

Missoulian

one bloch over: Take a (very) close look

By **BEN BLOCH** for the Missoulian | Posted: Thursday, February 24, 2005 12:00 am

Forensics TV is a cultural phenomenon with real impact

Turn on the TV any night of the week and there's a good chance you'll be looking at a view through a microscope.

Counting network and cable, at least one hour of crime-forensics programming airs in prime time six nights a week. "CSI (Crime Scene Investigation)" was the No. 1-rated television show last week. Its two spinoffs, "CSI: Miami" (which was No. 6 last week) and "CSI: New York" also have healthy viewership.

Being bombarded by this type of program - and the imagery it uses - seems to produce distinct effects on the culture. For instance, universities across the country are seeing rapidly growing numbers of majors in the forensic sciences. Where once our heroes might have been cowboys, doctors and lawyers, we now suddenly have the lab technician, a kind of "chic geek" character whose ability to use state-of-the-art equipment to produce the truth either frees the innocent or convicts the guilty.

Apparently, these shows are also causing real changes in the courtroom, where lawyers are finding that juries demand more and more scientific proof before they give a verdict. In a news article from last summer, Texas jury consultant Robert Hirschhorn is quoted as saying: "Talking about science in the courtroom used to be like talking about geometry - a real jury turnoff. Now that there's this almost obsession with the (TV) shows, you can talk to jurors about (scientific evidence) and just see from the looks on their faces that they find it fascinating."

Just as fiction often follows fact (a lot of the scientific techniques used on the show are the same as ones they use in real life crime investigations), forensics shows present a case where the opposite is happening, where people expect what happens on the TV shows to happen in real life. The fictional narratives are married to such convincing portrayals of the objectivity of science that they seem to have a greater impact on viewing minds.

In this period of terrorist paranoia, when more and more information about every individual is gathered in terms of statistics and records, it perhaps makes sense that these shows would thrive. On the one hand, it might be comforting to think that there are nearly foolproof ways to assign guilt and protect society from evildoers. On the other hand, our fascination may in part be connected to an uneasy awareness that every human - ourselves included - leaves a concrete trail of residue, and no one doesn't have a secret that can't be discovered with a little close-up detective work.

On top of this, forensic crime shows set a new and stimulating precedent for the visual structure of the television narrative. The focus on the micro-shot - a drop of blood spattering against the concrete, saliva on a cigarette butt, gunshot residue on a light switch - has the power to deepen the scope of a story, giving us a vision of separate worlds that require different reading techniques. As TV producers and directors well know, keeping our attention requires that scenes be visually appealing, so the interjection of the micro-shot - which feels so related to pure abstraction - is noteworthy as an aesthetic device which hasn't formerly existed in mainstream television.

Whenever a formula for television appears often and does phenomenally well, we can assume that the nerve it is tapping is a central one. Viewers seem to be learning from these shows, soaking up the contents from many angles - and always hungry for more. Not only do forensics shows find a new way to tell an old story, they also satisfy a desire to get closer to the more complete story that we may always be intuiting.

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