

Arresting drama: The television police genre

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the television police genre in general. It is one of three popular television genres (the others are soap opera and medical drama) that have survived more than five decades of changing societal norms and new cultural imperatives. Strictly speaking the television police genre falls under the umbrella of television crime. However, while the television crime genre encompasses programs about amateur sleuths, private eyes, professional crime fighters, and real life crime-watch depictions, the television police genre deals specifically with the actions of police officers. Using examples of the genre from Australia, Britain and the USA, this paper argues that the television police genre is influenced by issues of historical moment, national attributes, and cultural context. In doing so, it utilises a new research approach to the television police genre and its impact on contemporary society.

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Introduction

This paper provides an overview of the television police genre. Using examples of the genre from Australia, Britain and the USA, it argues that issues of historical moment, national attributes, and cultural context influence the genre. Existing research in relation to the television police genre focuses on the history and output of specific production companies and television industries (Moran, 1985); textual analyses of specific and defunct television police series (Clarke, 1982, 1986, 1992; Hurd, 1981; Laing, 1991; Moran; Thompson, 1996); form and ideology (Buxton, 1990); moral lessons and the place of crime in public life (Sparks, 1992); the effect of changing cultural discourses (Nelson, 1997); and anxiety about violence (Brunsdon, 1998).

In contemporary society, approaches to the analysis of television genres have diverged from traditional literary-based generic analysis, focussing more explicitly on issues of cultural history. For instance, Miller's (1997) analysis of *The Avengers* examines discourses of history, pop, fashion, sex, genre, the postmodern, and fandom. In relating these discourses to particular historical moments and particular cultural understandings on the part of the producers and the audience, Miller underlines the ways in which television series are inextricably linked to contemporary social mores. Ideologies and discourses date a program as easily as technology does and therefore it is possible to match television genre formats with particular decades. In relation to the television police genre, Sparks (1992, p. 230)

argues that “detective fictions might be considered to be phenomena which bear the imprint of their times.” Buxton (1990, p. 120) notes that “early police series in the 1950s like *Dragnet* ... took on strong documentary overtones with dispassionate professional dialogue.” Cunningham and Miller (1994, p. 9) make the point that “literary and televisual genres are always related to the cultural attributes of a population at a certain moment: sometimes as reactions to those attributes, and sometimes as sources of them.” However, an important part of televisual genre analysis remains centred on the flexible interplay of repetition and difference and with their organisation and interpretation by producers and audiences. This is particularly apparent in the television police genre. The British series *The Bill*, having been in production since 1984 and having undergone a number of shifts in relation to generic boundaries, is an example of the relationship between a television genre and the cultural attributes of a population at a certain moment in time. So is *New Tricks*, a British police series which combines an intertextuality of topics and actors designed to appeal to baby boomers with the contemporary trend of examining unsolved crimes that is exemplified by series such as the USA hit *Cold Case*.

In terms of televisual genres, there are three—the soap opera, the medical drama and the police drama—that have survived more than five decades of changing societal norms and new cultural imperatives. None are considered by academics as high class or intellectually appealing. The soap opera originated in the days of radio as a serialised domestic narrative that was sponsored by companies, such as Procter and Gamble and American Home Products, that produced toiletries and household cleaning products. The genre successfully made the transition to television screens across the world. Allen (1985, n. p.) makes the point that ... the connotation of “soap opera” as a degraded cultural and aesthetic form is inextricably bound to the gendered nature of its appeals and of its target audience. The soap opera always has been a “woman's” genre, and, it has frequently been assumed (mainly by those who have never watched soap operas), of interest primarily or exclusively to uncultured working-class women with simple tastes and limited capacities Despite the fact that the soap opera is demonstrably one of the most narratively complex genres of television drama whose enjoyment requires considerable knowledge by its viewers, and despite the fact that its appeals for half a century have cut across social and demographic categories, the term continues to carry this sexist and classist baggage.

The television medical drama, set in a hospital, surgery, or other medical environment, originated in the 1950s, with programs such as *Medic* (1954–1956), and *Emergency Ward 10* (1957–1967). Blending narratives of professional and private life, medical drama allows the regular introduction of new characters and fraught situations. Goodman (2007) argues that this genre allows for the exploration of the challenges of balancing impersonal institutional demands with an individual’s sense of fairness and of confronting fears of death and hopes that professionals and professional practices will achieve recovery. One could argue that these same challenges explain the popularity of the television police genre.

The television police genre, as Fiske (1987, p. 222) notes, modifies its conventions in a dialectical relationship with changes in social values, as do all genres. Neale (1980, pp. 22–23) argues that particular features which are characteristic of a genre are not normally unique to it but that it is their relative prominence, combination and functions which are distinctive. Thus police series, medical series and soap operas feature protagonists in everyday life but assign different foci to their

activities. The television crime genre is a case in point, encompassing programs about amateur sleuths, private eyes, professional crime fighters, and real life crime-watch depictions. The boundaries of the television police genre are more limited in that the genre deals specifically with the actions of police officers. Delaney (n.d.) argues that

Pared to its bare bones, the police drama is the ‘eternal struggle between good and evil.’ It is also a crossword puzzle in the tradition of Agatha Christie, with the thrill of a journey on the wrong side of the tracks. But this ‘conservative’ genre has consistently explored social mores, popular concerns and contemporary folk devils. At the same time, it treads a thin line between realism and a relentlessly upbeat representation of the police force, and is prone to stereotyping and tokenism. It remains a world dominated by individualistic white men. Despite this mass of contradictions, however, it is a versatile and flexible genre that can survive the loss of central characters and confront highly sensitive social issues.

In the early days of the genre, reflecting societal norms, viewers could expect to see distinct social stereotypes such as the gruff boss, eager subordinate, renegade officer, staid bureaucrat, menacing Internal Affairs personnel, fatherly/avuncular sergeant, den mother, drug pusher and villain. However, the utilisation of these stereotypes is related to the social and cultural attributes of a particular historic moment. For instance, Hurd (in Bennett, 1981, p. 58) notes the importance of stereotyping and argues that cameo actors, who play criminals in police shows

... must rely on crude stereotyping in order for their roles to be immediately identifiable to the audience. This is achieved either through iconography – the visual elements of an individual identity, such as clothes, physical characteristics, social settings, material objects and so on; or by particular behaviour patterns, such as violence, disloyalty, cowardice, irrationality.

This is not always true, particularly in British police series. *The Bill*, illustrating its use of difference, has featured non-stereotypical villains such as a little old lady (who conforms to the stereotype of sweetly fragile grandmother) as the mastermind behind an insurance and strong arm racket (the muscle was supplied by her grandsons) (*Sucking Eggs*, 1998); a ‘bent’ (corrupt) officer who accepts bribes to pervert the course of justice (the *Beech* saga, 2000); and a frail and elderly man who was arrested for the attempted murder of his beloved wife (*Villain*, 1998). Such characterisation, by introducing an element of unexpectedness, contributes to the longevity and institutionalisation of the television police genre in Australia, Britain and the USA.

Moran (1985, p. 163) notes that “the crime series, like the Western, usually employs an act of violence to set its story in train. Such violence is usually a crime of some kind, a violation of the law.” In the early years of the television police genre, such violence was attributable to a specific person who was inevitably captured, tried and convicted. Stark (1997, p. 35) reports that in January 1954, the influential *Time* magazine published an article that said, in part:

More people are killed each year on TV’s crime shows than die annually in the six largest cities of the U.S. But in one respect, television has a better record than the nation’s police: every TV lawbreaker pays the penalty for his crime.

Depiction of violence was not usually graphic, as family values had to be upheld and conventions of the timeslot observed, but it facilitated what Moran (1985, p.

163) sees as being of prime importance—the relationship between protagonist and others. Many police series in Australia, Britain and the USA—but not all—do show violence in varying degrees, depending on historical context, scheduled timeslots and target audiences, and reflection of dominant cultural concerns.

Tulloch (2000, pp .33–55) provides an incisive overview of theoretical approaches to the television police genre and implicitly acknowledges that the television police genre is shaped, in the first instance, by national, rather than global, discourses, and is displayed in iconography that reflects national attributes and cultural context. Iconography used by producers and expected by viewers in examples of the television police genre includes specific uniforms, equipment, vehicles, and jargon. Audiences remember Joe Friday’s dry “Just the facts, ma’am” and the staccato theme music of *Dragnet*, George Dixon’s “Evenin’ all”, the catchy lyrics of *Car 54, Where Are You?*, the black Granada crashing through a plate glass window in *The Professionals*, the heroes of *The Sweeney* snarling “Get yer trousers on, you’re nicked” or “We’re the Sweeney, son. So if you don’t want a kicking ...”, the operatic soundtrack of *Inspector Morse*, and the gunfire of many USA examples of the genre. Iconography is evident in the sub-industrial Melbourne back streets of *Homicide*, in *Blue Heelers*, visually replete with the iconography of the Australian country town, and in *The Bill*, which is full of what Brunsdon (2001, p. 43) describes as the iconography of London. Iconographic images are also evident in the weapons, poverty, and gritty urban landscape of *Hill St Blues* and in the crowded precincts and courtrooms of *NYPD Blue* and *Law & Order*.

In relation to Australian productions, Moran (1985, p. 102) notes that Australian police series of the 1960s such as *Homicide*, *Division Four* and *Matlock Police* show some important differences in that some police officers deal with murder and have little in the way of onscreen personal life (*Homicide*) while others such as *Division Four* include issues of a personal nature. Police series in the 1970s such as *The Sweeney*, *The Professionals* and *Starsky and Hutch* reflect a growing societal concern about escalating levels of violence and terrorism, while those of the 1980s (*Juliet Bravo*, *The Gentle Touch*, *Cagney and Lacey*) mirror increasing awareness of feminist discourse. The 1990s and beyond, in keeping with a growing postmodernist discourse and contemporary social disintegration, produced series as divergent as *Law & Order* (USA), *NYPD Blue* (USA), *Heartbeat* (Britain), *Taggart* (Britain), *Water Rats* (Australia), *Blue Heelers* (Australia), and *Stingers* (Australia).

It can be argued that audience members, influenced by cultural conditioning, who watch Australian, British, and American examples of the genre expect to see some evidence of police stations, police radios, uniforms, police vehicles, official forms, and correct use of phonetic alphabet during radio transmissions. As previously noted, what identifies and privileges national attributes and cultural context within the television police genre is the interplay of repetition and difference, the organisation, and the interpretation by producers and audiences. In studying the television police genre, it becomes apparent that even intertextual references within the genre seem to be governed to some extent by national attributes and cultural context. For instance, a character in a British police series such as *The Bill* or *New Tricks* may occasionally say “Evenin’ all.”. This is a reference to a phrase immortalised by the hero in the first local police series shown on British television (*Dixon of Dock Green*, which ran from 1955 to 1978). A character in a police series made in the USA would be more likely to say “Let’s roll, and hey—be careful out there”, a phrase used regularly by Sergeant Esterhaus each morning at roll call in *Hill St Blues*, a groundbreaking USA police series of the 1980s.

Neale and Krutnik (1990, p. 46) underline this relationship of genre to specific cultures, arguing that the concept of verisimilitude—in the sense of ‘probable’ or ‘likely’—and the question of the social and cultural functions performed are central to an understanding of genre. What is seen by Western culture as a generic product may have no meaning—or a different meaning—in a culture not communicatively literate in relation to that the product. It is this social and cultural aspect that exerts the strongest influence on television genre. For example, the avuncular, incorruptible ‘bobby on the beat’ of the 1950s (especially in Britain) is now fixed firmly in a heritage or nostalgia niche, and the strong-arm, anti-terrorist tactics of many of the 1970s television police series such as *The Professionals* and *The Sweeney* seem out of place two decades later. Hurd (1981, p. 64) acknowledges this, arguing that when a production is described as realistic it is not just a question of verisimilitude between a fictional world and an extant real world but the degree to which the production is able to make its reality convincing.

This is an important point, which Stark (1997, p. 82) acknowledges in relation to audience acceptance of production depicting past real worlds. Speaking of the “politics of nostalgia” in relation to a 1950s television family sitcom, he writes that the verisimilitude of *Leave It to Beaver* was so powerful that it is now widely assumed that the 1950s were exactly the way this show portrayed them. This assumption is heightened by the specific attributes of television—its constant presence in our homes and its repetition of icons and sounds that we associate strongly with particular historical time frames. The British police series *Heartbeat* (produced and transmitted in the 1990s and beyond) achieves the same effect through the use of fashions and music that viewers, through media exposure and cultural memory, associate with the 1960s.

In researching the television police genre, it becomes apparent that, despite its engagement with universal concerns of law and order, crime and punishment and the intersection of public and private spheres, most cultural studies theorists focus on the genre within the individual cultures of Australia or Britain or the USA, rather than a combination of the three. For whatever reason, subtitled foreign police series such as *Inspector Montalbano* (Italian), *Kommissar Rex* (Austrian), *Unit One* (Danish) and *The Eagle* (Danish) are ignored by these theorists. Therefore, it can be argued that while television police series share universal concerns regarding law and order and crime and punishment, it appears that such concerns are articulated in discourses shaped by national rather than global contexts. Arguably it is familiarity with these discourses that preclude Australian and British police series being understood and appreciated by American viewers. And arguably it is familiarity with these discourses that enable Australian viewers to understand and appreciate police series from Britain and the USA. American audiences, as evidenced by the popularity of contemporary series such as *Law & Order*, *NYPD Blue* and *CSI*, expect to see an emphasis on weapons, homicides, and court proceedings. Australian and British audiences expect to see this emphasis in generic examples from the USA but not in generic examples from Australia (*Blue Heelers*, *Water Rats*) and Britain (*Heartbeat*, *The Bill*). This seems to indicate an implicit acknowledgement that the genre is shaped, in the first instance, by national, rather than global discourses. This is true of *The Bill*, and of Australian series such as *Homicide* (gritty Melbourne backstreets) and *Blue Heelers* (rural Australian landscapes).

In fact, examples of the television police genre in Australia, Britain, and the USA show clear distinctions influenced by historical moment, national attributes, and cultural context. Contemporary Australian police series such as *Blue Heelers* and *Water Rats* privilege visually pleasing landscape and close knit community

whereas contemporary USA police series such as *Law & Order* and *NYPD Blue* show chaotic urban landscapes and communities divided by drugs and weapons. Arguably every Australian police series is shaped by the sentiment that drove Hector Crawford, in 1959 (cited in McKee, 2001, p. 52), to demand television programs that stimulated a consciousness of Australian identity, a sense of national pride, and a regard for national cultural ideas and patterns. Such programs, he believed, should typify Australian attitudes, institutions, habits, customs, manners, speech and dress. His conviction inspired him to produce some of Australia's best-known and popular examples of the television police genre (*Homicide*, *Division Four*, and *Matlock Police*) and to influence Australian popular culture by incorporating depictions of everyday routine into national channels of communication.

Since then, the Australian police genre has continued to produce iconography that conforms to national myth and cultural identity. In the 1970s *Boney* featured a part Aboriginal officer with a glamorous white female assistant. Made with international sales in mind, it sold well except in the USA. The 1980s saw series such as *Cop Shop*, which broke new ground by featuring females in lead roles. The 1990s produced *Cody*, featuring a larrikin protagonist who flouted authority; *Water Rats*, showcasing Sydney Harbour and its water police; *Stingers*, which focussed on an undercover squad operating outside normal police boundaries; *White Collar Blue*, with detectives alternating their work between mean streets and white beaches; and *Blue Heelers*, the only Australian police series that outlasted all the others and was still in production in 2004.

In conclusion, an analysis of examples of the television police genre shows clear distinctions influenced by historical moment, national attributes and cultural context, which in turn are emphasised by the interplay of repetition and difference. Australian police series privilege visually pleasing landscape and close-knit community in ways that USA police series, with chaotic urban landscapes and communities divided by drugs and weapons, do not. British police series share common ground with their Australian and USA counterparts but, particularly in the case of *The Bill*, use the interplay of repetition and difference to challenge relevant generic boundaries in ways not taken up by Australian and USA police series.

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