

**MAKING CRIME TELEVISION:  
PRODUCING ENTERTAINING REPRESENTATIONS OF  
CRIME FOR TELEVISION BROADCAST**

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Televised representations of crime have long been subject to criminological scrutiny to reveal their theorised effect on the audience's attitudes towards and perceptions of crime and criminality. While numerous disciplines offer a vast platform of scholarship in this field, the majority focuses on the effect that the finished product – i.e. the shows and films themselves – has on the public's attitudes. Even research that does delve into the world of production often concentrates its efforts on the study of crime news programs. Conversely, Lam's *Making Crime Television* looks behind the curtain 'to document the making of popular criminology' (p169) by studying the processes involved in constructing fictional crime dramas.

The book's first chapter provides a literature review of criminological and socio-legal theory relating to crime and criminal justice in television. This chapter exposes some of these theories' biggest failures, such as its generalisation of the 'mass media' rather than exploring different genres within this leviathan and its focus on critically well acclaimed rather than popular crime television. Whilst Lam praises cultural and popular criminology for moving in the right direction, she advocates a shift in criminology's approach to methods researching the development of shows in different genres from the ground up rather than looking at shows as final products.

*Making Crime Television*'s methodology chapter is substantial, giving a condensed and highly simplified description of the Actor-Network Theory perspective Lam employs through the book that may require supplementary reading for those requiring further understanding of the concept. The majority of this book is a primary research piece whereby Lam has observed and interviewed directors, writers and producers involved in making Canadian crime dramas *The Bridge* and *Cra\$h & Burn*. Within this chapter is also a section about the difficulties of gaining access to 'research subjects' (p55) for future scholars to consider.

The third chapter explores the processes that take place in the writers' room of *The Bridge*, which is likened to a Latourian laboratory. This includes thorough analyses of the ways writers and producers conjure and adapt stories to fit with the core themes and principles of the show whilst still captivating the audience. Throughout the chapter are excerpts from conversations between writers and the show's technical consultant (the protagonist's real-

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world equivalent) to show that the impact that the technical consultant's experience and expertise can have on the dynamic of events.

For the fourth chapter, Lam progressively walks the reader through the changes that ensue in a writing room throughout the development of an episode of *The Bridge*. In the chapter, she has 'refused to reduce and simplify the sometimes tedious changes to the story' (p100) in order to maximise the reader's immersion into the story changing process. During this chapter, emphasis is placed on the fact that the episode's plot can be completely altered by internal and external actors; such as creators, television networks and Standards and Practices executives, which can distort the original story and create inaccuracies.

Chapter 5 examines the significance of geographical location in the show *Cra\$h & Burn*, following the story of setting change from New York to Hamilton, Ontario. The chapter focuses on how, contrary to the generic, relatable urban environment that police dramas often prefer to create, the geography of *Cra\$h & Burn* is highlighted throughout episodes of the show. Several script excerpts are compared from different drafts (one set in New York and one set in Hamilton) to illustrate the effect that the location has on the script.

The conclusion gives a succinct summary of what can be drawn from the case studies and relates back to the first chapter's critiques of conventional criminology's focus. Recommendations for follow-up research are given and there is a discussion of why differences may occur in studies conducted on other shows and other processes, and predicting that this book's function and use will change.

The use of notes at the end of each chapter is a common and useful practice, with definitions of relevant jargon and methodological points outlined, though overlooking them is not detrimental to the flow of the book. There is also a sizeable bibliography and index at the end of the book.

The target audience of *Making Crime Television* is described as 'students and scholars of Law, Media, and Criminology' (preface). This being said, the book would be of little use to undergraduate students due to its narrow and concentrated focus, being more practical for more specialised scholars and postgraduate students. While this review has inevitably explored the book from a criminological perspective (being conducted by a Criminologist for a Criminology journal), much of the content would resonate most strongly with media scholars. Lam does, however, make a conscious effort to attract a criminological audience through critical discussions of traditional 'academic' criminology and suggestions of improvement. Following Garland and Sparks (2000), Lam proposes that 'if academic criminology is to remain relevant today, it needs to understand the terms in which crime and crime control are being debated and discussed in popular culture' (p11), as academic criminology is becoming outdated in the wake of new media's exploding popularity.

*Making Crime Television* is an attempt to 'lead by example' in a new method of approaching fictional crime media. Though there are merits to this method, such an understanding of the

differences between the intended effect and story of a television show and those seen in the final product, there is little need for this in criminological study, as it is the final product's – the television show when it is broadcasted – effect on the audience that is key to criminological study. Lam's proposal that academic criminology accept more input from popular and cultural criminology, on the other hand, may contribute to the ongoing debate between traditional criminological theory and more contemporary explanations and research focuses.

### **Reference List**

Garland, D., and Sparks, R. (2000) 'Criminology, social theory and the challenge of our times', *British Journal of Criminology* 40: 189-204