

Seeing and knowing: reflexivity and quality

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Bignell, J. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4874-1601>
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12

Seeing and Knowing

Reflexivity and Quality

Jonathan Bignell

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The critical evaluation of quality in television takes many forms, but it depends on attributing value either by claiming that quality television attains this status because it matches what the medium is or does, or because bringing into television an aesthetic from outside redresses an inherent predisposition for the medium to be of low quality. The influential US television theorist Horace Newcomb (1974) argued that the primary attributes of broadcast television are intimacy, continuity and immediacy, and his establishment of these criteria led him to claim that the medium is most suited to working on contemporary social anxieties through narrative forms characterised by verisimilitude and involvement with character and story. He associated visual stylishness, on the other hand, with cinema rather than television, and this distinction between media on the basis of their supposed specificities has dogged critical work ever since. In the British context especially, television has been considered a writer's medium, setting up an opposition between an aesthetically conservative essence of television as driven by dialogue and character and a more adventurous interest in style and narrative form in cinema. As contemporary Hollywood cinema has invested in films that base their appeal on spectacle, effects and distinctive directorial intervention in *mise-en-scène*, this supposed distinction between television and film has gained greater purchase

(McLoone 1997). The result has been a relative neglect of television style, especially where style is significant to popular and generic programmes. Furthermore, the interest in British academic work on forms of television realism has focused attention on the paradoxical cultivation of apparent zero-degree style in British television drama, a style that effaces itself in order to witness character and environment rather than to draw attention to the mediation of narrative by specific audio-visual forms. This separates quality in British television from its US counterparts, including those US programmes shown in Britain.

Theories of television viewership interact with these conceptions of the specificity of the medium. Assumptions about the ways television is watched justify conceptions of the medium as intimate, continuous and immediate, and conversely, such conceptions of television justify models of the viewer as someone ‘casting a lazy eye over the proceedings, keeping an eye on events, or, as the slightly archaic designation had it, “looking in”’ (Ellis 1983: 137). If audiences watch sporadically, inattentively and continually, then the attractions of self-consciously wrought *mise-en-scène* are largely wasted on them and would not be of economic value to producers or broadcasters. This chapter argues that contemporary US police/investigation series have been one of the locations where television style has in fact become a key component of their textual form and their appeal to audiences.

The analysis focuses on US programmes screened in Britain, and after a brief discussion of industrial and institutional factors that are part of this change in television aesthetics, it demonstrates how reflexive emphasis on *mise-en-scène* relates to the generic components of police drama and more broadly to the understanding of quality in television drama. In keeping with the primary focus of this book on contemporary US television drama, this chapter discusses the series *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* in most detail, a series featuring the forensic team examining evidence from Las Vegas homicides and fatal accidents. But because this series is a filmed production with a complex aesthetic of reflexivity about seeing, I contextualise it with a brief account of some previous filmed US series in the police/investigation procedural tradition from the 1980s onwards (see Rixon 2003; Bignell forthcoming). This leads to a brief concluding argument that quality and medium specificity are linked by the significance of reflexivity, and that together these characteristics

negotiate a shifting understanding of what television looks like and how its identity as a medium can be known. The police series is a programme type that necessarily addresses the meanings of seeing and knowing, and is especially prone to metacommentary on what television can be.

Industry, Technology and Televisuality

US network television underwent considerable change during the 1980s and 1990s, and this led to a reconfiguration of the aesthetic criteria through which television quality was understood. Series were designed to reward sustained viewing and involvement, through the creation of distinctive visual styles, serial character and storyline development, and generic hybridity such as blending the fantastic with the hermeneutic puzzles of detection in the crime series (Curtin 2003). This questions the continued purchase of the concepts of the glance and flow for describing television viewership, and also emphasises visual brands or signature styles in combination with, for example, a continued emphasis on star performers that characterised earlier phases of production and marketing of television.

Each of the series discussed in this chapter was shot on film, following the long history of series production for television based in Hollywood and using the resources of studios and personnel originally established for cinema early in the era of US dominance of the film business and its institutional mode of production. While made for television, the emphasis on *mise-en-scène* associated with the greater depth of colour, contrastive lighting and more elaborate camera movement of production on film is responsible for much of the aesthetic quality attributed to these programmes. By shooting using single cameras, with film stock used for both interior and exterior sequences, planned and consistent visual signatures are made possible for these series. Thus programme 'brands' are set in place as much by visual style as by the consistent planning of narrative arcs across episodes in a series, the continuities of settings and character that are conventionally determined by a series 'bible', along with a continuing author-producer's management of the production process. Because of the production system using single cameras, each shot can be individually lit and its camera positions planned to exploit point of view as much as possible. Post-

production of the film footage can harmonise aesthetic patterns of colour and contrast through grading processes, producing further opportunities for creative intervention after the period of shooting itself.

However, the institutional mode of production of filmed series does not necessarily lend itself to aesthetic consistency, richness or experimentation. Many US-filmed drama productions, especially in genre series such as sitcom but also in police/investigation series where the emphasis is on physical action or star performance, lay down a much more conventionalised *mise-en-scène*. The demands of the production schedule for television series can give little time for directorial finesse and experimentation, especially since different directors are hired for a few or single episodes, and therefore stylistic continuity will be assured by providing a template for those new arrivals to follow. The result may leave little leeway for direction that does not match the standard conventions of using wide shots and two-shots of main characters, alternating with close-up in a very conventionalised system for quickly obtaining shots for either coverage or dramatic emphasis. This was particularly the case in long-running police/investigation series of the 1970s where programmes were built around performers, and storylines tended to emphasise characteristic moments of performance and the props, costumes and catchphrases supporting them. While there are occasional examples of interesting *mise-en-scène* in *Columbo*, *The Rockford Files* or *Quincy M.E.*, for example, these series do not exploit the aesthetic of filmed drama in the ways that *CSI* and some predecessor series have done. In series where visual style is offered as one of the principal attractions of the programme, however, the directorial contribution within the established aesthetic offers series producers opportunities to exploit auteurism at the same time as an established stylistic brand. When film director Quentin Tarantino wrote and directed the season five finale of *CSI* in 2005 ('Grave Danger: Parts 1 and 2', 5: 24–25), the episode garnered an audience of 30 million (McLean 2005). It encouraged the identification of a directorial 'signature' by including sequences of body trauma that reference both his film work and also the established series trademarks of visceral CGI sequences reconstructing injury that are discussed below.

In the US context, Robert J. Thompson (1996) regards quality as an exception to the industrial production of most programming,

mentioning writer-producer-led or creator-led series such as *Hill Street Blues* and *ER* that were made after the loosening of power held by the big three US networks in the 1980s. As work by Simon Frith (2000a) and Jane Feuer (2003) has shown, discussing UK and US television respectively, contemporary quality television is simultaneously defined in relation to its aesthetics, mode of production and audiences. Quality television drama means an aesthetically ambitious programme type with the literary values of creative imagination, authenticity and relevance. As a mode of production, it is where writing and *mise-en-scène* are prioritised. Quality television is also valuable television in that it is what valuable viewers (relatively wealthy and educated ABC1 social groups) enjoy and, perhaps more significantly, what they will pay for through subscription to paid channels in both the UK and USA.

In relation to US programmes that were acquired for UK terrestrial broadcast, like those discussed here, the assumption that quality television is not commercially produced (as most US-acquired programmes are) was reflected in the stipulation in the 1990 Broadcasting Act that the Independent Television Commission (ITC) must apply a 'quality threshold' when it awarded ITV franchises in 1992. Companies had to demonstrate a commitment to quality programming associated with high culture rather than commercial culture, thus implicitly denigrating US television acquired for the UK. However, inasmuch as programmes are televisual or teliterate, they exhibit quality because they stand in opposition to the mass-audience popular forms such as soap opera and sitcom that are said to characterise the medium. I argue here that televisuality can be a criterion for quality in US programmes, in a way that deconstructs this opposition.

The mantle of 'quality' police drama has been inherited by *CSI*, which has been the tent-pole programme in the CBS network's Thursday schedule, the most significant weekday evening in the USA. In its second year (2001–2), *CSI* achieved the second-best ratings of any programme and in the following year was top-rated. By the fifth season in 2005, the franchise had spawned spin-off series *CSI: Miami* and *CSI: New York*. The original *CSI* continues to be shown in syndication and sold to overseas broadcasters. The scheduling of *CSI* and its spin-offs contributed significantly to the profile and audiences for Five in the UK. Shown in evening primetime as part of a strip of acquired US police series including

Law & Order, for example, the *CSI* franchise contributed to Five's repositioning in the mid-2000s. From a beginning in which the channel attempted to peel away audiences from Britain's main commercial terrestrial broadcaster ITV by offering what its first chief executive, Dawn Airey, called 'films, fucking and football', Five subsequently sought a reputation for quality by changing its mix of genres in evening programming and heavily marketing a small clutch of acquired US programmes in the established genre of the police procedural. Naming this strip of programmes as 'America's Finest' references not only the slang designation of the police force, but also the claim that these programmes represent the highest quality primetime imports.

CSI was created by Anthony E. Zuiker, and is jointly produced by the Hollywood film production company, Jerry Bruckheimer Productions, run by Bruckheimer – whose films (*Top Gun*, *Days of Thunder*, *Black Hawk Down*) share some of its interest in 'cool' masculinity. Though the series develops a sense of a community among its ensemble of lead characters, *CSI* is primarily structured through paired buddy teams and dual storylines in each episode. In common with *Homicide: Life on the Street*, it is much less about the commission of crimes than the process of solving them. While questions of narrative structure and character identification are significant, the relationship between visual style and the body is *CSI*'s greatest innovation. The use of rapid zooms towards and inside body parts or items of evidence (often at extreme magnification) shows how the integration of computer-generated imagery 'demonstrating' aspects of a crime develops the notion of vision as an evidential-investigative-conclusive activity in the police genre (see Lury 2005: 44–56). There is a strongly apparent physical agency of the detective's and the camera's look in identifying, understanding and proving.

Quality and *Mise-en-Scène* in *CSI*

CSI is distinctive in its use of long takes showing the processes of autopsy and the scientific analysis of fragments from bodies or crime scenes. Fluid but very slow camera movements track around the dimly lit spaces of the crime labs while the characters conduct procedures such as examining clothing fibres or skin cells through microscopes, or painstakingly arranging the fragments of an

object on a light-table so they can identify how they were broken. Pace is created in these long takes by the addition of non-diegetic music and the camera's elegant dancing motion. The emphasis in these sequences is on the concentration of the investigators and their systematic absorption in their work, connoting their professionalism and efficiency. These uses of the long take match the shot type's aesthetic histories in US cinema, in the films directed by Max Ophuls, for example, and more recently by Martin Scorsese. Long takes produce the impression of temporal continuity, and allow the camera to follow characters in a space that they interact with to reveal themselves and the relationships between character and environment.

The long take suggests a generosity with time in which there is the opportunity to consider what can be seen, thus handing interpretive authority to the audience. The continual extended look at the character places pressure on them, by enforcing the viewer's concentration on the detail of how the protagonist acts and reacts across a sustained passage of action. At the same time, the use of long shot within a long take to show the character moving in space permits the camera to have a physical and emotional distance from them, so that an analytical and critical understanding of the person can be gained by revealing movements of the body, gesture or costume, and embedding action in a represented world that contextualises and reflects on it.

Space shown by the long take dramatically determines characters and shapes them in counterpoint with it. This is a distinctly different visual system from the rapid alternations of shot-reverse-shot and close-up, which segment the human body and the relationships between characters and space, and determine how the viewer can perceive action and character differently. The selection and segmentation of rapid cutting and extensive close-up can be analytical, presenting directorial interpretations of character and action, but the long take allows the viewer to make sense of space and character in a different way, close to the Brechtian notion that viewers are empowered to choose where to look and must work to bring frameworks of interpretation to the images. The long take empowers the audience in this way by offering interpretive agency, and setting up levels of significance, parallels, contrasts and contexts. The long take draws on the theatrical set-up of a space for action that privileges performance, whereas segmented shooting

and close-up leave no 'dead space' that can open up additional meanings.

The camera in *CSI* seems to force objects to reveal their secrets, paralleling the agency of the forensic investigators with the agency of the camera. The camera not only matches the investigators' look, but it also supplements it, explains it and concretises its activity of gathering knowledge. So one of the functions of the close-up, and especially the zoom into an object or body in *CSI*, is to link the camera as narrating agency with the agency of the human characters. In fact, the relative paucity of conventional physical action in the series is chiasmatically related to this. The stillness and reticence of the characters are parallel and opposite to the fluidity and revelation given to the camera and its narrative agency. This also sets up a relationship between present and past. The present is characterised by its stillness, seen especially in the criminalists' absorption in their work and the literal stillness of dead bodies or evidential objects. But this stillness is made to reveal movement and passion that happened in the past. From the evidence they gather, the team reconstruct a crime that is then either restaged in the manner of a conventional flashback, or an injury to the victim's body is analytically re-enacted by means of CGI, prosthetics and models so that the causal processes that gave rise to physical effects on the body become knowable. In doing justice to the evidence, the forensic reconstruction of the process of the crime gives a body or object back its story. The present is therefore known by restoring a past that leads to it, and what is seen in the here-and-now is explained by another form of seeing that projects a history onto it.

This foregrounding of how seeing leads to knowing, and presents are given meaning by the restaging of pasts, has important effects on the significance of performance in *CSI* – and thus further distances the series from the potentially action-driven melodrama of the police procedural genre. Referring to critical reaction to the series' beginning, and the principal characters of its Las Vegas, Miami and New York incarnations, *CSI*'s executive producer Carol Mendelsohn explains that 'because *CSI* was very black and white – the evidence never lies – it was comforting in a grey world. There is comfort when Gil Grissom or Horatio Caine or Mac Taylor are on the case. There aren't many people you can trust in the world today' (McLean 2005). However, there is little character development in *CSI*, and only fragments of the characters' domestic lives or past

experiences are revealed. These people who might be trusted are almost unknown except in their roles as professional investigators who see scientifically and know because of how they see. This connects the camera as agency of seeing to the characters as agents of knowledge acquisition, and to the camera as a supplement that shows the audience what the characters have found out or think they have found out. However, the characters' reconstructions of events are hypotheses, and are sometimes wrong. Events in the past are reconstructed fragmentarily, sometimes repeated differently as more facts become clear, and attention is drawn to the processes of investigation. The investigative look is presented as a process of seeing that emphasises the linkage, whether easy or difficult, with knowing. The looks of the camera, characters and the audience are made surprisingly active, and the role of the look as an action or performance becomes significant in itself. What this leads towards is the conditional nature of seeing and the provisional nature of knowledge. *Mise-en-scène* and the foregrounding of visual style are not only markers of quality in terms of production value, but also perform seeing and knowing as meaning-making activities carried out for and in television.

A Lineage of Provisional Knowledge

The conditionality of seeing and the provisional nature of knowledge in *CSI* are by no means new. *Hill Street Blues*, for example, was a late-evening precinct drama following an ensemble of uniformed police and detectives. Created and executive produced by Steven Bochco and Michael Kozoll, it was the first in the long run of successes that established Bochco's reputation as a television auteur. *Hill Street Blues* developed complex character drama with both serial and series storylines woven around an ensemble of about a dozen recurring characters, yet also claimed a level of 'realism' that was groundbreaking back in 1981 and depended significantly on stylistic cues drawn from US direct cinema documentary (especially PBS's *The Police Tapes* in 1977). The colour palettes of the episodes, and the use of sound montages and apparent 'wildtrack' background sound textures, for example, work in parallel with an emphasis on visual style. Camera movement and unstable framing and composition support the structuring of sequences by parallel montage between storylines, and the often complex partial closure achieved at the

ends of episodes. The series' reputation for innovative visual style, structure, political slant and authorial quality depend on forms of television aesthetic that emphasise unsteady, fractured and multiple points of view.

This self-consciousness of medium is not dependent on a specific television form, but rather on formalism itself as a key signifier of quality, as a brief reference to a stylistically quite different series shows. *Miami Vice* is widely regarded by academic critics and television aficionados as one of the most innovative television series of its time. Centring on vice-squad detectives Sonny Crockett (Don Johnson) and Ricardo Tubbs (Philip Michael Thomas) and their undercover investigations of drug, prostitution and firearms crime, it pays more attention to design and production values than storylines. Contemporary (men's) fashion was selected to match a consistent colour palette for sets, architectural backgrounds and props, and rock-based pop music was laid under a greater proportion of action sequences than was usual in filmed US police drama. There has been some significant critical writing about *Miami Vice* that uses the series as evidence of how postmodern themes are expressed in popular culture (Wang 1988; King 1990), but the aesthetic of the series is constituted by *mise-en-scène* as much as by the manipulation of conventions of genre and format. The series was apparently created when an NBC executive sent executive producer Anthony Yerkovich a memo that read simply 'MTV cops', and Yerkovich and fellow executive producer Michael Mann created *Miami Vice* to fit this brief. Its episodes include many examples of slow motion, thematic colour contrast, specially written music, repeating shot compositions that emphasise surfaces and visual appearances (for example by prominently featuring props and costumes such as sports cars and sunglasses) and referencing characters' construction of an undercover persona and consequent questions of authenticity and deception by metaphorical sequences using mirrors or water.

Homicide: Life on the Street took on the aesthetic of hand-held documentary filming that was used in *Hill Street Blues*, but also some of the self-conscious dramatic stylisation of *Miami Vice*. David Simon, who spent a year with the Baltimore police's homicide unit, based the series on the book *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*. The documentary-like authenticity deriving from this source is supported by the specificity of place that one of *Homicide's* executive producers, Barry Levinson, brought to the *mise-en-scène* as a native of

Baltimore who wrote and directed the Baltimore-based films *Diner*, *Tin Men* and *Avalon*. The use of hand-held cameras on location in Fells Point, Baltimore worked together with an emphasis on the process of detection rather than the witnessing of crimes themselves, and the arrival at a crime scene usually opened each narrative strand. Place and evidence became more important than physical action, and character interaction was sometimes so foregrounded that the tone of dramatic performance became reflexive and almost parodic. *Homicide* therefore marked an interesting development of *Hill Street Blues*'s realist aesthetic, together with some of *Miami Vice*'s self-consciousness of style and performance, and this was also evident in the prominence of music accompanying the narrative from the second season onwards.

NYPD Blue is another of Steven Bochco's productions (co-created by him and David Milch), and developed authored quality in police drama by building on some of the successful elements of *Hill Street Blues*. The series aimed to maintain the urban texture of Bochco's earlier work with the use of hand-held camera. But this realist aesthetic was a convention that signified aestheticisation, together with slow motion and prominent music to underscore emotional tone. These distinctly different markers of quality combine with an emphasis on performance by the lead actors, especially Dennis Franz as Lt Andy Sipowicz, and a commitment to represent challengingly 'adult' sexuality (in US terms). This 'seriousness' and quality earned the series 80 Emmy award nominations, of which Franz had eight (and won four). Franz, along with the other lead actors (David Caruso, James McDaniel, Jimmy Smits, Kim Delaney), appeared in other Bochco productions, and perpetuated a performance style that contrasts with both *Miami Vice* and *CSI*. The 'signature' stylistic elements included moving camera and fluid shot composition, percussive and pervasive music tracks, and interesting use of different depths of field and slow motion. The decision to wound one of the leading characters in the opening episode, apparently fatally, and to include a lengthy sex scene, drew attention to the style and structure of the programme and announced it as an innovation in the police series genre while also connecting it to the heritage of quality work associated particularly with Bochco.

Boomtown was created by the writer Graham Yost and director Jon Avnet, and each episode centred on a crime seen from the different points of view of the people it affects, including the

central team of detectives but also uniformed police, paramedics, reporters and the district attorney. This produced moves back and forth in space between these characters as well as shifts in time. The premise for this format derived from Yost's experience in shooting interviews with Second World War veterans to appear as framing sequences in HBO's *Band of Brothers*: 'I thought, what if I told one person's point of view of their whole experience of the battle, and then you see someone else's experience of the battle, and let the audience take these real and subjective viewpoints and put them all together?' (Bianco 2002: D9). Arriving at this idea from watching the film *Rashômon* (1950), he reported that NBC was willing to risk it, having used temporal and spatial shifts in *The West Wing* and fractured point of view in the 2001 season's opening episode of *ER*. *Boomtown*'s shifts in point of view are used to provide new story or character information, rather than simply to offer a replay of the same scene from another viewpoint. The shifts are signalled by a fade in which the image's colour is bleached out to suggest a subjective or hallucinatory quality. Despite the unusual and relatively innovative visual aesthetic, *Boomtown* storylines were self-contained rather than serially linked, thus adopting an older form compared to series-serial hybrids such as *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, which *Boomtown* followed in NBC's Sunday schedule.

As this brief backstory to the arguments about *CSI* shows, the effect of a combination of the regularities of format with the exploitation of *mise-en-scène* and film style has given the police and detective genre new ways of making narratives visually distinctive. These include punctual moments that foreground spectacular effects, rapidly cut sequences underscored by music, or long takes that develop the analytical possibilities of temporal extension. Developing a distinctive aesthetic in niche programmes was not very significant in the USA's period of network dominance and the policy of 'least objectionable programming' when three US networks provided a restricted diet of programming for mass audiences. But from the 1980s onwards the emergence of a culture of niche programmes, repeated viewing, programme-related merchandise and exploitation of franchised formats was significantly dependent on the visual and aural aesthetic developed in the specifically televisual form of the long-running police procedural/investigation series. 'Quality' refers not only to character, dramatic logic and thematic complexity, but also to the distinctive use of visual and

aural resources. The provisionality of knowledge and the link between seeing and knowing as a conditional and often fragile relationship are crucial to this.

Popular television series rely on recurrent narrative patterns where, as Umberto Eco (1990) argued, formulas produce pleasure for the viewer by rewarding predictive activity. So the pleasures of a specific narrative, such as setting up an enigma that will subsequently be resolved, produce a second kind of pleasure at the level of the series as a whole through repetition of narrative patterns and the programme's conformity to viewer expectations. Those US series considered quality television work with an economy comprising generic verisimilitude's adaptation of programmes to audience expectation, and also play with verisimilitude and genre by means of visual pleasure and spectacle. A reflexive awareness that these programmes are television is crucial to their play with contrasts between excessive or unconventional *mise-en-scène* and generic narrative, characterisation and dialogue. They are series television but cinematically rich in visual terms. They are writer-producer led but exploit directorial control over camerawork and shot composition. They establish the specificities of US settings and use the resources of Hollywood's filmed television production system but are also recognised by British audiences, critics and broadcasters as quality television.

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