
Fictionalized Women in Trouble:

An Exploration of the Television Crime Drama *CSI: Miami*

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Abstract. This paper details the process and results of conducting an audio-visual content analysis of the television crime drama *CSI: Miami*. Specifically, a feminist analysis of the fourth season was performed in order to explore the ways in which women are portrayed as criminals and to identify any themes. The results indicate that female criminals are represented as: super models; socio-economically privileged; ‘liberated’; violent; and unreasonable. For the most part, the results are consistent with research on women’s portrayal as criminals in the media and are inconsistent with research on criminalized women’s circumstances in the ‘real world’. The potential effects that such erroneous and negative representations have upon the public, policy-makers, and ultimately criminalized women are vast and perilous. Thus, further research and activism is needed to strengthen the demand for socially responsible media production.

I.) INTRODUCTION

Today, almost everyone in North America is an audience member of some form of media. Television is an especially popular medium. In fact, “into the 1990s television viewing ranked as the third most time-consuming activity (after sleep, work, or school) for Americans” (Surette, 2007, p.5). Moreover, since its inception, television has relied on crime and violence as key audience-attracting material (Surette, 2007, p.13), and this reliance has increased dramatically in recent years (Chesney-Lind, 1999, p.130). Indeed, “crime and violence [is] the most common content found on television” (Surette, 2007, p.13).

Crime dramas have proven to be particularly appealing to the general public, as reflected in the recent proliferation of such programs. For example, since the original *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* launched in 2000, several successful spinoffs have been produced.¹ In 2002, *CSI: Miami* debuted: “a drama that follows a South Florida team of forensic investigators who use both cutting-edge scientific methods and old-fashioned police work to solve crimes” (About *CSI:*

¹ These include *CSI: New York*, *CSI: Miami*, and *CSI: Trilogy* (a three part television series).

Miami, n.d.). The popularity of the series is illustrated in its consistently high Nielsen ratings and its numerous awards and nominations. However, “while the series’ popularity suggests that it contributes to our fascination with crime, little critical analysis of the series has taken place” (Bissler and Connors, n.d., p.1).

Media attention does not simply reflect public perceptions and attitudes; it also helps shape them (Surette, 2007, p.210). Moreover, the media can have a particularly powerful influence upon policy-makers (ibid., p.213). These potential ‘real world’ effects are especially concerning given the prevalence of negative, erroneous, and stereotypical media representations of criminalized women (Chesney-Lind, 1999; Faith, 1993a, 1993b, 2005; Humphries, 2009) – a segment of the population that already faces marginalization and discrimination in the ‘real world’ (e.g., Faith, 1993a). Thus, critical analyses of the ways in which popular programs such as *CSI: Miami* represent women as criminals seem more pressing than ever.

In this report, I will critically analyze the ways in which women are portrayed as criminals in the television crime drama *CSI: Miami*.² I conducted an audio-visual content analysis of the program in order to explore how the series represents criminalized women and to identify any themes. This paper will first provide a description of the research process. Next, the themes that emerged through the process will be described. The themes will be considered in light of literature that examines women’s portrayal as criminals in the media, as well as that which examines ‘real world’ experiences and circumstances of criminalized women. Some potential implications of the portrayal of women in *CSI: Miami* will be incorporated into the discussion of themes; however, a separate section will be devoted to a more detailed examination of media

² While this paper will focus on the representation of women, this is not intended to imply that men necessarily fare any better. Rather, a key assumption underlying this report is that social ‘reality’ is gendered and therefore the portrayal of women is inherently gendered and has potential gendered effects. Nonetheless, the lack of attention to male characters – and the value of a comparative analysis – is an important limitation of this project, and would certainly be interesting for future research.

effects. Finally, this report will conclude with some recommendations for producing socially responsible representations of criminalized women in entertainment media.

II.) THE RESEARCH PROCESS³

During the initial phase of research, the context of discovery, [...] feminist researchers have an obligation to disclose a brief personal “biography” including why they have chosen to research a given topic, the vantage point from which they [approach the] inquiry and the way in which they [...] gather, analyze and report the knowledge they have produced. (Leavy, 2000, ¶15)

By remaining reflexive and transparent throughout the research process, the credibility of this project can be more thoroughly assessed (Berg, 2009, p.55).

1.) Perspective of analysis: In general, the personal/political perspective of an individual researcher has a significant influence upon the research process – from the choice of topic, to the selection of method, to the collection, coding, analysis, and presentation of data. With specific regard to the analysis of cultural artifacts, such as television programs, “the themes extracted from the data represent the discourse of those who created the products (including the social context in which that discourse lives) versus the personal/political discourse of the individual researcher” (Leavy, 2000, ¶14). Thus, there is no doubt that my personal/political positioning as a feminist academic and advocate for criminalized women has coloured and shaped the research process. Importantly, however, I have employed various strategies that help to ensure the trustworthiness of the research, as will be apparent throughout this report.

Recognition of the partial and particular nature of this project is important in order to “understand [my] contribution to the materials/narrations provided and those silenced” (Fine et al., 2003, p.200). It allows me to “avoid the tendency of claiming universal truths [and to instead...] place my project within a specified context” (Leavy, 2000, ¶15). It also makes room for the existence of alternative plausible conclusions drawn from the same data, especially those

³ It is noteworthy that this project was conducted in the context of a university course on qualitative methodology, which plays a role in terms of focus on methodological issues as well as time and space constraints.

that are more inferential. Nevertheless, I have worked hard to present the data in a way that allows the reader to judge whether my conclusions are plausible or, likewise, whether they can be challenged by rival interpretations (Palys, 1989).

2.) Selecting the topic: The topic for this project was selected due to a combination of personal and academic interests. My partner is an avid fan of *CSI: Miami* and the few glimpses of it that I have caught in the past always triggered a ruthless critique, particularly regarding the unrealistic portrayals of individuals and the criminal justice system. As an academic and advocate, I have become fairly knowledgeable of the experiences and circumstances of criminalized women in the ‘real world’, and so I chose to focus specifically on how they are portrayed in the program and what this might mean in terms of broader social issues.

3.) Selecting the method: The decision to conduct a content analysis was based on a few factors. Clearly, it is the appropriate method for the research question: How are women portrayed as criminals in *CSI: Miami*? But a content analysis was also selected due to my desire for methodological variety. That is, I have attempted interviews in the past (and will conduct more in the future), but have never relied on a content analysis as the primary method for conducting qualitative research. This is surprising, since content analysis is amenable to my personality; I am a shy ‘homebody’ and this method allowed me to conduct quality research from the comfort of my living room.

4.) Selecting the sample: Season four of *CSI: Miami* was selected due to convenience: Every episode was available on DVD at a local video store.⁴ The strategy that I employed to select the episodes within this season was purposive, specifically criterion-based (Palys, 2008, ¶10). That is, the season was screened for episodes that featured women who had committed a

⁴ I did not decide beforehand to restrict the analysis to one season. However, after amassing data from the fourth season, I felt that I had plenty for a rigorous and interesting analysis. Time and space constraints were also deciding factors.

criminal offence and were detected by authorities. This was achieved by skipping to the last or next-to-last scene, which invariably revealed the ‘criminal’. Of the twenty-five episodes, six involved portrayals of women, all of which were included for analysis. The inclusion of every episode maximized the “chances of discovering a negative case” (Berg, 2009, p.358), allowed me to avoid the selection of episodes that supported my beliefs, and thereby helped to maintain the integrity of the data.

5.) Approaching the data: I decided to employ an inductive or grounded approach for this project (Berg, 2009, pp.340-341, 347, 351). While I could have determined a set of concepts and coding categories from the literature before collecting the data, an inductive approach was selected in attempt to present the data “in the most forthright manner” (ibid., p.347). This approach allowed me to become deeply immersed in the raw material and ground the themes and related analysis directly in my observations. Moreover, cultural artifacts, such as television programs, benefit from a sort of inherent validity due to their naturalistic and nonreactive qualities (Reinharz, 1992, p.147). Thus, an inductive approach helped to preserve these qualities and minimize the potential for undue bias. Further, since feminist research is particularly susceptible to scrutiny, an inductive approach to the data is especially useful (Leavy, 2000, ¶14).⁵

However, an inductive approach does not imply a ‘purist’ account of the data. As previously mentioned, I entered the research process with an important background of knowledge and experience. Bruce Berg (2009) concurs:

Insights and general questions about research derive from previous experience with the study phenomena. This may represent personal experience, scholarly experience (having read about it), or previous research undertaken to examine the matter [...] Experience thus underpins [...] inductive [...] reasoning. (p.347)

⁵ Patricia Leavy (2000) argues that, for feminist research, “maintaining authenticity is not only an issue of methodological quality control, but also a political responsibility” (¶19).

Certainly, what I have previously learned about women's representation in the media and women's experiences with the criminal justice system has played a role in my interpretation of the data (i.e., what I *saw* and how I connected what I saw to broader issues). Nonetheless, I have strived to remain transparent and to justify my interpretations robustly.

6.) Collecting, coding, and analyzing the data: Collecting, coding, and analyzing the data was a rather fluid process and resembled “the spiralling research approach” (Berg, 2009, p.26). For example, as I was collecting the data, it did not take long to realize possible themes that were emerging and what these themes may mean in terms of the existing literature. Further, as stated by Ted Palys (personal communication, March 30th, 2010): “Writing [is] a process of discovery”. When I was writing up the findings, I was still engaged in the process of analysis, coding, and data collection, as I was thinking of new ideas, reframing themes, and re-visiting the raw data for confirmation or elaboration.

The data were collected by taking notes using a word processor while viewing the episodes. Each episode was viewed twice in its entirety. In most cases, the first viewing involved very little note-taking; rather, the opportunity was used to gain an understanding of the storyline. However, some emerging ideas and possible themes were noted. The second viewing involved a detailed examination of the data and many notes were taken. Any time the woman or her offence was addressed, I recorded as many aspects as possible, including dialogue, images, actions, interactions, and surrounding circumstances. I strived to achieve

the “ideal” of full and complete description of everything that might be or is relevant [to my research question....] Granting that it is, in principle, impossible to avoid all interpretation, [I still went...] a lot farther in the direction of pure description than most of us ever go. (Becker, 1998, p.76)

Much of the time was spent rewinding, fast-forwarding, pausing, and viewing specific scenes.

Each episode varied in terms of relevant material, which caused my “dross rate” (Palys, personal

communication, January 16th, 2010) to vary as well. During the second viewings, many ideas were emerging and potential themes were becoming more apparent, which were noted.

Once the viewing stage was considered to be complete,⁶ the notes – which totalled thirteen single spaced pages – were printed and grouped into episodes. I then engaged in “open coding” (Berg, 2009, pp.353-358) as I minutely and repeatedly reviewed the notes for “naturally occurring classes of things [...] and important characteristics of these items” (ibid., p.148). (I was also able to further explore the ideas that I had noted during the collection phase.) During this iterative process, I used separate sheets of paper to jot down elements that appeared across several episodes. The list that developed comprised the first draft of potential themes. When I considered the list complete (i.e., I could not discover additional items upon further reviews), I had nine potential themes. I assigned a colour to each one and began a focused and systematic process of reviewing and colour coding the transcribed notes. During this process, it became clear that some themes lacked sufficient evidence and were therefore abandoned. Other themes were found to overlap considerably, so were reframed and combined into a single underlying theme. By the end of this process, I had developed a list of five themes that I was confident were strongly verified by the data in terms of content and prevalence.⁷

The credibility of this project is enhanced as a result of various techniques that I employed during the collection, coding, analysis, and write-up process.⁸ For example, when logging the data, I avoided reliance on analytic summaries (although I did note some interpretations). Rather, I

⁶ This decision was based on my understanding of each episode, the amount of detail in my notes, and time constraints.

⁷ An important benefit of this project was my ability to re-observe the raw data. This allowed me to gain a detailed description of the material and also to ‘double check’ for possible themes (i.e., replication and verification). Indeed, upon the narrowing and solidifying of themes, as well as during the write-up stage, some scenes from some episodes were viewed for a third time in order to verify my interpretations or to collect additional information (e.g., quotes, images). Open access to the raw data also permits other researchers to replicate this study and assess the inter-rater reliability of my conclusions.

⁸ An important limitation of this project is the reliance on one researcher. The process of data collection, coding, and analysis would have more validity if an independent researcher had participated (Berg, 2009, pp.6-7, 361). Triangulation using multiple perspectives would better ensure “that naturally arising categories are used [...] and would] clarify meaning by identifying different ways the phenomenon is being seen” (Stake, 2003, p.148).

carefully described my observations in thick detail and strived towards descriptions that were “unfiltered by [...] ideas and theories” (Becker, 1998, p.85). In fact, I recorded information that, at the time, “seem[ed] routine, irrelevant, [and] boring” (ibid., p.96). Thanks in large part to my inductive approach, I deeply immersed myself in the raw data and explored its particularity before making formal theoretical connections and other generalizations (Stake, 2003). I was forced to look at the data in its totality, “rather than ignor[e] what might be inconvenient” (Becker, 1998, p.85). This allowed for the emergence of unexpected “new ideas and categories” (ibid.) and helped to protect the authenticity of the data.

In addition, I developed “criteria of selection” (Berg, 2009, p.342) for each theme. Such criteria involved explicit rules that were “rigidly and consistently applied [to the data] so that other researchers or readers, looking at the same messages, would obtain the same or comparable results. This may be considered a kind of reliability of the measures and a validation of eventual findings” (ibid.). The criteria are noted in the presentation of results.

Another quality control technique employed during the research process was to search for “negative cases” (Berg, 2009, p.360). That is, I “identified the case that [was] likely to upset [my] thinking and look[ed] for it” (Becker, 1998, p.87). For example, I consciously searched for positive and realistic portrayals of women. In this way, I “gather[ed] data that anticipates rival plausible [...] conclusions” (Palys, 1989, p.143).

Further, during the analysis and write-up process, each theme has been justified with detailed evidence directly from the raw data. This should permit the reader to thoroughly understand and verify the connections that I have made between the raw data, the constructed themes, and the related analysis. Most themes are illustrated with at least four examples (one involves two and several involve six). Counts of themes across episodes are also included; that

is, I report how many of the six episodes/characters fit with a given theme. This is intended to “convince [the] audience by suggesting the magnitude (frequency) of a given theme” (Berg, 2009, p.229). In addition, possible exceptions to themes are noted. The inclusion of inconsistencies permits the reader to determine whether “they have invalidated overall patterns” (ibid., p.361). Because of these various strategies employed during data collection, coding, and analysis, readers are in a better position to reach their own conclusions and judge the credibility of mine (Becker, 1998; Berg, 2009).

III.) RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The themes are categorized under two general headings for organizational purposes:

(1) characteristics of the women; and, (2) characteristics of the criminal offences.

1.) Characteristics of the women

a. Super model women in trouble⁹

The most widespread theme in the portrayal of women as criminals in *CSI: Miami* is that all of the six characters resembled a super model. For example, each character had a symmetrical face with full lips, straight and white teeth, large eyes, manicured eyebrows, and smooth, unblemished skin. In addition, each had long (shoulder length or longer) shiny, well-maintained hair. Most characters (with the possible exception of Kim in “Urban Hellraisers”) maintained flawless makeup throughout each scene. Regarding body size and shape, the characters were all thin and had full breasts. Their outfits accentuated their physique and helped to sexualize their image. They all wore form-fitting garments (e.g., tight jeans and tops), which were often detailed with an attention-grabbing pattern or stone/jewel appliqué. Their clothing also often revealed

⁹ The “criteria of selection” (Berg, 2009, p.342) used to develop this theme was any information relating to the physical image of the female characters. All visual images of the women were included for analysis, with particular attention to facial features, body shape and size, hair, clothing, and age (an appraisal of age was based on appearance and in two cases age was explicitly stated).

significant amounts of bare skin, such as cleavage (e.g., low-cut halter tops) and legs (e.g., miniskirts). Heels were another staple in the characters' wardrobe that worked to idealize and sexualize their image. In addition, the characters were all relatively young: two were under the age of twenty-one, three were in their twenties or early thirties, and one was in her late thirties or early forties.

The portrayal of women in *CSI: Miami* as fitting perfectly with the cultural 'beauty ideal' reveals "the presence and power of white heterosexual male domination in the processes of image production and distribution" (Leavy, 2000, ¶44). Of course, this theme is not unique to *CSI: Miami*; such images are rampant in the mass media and other popular culture industries (Wolf, 1991, pp.58-85). As stated by Karlene Faith (1993a): "Most characters still have in common an unexamined devotion to the heterosexual imperative [...] and gender-fixed notions of sexual identity are still prevalent in the media" (p.270). The portrayal of criminalized women as super models in *CSI: Miami* is similar to a theme identified by Faith (ibid.) as "super-bitch killer beauties": dangerous criminal women "whose beauty and charms mask their evil natures" (p.265). This theme stands in contrast with other portrayals of 'criminal women' as physically androgynous and masculine (ibid., pp.256-257, 270; 1993b).

"Of course, it goes without saying that few women in the criminal justice system resemble the [...] rail-thin, drop-dead beauty" (Chesney-Lind, 1999, p.120) of *CSI: Miami* characters. The program's obsession with women's physical and sexual appearance and the unrealistic portrayals might – in combination with the other themes identified in this report – have the effect of trivializing and decontextualizing women's criminalization in the 'real world'.

b. Socio-economically privileged women in trouble¹⁰

A close second to the preceding theme is the portrayal of female criminals as socio-economically privileged. Every character appeared to be Caucasian, and four of the six were clearly upper-middle class.¹¹ Their economic standing was interpreted, in part, through the character's clothing, which was new-looking, stylish, and often adorned with jewels or stones. Jewellery was also a standard piece of the characters' wardrobe. In three cases, the homes of the characters provided the clearest indicator of their socio-economic status. In "Silencer", "Payback", and "Double Jeopardy", the women's homes were large, architecturally unique (e.g., arched doorways, floor-to-ceiling windows), decorated with modern furniture, artwork, and sculptures, had hardwood flooring, decorative tiling, and exterior landscaping, and were spotless. In "Silencer", the female character even made reference to her "yard people" and "pool man". A first-class cruise ship (with several pools, a theatre, and modern furnishings) provided the temporary residence for another character in "Open Water".

This theme is consistent with literature on the media portrayal of offenders in general. "The typical criminal portrayed in the entertainment media is [...] white and of high social status" (Surette, 2007, p.59). Denise Bissler and Joan Connors (n.d.) make a similar conclusion from their analysis of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*: "As earlier shows have done, *CSI* privileges white, middle class audiences in both character representations and content" (p.18). This privileging likely reflects, to a great extent, the (Eurocentric, well-to-do) producers of the

¹⁰ The "criteria of selection" (Berg, 2009, p.342) for this theme included any information relating to the socio-economic status of the criminalized women. Socio-economic status was determined through an interpretation of race and class. The former was inferred through the women's physical appearance and its perceived fit with racial stereotypes (e.g., skin pigmentation). Class was determined chiefly through material possessions, such as homes, vehicles, jewellery, and clothing; in two cases, occupation was known and provided clues regarding economic status.

¹¹ One character was a university student and no information was given pertaining to her economic status. In reference to another character, Detective Frank Tripp stated: "Sonny and Cher came into this city with the clothes on their back" ("Free Fall"). While this implies a lack of economic resources, the character's clean, new-looking clothing, jewellery, flawless makeup and well-maintained hair makes her status unclear. The ambiguousness of her circumstances means that any potential for connecting her crimes with economic inequity is lost. The tone of 'carefree excitement' that surrounds her crimes further impedes contextual linkages and encourages an individualized focus.

program. As stated by Shulamit Reinharz (1992): “Some texts may, in fact, ‘reflect’ conditions, but others (e.g., television and movies) are thought to ‘mediate’ experience, i.e., to reflect those who produced it, such as the culture industries” (p.145).

Clearly, none of the women portrayed as criminals in the fourth season of *CSI: Miami* represent the socially and economically marginalized women who are imprisoned in North America. In fact, the profiles of women in American prisons

describe a population that is poor, that is disproportionately African American and Hispanic, and that has little education and few job skills. This population is primarily composed of young women who are single heads of households; the majority of those who are imprisoned (80 percent) have at least two children. (Owen, 1999, p.85)

Importantly, the ‘real world’ criminalization of women is significantly related to their inequitable socio-economic status. As stated by Barbara Owen (1999): “The poverty of their lives and the lack of educational and economic opportunity makes crime a reasonable choice for some women” (p.84). For example, the crimes committed by young single mothers – which none of the characters in *CSI: Miami* portrayed – “very often [...] are the consequence [...] of the effort to sustain themselves and their children with inadequate resources” (Faith, 1993a, p.4).

The representation of female criminals as socio-economically privileged has potentially disastrous consequences. The context of inequity which underlies so much of women’s criminalized behaviour provides a means for making sense of that behaviour. Thus, by taking women’s crime so far out of context, *CSI: Miami* may reinforce the ignorance that has traditionally existed towards women’s issues, especially women in conflict with the law. The portrayal of criminalized women as socio-economically privileged may send the message that ‘real’ women’s crimes are committed in similar circumstances, and that the intersections between race, class, and gender do not matter when it comes to issues of crime and justice. Through such

portrayals, responsibility falls more heavily upon the individual ‘wrongdoer’ and punishment is more easily justified. In this way, the portrayal of women in *CSI: Miami* might reinforce ‘crime control’ thinking and related practices and policies. Moreover, by disconnecting women’s crime from the context, socio-economic inequity remains unchallenged – perhaps reinforced.

c. ‘Liberated’ women in trouble¹²

A theme that is related to the previous two, but more theory-based, is that at least two of the six episodes present the modern ‘liberated’ woman as criminally dangerous. In “Silencer”, a female CEO of a successful pharmaceutical company¹³ – the modern career woman – paid a gang-member to kill the woman (an employee) whom she believed her lover was having an affair with. Her position as a successful head of company provided her with the financial means and power to execute her desire to kill the victim. In “Urban Hellraisers”, a female university student had access to underground gaming with a criminal and violent twist. Desperate to “have more points than any other guy on the board”, she engaged in bank robbery, murder, and kidnapping to bolster her ranking in the game. Her position as a university student amongst “the guys” provided her with the motivation and the means of carrying out various criminal and violent acts. “These women are active, they’re independent, and they’re exercising power in a field [traditionally] dominated by men” (CBS, 1992 as quoted in Chesney-Lind, 1999, p.117) – they are “masculinized by some form of emancipation” (Chesney Lind, 1999, p.131).

¹² The “criteria of selection” (Berg, 2009, p.342) used to develop this theme included information indicating that the woman was involved in a traditionally male-dominated arena and that this involvement was in some way connected to the commission of the offence. Only two of the six episodes included information that revealed involvement in any arena (male- or female-dominated), and both met the criteria for this theme. It is important to note that, unlike the previous themes which involved ‘surface level’ messages (physical appearance; socio-economic status), this theme is based on an underlying message in the data (i.e., liberation leads to crime) (Berg, 2009, p.344). As a result, a ‘trade-off’ is involved: As my claims become less reliable through inferential reasoning, they also become more interesting (Ted Palys, personal communication, March 23rd, 2010). As stated by Howard Becker (1996): “Epistemologically, I think, the observation which requires less inference and fewer assumptions is more likely to be accurate, although the accuracy so produced might not be worth bothering with” (¶46).

¹³ The success of the company was gauged, in part, by the character’s large office decorated with modern artwork and furniture and her large home with paid yard work.

This theme is consistent with some literature on the media portrayal of women as criminals. For example, in her discussion of “super-bitch killer beauties”, Faith (1993a) describes the image constructed by the media of “the beautiful, solitary, ominous, male-identified, childless, pathologically obsessive woman, ‘liberated’ in anti-feminist terms, who would take what she wants at any cost” (p.265). Any cost, indeed; even if it involves extreme acts of violence, such as the murder of a mistress to have her lover to herself, or the murder of a bank teller to earn points in a game.

“In the 1970s, a notion emerged that the women’s movement had ‘caused’ a surge in women’s serious [and violent] crimes” (Chesney-Lind, 1999, p.116).

The basic proposition [...] is that as the modern women’s movement has resulted in women gaining increasing equality with men in such legitimate contexts as education, occupations, family, politics, and the economy, women have come to resemble men in the illegitimate or criminal context as well. (Boritch, 1997, p.62)

Despite the liberation thesis being “definitively refuted by subsequent research [...] the popularity of this perspective, at least in the public mind, is apparently undiminished” (Chesney-Lind, 1999, pp.116-117). In fact, since the 1980s, “we have seen a particular and determined focus on [criminal and] violent women” (ibid., p.120) in the media.

As argued by Faith (1993a), such representations, “wittingly or not, are transparent expressions and perpetrators of backlash against feminism” (p.266). They may “serve as a cautionary tale [...] about the profound risks associated with women accessing strategies of male [power and] violence” (Chesney-Lind, 1999, p.134). The portrayal of women in this way may send the dangerous message that women’s crime is a result of ‘equality’ and enhanced opportunities – rather than inequality and limited opportunities – and that it essentially resembles men’s crime – instead of being shaped by gendered experiences. Without an appreciation for the

‘real world’ context in which women’s ‘offending behaviours’ occur, like poverty and single motherhood, such behaviours can appear unreasonable – and punishable.

2.) Characteristics of the criminal offences

a. Violent women in trouble¹⁴

All six women portrayed as criminals in season four of *CSI: Miami* engaged in violent crime. In “Urban Hellraisers”, for example, a woman committed armed robbery, kidnapping, and homicide. In fact, homicides were committed in every episode.¹⁵ “Killers are, after all, the *raison d’être* of crime dramas” (Humphries, 2009, p.57).

The focus on violent crime is certainly not unique to the producers of *CSI: Miami*. As stated in the introduction, crime and violence has long been a central topic in the media (Surette, 2007). Mass media in general tend to focus on the unusual and sensational, since the everyday, boring ‘stuff of life’ would not attract much of an audience or profit. Therefore, because violent crime, especially murder, is unusual, it is disproportionately represented in the media (Peter McKnight, personal communication, March 17th, 2010). It is, thus, not surprising that crime dramas have been found guilty of “sensationaliz[ing] rare violent crimes, increase[ing] fear and overstat[ing] the crime problem” (Bissler and Connors, n.d., p.1).

The ‘violent women in trouble’ theme is also consistent with literature that criticizes the media focus on violent and ‘dangerous’ women (e.g., Faith, 1993a; 1993b). Despite the low rate of female violence, “architects of popular culture have subjected us to a steady stream of powerful representations of violent girls and women” (Chesney-Lind, 1999, p.115). It appears that, “for the media, violence by women doubles the fascination” (Shaw, 2000, p.62).

¹⁴ The “criteria of selection” (Berg, 2009, p.342) for this theme included any information (e.g., images, actions, interactions, speech) relating to the type of offence. In each case, the type of offence was explicitly stated or displayed in the data. The type of offence was classified according to general legal categories (e.g., violent, property).

¹⁵ “Free Fall” involved a *Bonnie and Clyde*-style couple and the specific involvement of the female and male character in the death of the victim is not revealed. The only reference to the killing was made by Officer Ryan Wolf, after finding a bloody body stuffed in the trunk of the couple’s stolen vehicle: “It proves Leo and Sienna were crazy, they killed the cartel boss”.

The portrayal of women as violent offenders in every episode of the fourth season of *CSI: Miami* is glaringly inconsistent with the evidence on women's crime. In reality, women are responsible for only a fraction of violent crime¹⁶ and are far more likely to be victims than perpetrators. "Official statistics indicate that women are most likely to be charged with property-related crimes" (Comack, 2006, p.64). Regarding the 'liberation leads to (serious and violent) crime' theme discussed previously, it is important to recognize that "most of the increase in female criminality has been in traditionally female crimes such as shoplifting, welfare fraud, and passing bad cheques" (Boritch, 1997, p.65). However, "the mundane stories of women who have committed theft or drugged themselves are not as interesting as the dramatic fictional crimes conceived by men who have traditionally feared women's powers" (Faith, 2005, p.80).¹⁷

By consistently representing women as violent criminals, *CSI: Miami* might send the message that criminalized women are more dangerous than they are in 'reality' and that the public needs to be protected from them.¹⁸ In fact, "when women are erroneously portrayed as having a great attraction for evil as expressed through violent behaviour, all women in effect are misrepresented and the gap between knowledge and ignorance is widened" (Faith, 1993b, p.198). Moreover, 'law and order' and 'community protection' ideology, practices, and policies may be reinforced through this representation, while measures that address the social roots of women's troubles may be hindered.

¹⁶ "Women killers have accounted for about 10-15 percent of all homicides for centuries" (Chesney-Lind, 1999, p.115).

¹⁷ It is probably true that property or drug crimes would not provide the interesting crime scene and DNA material that shows such as *CSI: Miami* rely on.

¹⁸ The low risk that criminalized women pose to the public is well-documented (Hannah-Moffat and Shaw, 2000, p.4).

b. Unreasonable women in trouble¹⁹

For at least four of the six episodes, the women's motivation for crime and violence would arguably be perceived by a 'reasonable person' as illogical, abnormal, and unjustifiable.²⁰ In "Urban Hellraisers", for example, Kim robbed a bank, killed a bank teller, and kidnapped a bank manager all for the sake of earning points in an underground game. Detective Horatio Caine summarized the offence while pointing out its irrational nature: "Life and death reduced to points on a board." The dialogue between Kim and Officer Calleigh Duquesne during the interrogation scene illustrates the motivation behind her criminal and violent actions:²¹

KIM: The guys play games twenty-four seven. They don't even *look* at you if you're not a gamer.

OFFICER DUQUESNE: So you were going to out-do them?

KIM: I've got more points than any other guy on the board.

The unreasonableness of women's use of violence is especially reflected in the role of jealousy and emotion. For example, in "Open Water", Mandy murdered her mother's new husband (Mike) because she was jealous and angry about the time her mother spent with him.

The following interrogation reveals her motivation:

MANDY: Mike ruined [pause] *everything* [...] Did you know that this is my mother's *fifth marriage*? She said that this trip [cruise] was [pause] for *us* [...] Every three years there's a different guy wanting me to call him *dad*. They don't care about me [pause] they just want to *sleep with my mom*.

¹⁹ In developing this theme, I considered all speech, images, actions, interactions, and surrounding circumstances that indicated the reasoning and motivation for the offence. In most cases, this information was chiefly revealed in the interrogation scene and the scene displaying the offence and/or the lead-up to the offence. The 'unreasonableness' of the women's motivation was based on a personal conception of how a 'reasonable/average person' might interpret it. Clearly, this theme is very inferential and it involves the 'trade-off' noted previously. Nonetheless, I have justified my interpretation of 'unreasonableness' with evidence from the raw data, thus permitting the reader to draw their own conclusions (Berg, 2009, p.344).

²⁰ The episode entitled "Payback" is a possible exception, and will be discussed later. Another possible exception to the unreasonableness theme is "Free Fall", in which a couple commits theft, armed robbery, and murder. This episode involved few indicators of motivation. A reference is made that the woman "came into [Miami] with the clothes on [her] back". While this message seems to imply financial hardship and may add an element of 'reasonableness' to her actions and motivations, it conflicts with the image of the woman (see footnote 11) and therefore lacks impact. Also, despite the homicide being committed in somewhat defensive circumstances (the victim was trying to kill her and her boyfriend for stealing drug money) it is still perceived as illogical by Officer Ryan Wolf, who comments: "It proves Leo and Sienna were crazy, they killed the cartel boss".

²¹ Italics indicate words emphasized in the woman's voice and pauses are bracketed. These indicators are included in attempt to portray meaning communicated through the subtleties of speech (Berg, 2009, pp.133-134).

OFFICER DUQUESNE: You know, Mandy, I think it's entirely possible that Mike did want to get to know you [...]

MANDY: I just didn't want to lose my mom *again* [...] Why am I not enough for her?

The scene of the murder further illustrates the passion motivating Mandy's use of violence. She charged Mike with a knife in her hand while screaming "I hate you! I hate you! You ruined everything!" and then stabbed him four or five times in his chest and leg.

In "Silencer", Elissa hired a hit man to murder a woman (Claire) whom she believed was having an affair with her lover (Paul). Even the hired killer recognized the unreasonable nature of her crime: "You're one crazy lady" he said to her as she handed him the money and a photo of the victim. The dialogue between Elissa and Officer Eric Delko during an interrogation illustrates the role of anger, jealousy, and revenge in motivating her crime:

ELISSA: They were *sneaking off* together every day. The *whole office* knew [squints eyes].

OFFICER DELKO: And that just burned you up, didn't it?

ELISSA: *Yeah*. Paul and I made a great team. Claire... *she had no right*.

OFFICER DELKO: Claire was teaching Paul how to dance... to make you happy. Obviously, that was a waste of time.

Similarly, in "Double Jeopardy", Allison killed the wife (Melissa) of her lover, Steven, so they could be together. After learning that Steven did not want to kill Melissa, Allison asserted: "You *promised* me we'd be together". An added motivational twist which adds to the unreasonableness of Allison's use of violence is that she was a White-supremacist and did not want Steven to be with his African American wife. Her motivation is illustrated in a conversation with Detective Horatio Caine:

ALLISON: That's what he never understood. There was *never* going to be another way. He was not going to stay with a black woman, and Melissa *wasn't* going to give him a divorce.

DETECTIVE CAINE: So you took the knife from the practice murder.

ALLISON: It was easy. I called her, told her if she wanted to know who her husband was sleeping with then to come over.

The scene then cut to an image of Allison as she approached Melissa outside by a pool, pulled a knife from behind her back, and then stabbed Melissa in the chest three times. When the scene cut back to the interrogation, Allison said to Detective Caine, with a smirk on her face:

“Sometimes you have to fight for what you want”.

It would definitely be dangerous if viewers of *CSI: Miami* finish the program with the idea that women’s crime and violence tends to be committed in circumstances such as those described above. Rather than being fuelled by unreasonable motivations, such as jealousy, women’s crime more often represents a very rational response to intensely oppressive circumstances, such as the need to defend, or provide for, themselves and/or their children. In fact, by portraying women’s violence in the ways it does, *CSI: Miami* might “develop and reinforce negative images of those women who are struggling to end violent situations” (Schwartz and DeKeseredy, 1993 as quoted in Stanko, 1995, p.212). Women’s crime and violence must be considered in light of structured inequity and limited opportunities in order to be understood. Without addressing the context, *CSI: Miami* minimizes the centrality of social conditions in women’s lives and, as a result, might send the message that women’s crime and violence is based on individual personality deficiencies (e.g., violent propensities, uncontrolled emotions) and simplistic, unreasonable motivations (e.g., jealousy) – bases that can be argued to deserve punishment.

The portrayal of women’s crime and violence as unreasonable is not unique to *CSI: Miami*. For example, Dave Humphries (2009) found that representations of female killers on *Law and Order* are “saturated with masculine stereotypes about [...] sexualized women motivated by [...] jealousy and sexual revenge” (p.72). As stated by Faith (1993a):

Journalistic accounts of “women who kill” generally focus on women who can be readily demonized, sending out the conflicting messages that, on the one hand, only a complete psychopath or sociopath could commit these heinous crimes, and, on the other hand, all women are potential killers and society (men) must control them [...] Murder stories, when focused on the deed, take on the quality of monster tales, but when the deeds are contextualized and the murderers demystified by the details of their lives, they lose their sensational quality and much of the onus shifts to society’s failures to provide relief to women trapped in intolerable situations. (pp.95, 97)

Based on interviews with women in prison, Elizabeth Comack (1996) concluded that “women’s law violations emerge [...] in the course of trying to manage problems, dilemmas and conflicts in their everyday lives” (p.27). In *CSI: Miami*, however, women’s everyday lives and the social context “have been ignored or trivialized. Instead, we witness the sporadic ‘discovery’ of rather heinous female offenders” (Chesney-Lind, 1999, p.133).

Further, by implying that women’s crime is often based on motives such as anger and jealousy, *CSI: Miami* might reinforce “misogynist speculations on women’s hidden capacity for evil and cunning” (Faith, 1993b, p.183) and “unchecked female rage” (Humphries, 2009, p.62). The portrayal of women’s criminal motivations on *CSI: Miami* certainly reflects the misogynist perspective endorsed by Cesare Lombroso and William Ferrero (1895), historical figures in the development of criminology: “[When their evil tendencies are awakened, women] are revengeful, jealous, inclined to vengeance of a refined cruelty” (quoted in Faith, 1993b, p.183).²²

A possible exception to the ‘unreasonable’ theme is an episode entitled “Payback”, in which Valerie fatally smashed a statue against the head of her real estate agent who had raped her six years earlier. Unlike the other characters examined, Valerie had somewhat understandable reasons for her crime. Even Detective Caine expressed sympathy for her situation: “I understand how you got there. You were in a very difficult position.” “Certainly, with the mention of male violence against women [... the producers of this episode have begun] to approximate a consideration of women’s

²² Or consider the old adage: “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned”.

violence in a patriarchal context” (Chesney-Lind, 1999, p.120). In many cases, when women are charged with causing death, “their actions were defensive or otherwise reactive to violence directed at them, their children, or another third party” (Hannah-Moffat and Shaw, 2000, p.4).²³

Often, however, women’s use of defensive or reactive violence occurs in the context of a history of abusive relationships and a lack of economic resources (Chesney-Lind, 1999, pp.132-133; Shaw, 2000, pp.61-62). Importantly, it is these elements that help one to understand women’s use of violence as rational, necessary, and rather ordinary in the circumstances. Valerie’s use of violence, however, did not occur in a context of long-standing abuse and limited options. To the contrary, she was socio-economically privileged and had an abundance of resources at her fingertips. In fact, her violence appeared to be motivated more by revenge than defence and, therefore, might be considered to reflect a degree of unreasonableness, and may actually reinforce the aforementioned stereotypes about “unchecked female rage” (Humphries, 2009, p.62). Ultimately, the portrayal of Valerie’s use of force does not do justice to the ‘real world’ circumstances of women who use violence in response to abuse.

When the true nature of [...] women’s use of violence is explored, its place in patriarchal society (and particularly its link to women’s victimization and economic marginality) is a major explanatory theme. But one can look long and hard in media accounts of women’s violence for any careful discussion of these issues [...]. Media treatment of women’s violence, instead, tends to focus on [...] sensationalistic crimes [...] and] deploy either individualistic, pathological explanations or some version of the emancipation hypothesis. Certainly, [few media accounts] that have represented women’s violence do adequate justice to the lack of options and desperation that characterizes the lives of the women who actually commit violent acts [...]. The shortcomings of this approach are clear when compared to the important work of scholars who are contextualizing women’s aggression and violence in a society that is racist, capitalistic, and patriarchal. (Chesney-Lind, 1999, pp.132-133)

²³ It is worth noting another discrepancy between the portrayal of women as criminals in *CSI: Miami* and the research on criminalized women: the targets of women’s violence. While most victims in *CSI: Miami* are not complete strangers to the women (except for “Urban Hellraisers”), they do not reflect the ‘real world’ targets of women’s violence: “Approximately half of [homicides and attempted murders committed by women] were against family members, primarily spouses” (Faith, 1993a, p.95).

IV.) MEDIA EFFECTS

Before concluding, it is necessary to provide a more detailed discussion of the potential ‘real world’ effects of media representations such as those in *CSI: Miami*. The regular reference to *potential* implications in the preceding discussion is intended to signify the unstable nature of media effects. Any relationship between media attention and public concern is complex, but the available evidence indicates a weak to moderate correlation (Surette, 2007, p.210). In addition,

the research to date indicates that media effects are variable; appear to increase with exposure (those who are exposed to the media content mirror the media ranking of issues more closely); are more significant the less direct experience [and alternative sources of information] people have with an issue [...] and are nonlinear, sometimes reciprocal, and highly interactive with other social and individual processes. (Ibid.)

Given the popularity of programs such as *CSI: Miami* and the lack of direct experience or alternative sources of information that the general public has with crime and violence (especially female crime and violence), portrayals of criminal women may have a particularly strong influence. In fact, the general public obtains most of their information about crime and justice issues through the media, both ‘fact-based’ and fictional forms (Surette, 2007, p.34).²⁴

The portrayal of predatory criminality – crime that is violent, sensational, and unreasonable – is a recurring theme in media representations (Surette, 2007, pp.60-63), as it was in *CSI: Miami*. Importantly, these “recurring patterns [...] or ‘stock images’ may not only influence how we perceive people on television, but also how we perceive others in real life” (Bissler and Connors, n.d., p.2). Moreover, “if one accepts the media’s explanation of crime as being caused by predatory personality traits – by innate greed and violence – then the only valid approach to stopping crime is to hold individual offenders responsible” (Surette, 2007, p.207).

²⁴ “Although the bulk of media content [...] is usually recognized by the public as unrealistic and heavily edited, continued exposure to media content ultimately influences one’s view of reality” (Surette, 2007, p.5). Consider, for example, the “*CSI* effect”: the notion that jurors’ expectations about evidence have been effected by portrayals of sophisticated forensic evidence on television shows such as *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (e.g., Bissler and Connors, n.d., p.1; Surette, 2007, p.100).

This is where significant danger lies: Such public perceptions may be transferred to social and criminal justice practices and policies.

While it is generally acknowledged that media have an effect on policy, it is also understood that any relationship is convoluted. As stated by Ray Surette (2007): “The media are not the most important factor in the construction of crime and justice policy, but their influence cannot be ignored” (p.218). In fact, policy decision-makers often look to the media for indicators of public opinion, which they then use to help inform policy (Dye, 2005, p.34).

The available information indicates that among criminal justice officials, even more than among the public, the media significantly influence both policy development and support. Effects are multidirectional, and media content, the timing and presentation of the claims, and the characteristics and concerns of the general public, claims makers, and the criminal justice policy makers interact to determine the media’s influence on criminal justice policies. (Surette, 2007, p.213)

It is not surprising that any effects the media have on policy tend to be in the form of enhancing support for ‘crime control’ policies. As pointed out by Surette (2007):

The repeated message in the media is that crime is largely perpetrated by predatory individuals who are basically different from the rest of us; that criminality is predominantly the result of individual problems; and that crimes are acts freely committed by individuals who have a wide range of alternate choices. This image locates the causes of crime solely in the individual criminal and supports existing social arrangements and approaches to crime control. The media-constructed reality of crime also allows crime to be more easily divorced from other social problems and highlighted as society’s greatest threat. (p.218)²⁵

As a result of such representations, programs like *CSI: Miami* have the potential to

influence how people think about and feel toward women convicted of crime. The cultivated fear of unruly women [...] helps justify the construction of new maximum security prisons for women across North America. At any given time no more than 10 percent of women confined could be accurately perceived as representing a threat to other human beings or to the social order. Media-supported notions of she-monsters have contributed to public acceptance of monetary and social costs of imprisoning women who are not dangerous. (Faith, 1993a, p.271)

²⁵ This decontextualized media construction of ‘criminals’ reflects (and reinforces) the predominance of neo-liberal ideology, particularly the emphasis on ‘individual responsibility’.

“Feminist scholars [have worked hard to begin...] the daunting task of redressing the significant gaps in our knowledge about women’s ‘everyday’ experiences in the criminal justice system” (Hannah-Moffat and Shaw, 2000, p.13). They have worked hard to begin to sensitize people to the gendered circumstances of criminalized women and the injustice of the current ‘crime control’ system. The challenge to this knowledge that *CSI: Miami* represents is regressive and is a backlash against gendered justice.

V.) RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Most [producers of entertainment media...] rely to some degree on fantasy, caricature, and stereotype, whatever the setting for the story they’re telling. But when these devices are employed to denigrate people who are already, in the real world, the victims of discrimination and prejudice [...] the effect is to reinforce and justify those social divisions rather than to demystify the people involved, to offer a more constructive way of increasing people’s understanding of one another, or to challenge structural inequalities. (Faith, 2005, p.82)

It is not impossible for the media to represent women’s crime and violence in ways that more closely reflect ‘real world’ circumstances and context. For example,

sporting events are consistently placed by the media in their larger social context (the world of sports in this case) and constructed in a way that provides historical understanding and current comprehension. [By] covering justice like sports [...] crime could be removed from the realm of the bizarre, grotesque, and sinister and placed in the social world. (Surette, 2007, p.219)

Producers of entertainment media have great creative capacity and they could no doubt find ways of portraying criminalized women in an entertaining, relatable, *and* realistic manner.

While the tendency of the media is to “reflect and create mythologies which support dominant value systems [...] at the same time [...] the media also serve as sites of resistance” (Faith, 1993a, p.270). Indeed, television “is a powerful medium with significant potential for educating the public” (ibid., 1993b, p.198). Thus, producers of entertainment media must adopt a more socially responsible role, especially when representing people who are marginalized in the

‘real world’, such as criminalized women. When producing shows like *CSI: Miami*, creators should devote the resources to inform themselves of the academic literature on the subject matter and allow this information to guide the content and format of the program. The format in which stories are represented should allow for the exploration of systemic issues. Presently, the entertainment media employs the “episodic format [which] treats stories as discrete events: [...] an individual committed a crime, why did he [or she] do it?” (Surette, 2007, p.203). A systemic format would contextualize women’s criminalized behaviours in terms of individual biography and overarching social issues, such as poverty, racism, and violence against women.

Meda Chesney-Lind (1999) asserts that

media constructions of women’s [crime and] violence must be challenged by those who are most knowledgeable [...Criminologists should] engage directly in what Barak (1988) has called “newsmaking criminology” and actively seek ways to build alliances, and build credibility, with progressive journalists to construct better coverage of crime issues. (p.134)

However, it would be difficult for academics to connect with Hollywood producers of entertainment programs like *CSI: Miami*.²⁶ Perhaps stronger connections can be made with local programs, such as news media, and the influence may trickle out to other forms.²⁷

For now, much responsibility lies with the creators of entertainment programs, and much hope for the future lies with the courageous few who dare to break the mould and use their opportunity and resources in socially beneficial ways. In fact, “in the past decade, North American movies and television have introduced more honest and positive images of women [...] due in part to some excellent female writers and directors” (Faith, 1993b, p.196). Instead of reinforcing negative and erroneous representations – such as ‘spoiled’ women who commit heinous violent crimes for no good reason – the media could dispel myths, break down

²⁶ “Media power is concentrated in the hands of a relatively small number of people: the editors, producers, anchors, reporters, and columnists of the leading television networks” (Dye, 2005, p.40).

²⁷ There is also a “need for programming developed to foster media literacy skills” (Ballentine and Ogle, 2005, p.303).

stereotypes, and foster consciousness-raising. Instead of demonizing individual women, the media could highlight social problems. Instead of supporting destructive ‘crime control’ policies, the media could support compassion and social justice initiatives that address the roots of women’s troubles with the law.

Certainly, this is an area that requires further research and activism. The potential effects that television programs like *CSI: Miami* have on public perceptions and policy decisions are too great and too disastrous to allow such negative and erroneous representations of criminalized women to continue. Researchers are encouraged to investigate other programs, genres, and forms of media in order to build on the evidence and strengthen the demand for a socially responsible approach to media production. Criminalized women suffer too much injustice already; it is absolutely unacceptable for this to be furthered through entertainment (and other) programs.

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