Detection in a Complex Age:
Collective Control in *CSI: New York*

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**Abstract**
This article examines the rejection of the heroic individual detective figure in the popular forensic crime solving drama *CSI: NY*. It explores how this archetypal modern figure is replaced by an integrated network of technologies and human investigators. By paying close attention to the postmodern conditions of the information economy and the global political context of the first decade of the twenty-first century—specifically, the U.S. legal response to the threat of networked terrorism—the article asserts that the demise of the individual detective is inspired by the recognition of the limited capacities of individuals to respond to complex threat. In particular, the alternative vision to the individual detective developed by *CSI: NY* is shaped by changing relations between state and individual in the wake of the 2001 USA PATRIOT Act. Asserting the essentially conservative nature of *CSI: NY*’s collective detective, the article considers how mass fears of chaos and complex crime are consoled through a team of “everyman” investigators, who draw their moral authority from the collective social body, and who justify their access to and exploitation of comprehensive databases through their selfless commitment to protecting the security of the collective. The postmodern and posthuman economic and theoretical basis of this shift is explicated, as is the series’ reliance upon the technologies and information paradigm of cybernetics, in order to account for *CSI: NY*’s contribution to the long tradition of detection, and to assert how thoroughly this popular narrative of consolation is implicated in the economic and scientific contexts and the political concerns of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

**Keywords**
detection, complexity, individualism, postmodernity, technology
The figure of the detective has been seen by many critics as a literary response to crises in the social and economic organization of modernity. The “simplest example” of the epistemological interest of modern fiction according to Simon Malpas (9), the detective figure reasserts the gifted individual’s capacity to penetrate and know the social matrix in spite of the crowded conditions and de-centered muddle of urban modernity: the “strangeness and crowding and thus ‘impenetrability’ of the city,” as Raymond Williams has said of the nineteenth-century detective (87). The context for the perpetuation of the literary detective can likewise be seen in the decline of meaning-conferring social institutions and the proliferation of modes of representation such as photography, advertising, and burgeoning twentieth-century mass media. In his essay “On Raymond Chandler,” Fredric Jameson sees the hardboiled hero Philip Marlowe as answering the uncertainty caused by urban breakdown, in which architectural factors and economic forces had reduced society to self-contained and isolated monads: “Since there is no longer any privileged experience in which the whole of the social structure can be grasped, a figure must be invented who can be superimposed on society as a whole, whose routine and life pattern serve somehow to tie its separate and isolated parts together” (629). A heroic figure, a genius and a maverick, the hardboiled detective’s privileged insight, shared isolation, and sense of a moral crusade displays an individualistic streak—the “romantic individualism” that critic Stephen Knight notes in Chandler’s writing (138)—meaning that detective and the criminal as an agent of anti-social unorthodoxy are often, perversely, aligned.

In the forensic, crime-solving drama Crime Scene Investigation: New York (2004-present), the figure of the detective is relocated to fragmented, fractured, dynamic, hyper-real, and infinitely plural postmodern New York. Drawing from a rich inheritance of detective prototypes—including the classic British forensic reasoner Sherlock Holmes and the hardboiled urban sleuths of North American noir—the series both pastiches and moves beyond these modern heroes in its creation of a “detective” capable of responding to the complexity of its early twenty-first century location. This change has repercussions for the distinctive role of the detective to console, control, thoroughly know and ethically adjudicate, which it will be this essay’s objective to analyze. Writing of emergent detective figures of the early nineteenth century, Knight has articulated how the detective arose as a “culture-hero bringing comfort and a sense of security to millions of individuals” in a culture in which “audience and author could believe in the subjective individual as a basis of real experience and could see collectivity as a threat” (28). Using a fusion of technology, extraordinarily sensitive forensics, and
anti-individualistic teamwork on a military model, *CSI: NY*’s contribution to the long detective tradition lies in its assertion that its nexus of technology and teamwork, and not the privileged experience of an individual, can be used to “control” and “console” mass fears of crime. Whilst recognizing that technology has contributed to making the urban excessively complex with the proliferation of handheld devices, instantaneous communications, and techno-savvy criminals, *CSI: NY* insists upon technology’s unique capacity to isolate, simplify, and reorder in the confusion of the postmodern city. In a dual process, the responsibility, authority, and romantic individualism of the solitary detective figure is dismantled, and the “detective function”—the capacity to reorder, control, and console—distributed among a group of state employees and their syndicated, technological network. Moving away, then, from the individualistic strain of the modern detective figure, *CSI: NY* moves beyond Knight’s assertion by promoting collectivity as a good, and subjective individuality as a threat.

This essay will account for the replacement of the individual detective by a technological-team network through attention to the political and economic context of the series’ creation. Firstly, the move from a heroic individual to a throng of computational devices operated by a state workforce must be seen in the context of the economic and cultural significance of the shift from modernity to postmodernization. Modern social organization, broadly speaking, is built upon an industrial model in which production is a process of assembly—the creation of complete objects out of individually manufactured component parts—with a divided labor model to match. The modern experience of fragmentation and reification, and the detective who responds to this experience, is consoling because s/he responds to the conviction that despite its disassembled appearance, order does ultimately underlie society, and that the parts can be put back together. The modern detective can therefore be seen as an assertion of individual dignity and heroism in an alienated labor market, a figure capable of reconnecting the disassembled components of a mechanical, but disordered, reified modern experience—“partial fragmented rationality elevated to the status of an absolute guiding principle of human behavior” according to Marxist critic Ernest Mandel (46). This figure clearly no longer fits the *CSI: NY* model, and a reason for this can be found in the postmodern conditions of the contemporary information economy. Since the 1970s, instantaneous electronic communications, businesses as service providers, and computerized information exchange have largely replaced the industrial machinery and labor model of modernity in the U.S. Rather than the mechanistic, reified, and modular urban experience, the postmodern experience responds to the
heterogeneous, unexpected, and eclectic proliferation of information across non-hierarchical, user-generated, complex networks. Simultaneously, implication in technologies and distribution over networks has shaped theoretical responses to the postmodern individual as “posthuman.” As N. Katherine Hayles has contended, in a society that is “enmeshed within information networks” (27) such as the U.S., “the posthuman appears when computation rather than possessive individualism is taken as the ground of being, a move that allows the posthuman to be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines” (34). In a comparable thread, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have asserted that postmodernization and “informization” have changed the mode and meaning of “becoming human” (289) to the same extent as modernity’s private property and alienated labor model shaped the self-interested, right-possessing bourgeois individual and its romantic counterpart. They state: “Today we increasingly think like computers, while communication technologies and their model of interaction are becoming more and more central to laboring activities. . . . The anthropology of cyberspace is really a recognition of the new human condition” (291). On a basic level, CSI: NY largely accepts this shift in labor patterns in the work of its investigators. Their relationship to their work is shaped by the instantaneous, computerized information processing order of postmodernity. Recognizing themselves as part of an integrated and complex network, they reassert their personal fallibility at the same time as they celebrate the ascendancy of the technologies they use. Consequently, their role is reduced from reasoning to processing, and from solitary and self-determined wandering to self-abnegating mediation between the disorder of the crime scene and the ordering capacity of the computer. The detective figure becomes the detective function, and is taken over by this integrated network of workers and technology because it is no longer possible to place faith in any sole subject, or in individual reasoning, without verifiable technocratic support.

The second argument of this essay will account for CSI: NY’s preference for a corporate, technological detective through attention to the political context of the series’ creation: that is, the U.S. response to the rise of global networked terrorism in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Network terrorism has, of course, itself been made possible by the information and communication technologies of postmodernization. A nebulous and dispersed “decentralised and polymorphous network” (Bousquet 206), U.S. perceptions of al-Qaeda are essential context for understanding, if not the specific criminal threat posed in CSI: NY, which tends towards eclectic and disconnected private crimes, then its presentation of the powers and technologies with which the investigators must be equipped to console
mass fears of crime specifically as a sprawling and dispersed threat. Recognizing the complexity of the global context, CSI: NY shapes its resources to answer viewers’ fears about the diffusiveness of crime and to enforce the state’s capacity to respond. In terms of the long detecting tradition, this is a common trait. As Ronald R. Thomas has contended, the cultural authority of the detective since the genre’s inception has been founded in her/his unique ability to exploit the rising technologies and sciences of the day, meaning each successful case demonstrates “the power invested in certain forensic devices embodied in the figure of the literary detective” (2). In CSI: NY, the older forensic, bureaucratic, and identity-fixing capacities of modern detectives—including photographs, imprints, and other biological measurements—are supplemented with a powerful array of communication interception and surveillance technologies, capable of matching the complexity of the networks which are perceived to hide, and to hold the solution to, crime.

The political context of CSI: NY’s forensic and technological supremacy is particularly relevant in relation to this essay’s central question of the decline of the individual detective. The ideological implications of this can be assessed by attention to the show’s appearance in the context of the post-9/11 reconfiguration of constitutional law in the USA PATRIOT Act (2001). The Act empowered the government to peruse business, medical, library, telephone, and online records, to tap wires and access private databases, and to detain and question suspects with less legal justification than was previously necessary. Understandably, the Patriot Act significantly altered the relationship between the individual and the state, leading to anxiety over the erosion of liberal bourgeois rights and of the privileged position of the individual in American democracy and law. As constitutional scholar Susan N. Herman states, the Act meant that “administration officials were empowered to spy on anyone, including Americans, with less basis for suspicion and less judicial review” (5) with consequences not just for suspects of terrorism. Herman believes that the hurried creation of these laws offered consolation, “making people feel safer” (14), with any concern for the erosion of rights by the unilateral expansion of the U.S. government’s executive power assuaged by an insistence on the need to protect the security of the collective, and the assertion that the state was a trustworthy institution to hold such power. With this came a discernible rhetoric of defiance: when former U.S. President George W. Bush announced in 2001, “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” (Bush 2001), he delimited an exclusive hegemony under the guise of inclusivity, at the same time as he challenged the ethics, intelligence, and legal freedom of the any who would criticize
or seek to complicate his simplistic polarization. Likewise, the U.S. government’s “Just Trust Us” philosophy, which suggested that the relinquishing of rights was acceptable “as long as the people who wield that power act in good faith” (Herman 7), asked a very specific thing of the liberal individual—to suspend personal judgment and liberties in an act of generous trust of government authorities and submission to the interests of the “collective.”

Without attempting to address the critiques of the real “liberty” of the liberal bourgeois individual—an issue Ernest Mandel interrogates in his Delightful Murder—this essay will assess how anxiety over the complexity of postmodern networks and the expansion of executive power over those networks is consoled in CSI: NY through a structured intolerance to individualism. The interpretation of the individual who seeks to differentiate him or herself from the collective status quo as stubborn, arrogant, selfish, and dangerous is conveyed routinely in CSI: NY as a fundamental explanation of criminal motivation; in portrayals of solitary investigators as untrustworthy; and in the eccentric and hedonistic New Yorkers encountered during the process of investigation. The dignity and veracity of individual judgment is downplayed, while technology and the mutual support and scrutiny of the team framework are celebrated in a simple, ideologically affirmative process. Anonymous, holistic surveillance consoles mass fears over complex threats at the same time as the shared responsibility of the five-strong detective team attempts to assuage fears over the threats to liberty posed by the expanse of surveillance and data-recording. The detective function persists in that CSI: NY answers crime fiction’s essential narrative drives to explain mystery, to console readers, and to control deviance. However, the individual detective figure is replaced by a collective control mechanism distinct from the innumerable iterations of the post-Second World War police procedural drama, with its emphasis upon the hard-working, ordinary investigator working in the context of the legal framework and manifold corruptions of state institutions, most recently perfected in HBO’s Baltimore-based crime series, The Wire (2002-08). Relinquishing the counter-ideological potential of such detective figures, who may be willing to break the law to achieve a personal moral objective or a just solution that corrupt state institutions are unwilling or unable to pursue, CSI: NY boasts a patriotic, “Just Trust Us” policy with its morally standardized team which, as this essay will later suggest, displays a military unit dynamic and which uses team powers in uncritical support of the state and the collective status quo.

This essay’s first section will discuss how the suppression of the individual is achieved, paying particular attention to the mutual scrutiny of the team and the
dependence upon techno-science, which enables the investigators to achieve a level of detachment, suppress their individualistic urges, and abnegate themselves in the pursuit of collective team goals. The postmodern and political-legal context will be reaffirmed, leading in the second section to a discussion of how militaristic techno-science is offered as consolation for mass fears, and how this shapes *CSI: NY*’s development of the figure of the detective.

I.

In order to approach the dismantling of the individual, it is fitting to begin with the corpse. Rather than a routinely melancholic find, considerable humor and camp grotesquery is achieved through the absurdity of killings (spearling by a swordfish, for example) or the materials found in autopsy (including a complete, undigested baby octopus). Gruesome, invasive procedures are common, with crash zooms into the degraded matter of the corpse interspersed with shots of investigators taking palpable pleasure in the task of dissection. There is an egalitarian aspect to this fun-loving reduction of innumerable lives to the materials of laboratory machinery, such that, underlying the upbeat, offhand portrayal of human remains, *CSI: NY* reflects an archaic association of *memento mori*, and the exhortation to worldly humility. Collective values are expressed in the fact that each murder merits equal expenditure of energy, police-time, and technological resources, irrespective of the perceived social importance of the victim or high-profile nature of the crime. The crime laboratory is not underfunded or backlogged, and the CSI team leader pays little heed to economic concerns: when he tests a new high-tech facial reconstruction device, he merely quips: “Looks expensive. Did I sign a PO for this?” (2.20 “Run Silent, Run Deep”). The message is that each case will be treated dispassionately and as a unit, although there are of course many inconsistencies. Christiana Gregoriou, in her recent study on the language and rhetoric of serial killer narratives, notes how a hierarchy of victim “deservedness” is established with notable consistency across a spectrum of criminal narratives. In keeping with her findings, *CSI: NY* cedes greater dignity to younger and more naïve female victims, while judgments upon the lifestyles of more “deserving” victims are made explicit. Nonetheless, the program’s episodic structure and limited overarching cases tends to resist empathy and promote a professional and scientific detachment founded on the fundamental comparability of each case. Although, of course, the complete success rate of *CSI: NY*’s investigators makes such compromises tolerable, it is the shared responsibility of victims (or more practically,
their families) not to expect their cases to receive unique attention.

Attempts to resist individualism in CSI: NY are particularly striking in the show’s indifference to civil liberties. The investigators’ willingness to interrupt and intervene in the private lives of suspects and witnesses demonstrates that they have the capacity to open the world up to instantaneous scrutiny, at the same time as they assert their right to do so. Of course, the romantic individualist detective figure, sure of his/her insight and abilities, frequently ignores the law in pursuit of a case. However, the interventions of the investigators in CSI: NY serve less to highlight their personal transcendence of the law and more to enforce the law, the message being that such powers should be within the remit of the state collective. Much of the moral ambiguity of the long detective tradition is thereby lost, or rather, stifled. The audience is encouraged to find consolation in the morally upstanding team and their collective efforts, and to distrust all suspects. The investigators trick, threaten or bribe these suspects in order to search their homes or property; warrants are seldom used, and investigators are able to access comprehensive databases and pull up detailed personal records at the touch of a button. The ethics of these interventions are not portrayed as problematic; indeed, they are often made with a defiant sense of moral justification. In “Stealing Home” the team leader Mac goads a witness into slapping him, gloating with his colleague that he has tricked her into assault so he can take forensic samples from her, which he would otherwise have no legal right to do. So too, in CSI: NY, it is suggested that the innocent have no need of civil rights. When a suspect provides a convincing alibi, the investigator responds, “You won’t mind giving me a DNA sample, then?” (2.23 “Heroes”), effectively blackmailing an unlikely suspect for the purpose of accumulating a greater store of DNA for the database. Again, this is not displayed as problematic. In a consistently Manichean stance, CSI: NY isolates the independent and resistant individual as a particular threat to their mission. Those witnesses who do have lawyers obstinately defending their rights to avoid questioning are portrayed as either financially privileged, egocentric or suspicious potential deviants. Indeed, the most dubious trait of one villain, a multiple rapist, is the fact that he has employed a highly skilled lawyer, and that together they refuse to provide the investigators with forensic evidence without comprehensive legal justification. A conservative strain can be detected in its insistence upon physical and ideological collaboration with the executive and legal system CSI: NY endorses—the U.S. state in the midst of the “War on Terror.” An impatience with egotistic individualism, and its association with criminal excess, underlies CSI: NY’s unproblematic enforcement of the security of the collective. This comes without any interrogation of whether that
collective system works or whether their own—if not extra-legal, then at least
generous interpretations of their own rights to enforce the law—constitutes an
excess which acts to undercut it.

In an interesting instance of counter-ideological posturing, CSI: NY
emphasizes a moral disinterest in the immediate and concomitant costs of
investigation. In order to make the accumulation of forensic evidence possible, the
crime scene catalyzes a point of suspension in the city-in-motion, which must be
solved in order to allow the city to flow once again. When a crime has occurred, the
scene is taped off, commerce and traffic stops. “Can you give me the dead guy’s
address? I want to send his family flowers just to say, thanks for ruining a day’s
business,” complains one unsympathetic local, who is quickly reprimanded by the
investigators (2.14 “Stuck on You”). In a city dominated by rampant neoliberalism,
the crime scene is economic irrationality exemplified, demanding a cessation of
economic activity and costing more the longer it is kept sacrosanct. In an episode in
which a body is found on a building site, construction work continues as evidence is
photographed, causing an investigator to remark with contempt: “Looks like his
friends are all choked up about it. I guess the building must go up” (2.17
“Necrophilia Americana”). Ostensibly, the CSIs are enforcing competing values—a
respect for human dignity, community, the innocence of bystanders, and the right of
ordinary citizens to live peacefully. Of more thematic importance is their resistance
to the pervasive possessive individualism which governs the city’s work ethic and
its drive to greater productivity and accumulation. This has less to do with anything
resembling socialist critique than an impatience with self-interest claiming priority
over collective security as enforced by the executive.

Individual economic trajectories are shown to be delimited by the higher
powers of law enforcement, and must work in that context irrespective of the
indignation or sense of entitlement of the business-people who complain. Such
figures receive little sympathy, and indeed their displays of self-interest and egotism
are on a plane with the motivations of CSI: NY’s killers, who are often cultural, as
well as criminal, deviants. In its lust for depicting the quirks and perversions of up-
to-the-minute and exclusive urban vogues—whether it be subway surfing, urban
golf or invitation-only cuddle parties—CSI: NY adopts a highly accessible tone of
common-sense skepticism. Investigators act as a mainstay against the hype of
cosmopolitan activity with the crime scene functioning as a platform from which to
offer a pragmatic critique of the potential excesses of often baffling subcultures. For
example, in an episode set in Harlem, the gentrification of notoriously neglected
areas, previously unfrequented by more wealthy New Yorkers, provides the context
for a killing. A trend-spotter from a Madison Avenue fashion label is found beaten and murdered. On his camera phone are hundreds of pictures of one eccentrically dressed, stylish local girl who, despite her poverty, marks her individuality by designing and modifying her own clothes. For the trend-spotter, this girl is the “next hot thing” and he intends to copy the designs and make a fortune from “street-cool.” However, a local designer, himself a member of the Harlem community, has also been using the girl for inspiration. He murders the trend-spotter not just to protect his source, but in disgust at the encroachment of wealthy outsiders repackaging the street-look to sell to consumers from the Upper East Side: “This is my neighborhood, my street, my people. Him and his big corporation raking in millions off the ingenuity and style of those poor kids,” he explains heroically. The irony is, of course, that this is something the murderer himself has become rich through doing. “You in your $3,000 suit,” an investigator replies, “You sold out your neighborhood, and your people” (2.16 “Cool Hunter”). In this case, the suffering of the murder victim is supplanted by a romantic defense of the intellectual property rights of an ingenuous beauty, whose resourcefulness in adversity is made to speak to a uniquely American spirit of modest, demotic enterprise. The deluded murderer’s self-interest and egotism have moved him outside of the community which he claims to represent, and he has taken to exploiting his people for gain, in effect opening up the collective to threats of wider exploitation. Such hubris, coupled with his sense of heroic individualism, is the essence of his criminality, a moral message which the investigators enforce in their everyman role and in their identification with the collective of “real people” who form a backdrop to the story.

The common-person persona of the investigators has undoubtedly contributed to CSI: NY’s considerable popularity; however, it is worth recognizing its limitations in order to adequately define both the show’s ideological commitments and its resistance to individualism. The investigators’ sympathy tends to reside with a consciously defined class of regular, hard-working, low paid, and unassuming people from whose moral order the investigators claim to draw their collective authority. However, attempts to upset the status quo or to exceed one’s station through an act of self-interested scheming, rather than a gradual process of humble exertion, meet with disapproval. This is because of the show’s assertion that individualism is a form of moral perversion which underpins most crimes. So much is suggested in the episode “Risk” in which a subway conductor is mocked and harassed by drunk, spoilt college kids. They pull the emergency cords and open the train’s doors, making his train late and endangering his relationship with his employers. When one boy spits in his face, he loses his temper and batters the other
boy to death. The conductor attempts to justify his crime as follows: “You ever had anybody spit in your face, Detective? I’ve been hit by soda bottles, cans, called every name in the book. . . . I make $43,000 a year to keep the city moving. People depend on these trains and me for their livelihood, but who’s got my back? Who cares about the working man?” The investigator replies, “I did. Until you broke the law” (2.13). The conductor’s movement from moral conviction to immoral excess is cleanly accomplished through an ideological commitment to maintaining the collective status quo as enforced by the investigators. Some sympathy will be offered to the worker, reminded daily and viscerally of their lowly position within the collective, but when they lash out violently the sympathy stops, along with any possibility of social or economic critique or a more nuanced view of the causes of crime.

Having established CSI: NY’s intolerance of excess and egotism, and its insistence that witnesses and criminals conform to the self-effacing moral pool of the collective, this essay will now turn to the figure of the detective in order to assess how the heroic individualism of this figure is dismantled in a manner that separates CSI: NY from its contemporaries, with implications for the long tradition of detection. As was mentioned previously, CSI: NY presents a different figure of detective to similar successful North America crime dramas such as NYPD Blue (1993-2005), The Shield (2002-08), and The Wire (2002-08), which all manifest an ambivalence to legal and executive structures by representing the difficulties individuals face in the context of underfunded, corrupt or mismanaged institutions. As is especially the case in The Wire, in these dramas detectives must frequently break or bend the written law, tapping into restricted systems, finding devious ways to convict, planting evidence and assaulting or courting criminals when standard detection cannot provide resolution. Detectives—although working within a police team or detail—in many cases have a personal, overriding moral code which to them justifies transgressions of the written law and the interests of the penal system, as well as the trust of other members of their own team and the overriding institutional framework. While the shortcomings of such crusades are both readily apparent—and thematically central to The Wire, which responds to the demise of the “heroic” McNulty with a mingled sense of exasperation and loss—CSI: NY treats the rejection of such heroic individualism as a moral necessity. In its ideal, methods of government control are aligned with unquestionable moral superiority; the concord between investigators and the institution is asserted, and each investigation is succinctly brought to a close, thereby emphasizing that the state works and is both technically and ethically competent in protecting the collective.
The benefits of the collective investigation team over the heroic individual detective are emphasized in a case that over-arches CSI: NY’s second season. This involves investigator Aiden Burn, who becomes increasingly frustrated when the multiple rapist and murderer D. J. Pratt repeatedly avoids justice due to a lack of forensic evidence at each of the crime scenes. Although Aiden’s efforts in the case are initially supported by the team leader, Mac Taylor, her obsession with prosecuting Pratt eventually turns into a moral crusade, which inspires her to tamper with the evidence by planting DNA in order to incriminate Pratt (2.2). As well as contravening the fundamentally pure structural position of the evidence, Aiden’s deviance demonstrates a dangerous belief in her individual insight which motivates her to transgress the law and her corporate role. This inevitably leads to her losing her job, which (aside from imprisonment) is the ultimate suppression of her individual excess that the institution is capable of bestowing. Already committed to her campaign for justice, she then takes on the role of solitary investigator, tracking, monitoring, and photographing Pratt using consumer technologies and her own dwindling financial resources. Finally, when Aiden believes that Pratt is on the verge of committing an offence, she intervenes, only to find herself his intended murder victim and to suffer a painful death in a burning car. Operating alone and without the protection of the team, Aiden certainly resembles a “lonely questing figure,” but is by no means either “a hero” or the embodiment of “an absolute value” (Knight 28). Instead, she appears vulnerable, unprofessionally enmeshed and dangerously single-minded. When her apartment is searched, the materials she has accumulated on Pratt using her rudimentary resources seem pathetic and pathological, resembling the photographic and newspaper archives accumulated by serial killers in numerous cinematic representations, and occasionally in CSI: NY itself. Although the team of investigators is moved by Aiden’s commitment to the case, a subtle sense of repulsion from her as rogue figure is mingled with the suspicion that an unarticulated mental unbalance might have motivated her campaign.

Aiden’s death and its investigation take place, however, in an episode entitled “Heroes,” and it is through a posthumous forensic “conversation” that she is brought back into the fold of the mutual, moral, and methodical reinforcement of the team. When Aiden’s burnt and unrecognizable corpse becomes grist for the mill of the CSI laboratory, investigators are startled to realize that before she died, Aiden made sure that sufficient forensic evidence would be left for the investigators to prosecute Pratt. Her courage and her selflessness, coupled with her understanding of the scientific capacities of the team and their obligation to work within a demanding
judicial framework, account for why and how she can now come to be recognized as a hero. It is not through her amateurish, solitary investigation that she achieves her heroic status, but through the—in her case absolute—disintegration of her body and individuated self, and the reconnection with collective goals, limitations, and responsibilities. To reconnect this narrative to the series’ political context, it is worth noting that the specific complaint of rights activists against the Patriot Act was the danger that a lack of transparency and a massive expansion of the right of executive authorities to hold suspects on minimal evidence would mean that the effort spent on evidence acquisition and evidence testing would be significantly diminished. On these grounds, it might be possible to form the basis of an argument for CSI: NY as a critical narrative, which asserts that the expansion of such executive authority can only be justified by the actual conformation of executive authorities to pre-existing legal structures which protect the rights of suspects. In the Aiden–Pratt storyline, this would translate as the investigator’s demand that evidence actually exist, and stand up to rigorous legal testing and collective scrutiny, in a manner that was not being reflected in the real-world detention of terror suspects by a secretive elite. I would argue, however, that CSI: NY’s recognizable impatience with rights-oriented individuals, its patriotic commitment to the military (which will be discussed in greater detail below), and its unproblematic, affirmative stance on the suppression of crime all make such a critical stance unlikely. Aiden’s transgression may hint at a “crack” or contradiction in the story’s ideology which, as Knight asserts, is discernible in other socially conservative, affirmative generic iterations. In cases such as that of the Newgate Calendar, which affirmed divine means of testing and punishing criminals, Knight notes certain contradictions in the stories which almost accidently undermine their own commitment to the ideology of divine control. Although the ideology is thereby put under strain, the narrative works to deny this—“[t]he plotting recognizes reality, but this does not impinge on the ideology” (Knight 15). In CSI: NY, mutual scrutiny, the collection of hard evidence, and identification with the moral order of the collective all affirm the ideology that is under strain and, rather than setting an example to less meticulous executive authorities, claim to reflect the real meticulousness of the authorities it portrays.

A corporate, not a private eye, is the model for the CSI: NY’s contemporary detective. Satisfying a political framework of mutual scrutiny and the ideological submission of the individual to the needs of the group, it attests to an inevitably postmodern recognition of perceptual heterogeneity and the loss of faith in the privileged experience of the individual. The second issue relates to the use of
technologies, which will be discussed in this essay’s second section. In regards to the first issue, the benefits of the collective, group model are emphasized both in the parallel investigation to Aiden’s in the episode “Heroes,” which shares the fact that the highest ranking investigator and team leader, Detective Mac Taylor, served in the Marine Corps. Upon learning of the murder of a Marine, Mac expresses his commitment to solving the case, stating, “When you attack one of us, you attack us all” (2:23). Mac’s solidarity is with the Marines, and he becomes emotionally invested in the case, even brushing aside the assault of a street hawker committed by Marines whilst on shore leave, despite the fact that in other episodes investigators frequently pursue minor charges encountered during an investigation—something of a blow to the team’s “Just Trust Us” policy. What is imparted is that heroism only has meaning within a self-abnegating unit: a team model which is treated as a microcosm of the social collective. As much as the team strives to idolize Mac (the only potential “detective” figure that CSI: NY presents), he has already alienated his agency to an elite military body in which the subject becomes a unit—a highly skilled unit, but a unit nonetheless. CSI: NY thus creates continuity between military and civilian elements of state security forces, at the same time as it departs from figures of solitary genius and heroism. Mac’s privileged experience is that endorsed and propagated by the state; his understanding, capacity to unify, and moral code are derived from a higher body. Likewise, his corporate role as a Marine is mimicked in his practice as an investigator. Acting as a friend and role model, he is technically as capable as any of his four protégés, and any particular specialist insight is subject to the same processes of testing and verification as theirs. Equipped with varying personal skills and different cultural and professional experience, these younger investigators frequently surpass Mac, but they are by no means infallible. Excepting the example of Aiden, they do not solve a mystery through any particular sense of personal commitment or elevated insight, but through the mundane process of trial and error and through dependence on networked technologies.

II.

This essay will now turn more specifically to the role of networked technology in CSI: NY. Although it rejects “the subject supposed to know” (57), as Slavoj Žižek describes the detective figure, CSI: NY maintains the detective’s omniscient structural placement. As Žižek goes on to state, in an argument established on a Freudian/Lacanian understanding of the process of transference,
the detective is a figure who “solely by means of his presence” at the crime scene, with its “diversity of clues, of meaningless, scattered details with no obvious pattern,” provides structural resolution in that he “guarantees that all these details will retroactively acquire meaning” (58). CSI: NY’s reluctance to place a subject in this role and function can be accounted for, as is suggested above, firstly by its readiness to recognize the processing capacities of the individual as impotent within conditions of postmodern complexity and heterogeneity, and secondly by its sensitivity to the political demands of a militarized social collective, for whom the primary significance of the individual is as a source of complex deviance and instability, as borne out in legislative responses to the random threat of global networked terrorism.

In regards to postmodernism, it is fair to say that the flippant, existentially disintegrative and occasionally despairing rejections of the detective-hero, or the experimentations with meaning absence, manifold perspectives, free-floating subject positions, and kitsch eclecticism found in the postmodern forays into detective fiction of the nouveau roman—Paul Auster’s The New York Trilogy (1985) or the bizarre police procedurals of Fred Vargas, for instance—find only minimal cross-over with the CSI: NY narrative. CSI: NY frequently shares the ironic detachment characteristic of much postmodern cultural production, but nonetheless guarantees that epistemological and ontological uncertainties will be resolved despite the central ambiguity of individual insight and the undeniable chaos and complexity of the world it explores. CSI: NY is not “postmodern” in the ways suggested above, but it certainly responds to the opacity and high density heterogeneity of the city, offering consolation through control of the very technologies that contribute to complicating the urban. Material dissection, sample-taking, measurement, taxonomization, chemical analysis, and data cross referencing are just some of the many tools the investigators use to overcome ambiguity, indeterminacy, and flux. The “subject supposed to know” is withdrawn, but the hyper-confidence of investigators in manipulating techno-science is put forth as a solution. In each episode, facts are collected by these investigators and then fed into the show’s actual star—“the system,” the accumulated network of personal records, geophysical data, ballistic, genetic, and material information through which the investigators process and match the evidence of crime. The solution is found in the connection of all these details together, something which only the network can do.

Two examples of exceptions to the network-dependent detection formula will be most effective in articulating how far CSI: NY departs from the heroic individual detective. The first occurs when an investigator chooses to reconstruct the face of a
skull in the old-fashioned way, using markers and clay to form the basis of a sketch, instead of using the department’s high-tech facial recognition software (2.23 “Heroes”). When his hand-made composition appears to show the face of his former colleague Aiden, he switches to the expensive equipment for assurance that his potentially inaccurate finding is the truth. Working considerably faster than the investigator, the machine quickly rebuilds the face from the bone structure, then digitalizes the facial coordinates into a sequence of information which it cross-references with the department’s enormous store of facial records, eventually matching the skull to a photograph of Aiden. While the machine turns potential human error into shocking fact, it is inconceivable that the investigator would use the hand-sketch method to confirm the machine’s findings. The fallibility of human judgment is not shared by technology, which can only process, compute, and order data. A second illustrative example occurs in the episode “Trapped,” in which an investigator gets locked in a sealed “panic room” with a dead body and must process the evidence before it deteriorates, using “old fashioned methods” (2.11). Numerous citations to Sherlock Holmes enliven the episode, and suggest that the privileged experience of the individual, or the genius of a gifted reasoned, may still be able to threaten the technocratic dominance of the networked detective. However, even the appearance of a suspect smoking a calabash pipe cannot disguise the fact that the crime is solved by networked technologies rather than deduction or personal expertise. The investigator makes a copy of fingerprints using Sellotape, then holds his find up to a CCTV camera within the room for the investigators outside to take a digital photograph from the viewing screen. The technological, bureaucratic, and surveillance matrix can then reassert its dominance, leaving the now irrelevant investigator sealed in and waiting for the locksmiths. In both of these cases, technologies come to perform the function of the detective, with the human investigators acting as mediators between the chaos of the crime scene and the order of the system. The fallibility of hands-on forensics, the vulnerability of the lone crusader, and the deductive vacuity of the isolated investigator all contribute to the deposing of anachronistic heroic detectives and their supersession by a vast network of data and computerized resources with no central operator.

In order to fully assess the role of technology in postmodernization and its representation in CSI: NY, it is necessary to conclude this essay by looking at cybernetics, or “information theory,” which provides the series’ specific technoscientific paradigm. Cybernetics, put simply, is a science of communication and control. It gained in prominence as the networked computer, with its capacity to store and order data, to rationalize complex details into manageable units of
“information” and to share data with other networked devices, came to be the prevailing scientific paradigm in the U.S. in the years following the Second World War. This rise was synchronous with what Steven Best and Douglas Kellner recognize as a central facet of the postmodern perspective: the view of the world as “composed of complex, dynamic, interrelated, and holistic processes rather than of simple, static, discrete, and atomistic mechanisms” (103). Best and Kellner describe postmodernism itself as “a constellation marked by the coevolution and co-construction of science, technology, corporate capitalism, and the military” (57): the increased research, spending, and reliance upon computer and information systems, satellites, and communications which has been central to the late twentieth-century reworking of capitalism. In its military application, the premise and ideal of cybernetics theory was that warfare be subject to a state of full control, automation, and predictability. With enough data, and enough computer intelligence to analyze it, cyberneticists asserted that the underlying order of any seemingly chaotic situation could be made tangible. Technologies were developed which aimed to turn the world into a charted, predictable, and total surveillance territory, the most lasting and most currently used of which is the USA’s NavStar GPS system. GPS and its synchronized technologies would, cybernetics enthusiasts hoped, enable commanders to “find, fix or track and target—in near real-time—anything of consequence that moves upon or is located on the face of the Earth” (Air Force Chief of Staff Ronald Fogleman, qtd. in Bousquet 217).

The penetration of this paradigm and these technologies in civilian life are most striking in the ubiquitous applications of GPS, of which CSI: NY makes considerable use. Architectural obstacles to totality which defined the complexity of the metropolis in modern crime writing are effortlessly overcome, both through panning, in-flight shots of the city which zoom in to a relevant office or apartment window, and through the frequent use of the GPS collage, a patch-work of multiple satellite photographs which together create an aerial map. Shots frequently involve crash zooming into this map, expressing the capacity that such technologies afford to locate a suspect at any given time. GPS data from mobile phones, SatNavs, and security devices installed in cars are combined with digital photography to create “moving maps” which can plot an individual’s course through the city. Indeed, this conceit is perfected in the case of a murdered blind girl who is found in possession of a Braille GPS tracker, a device which annunciates its exact position in space to its user to help them move around the city, even giving specific details such as address and floor within a building. The tracker also records previous coordinates, making it possible to generate a retrospective map charting her course “from
apartment to death” (2.2 “Grand Murder at Central Station”). By following these coordinates, the detectives reconstruct her route and encounter the individual who killed her. The GPS tracker enables the complete charting of space and the fixing of an individual unit within it at any given instant, the exposure of the city to effortless navigation with limited human error, and a complete recording, all of which conform to the cybernetics paradigm and demonstrate the superiority of networked technologies in controlling crime above individual deduction and the collation of eyewitness accounts.

The movement away from the solitary modern detective figure—able to fix identity and locate an individual in an over-populated and confusing, but fundamentally knowable, modern city—to a network of individuals and technologies able to console in a complex and increasingly interlocked age, attests to CSI: NY’s acceptance of the cybernetics paradigm. Recognizing that the world is seen to be “composed of interlocking systems amenable to formal mathematical analysis” (Edwards 138-39), real-world physical relations and material qualities are abstracted into units of “information” and then subjected to organization and control. In each episode of CSI: NY reams of data are fed into computers, and simulation models run to decide how a crime was committed and under what conditions the crime was possible. A compliant and infinitely forthcoming forensic database means that identities are instantaneously located from fragmentary traces. If modernity, as defined by the historian Arnold J. Toynbee, is as one with humanism, which recognizes human beings as “the basis of knowledge and action” (Malpas 33), then CSI: NY’s ideological commitment to the superiority of networked technologies may denote that the “posthuman” turn to other basis for knowledge and action may have found its articulation in crime fiction (while, of course, its application in science fiction has been widely discussed). An epistemological shift of the kind may help to account for CSI: NY’s considerable reliance upon processing. Certainly, the limited regard paid to the individual in CSI: NY attests to a significant overlap with cybernetics theories. According to the political theorist Antoine Bousquet, compared to the formidable processing power of computers, the judgments of individual generals came to be seen as suspect in the post-Second World War years. With commanders acting as overseers of automated technologies and instantaneous, continuous responsive mechanisms, “Combat experience and traditional common wisdom of the military were thus devalued” (148). The cybernetics context can help account for the processing role adopted by investigators in CSI: NY, as well as the largely pastoral role of Mac Taylor, whose expertise as a manager of and friend to his elite team far outbalances his responsibilities as a coordinator of their
investigations. Both attest to the general diminishing of reliance upon the individual as a source of privileged experience and broad perspective.

In an era of mass paranoia over the threat of networked terrorism, the totalizing fantasies of the war gamers and their optimistic belief in the organizing capacities of computer systems may appear both naïve and insufficient. Such, at least, is the view of Bousquet, who marks a change in the U.S. military policy sparked by the failure of cybernetics models in the U.S. invasion of Vietnam, new paradigms founded on sciences of chaos and the rise of the Internet. The premise that chaos underlies complexity and that chaos can be used to combat chaos has led Bousquet to predict that chaoplexic “swarm” models located in the paradigm of non-linear sciences will alter military policy through the synthesis of high technologies with the capacity of decentralized, non-hierarchical networks to act towards a strategic, but tactically disorganized, goal. CSI: NY, although far from imagining a “chaoplexic” detective, offers a reassuring response to this perceived complex threat in its portrayal of a technologically competent security force. Asserting the need to penetrate and survey proliferating global networks, it situates itself ideologically alongside the U.S. policy which saw a reworking of privacy laws, which were themselves justified by such a threat. The liberal bourgeois individual, whose primacy is necessarily effected by legal alterations, is imagined in CSI: NY not as a heroic or romantic wanderer, but as a potential deviant open to unpredictable acts of egotism and excess. The modern detective who was formed as the individual par excellence is fragmented into a more ideologically pertinent team of self-abnegating “everyman” workers, whose interest lies in promoting the interests of the collective status quo, as well as the notion of the status quo as aligned with the interests of the collective. Taken together, all of these developments have considerable impact upon the long detective tradition, suggesting that the immensely popular CSI: NY shares certain of the fundamental concerns of “high” postmodern forms at the same time as it builds a conservative, ideologically-reinforcing narrative out of the very chaos and uncertainty that inspires it.

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