

Book review

by Ilka Brasch

American TV Detective Dramas: Serial Investigations, by Mareike Jenner, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 191pp.

Mareike Jenner's monograph focuses on methods of detection and conceptions of finding 'truth' in detective dramas throughout the history of US-American television. Her broader research interests and ongoing projects concern conceptions of genre, gender, modernism, and postmodernism in the televisual context as well as the medium's transformation in digital environments, all of which inform her take on detective fiction. Jenner's book combines a history of US-American television detective dramas with a study of genre formation and an analysis of the relationship between diegetic investigative methods, narrative structures, and ideological implications. She bases her argument on a rich corpus that allows her to trace prevailing trends of an era and that bypasses distinctions of network and cable or 'quality' television without ignoring such discourses in television studies. Meanwhile, her focus on individual detectives' approaches to conceptualize and uncover the possible 'truth' underlying criminal cases reintroduces the particular to the general.

The present volume starts from the observation that methods of detection in television drama, which adopts generic elements from literature and film, are either rational-scientific or irrational-subjective. Rational-scientific methods of detection require the extensive collection of evidence, emotionally distanced deduction, the inclusion of advanced scientific methodologies, and efforts to ensure a criminal's conviction in a court trial. Irrational-subjective methods, by contrast, allow detectives to base their investigations on instinct. They establish emotional relationships and they engage physically with witnesses and suspects in fight, torture, or sex scenes. The related programs include visual spectacle in car chases, explosions, or extreme violence. Jenner considers these methods of detection particular generic features of detective series, with specific narrative modes and serial structures of storytelling.

Chapter 2 places the two detective methods in their specific epistemological contexts. Jenner relates rational-scientific methods of detection, with their reference to an underlying objective 'truth' and an implicit world-view that champions binary oppositions, to Enlightenment efforts to structure the contingent according to distinct categories, which inform diegetic methods of collecting evidence and raking the importance of clues hierarchically. By thus extending enlightenment thought patterns into the post-enlightenment era, rational-scientific television shows reiterate established epistemological frameworks and disable their criticism. From the 1950s to 21st-century programs like CSI, rational-scientific methods of detection reinforce existing binarisms to create a sense of order without questioning underlying ideologies.

Irrational-subjective detection, by contrast, takes places in chaotic, confusing environments in which a personalized moral framework provides guidance in an ambiguous world. The corresponding worldview relates to modernism's optimism towards scientific progress and the simultaneous pessimism that resulted from the experience of the First World War. Corresponding television dramas allow for complex narrative structures, for an exploration of social contexts that breed crime, and for parodic questions of binary moral codes.

The third chapter offers a more detailed reflection of genre conceptions, in which genre is a layered formation. Thus, the detective genre is a sub-genre of crime fiction and itself has further sub-genres, for instance the 'genius' detective drama or the police

procedural, which often combine into hybrid forms. Moreover, following Jason Mittell's Foucauldian approach, genres are discursive clusters that exist at the intersections of other discourses, such as race, class, gender, or political power structures. Vice versa, Jenner also takes into account the detective genre's impacts on discourses of social power and the legal system. Localizing the detective genre at the intersection of such discourses is especially relevant for later chapters in Jenner's study, which contextualize different eras in TV detective fiction.

Chapter 4 returns to the distinction of rational-scientific and irrational-subjective methods and their relation to narrative structures and ideological outlooks. In television drama, rational-scientific methods are connected to the whodunit as well as to a three-act narrative organization of "discovery, investigation, revelation." Nevertheless, individual shows allow for intense variation within this rigid structure. Viewers follow the series' provision of clues and they take part in uncovering the plot of what Jenner considers with Roland Barthes a "writerly text." She further describes the viewer's activity in terms of play, the engagement in which presupposes the acceptance of a given ideology or moral code which will serve to bring a criminal to justice in an episode ending that correlates narrative and ideological closure.

Narrative structures linked to irrational-subjective detection are more diverse, as their more chaotic world-view invites experimentation. Until the 1980s, however, such programs follow a similar three-act-structure as the whodunit but expand the middle sequence to include sequences of violence and action, commodity fetishism, the objectification of the detective's body, romance, or comedy. Jenner attributes the change after 1980 to the influence of successful soap operas and to the post-millennial replacement of the episode as the underlying structural unit of the narration by the season. Longer story arcs and the description of multiple interrelated narratives effect a complexity that, in including multiple contradicting viewpoints, effects ideologically more open stories.

Chapters 5 to 8 offer a compelling history of the detective genre on American television from the early 1950s to today. Until 1968, detective dramas predominantly show rational-scientific methods of detection in series that add action sequences. Jenner relates their often simplistic moral stance to J. Edgar Hoover's efforts towards a positive depiction of the police forces. This surfaces in series like *Dragnet*, for which the cooperation with police departments serves as a marker of both realism and an explicit ideological agenda. Their binary moral code further corresponds to the McCarthy-era ideal of conformity. However, emotionally intense acting of convicted felons in these series offers entryways into subversive readings. The 1970s saw an increase in police procedurals, which seek to bridge the generational and racial divides informing 70s public discourse while keeping existing power structures in place. Whereas the police were charged with institutionalized racism and the Watergate scandal and the death of Hoover revealed structural corruption in the government and within the FBI, respectively, TV detective dramas stressed the police's ability to reform without questioning its justification to exist.

The increase of both network and cable channels between 1980 and 2000 effected the production of a greater variety of television shows, which prompts Jenner to trace individual cycles rather than the genre in its entirety. She focuses on three particular cycles: The sunshine noir cycle, which relocates a noir aesthetics to sunny settings in Miami or Hawaii and includes innovations such as *Miami Vice* with its postmodern MTV aesthetics, the social 'realist' cycle, a soap narrative structure and documentary visual style with anti-hero detectives and a postmodern refusal to reduce complexity that combine into a circle that begins in the 1980s with *Hill Street Blues* and extends across the millennium to series like

The Wire, and the visually glossy and narratively willingly incoherent 'quirky' cycle that begins in the 90s with Twin Peaks, which disrupts genre conventions.

Especially the social 'realist' and the 'quirky' cycles inform the years between 2000 and 2010, which are however marked by a resurgence of rational-scientific methods of detection in the newly emerging cycle of the forensic drama. Simultaneously, a small but highly influential number of series retain irrational-subjective detection. Jenner reads both trends in storytelling as post-9/11 responses to the previous postmodern deconstructions of the good/bad binary: Whereas the forensic drama imagines the existence of the binary both narratively as well as through the highly structured mise-en-scène of lab environments and the reliance on consistent color schemes, irrational-subjective dramas display a resignation in the face of the same historical context. Both types of shows thus express a critical stance towards postmodern fragmentation but retain its aesthetics and tendency to innovate, from SCI's "SCI-shot" to the split-screen aesthetics of 24.

The penultimate chapter maps how recent network and cable dramas explore alternative ways to access 'truth' by deconstructing the binary of rational-scientific and irrational-subjective detection. The Wire, for instance, disables the formation of binary oppositions through narrative complexity, Dexter, collapses the binarism through its combination of the genius detective and serial killer genres, and NCIS: Los Angeles combines both methods of detection in one investigative team. In all three examples, alternative ways to think 'truth' hinge on the series' renderings of power relations and surveillance.

The conclusion highlights the simultaneity of irrational-subjective and rational-scientific approaches in detective dramas of the post-postmodern era. Jenner sees this diversification in the televisual landscape as a result of television drama's responses, throughout the decades, to national trauma and a growing genre history's influence on renderings of social-historical contexts. Whereas her generalizations are based on an extensive canon, she also always includes series that complicate her generalizations, thus offering a vocabulary that helps to identify innovation rather than glossing over its existence. Jenner's study provides not only a compelling history of detective dramas, but it also demonstrates how a diversifying televisual landscape itself deconstructs mid-20th century ideological binarisms and related genre categories.

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