

Television Crime Drama and Homeland Security: From *Law & Order* to "Terror TV"

by YVONNE TASKER

Abstract: This article explores the migration of themes of homeland security and political violence from sensational action formats to procedural crime dramas. It argues that, although the latter have typically developed distinctive strategies and relatively complex narratives, there are commonalities across the broad category of crime television. Themes explored include racial profiling, motive and political violence, coercion, and the ethics of interrogation within crime television.

In the years following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, US crime drama has increasingly drawn on themes of political violence and homeland security, developing narratives that deal with actual, threatened, and suspected terrorist acts. Crime dramas as varied as *Law & Order* (NBC, 1990–2010), *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* (NBC, 2001–2011), *Bones* (Fox, 2005–), *Without a Trace* (CBS, 2002–2009), *Numb3rs* (CBS, 2005–2010), and *Lie to Me* (Fox, 2009–2011) have all featured episodes dealing with political violence linked to Islam, to Arab nationals residing in the United States, and/or to Americans of Middle Eastern descent. In doing so, these shows make use of the genre's long-established strategies for the understanding and dramatization of deviance and criminality; mobilizing tropes of otherness, they pick up on the military inflections of the "war on drugs," the "war on crime," and the "war on terror." They also avail themselves of tropes which are central to a more sensational mode of representing the policing of political violence and threats to national security, a mode associated with thrilling, action-oriented television. It is my argument that crime drama has developed a distinct set of conventions for dealing with political violence and the figure of the terrorist as national and/or cultural "other," staging these concerns within the particular terms of the procedural narrative.

It is not my intention to argue that, post-9/11, crime drama suddenly became dominated by narratives foregrounding political violence; this is not the case. Rather, I suggest that there is an intriguing exchange between those action-oriented

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shows which most directly deal with these issues and more familiar procedural crime formats. As themes of national security and the necessity of combating terror—on occasion via unpalatable techniques—migrate from action formats, whether crime or espionage, they are effectively normalized. In exploring the connection between crime and terror on television, I take my cue in part from James Castonguay, who argues for the importance of considering popular cultural responses to the political rhetoric of homeland security alongside the already-developed analysis of news media coverage; such an analysis, he argues, should acknowledge the diverse range of texts that “comprise the cultural production of the ‘war on terror.’”¹

Discussing *Law & Order*, Susanna Lee describes “the modern television crime drama as a forum for working through the trauma of living in a violent culture.”² As she notes, the preoccupation with homicide—a crime most viewers are far less likely to have encountered personally than theft, substance abuse, or domestic violence—suggests a quite particular form of trauma, one that has to do with the mediated experience of a violent culture. These observations are also clearly pertinent to the insistent mediation of political violence and the fear that it generates. Although the majority of citizens are unlikely to experience such crimes directly, the possibility of terrorism and, indeed, its staging or attempted staging in ordinary, civic, and public spaces (e.g., public buildings, shopping malls, transit systems) is a marked feature of television series (or single episodes) focused on political violence. Threatened or actual attacks on shopping malls feature in *24* (Fox, 2001–2010) and *NCIS: Los Angeles* (CBS, 2009–), for example, both of which are action shows that hybridize crime and espionage conventions. In *Bones*, a cultural center is targeted, whereas in *Lie to Me*, bombers target first a bus, and then a mall, before further attacks are averted at three public locations, including the area in front of the White House. *Numb3rs* sees a terrorist cell planning to distribute sarin via the city water supply, whereas in *NCIS* (CBS, 2003–) terrorist action threatens to take out the power grid. Televisual terrorism thus affects ordinary life in extreme or violent ways—with the nation and its urban and civic spaces repeatedly under attack.

A number of questions are generated by crime drama’s turn to themes of homeland security. How does television stage fictional political violence, which is typically spectacular and action oriented? What continuities are there between such spectacular violence and what we might describe as the “mundane” or familiar homicide that forms the basis of crime drama? It is also crucial to consider the forms of coercion, manipulation, interrogation, and violence—even torture—deployed as investigative and/or punitive tools and techniques; from the invocation of the Patriot Act to allow certain forms of detention or intrusive inquiry to practices of racial profiling, both procedural crime dramas and action shows debate the boundaries of acceptable practice in the tackling of political violence and the defense of national security (although

1 James Castonguay, “Conglomeration, New Media, and the Cultural Production of the ‘War on Terror,’” *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 4 (Summer 2004): 105.

2 Susanna Lee, “‘These Are Our Stories’: Trauma, Form, and the Screen Phenomenon of *Law & Order*,” *Discourse* 25, nos. 1–2 (Winter–Spring 2004): 81.

these debates are frequently rather cursory).³ To what extent is detention without trial dramatized as a legitimate response to criminality, a tool to secure the integrity of the city or nation? How does the staging of these questions relate to crime drama's assumptions about the complex power relations between police and suspects, cops and citizenry? As these questions begin to suggest, the migration of homeland-security themes produces an intriguing reformulation of crime drama's ongoing engagement with the ethics of policing and the politics of race in the United States. In exploring such questions, this article first overviews the generic characteristics of sensational television drama concerned with themes of terrorism and homeland security. It then discusses the staging of political violence within crime drama, exploring some of the ways in which established and new shows have incorporated these themes. The final section extends this analysis, focusing on themes of racial profiling in particular.

“Terror TV”: Sensational Television and Homeland Security. What I term here “terror TV” stages political violence and official attempts to tackle that violence. Terror is a central trope of shows such as *The Agency* (CBS, 2001–2003), based on the CIA and made with its cooperation; *24*, centered on a counterterrorism unit (CTU) modeled after the CIA; and *Threat Matrix* (ABC, 2003–2004). *Sleeper Cell* (Showtime, 2005–2006) centers on undercover work, whereas *The Unit* (CBS, 2006–2009) contrasts the work of Special Forces with the activities of wives and loved ones at home. *E-Ring* (NBC, 2005–2006), set in the Pentagon; *NCIS*; and *NCIS: Los Angeles* all involve military investigation and intelligence units. In some shows, terrorism is the primary preoccupation of the special unit portrayed; for others it is one component of a broader range of activities. None of the shows mentioned here is based on conventional police forces, although these special units and agencies typically involve investigators and even cooperate with the police and other agencies. Because these shows employ investigative narratives—following clues and hunches, interviewing witnesses and suspects, engaging in surveillance—there is an obvious overlap with the broad generic category of crime television. Indeed, as I argue here, *NCIS* is for all intents and purposes a crime show, albeit one with a military setting and an emphasis on action. Terror TV is not, then, a genre; neither is it defined by, or limited to, the Department of Homeland Security. Rather, the phrase “terror TV” encapsulates a set of themes operating across a number of genres and formats, from news to crime and espionage, and summoning up a nexus of concerns with the post-9/11 policing of national borders and the securing of the nation's urban spaces.

As Ina Rae Hark points out, before the events of September 11, the 2001 fall season had seen the debut of three new and very different espionage-CIA dramas in *24*, *Alias* (ABC, 2001–2006), and *The Agency*.⁴ The first two of these were action-oriented shows featuring convoluted and improbable story arcs, whereas the last was made, as

3 Crime dramas also use the Patriot Act as carte blanche to catch non-terrorist-related criminals. In “L.D.S.K.” a first-season episode of *Criminal Minds* (CBS, 2005–), for example, the FBI team investigating a serial sniper uses the threat of detention under the act to compel a journalist to reveal his source.

4 Ina Rae Hark, “‘Today Is the Longest Day of My Life’: *24* as Mirror Narrative of 9/11,” in *Film and Television after 9/11*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 121–141.