Seeing is Believing:

CSI, Serial Mortality, and the Discourse of True Vision

Aviva Dove-Viebahn
Program of Film Studies
University of Northern Colorado, USA

Abstract
This essay considers the fascination and seduction of death as it is portrayed in the long-running American crime show *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (CBS, 2000-present), exploring the relatively recent trend in and popularity of crime procedurals in which death, dying, and violence are repetitively enacted. *CSI*’s narrative and visual form both suggest that the more investigators repeat, the closer they arrive to truth and justice. As with the episodic imperative of narrative television more generally, *CSI*’s repetitive drive offers eventual visual gratification for its viewers while situating them in a discourse of true vision—or, vision as truth—in which the show’s investigators also circulate. This essay ties these specific interrogations of *CSI* to an articulation of the concept of the televisual gaze, a scopic function that derives its meaning from the subject imagining herself as part of a field of other gazers and gazes.

Keywords
television, the gaze, crime, truth, repetition, visual pleasure, spectatorship
Introduction

Rendering truths is part and parcel of television’s *modus operandi*, whether these “truths” are fictionalized self-contained narratives (i.e., episodic television) or so-called reality. We need not look only to the example of reality television to consider the ways in which contemporary television handles truth in representation. That these televisual representations are incomplete or deceptive is no small wonder, as part of television’s appeal is its ability to hold up a shiny, self-contained mirror on the world, offering a fantasy version of reality more appealing, more exciting, more adventurous, more entertaining, more humorous, more erotic, or simply more compelling than the ostensibly humdrum lived reality of the day-to-day. On the one hand, this mirror offers viewers a bridge between actual (banal) reality and the heightened realism television affords. On the other hand, this bridge has a sizeable flaw: truth is a specious ideal and, hence, its representation is all but impossible. While truth is already a form of fiction, I contend that this fissure between reality and televisual realism and the tension between representational fiction and actual truth are fundamental aspects of televisual pleasure, or the pleasure of being a spectator of television. These manifestations of truth, fiction, and representation are intimately connected to vision as a salient element of television’s significance as a medium. Therefore, in this essay, I engage in a twofold analysis of the televisual through the popular American crime show *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (CBS, 2000-present). In my analysis, *CSI* and the mode of investigative visual mastery it highlights functions as a case study of a more expansive interrogation of televisual spectatorship, the viewer’s position in relationship to characters’ visual acuity and the structuring of the televisual gaze, which I further explicate below. Parallel to these concerns, this essay also considers the visual techniques of the show, in particular its fascination with the repetitive rendering of death, violence, and crime, and articulates how these techniques speak to the dichotomy between truth and representation.

The Discourse of True Vision

In the opening anecdote of his seminal text *Vision and Painting*, Norman Bryson retells a paradigmatic story in the history of Western art and visual culture. First recorded in Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*, the tale recounts a competition between two Greek painters, Zeuxis and Parrhasius, and acts as a parable of art’s continued development towards greater and greater veracity in the imitation of
nature through representation. As Pliny describes it, Zeuxis challenged his rival Parrhasius to a competition: which man could paint the more realistic representation? Zeuxis’s entry, painted grapes, was so lifelike that birds flew down from the trees to peck at the false fruit. Emboldened by what he felt was his sure victory, Zeuxis asked Parrhasius to draw back the curtain over his frame and reveal his painting, only to find that Parrhasius’s curtain was, in fact, his painting—a masterful trompe l’oeil—and that there was nothing beneath the represented cloth. Graciously, Zeuxis conceded to Parrhasius’s superiority; while he may have deceived the birds, Parrhasius had deceived a fellow artist (Bryson 1). When Zeuxis mistakes Parrhasius’s painted curtain for actual fabric, he exposes not only the deceit possible in the field of vision, but also the dilemma of representation as truth. Seeing may beget believing, but visual faith usually proves to be a false promise. In the Greek story, Parrhasius’s victory does not stem entirely from his ability to trick his rival. Instead, his triumph sets up a hierarchy of vision, as Parrhasius demonstrates visual as well as artistic mastery. Here, the discourse of true vision becomes a hierarchical model of knowledge through which those “in the know” have the power to correctly interpret visual signs while those without that level of skill may be left in the dark. As a crime procedural in which experts, analysts, and the otherwise uniquely-skilled attempt to “learn the truth” and identify those who are guilty, CSI serves as an excellent model for the discourse of true vision and its televisual function and effects.

The investigative pursuit as depicted on television relies on truth, in general, and visual truth, especially, as lawyers, detectives and/or forensic experts must demonstrate the criminal’s identity and motive beyond a shadow of a doubt. Whereas in Zeuxis’s case visual truth is a fallacy—his skill as an artist cannot match Parrhasius’s and hence he does not recognize his competitor’s deception—in the crime procedural, investigators rely on their own visual mastery to aid them in their pursuit of justice. The discourse of true vision frames the way the investigator eventually catches the criminal and how evidence and what it means are presented to the viewer. This discourse also speaks to the role of the viewer in relation to the televisual object; television, and crime shows especially, give spectators the tools to participate (passively) in the narrative, identifying with the show’s characters and drawing their own conclusions from the clues provided.

CSI, which began airing on CBS in 2000 and has sparked two spin-offs, follows the lives and work of an ensemble cast of forensic experts. In its first nine seasons, consummate scientist Gil Grissom (William Petersen) leads the CSI graveyard shift in Las Vegas; his near-obsessive rapture with evidence and the
stories it has to tell is both tempered and supported by his team, from the empathetic Catherine Willows (Marg Helgenberger) and boyishly eager Nick Stokes (George Eads) to the no-nonsense Sara Sidle (Jorja Fox) and a wry, hard-bitten detective, Jim Brass (Paul Guilfoyle), to name a few. Each episode showcases another unexplained death or deaths which the CSIs scrutinize and explore from every angle. The superior interpretative capabilities of CSI’s investigators and their heightened ability to visually reconstruct each crime scene are contingent upon an empirical hegemony: the accuracy and dependability of forensic equipment and the scientific method. Martha Gever associates this faith in science in part with a cultural obsession with the supposed veracity of digital and other forms of technology. CSI enforces this idea through the “magical property of photography: a visualization technology associated with the idea of unmediated truth” (Gever 456). As each investigator discovers new pieces of evidence, visualizations in the form of flashbacks walk viewers and other investigators through a revised version of the crime, showing what might have happened and how the evidence supports each theory. New evidence begets new flashbacks, new versions of the story that are ostensibly truer with every telling. Rarely, if ever, does the evidence in CSI lie—although occasionally a clever criminal is able to plant evidence slyly enough to trick even the eagle eyes of the inexorable Grissom, at least for a little while.

CSI relies on extraordinary techniques of visual reconstruction to relay evidentiary support for the investigators’ findings and to convince “outsiders” of the nature of the crime and its perpetrators. Crime scene investigators can see what others cannot see, while outsiders need to be enlightened and persuaded. Importantly, the role of outsider includes not only a string of law enforcement officials, jury members, lawyers, and judges, but also the show’s viewers, who at the very least expect to be entertained, as well as being simultaneously integrated into the investigative process. One aspect of CSI’s display of mastery is its focus on forensic technology and the “CSI shot,” a term used to describe the way the camera often zooms into the body of the victim, graphically replaying the impact of a murder weapon on splintering bones or the rupturing walls and arteries of vital organs. Sue Tait elaborates that the CSI shot “render[s] the effects of violence within the body. What happens within the body as violence occurs has previously escaped visual representation” (54; emphasis in original). The CSI shot allows

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1 While the cast of CSI has changed significantly over the most recent few seasons, these are a few of the characters who make up the original core cast. All of the episodes I discuss in this chapter are from before Season Eight, when the cast began to shift dramatically.
viewers to see things that are not apprehensible with normal vision, explicitly marking television’s capacity for representing the unrepresentable. Of course, any visual medium with imaginative capabilities, including art and film, can represent things normally invisible or inapprehensible to the naked eye; fiction, especially when paired with digital technology and computer-enhanced graphics, offers up an infinite palette for rendering new worlds and otherwise impossible points of view. However, the *CSI* shot is persistently affiliated on the show with notions of visual truth and desire. In their discussion of *CSI* vis-à-vis the conventions of pornography, Elke Weissmann and Karen Boyle identify the *CSI* shot as an element of the show that “divorced from the fictional narrative . . . [offers] a unique and privileged access to the ‘truth’ of the crime” (93). Its recurring use renders it a mode of viewing, a way of seeing; the *CSI* shot represents not a one-time trick of the camera, but a special intellectual skill of *CSI*’s investigators. By employing trademark techniques—such as the *CSI* shot; montages of complicated scientific procedures and the close examination of evidence; and continuously-repeated images of investigators looking, peering, staring, and squinting at crime scenes, down microscopes, and across metal interrogation tables—*CSI* urges its viewers to imagine not only what the human eye can see if we would only look but also what television can be, what it should be, and what it can show us if we would only watch.

**A Tale of Three Gazes**

*CSI*’s investigators can see things others cannot. Years of training have taught them to visualize how the velocity, force, and shape of a knife, for example, might penetrate and shatter a victim’s sternum. So, too, television trains its viewers to construct, identify with, and share in its *trompe l’oeils*, narrative or otherwise. It is not a new argument to say that television sets up a reciprocal relationship between viewers and its characters or narratives. The television viewer enacts a mode of participatory spectatorship and visual identification while acting, consciously or unconsciously, as part of a community of other viewers. Despite the fact that television is most often viewed by people alone or in small groups, in the relative comfort and privacy of their own homes, no television viewer is deluded into thinking they are a show’s only audience. I contend that part of the pleasure of viewing television is this sense of community, whether imagined or actual—a sense of dialogue with an unknown, and often unseen, fellow audience. In regard to *CSI*, the show serves as an explicit example of this aspect of the televisual experience,
illustrating how viewers are drawn into an economy of vision with the investigators on the show. Not only do we see what other viewers see when we watch CSI, but we also see what the investigators see, both physically (through their eyes) and intellectually (through their minds).

This aspect of television spectatorship is something unique to the medium, something I classify more specifically as the televisual gaze. Televisuality as an aesthetic concept is most notably described in John Thornton Caldwell’s seminal text *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television*, and his interrogation of the growing stylistic concerns of television in the 1980s and 1990s certainly speaks to CSI’s emphasis on spectacle and its unique visual style. While still concerned with the aesthetic nature of the medium, my use of the term televsual in relation to the gaze articulates a different facet of the medium’s effects. The televisual gaze is not about looking or being looked at. I define it as a scopic function that derives its meaning from the subject imagining herself as part of a field of others and, importantly, as part of a field of other gazers and gazes. This definition is based in large part on Jacques Lacan’s theorization of the gaze, in which he argues that the cause of consciousness in the subject, her subjectivity, also makes her a spectacle of the world. The subject does not just look, she is also looked at, incorporated into the visual experience of indefinable others: “In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it—that is what we call the gaze” (Lacan, “Gaze” 73). Contrary to the standard definition of the term, Lacan’s gaze does not directly invoke the faculty of vision; rather, it is an experience had by the subject, whether real or imagined, of being seen. Therefore, perception splits the subject, requiring a privileged position where vision is marked both within and outside the subject (80). This reciprocal positioning is fundamental to my consideration of televisuality. The gaze for Lacan does not manifest itself when the subject is seen in the eyes of others, but is revealed in how the subject envisions herself being looked at by others (84). This is the gaze that instructs my theory of the televisual gaze, a gaze that is not just looking or being looked at, but which derives its import from imagining oneself as part of a community of other looks and other gazes. On CSI, the investigators, who are ostensibly imbued with a special ability to see the evidence and the bodies of victims in ways that no one else can, share their vision with each other and with the show’s viewers. In this way, viewers are made part of the show’s economy of gazes; after all, it is not the investigators who see the flashbacks and CSI shots that they themselves envision. In my
theorizing of the televisual gaze, the spectator-subject (or a multitude of spectator-subjects) is not the only one who looks; the object looks back.

Through this model, the relationship of the televisual gaze to the investigative gaze as it is presented on CSI becomes clear. Under the auspices of the televisual gaze, viewers may imagine themselves with a special vision, able to create, negotiate, and satisfy their own desires. CSI is a prime example of television’s ability to offer the world to its viewers in a way in which it normally cannot be seen. Viewers are encouraged to believe that what they are seeing is a true representation, perhaps even more real than what we can see with the naked eye. For example, the CSI shot renders the inside of the human body visible; even though no actual investigator can see what the CSI shot illustrates, the show underscores its accuracy by presenting it as a form of scientific evidence (Weissmann and Boyle 93-94). This discourse of true vision illustrates one way in which the televisual gaze may inscribe the viewer in a position of visual mastery, aligning her pleasure and desire with that of the on-screen investigators—a pleasure manifested through technological and forensic authority in CSI.

Deviating from the trend in a long history of cop and detective shows on television in which criminal cases are systematically and rationally solved, CSI relies on the spectacle of the unseen, such as impossible views inside the human body to augment its appeal. This spectacularization of crime marks a fundamental shift in the nature of detective drama in the twenty-first century, reflecting the changing effects and affect of the televisual. As an archetype of the televised detective genre, a show like Dragnet (1951-59) may promise that “the story you are about to see is true” in a way reminiscent of the CSI investigators’ continual insistence that the “evidence doesn’t lie.” Featuring cases ripped-from-the-headlines and shot in a black and white documentary style, Dragnet offers a realistic, though still fictionalized, account of life in the LAPD. While Sue Turnbull argues that CSI and Dragnet share a common “bid for authenticity” in their “focus on documenting the work of the police,” cases on Dragnet are solved methodically, without flashy equipment or visual feints (28). Turnbull continues her comparison by arguing that

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2 The new televisual method of crime-solving evinced by CSI is also both unrealistic and specious. For example, real crime scene analysts’ jobs are very specific and they only perform a small portion of the duties assigned to CSI’s investigators: they may only work in the lab instead of also going out into the field or they only catalogue evidence instead of also interpreting it. Rarely do analysts have a direct hand in bringing criminals to justice. Forensic evidence is also not nearly as accurate as CSI might lead people to believe: some lawyers complain that juries who watch crime shows on television are automatically prejudiced towards forensic evidence, regardless of lab results’ potential margin of error. For more on this, see Tyler.
“while Dragnet offered its viewers the innovation of documentary authenticity couched in the stylistics of film noir, what CSI in all its franchises offers its viewers is the crime show as a neo-noir digital spectacle. . . . That the crimes can be solved simply by looking at the evidence as revealed through science is the compensatory fantasy on offer; a fantasy which is at the heart of the success of the show” (32). Instead of focusing on the step-by-step procedural process of detective work, CSI emphasizes the visual acuity of its forensic analysts and detectives. Scientific explorations supersede systematic process, emphasizing the spectacular over the procedural, stressing a discourse around visual representation as truth. This discourse acknowledges the gaps inherent in seeable knowledge while simultaneously imagining ways those gaps might be filled or bridged. While CSI fits the genre conventions of the crime procedural, the impetus to go visually where no one has gone before casts this show and its adapted genre conventions in a different light.3

On CSI, visual mastery is usually only extended to the forensic specialists, who can see beyond the surface of a crime scene and beyond the flesh and bone confines of the human body, whereas the police and the criminals themselves may be blind to evidence beyond the obvious. So, where do we locate television viewers in this hierarchy—viewers who can see that this “truth” is not always what it appears to be? CSI positions the spectator at the apex of its hierarchy of visual mastery: eventually, the spectator sees everything seen and unseen. This is not an arbitrary formulation. In fact, in order to envision this tripartite hierarchy of gazes evinced by the crime procedural, let me take a moment to consider Lacan’s reading of another mystery: Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Purloined Letter.” I do not want to dwell on what would ultimately be more of a tangential indulgence than a relevant comparison, except to the degree that Lacan’s critique is useful for this analysis. Briefly: in Poe’s story, a government Minister steals an incriminating letter from the Queen as she watches, unable to protest the theft without giving herself away. The police search everywhere in the Minister’s home—even going so far as to take apart chairs and inspect walls—but find nothing because they are looking for the letter as it has been described to them. When Dupin, Poe’s hero, visits the Minister under false pretenses, he immediately identifies the letter because it so starkly appears to be what it is not: a crumpled piece of refuse hidden in plain sight. Repeating the Minister’s earlier bait and switch, he steals the letter back from the Minister and leaves a facsimile, with a mocking note, in its place (Poe 3-27).

3 For a more thorough discussion of CSI’s genre conventions, see Dobson.
Lacan’s psychoanalytic account of this story is wide-reaching, but several specific aspects of his analysis are relevant here. First of all, the content of the letter does not matter—Poe never reveals what the letter says—except to the extent of its potential effect: if it falls into the wrong hands, the letter could cause a scandal, giving the Minister power over the Queen as long as he has it in his possession. What makes the story interesting is not the letter itself, but its circulation and its visibility: how characters hide it in plain sight, who can see it and who cannot, and how it comes to be purloined, not once, but twice. Similarly, crime procedural shows such as *CSI* focus on the imperative of vision, how investigators see, what they see, and how they interpret what they see, over and above the particulars of a given crime. While these shows underscore the pleasure of the process of detection, they also render the visual aspects of their narratives as an indispensable part of this process, using spectacular and extraordinary tools and methods to supplement an otherwise systematic portrayal of evidence.

Likewise, Lacan identifies three interlocking gazes in Poe’s narrative: the blinded gaze (embodied by the police who cannot see because they do not know how to look); the gaze of the person who sees that the first subject sees nothing and speciously believes that his or her secrets are safe (the Queen and, later, the Minister); and the third viewer whose gaze reveals that the prior two gazes “leave what should be hidden exposed to whomever would seize it” (embodied first by the Minister, when he steals from the Queen, and then by Dupin, when he steals from the Minister) (Lacan, “Purloined” 32). As with the play of the televisual gaze in *CSI*, the drama and, indeed, the mystery of Poe’s story emerge from the interchangeability of these viewing positions. One minute the Minister occupies the third position—he is a subject who knows—and the next moment he himself is duped by the aptly-named Dupin. With television, especially in the crime serial, the viewer cycles through a similar field of gazes. First, the episode begins and we know nothing. Then, we know what the investigators know, but often what we think we know reveals its deceit. Finally, we arrive at the third position; we know everything there is to know about the crime, not only what each investigator knows individually, but also what they all know collectively. We see the crime scene, the victim(s), the criminal, and the investigators for who and what they really are, whether they appear as described or whether they, like the purloined letter, are disguised to look like what they are not.

*CSI*, like many crime procedural shows, achieves this eventual impression of absolute knowledge through repetition. According to Lacan, “The Purloined Letter” enacts Freud’s repetition compulsion when Dupin repeats the “primal scene” of the
letter’s initial theft in the Minister’s home: he, like the Minister, finds the letter in plain sight and replaces it with a facsimile (Lacan, “Purloined” 30-31). CSI relies heavily on the visual reenactment of its own primal scenes—violent crimes and deaths—as a central facet of its narratives. This persistent re-envisioning suggests that repetition will lead the investigators closer to the truth and thereby closer to providing justice for the victim(s) and punishment for the criminal(s). In CSI, recurring, mutable flashback sequences offer alternate interpretations of the hows and whys of each crime. As investigators find evidence and interview suspects and witnesses, these objects and testimonials shift their understanding of the nature of each case. These shifts are explicitly illustrated for the television viewer as visual reconstructions of the crime which change depending on the evidence at hand and how the investigators interpret that evidence. In Poe’s story, the repetition of the primal scene allows the retrieval of the letter and establishes Dupin’s visual and intellectual mastery over both the police and the Minister. The crime procedural’s repetitive working-through of evidence functions as a strategic progression towards an ultimately unknowable but immanently inferable truth. As in Poe’s story, however, it is only through the interweaving and interchangeable perspectives and gazes of an assembly of viewer-subjects—the Queen, the Minister, the police, Dupin, and Poe’s unnamed narrator—that we can form this narrative about the search for the letter and its discovery. As I explore further below, CSI’s repeated promises of visual truth and mastery reveal how its intersection of investigative gazes underscores the communal spectatorship inherent to the concept of the televisual gaze.

CSI’s sixth season episode, “Rashomama” (episode 621)—a direct riff of Kurosawa’s 1950 film Rashômon, notable for its differing perspectives on the same crime—serves as an eloquent illustration of interchanging modes of spectatorship, the flexibility of interpretation, the ambiguity of (tele)visual truth, and the process by which criminologists work through by repeatedly re-visioning death. When the episode begins, the CSIs are in the middle of investigating the murder of criminal defense attorney Diane Chase, killed at her son’s wedding. A pit stop at a local diner turns their usual process upside down; while Nick, Sara, and lab-tech-turned-investigator Greg Sanders (Eric Szmanda) eat, Nick’s truck is stolen and with it all the evidence collected at the scene—evidence which now is not only missing but hopelessly compromised even if recovered. This opening diner scene sets the tone for the episode in more ways than one; before the truck disappears, Nick, Sara, and Greg argue about the social importance of and their personal feelings toward weddings until their waitress, having overheard them, asserts, “Weddings are a
Rorschach; everyone sees what they want to see,” simultaneously settling the argument and foreshadowing the rest of the episode.

Chagrined by the loss of their evidence, Nick, Sara, and Greg decide to talk through what they remember of the case and their investigation while awaiting an inquiry by Internal Affairs. Throughout the remainder of the episode, the three criminologists and their boss, Grissom, narrate their memories of the investigation, revealing very different perspectives which all lead towards a surprisingly unified resolution. Each flashback begins the same way, with the given investigator stepping onto the crime scene, walking by the coroner, and passing under an arbor made of flowers and vines. Individual voiceovers accompany each character’s entry onto the crime scene, and the distinctive cinematography associated with each flashback ties the memories firmly to the singular interpretative vision of each criminologist. Sara begins—the camera in sharp focus, the colors overly-bright—her narrative clearly colored by her obvious distaste for the institution of marriage and what she perceives as the vapidity of the wedding party: “So there we were at Cupid’s Kiss, a nuptial Neverland where the cheese factor was dangerously high and the flowers were obviously fake. Can the love be real when the flowers aren’t?” Her retelling of interviewing the drunken, obnoxious groomsman contrasts sharply with Nick’s deeply romantic perspective. His flashback begins with everything in soft focus, hazy and haloed, as he intones, “The perfume of American Beauties was everywhere. But a rose by any other name would have smelled just as sweet with that much love in the air.” Walking under the arbor, he stops to pluck and sniff a white rose before continuing on to interview two shaken bridesmaids, one of whom he chivalrously offers his jacket to ward off a chill. In Grissom’s account, he walks briskly onto the scene, the accompanying camera-work sharply focused and dominated by close-ups as he takes note of every little detail while listening to the bride recount how much she hated her deceased mother-in-law. The opening of his voiceover, steeped as it is in literary turns-of-phrase, reflects his erudition and underscores his roots as an entomologist: “Spring is but a song, where love and laughter are not wrong. The blossoms of desire do belong, and Harmonia axyridis fly along.” Lastly, Greg’s version of events is undoubtedly the most stylized, with a Raymond Chandler-esque narration: “A dame was dead, but enough about her. The air was hot and heavy with wrong, making me thirsty. Thirsty for a tall drink of water. That’s when I saw her, a flower, but not the kind you’d pin on a lapel. She was long stemmed.” Reminiscent of a noir comic book, Greg’s segment is shot in black and white with only lipstick and blood pictured in bright red contrast. In

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4 *Harmonia axyridis* is the Latin name for the common ladybug.
Greg’s eyes, the same two bridesmaids with whom Nick spoke take on qualities reminiscent of *femme fatales*; instead of demure and rattled, they are confident and seductive.

Paradoxically, through Greg’s stylized rendering pieces of the puzzle begin to fall together. As he describes searching the premises, he comes across evidence which suggests that the mother-of-the-groom was drugged and then shoved into the pointed arrowhead of a Cupid sculpture. The wedding video, as “unmediated” documentation of the event and the only piece of evidence the CSIs have that is not tainted, confirms Mrs. Chase’s drugging; she was videotaped slurring her way through her wedding toast shortly before her death. Her subsequent fight with a bridesmaid results in the accidental Cupid-inflicted head trauma, which, in turn, leads eventually to Diane Chase’s death when she is tied behind the wedding car among the tin cans—a ploy meant to cast the blame on a recently-arrested member of a crime family with a similar criminal signature. When Nick’s truck is found, the compromised evidence can only be used to help fill in blanks, rather than structure the usual narrative resolution. Testimony proves the victor in this storyline, as the investigators’ verbal and visualized reconstructions of the crime convince the perpetrators to confess, allowing Grissom to assert to Internal Affairs at the end of the episode, “I don’t think it matters [whom you talk to first]. I’m sure our stories are all the same.” Although each investigator’s story is tellingly different, they all lead to the same result: the truth uncovered, the case solved.

*CSI*’s “Rashomama” showcases a criminal investigation in which the collaborative relationship between the gazes and interpretations of each respective investigator allow for a more comprehensive sense of the crimes at hand than any one investigator or viewer alone might provide. By welcoming and encouraging the television viewer to participate in this economy of gazes, *CSI* not only affords specialized insight to the investigators, but also to the viewers as we sit in front of the television and see what they see. This economy marks the spectator as both an individual and a member of a community. Grissom’s confidence in his ability to affirm the accuracy and compatibility of his team’s “stories” regarding the crime and its investigation stems from the episode’s repetitive forays into distinctively-interpreted flashbacks. As each CSI walks through the crime scene, he or she notices different things, from the mundane to the esoteric, and their multivalent perspectives on the murder’s aftermath eventually coalesce into a vivid, viable reality. In this and other episodes, the criminals’ ultimate confessions authenticate a truth that has already been constructed by the investigators from building blocks of evidence; justice is either served or imminent by the end of the episode. Employed
by myriad crime shows, this basic formula—find evidence, interpret evidence, construct missing truth, revise missing truth based on new evidence or witnesses, and have missing truth verified as actual truth by the perpetrators—is not unique to *CSI*. However, the show’s insistence on *repeatedly* subjecting viewers to the sight of dead bodies and the specter of death is relatively distinctive. The dead are the unnamed stars of the drama, and literally haunt each scene of any given episode: first the dead are discovered, often bloody and gruesomely murdered; then the bodies are dissected on the autopsy table, complete with blood and viscera; the spelunking cameras zoom into the deepest recesses of the cadavers, reenacting violations of the flesh; and finally, the already-dead are killed over and over again in the show’s trademark recurring flashbacks. This pleasure in the excess of death and the fascination of serial mortality in *CSI* mirrors the more general, televisual insistence on seriality and ubiquity over and above narrative closure.

**Serial Mortality and the Televisual Gaze**

*CSI* demonstrates a profound fascination with death and criminal motivations as its investigators willfully engage with death in all its manifestations. If death is a gap in human knowledge, then the investigators of *CSI*, aided by an army of lab technicians and other guest-starring specialists, strive to fill that gap by repeatedly returning to its origins or cause—using advanced scientific techniques and technological innovations to explicate the clues hidden in each piece of evidence, no matter how seemingly insignificant. Both the discourse of true vision and the potential pleasure of the televisual gaze as enacted by *CSI* relies on a repetition of scenes which visually glorify death, blood, gore, and violence. According to Jib Fowles, violent television imagery on crime procedurals “serves the fearful viewer as well as the fearsome one. All its genres produce resolution: The winner wins, order is restored, and crime does not pay. The troubled mind is set to rest one more time” (118). While the repetitive violence of crime shows is potentially cathartic and escapist, these violent repetitions also accentuate a fascination with death enacted by the investigators and passed on to its viewers. *CSI*, more specifically, ritualizes the division between life and death and accentuates the pleasure of looking at and navigating this gap.

The approach to violence and death in crime procedurals generally falls somewhere between two extremes on a spectrum. Whereas some shows depict crime in a wholly rational way, with context coming first as investigators piece together clues through logical deductions, devoid of emotional entanglements or
spectacularized violence, other shows may choose to portray crime as purely traumatic, with the victims and/or witnesses unable to fully comprehend or articulate what has happened. The rational model falls more closely in line with the experiences of real-life investigators, whose narrative paradigm is approximated by shows such as *Dragnet* and the original *Law and Order* (1990-2010). A wholly rational, quotidian detective show, however—full of the real-life tedium of paperwork and tracking down useless leads—would make for utterly boring television. While I know of no television programs which completely embrace the latter model, shows such as *Criminal Minds* (2005-present)—in which FBI profilers hunt down serial killers who are often shown stalking, terrorizing, or torturing their latest victim before they are caught—do play with this idea and therefore fall more closely in line with horror film than procedural crime television. In this instance, though, the non-stop tension and terror of some horror films, particularly those in the recently-christened genre of “torture porn,” would be undoubtedly upsetting and unwatchable on a weekly basis.\(^5\) As a television show, which requires from its viewers both investment in narrative protraction and identification with its characters, I imagine neither extreme would be entertaining to most viewers. Without manufactured drama, some emotional chaos, and a few plot twists, a realistic crime show would be tedious and never-ending, with few pleasurable denouements and only occasional judicial convictions. Alternatively, the horror film’s gruesomely slain victim(s) differ significantly from the depiction of crime in shows like *CSI*. Plot can take second place to spectacle in a horror film; it is this spectacle of blood, guts, violence, and occasional retribution from which viewers may derive their rush of fearful excitement and viewing pleasure. The crime show’s repeatedly enacted narratives of death, however—especially death as it is seen through the expert eyes of the investigator—fuel the potential for televisual pleasure in a different way. Death on *CSI* may be gruesome or gross, but it is also distinctly bounded by a narrative framework; these murders are not only fictional, but they

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\(^5\) See, for example, film critic David Edelstein, who is credited with coining the term. He writes:

> Seen any good surgery on unanesthetized people lately? Millions have, in *Hostel*, which spent a week as America’s top moneymaker. It’s actually not a bad little thriller, if you can live with the odd protracted sequence of torture and dismemberment. . . . Certainly television has become the place for forensic fetishism. But torture movies cut deeper than mere gory spectacle. Unlike the old seventies and eighties hack-'em-ups (or their jokey remakes, like *Scream*), in which masked maniacs punished nubile teens for promiscuity (the spurt of blood was equivalent to the money shot in porn), the victims here are neither interchangeable nor expendable.
are also implicitly or explicitly *storied*, stylized for viewers’ comprehension and easy digestion. The contextual framing of violence and the promise of narrative resolution (e.g., the impetus to catch the killer), allows violence to become part of the story, entertainment rather than trauma.

In the first season *CSI* episode, “Blood Drops” (episode 107), the structure of the narrative continually alludes to the ways in which the show’s investigators use science and technology to see things that are not obvious to the naked eye. This episode also emphasizes the power of repetition; the investigators repeatedly visualize the crime in order to fill gaps: between truth and representation, between life and death, and between perpetrator and victim. As one of the earliest episodes of the show, “Blood Drops” sets up many of the principles and ideas that become standard *CSI* tropes in later seasons, from the use of progressive flashbacks to the underscoring of the pivotal importance of intense looking by the investigators, signaled by extensive use of close-ups to peer at small details and tiny scraps of evidence. The episode begins with a gruesome quadruple homicide; most of a family is murdered, with the mother, father, and two teenage boys stabbed to death in their home. The only survivors are the teenaged daughter, Tina, and her little sister, Brenda (played by a very young Dakota Fanning), who is almost catatonic from the trauma. Upon his first entry onto the property, Grissom catalogues his responses and observations out loud to a note-taking underling, who is eventually replaced by Sara when the young cop can no longer handle the gore and leaves the scene. The visceral reactions of the officers who encounter the violent carnage, including a policeman vomiting just outside the front door when Grissom first pulls into the driveway, are in stark counterpoint to the professional attitude of the forensic analysts, who do not seem especially affected by the puddles of blood and gashed bodies. A viewer’s reaction might straddle this divide; while we may not respond with Grissom’s nonchalance, the obliqueness of only seeing the victims cannot approach the level of corporal sensation experienced by someone actually in the house. Even Grissom’s advice to the assisting officer, “The air smells like copper. Lots of blood. Breathe through your mouth,” does little to assuage the viewer’s sense of detachment from the displayed body of the dead father. When Grissom and Sara move into the bedroom, the uncanny darkness of the house shifts into a more sinister register. As Grissom examines the mother’s face, her neck bloody and gaping from a stab wound, a steady dripping sound gradually insinuates its tattoo into the heavy silence of the room, amplified by eerie non-diegetic white noise. Sara trains her flashlight on the woman’s hand, which is still dripping blood. This moment is infinitely more visually affective than the static medium shot of the
dead father’s still body, and the investigators react more strongly in turn. Grissom’s
and Sara’s faces register distress at the movement and sound issuing from the
mother’s lifeless hand, both of which highlight the recentness of her death. With
growing unease, Grissom explores the rest of the house and finds spirals painted in
blood on the walls and mirrors and the bodies of the two sons, the youngest boy’s
bloody handprints violently bright against the wall by the floor where he attempted
to hide from his killer.

Grissom calls his entire team to the scene with a sense of urgency, but as he
and Catherine re-examine the house, their intuition and experience reveal an
underlying story. While the bloody spirals imply cult activity or the work of a
deranged madman, other factors quickly draw the investigators away from this
conclusion: there is no sign of a break-in; a knife missing from an otherwise
undisturbed kitchen indicates the killer knew his or her way around the house; a
clove cigarette and scooter tracks outside reveal that the criminal had been lying in
wait and then made a quick getaway; and the older daughter’s clothing is
suspiciously free of blood despite her claims to have held her dead parents before
she ran screaming from the house. This blood evidence, or lack thereof, trumps the
teenaged girl’s eyewitness account, privileging the criminologist’s vision. Grissom
specifically underscores this privilege when Tina insists that her version of events—
that she was sleeping when she heard an intruder and hid—is “the truth” and he
quickly counters, “The evidence is telling a different story,” implying that while she
can lie, the evidence cannot.

After a few more pieces of physical evidence emerge, the older girl and her
boyfriend become the prime suspects. When the boy finally confesses that he killed
the family at the older girl’s request, most of the team is satisfied that the criminal
has been apprehended, and the murder scene is reenacted for the viewer as the
investigators imagine it to have occurred based on the boy’s testimony. However,
the killer’s lie detector test reveals that he is fabricating an important part of the
story, his motive, and Grissom, more out of scientific curiosity than judicial
necessity, declares the need to fill this hole before the investigation ends. The near-
catatonic little sister Brenda creates an axis around which the story orbits, as her
inability to speak of the trauma she has experienced renders her the most significant
and most intractable piece of evidence; her body holds the key. When Grissom
questions her near the beginning of the episode, she is completely disengaged, eyes
fixed on the middle distance; as she is otherwise completely silent, her one
utterance proves pivotal to the episode. Just as Grissom stands up and begins to
walk off, Brenda says, “the buffalo,” her eyes shifting away as he asks her to
explain. Grissom needs to fill in all the gaps in his knowledge of the crime, from the missing motive to the break between the girl’s inexplicable declaration and its meaning. Since eyewitness accounts have proved either unreliable or incomprehensible, the CSIs turn to their own investigative vision for guidance, eventually providing context for the crime and a voice to Brenda’s trauma.

Two things ultimately break the case: the traumatized girl’s body and blood drops at the crime scene, both silent but revelatory. Upon reexamining the crime scene photos, Catherine uncovers the actual sequence of events when she notices an extremely esoteric discrepancy between the blood evidence and the young man’s confession. According to the blood drops found and photographed at the scene, the father was leaving Brenda’s room when he was killed rather than running to protect her. This peculiarity, coupled with Sara’s use of an ultraviolet camera on the little girl—a camera that she explains can see “deep into your skin. It can see things nobody can see”—reveals a history of sexual abuse and suddenly uncovers a much more complicated truth. The criminals are no longer a spoiled, vindictive teenager and her homicidal boyfriend, but a girl at her wit’s end and a boy willing to do anything for her, both trying to protect a helpless victim, the little girl, from sexual abuse at the hands of their father. In an added twist, Brenda is not only the teenaged girl’s sister but also her daughter, the product of a family legacy of incestuous sexual abuse. Brenda’s cryptic utterance, “the buffalo,” turns out to be her way of identifying her paternal abuser; among the deceased’s effects, the CSIs find the father’s necklace, upon which the image of a buffalo is engraved, a piece of ephemera no one had initially considered relevant. While the truths gleaned from the evidence and brought to light through skilled investigative vision do not alter the outcome of the case, they do nuance the identity of the teenaged murderers, particularly the girl, from cold-blooded killers to somewhat sympathetic victims. The resolution of the case emphasizes both the triumph of the evidence over verbal testimony—bodies and blood speak more truthfully than people themselves—and the visual mastery of the show’s investigators, whose collective insights lead to justice on two fronts: for the murder victims and for the murderers, who are victims themselves.

Conclusion

One of the appeals of the contemporary crime show is its replication of moments of fear, horror, trauma and violence, and the alleviation of the same through the mastery of the investigators. On CSI, this mastery takes on a distinctly
visual timbre. In myriad ways, the show offers its viewers visual insight into experiences that are usually outside of their realm of control or understanding: death, forensic investigations, and the relative mystery that is the human body. By repeatedly enacting scenes of death, dying, and violence the show suggests that through repetition investigators can “work through.” The more the narrative repeats, the closer it represents the truth and the closer viewers are brought to a sense of (visual) gratification at the resolution of the crime. Thus, the show articulates how viewers might derive pleasure from both imagined visual veracity and the failure of representation. As with television more generally, seeing is only believing when two facets of the scopic field align. First, the power of the serial narrative is such that profligate iterations often beget a deeper sense of realism or truth; the more investigators and viewers envision the crime enacted, the closer it approaches the true narrative. Secondly, the televisual gaze is contingent upon a community of spectators whose gazes intersect; each investigator’s respective and specialized visual mastery speaks to a collectively-understood truth to which the viewer is also privy.

The deeper motive underlying the teenagers’ actions in “Blood Drops” demonstrates the potential power of this visual acuity. We may be reminded here of Lacan’s third gaze, enacted by Poe’s Dupin, who sees what the others cannot or will not because he understands that to find what one is looking for sometimes means to look for something else. In Dupin’s case, this something else is not the letter as the Queen describes it, but something so ordinary and unlike the Queen’s letter that it can be hidden in plain sight and still avoid detection. “Blood Drops” reinforces the investigators’ quest for truth as a distinctly visual adventure, applauding their specialized ability to see what others cannot see. CSI emphasizes not only the special nature of the investigative gaze—founded on both curiosity and a passion for justice—but also the investigators’ driving need to know, to understand, and to see. As viewers, we may derive pleasure from seeking out the truth—a rational, narrative pleasure, the pleasure of knowledge, though ultimately a fictitious knowledge. Or, we may bask in the show’s visual prowess, as television makes visible the invisible, courting our gaze and then applauding us for watching.

Works Cited


About the Author

Aviva Dove-Viebahn is an Adjunct Professor of Film Studies at the University of Northern Colorado and recently received her Ph.D. from the Graduate Program in Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester. Her articles and essays have appeared in *Invisible Culture*, *Ms. Magazine*, and *Women’s Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* and in the anthology *Queer Popular Culture* (Palgrave, 2007). Her research and scholarship interrogate the intersection of television and contemporary visual art as well as the representation of gender in popular culture.

[Received 15 August 2011; accepted 31 January 2012]