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Wire in the Blood, Crime Drama with a British Flair

Leslie Eliason

Americans love a good murder – as long as it takes place on television and the perpetrator is apprehended within an hour. Crime dramas are one of the most popular genres of programming available today, a trend that shows no sign of waning. Megan Larson of *Media Week* wrote in 2004 that eight of the top twenty five shows on network television were crime related. She also noted that the series *Law and Order* was entering its fifteenth year – quite a feat in the here-today-gone tomorrow world of broadcast television. The most recent Nielsen ratings indicated that seven of the top twenty shows had a crime theme and *NCIS* held the number one spot. It does appear that little has changed in the past five years.

Crime is popular across the pond as well, and the UK, better known for its more traditional who-dun-it-style of detective show, has slowly been ramping up its crime genre offerings with shows like *Prime Suspect* and *Spooks*. *Wire in the Blood* (which ran for six seasons and ended in 2008) may be the UK's grittiest contribution yet. The series' main focus is Tony Hill, a psychotherapist played by Robson Green who has an eerie ability to seemingly enter the mind of serial killers. He works closely with Detective Chief Inspector (DCI) Carol Jordan (Hermione Norris), who relies heavily on his profiling skills to help determine the direction of her investigation. The show can be grossly violent, somewhat shocking, and tends to lack many of the elements common in its American counterparts, but for fans of the genre, it is worth tracking down and watching.

Wire in the Blood does not fit neatly into any of the American crime drama molds. Not quite a police procedural, such as *Law and Order Criminal Intent*, or the forensic smorgasbord of *CSI*, it is a mixture of the two that excludes much of what American viewers are accustomed to seeing. And what do Americans want to see? "Cool science!" At least that is what Rene Ebersole's short article in *Current Science* contends. She suggests that *CSI* is wildly popular because viewers are fascinated with forensic science and the process of finding criminals via technology. Martha Gever offers another perspective. In her journal article "The Spectacle of Crime, Digitized" she reflects on the changes in visual imagery that have taken place in crime drama over the years. These changes can be seen in both the scientific technology that is the central theme of *CSI* and the visual spectacle of lights, bright colors, and fast flashing scenes that comprise the backdrop of the show (446-449). She writes, ". . . recent shows inject a major new ingredient into this particular kind of program, treating crime dramas as occasions for audiences to engage with displays of power presented as technological mastery" (448).

Gray Cavender and Sarah Deutsch have noticed changes in the genre as well. In their study of the cultural meanings intrinsic in the most recent incarnations of the crime drama, they observe that, over the years, the plot lines of the shows have migrated from portraying defense lawyers as protagonists to police filling those roles. When the element of forensic science is added to this shift, a new moral authority is proffered – the combination of police and science as hero. Cavender and Deutsch also point out that many of the newer crime dramas focus more extensively on the characters' interpersonal relationships and private lives. This formula serves the dual purpose of creating more realistic characters that viewers are attracted to and giving credence to cultural meanings that the characters convey (68-70). Returning to the question of what people want to see in crime drama, Cavender and Deutsch's answer focuses on the idea that the most popular crime dramas also reflect the audience's greater societal beliefs about crime and punishment (69). Therefore, here in America, if a crime drama is to be successful, it must incorporate tough but fair and empathetic police, forensic science, back-stories about the characters, and violence. Additionally, loud music, car chases, guns, SUVs, and, if cable networks are involved, a lot of cursing only serve to sweeten the pie.

So how does the British produced *Wire in the Blood* stack up to America's version of crime drama? In terms of violence, very well indeed. Chris Shaw, of the British weekly news magazine *New Statesman*, points out that in the past, depictions of graphic violence on television were not looked upon favorably by the viewing public. In fact, British audiences were much more offended by portrayals of violence than by portrayals of sex, the reverse of American attitudes at the time (Shaw).

As revealed in *Wire in the Blood*, however, that opinion has obviously changed. In the episode entitled "Still She Cries," Tony, the psychologist, meets with a convicted serial killer in an effort to help her remember where exactly on the British moor she buried several children she had strangled.

The audience is witness to flashbacks of the killings - the children's screams accompanied by their kicking legs pawing the earth as the life is drained from their bodies. In the same episode, an unknown killer snatches young women, brutally murders them, rapes them postmortem, and taunts police with bits of hair, Barbie dolls posed as the victims, and handwritten notes.

Comparing *Wire in the Blood* to other American crime drama criteria reveals the true nature of the show. The overall tone is generally quieter, less hectic; it displays fewer of the ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) characteristics common in American programming. This can also be seen in the episode length – a full ninety minutes for the British version as compared to the typical forty-five minute American episode. While loud music is sometimes used as a backdrop, in "Still She Cries" it is paired with aerial views of the British moor (as opposed to *CSI's* Las Vegas at night scenes) and a rather melancholy bar scene. The ubiquitous car chases and SUVs are nonexistent, as are guns – in the UK most police do not carry firearms.

The sort of dialogue used in *Wire in the Blood* is also distinctly different from that used in American crime dramas. Unlike American scripts, where conversations tend to wallow in puns and/or profundities, the discourse in *Wire* is very ordinary, which tends to make it more realistic. The exception to this rather bland speech is Tony Hill's dialogue when he is in the mind of one of the killers. In a scene from "Still She Cries," he meets with DCI Jordan and her team after a second body has been found. Pointing to a note from the killer pinned to an evidence board he reads, "I let sweet Hatie go." At this point Hill takes on dual roles:

HILL AS HIMSELF: [Speaking to Jordan], Implying mutual consent, no harm.

HILL AS KILLER: I was looking after her, caring for her.

HILL AS HIMSELF: See the relationship?

HILL AS KILLER: She was safe with *me* [pause], safe with me.

HILL AS HIMSELF: Thinking this person enjoys the role of abduction, the incarceration, and later on the body, but what they don't like is the death and for that they blame *you*.

HILL AS KILLER: [face to face with Jordan] It's *your* fault I had to kill her.

This sort of banter is relied upon heavily throughout the show as Hill, in his mind and out loud, constructs the psychological make-up of the killer. Robson Green, as Hill, is very effective, and his delivery of the dialogue is convincing enough to draw the viewer in.

Unlike *CSI*, forensic science is not a major component of *Wire in the Blood*. It is alluded to as part of the regular procedural process that the police must follow, but viewers are not privy to autopsy scenes and medical examiners giving close-up, intricate details of individual injuries. DNA testing is mentioned frequently and often is a vital bit of evidence required for resolution, but the technology used to process the DNA does not enter the picture. This does not make the show less watchable, however. The interpersonal relationship between Tony and Carol is subtle but interesting. The audience can never be quite sure of what is written between the lines. The supporting characters are not strong but become more personified as the series continues. Finally, it is refreshing to watch a series in which the actresses resemble regular people – not supermodels wearing designer clothes and three inch heels.

Wire in the Blood is not the best crime drama on television. It may not even be second best. Diehard fans of the American style may be disappointed and perhaps a little bored at first but should stay tuned long enough to give the show a chance. It is possible some viewers may require a little time to adjust to the lack of sensual bombardment that typically defines American television. However, *Wire in the Blood* is well worth the ninety minutes one must invest to watch it. Why? Because it is atypical – a little slower, a little grittier, and more psychologically provoking than others in its genre tend to be. It is a shame the show was canceled, but, really, how many serial killers does it take to satisfy one's palate?

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