

The story of the crime drama and the cellphone

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ABSTRACT

[...] when the cops on "The Wire" try to build cases against violent drug dealers, their investigation of the surface crime of narcotics trafficking reveals a deep crime they can't do anything about: the failed war on drugs only makes things worse in a city already plagued by the near-total defeat of governance and public life by market forces run wild.

FULL TEXT

CRIME STORIES, like fairy tales, can tell us a lot about our culture. The crime story's structure is built to carry meaning beyond the literal. There's a surface crime that makes the plot go, a theft or murder to be investigated; and then there's the deep crime, a systemic social or historical or psychological wrong revealed during the course of investigating the surface crime. You can identify and punish a perpetrator of the surface crime, but it's a lot harder to do anything about deep crime.

For example, when the cops on "The Wire" try to build cases against violent drug dealers, their investigation of the surface crime of narcotics trafficking reveals a deep crime they can't do anything about: the failed war on drugs only makes things worse in a city already plagued by the near-total defeat of governance and public life by market forces run wild.

Every once in a while, I'll take an unscientific tour around the TV channels to see what kind of crime stories we're telling ourselves these days. Apparently, what viewers want to see are children in danger and people using cellphones.

It's not difficult to imagine why crime stories might dwell so obsessively on children. Parents' universal concern for their kids takes a peculiar form in this country. We have created an ideal safe zone of perfect security and innocence in which good parents are supposed to cocoon their children until they reach the age of majority and suddenly become fair game in the anything-goes competition of adult life. It makes sense that we'd use crime stories to think about this arrangement - to both shore it up and question its premises.

Still, I find it hard to believe that anybody actually enjoys watching one show after another in which weeping, terrified children are hurt, abused, or kidnapped by a mastermind who rigs a hidey-hole with a limited air supply the heroes must race to locate. Do regular viewers of, say, "Law and Order: Special Victims Unit" regard a scene of a child with blood running down her legs as entertaining? Or is the idea that such scenes remind us that real children really do get hurt? Either way, this particular update on the Brothers Grimm breeds fear and fantasies of vengeance, and there's always a brisk trade in those.

Speaking of the "Law and Order" franchise, have you noticed how much screen time is taken up by actors talking

on cellphones? Real cops do use their cellphones, of course, just as they sleep and use the bathroom, and I can appreciate how the device of the timely call or text message serves writers looking for efficient ways to advance the plot. But is there anything more irritatingly dull than watching someone else, even a good-looking actor, use a cellphone? Yes, they whip it out with a stylish gesture and speak into it with dramatic terseness, but there's only so much one can do to dress up the act itself.

So why do we want - or at least consent - to watch anything so inherently tedious? I see no evidence that the shows are protesting the small declines in quality of life that form the downside of the convenience of cellphones. I think it's more likely that the annoyances associated with cellphones have grown so normal that they're almost invisible. You so often see in daily life the scenario in which one person abandons another in mid-sentence to chat or tap away on some device, leaving the flesh-and-blood companion to wait for the conversation to finish, that the rudeness and boredom of it barely register anymore. So when actors do it to viewers, it feels like real life, only with better production values.

Crime stories give us a way to unearth and examine our most powerful concerns, but they also make a record of changes in daily life that become so routine that they sink beneath our notice. When you see a TV cop talking on a cellphone while investigating yet another lurid offense against a child, you get both at once.

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Illustration

Caption: istockphoto

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