

“I Swear It’s Not a Cow...”

The Eerie Glow of Television Screens in America’s Heartland.

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It’s three o’clock in the morning, and despite the incredible silence outside, I find myself laying in bed, listening. I lie perfectly still, frozen in fact, incapable of moving even if I had to. I don’t really know what I’m listening for – the sound of a twig breaking outside, the door of the garage slowly opening, a car coming up the driveway maybe. Wait, I hear something, I swear – a faint thumping. It’s my own heartbeat resonating in my ears.

Given my hyper-attentive state of mind, you might think that I’m somewhere... in a conflict zone, maybe, or clandestine in hostile territory of some sort – somewhere where still and silence always have an uneasy undertone. Oddly enough, I’m in my childhood home in rural Northeastern Wisconsin, one of the states in the Midwest region of the US. The nearest town is five miles away, and there are at least as many cows as humans in this neck of the woods.

Having left Northeast Wisconsin immediately after high school and generally feeling more comfortable in urban environments, whenever I return to the dairy state (a.k.a. Wisconsin), I am subjected to the usual questioning: am I not scared of the big city – of shootings, of car jackings, of gang violence? For people here, fear means fearing the other – the racial other, the sexual other, the national other – the source of their fear is so transparent I can’t help but

answer with a stern, exasperated stare. No, I think to myself, being here scares me. When I find myself in Northeast Wisconsin in the middle of the night, I am gripped by an irrational sensation of fear that prompts me to make sure all the doors are locked and to constantly turn the lights off inside the house and on outside so I can peek through the closed blinds into the night to check that nobody's out there. Why, I wonder to myself, am I doing this? Where is this intense sensation of fear coming from?

Granted, it's not that there's nothing to be afraid of here – some fear has precedent. This includes the fear (for myself and others) of being killed by a drunk driver before reaching home, of being hit by a stray bullet during hunting season, of being chased by a deer or dog or bear while jogging, and the fear of freezing to death in a snow storm. These are transparent fears – unpredictable, but at least the potential threat presents itself clearly. The fear I'm referring to, however, kicks in after an evening of watching the local news, followed by major network television shows like *60 Minutes*, *48 Hours*, *CSI* and *America's Most Wanted*. The barrage of stories of random crime ruthlessly committed against innocent victims, all delivered in an uncannily enthusiastic and excited tone, leaves me helplessly paranoid, imagining there's someone with an axe or a semiautomatic machine gun hovering outside, waiting for me to go to sleep.

In my very own, unscientific, personal survey of true crime television shows broadcast on the major commercial networks in NE Wisconsin, I've come to the conclusion that there are four particular crimes that get heavy rotation. These include a) kidnapped child either still missing or found dead – this is a standard, b) young woman disappears from a parking lot somewhere and is either missing or dead, c) an elderly woman is preyed upon in her own home – often ending up dead, or d) somebody breaks/forces/manipulates their way into the home of unsuspecting rural couple or family, sometimes taking advantage of their generosity – these people often end up dead. In theory, these are tragic stories – horrible stories – of events that theoretically shouldn't be repeated – and yet they are, in different variations, night after night. In isolation, these televisual 'events' could be considered crises – calamitous happenings that encourage people to reflect upon themselves and their communities – but the substantial and consistent flow of true crime programmes over what is now many years of televisual time places these shows, and thus these dramatically violent events, firmly in the realm of televisual information.¹ It could be called 'crisis information', actually – regular and even predictable, yet disturbing and destabilising, but never enough to actually stop the televisual flow.

Ever since the promise of Y2K delivered only disappointment to those hoping for something big, it seems like crisis information has become 'the' information in Northeast Wisconsin (and maybe the entire country). True to the old adage, 'if it bleeds, it leads', nothing that is not related to crime or violence seems to make it onto the local evening news. Instead, on a nightly basis, there's the report of the latest convenience store armed robbery or a shooting of some kind, intoned with a voice that implies simultaneous concern and anticipation that the world is going to hell in a handbasket. Couple the news with the true crime shows that follow, and basically what you end up with is a good reason to buy some guns and install a

CCTV setup around your house, and maybe build a bomb shelter while you're at it – all in the name of self-defence, mind you – and then wait for Armageddon to come because it's the only thing that's going to deliver you out of the terror of your monotonous, ordinary, 'normal' Midwestern life.

And this, of course, is the attraction of true crime television – the fact that these shows strip away the “fiction of normality” in a “sudden eruption of violence from beneath a therefore deceptively normal surface of things”.² These shows remind you that there's always potential for action, even if that action is completely deranged.

I can't help but liken this type of television programming to the neo-conservative political agenda that still hangs over parts of the US like smog, with its preference for crisis and pure affect in the face of complicated economic and social problems. In Northeast Wisconsin – with its mostly White, Christian population of Northern European descent that has never come to terms with its colonial past, now facing both a shift in the social constellation of the region due to migration, and a new economic reality with the decline in manufacturing and the almost complete disappearance of small farming – crisis is attractive. It's attractive because it is a distraction from thinking about or thoughtfully dealing with a complex and threatening reality – crisis is almost as good as a crystal meth addiction or alcoholism.

Unfortunately for me, although I'm capable of intellectualising the attraction of true crime shows and the televisual flow of crisis information from the safety of my desk in Berlin, thousands of miles away, when I'm confronted by this disturbing realm of televisual violence in person, I lose all capacity to abstract, and become a ball of tightly wound nerves. I, unlike the people who watch these shows on a daily basis, am not numb to them. I've often hypothesised that if the content of mainstream television broadcasting in Northeast Wisconsin would shift from crime and violence to, say, something a bit less sensational, that viewers would suffer from a form of post-traumatic stress disorder due to a lack of the particular affective experience television currently delivers. I, on the other hand, suffer from an affective overdose that triggers excessively paranoid behaviour, which is otherwise, thankfully, dormant. Rule to self – no watching television in Wisconsin.

Notes

1. Mary Anne Doane. “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe”. In (eds.) Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Thomas Keenan, **New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader** (Routledge, 2006, New York). *Crisis, in a televisual sense, according to Doane, “is startling and momentous precisely because it demands resolution within a limited period of time”, i.e. we have to find the killer, the body, etc. Televisual information, on the other hand, is the “steady stream of ‘newsworthy’ events characterized by their regularity if not predictability”.*

2. Mark Seltzer. **True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity** (Routledge, 2007, New York) p. 41.