

The Boom of Crime Dramas Within Postmodern Society: The Spectacle of Crime, Commercialisation, and Stereotyping

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Within this critical reflection, I aim to highlight how, during the shift from modernity into postmodernity, society saw a growth in fictional crime dramas on television. Through understanding this growth, along with the reasonings behind why these shows have become immensely popular, the paper will divulge into how this sensationalised portrayal of crime through crime dramas has created distortions of crime and as a result generated harmful images of crime and the justice system along with certain groups within society.

Using contemporary social theories which identify key characteristics of postmodern society, the paper will discuss topics including the commercialisation of crime through McKee's (2005) studies of the public sphere and how this links to Webster's (2014) theory surrounding information society. Then, the paper will look deeper into what McKee (2005) calls spectacle and how this in turn creates distortions of crime. Finally, the paper links these distortions of crime to what Beck (1992) described as a risks society as well as looking at how generalised fear which is found within risk society is created to reinforce

stereotyping and marginalisation of ethnic minority groups.

Crime and criminal behaviours have been ever present on our TV screens for a number of decades, therefore the viewing of crime and criminality is not new, however, with the shift from modernity into postmodernity, there has been a boom in popularity of crime dramas. McElroy (2017) describes crime dramas as stories surrounding criminals and the justice system that are 'highly entertaining [...]

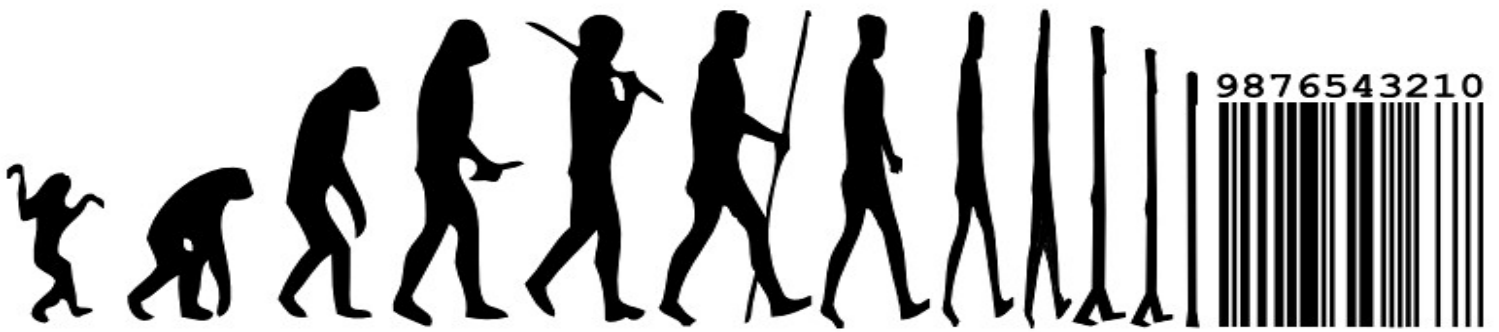
and thought-provoking'

(p.1).

Popularity of this form of entertainment is evident as according to the IMDb Top 250 TV Shows, *Breaking Bad* is ranked at number one, followed by *The*

Wire at number five and *The Sopranos* at number nine (IMDb, 2023). Also, Rotten Tomatoes' Top 10 Best TV Shows includes *A Murder at the End of the World* at number 5 and *Bodies* at number nine, illustrating the popularity of fictional stories involving crime (Rotten Tomatoes, 2023).





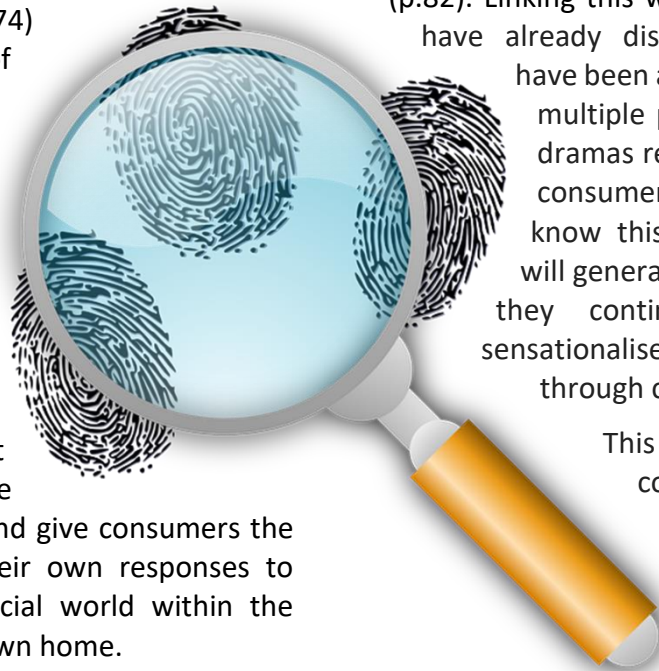
The shift into postmodernity, along with the rise of technology, resulted in an increase of 'visual, intrusive and technologically capable' television (Surette and Gardiner-Bess, 2014: 374). Therefore, Surette and Gardiner-Bess (2014) describe crime dramas as involving 'impossible fights and adventures by people with abilities that no human possess' (p.373-374) acting as a form of escapism for viewers, along with satisfying the audiences voyeuristic pleasures. Also, according to McElroy (2017), crime entertainment such as crime dramas are not only entertaining but are a 'place to explore social anxieties' (p.1) and give consumers the ability to challenge their own responses to criminality and the social world within the private realm of their own home.

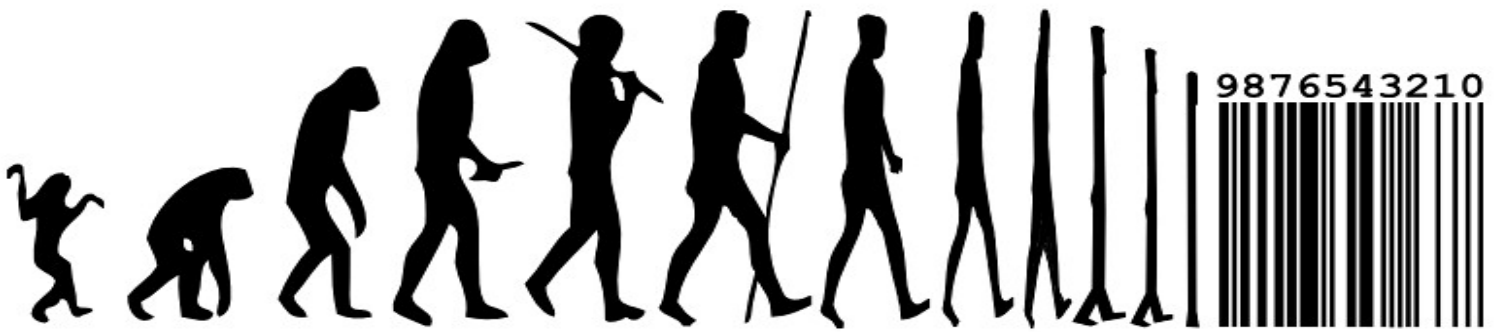
Following this growing popularity of crime dramas, emerged the increasing commercialisation of crime in the form of crime dramas. McKee (2005) in his work around the public sphere argues that the public sphere has become 'too commercialised', believing that our public culture is solely driven by 'the search for profits' with no care taken towards the quality of what is produced (p. 66). McKee (2005) goes onto explain how producers 'dumb-down' content for the masses, which refers to the working class, therefore making content easily consumable for that larger audience and

'uneducated consumers', generating more profits (p.66).

However, although this can be seen as positive as it allows insight and information for the working class, there are concerns surrounding the 'sensationalism' of media content, believing it to cause 'intellectual laziness' (p.82). Linking this with crime dramas, as we have already discovered, various shows have been at the top of the charts on multiple platforms meaning crime dramas receive a lot of views from consumers, therefore, producers know this form of entertainment will generate profits, explaining why they continue to create these sensationalised stories of crime through crime drama television.

This idea surrounding the commercialisation of crime dramas coincides with Webster's (2014) discussions of information society. According to Webster (2014), we have entered an 'e-society' (p.2) where there is the creation of new modes of information within postmodernity due to the increased growth in ICTs (Masudi and Mustafa, 2022). This new society we have found ourselves living in has generated some controversies, as whilst some believe that this is the emergence of an increase of education for all individuals to create a more professionalised society, others believe that this society is one which encourages divulging in 'trivia, sensationalism, and misleading propaganda' in order to 'keep people stupid' to reinforce capitalist inequalities (Webster, 2014: 2).





This new form of information society has also been classed as a global information economy as the use of increased technology has allowed for the condensed gap between space and time meaning information can spread globally (Webster, 2014). This can be directly related to crime dramas as, for example, *Bodies* is in the top ten charts in TV in eighteen different countries on Netflix in the week of November 6th to the 12th 2023 (Netflix, 2023).

Therefore, these new forms of media technologies allow people access crime content globally (Surette and Gardiner-Bess, 2014).

Although crime dramas are entertaining and can be viewed through a positive lens as providing easily consumable information about the social world, concerns rise as the sensationalism of crime dramas distort the actuality of crime and the justice system (Surette and Gardiner-Bess, 2014). For example, the show *Breaking Bad* involves a chemistry teacher who is diagnosed with terminal cancer and therefore breaks bad by becoming a drug lord, which is so far out of the realm of possibility for the ordinary person.

It can be argued that this is a result of what McKee (2005) describes as the spectacle of the public sphere. McKee (2005) writes extensively around the spectacle of the public sphere and believes this notion of spectacle is within reference to the 'showy' communications

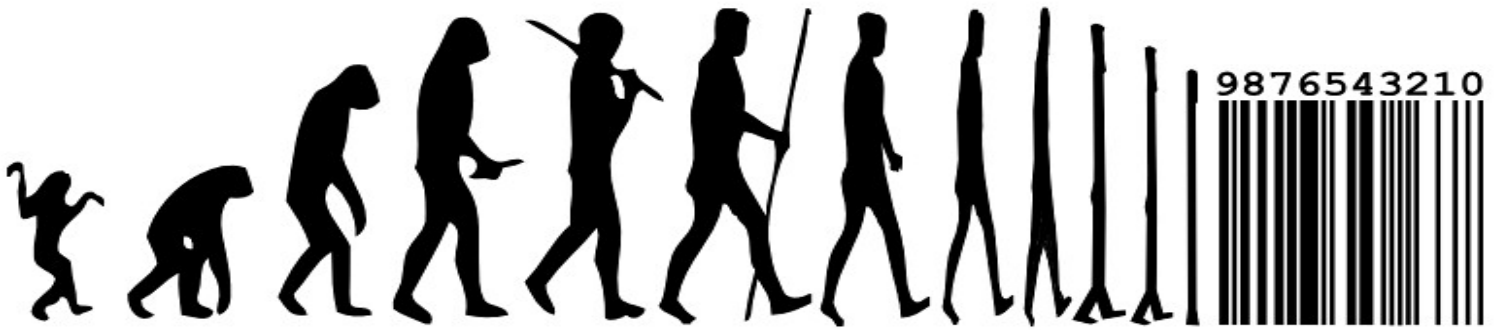
which consumers are fed, and how the appearance and representations of the public sphere majorly outweighs substance and rationality (p.105). Distortions of crime through crime dramas include the portrayal of predators as being strangers who commit violent, senseless crimes, therefore violence between strangers is seen as a norm within society (Surette and Gardiner-Bess, 2014).



However, this is what Surette and Gardiner-Bess (2014) have come to see as "backwards-law" meaning the representations of crime and the criminal justice system is often the opposite from the truth (p.374).

These spectacles and distortions of crime contribute to what Beck (1992) described as a risk society whereby he explains how modernity and the belief in scientific knowledge is being challenged with the shift into late-modernity and the rise of 'a new set of risks and opportunities', leading individuals to view late modern society as a dangerous place, living alongside constant risk. (Beck, 1992 cited in Furlong and Cartmel, 2007: 3). This links to Surette and Gardiner-Bess (2014) as they describe those who have had extensive exposure to crime content as adopting a 'mean-world view' and believing society is a violent and dangerous place.

However, this is not the only concern surrounding distortions of crime and the justice system, as it is also said that these distortions of crime image have been related



to stereotypical views on minority groups. Surette and Gardiner-Bess (2014) argue groups such as 'women, minorities [...], the mentally ill' and many others, are stereotyped by adopting "'ideal" caricatures' for their roles (p.378). For example, women are portrayed as an ideal victim as they are emotional and naïve, in need of saving, whilst men are portrayed as the ideal offender as they are classed as 'foreigners' and 'aliens', unable to be rehabilitated (Surette and Gardiner-Bess, 2014: 378). This is the same for ethnic minorities also, for example, within *Breaking Bad*, the Latinx actors within the show were given roles which embodied stereotypical characteristics, involving them being violent criminals with heavy involvement with the dealings of drugs (Bernhardt, 2021).

This also links with risk society, and the notion of generalised fear. Generalised fear is classed as a fear response from what Puddifoot and Trakas (2023) explain as 'aversive stimuli' (p.2) such as an object which instils fear, onto other stimuli such as places and certain people, leading individuals who have generalised fear avoiding certain groups or circumstances, which can include certain ethnic groups. Therefore, those who continually watch crime dramas and watch these stereotypes of ethnic minorities will create feelings of fear and danger towards individuals in these groups, sustaining racist stereotypes, which can lead to the

marginalisation of ethnic minority groups within postmodern society (Oliver, 2003).

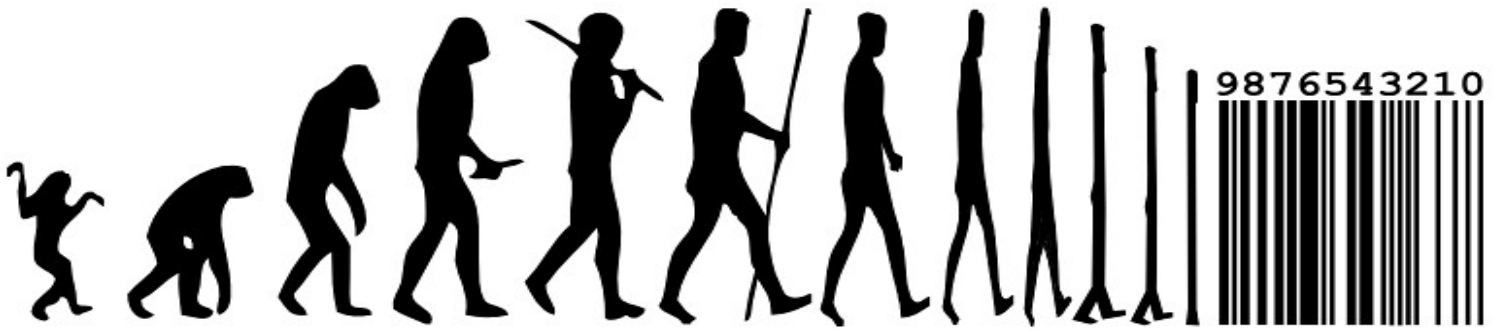
In conclusion, it is evident that within contemporary society, crime dramas are highly popular as not only do they allow individuals to explore social anxieties, but they are highly sensationalised, entertaining, and easily consumed due to them being "dumbed down" for the masses (McKee, 2005). The commercialisation of crime has created this sensationalised view of criminality and the justice system as producers know these fictional forms of entertainment will generate the most profit for capitalist gain.



This links with Webster's (2014) information society and global information economy, as the growth of technology has enabled information to be passed and

consumed with ease across the globe. However, as this paper argues, this can create major distortions and misrepresentations of crime and the justice system, as it adopts a "'backwards law'", causing representations found in crime content often being the opposite to the truth (Surette and Gardiner-Bess, 2014).

The showing of these crime dramas, often involving overly violent crimes can create what Beck (1992) calls a risk society, arguing that individuals within contemporary society feel at constant risk within their surroundings, believing society to be a dangerous place. Not



only this, but the reinforcement of stereotypes within crime dramas, such as the roles of Latinx actors in *Breaking Bad*, can produce generalised fear, which can reproduce harmful beliefs that individuals of ethnic minorities are to be feared and avoided, creating marginalisation for individuals within those ethnic minority groups.

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