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S: Truth and Crime: Investigating The True Crime Genre

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Reading Journal

on "Truth and Crime: Investigating the True Crime Genre"

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1. Introduction

When I first saw the title of the seminar, "Truth and Crime: Investigating the True Crime Genre," I was immediately intrigued by the juxtaposition of "Truth" and "Crime." This wordplay made me think of how crime, particularly in the true crime genre, often appears to challenge the concept of truth. I am curious to explore how true crime narratives convey the truth, especially when crimes are sensationalized or when wrongful convictions occur. The title raised questions for me: Can true crime stories ever fully reveal the truth, or do they distort it for entertainment purposes? How does the genre balance fact and fiction and what kind of impact does this have on our perception of crime and justice?

Before this seminar, my exposure to true crime was mostly through movies about infamous serial killers like Ted Bundy and Richard Ramirez, which often left me feeling conflicted inside. On one hand, I was deeply absorbed by the stories because they were real; on the other, I felt disgusted by the details of the crimes, which left me unsettled for days afterward. Although it was captivating, I realized that it was not healthy for my mental health to be watching true crime as it was a lot to take in for me. I found the feeling I had watching true crime more striking than watching a horror movie. This initiates another question I hope the seminar will address, namely, what kind of impact the consumption of true crime content can have on our psychological and moral wellbeing. As a Philosophy student who had previously explored themes of morality and human nature in seminars like "Was ist das Böse? Philosophische Perspektiven," I was eager to see how true crime intersects with these philosophical questions, especially concerning human behaviour, guilt, and the nature of evil.

In this reading journal, I will reflect on the key themes we explored during the seminar, particularly the features of the true crime genre, and its intersection with gender, sexuality, and race. I want to find out how true crime media shapes our understanding of these issues and explore whether it reveals the complexities of human behaviour and justice. Ultimately, I hope to answer the questions that first intrigued me about the genre and uncover what true crime tells us—not only about crime itself but also about the societies that consume it.

2. Investigation of True Crime

2.1 Features and Fascination of True Crime Genre

At the beginning of the seminar, as I learned more about the characteristics of the true crime genre, I realized I was not aware of its complexity. Before attending the seminar, the only connection I had made with the genre sensationalized portrayals of popular serial killers like Ted Bundy or Richard Ramirez that targeted female victims. What stood out to me, was the fact that these crimes happened in real life and that they were specific sensational cases as they were outstanding due to their high number of victims or unusual circumstances in which they happened. As we frequently discussed the Netflix series *Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*, I watched it to so I could analyse the depiction of the true crime genre in the series and compare it to the literature covered in the seminar. In short, the series *Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* is about how Jeffrey Dahmer became a notorious serial killer and a cannibal who murdered 17 young men and boys between 1978 and 1991 (Jenkins 2024).

One major takeaway is that what makes true crime complex is the fact that it moves between fact and fiction (Seltzer 2007:38). This made me wonder what one can be sure of as true in true crime. Many critics also argue that the blurriness between fact and fiction in true crime causes harm, as it is difficult for viewers to tell them apart (ibid.). According to Seltzer "this is the logic of true crime" which suggests that true crime functions within a paradox where it reveals the truth about crime but simultaneously constructs a narrative that may sensationalize reality for entertainment purposes (Seltzer 2007:51).

In the seminar we discussed how sensationalism causes people to perceive serial killers as heroes such as the Japanese killer Seito Sakakibara. While he may not have been directly stating he killed because of his idols, his behaviour and remarks show an influence and desire to do similar to his idols (Nucleus 2022). Similarly, Dahmer's use of yellow contact lenses showed how much he resonated with his favourite movie villains and his desire to look and feel like them (Molloy 2023). Furthermore, true crime tends to reconstruct serial killers as anti-heroes for financial gain and entertainment at the expense of the victims' families (Bonn 2014:173). Throughout the series the viewers are made to feel empathy for

Dahmer, for example, through the depiction of his troubled childhood with signs of neglect by both of his parents. Especially in the third Episode *Doing a Dahmer*, in which Dahmer returns home in a good mood to find his mother packing the car and leaving because of his father. Jeffrey begs her not to go, she angrily criticizes his hobbies as she drives off, the camera zooms out so one can see Jeffrey dejectedly watching his mother drive away (*Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* 2022: S01E03 18:18).

Similarly, when watching the trailer for *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness*, I noticed a troubling trend, namely, that the documentary appeared to prioritize entertainment over respect for the victims. The use of fast-paced music and dramatic visuals in the trailer trivialized serious issues, making it feel more like another episode of *Keeping up with the Kardashians* than a serious documentary about crimes Joe Exotic was convicted of (*Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness* 2020). This is problematic as it blurs one's perception, puts one in an inappropriate mood for watching a documentary about a topic that has to be taken seriously. This confusion is also seen in the comments section of the trailer, where one user writes: "I just finished the show and there were so many times where I forgot this was a DOCUMENTARY and not a fake plot of a tv show …" (@yomamas1559 2020).

Moreover, in groups we discussed three quotes regarding the popularity of *Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* series and what could be the reason why it is perceived as fascinating by many. In our group, we agreed that each of the quotes could be partly true for different people. I found Ridderstrom's quote spoke to me the most as I felt I experienced a similar reaction to what she describes as *kama pida*. Ridderstrom exemplifies a cause of *kama pida*, for instance, as "an overwhelming desperation for the sake of humanity" (Ridderstrom 2023:23). It also evokes strong emotions as it may trigger "revulsion and fascination, disgust, repellence and delight" (Ridderstrom 2023:24). This sparked my interest in understanding the human psychology behind why people can commit such evil and why many victims in true crime seem to be female (Vicary & Fraley 2010:84). Additionally, I wanted to understand how it is possible that certain serial killers can kill for so long without getting caught or what was holding the law enforcement back from bringing them to justice.

Apart from that, I found that the question that usually emerges in true crime is not whether the actions could be classified as *evil,* but rather what has led to the transformation

into an individual capable of committing such crimes (Seltzer 2007:53). Especially, the Dahmer series illustrates Dahmer's troubled childhood, his arrest, and trial (*Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* 2022: S01E02). Even though providing insights into the psychological aspects of criminal behaviour is intriguing, true crime narratives often run the risk of minimizing the victim's humanity (Seltzer 2007:37). This can also be seen in the Dahmer series, as viewers do not get to know much about the victims, not even their names (*Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* 2022: S01E03).

Taking a closer look, McCain's quote reminds me of one session in the philosophy seminar on the nature of evil. According to McCain the interest in true crime derives from the exploration of "our most uncomfortable emotions" such as "fear, empathy, and desire, without exposing ourselves to real physical danger" (McCain 2022:2). In one of the sessions of my philosophy seminar I encountered a quote by Georges Bataille, in which he says that violence would not terrify us so much if we did not know or at least were vaguely aware, that it could lead us to the worst in ourselves (Bataille 1962:63). I figured that McCain's quote implies that the reason we watch true crime is that we want to explore these dark aspects of ourselves. The German-American philosopher Hannah Arendt, for example, acknowledges in her report on the "banality of evil" that every person has the potential for evil (Arendt 1986:400). She exemplifies this with the case of Adolf Eichmann who was responsible for the mass deportations of Jews to concentration camps: "What was disturbing about Eichmann was precisely that he was like so many others, and that these many were neither perverted nor sadistic, but terribly and frighteningly normal." (ibid.)

Interestingly, this is another feature seen true crime: normality is often portrayed as abnormally normal, where extreme violence erupts from seemingly ordinary settings (Seltzer 2007: 41). This "Violence-Normality Paradox" can also be seen in *Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (ibid). Throughout the series, Dahmer is portrayed as seemingly normal as he does typical everyday chores such as talking with neighbours, going to work, or mowing the lawn (*Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* 2022 E01S02 19:37). This is, however, contrasted with the violence he commits in his closed apartment. This paradox makes the viewer aware of how evil can be masked behind seemingly normal behaviour.

2.2   Gender: Heterosexuality and Women in True Crime

In this section, I want to address the following gender related aspects of true crime, such as why women seem to consume true crime the most, the homophobia in *Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*, and how true crime shapes our perception through media.

One of the most eye-opening sessions of the seminar was when we learned how to analyse media texts and what to pay attention to. For example, when I first watched *Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*, I did not think too much about each scene and how it was shot or framed. However, as we learned to analyse small details within each scene, I noticed far more when watching each episode for a second time. What stood out to me was my emotional reaction after watching the *Sandwich Scene,* which we analysed in groups during one class. In this session, we were introduced to "The Tripartite Model for the Analysis of Media Texts", which examines media content through three lenses: textual analysis, reception, and modes of production (Olson 2022:75). This model is helpful for approaching the analysis of a media text.

Before analysing the sandwich scene, I assumed that title was referring to the fact that Dahmer was handing a sandwich to his neighbour, Glenda. However, the title actually refers to the symbolic way the sandwich becomes a focal point in the camera's framing, that is sandwiched between Dahmer and Glenda and thus heightening the tension between the two characters. My first reaction while watching this particular scene was fear, as I anxiously anticipated something bad happening, which was cleverly enhanced by the suspenseful music. After analysing the "Sandwich scene", I realized how much effort was put into that single scene by the producers. For example, the scene starts with the opening of the door and ends with its closing. Once the door closes the music also stops and creates a sense of relief as if the audience can finally stop holding their breath. Apart from the music, the scene is shot in real time, which stands out in comparison to other scenes as it takes much longer until something is happening.

When something is shot in "real time", it means that events on screen are depicted at the exact pace they occur in reality instead of showing highlights of events only (Reed 2012:64). This makes the audience feel as if they were in that place and time. Before the session, I was not familiar with certain vocabulary related to film making. Moreover, I only

realized later that even though the scene was playing during the daytime, the apartment had ambient lightning that was purposefully chosen to create a weird yellow and warm colour, which evokes the feeling of discomfort and being trapped in Dahmer's apartment.

Through this deeper analysis in class, I started to notice other elements of the series, such as the homophobia in *Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*. First of all, the series portrays how societal homophobia and racism at that time enabled Dahmer to commit his crimes. For example, in the second episode *Please Don't Go*", the police ignores Glenda's concerns about the safety of the young Asian boy, Konerak. Despite obvious signs that something was wrong, the officers returned him to Dahmer and were more concerned with avoiding "gay stuff" and "catching anything" than addressing the situation seriously (*Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* 2022: S01E02 43:19). Evan Peters, the actor who plays Dahmer, remarked in an interview that the homophobia and racism at its time has contributed to Dahmer getting away with his crimes: "It's the society. It's this how society and our systems failed to stop him multiple times because of racism, homophobia" (*Evan Peters On The Complexity Of Playing Dahmer* 2022: 03:11).

The Netflix series also depicts Jeffrey Dahmer's sexuality as deviant in many scenes. For example, in the second episode "Please Don't Go", the camera frequently lingers on Dahmer's attraction to male corpses or his arousal by animal viscera (*Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* 2022: S01E02 15:18). By repeatedly focusing on these aspects, the series risks equating his violent, necrophilic tendencies with his homosexuality (Copenhaver 2023). This might give the viewers the impression that being gay is associated with being monstrous. Thus, Dahmer's abnormal behaviour is linked with his sexual orientation rather than his violent crimes throughout the series (Woodstock & Vena 2022:62). This depiction reinforces the idea that being gay is dangerous. If homosexuality is portrayed as abnormal, it implies that heterosexuality is considered normal, which reflects a homophobic perspective (Schmid 2005:228). Consequently, the series perpetuates the view that heterosexuality is superior to homosexuality. Schmid argues that while Bundys' is deviant traits are minimized, Dahmer's homosexuality is emphasized (Schmid 2005:178): "This 'straight' method of true crime, although alluding to or outright dramatizing histories of discursive categorical

construction […], frustratingly fails to challenge the very artificial nature of deviance itself." (Woodstock & Vena 2022:66).

A comparable issue is the depiction of women in true crime through the "male gaze", which refers to how visual media and popular culture present women from a masculine, heterosexual perspective (Olson 2017:4). Women are often portrayed as victims, with the suggestion that their behaviours or choices contributed to their victimization. Cowan and O'Brien's (1990) study on film victims, particularly women, reveals that those who do not survive the killer are often depicted as more sexual: "On almost every measure of sexual appearance or sexuality, the non-surviving females were more frequently sexual than both the surviving females and the non-surviving males" (Cowan & O'Brien 1990:194). This subtly implies that sexual behaviour is punished with death, while abstinence is rewarded (ibid:195). A similar pattern can be found in Gothic novels, where heroines like Isabella in *The Castle of Otranto* are portrayed as innocent, passive, and virtuous. Isabella's lack of control over her own fate, depending on the intervention of others for survival, reinforces the idea that women who conform to traditional gender roles are spared (Walpole 1764:24). On the other hand, when women are portrayed as perpetrators, they are often depicted as overly masculine or hypersexual. An example for this is the female character Matilda in *The Monk*, who disguises herself as a man to enter a monastery, only to later reveal herself as a demonic seductress who leads Ambrosio into sin and ruin (Lewis 2012:341-342). Overall, one can see that the depiction of women in true crime and Gothic novels suggest that women who step outside traditional roles are seen as dangerous and deserving of punishment.

When I noticed these recurring patterns, I considered why women seem to be particularly drawn to true crime. It is not that they enjoy consuming violent content, but rather that they may want to avoid doing the same "careless" decisions that has led other victims to encounter such cruel fates. In that way, it can serve as a mental preparation in case they find themselves in a similar situation or to look out for danger and to recognize it better than some victims did. Keeping this in mind, it makes sense that podcast such as *My Favourite Murder* have become popular, as they offer an intimate platform where listeners can share their experiences (Rodgers 2022:3408). A study in 2010 discovered that one reason for women to consume true crime is "as a way to process the dark persistence of misogynistic violence in

society at large" (Hawgood 2018). Moreover, many feminist scholars link "women's fear of crime to a range of men's violence (physical, sexual, psychological) that girls and women are subjected to throughout their lives …" (Rodgers 2022 3054-5). By engaging with podcast like *My Favorite Murder,* women are given an opportunity to question and reshape how true crime portrays women and victimization (ibid: 3060).

Apart from that, we also discussed in the seminar that certain podcasts encourage the audience to solve cases on their own and determine the truth or justice of the crime for themselves. Although podcasts can provide a sense of community, I found it worth questioning whether people should engage in investigations without any expertise. Consequently, those who people who constantly consume true crime content might start treating true crime like a "cult" by discussing it as if these were not serious crimes but instead fiction, similar to shows like *Breaking Bad*. Some even fetishize serial killers, especially when attractive actors portray them in shows like *Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* and *The Ted Bundy Tapes*. As a result, true crime fans true crime fans may fail to treat these sensitive topics with the seriousness they deserve and should not be exploited. Personally, I feel that many of the true crime shows I have watched were not intended to educate me but rather to sensationalize and monetize the content to the fullest.

2.3   Race: The Whiteness of True Crime

Another major topic in true crime is the role of race, the depiction of stereotypes, and how those stereotypes influence the narration of true crime stories. In a session with Prof. Dr. Grunewald on "Evidentiary Power of Storytelling in Law", he mentioned how stereotypes can impact investigations. For instance, he referenced the case of Michael Morton, who was wrongfully convicted in 1987 for the murder of his wife, largely due to suppressed evidence and stereotypes that portrayed him as the "angry husband that was sexually rejected" (Grunewald 2023:100). After nearly 25 years in prison, new DNA evidence pointed to the real killer (ibid.). This case highlights how true crime storytelling often oversimplifies complex cases, leading to the neglect of crucial details (ibid.). Upon hearing this, I was reminded of how people often form judgments when they hear about disputes within relationships, usually assuming who is right and who is wrong without knowing the full story.

As an outsider, they lack all the details and can only base their judgments on the information presented to them.

Similarly, true crime podcast such as *My Favorite Murder* create a sense of closeness to the crime and its details, even though the listener is not personally connected to the individuals involved. Seltzer describes this as a key feature of the true crime genre:

> The most visible markers of […] true crime is the popularity of both stranger-intimacy and stranger-violence. The public spectacle of torn and private bodies and torn and private persons is also the spectacle of a style of sociality. That style of sociality has become inseparable from the mass exhibition and mass witnessing. (Seltzer 2007:35).

Since everyone forms their own judgment about the crime, there is a risk that justice may mean something different for each person. What stunned me about this is that I have felt similarly to some extent. It Is also quite concerning that even investigators might rely on stereotypes rather than seeking proper evidence to ensure they are convicting the right person. Although categorical thinking is an inherent cognitive process, it is still important, especially as an investigator, to be aware of their own biases and the influence of these biases on their judgments to prevent making unfair decisions.

Ultimately, law tends to give white people the benefit of the doubt and presents them in more positive ways, while people of colour face negative stereotypes (Grunewald 2023:95). This disparity means that white people are more likely to get a fair trial, while people of colour frequently have to work harder to prove they are innocent. Grunewald refers to these "biases against suspects and defendants of a certain race, ethnicity, gender, sexual inclination, religion, or other characteristic" as masterplots (ibid.). In the case of Michael Morton, the assumption is that the husband is typically the killer when a wife is murdered. Additionally, his note expressing his sexual frustration only validated the assumptions of the investigators. What I found shocking about this, was Grunewald's observation that "when a crime is severe enough, prejudicial evidence can always be used to connect the defendant (who still enjoys the presumption of innocence) to that crime" (Grunewald 2023:123).

During the session with Dr. Beate Christ, we discussed Elon Green's essay, which argues that the true crime genre is overwhelmingly dominated by whiteness, which ultimately distorts public perception of crime and justice (Green 2020). What particularly stuck out with

me was what Yusef Salaam, who was wrongly convicted of raping a white woman in 1989, describes as the *Criminal System of Injustice*. He explains that there are two criminal justice systems in the US, namely:

> one system of white privilege that signals the rule of law and in which there are fair trails and a proper defence for everyone, and one system in which Blackness is immediately associated with guilt and in which People of Colour have to prove their innocence rather than their guilt (Thiem 2023:3).

When I first read this quote, I not only found it accurate but also felt deep sadness because of the ongoing reality of racism that continues to cause suffering for people of colour. For instance, the death of George Floyd in 2020 at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer shows how Black people are treated differently within the legal system. Additionally, there is a systemic issue as there was no immediate accountability and action against the officers involved.

A similar theme emerges in *Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story,* which highlights the negative portrayal of Black people by depicting them as easier to manipulate (Daniela & Kusumaningtyas 2024:111). Black or Asian victims like Konerak and Tracy could be lured with beer and small amounts of money, while two white men whom Dahmer approached with the same simple tactics were not interested. For instance, in Episode 3 *Doing a Dahmer* Dahmer's white classmate immediately rejects him, and the white runner flees before Dahmer can make any advances (*Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* 2022: S01E3 13:22*)*. It becomes clear that Dahmer targeted Black victims intentionally because they were poor and concerns regarding their safety were dismissed by authorities, for instance Dahmer's neighbour Glenda Cleveland repeatedly reported suspicious activities to the police but was ignored by the police (*Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* 2022: S01E2 41:58).

Moreover, racism is also evident in how Black people are portrayed in the media and through their lack of representation. Before I explored the importance of Black representation in true crime, I realized that no Black serial killer came to my mind. However, this did not seem accidental to me. While reading Allan Branson's journal article "African American Serial Killers: Over-Represented Yet Underacknowledged" I came across the reason behind

this discrepancy. Branson argues that the rarity for African American serial killers in true crime is due to a "continuum of negative imagery as a result of slavery; the FBI and media construction of the serial killer" (Branson 2013:2). However, statistics show that African Americans are overrepresented, with one in five known serial killers being Black, despite making up about 13% of the U.S. population (ibid.). While the media portrays Black men as "low-level criminals" and rarely as serial killers, white males are depicted as serial killers with "iconic, myth-building characteristics" which are more likely to be turned into cultural icons (ibid.).

For instance, white male serial killers are often presented as intelligent, cunning, and charismatic, as seen in *Silence of the Lambs, Psycho or Darkly Dreaming Dexter,* while Black serial killers are depicted as mentally challenged or dim-witted such as in the portrayal of Harrison, who is described as having the "mind of a child" (Branson 2013:3). The lack of representation is problematic because it not only perpetuates harmful stereotypes about Black people but also "poses an inherent danger for society as a whole" as law enforcement and the public focus on the myth of the white male serial killer by allowing the actions of Black serial killers to go unnoticed (Branson 2013:15). This lack of representation also suggest that the true crime genre leans more toward entertainment than actual "infotainment" (Cecil 2020:7). The focus on white serial killers, as seen with Dahmer's coverage in books, documentaries, and films, also empathizes how white serial killers are mythologized and commodified, while Black serial killers remain underrepresented in popular culture (Branson 2013:2).

3. Conclusion

After reflecting on my expectations on the seminar, I realized how my understanding of the true crime genre has deepened, especially by getting to know more about its features. At the beginning, I questioned whether true crime could ever fully reveal the truth or if it distorts reality for the sake of entertainment. After reading and engaging with various forms of true crime I came to understand that while true crime narratives try to present true events, they will always run the risk of simplifying complex issues. That is because the genre - similar to romance movies which idealise love in unrealistic ways - is created for mass audiences and prioritizes entertainment over depth. Moreover, our class discussions on the male gaze made clear that true crime often reflects societal prejudices and reinforces them rather than challenging them. Furthermore, my attitude towards consuming true crime has shifted as I now find myself evaluating the purpose behind its production, which has heightened my awareness of the exploitation of victims and the blurriness of the genre between fact and fiction.

During this seminar, I also became particularly engaged with the genre during the seminar. I found it interesting to learn through podcasts, films, and YouTube videos, which made the exploration of true crime more intriguing than typical seminar topics. Further, I found that the answer to the recurring question, whether true crime holds value beyond entertainment, is difficult to answer as it appeared to me that it depends on the intentions and awareness of its consumers. Additionally, my philosophical questions about the nature of evil were also addressed by discussing McCain's quote about the fascination with true crime, which empathized that we all have the potential for being evil.

In conclusion, the seminar largely fulfilled my expectations. Although I first found it uncomfortable to consume true crime stories, the seminar made the exploration of true crime more dynamic than traditional research methods. Ultimately, it has helped me understand the genre and the broader societal issues as well as the impact they have on of how crime stories reflecting societal views

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