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Sensation/Investigation: Crime Television and the Action Aesthetic

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Abstract:

This article explores the interface between crime television and action television, arguing that action/crime is a significant mode which has typically been overlooked in studies of the genre. It engages with the history of action/crime and its most prominent formal features discussing in more detail NCIS (2003--) and The Blacklist (2013--) and foregrounding the sensational elements of violence and physical movement through space as well as the flows of data and dynamic rendering of analysis typical of forensic crime television. Action/crime is framed as one of several modes which can be seen to organise and inflect crime content; in this way the piece suggests that textual approaches are most productive when premised on an understanding of the fluid, modal aspects of television genre.

Keywords: genre; crime television; action television; sensation; NCIS

This article explores the interface between crime television and action television. Crime formats have proliferated on US television since the high visibility of action-oriented series of the 1970s and 80s, crossing factual and fictional modes, adopting various aesthetic styles and exploiting a longstanding cultural fascination with criminality, violence and policing. Crime television remains a staple of the post-network era, with long running content broadcast across the spectrum of televisual formats. The extensive syndication of award-winning network shows (CSI [2000-2015], Law & Order [1990-2010]) and niche cable programmes (Dexter [2006-2013], The Wire [2002-2008]) feature alongside the longevity of reality formats dealing with "true crime" (Cops [1989-2013] or *America's Most Wanted* [1988-2011). US crime television focuses on many different crime solving agencies (the FBI and CIA in particular) in addition to urban police forces and/or private investigators; agencies such as the FBI or the CIA are evoked in series such as Without a Trace (2002-2009) or The Blacklist (2013--) (the latter developing a complex conspiratorial thread). Crime television is engaged in an ongoing process of generic renewal. Indeed, the relative stability of the police procedural format aside, television crime has been the site of an extraordinary degree of generic reinvention since the 1990s. The fascination with crime as a form of media content and the palpable hybridity of crime television provide the context for my exploration here into the aesthetics and cultural significance of sensational action elements across its numerous formats.

I argue that despite the extensive literature on crime television as a genre and the investment of television studies in concepts of generic hybridity or genre mixing,[1] crime/action as a key generic site has not come to the fore. This oversight has two dimensions. First it involves an overlooking of action-oriented crime shows that are or have been immensely popular (for example, NCIS [2003--]) and those which have been important in the development of the genre (for example, Starsky and Hutch [1975-1979], or Miami Vice [1984-1990]); consideration of crime/action then provides a useful corrective in our historical modelling of

crime television. That is, if we omit discussion of commercially significant series in favour of those with greater levels of narrative, thematic or visual complexity (for example, so-called Nordic noir explored elsewhere in this issue), our understanding of the historical development of crime as a genre will be not only abbreviated but overly simplistic. The overlooking of action-oriented crime involves a further dimension in that the sensational action aesthetic of North American shows such as NCIS is present within crime television more broadly. I argue that action aesthetics – most obviously visual effects designed to capture movement of objects, people and data, the use of pulsing sound and the centrality of montage – have become established as prominent features of crime television beyond the more clearly delineated action-oriented shows. Post-CSI then, crime television's frequent recourse to montage as a strategy for conveying the time-consuming work of investigation (whether deductive, data-driven or laboratory based) exploits sensation in the service of procedural form. The significance of this particular observation – that action aesthetics are exploited as important elements of crime shows that are not typically understood as action – has to do in part with models of television genre. Since action is here a way of inflecting or representing crime content, it is easily overlooked.

Modes of Crime Television

Crime television deals at a basic level with crime and its investigation, with the pursuit of criminals, the policing of society and the legal systems which justly, or more often imperfectly, govern investigation and policing. These concerns frame much work on the genre which locates the representation of policing in relation to social and political discourses.[2] The understanding that crime is a television genre particularly concerned with men and masculinity has also informed and shaped scholarly approaches.[3] Yet if crime television is unified by a particular type of content, perspectives on the genre must take account of the multiple ways in which crime content can be and has been presented, that is the genre's diversity (and historical development). The focus on action/crime in this piece, for example, emerges in part from earlier research on the ways in which crime television engaged with themes of political violence and its implications for national security in a specifically North American context. Considering what kinds of crime and what kinds of investigative units or forms of specialist knowledge were brought to the fore in a given moment led to other questions as to how that crime content was framed for viewers.

Analyses of crime drama have explored in detail the narrative structures organised around investigation, the legacy of a realist mode of programme making, the significance of the forensic turn and the extent to which the genre engages with or circumvents societal and political concerns with policing, justice and inequality.[4] This paper was originally developed as part of a symposium organised around an idea of the "post," specifically reflecting on the characteristics of crime television post-CSI,[5] following from and yet shaped by what has been cast as a forensic moment or a forensic turn (Steenberg, 2013). If the forensic moment has past, and certainly it is no longer novel, its legacy clearly remains. As a consequence my argument engages with both genre history and genre aesthetics. The significance of forensic crime for television studies has been a renewed attention to questions of style.[6] This article's

interest in the representation of forensic science as data in action can be situated in that context.

Crime is a rich television genre, operating within and across multiple modes. Though an extensive category (encompassing, for example, The Blacklist and Castle [2009--], Criminal Minds [2005--] and Elementary [2012--]) crime nonetheless makes sense as genre even while it tests, perhaps challenges, our understanding of genre. Elayne Rapping's Law and Justice as Seen on TV (2003) acknowledges as much both in her coupling of police and legal dramas and in her attempt to take account of the importance of both reality and true crime formats. Looking beyond crime content it is clear that crime television employs a diverse series of narrative and aesthetic modes. Among the most prominent of these modes are the following: realist, surveillance, forensic, Gothic and action. I am not suggesting that these five modes provide the only way into contemporary crime genres. Nor do I wish to argue that they are unchanging or unrelated to the sorts of crime content portrayed;[7] rather I suggest that they represent a strategy for thinking about the commonalities between disparate forms of crime programming from reality shows to self-reflexive episodic drama. Exploring crime television through particular aesthetic modes allows connections to emerge across seemingly disparate examples, to take account of the myriad ways in which genres are fluid rather than fixed. It allows consideration of the diverse staging of crime content as comic, grotesque or theatrical, how crime television leaks into other broad generic categories such as horror or action. There is an attraction, and an undoubted value, in focusing generic analysis on content (the police series, say, or supernatural crime), settings (squad room, special unit, federal agencies) or characters (the PI, profiler, intuitive investigator, medical examiner or uniformed officer). Yet in thinking about the development and textual characteristics of such an extensive entity as crime television it is also productive – vital even - to consider connections and patterns. This is in part my aim in coupling action crime and forensic crime television in this essay, to elaborate a particular instance of the genre through the interplay of these modes and to consider the implications for approaches to television genre.[8] My entry point for doing so is CBS staple NCIS, a long-running military cop show with strong action and forensic crime elements. I also refer to The Blacklist, NBC's FBI-based investigative series which incorporates violent crime, data-driven operations and frequent scenes of action.

Action as a Mode of Crime Television – Historical and Formal Perspectives

Crime genres share a concern with the subject matter of crime, its enactment, effects and – typically – its containment. If crime has been persistently understood as a sort of content, framed as meaningful in relation to social perspectives on violence, policing and law, the absence of defining types of content goes some way to explaining the relative lack of attention paid within critical writings to action television. Rather than suggesting particular elements of content, action offers a way of presenting material - a mode which emphasises urgency and movement. Exploring action-oriented crime television in this article thus provides an opportunity not only to look at a neglected aspect of crime drama but also to open up some of these wider generic questions.

There are two distinct dimensions of my approach to the interface of crime and action television. The first is historical, involving an insistence that action has long been a feature of television crime programming. The second is broadly aesthetic, involving an attempt to consider the specificity of action/crime television. Needless to say, the two are not unconnected so that thinking about the historical development of what can be termed action-oriented crime television, or, more simply action/crime, in turn helps an exploration of the particular formal strategies currently employed within this mode of crime television. In the process the argument also aims to gives greater attention to action television as a category. Indeed in their account of the production context for action television Bill Osgerby and Anna Gough-Yates point to a process whereby crime shows such as The Untouchables (1959-63) displaced the earlier prominence of the Western (2001,16). Most obviously this is the case in the action sequences that feature so routinely in the genre, from pursuit on foot or in vehicles to scenes of physical combat and confrontation, gunplay and explosions. To shift briefly to a different medium and historical frame, within early cinema the chase film emerged with and through the development of montage, in the process elaborating a distinctive form of action narrative in which cross-cutting is exploited as a formal strategy for conveying accelerating tension. Crime is the chase film's characteristic pretext. In the two examples most often cited, Daring Daylight Burglary and The Great Train Robbery (both 1903, UK and US respectively), it is the commission of a crime and the pursuit of the criminals that generates action.[9] Of course we may observe that it is theft that provides the motivation for the chase while crime television is overwhelmingly concerned with homicide, the discovery of the crime (scene) initiating a narratively more complex pursuit than the simple chase.

A routine action sequence which recurs across numerous examples of crime television features officers or investigators approaching and entering a space of potential danger; the space itself varies from domestic buildings to office blocks to industrial settings, the specific location subordinate to a dynamic of armed officers moving together in anticipation of violence. Such scenes express urgency and tension. Movement within the frame conveys speed and decisive action on the part of investigators. The soundtrack may use music to emphasise excitement or danger while the sounds of movement – officers running, calling out their presence and so forth – and editing suggest individuals who are authorised to occupy the spaces they penetrate. Such sequences enact narrative strands – investigators may find themselves just in time or just too late; they may interrupt a scene of violence, find clues in what is left behind or interpret the absences of the spaces they enter so forcefully. Like combat and chase sequences there are a number of possible narrative outcomes; the staging of the action across space and time dramatizes and enacts these outcomes. These sequences offer the viewer sensational scenes of action but to the critic they are easily overlooked. In a genre discussed most extensively in thematic or ideological terms, such generically familiar sequences are not particularly pertinent. **[INSERT Figure 1**]

In a manner akin to the overlooked action sequence, action television in its broadest sense remains largely untheorized (perhaps a function of its distinctive character which I refer to here as a mode), and the extent to which its history is dispersed across that of other genres. It is telling perhaps that the subtitle of Osgerby and Gough-Yates's 2001 collection Action TV:

Tough Guys, Smooth Operators and Foxy Chicks foregrounds neither historical nor formal features but stereotypes/character types of particular relevance to debates around gender and race in popular culture. Similarly, within recent writings exploring action and adventure television, gender is a particular preoccupation with scholars probing the significance of action and hybrid shows with female leads such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer. In her analysis of female centred action-adventure Amanda Lotz accords particular significance to hybrid forms noting that both Buffy and Xena work in new ways to incorporate "melodramatic stories of intense and complicated interpersonal relations" alongside the action. For Lotz then "action dramas of the late 1990s enact a hybridization to broaden the appeal of their narratives" (2006, 87). Implicitly, for Lotz these moves accord greater possibilities for women in action, and while this may well be the case, an historical perspective on action television reveals a genre which foregrounds strong bonds of loyalty and friendship between partners and teams operating in dangerous circumstances. Clearly the story arcs to which Lotz refers are more elaborate than those which frame the group and their interactions in a show such NCIS, but nonetheless work-family components and personal back stories are key elements of much action/crime drama. Indeed these elements are relatively elaborate in The Blacklist which combines an episode case of the week (assigned a number within Reddington's personal blacklist) with developments around the story arc to do with the mysterious Cabal, Elizabeth Keen's background, and her relationship to Red himself.

Action television as a category has relatively low cultural status (coupled no doubt to extremes of violence on one hand, kitsch humour on the other). In this context James Lyons writes: "It is perhaps no coincidence that all the deficiencies cited by critics in relation to Miami Vice were also key attributes of the action-adventure genre, foremost of which was an emphasis on style and spectacle at the expense of 'literary sophistication'" (2010, 34-5). Although over its run Miami Vice certainly featured some complex storylines – e.g. Sonny's amnesia – its impact as a show lies primarily with the visual. For Jeremy Butler, Miami Vice is an example of "visually sophisticated" television (2010: 14).[10] As the example of Miami Vice suggests, cultural value in television stems from many factors including thematic and narrative complexity. Such complexity is rather different from the emphasis on spectacle, sensation and surface that typifies action, contributing to the relative neglect of key crime/action series in accounts of the genre. Moreover, the thematic complexity valued in long form television can be contrasted to the relatively simple coding of heroism typical of action/crime television – the patriotic military masculinity of Gibbs in NCIS, for instance.

Crime television is an interesting genre in this respect since it includes within its purview series that are high status complex dramas and others which are, by contrast, low status or middle brow (Castle, with its gentle self-reflexivity and strong romantic and conspiratorial story arcs exemplifies this category). Action elements – notably the chase but also scenes of combat, violence or confrontation - feature in both high and low status instances of crime television so it is not the presence of action per se that determines cultural value. It is also – as in the generic sequence of armed entry into a space of violence or suspicion – excessively familiar and to this extent relatively unremarkable.

Although action as a mode is pervasive within crime television, action/crime is not writ large in accounts of the genre. Historical perspectives on crime television tend, rightly, to emphasise discourses of realism and plot (the significance of Dragnet [1951-1959] and procedural conventions, for instance); scholarship on the representation of policing and legal drama has similarly noted the importance of realist visual and narrative codes rather than those of action and sensation. Crime media has a long-established tradition of the sensational – gruesome details, confession narratives, true crime – yet within television the procedural form emphasises order in a manner that frequently evades the violence done to the body (hence an emphasis on crime as a genre of reassurance [Lee, 2003]). Investigations underpinned by reason and the witness interview/suspect interrogation both functioning as key sites for the development of narrative information all geared towards a revelation that in turn generates justice. The apprehension of a suspect through mechanisms of investigation and deduction is a vital narrative drive of crime television.

In order to place action-oriented crime television in an historical frame we can chart a historical trajectory while acknowledging that such formulations can assume an overly straightforward sense of progression and development of genre codes. Dragnet typically kept action off-screen, retracing the crime and following the investigation via the work of the detectives, the interviews they undertake with citizens and experts. While this procedural tradition was vital in establishing the genre it is also important to acknowledge that for decades action has been a prominent feature of crime television – since at least the late 1960s with the introduction of long-running crime series Hawaii Five-O (1968-80), action is a key part of the entertainment on offer, foregrounded as a promise of coming attractions in fast-paced credit sequences. This trajectory came into its own during the 1970s with Starsky and Hutch, a successful action/crime show which ran on ABC from 1975 to 1979.

These series routinely exploited the exhilarating pleasures of the action sequence, whether in the form of car chases and shoot-outs, explosions, fights or scenes of urban pursuit. Hawaii Five-*O*'s innovative use of location shooting exploited the juxtaposition of a familiar police procedural with the 'exotic' surroundings of Hawaii. The rapid montage of the show's iconic credit sequence opens with crashing waves, followed by a rapidly edited series of mobile shots featuring the effects of light on water, sweeping aerial shots of Honolulu and characters introduced in action. The Hawaiian setting is figured through landmarks, shots of the airport and shots of Hawaiian-Chinese women presented as sexual spectacle.

Though Hawaii Five-O certainly depended on action sequences and spectacle for its distinctive take on the police procedural, it is Starsky and Hutch that provides the significant starting point of the historical trajectory of crime/action I wish to delineate here. Much mimicked over the years, the series' title sequence[11] involves a number of iconographic action images including cars, guns, pursuit, female bodies on display, physical violence and explosions. In addition, at different points the titles feature the male leads Starsky (Paul Michael Glaser) and Hutch (David Soul) in a variety of costumes (operating undercover) or states of relative undress (for example, attired in towels and gun holsters in a sauna). The credits depict the stars of the show engaged in action, racing urgently through onscreen space in gestures that are briefly frozen. Thus we see Hutch leaping onto the bonnet of a car in

pursuit of unseen individuals, Starsky charging upstairs seeming to bounce off walls in his haste or the pair emerging from a crouching position drenched in water. The posing of actors within shots and their facial expressions – underscored by the up-beat soundtrack – suggest elements of comedy alongside the action, while in narrative terms battles with authority and strong bonds of male friendship are also promised. As Osgerby and Gough-Yates note, Starksy and Hutch coupled action with an emphasis on appealing to a youthful audience, combining "laid-back individualism and gritty realism in its premise of youthful, streetwise cops struggling against pimps, muggers and drug-dealers in a downbeat cityscape" (2001, 22). In critical commentary on Starsky and Hutch the relationship between the central characters – its intensity and homoeroticism – has been frequently remarked.[12] Yet the show is less often discussed in relation to action, a designator which seems so obvious as to require little comment.

Starsky and Hutch was not the first cop show to foreground action in this way. Stunt-work involving car chases was a notable feature of both The Streets of San Francisco (1972-77) and The Rockford Files (1974-80). And as I have suggested above, the procedural format of Hawaii Five-O was framed by its use of dynamic action sequences. I retain Starsky and Hutch as my exemplar not because it is the first then, but because of the prominence of action within the series from its beginnings through its successful run and, just as significantly, as a consistent feature of individual episodes. In this I take a lead from Eric Lichtenfeld's (2007) overview of the development of the action film as a recognisable category, a move he pinpoints via a discussion of the 1971 film Dirty Harry which stars Clint Eastwood as hard-boiled cop Harry Callahan. For Lichtenfeld the origins of a distinctive action cinema lie in the coupling of the western and film noir.[13] Crucially he notes that Dirty Harry features an action sequence approximately every ten minutes suggesting that it is the timing and repetition of action that defines the novelty of the genre in cinema. In turn it is the importance accorded to action through repetition and its centrality to securing narrative resolution that in part delineates crime/action.

Though it can seem somewhat camp today (the comedy, costumes, sentimental male friendship themes and misogynistic treatment of female characters all work to date the series), Starsky and Hutch was deemed troubling in its violence, objected to by concerned cultural commentators and reputedly by some involved in the production itself.[14] Certainly networks were cautious of alienating advertisers even as they courted a youthful demographic. From the third season onwards the series shifted towards an emphasis on lighter stories and a foregrounding of male friendship between the central buddy couple. The specific instance points to a wider issue for the genre around the controversial nature of crime and policing as a subject. Crime television – in particular network shows that depend on advertising revenues – negotiates a difficult terrain of taste and cultural value while exploiting topics such as sexuality, violence, death and social inequalities that inevitably tend towards controversy. Crime is frequently characterised as a conservative genre, in part due to its adaptation of grotesque violence for mainstream audiences, in part due to its typical insistence that crime can be solved, violence explained and justice done.

NCIS and Action Crime Television

While Starsky and Hutch did not have a particularly long run, action-oriented crime series would continue to be produced and to achieve ratings success. The replacement of Hawaii Five-O in 1980 with Hawaii-located Magnum P.I. (1980-1988) provides an obvious example, as does the atmospheric undercover crime series Miami Vice (1984-89). Both, albeit in radically different ways, foregrounded action as key components of the pleasures of crime television. Action was less prominent as a feature of crime drama through the 1990s with high profile instances of reality crime programming (Cops) and the procedural (notably the Law & Order franchise) but the twenty-first century has seen action taking on a greater prominence once more in espionage and military-themes series including 24 (2001-10) and NCIS. The latter has proven to be one of the most popular crime programmes on network television, generating two spin-offs NCIS: Los Angeles (2009-) which features a covert unit and has a greater emphasis on action than its DC based original and NCIS: New Orleans (2014--) which offers a more comic tone and foregrounds the musical heritage of its host city. I am not then attempting to argue here that all police dramas foreground action (although most feature it). Indeed as noted above there were fewer action-oriented crime shows on the networks through the 1990s, with dramas such as NYPD Blue and Homicide as well as Law & Order pushing the conventions in different directions, notably a greater emphasis on dialogue and debate over contemporary issues to do with crime and policing.I am however suggesting that the success of action-oriented crime shows needs to be acknowledged as a persistent and important element of crime television.

NCIS suggests the familiarity and popularity of action-crime formats. The show was itself a spin-off from the long-running military-legal drama JAG (1995-2005). NCIS developed as a hybrid of JAG and another CBS show CSI, coupling the military setting of the former with the forensic procedural style of the latter. As this suggests the post-forensic moment effectively involves the incorporation of the forensic into rather different sorts of drama. Storylines occasionally reach back as far as WWII as in "Call of Silence (02x07, tx 23 November 2004) in which Gibbs and the team help a veteran of Iwo Jima who believes that he murdered a fellow soldier to reconstruct events he is unable to fully recall. Lindsay Steenberg's work underlines that CSI is only the most prominent of the forms to foreground a forensic imagery (2013). Comparing the NCIS title sequence to the earlier action-oriented shows discussed above is telling. The most striking elements of similarity are the iconography of weaponry, explosions, combat and cars all of which feature prominently. In addition we see imagery suggesting specialist activities and knowledge, technologies of surveillance, forensics, the Americana flag and the importance of the team. Action is then prominent albeit tempered by the forensic and military imagery. NCIS: Los Angeles gives greater prominence to action and to the central male partnership (its opening titles depicts the majority of the cast members depicted in action sequences) and less to the laboratory.

While NCIS exemplifies action/crime television and, as I argue below, the visual dynamism associated with scenes of analysis and surveillance exploited here are very much in line with wider developments in the genre, it would be a mistake to overlook the sentimental construction of the team that forms such a central part of the show. Just as decades earlier

Starsky and Hutch was an action cop show which depended for its flavour on the particular, intensely loyal and emotional relationship between the leads, multiple-cast shows such as NCIS derive emotional intensity and humour from the interactions between team members and the moral qualities we are led to understand they possess. Jethro Gibbs's (Mark Harmon) multiple marriages and boat building, DiNozzo's cinephilia, Abby's Goth styling and enthusiasms, Ducky's old-fashioned sexism all play into character types and character interactions that are as important as the action elements. The sentiment of dutiful service associated with police series is inflected in NCIS by reverence for the military and the sacrifice of good men (and women) in conflict.

In the earlier quotation, Lyons mentioned style and spectacle as features of action-adventure cinema which are also found in action/crime television. Forms of content such as the car chase, pursuit on foot, explosion or combat are one element. The stylistic rendition of such content through particular editing techniques and the use of music are another. Both are powerful evidence within the credit sequences of action-oriented crime television. As I noted above Starsky and Hutch shifted its emphasis through its run, becoming more humorous and downplaying violence in response to concerns over the suitability of such content for television broadcast. Throughout, however, the car remained central – emblematic of 1970s action television's particular preoccupation with speed.[15] In his review of the show's first season (following its release on DVD) James Oliphant writes: "The series… became synonymous with smoking tires, screeching u-turns and gravity-defying, in traffic manoeuvres." The particular form of spectacle evoked (nostalgically) here is, significantly, both visual and auditory. As numerous scholarly analyses of CSI and forensic crime more broadly suggest, the car has been partially displaced by a different form of action/spectacle, one which also captures investigation and pursuit in visual form – spectacular presentation of data/tracking/forensics. Yet, as I argue below, there is a greater degree of overlap between action and forensic modes of crime drama than our model of television genre typically allows.

Forensic spectacle, Data in Motion and Sensational Action/Crime Television

The description of true crime and crime media more generally as fundamentally sensationalist is well known. Forensic shows such as Bones (2005--), and indeed CSI, are well aware of and frequently play with the corpse/crime scene as grotesque spectacle. It is a peculiarity of crime fiction and crime television however, that the scene of violent death is frequently rendered static, even banal. Indeed for Ascari the "innovative character of sensation fiction" stems from "the juxtaposition of everyday reality and the horrors that gothic fiction used to set against the exotic backgrounds of faraway countries and times" (2007, 114). The television crime narrative is typically initiated with a scene of the aftermath of violence, a discovery of death or revelation of the victim's body via images within images. The staging of death takes multiple forms; it may be grotesque, theatrical or more matter of fact. In the context of crime television death is rarely shocking – it is rather expected, everyday: sensation lies primarily elsewhere.

Though sensationalism is typically an accusation, an expression of cultural discomfort with the lurid details of crime (and particularly murder) which draws the readers and viewers of

crime fiction/drama, a concept of sensation provides a useful way of analysing the genre. Of particular interest here is the way that sensation captures both the very sensationalist qualities of crime media that trouble systems of cultural value – an interest in corpses and scenes of violence, the coupling of sex and death – and the aesthetic qualities of crime/action drama. In crime television what are frequently referred to as instances of style or spectacle can alternatively be framed as multiple sources of sensation. The sensational dimensions of crime television have to do with the action sequence as a component of procedural narrative – the sensationalistic acceleration of procedural form is evident for example, in the race against time to defuse a bomb or save a hostage, in the chase or scenes of conflict in which cop heroes subdue or are overcome by opponents. Sensation, that is the rendering of crime/action content to stimulate, is also at stake in the dynamic presentation of investigative sequences. This emphasis on sensation is a product of the forensic turn, of course, but it is more than that, bleeding into a mapping of the world through data, a process that is at times bewildering, at times associated with bringing order. **[INSERT Figures 2&3]**

An interest in sensational style is crucial to the influence of CSI and other forensic crime shows which involve the spectacular visual staging of laboratory science. In her study of the forensic turn in popular culture, Steenberg outlines three sites around which the vocabulary of science, crime and expertise are organised: "the victimised human body/corpse, the mind of the expert in action and the spectacle of data" (2013, 3). The rendering of knowledge, data and analysis as spectacular is perhaps the key aesthetic innovation of forensic crime television. While explanatory voiceover plays an important role, montage is an essential technique within the CSI franchise for presenting complex processes of knowledge acquisition economically and stylishly. Steenberg, drawing on Derek Kompare, captures this as a process of 'show and tell' by which viewers "see the spectacle of science and scientists in action through dynamic montages that flip from the concentrating gaze of the scientist to the object of his or her inquiry – a microscope point of view, a test tube, the striking graphic print-out of test results and the gleaming surfaces of high-tech machinery" (2013, 5-6).

Such an emphasis on montage as part of the visual impact of forensic television is highly significant for a consideration of the crime/action interface, since montage (as discussed above) is such a defining feature of action. It is the coupling of the laboratory as a dynamic space in which data comes alive and more familiar action sequences – pursuit, storming buildings, over-coming opponents – that underpins the popular success of action-oriented crime in NCIS. *CSI's* remarkably successful innovation on the crime show format results both in renewed scholarly engagement with the genre and a particular interest in television style. The so-called "CSI shot", an effect by which forensic investigations within objects and bodies are visualised, has been discussed at some length. The show's extensive use of montage and the prominence of the soundtrack have prompted useful commentary on television style, but not the connection to action aesthetics which I foreground here. The centrality of montage to action – from the chase films of early cinema to the scenes of pursuit in crime shows such as Miami Vice – is fundamental to the genre and the thrills/sensation it produces.

While in a well-known essay Jason Mittell (2006) explores the spectacular qualities of narrative complexity at work in shows such as Lost, I foreground here the sensational

qualities of mainstream action crime drama which combine elements of narrative and spectacle in intriguing ways. Tom Gunning's (1986) essay on the cinema of attractions is well known in historical film studies and the concept of attraction has been used by commentators in relation to a range of different media forms including television and journalism; yet postulating a television of attractions risks underplaying the ways in which narrative is so clearly at stake in crime television's sensation scenes. The investigative narrative structures crime television which works towards uncovering motive and resolving mystery. It is the visceral, sensational way that is delivered in action/crime that suggests a productive connection with the figure of "attraction".

Tom Gunning's argument points to the early cinema's "harnessing of visibility" (1986, 63) for pleasure, an analysis which seeks to understand the context of exhibition and to avoid overemphasising narrative as the most significant dimension of media experience. Gunning cites Fernand Léger's observation that the new medium's power and potential was "a matter of making images seen," and invokes Marinetti's praise for variety theatre as a form that encouraged active spectators as well as deploying "aesthetics of astonishment and stimulation" (1986, 63, 66). At least two aspects of this modernist moment strike me as of interest for the consideration of postmodern crime television in the action mode. Firstly, an aesthetic of abstraction, the spectacular/visual qualities of images which provide stimulation for audiences immersed in an intensely mediated culture. Secondly, the importance of speed, or at least movement – drawing in sensation and attraction as terms, allows us to think about the action sequence and the action aesthetic as more than the physical chase, just as likely to consist of the rapid flow of data as of people.

The emergence of NCIS as a franchise in its own right speaks to the normalisation of forensic imagery and the centrality of the sensations it provides within crime television. Police series of the 1980s and 1990s such as NYPD Blue referred to over-burdened laboratories and pressured labs, an imagery displaced by the efficient and resource-rich mobilisation of science in shows such as Bones and CSI. That contrast is explicitly referenced in an NCIS episode which has a stretched civilian doctor, having failed to detect a murder later picked up by Ducky during a demonstration autopsy, bemoan the fact that for her work DNA testing takes six months to process ("Identity Crisis" season 5). Forensic work in NCIS operates across the autopsies conducted by Ducky and his assistant and the laboratory in which Goth-styled Abby Sciuto holds sway; both are framed in very different ways as eccentric. The television crime lab has developed as a site compatible with non-conforming femininity, frequently evoking the woman with scientific expertise as defiantly brilliant (as in Bones' Temperance Brennen). Abby's lab is a basement space of fascination, the various screens and experiments supplemented by a rock soundtrack that is her preferred method of working. Her addiction to a high caffeine drink, rapid-fire delivery of complex results and quirky behaviour signal a brilliant non-conformity that is very much about movement. In contrast to shows such as Bones, in which, as Steenberg notes Brennan is tutored by her co-workers in acceptable femininity, Abby's intensity, unconventional behaviour and enthusiasm for her work is never coded as failing femininity; thus while in some respects Abby enacts an

excessive version of forensic femininity, her caffeine-fuelled intensity is integral to the work of the team on the ground. **[INSERT Figures 4&5]**

In addition to the autopsy room and the laboratory there is a third site of investigation foregrounded in NCIS: the digital. Here the show intersects with a wider generic emphasis on a culture of surveillance in which investigators from multiple agencies track citizens through their purchases, vehicle registration, personal or criminal records and so on. Data is drawn into the operation centre, its analysis presented on screens within screens. Steenberg's formulation of the 'spectacle of data' is particularly resonant for twenty-first century formulations of action-oriented crime television. Elsewhere I have used the formulation of sensational television to frame the ways in which popular shows have narrativized anxieties about homeland security in a broadly investigative context. Here the spectacle of data functions as part of a visualising of surveillance which, I argue, is implicitly justified by threats to national security: "Banks of monitors, computer screens running databases, and camera relays are central to the iconography of both NCIS and NCIS: Los Angeles. These technologies allow the graphic representation of the work of investigation, with the protagonists accessing information via screens." (Tasker, 2014, 48). Surveillance is now a central theme of crime television; across forensic and action modes of crime drama the availability and the visualisation of data (on say, suspicious credit card purchases) for audience and investigators is a source of sensational pleasures while advancing narrative goals.

The emergence of a surveillance aesthetic in contemporary crime/action involves not just the visualisation of data then, but the remediation of images within images. Recall that in the previous section I mentioned a sequence familiar to viewers of crime television, one in which officers rapidly and efficiently enter premises in pursuit of suspects or evidence. NCIS – in common with military and espionage themed shows – frequently presents such scenes of movement through unknown and potentially dangerous environments both directly and via screens within screens. Such mediated scenes of action (if you will) foreground the possession of surveillance technology and visual communication systems that enable operations to be simultaneously relayed to headquarters. Viewers see ongoing operations directly, via the various screens in the M-TAC room (for example, Navy SEALS in a tense scene of action in "Patience" [09x12]) or a combination of the two. The military setting of NCIS allows investigators privileged access to data such as surveillance equipment, although there are frequent disputes with other agencies; indeed while the show is framed by a reverential attitude towards the military and the Marine Corps most particularly, agencies such as the CIA are treated with suspicion. At other times members of the team are themselves on the ground, as in "Engaged" (09x09) in which Gibbs and Ziva travel to Afghanistan to assist in the search for a missing Marine. Both are involved in the raid that rescues her from her captors.[16] Such sequences foreground the military aspect of the team's work and the battle-readiness of the investigators, the extent to which they are ready for action.

While this is to some degree novel, the coupling of forensic and action modes had already been exploited extensively in CSI: Miami (2002-2012), by some way the most action-driven

variant of the franchise. These action qualities are evident in the signature use of split screen to enhance visual dynamism and the frequent action sequences including the onscreen playing out of violent crimes (in addition to discovered elaborate scenes of violence common to crime representation). Action qualities are equally evident in the characterisation of CSI Miami's male lead, Horatio Caine, as charismatic cop hero in sharp contrast to the paternalist scientist, Gil Grissom, of the original Vegas-set CSI. While neither a military nor a forensic action/crime show, The Blacklist shares a number of the formal features discussed above in relation to NCIS. Episodes involves fast paced action scenes (gunfights, storming of buildings, chases) and multiple sources of data channelled and visualized into the unit's headquarters. In "The Troll Farmer" (03x01) Red has hired the title figure to assist them in eluding capture by planting false sightings through social media, aiming to manipulate the stream of data to their advantage. Lizzie's movement through the city streets and the (false) logging of that movement via digital media – a fiction that Ressler, Lizzie's former FBI partner, is able to see through – stages evasion and pursuit across multiple domains culminating in an improbable scaling of the Russian Embassy to seek security. In the following episode "Marvin Gerard" (03x02) Ressler engages in a high speed pursuit to release Keen from an embassy car when he is warned by Red of the danger she faces. Red and Lizzie employ Red's extensive network of criminal contacts to escape pursuit on foot, by car and ship; Ressler's FBI team are able to reconstruct the paths of escape through their own array of sources. Capture and evasion are framed not only by pursuit on the ground but via flows of data (at one point the pair are downloading files which provide a clue to the FBI who are in close pursuit) and via surveillance. Thus, in these action/crime formats the teams work with, and depend on, data which is staged for audiences in dynamic visual style; at the same time data is a prelude for action in a world monitored by multiple screens. **[INSERT Figure 6]**

Such continuities demonstrate the extent to which action aesthetics are present across multiple crime formats. This is not to underplay the differences between shows – The Blacklist gives far greater prominence to grotesque scenes of violence than NCIS for instance – but to note the unremarked commonalities. The semi-militarized representation of the police force, and even more those specialist units which are so often the focus of action/crime series, facilitates the drawing together of a variety of crime television conventions through an action aesthetic: the dynamic image which is at work in the chase, the forensic montage and the incessant flows of data that shape the direction of the investigators' movements in the physical world.

Conclusion

The emergence of the forensic crime show and its foregrounding of a dynamic visual style to represent complex or abstract techniques for analysis has triggered a productive wave of scholarship interested in television style. The conventional opposition between narrative and spectacle as two contesting components of visual culture is one context for such interest. It is certainly the case that this opposition has had more resonance in the study of cinema than of television. Nonetheless, the argument I have sought to make here is that the development of an approach to crime television that takes account of both investigative narrative structures

that are bound up in discourses of resolution and justice (so central to accounts of the genre) and the sensational qualities of investigative action is immensely fruitful. I have suggested that the connection to the aesthetics of action – formally and thematically emphasising the speed and connectedness of the investigative team via digital surveillance and data flows – can be understood in terms of a formulation of sensation which is to do with the auditory, the visual and the narrative elements of crime television.

Action has long been an important but rarely discussed aspect of crime television. This relative neglect omits a significant dimension of the genre not only in relation to shows that are clearly action oriented, but also in overlooking the importance of an action mode within crime television more generally. As I suggest here, action is one of several overlapping modes that can be seen to organise crime as a generic content within television. Conceptualising a genre such as crime television – one defined most often by particular sorts of content – through modes that overlap and inflect each other, represents an important strategy for understanding the diversity and flexibility of the category. Moreover, action/crime is far from the only successful variant typically overlooked by existing scholarship. Indeed as the example of action/crime suggests, textual genre work – analyses that foreground formal as much as contextual factors – have much to gain from an understanding of genre as fluid and modal.

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[1] See Jason Mittell (2004: 153-160) on genre mixing, a term he prefers to hybridity given the latter's connotations of fixed categories that are brought together rather than a fluid model of television genre. It is in part the very extent of crime television as a category, as I suggest later in this piece, that poses particular challenges for models of genre and the crime/action interface more particularly.

[2] See for example Fishman and Cavender. eds. Entertaining Crime; Quinn "The Politics of *Law and Order".*

[3] See for example Liza M. Cuklanz and Sujata Moorti "Television's "New" Feminism" who locate their discussion of Law and Order: Special Victims Unit as intervening in and yet framed by what they regard as "the traditionally masculine genre of detective fiction" (2006, 303).

[4] See for example, Elayne Rapping Law and Justice as Seen on TV; Susanna Lee "These are Our Stories."

[5] "Crime in a Post-CSI Mediascape," Oxford Brookes University, September 2013.

[6] Amongst others see Steven Cohan's analysis of CSI's visual strategies in his (2008) monograph. An interest in visual style underpins the identification of 'nordic noir' in recent critical commentary.

[7] For example the shifting rhetoric from that of a "war on drugs" to that of a "war on terror" impacts crime television significantly in the post-9/11 era.

[8] Undoubtedly my approach is primarily textual since I wish to highlight textual qualities that have, in my view, been unhelpfully overlooked. This is not to argue against the importance of the cultural model that Mittell so influentially outlines. Indeed the management of sensational content via discourses of responsibility, realism and authenticity is a key institutional aspect of the history of crime television in the United States as Mittell's analysis of Dragnet demonstrates (2004).

[9] Georges Sadoul writes of Daring Daylight Burglary that "it presents at least ten scenes linked together by the presence of the thief or of his pursuers. Here we see how montage in natural settings brought about the birth of the 'chase sequence,' discovered by the English about 1900." Sadoul remarks the shift from the comic chase to the dramatic although not the importance of crime. (1946, 255)

[10] Butler is not dealing specifically with crime as a genre here, referring to "visually sophisticated programs such as Miami Vice, ER, and single-camera sitcoms" (2010, 14).

[11] Although the title sequence varied across seasons the characteristics I draw attention to in my discussion are remarkably consistent. See the title sequence at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_VFciCh8d6g [Last accessed October 31st 2015.]

[12] Amy Villarejo (2010) effectively develops this queer framing of Starsky and Hutch in the broader context of a 1970s television in which "relevance" was a vital component.

[13] To some extent this accords with Osgerby and Gough-Yates account of action television as a genre, the modern detective series displacing the television western. See also Buscombe and Pearson eds. (1998). Mittell notes and problematizes the relationship between the developing forms of television crime and the variant of crime cinema that was retrospectively termed film noir (2004, 129).

[14] In the UK Starsky and Hutch was one of the shows objected to by campaigner Mary Whitehouse.

[15] See for example, The Dukes of Hazzard (CBS, 1979-1985).

[16] Surveillance technology also generates humour on occasion, as when the comic interactions of *NCIS's* DiNozzo and Bishop going undercover in a couples' intimacy class causes embarrassment.