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FEMALE DETECTIVES AND THE MORAL CRISIS IN AMERICA: WOMEN IN THE NEW TV CRIME DRAMA

For many decades, television has been an important medium through which sex roles are acquired (Signorielli 1989). Television texts may reinforce gender role stereotypes (Bandura 1977; Gerbner et al. 1986), but they may also be important for registering and strengthening transformations in sex roles. Television retains this social potential in the twenty-first century, despite the radical changes in viewing patterns, when increasing numbers of viewers access TV shows via on-demand streaming services rather than traditional networks.

The present paper investigates representations of female detectives in recent American crime drama to study how their constructions correspond to the transformations of female roles in American society, affected by a series of economic and moral crises in the early twenty-first century. Obviously, there is nothing new about the presence of women detectives in crime narratives. They have been there since the beginning of crime fiction, it suffices to mention Agatha Christie's Miss Marple (see Kestner's [2003] analysis of the female detective in late Victorian fiction). There is also nothing new in the appearance of women as police investigators, and the portrayal of women in crime drama has long been of considerable interest to researchers. The appearance and evolution of film and TV female detectives is traced by Linda Mizejewski in *Hardboiled & High Heeled: The Woman Detective in Popular Culture* (see also Gates' [2014] analysis of the early representations of female detectives in film noir). Mizejewski links the gradual transformation

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of female investigators from talented amateurs to ambitious professionals with the changing social roles of women and appearance of larger numbers of females in the police and other criminal justice institutions. She also points to the problematic efforts of making the new female protagonists fit the narrative roles conventionally written for male detectives, often portrayed as individualistic outcasts with a variety of personal problems which alienate them from society.

In a 2009 quantitative study of ten prime-time television crime dramas, Kimberly A. DeTardo-Bora found out that women were actually overrepresented as crime scene investigators, detectives, and special agents. However, they were also subject to considerable stereotypization, being almost exclusively young, white, and single. Female characters in the shows tended to be overtly sexualized, but at the same time presented as caring and emotional. The female detectives and other criminal justice professionals occupied subordinate positions, but they equaled male characters in assertiveness, self-assurance, and determination.

Mizejewski and others pointed to the existence of feminist crime genre, which is most easily identified in novels, but seems to be more and more present in film and television (Mizejewski 2004). Feminist crime genre pictures strong, independent women and exposes gender stereotypes present in crime narrative. The texts representative of this form of crime fiction and drama focus on the social context of crime and picture female characters engaged in a search for justice, which, growing from a sense of moral duty, is likely to go beyond law (Mizejewski 2004; Cavender and Jurik 2007, 282). Further, Mizejewski argues that television series, more flexible than films, is a medium which has the potential to swiftly answer audience demands and develop or modify a character even within one season. This, as she says, makes television “relatively adventurous about portraying professional women investigators” (10).

Comprehensive accounts of the evolution of the figure of the fictional female detective presented by Mizejewski in her book and by Sue Turnbull in *The TV Crime Drama* (2014, 153–85) point to the significance of several now classic series for reshaping television representations of women as investigators and police officers. Both authors emphasize particularly the role of such shows as *Police Woman* (1974–78) and *Cagney and Lacey* (1982–88), made for American television, and the British series *Prime Suspect* (1991–96). “Pepper” Anderson in *Police Woman*, a female action hero, is heavily sexualized, but her narrative was important in showing the police of-

ficer concerned with crime directed at women and sympathizing with the victims. In *Cagney and Lacey* the eponymous characters (played by Tyne Daly and Sharon Gless) are NYPD detectives who are friends and partners even though they come from different social classes. This crime drama addresses a number of important social issues, such as female professionalism, gender bias in the police force, sexual harassment, breast cancer, abortion, and other (D'Acci, 1994; Cavender and Jurik 2007, 282; Turnbull 2014, 164–68; Mizejewski 2004, 71–77). *Prime Suspect* shows DS Jane Tennison (Helen Mirren) as a female detective working tirelessly to render justice in the male-dominated field of British police. The series, through the character of Tennison, brought attention to the situation of the socially marginalized groups and spoke about victimization of women, being one of the best example of a progressive moral TV fiction from the 1990s (see Cavender and Jurik 2007, 282; Mizejewski 2004, 80–85; Turnbull 2014, 173–77).

When it comes to the reformulation of the character of the female investigator in the twenty-first century, much of the impetus for the change originated in Scandinavian TV noir, with the two female investigators, Sara Lund (Sofie Gråbøl) from *The Killing* (2007–12) and Saga Noren from *Broen/Bron* (DATA) being the new versions of the female detective. The figure of the single, troubled, rational, but socially dysfunctional and vulnerable detective appears in several other notable TV shows, most strikingly in the American series *Homeland* (2011–20, with Claire Danes as Carrie Mathison, a CIA officer with a bipolar disorder), and several transnational versions of *Broen/Bron*. As Kate R. Gilchrist (2022, 184) argues, such a character of the single female detective offers a positive interpretation of new femininity and “subversively troubles the gender binary”, but “she simultaneously reinscribes patriarchal discourses of heteronormative coupledness and normative femininity... rendering the single woman a threat to femininity” (see Schmidt 2015, 445–54; Schwartz and Kaplan 2018 for similar interpretations).

In the following years the evolution of the TV female detective has continued. The feminization of crime drama is a global trend and the evolution of the character of the female detective is a transnational generic phenomenon. Overrepresentation of female detectives in TV crime drama, identified several years ago by DeTardo-Bora, is a lasting trend, perhaps best manifested by the UK crime drama scene, where numerous crime shows with a strong female lead have been produced, for example the long-running *Vera* (2011–, with Brenda Blethyn as Detective Chief Inspector Vera Stanhope); *No Offence* (2015–18, with Joanna Scanlon as DI Viv Deering), *Marcella*

(2016–, with Anna Friel starring as DS Marcella Backland), *Unforgiven* (2015–, with DCI Cassandra “Cassie” Stuart played by Nicola Walker), and *The Fall* (2013–16, with a memorable performance of Gillian Anderson as Detective Superintendent Stella Gibson investigating serial murders in Belfast).¹

The present paper studies two recent American TV crime dramas, *Unbelievable* (2019) and *Mare of Easttown* (2021), which by going beyond the classic formula of crime drama variously reshape the format of the genre, placing female detectives in central roles. Even though they were both produced as mini-series, and not as long-running TV shows, it may be expected that they will make a lasting impact on the development of crime drama, similarly to *Police Woman*, *Prime Suspect*, or *The Killing*. *Unbelievable* and *Mare of Easttown*, owing to their reformulations of the figures of the female detectives, manage to overcome the generic constraints of crime drama and discursively address significant social and economic issues, often ignored by conventional crime narratives. These two shows picture American communities as morally devastated spaces, with crisis affecting individuals and families in many spheres of life. Contrary to the established model of crime drama, *Unbelievable* and *Mare of Easttown*, although based on stories of criminal investigation, focus on exploration of the social and economic context of crime.

Unbelievable and *Mare of Easttown* exploit the formula of the police procedural. These quality, big-budget TV shows, based on carefully written scripts, are visually attractive, and make use of producing and directing talents (for example Lisa Cholodenko for *Unbelievable*), and, most notably, cast stars in major roles (Toni Collette and Merrit Wevers in *Unbelievable*; Kate Winslet and Julianne Nicholson in *Mare of Easttown*). Contrary to the Scandinavian TV noir construction of the female detective as an isolated and troubled person, the protagonists of these two American miniseries are presented as women who are family-oriented, closely bound with their communities and emotionally engaged in the problems affecting them.

Unbelievable (2019), a Netflix show based on facts and a journalistic narrative describing the case, shows two ambitious female investigators, Grace Rasmussen (Toni Collette) and Karen Duvall (Merrit Wevers) tracking a seri-

¹ A notable New Zealand/Australian show centered on the figure of the female detective is *Top of the Lake* (2013–17, starring Elisabeth Moss). Female detectives are major protagonists in several acclaimed Polish crime dramas, such as *Chyłka* (2018–22), *Rysa* (2021), *Rojst’97* (2021), and *Odwilż* (2022).

al rapist in Colorado. The other plot, chronologically earlier, follows the story of a victim of the same criminal, Marie Adler (Kaitlyn Dever). The male detectives assigned to the case bully Marie into recanting her statement, allowing her to be charged with making a false report of rape and given criminal citation. Marie, who has been in foster care for most of her life, is vulnerable not just to crime, but also to the impersonal, red-tape practices of judicial and social welfare institutions.

Unbelievable demonstrates how not to deal with rape cases by showing a more compassionate way for police to proceed (Havas and Horeck 2021, 251). What makes this show special is its focus on the victims. The organization of the narrative implies that Marie's story is more important than the other subplot, that of the investigation. The first episode centers exclusively on Marie's rape and the legal troubles she gets into, and is told from the young woman's point of view. The two female detectives, Grace and Karen, appear only in episode 2, when, working on two different cases, they realize that several rapes could be committed by the same perpetrator. The two plots connect only in last episode of the series, which concludes as Marie, finally given justice, embarks on a journey towards a new life away from Colorado.

Marie's tragic story is the main theme, but other rape victims are also important characters in the series. They are shown as full personalities, women of different backgrounds, each with a specific life history interrupted by the crime committed against them. In contrast, the viewer does not learn much about the rapist apart from what the detectives establish about him. He is real, but the script does not show him as a person: he is rather a dark force behind the appalling crimes (262).

Unbelievable reworks the buddy cop formula,² using female characters constructed through contrast. Karen and Grace represent new police professionalism, based on intelligence, diligence, devotion, and a sense of morality. They doggedly investigate their case, because they want to stop the rapist from hurting more women, because rape causes, as one of them says, "irreversible harm". However, they represent two different models of femininity. The contrast between the two investigators is used to evoke a variety of new perspectives on two subjects: crime against women and female professionalism.

Karen is the younger partner in the duo. Married, with two daughters, she manages to use her organizational skills to successfully balance work and

² The formula of female buddy detectives has been widely used in American crime drama after *Cagney and Lacey*: for example in *The Division* (2001–04), *Women's Murder Club* (2007), *Rizzoli & Isles* (2010–16), *Justice* (2013–).

home, even though it comes at a considerable personal cost, as she shares parenting duties with her police officer husband. As an active member of the local church, she seems to get an ethical compass from her Christian beliefs. Systematic and thorough, Duvall is a demanding boss for her male subordinates (259–60). Grace, the senior and more experienced officer, is married, but does not have children and devotes her free time to jogging and repairing old automobiles. Grace is a fast-acting, sharp-tongued, sarcastic, no-nonsense woman. She seems to be incapable of showing friendliness, but quickly recognizes Karen's investigative talents to occasionally praise her partner with words like "Bitch, you are on your game."

The restricted narration of *Unbelievable* follows the police investigation from the perspective of the officers. But there is little action here, the drama provided by the new discoveries made by the investigative team, in which other women have important functions. Much of screen time is devoted to police interviews, a convention typical for the police procedural.³ *Unbelievable* points to the power of conversation as an investigative technique: it is through the use of language, and a compassionate but professional attitude that Karen and Grace manage to gather valuable evidence in their investigation. Detective Duvall knows how trauma affects rape victims and shows empathy and support when interviewing them (259–60).

The figures of the detectives are also used to express female anger. This is largely done in impassioned speeches, like the one delivered by Karen Duvall, in episode 3, when she gives vent to her frustration over the slowness of the investigation. Duvall angrily acknowledges the depth of trauma that victims carry focusing her wrath on how the criminal justice system handles rape cases (259–60). The contrast between Rassmussen and Duvall and the pair of the male detectives who originally dealt with Marie's case points to the inability of the patriarchal structures of the police to deal with serious crime against women. The male detectives are incompetent, insensitive and show lack of communication skills. The women's dedication, compassion and respect for the victims, combined with rigorous detective work allows them not only to solve the crime, but also to help the victims regain dignity and self-control, destroyed by the trauma of rape (Honig 2021; Hogan 2021; Havas and Horeck 2021).

With its wide array of women characters *Unbelievable* seems to be a unique police procedural, offering an original take on representation of crime.

³ The miniseries plays with the traditional conventions of the police procedural, for example in the scene showing the two female detectives playing snooker after work in episode 4.

Transforming a well-known and popular formula, it discusses both the new female professional empowerment and women's vulnerability, not only to crime, but also to the gender bias of public institutions. As argued by Gastón-Lorente and Gómez-Baceiredo, the miniseries has the power to make the story, initially published as a journalistic report, more believable, with the added fictional scenes presenting feelings and motivations of the main characters and strengthening the viewers' alignment with the protagonists. *Unbelievable* contends that moral decadence and the rise of crime is one of the consequences of the political, social and economic crisis in contemporary America, but, nevertheless, gives a hopeful message. A better understanding of the trauma of crime and improved communication with the victims is a way to bring justice and possibly prevent crime by increasing public awareness (Honig 2021).

Moreover, *Unbelievable* explores the concept of American domesticity, and the pictures of Karen and Grace's family life offer the viewer a better understanding of the pressures which female professionals face. The focus on domesticity is even more pronounced in *Mare of Easttown*. The setting of the series is a small Pennsylvanian town. On the surface, the local community seems to be closely-knit and friendly, but the story, centered on the investigation of the murder of a teenage mother, reveals a severe crisis affecting the town. De-industrialization, post-industrial poverty, petty crime, juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, violence, and religious crisis are closely linked to disintegration of traditional morality.

The plot centers on a local police officer, Mare Sheehan (Kate Winslet), who is a local hero, still celebrated as the star of a high-school basketball championship game twenty-five years ago. Mare is an excellent investigator who struggles in her personal life. Divorced, with a teenage daughter, she shares the house with her interfering mother. Mare's ex is living next door and, as the story begins, he is getting married to his new partner. Mare's quiet demeanor in public cannot hide the fact that she suffers from the trauma of having lost her son to suicide. Moreover, she is fighting a custody battle with her daughter-in-law over her grandson, whom she helped to raise, when the young woman, a heroin addict, was unable to take care of him.

With Kate Winslet in the lead role as a middle-aged detective, and with other older female characters given prominent functions in the narrative (Mare's friend, Lori Ross, played by Julianne Nicholson, and her mother, played by Jean Smart), the show offers an extended treatment of American femininity. *Mare of Easttown* exploits, in challenging ways, Kate Winslet's

star image, focusing on her somewhat overweight body, lined face, and rough movements. This, however, does not question her desirability as a woman, or her sexual attractiveness, as evidenced in the romantic subplot of involving Richard, a visiting academic, played by Guy Pearce. The series constructs its representations of older women within a discourse of age rarely used on the screen, presenting these female characters as complex persons, with much agency. The crisis in the families and in the community threatens the sense of the women's solidarity, as the protagonists respond to it in varied, often conflicting ways. But it is the women who, failed by their male partners, retain a higher sense of integrity and follow a moral compass (Stead 2022, 10–13).

The show is based on the formula of the police procedural, but Mare is a new type of detective: a mature police officer, a hard-working mother, and a caring grandmother. She is an outsider, not an unusual thing for a fictional detective, she is an outsider of another kind: a lonely character, inhabiting the crowded space of her family home and being one of the best recognizable persons in her community. Paradoxically, she is placed at the center of this community as an investigating agent. Kate Winslet's performance as Mare helps to visualize the complexity of the character and the weight of the pressure of the policing job and the job of managing her complicated family life. Mare is a police detective, but she is also a specifically maternal subject—embodying compassion, female-centered kinship, and rootedness in her community.

Mare's determined investigation exposes the underlying patriarchal structure of Easttown. The viewer is confronted with a range of paternal figures, who are flawed, do not live up to their parental responsibilities and fail as fathers of the community. Mare, as a powerful but troubled maternal figure, is obsessively pursuing the cases of missing teenage girls, driven by her own grief at her son's death. Focusing the plot on the middle-aged female detective allows the viewer to see the ways in which the moral crisis, in the long run caused by neoliberal economic transformations, affects individual persons and families in a small American community, and helps to understand the gender dimension of the crisis.

As noted by Sue Thornham, *Mare of Easttown* places its emphasis on individual failure rather than structural inequalities in American society and offers a promise that such failures can be overcome by individual action (2022, 1, 4–5). *Mare of Easttown* bears striking similarities to a British show, *Happy Valley* (2014–16, BBC One), based on Sally Wainwright's script and

featuring Sarah Lancashire as Catherine Cawood, a middle-aged police officer from a small de-industrialised town in Northern England. Both Catherine Cawood and Mare Sheehan are compassionate but angry, living with the guilt of a child dead by suicide, and bringing up their grandsons, sons of that dead child, with the aid of an extended, female-centered, warm but dysfunctional family. Thornham convincingly argues that *Mare of Easttown*, contrary to *Happy Valley*, does not link the moral crisis it depicts to the structural flaws in neo-liberal capitalism, or to destructive masculinity, but to individual male failures (4–5).

Unbelievable and *Mare of Easttown*, by using the transformed figures of female detectives extend the discursive power of TV crime drama. With women in prominent roles, they offer a vivid picture of economic problems and moral decadence in contemporary America. The two shows deal with different aspects of the social and moral crisis of America. In both cases this is the female detective who takes charge and seems to be better equipped than its male counterpart to deal with the challenges which small town America faces today. The making of the mini-series discussed here was made possible thanks to the earlier elevation of TV shows to a higher status, the activities of such platforms as Netflix or HBO, and the growth of a new spectatorship. The two shows may be surely treated as attempts to reach out to women as a new audience for crime drama. The attempt to appeal to new viewers is linked to a new kind of affective response which the shows demand. The caring female professional and the maternal subject who confronts personal and communal loss may elicit a new profound emotional reaction from viewers.

The narratives of the two shows picture American communities as morally devastated spaces. *Unbelievable* and *Mare of Easttown* explore social causes of crime, expose systemic injustice, lack of institutional engagement, and the resulting dangers of the breakdown of traditional communities. The two mini-series point to gender and class inequalities, corruption, inefficiency of government institutions, inadequacy of health care and foster services, and many other factors as sources of disintegration of American society. In general, the shows express lack of confidence in the permanence of core American values. However, they offer some hope and reassurance to the viewer by showing that courageous and caring individuals, the female detectives, can combat crime and bring temporary order to the affected communities. Their function may be described, following Jane Aiken, as that of “justice provocateurs”: persons who, understanding the law and its limitations, make ef-

forts to defend human dignity, produce justice and social change (see Cavender and Jurik 2007). The present discussion of the two TV series demonstrates how, by giving voice to women, the formula of the American police procedural can be modified to present crime within a larger, realistic context, to offer a view of justice as a transformative process, and to ask important moral questions about the origin and consequences of crime.

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FEMALE DETECTIVES AND THE MORAL CRISIS IN AMERICA:
WOMEN IN THE NEW TV CRIME DRAMA

Summary

The paper investigates recent American TV crime drama in which prominent roles are given to female protagonists. The TV miniseries *Unbelievable* (2019) and *Mare of Easttown* (2021) place women in central roles and, by going beyond the classic formula of crime drama, reshape the format of the genre. They address significant social and economic issues, often ignored by conventional crime drama narratives. The paper offers a brief investigation of the figures of female police detectives in older American TV crime drama, and in Scandinavian TV noir, arguing, that the evolution of the character of the female detective is a transnational phenomenon. The female detectives in *Unbelievable* and *Mare of Easttown* are excellent investigators, but they also display a strong moral integrity and deep emotional response to the injustice brought by crime. The two crime dramas focus not just on the investigations, but explore the social causes of crime and point, among other things, to gender, class and race inequalities, instability of the family, corruption, inefficiency of government institutions, and inadequacy of health and social care as sources of disintegration of American society. The stories offer some hope and reassurance to the viewer by showing that the detectives can combat crime and bring temporary order to the affected communities, but express lack of confidence in the permanence of core American values.

Keywords: female detective; TV crime drama; crisis in 21st-century America; criminal justice; gender relations

KOBIETY JAKO DETEKTYWI WOBEC KRYZYSU MORALNEGO W AMERYCE:
NOWY TELEWIZYJNY DRAMAT KRYMINALNY

Streszczenie

Artykuł poświęcony jest współczesnym amerykańskim telewizyjnym dramatom kryminalnym, w których główne role przypadają kobietom. Należą do nich miniseriale *Unbelievable* (2019) i *Mare of Easttown* (2021), które wykraczają poza klasyczną formułę kryminału i przekształcają format gatunku. Poruszają istotne kwestie społeczne i ekonomiczne, często ignorowane przez konwencjonalne narracje kryminalne. Artykuł przedstawia krótkie studium postaci kobiet-detektywów policyjnych we wcześniejszych amerykańskich serialach kryminalnych i skandynawskiej telewizji „noir”, argumentując, że ewolucja postaci kobiety--detektywa jest zjawiskiem ponadnarodowym. Policjantki z *Unbelievable* i *Mare z Easttown* są doskonałymi śledczymi, ale wykazują również siłę moralną i emocjonalnie reagują na niesprawiedliwości spowodowane łamaniem prawa. Te dwa dramaty kryminalne koncentrują się nie tylko na policyjnych śledztwach, ale badają społeczne przyczyny przestępczości i wskazują między innymi na nierówności płci, różnice klasowe i rasowe, niestabilność rodziny, korupcję, niewydolność instytucji rządowych oraz słabość systemów opieki zdrowotnej i społecznej jako źródła rozpadu amerykańskich wspólnot. Historie opowiedziane w serialach dają widzowi nadzieję i otuchę, pokazując, że kobiety w rolach detektywów mogą udanie zwalczać przestępczość i przywracać ład w dotkniętych kryzysem społecznościach, ale wyrażają brak zaufania do trwałości podstawowych amerykańskich wartości.

Słowa kluczowe: kobieta-detektyw; telewizyjny dramat kryminalny; kryzys w Ameryce XXI wieku; sprawiedliwość w sprawach karnych; relacje płciowe