo itself, whether by producing increasingly absorbing plots (seasoned with shock and surprise), showing increasing amounts of action sequences, employing increasingly spectacular special effects, or featuring dying film stars. Features achieving commercially successful chemistries of these elements spawn genres of sequels and imitations. (Kearl, 1989, p.387)

The narrator's voice is hypnotic. It puts me "under" and introduces me to my other self. I begin having thoughts that I would like to believe are out of character for me. I wonder how much a hit man charges to kill someone. I speculate it is at least what it would cost to pay an attorney in a murder trial. That way, he could break even if he gets caught. I find myself wishing, for his sake, the perpetrator could have known then what he knows now. He might have gotten away with it. Immediately, I'm embarrassed for having such thoughts. Does that make me a bad person? I move on to something else in my head. I'm trying to pay attention to the right things like how devastated the victim's family must be or how the murderer needs to be put underneath the jail.

Still, I don't like the me that is surfacing as I watch this show. It's like being in limbo. I am the part of me that despises murderers. I am also the part of me that accidentally makes a protagonist out of the murderer. I liken it to being a cheerleader, cringing at the killer's every fumble.

The narrator's voice draws me back in again: "Frustrated by a lack of suspects or an obvious motive, police in Wendy's hometown of Bradenton, Florida question the victim's friends and neighbors" (*The New Detectives*, 2002). The victim in this episode has been beaten, placed in a van, and driven over a cliff to make it look like an accident.

Some of the friends and family members being interviewed aren't displaying the right facial expressions or emotions. Police are suspicious of people who don't seem sad enough when someone is murdered. The police suspect the husband is guilty of murder in this plot. I hope no one ever has to question me about any murder. When I get nervous, I smile. That wouldn't be an appropriate facial expression. It'll make me look guilty, and they will think I did it. I add this bit of information to my long list of mental notes on how to avoid being falsely accused of murder.

"The police question the husband too. His alibi checks out" (*The New Detectives*, 2002).

The victim's body is found slumped over the passenger side seat with her head in the floor board. The camera angle is fooling. The frame bounces and swings producing the "killer cam" effect. The killer is the videographer and I am the voyeur. I can't help but think that if the perpetrator had actually filmed it, I would have gotten to see the dead body.

Frozen in time, these corpses can only be understood spatially as volumes and textures, promptly qualifying for an aesthetic scenification such as the one provided by dioramas. As a mis-en-scene of life, dioramas follow the basic principle of both photography and memory: things must die in order to live on forever. A locus of conflict, death, and pain can be automatically aestheticized by the cameral – or the photographic gaze in general – which makes trophies of even the most gruesome images. In a reversal of straight hunting, photographic "shooting" kills not the body but the life of things, leaving only the carcasses. Sempiternally freezing life into an object by making it into still life, photographic and filmic shooting are reminiscent of turn-of-the-century camera safaris and their attempt to appropriate the foreign by capturing its images. (Olalquiaga, 1992, p.58)

A writer by the name of de Sade wrote, "There is no better way to know death than to link it with some licentious image" (as quoted in Bataille, 1986, p.11). What better place to view these not-so- licentious images than from my sofa. I'm selective in my viewing though.

...the American appetite for violence and perverse forms of death has produced an ethos of "pornographic death." The motif is pornographic as it involves the culture's twentieth-century prudery toward and denial of natural death. As sex becomes pornographic when

divorced from its natural human emotion, which is affection, so death becomes pornographic when abstracted from its natural human emotion, which is grief. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the cinematic medium, wherein, over time, such deaths have become increasingly vivid. (Gorer as quoted in Kearl, 1989, p.387)

I anticipate seeing the re-enactment of the murders themselves. This show allows for a special kind of voyeurism. Here, I am able to watch a simulation of murders without being in danger. If I had actually been there to watch the actual event, I would probably have been killed too and certainly would not be able to go home and watch a play-back of the actual event. I'm watching a staging of a staged murder. How post modern. It takes a conscious effort on my part to peel back the layers of simulation to find the center of reality, although I never do. I enjoy what I'm seeing, but I enjoy not being seen even more.

The eye of TV is no longer the source of an absolute gaze, and the ideal of control is no longer that of transparency. This still presupposes an objective space (that of the Renaissance) and the omnipotence of the despotic gaze. It is still, if not a system of confinement, at least a system of mapping. More subtly, but always externally, playing of the opposition of seeing and being seen, even if the panoptic focal point may be blind. (Baudrillard as quoted in Brooker & Brooker, 1997, p.163)

The narrator is still speaking: "Following up on the information, investigators learned that [the victim's husband] stood to gain \$100,000 from her death, but so far he had made no attempts to collect on his wife's insurance policy" (*The New Detectives*, 2002).

I am waiting for the money or the sex to figure into the story somehow. It usually does. I don't watch shows about 107-year-old women who die peacefully in their sleep from old age.

The truly alluring case has three essential elements – death, sex and crime.

The triple "threats of death, sex and crime, are held to be particularly newsworthy and and so are then ripe for journalistic plucking from the general tree of events. The crime of murder figured as the third major thematic strand woven into stories concerned with the category of death. It is through the interweaving of these gender-linked "inversions" in connection with stories of murder that their major ideological focus of disruption to conventional order is characteristically developed. (Field et al., 1997, p.125)

My concentration is broken now. The telephone is ringing. I answer it: “Hello. You know you can’t call me now. *The New Detectives* is on. It’s so cool. This guy had his wife killed and sent her over a cliff in a van. Let me call you back when it goes off.”

I’m embarrassed again. I don’t really think it is cool that someone kills another person. Perhaps, I’m fascinated over the nerve that it takes to actually kill or have someone killed. Although the elements in the dramatization are factual, the images themselves are hyper real. This hyper reality in some way gives me permission to abandon “appropriate” responses to grief or dismay. I am engrossed in the description of the murderous act just as I am in the escapade of the villain in a movie.

You can’t just kill your spouse or anyone else that others are aware of and have no one notice. Or can you? Even if a person gets ideas of pulling off a perfect murder from watching television, why don’t they also take note of the fact that more often than not, there is resolution? The police always get their man. Justice is served.

...death is just another invented characterization, a negative resource, a sign of fatal flaw or ineptitude, a punishment for sins or mark of tragedy.” In addition, the medium’s death lessons are unwittingly “calculated to cultivate a sense of insecurity, anxiety, a fear of the “mean world” out there, and dependence on some strong protector. (George Gerbner as quoted in Kears, 1989, p.384)

I try to get the details of this murder straight in my mind. Thus far, a married couple who is friends with the victim and her husband is going to be arrested for the murder of this woman. Investigators have learned that the couple had been in the area surrounding the place of the murder at least a week before. They know this because of their credit card paper trail.

“The prime suspect in the homicide was missing and presumed dead.” (*The New Detectives*, 2002)

The word “dead” is interrupted when the first commercial begins. It is the last word of the last sentence, but the music from the commercial horns in on the word “dead.” How convenient it is that this particular segment comes right before a credit card commercial that promotes privacy for the cardholder. I can hardly wait for the commercial break to be over. While I’m waiting for the commercials to end, I flip through the channels. I come across a promo for *The Oprah Winfrey Show* about a divorced man whose ex-wife recently died. I suspect he killed her. I turn back to Discovery Channel. Paranoia and suspicion have long been a symptom of my addiction to this show.

“Just before her death, Wendy had talked about leaving her husband,” the narrator commented. I am watching the show in suspense as one does when the developments in the plot are unpredictable. At the same time, I know what will happen next. I expect the obligatory gendered dimension that is omnipresent in this re-enactment. This case has the unruly wife who threatens the husband’s struggle for dominance in the home. I realize *The New Detectives*, a show that boasts its dedication to nailing murderers, is essentially no different from the popular Hollywood films that are criticized for their use of the same formulaic plots. But I don’t care. I like it.

This entire episode is like some sort of giant clue or warning like “wife beware.” I usually ask the men I meet if they are married. Now I ask them if they are married and if they are a murderer, halfway expecting them to say yes if they really are. The husband in this episode started out as a doting, devoted husband and father. But somewhere between the beginning and the end of the story, he became a conspirator of his own wife’s murder. This show is just like those Hollywood movies. Boy meets girl. Girl falls in love with boy. Boy conceals his insanity.

Girl makes boy mad. Boy kills girl, chops her body into hundreds of pieces, hides the pieces and moves to Mexico – or something like that.

These moral commentaries upon the relations between women and men employed images of death to convey the problematic nature of women. Death was also represented as a solution to gender conflict. Marital strife initiated by the disobedient wife was a common theme elaborated in cheap illustrated prints. A precious good, hallowed recipe for men who have shrewish wives (c. 1620) tells the story of a husband who suffered as a result of the misconduct of a noisy, quarrelsome wife. He is advised by a neighbor to beat her soundly. The wife then takes to her deathbed and after her funeral the husband celebrates in triumph. (Field et al., 1997, p.113)

This gender struggle that may end in the death of the wife haunts me. I find consolation in assuring myself that I would definitely know a murderer before I married him; thanks to *The New Detectives*.

I am halfway through the show before I notice that the actors are making sounds, but they aren't saying anything that I can understand. The narrator is doing all the speaking, so the actors just look as if they are playing an intense game of charades. I look more closely to examine the particulars of the actors. Their facial expressions and gestures are exaggerated. They have a way of looking especially stupid or especially worried. I can't tell which one most of the time. I am impressed. The actors, along with the narrator's voice, wave almost every arm of humanness. They pull me in, push me away, and then pull me back in. At times, I am so engrossed in it, I cannot tell what is real and what is simply true. But at other times, I seem to have stepped away from everything and I'm just pointing and laughing at the screen. And even then, I'm waiting to be waved back in again.

I am beginning to experience some anxiety like fear and more paranoia. I'm actually afraid the way I am when I watch a horror movie. But it's a little different. I am horrified. This

show isn't just the product of some writer's crass imagination. It is true. I'm afraid because I think it might happen. It has already happened, so it could happen again. That scares me.

I don't think I have any paranoia of actually being murdered. It is more of an obsession with being prepared to be murdered. Maybe *The New Detectives* is my coping therapy and in-home information session. I'm learning so much about how murders are solved. I keep all my new information in my mind's closet for safe keeping just in case I need it.

Horror equals categorical transgression or jamming plus fear; incongruity humor equals, in part, categorical transgression or jamming minus fear. Exposure to incongruity can elicit a series of different behavioral responses, including fear, problem – solving, and laughter. The same stimuli can evoke a fear response or a laughter response, depending upon whether or not it is threatening. (Carroll, 1999, p.157)

I'm still thinking that this fright could be intensified if they would show a corpse. With the absence of actual death-related imagery, I am walking the fine line between horror and laughter. There is no one here but me. There is no one to laugh before I laugh or signal to me that this is a sad moment by wrinkling their brows and turning the corners of their mouth downward. Nor is there anyone there to brandish a knife in my face (I don't wish for it either). I must settle on being killed vicariously through the television.

Death concepts are influenced by the situational context. How we conceptualize death at a particular moment is likely to be influenced by many situational factors. Is there a dying person in the room with us? A corpse? Does the situation contain a possible threat to our own life? Are we alone or with friends? Is it bright noon, or black midnight? (Kastenbaum, 2002, p.5)

The narrator speaks: "They had agreed to kill the victim for her husband. The suspect said he could make his problem go away for a fee" (*The New Detectives*, 2002). I chuckle to myself when I hear that. I didn't know people actually said that. I thought that was from the movies. That's not a *real* thing to say. I thought real people just said, "I want her dead and I'll pay you to kill her."



The little windows of opportunity for laughter are stress relievers for me. It helps curb the paranoia. My laughter might be at the expense of the integrity of the show, but I'm not disregarding all concern for the victim when I laugh. I like that I can alternate between the two, let the tension of fear build and then release it with a laugh. The show is doing its best to present a serious dramatization of serious events, but if the slightest thing becomes inadvertently funny, the ultimate objective of the show is jeopardized.

...it appears that these two mental states – being horrified and being comically amused – could not be more different. Horror, in some sense, oppresses; comedy liberates. Horror turns the screw; comedy releases it. Comedy elates; horror stimulates depression, paranoia, and dread. (Carroll, 1999, p.148)

In no way do I equate the show with a comedy. However, finding humor in the lines or scenes shift the way I view the show and puts the characters in somewhat of a comic frame. One of Sigmund Freud's proclamations well describes the emotional state I am briefly experiencing: "...the emotion in question is fear, which disappears when the comic frame causes the burden of moral concern for the life and limb of comic characters to evaporate" (Freud as quoted in Carroll, 1999, p.152).

It seems the fear would subside since the detective interviews interrupt the dramatization. But it doesn't. The signifiers to which I have grown accustomed are not employed in this show. I keep waiting for the person's name to appear across the bottom of the screen to indicate to me that what I have just seen is not real and what I am currently seeing is real.

The show's depiction of murder without images of death makes death seem boring. Boring in the sense that it lacks all the gore and drama that I assume accompanies being murdered. Instead, here, interviews, acting and production style overshadow death and murder from time to time. It all reminds me of the 2000 televised rally surrounding the execution of

Gary Graham in Texas. I live a time zone away from Huntsville, Texas and still programmers saw fit to preempt my evening television programming with live coverage of an execution. I could not believe this was on TV – on my TV at that. The possibility of seeing a dead body disgusted me. To add to this circus of an execution, Jesse Jackson and Bianca Jagger strutted out together after giving Graham some last minute spiritual guidance and advice (I’m not sure what kind of advice a person needs minutes before they are scheduled to be executed, but they put that on TV too). The camera wasn’t actually inside, but it was situated outside so that the camera could focus through a window. I saw the doctor shaking his needle. I could tell he was administering the lethal injection. I remember watching the doctor administer the lethal injection and then wondering if Graham is dead yet. “Now am I looking at a dead body?” I asked out loud. I really hoped I was not watching a dead body, but I was not sure. That was a dead body I did not want to see. I just stared at the screen thinking that even with all the protesting and celebrity appearances going on outside, the death inside is boring. But all this was real. It was real *and* true.

For some reason, I remember feeling more fear and disgust toward and the doctor that administered the lethal injection than I felt toward the perpetrators depicted in *The New Detectives* episode. Perhaps I credit the murderer for having enough sense to lie, cheat and hide after he kills someone as opposed to the executioner who graciously grants interviews after the execution. Or maybe it is because the victims presented in this *New Detectives* show are more like “cases,” but the media had made Graham a real person to me over the last few months leading to his execution.

I keep getting lost in what is real and what is true and what is false and what is fiction. The simulation of crime scenes is informing, yet confusing. Maybe that is what *good art* does.

It functions as a hard copy of some abstract concept for us to return to repeatedly to contemplate its meaning. I set my VCR to record this show every week so I can watch it and re-watch it if I want to. Each time I do so, I make some new distinction among the elements of the show that I missed the time before.

Nature Morte artists address the aestheticization of pain, the perdurability of death, and the constitution of the real through artifice. Instead of erasing what is disturbing, they repeat and simulate it to infinity... Thus it is in the ruins of images that allegory and postmodern melancholic sensibility converge and exalt each other. Simulation declares absence through presence. It is a relic of what has ceased to exist. (Olalquiaga, 1992, p.74)

My mind drifts to a show I once watched about the gift shop in the LA County Coroner's office. There, you can purchase towels with chalk outlines like the ones used at a murder scene and T-shirts with the LA County Coroner's Office logo. I don't want any of those things, but it is nice to know that others do. I guess it is the same thing as buying an action figure of a character from a movie. It is sort of a synergy effect. It does make me feel better for laughing at this show when I know that even a coroner's office thinks there is something funny about its line of business. So much so, they think it is a good idea to sell novelty gifts.

In fact, this whole process can only be understood in its negative form: nothing separates one pole from another anymore, the beginning from the end; there is a kind of contraction of one over the other, a fantastic telescoping, a collapse of the two traditional poles into each other: *implosion* – an absorption of the radiating mode of causality, of the differential mode of determination, with its positive and negative charge – an implosion of meaning. *That is where simulation begins.* (Baudrillard as quoted in Brooker & Brooker, 1997, p.164)

Lefebvre (1971) writes of the articulation of reality and fiction as well:

Here are the two sides of a reality more amazing than fiction: the society of which we are members. It is impossible to state once and for all which of the two is the signifier and which the signified; both sides signify each other reciprocally; each one in turn becomes signifier or signified according to the slant of the inquiry, and up to the moment of the inquiry there is nothing but aimless signifiers and disconnected signifieds. (p.24)

Admittedly so, this show challenges my sanity in terms of rationality. It is often said that “crazy” or “irrational” people do not know where fiction ends and reality begins. If this is true, I must have checked out as “crazy” a few times during the show. This show, with all its gray areas and blurred lines, molds my orientation to dying and murder and drapes it in ambiguity.

Baudrillard comments on the disillusioning of the real in *Perfect Crime* (1996):

Cipher, do not decipher. Work over the illusion. Create illusion to create an event. Make enigmatic what is clear, render unintelligible what is only too intelligible, make the event itself unreadable. Accentuate the false transparency of the world to spread a terroristic confusion about it, or the germs or viruses of a radical illusion – in other words, radical disillusioning of the real. Viral, pernicious thought, corrosive of meaning, generative of an erotic perception of reality’s turmoil. (p.104)

The narrator’s voice introduced a new case about a young mother of six who had been shot and stabbed to death:

“She had suffered a single gunshot wound to the cheek. There were also indications that she had been viciously beaten. Her throat was so deeply cut she was almost decapitated.” (*The New Detectives*, 2002)

I’m glad they did not attempt to create a dummy body like the ones on that CSI show. The bodies look too fake and it takes away from any part of the simulation that I was about to believe.

Simulation can only be artistic as it approaches the line of invisibility: once the crossover is complete, the game is lost. We all know that Reagan is only “acting” president, but he’s so damn good that we can’t quite be sure. (Gitlin, 1986, p.163)

I watch the police in their role play with the actors. They are pretty good. It almost seems like the cases are chosen after the police officers audition. Knowing that the police officers in the scene are actually the officers who worked the case makes me forget that the

people to whom they are talking are not the real suspects. This is, I'm sure, a desired effect of "substituting signs of the real for the real itself" (Baudrillard as quoted in Gitlin, 1986, p.164).

In the verité experience it is not a question of secrecy or perversion, but of a sort of frisson of the real, or of aesthetics of the hyper real, a frisson of vertiginous and phony exactitude, a frisson of simultaneous distancing and magnification, of distortion of scale, of an excessive transparency. The pleasure of an excess of meaning, when the bar falls below the usual waterline of meaning: the nonsignifier is exalted by the cameral angle. There one sees what the real never was (but "as if you were there"), without the distance that gives us perspectival space and depth vision (but "more real than nature"). Pleasure in the microscopic simulation that allows the real to pass into the hyper real. (Baudrillard, 1994, p.28)

There is no longer a tangible, clear message in television. Marshall McLuhan postulates that this "confusion of the medium and the message is the first great formula of this new era" (as quoted in Brooker & Brooker, 1997, p.63).

A change in the music and the narrator's gets my attention:

Detectives returned to the Bellish neighborhood to question residents about the day of the murder. One recalled seeing a Hispanic man dressed in military camouflage getting out of a white car and walking through the neighborhood. (*The New Detectives*, 2002)

I can't believe people actually recognize and remember people from a newspaper description. I wonder how many times I have met a murderer. Probably lots of times. I'll have to start paying more attention to people I meet.

"We found out he had a criminal history but nothing that would make you believe he was a murderer," says the narrator (*The New Detectives*, 2002).

I wonder what you have to do to make people believe you are a murderer besides murdering someone. I want to know because I want to make sure I don't do any of those things. Is there some sort of progression toward murder? I don't think there is a particular set of crimes that always precedes murder. There is a gap between all other crime and murder – at least on TV. Murder is the ultimate act of crime. Death is the ultimate act.

If death is life's final episode and annihilation underscores the contingencies of existence (all those things that, like time, were taken for granted), then the aberration of a natural order of things should also serve an allegorical function. This is probably why the cult of death is often accompanied by an almost perverse pleasure in physical deformities, freaks, accidents, and deviant behavior. (Olalquiaga, 1992, p.61)

"Now, he admitted he accepted \$14,000 from Danny Rocha to murder Sheila Bellish."

*(The New Detectives, 2002)*

I can't believe this woman's ex-husband paid someone to kill her. I'm glad he got a life sentence for orchestrating his ex-wife's murder. Fourteen thousand dollars is not a lot of money. I wish the murderer had realized that he was ending his own life, as well as someone else's, for a mere fourteen thousand dollars. I tell myself not think like that. I say it I out loud. I am angry at myself for feeling sorry for a killer.

The show has a way of making me misplace my sympathy. I think it is mostly the way the narrator is using different tones to tell the story. Sometimes his tone is sarcastic as if to say, "I told you so," and it suggests there is some humor to the situation. My favorite is when he uses what I call the ominous soap opera tone just as he is announcing who the killer is. At the end of the show, I am feeling concerned for the murderer's fate and happy that the detectives solved the mystery, but I don't feel sad for the victim. I'm not glad about the victim's loss of life. I just can't say I am particularly saddened at the moment.

Marshall McLuhan argued, the form of each medium brings its own message. Each peculiarly brings its own message. Each peculiarly distorts the lesion as each differentially affects our cognitive habits, reshaping the traffic or symbols and experiences from which we derive meaning. "Hot" media such as books and records, allow for less sensory involvement and participation than is the case for "cool" media, such as television and cinema, where more senses are involved and where feeling is more likely to be interwoven with thought. The cooler media through which cultural death themes are broadly disseminated – which has been the historical trend – the greater death's ability to control attention, to frighten, or to galvanize public opinion for some cause. (Kearl, 1989, p.387)

The show is coming to an end now. “For some, money is motive enough to commit murder. When there are no obvious connections between killer and victim, detectives turn to forensic examiners to expose the master mind behind a murder for hire,” says the narrator.

The show ends. I exhale. I did not even realize I had stopped breathing. I thought I knew what I was looking at while the show was on. But now that it has ended, I do not know what to make of what I have just seen. There seems to be no rational connection between the ideas presented in the show and the ones left in my head. After only one episode of *The New Detectives*, I rethink the way I currently live my life. I take the time to add some other things to my running list of mental notes: 1) Remember to always leave my house clean in case I’m murdered. I don’t want the detectives to think I was a dirty person when they come to my house to investigate. 2) Make sure my neighbor puts only wood – not bones - in his wood chipper; especially if he is recently widowed. 3) Don’t dust for a few days after having houseguests. If they return to kill me, the police need to be able to find fingerprints of people who don’t live with me. However irrational this list might seem, it makes perfect sense while I am watching the show. It makes sense to me even after the show is over. I think rationality could be situational. When we are inside the hyper real world of fusion and *confusion*, what is "rational" changes somewhat.

My own “irrationality” reminds me of *Tesis* (1996), a Spanish film about a student who is conducting research for her thesis on murder in the media. She discovers that the professor overseeing her project produces snuff films and wants her to be his next star. Needless to say, I prayed that the character’s situation does not mirror my own.

In this world you just do not know where you stand; you are led astray by mirages when you try to connect a signifier to a signified – declamation, declaration or propaganda by which what you should believe or be is signified. If you allow the swarms of signs to

flow over you from television and radio sets, from films and newspapers and ratify the commentaries that determine their meanings, you will become a passive victim of the situation; but insert a distinction or two – for instance everyday life and modernity – and the situation is changed: you are now the active interpreter of signs. (Lefebvre, 1971, p.25)

I don't know where I stand. The signs no longer signify what I expect them to. This is my excuse. It is permission to float undecidedly somewhere between the rational and irrational, fright and humor, and the real and the unreal. The show is altered by me, and I by it.



## CONCLUSION

Through television, a viewer delves into something unknown, and perhaps, emerges with a new consciousness of death in contrast to the familiar reality that is their dear life. Television shows like *The New Detectives* objectify death which enables viewers to deal with their feelings of anxiety or fascination with death and murder. Reality TV shows about murder makes it more familiar and less mystifying. *The New Detectives* unfolds the drama of disturbing events frame by frame and televises them so we can all watch them over and over. This type of preservation of gruesome events appeals to the human tendency to take snap shots (mentally or literally) of the most memorable moments in life as if we would ever forget them. The show is the viewers' talisman of the experience although it is indirect. It reminds me of the way the photograph of the firefighter carrying the dying little girl out of the rubble of the 1995 Oklahoma Bombing became the single most recognizable symbol of that event. The subject of the photograph was disturbing and depressing, but it wasn't erased or hidden away. That picture was put on posters, T-shirts, coffee mugs, and anything else that could display a photograph. This image is of a little girl dying or already dead, but that moment has been frozen and copied repeatedly and made into a souvenir with seemingly no regard for the girl's family. Not only was this a picture of two people, but it was a picture of death too. Making a souvenir out of it objectifies both the people and death. *The New Detectives* does the same for the stories it tells.

This objectification paves the way for another pleasure of the human psyche - voyeurism. Although voyeurism is often deemed perverse in nature, it is necessary for several reasons. Voyeurism via television acts as a means of self measurement against other people's lives and as a resource of our social constructs of reality, or in this case, our social construct of death. The success of *The New Detectives* hinges largely on the fact that it illustrates acts of murder, the

most savage behavior a human being can demonstrate. As horrific as the idea of dying a murderous death can be, a show about victims of murder can be relieving and even uplifting. The viewer can compare his own life to that of the victim and will probably come to the conclusion that his life is better than the one of the deceased person.

Like most reality TV shows, *The New Detectives* floats between the realms of reality and simulation. The conjunction of the two work to achieve a distorted realism. No matter how inaccurate the viewer's concept of death may be after viewing this show, it is still the closest that he will get to an understanding of the process of death without dying; even if it is only an objectified version of death.

Television is a medium that allows us to look in on ourselves, and has in turn, become a cultural arm of American society. It serves as an agency of the established order to maintain conventional beliefs and conceptions. The relation between fear of crime and the increased dependence on established law enforcement is a symbiotic one. The desire to see enforcers of the law succeed in catching the bad guy is part of what attracts viewers to *The New Detectives*. In turn, watching the show may result in an increased fear of the outside world and dependence on established authority. However, I found no evidence that other viewers developed fear of their immediate neighborhood or surroundings as a result of viewing *The New Detectives* as I expressed in my self exploration.

While television may enculture conventional conceptions, it often promotes conventional misconceptions as well. Misconceptions of members of certain ethnic groups or genders are commonplace on television. *The New Detectives* does choose stories with women in the role of the victim, which is often the case in mainstream media. However, as I concluded my research, I noticed the absence or minimal presence of race or ethnicity as a factor in my research. Not only

was it minimal in works that compared the elements of crime-oriented television, but it was not a factor in my autoethnographic study. The scenario of the black or Hispanic male stranger who brutally murders the young, beautiful white female that Hollywood films usually reduplicate was not depicted in the episode of *The New Detectives* featured in my research, nor has it been a recurring theme in any of the other episodes that I've seen. I find it ironic that as much as *The New Detectives* embodies traditional ideals of crime, such as women being victims and the police officers as the protagonists, the cases solved on the show often involve people who are not poor or black, nor are they strangers to one another. Even in the close examination of my own emotions and feelings about the show, I found no place for examination of race or ethnicity in this research – neither as it relates to my own or to that of the people in the program. The show evokes feelings that transcend the race factor. At least for the duration of the program, feelings of horror, paranoia, triumph, and sadness are for me human emotions that overtake whatever space any concept like race might have occupied.

Reality TV reigns as the king of simulacrum. It goes out of its way to convince us of its implied realism. And thus, we fail to notice how unrepresentative the televised *reality* situations are of most people's everyday lives. The sanctity of private space is threatened. The irony of *The New Detectives* and other reality crime TV programs is that it uses voyeuristic methods of presenting societal truths, but then challenges these truths by reinserting the perverse aspects of voyeurism. We are wooed by these genuine revelations of real life and tricked into peering into the looking glass that is reality TV for long periods of time. Pleasure and power reside in watching people perform re-enactments of murderous crime. Signifiers of what is real or true are no longer clearly defined. *The New Detectives'* depiction of true stories through overlapping of

genres plays on the most post modern elements. It is both feeling and teaching at the same time- a combination not usually achieved by reality TV, dramatic fiction, or traditional news alone.

Reality crime TV depicts death and murders in such a way that it appeals to emotions that seem bipolar and incapable of occurring at the same time. It is presented as a prankster that sometimes plays the lighter elements of romance and wealth against the more serious ones of death and murder. As a viewer of the show, I must often confront my different selves that emerge to battle out conflicting feelings. The line between what actually *is* and what I think *should be* while watching the show blurs as my conflicting emotions battle for first place. I disagree with Herzog's (1967) claim that "...inability to differentiate his environment from himself is pleasantly childish, but is also inhuman" (p.16). Being able to be momentarily drawn into a hyperreality induced experience is a privilege of being human. This ability to commune with the imaginary and real simultaneously is enhanced when we engage in the stories told through reality TV crime programming.

Hyperrealism, in all its ambiguity, is the element of choice in *The New Detectives*. It introduces the unreal to the real as a resemblance of itself. *The New Detectives* reproduces true events until they become "real" only within the context of television. A show that is meant to bring viewers closer to the realness of death and facts of murder inevitably pulls the viewers farther from those things. Enough room is left for the viewer to form his own perception of what is true when elements that usually indicate truth are interrupted by the dramatic effects of hyper reality.

*The New Detectives* presents death as being more immediate but less predictable. The show is about people who die at the hands of other people. The re-enactments of the murder stories on *The New Detectives* are generally void of very explicit photographs or video. The

murders are structured into a framework that allows us to confront death in such a way that it doesn't contain the full measure of visual horror. However, the psychological horror is present. But instead of changing the channel, the viewer watches more closely. He becomes more vulnerable to the pleasures of the unmasking of death. While the show depicts images that are basically familiar (police officers, people in their homes, neighbors being interviewed), certain aspects of the show can be taken out of context depending on who the viewer is and how crime-phobic he may be. And thus, the viewer can engage in unconventional ways of decoding the images. The articulation of real images and implied horror creates radical viewing experiences that are unique to each viewer.

Television, like other media, does not send the same messages to all of the people all of the time. Much of the differing in messages that *The New Detectives* sends can be attributed to the genres that overlap to make the show what it is. In genre mixing, the elements that we have come to know as signifiers of certain moods or clear evokers of certain emotions become ambiguous. The line between being saddened or humored or horrified or relieved is blurred. And because these emotions and moods overlap one another, words like sad, frightened, or glad alone are insufficient when trying to describe my reactions to a show that also could not be described in one frameset. Just as *The New Detectives* is a hybrid of reality TV, horror film, news cast, and fiction drama, so is the experience of viewing it.

Reality TV, especially those that document members of society at their worst, have been thought to be perverse and destructive to our societal morals and to those who try to uphold the law. However, such programming is valuable because it provides the viewers opportunity for catharsis. While our societal rules may include being polite to others and exercising restraint (both physical and verbal), having multi-dimensional personalities is what makes us human.

Through studying the factors that influence a viewer's tendency toward certain television behaviors comes the unmasking of many layers of the human psyche. It is how sympathy for a murder victim and relief that you are not the victim can both enter your mind at the same time. It is what invites our very present, but less dominant selves out to play.

*The New Detectives* is not entertaining because we like to see the bad guy punished or because the plot is so unpredictable; it isn't. It is entertaining because it challenges the established criteria for what is real and true or both. We understand that the images of death and murder are restricted to the television screen and pose no threat to our actual environment. However, *The New Detectives*, in all its post modernism, is as unreal as it is real. It is not real since it is a re-enactment, but it is true because the stories are from actual murder cases. It is false because the people are only acting, but it is factual because it is told from the recorded accounts of law enforcement agencies. It is true and false and real and unreal all at once. The phenomenon of *The New Detectives* is as complicated on the human side as it is on the creative side.

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## Appendix

### EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

*The New Detectives: Cases Studies in Forensic Science*

“Murder for Hire”

Narrated by Gene Galusha

Recorded and Transcribed in 2002

**Narrator:** This program contains re-enactments of real people and real events. This program is intended for mature audiences. Viewer discretion is advised.

**Narrator:** In North Carolina, a tragic accident is blamed for the death of a 45-year-old woman. But a routine investigation raises more questions than answers. And police soon learn that things aren't always as they appear to be. A mother of six is found brutally murdered in her Florida home. The forensic evidence points detectives to a suspect. But his whereabouts and the motive behind the murder remain a mystery. For some killers, murder can be a profitable business. And when a victim has been targeted for death, homicide investigators must look beyond the obvious to uncover a murder for hire.

[Break]

**Narrator:** On the morning of August 3, 1995, a motorist summoned rescue workers and emergency workers to a remote area off North Carolina's Blue Ridge Parkway. While pulled over at a scenic overlook, she had spotted a van plunged several hundred feet down the steep embankment. There was no movement in the vehicle. Transylvania County rescue workers made their way down the cliff hopeful they would find survivors. When the rescue worker entered the vehicle, a piece of cinder block stained with blood fell out of the van. A woman lay slumped over the passenger seat. She had suffered massive head injuries. There was no pulse. The body was removed from the vehicle and sent to the morgue for examination. The van was

brought up the embankment for a more detailed evaluation. A check on the vehicle's tag revealed that the van was registered to a man named Edward Kratzert. His address was several hundred miles away in Bradenton, Florida. After finding no obvious mechanical problems with the van, technicians processed the vehicle. Reddish-brown stains were found on the exterior of the driver's side door. They tested positive for human blood. Inside, they recovered a wallet and driver's license. The driver was identified as 45-year-old Wendy Kratzert, the wife of the vehicle's owner. Blood was found throughout the van. The back of an earring was located on the passenger seat floor. Unsure what to make of the findings, investigators collected several items into evidence. At autopsy, medical examiner Dr. Robert Thompson looked to the victim for clues that could explain the crash. He found no traces of blood or alcohol in the victim's blood or tissue. Wendy's death had resulted from blunt force injuries to the head. She had suffered five individual fractures to the top and back of her skull. Though Wendy had not been wearing a seatbelt, for Dr. Thompson, the location and number of injuries were not typical of car crash victims.

**Dr. Thompson:** Usually the injuries that we find in automobile accidents are those in the face area where the face comes down and hits the dash board. So the injuries that I found are not consistent with an automobile accident, although conceivably it could have happened that way.

**Narrator:** The autopsy results prompted investigators from the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation to take a closer look at Wendy Kratzert's accident. Special Agent and blood splatter expert Andy Klein reviewed photographs taken at the scene. He was immediately struck by the lack of blood found where the victim's body came to rest.

**Klein:** From the position that she came to rest in with her head in the passenger side floor board and with the wound being to the top and the back of her head, I would have expected to see a larger pool of blood in that floor board had she received the wound inside the van.

**Narrator:** More troubling however was the presence of the victim's blood on the vehicle's exterior running board.

**Klein:** There were several blood splatters that I noted on the running board. Of course you know the vehicle - that would have been protected had the door been shut. So, at some point the door was opened and she bled on it.

**Narrator:** All of the evidence suggested Wendy Kratzert had been bleeding before she ever got into the van. Police learned that Wendy and her husband owned a vacation home a few miles away from the scene of the accident. Later that night, authorities went to the address. No one appeared to be home. Then, they discovered a large pool of blood. Tests later confirmed that it had come from Wendy Kratzert. An earring back identical to the one found inside the van was located a few inches away. Technicians concluded that no one could have survived such blood loss without immediate medical attention. Nearby, investigators found the outline of an object. Its shape was similar to the blood stained cinder block found inside the van. For police, there could be no doubt that Wendy Kratzert had been brutally murdered. Her death had been staged to appear as an accident. After obtaining a warrant, the team made their way into the residence unsure of what or whom they might find. No one was home and the residence showed no signs

of forced entry or ransacking. Investigators thoroughly photographed the scene. They also collected numerous personal items and papers that belonged to the victim. Now, investigators had to determine who had killed Wendy and why. Transylvania County police were eager to question Wendy's husband, Ed. He was tracked down to his home in Bradenton, Florida. Police there were contacted and asked to speak to the victim's husband. Ed Kratzert couldn't believe his wife had been murdered. He stated that since the couple's children had graduated from high school, Wendy had been spending a lot of time at their vacation home in North Carolina. Ed explained that he had recently suffered a heart attack and was at home at the time of the murder. Wendy had helped nurse him back to health. And soon after, she decided to return to North Carolina by herself. Ed couldn't think of anyone who might want to harm her. Florida police confirmed Ed's alibi and soon after, he was cleared as a suspect. Police and forensic examiners had exposed a tragic car accident as an elaborate attempt to conceal a brutal crime. But with few leads and no obvious suspects, it appeared that Wendy Kratzert's killer might get away with murder.

[Break]

**Narrator:** In Transylvania County, North Carolina, a routine traffic death investigation had exposed a brutal homicide. Forty-five-year-old Wendy Kratzert had been savagely beaten to death. Her body placed in a van which was then pushed over a steep cliff. Frustrated by a lack of suspects or an obvious motive, police in Wendy's hometown of Bradenton, Florida questioned the victim's friends and neighbors. One close friend told police she could think of only one person who might want to harm Wendy and that was her husband Ed Kratzert. Wendy had described him as ruthlessly controlling. He watched over her every move and was extremely critical of her behavior. Wendy said he could also be physically abusive. Just before her death,

Wendy had talked about leaving her husband. The findings were passed on to police in North Carolina where Wendy's murder took place. Following up on the information, investigators learned that Ed Kratzert stood to gain \$100,000 dollars from Wendy's death, but so far he had made no attempts to collect on his wife's insurance policy. Though Ed had misrepresented his relationship with Wendy, he had a solid alibi, and there was no motive connecting him to the crime. Desperate to identify Wendy's killer, detectives questioned her coworkers at the local restaurant where she worked part-time. One recalled that just before her death, Wendy had been tired and irritable. She said she had been dealing with unexpected houseguests who had shown up from Florida on a few occasions. The coworker didn't know the name of the visitors, but it was clear to Transylvania homicide detective Rita Smith that Wendy was not happy to have them in her house.

**Smith:** Wendy had been very uncomfortable with these people that they had smoked in her house. She felt that they had pilfered through her belongings.

**Narrator:** Looking to identify the houseguests, investigators scoured through the items collected from Wendy's vacation home. They found a potential clue. The names Tom and Louana Harrison had been handwritten on Wendy's calendar. And a records check revealed that the Harrisons lived in the same Bradenton, Florida neighborhood as Wendy and her husband. Florida police were dispatched to the Harrisons' home to question the couple. They admitted having visited Wendy in North Carolina a few weeks prior to her death. Tom explained that he and Louana were close friends of the Kratzert's. They spent a lot of time with the couple. They hadn't noticed any problems between Ed and Wendy. Wendy invited them to come stay at their

North Carolina home whenever they wanted. She even gave them a key to the house. They took her up on the offer, but that was weeks before her murder. They hadn't been back since. As a matter of routine, the officer asked the couple their whereabouts at the time of Wendy's murder. Tom Harrison suddenly became agitated. He felt he was being treated like a suspect. He ended the interview and asked the officer to leave. Tom Harrison's odd behavior led police to believe he was hiding something. To find out what, they subpoenaed his credit card statement for the weeks surrounding the murder. They found that numerous charges had been made to hotels and car rental agencies throughout North Carolina. In fact, the receipts put Tom and Louana Harrison near the scene of the crime in the days before and just after the murder. Tom Harrison had been caught in a lie. Though police could find no motive, the circumstantial evidence was pointing to the Harrisons as Wendy Kratzert's killers. Agents from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement were contacted. They were asked to take Tom Harrison and his wife Louana into custody. As FDLE Special Agent Vince Delakio prepared to put his team together, he received some startling news. Tom Harrison was dead.

**Delakio:** I had come in in the morning and received a phone call from the Manatee County Sheriff's Office. The investigator there asked me if I had seen the front page of the morning paper and the front headline was "Local Man Dies in Boating Accident."

**Narrator:** According to reports, authorities had discovered Tom Harrison's boat burning out of control in the Gulf of Mexico. After putting out the blaze, rescue workers began a massive search to find the owner. For several days, efforts to find Tom Harrison turned up nothing. Soon after,

the search was called off. The prime suspect in Wendy Kratzert's homicide was missing and presumed dead.

[Break]

**Narrator:** Authorities in North Carolina believed they had finally identified the killer of 45-year-old Wendy Kratzert whose brutal murder had been staged to look like a car accident. But as they prepared to make the arrest, they learned that their prime suspect was missing and presumed dead after his boat was found burning in the Gulf of Mexico. But authorities were convinced that Tom Harrison had staged his own death in an attempt to throw investigators off his trail. Lieutenant Marty Rittman of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission was asked to find out.

**Rittman:** When I got to the scene and looked at the boat, I saw a vessel approximately 25 feet long. It used to be a cabin-type boat. The boat had burned completely to the water line except in certain portions of the starboard bow and the starboard quarter.

**Narrator:** Fire marshals were able to quickly rule out electrical problems as the source of the blaze. After carefully analyzing the burnt remains, investigators found that some places on the boat had burned at a much higher temperature than others. And wood marred with deep scaly scars referred to as alligator patterns was found next to wood that was nearly untouched by the fire. There was only one explanation for the uneven burn patterns.

**Rittman:** The fire marshal office determined that the fire was started with an accelerant and where in the boat that it was started by indicators from burn patterns, different melting point of



certain materials, and other items that they are skilled in looking for in charred ashes and charred remains of fires.

**Narrator:** The fire had been intentionally set. The Lieutenant had found no traces of human remains among the debris. Investigators were certain that Tom Harrison had set it. Police soon learned why. In addition to being suspects in Wendy Kratzert's homicide, the Harrison's were in deep financial trouble, and Louana stood to collect a large life insurance settlement as a result of Tom's death. Florida Department of Law Enforcement Special Agent Vince Delakio:

**Delakio:** But I knew at that point in time that Tom Harrison was not dead and that this boat accident was more than likely a staged accident to hide from the fact that he was a suspect in that case and probably more than likely knowing his situation that he was looking for some insurance money.

**Narrator:** To test the theory, authorities put 24-hour surveillance on the Harrisons' Bradenton, Florida home. Months passed without a break. But then, police spotted Tom Harrison alive and well, and it appeared that he and Louana were preparing to leave town. Shortly after the couple hit the road, police pulled them over. Tom Harrison gave the officer a fake name and driver's license. He and Louana were placed under arrest and charged with insurance fraud and arson. But Tom Harrison was uncooperative. And with no hard evidence tying him to the homicide, investigators were still a long way from proving that he had murdered Wendy Kratzert. For police, the Harrisons' close ties with the victim's husband could no longer be ignored. Investigators began to theorize that Ed Kratzert, unhappy in his marriage to Wendy, had hired

the Harrisons to kill her. Kratzert was brought in for questioning and informed of the Harrisons' arrests. Investigators confronted him with their murder for hire theory and insinuated that they had evidence to back it up. It was a bluff, but it worked. Ed Kratzert decided to talk. He confessed to taking part in a plot to murder his wife. He insisted it wasn't his idea. Kratzert said that he was complaining to the Harrisons about his marriage. He knew Wendy was planning to leave him. After his heart attack, he was dreading the idea of a prolonged divorce and separation of assets. Tom Harrison told him he could make his problem go away for a fee. Ed agreed. The death was supposed to look like an accident. When it was exposed as a murder, Ed refused to collect on his wife's life insurance policy. The Harrisons were never paid for the job. As a result, Ed feared that Tom Harrison was plotting to kill him. Ed Kratzert was placed under arrest and charged with conspiracy to commit murder.

Police confronted Tom Harrison with the statements. He refused to cooperate, but it made no difference. The credit card receipts that put him near the crime scene at the time of the murder coupled with Ed Kratzert's confession was all police needed to charge him with the homicide. Police believe that after showing up unexpectedly at Wendy's North Carolina vacation home, Tom Harrison bludgeoned the unsuspecting woman to death. After the kill, the couple loaded Wendy's body into the van and drove to a remote spot along the Blue Ridge Parkway where they then attempted to stage her death as a car accident. Ed Kratzert was found guilty of the first degree murder of his wife. He received a sentence of no less than eleven years. Tom Harrison was sentenced to twenty years. In exchange for her testimony, Louana Harrison received three years probation. The Harrisons had tried to get away with murder by staging an elaborate accident. But in 1995, in the suburbs of Sarasota, Florida, one killer made no attempt to cover up his actions. On the afternoon of November 7, 13-year-old Stevie Bellish returned

home from school. No one appeared to be home. But then she stumbled upon a horrifying scene. Her mother, 35-year-old Sheila Bellish lay dead on the kitchen floor. Panicked, the young girl called 911. Deputies and forensic technicians from the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office were immediately dispatched to the home. To prevent any contamination, a single forensic technician was allowed to enter the residence and document the scene. Sheila Bellish had been brutally murdered. She had suffered a single gunshot wound to the cheek. There were also indications that she had been viciously beaten. Her throat was so deeply cut she was almost decapitated. As technicians began processing the scene, the victim's husband Jaime Bellish arrived home. Detectives broke the news. Police assured him that his stepdaughter Stevie and the couple's newly born quadruplets were all safe and unharmed. The frantic husband was escorted away from the house and taken to the police station to answer questions. Technicians looked to the blood evidence to help them piece together the events that transpired inside the house. Based on the size and location of blood splatter patterns, they determined that Sheila Bellish was initially shot near a door that led to the laundry room. Streaks of blood suggested she then attempted to crawl away from her attacker. But she was only able to get a few feet away before her killer caught up with her and slashed her throat. There was nothing to suggest that robbery was the motive. In the laundry room adjacent to the kitchen, technicians located a single 45 caliber shell casing. A few feet away lay a white towel. Some of the fabric was covered with gunshot residue suggesting it had been used as a makeshift silencer. But for some reason the killer only got off one shot before using a knife to finish the job. Evidence technician Lisa Lanham tried to make sense of the excessive violence inflicted on Sheila Bellish.

**Lanham:** There are two possibilities of why he abandoned the gun. One is that the gun is very loud in a small confined area and probably sounds even louder when you're the one shooting it. And, he may have feared that the neighbors would overhear the weapon. The other possibility is that the towel got caught in the gun and then basically made the gun inoperable.

**Narrator:** Looking for any trace of the killer that may have been left behind, technicians collected dozens of prints from throughout the residence including some found inches from the bullet casing. Homicide detective Chris Iorio was assigned lead detective on the case.

**Iorio:** All I knew at that point was that we did have a mother of six kids deceased in the kitchen, head trauma – most likely a gunshot was involved and we took it from there.

**Narrator:** Investigators know from experience that their best opportunity to solve a murder falls within the first twenty-four hours. With few clues and no obvious suspects, they hoped an autopsy could point them to this brutal killer.

[Break]

**Narrator:** Police in Sarasota, Florida struggle to find answers in the death of 35-year-old Sheila Bellish, a mother of six found brutally murdered in her home. Sheila's husband, Jaime Bellish was brought in to answer questions. He described Sheila as a dedicated mother and a loving wife. Jaime explained that he and Sheila and her two children from a previous marriage had recently moved to Florida from San Antonio, Texas. Sheila had just been through a nasty divorce. And when she and her husband learned that they were going to have quadruplets, they decided to start their lives over in a new city. The decision to move had not been an easy one.

But according to Jaime, Sheila's ex-husband continued harassing her after the divorce was finalized. Jaime said that at the time of the murder he was at work. But homicide detective Chris Iorio was taking nothing for granted.

**Iorio:** At the beginning of the case Jaime Bellish was our obvious suspect due to just his role in the family structure, but within four or five hours after we responded we felt pretty sure that he was not involved.

**Narrator:** Detective Iorio contacted authorities in San Antonio, Texas. He asked them to speak with Sheila's ex-husband about the murder. Alan Blackthorn, a wealthy businessman admitted that his divorce from Sheila had been bitter, but he insisted he never would have harmed the mother of his children. At the time of the murder, he was on a golfing trip in Arizona, and he had the receipts and documents to prove it. With no suspects and no obvious motive for the killing, Sarasota police turned to the physical evidence. Examiners found a fingerprint that did not match any of the Bellish family members. And it had been found just inches away from the spent bullet casing. The evidence put investigators one step closer to identifying Sheila's killer. Detectives returned to the Bellish neighborhood to question residents about the day of the murder. One recalled seeing a Hispanic man dressed in military camouflage getting out of a white car and walking through the neighborhood. The neighbor didn't get a good look at the man's face but was able to recall a few numbers from the license plate.

**Iorio:** When we heard about a Hispanic man walking through the neighborhood in camouflage, we new that most likely he didn't belong to that neighborhood. It was mostly a retirement

community. Nobody wears camouflage in this heat. Evidently it was a long sleeved shirt, long pants, and that just stood out.

**Narrator:** A description of the man and details of the homicide were released through area news papers. A short while later, police got a tip. A clerk that worked at a convenience store a few miles from the crime scene told police that he also saw the Hispanic man dressed in camouflage around the time of Sheila's murder. The man had come in looking for directions. In fact he was trying to locate the neighborhood where the young mother was found murdered. The clerk handed the man his laminated map of the area. He added that the stranger got into a white car and drove off. Now, they needed to know his name. All they had was a partial license plate number from his vehicle. It wasn't much to go on.

**Iorio:** We initially ran a tag out of Florida. A lead is a lead. You have to try. And it came back to nothing. And then we decided that since the Bellishes were from Texas that would be the next state to try, and when we got that tag information back it registered to somebody in Texas, so we had to follow up that lead.

**Narrator:** Investigators traced the vehicle to a 21-year-old Austin, Texas resident named José "Joey" Del Toro.

**Iorio:** We ran a background check on José Del Toro as soon as we got his name. We found out he had a criminal history but nothing that would make you believe he was a murderer.

**Narrator:** But that was a conclusion forensic scientists would have to make. Joey Del Toro's fingerprint card was forwarded to the Sarasota County crime lab. There, examiners compared his prints to those recovered from the Bellish home. After careful scrutiny, they concluded that Joey Del Toro had left the print. A warrant was issued for his arrest. Police in Del Toro's hometown of Austin, Texas were unable to track down the suspect. However, they did manage to locate his white vehicle. Armed with a warrant, investigators processed the car. Inside a bag, they collected a colt 45 caliber semiautomatic handgun. It was the same type of weapon used to shoot Sheila Bellish. To nail their case against Joey Del Toro, investigators forwarded the weapon to experts at the Florida Department of Law Enforcement crime lab. First, the weapon was fired into a water tank. The water slows the bullet's flight without distorting the unique marks left behind as it passes through the gun barrow. The rounds collected from the water tank could then be compared to the bullets collected from Sheila Bellish's cheek. Under a comparison microscope, examiners found that the striation marks that are unique to each gun are identical on both bullets. All of the forensic evidence left investigators with no doubt that Joey Del Toro had murdered the young mother of six. But having found no obvious connection between the killer and the victim, the motive behind the savage slaying was as mysterious as the killer's whereabouts.

[Break]

**Narrator:** Police in Sarasota, Florida had finally linked the suspect to the murder of 35-year-old mother of six, Sheila Bellish found brutally beaten, shot, and stabbed in her home. All of the evidence suggested that 21-year-old Joey Del Toro committed the murder and then fled to Texas. But so far all efforts to locate him had gone unsuccessful. Then, police got a tip that the fugitive was staying with relatives in San Antonio. For help, Florida police contacted the Texas Ranger

station there. But authorities there had no luck finding the suspect. However, they managed to track down his cousin, a man named Sammy Gonzales. He agreed to come in and answer questions. Texas Rangers' Lieutenant Gary De los Santos conducted the interview. Sammy Gonzales said he had no idea where his cousin Joey Del Toro might be. But he believed he had information about the murder. He said that a few months back, an acquaintance of his, a golf hustler named Danny Rocha hired him to beat somebody up. Sammy was interested in the job, but when he saw the intended victim, he declined. But he knew someone else that might be interested in the job.

**De los Santos:** Sammy admitted to us that he was approached by Danny Rocha to beat up a girl. Once Sammy realized it was a woman, he refused to do it but he brought up that his cousin Joey Del Toro may be willing to do it.

**Narrator:** Unsure what to make of the information, investigators begin digging into the golf hustler's background. They were surprised by what they found. Danny Rocha was a close associate of Sheila Bellish's wealthy ex-husband. Suddenly, investigators had to consider that they had exposed a murder for hire. Police knew that Sheila's divorce had been bitter, but had it led to murder? One friend who knew the couple well thought so. Sheila had described her ex-husband, Alan Blackthorn, as obsessive and controlling. During their divorce, he had demanded that Sheila sign over custody of their children. When she refused, Blackthorn had her falsely arrested for child abuse. The charges were ultimately dismissed, and she was awarded custody of the children. Alan Blackthorn allegedly said that he would get even. According to the friend, Sheila took the threat seriously. When Sheila and her new husband moved to Florida, they kept



an unlisted phone number and took pains to keep the new address a secret. Now, investigators look for proof that the victim's ex-husband had orchestrated her murder. Danny Rocha, the person police believed hired the hit man, was brought in for questioning. Under advice of his attorney, he refused to answer any questions. Before letting him go, however, Lieutenant De los Santos asked Rocha to pose for a photograph with him. He agreed. The following day, Sammy Gonzales was brought in for another interview. Police were convinced he knew more about the murder plot than he claimed. When shown the photograph, Sammy became convinced that Danny was cooperating with authorities. Fearing he had been implicated in the murder, he decided to talk. Now, he admitted he accepted \$14,000 dollars from Danny Rocha to murder Sheila Bellish. A short while later, he hired his cousin to actually carry out the homicide. Sammy believed that Sheila Bellish's ex-husband Alan Blackthorn had ordered and financed the murder. He also told investigators where they could find the hit man del Toro. Soon after, del Toro was tracked down to a motel in Mexico. He was placed under arrest, and after extensive legal wrangling, extradited back to the United States to stand trial for murder. Authorities had now exposed three conspirators in the murder of Sheila Bellish. But the alleged mastermind Alan Blackthorn was still a free man. Looking to find evidence linking him to the murder, investigators subpoenaed his phone records for the months prior to the homicide. One number that continually came up was traced to the bail bondsman who had helped Sheila get out of jail when she was falsely arrested. The bondsman said he recorded all of his phone conversations. Police realized that he would have been one of the few people to have record of Sheila's most current arrest.

**De los Santos:** Once we got those recordings, that's when you hear Alan Blackthorn calling and pretending to be somebody else and trying to ascertain Sheila's address.

**Narrator:** Investigators confirmed that just before the murder, Alan successfully located Sheila's Florida address. The evidence, along with the testimony of the other conspirators, was enough to arrest the wealthy business man. On January 4, 2000, Alan Blackthorn was taken into custody and charged with conspiracy to commit murder. At trial, police learned that soon after his divorce from Sheila, Alan Blackthorn began plotting to kill her. While on a golfing trip, Blackthorn told his associate Danny Rocha that his ex-wife was an abusive mother and he wanted it stopped; even if it meant killing her. Danny Rocha agreed to set it up. After acquiring Sheila's address in Florida. The hit man drove from Texas to the Bellish home. Joey Del Toro broke into the residence and waited for his opportunity. He caught the unsuspecting mother completely off guard. For their role in the murder, Joey Del Toro and Danny Rocha each got life sentences. Sammy Gonzales was sentenced to 19 years. Alan Blackthorn was found guilty of orchestrating his wife's death and sentenced to life in prison. For some, money is motive enough to commit murder. When there are no obvious connections between killer and victim, detectives turn to forensic examiners to expose the master mind behind a murder for hire.