

*CSI at the bfi ...*

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The buzz began some weeks before the actual *CSI* event. The National Film Theatre's (NFT) annual Crime Scene festival of crime fiction in literature, film and television, organised by the British Film Institute (*bfi*), from 30 June – 3 July 2005 was to feature a special *CSI* weekend complete with a preview screening of the season 5 finale of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* - 'Grave Danger' written and directed by Quentin Tarantino. This was to be followed by a *Guardian* interview with the man himself as well as executive producer and writer Carol Mendelsohn. The following day was billed as a panel discussion featuring Danny Cannon, director and executive producer, Max Allan Collins, author of the *CSI* novelisations, Mendelsohn, and possibly Tarantino, chaired by Adrian Wootton, Director of Crime Scene Festival. Quite a line-up and totally impossible to get a ticket for the Friday night screening – believe me I tried. And here's an irony. After years of attending screenings at the NFT I could not get a ticket for a preview of a *television programme*. It may be that *CSI: Miami* has recently been named the world's most watched television show (2006), but does this adequately explain the fact that there was not a ticket to be had for love nor money on a balmy night on the South Bank in July 2005?

*... Or, no QT at the NFT*

As it happens Tarantino cancelled at the last minute due to pressure of work and my very lucky friend (who did manage to get a ticket) was absolutely correct in her assumption

that if I just came along I would get a seat. Of course I would. How many people would turn up for the screening of something that would be on television in the next few months? Quite a number as it happens; and even though I could have got in and shared the moment, the auditorium was packed. With good reason as, without a doubt, even *sans* Tarantino it was quite an experience (or so I have been reliably informed) and as filmic as anything previously screened at the NFT. But the question still remains – director notwithstanding - what is it about *CSI* that prompted the NFT to feature the programme so prominently? This chapter will focus on the programming of a weekend event featuring a television series that a colleague once called ‘the trashiest of all trash TV’ (he shall remain anonymous in order to protect his professional reputation).

Before talking about the event itself, I have to return to the end of May 2005 when the buzz began. What was more exciting: the fact that Tarantino had directed an episode or that the NFT was featuring *CSI* over a whole two days? Both facts give the series kudos and provide a modicum of street cred for a fan that had always been forced to keep her dirty little secret to herself. It was not only my erstwhile colleague quoted above that had despaired of my taste in television. The fact that I wrote (and still write) about the medium at all was a source of much amusement, amazement and disparagement to colleagues. As anyone who works in British academe will tell you, there is a hierarchy of respectability among subjects with humanities way down the scale. Film studies has only gained any kind of propriety since the 1970s; media studies is something that students allegedly only sign up for because it is an ‘easy’ option; and television studies lurks beyond even that particular pale. So, the thought of somebody at the NFT having the

chutzpah to programme a weekend dedicated to *CSI* felt like two fingers stuck up at those who had not spent evenings curled up on the sofa sharing time with Gil Grissom, Sara Sidle, Catherine Willows, Warrick Brown, Nick Stokes and, more recently, Horatio Caine, Mac Taylor et al. As a (much more astute) colleague remarked to me on hearing about the event, the buzz generated by it and the rush to get tickets: ‘You must be onto something if the NFT are showing *CSI*.’ Yes, indeed I must.

To be sure, this is not the first time Quentin Tarantino has been involved in a groundbreaking TV show, giving the medium a whiff of credibility. Way back in 1995, shortly after the success of *Pulp Fiction*, he forayed into television to guest direct an episode of *E.R.* ‘Motherhood’ (1: 23) which was aired in May of that year. Some ten years later his return to TV to both write and direct the *CSI* episode caused an even bigger stir. According to Adrian Wootton it was quite a coup for the NFT to get permission (from both Alliance Atlantis and Channel 5) to screen ‘Grave Danger’ before it was broadcast on British TV, but the presence of Tarantino would legitimize the decision for the NFT as well as bringing in an audience that might not necessarily watch the series. ‘I was always interested in doing a focus on *CSI* and ... the Tarantino episode made the whole thing a much stronger proposition’ (Interview October 2006). But it was not the sole reason that many attended. According to Wootton, ‘overwhelmingly the attendances were from people who were huge fans of the show’ (interview September 2006). This was evidenced by the turnout for the Saturday afternoon event (which I *was* able to get an advance ticket for). The auditorium was certainly not as full as it surely would have been had Tarantino been on the panel, but those that did attend were obviously diehard *CSI*

fans. And no, we weren't just sad freaks and geeks with little else to do on a Saturday afternoon (after all, we could have been watching Live 8 instead), but an assorted bunch, both fans and scholars, with a genuine fascination for the phenomenon that is *CSI*.

*This much I know ...*

Why *CSI*? Why indeed? Especially when *Law and Order* [Wolf Films/NBC, 1990 - ] could have been of equal interest in a crime fiction event. The series is longer running and has its own franchise to boot (*Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* [Wolf Films/NBC, 1999-] and *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* [Wolf Films/NBC, 2001- ]). Wootton explains his choice thus:

Well first of all I loved [*CSI*], and it was precisely its newness and the freshness of format we wanted to explore. Also and rather obviously *Law and Order* is a great show (which I am also a big admirer of and I have pretty much seen all of that too in its three different franchises) but it has never had the public appeal in the UK of *CSI* and, even in the US, I don't think that, despite its longevity, it has ever captured the public imagination in quite the same way (September 2006).

Immediately what strikes me is how Wootton outs himself as a fan. But more interestingly he seems to justify his own fandom in the context of the show's enormous appeal in the UK and the US. Such unease epitomises for me the ongoing debate amongst TV scholars: what is the place of taste within television studies?

It is an issue that has long preoccupied contributors to the online journal *Flow*. Launched two years ago with a mission statement aiming to bridge the gap between ‘academics and an informed public’, and ‘to generate a new type of conversation’ (October 2004) (similar to what was happening at the NFT), *Flow* reflects on the taste debate. Brian L. Ott cites Susan Sontag’s ‘erotics of art’ (2001: 14) and urges television scholars ‘to develop modes of criticism rooted in pleasure’. Fast-forward two-years and John Corner asks, ‘How openly subjective should it [criticism] be, stressing a personal relationship ("response") between critic and work or, conversely, what level of objectivity can it attain, what "scientific" support can it draw upon?’ (September 2006). In the same issue Jason Mittell argues that this is part of a larger problem that must be addressed in order to re-evaluate how television in general, and television studies in particular, are viewed. Suggesting that, ‘Television has been too easily dismissed as disposable and not even worthy of evaluation’, he contends that the debate should focus on ‘*what* should be valued rather than *whether* we should value’ (ibid.). Adding that this will result in ‘both the medium and our field [gaining] importance and legitimacy’ (ibid.).

For me, the idea of ‘*what* should be valued’ and the question of ‘importance and legitimacy’ are central to what the *CSI* weekend was all about. *CSI* was incorporated into the crime fiction event not only because it is perceived as changing the face of the one-hour procedural drama (for example, its technological innovations in television aesthetics), but more importantly because an institution that takes media seriously has absorbed it into its institutional mission and given permission to speak about it. Less important for me was not what was said (even though I now know what the deal is with

Horatio's sunglasses; that *CSI: Miami* is all about being seen while *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* is all about being hidden and some valuable insights from Danny Cannon about the *CSI* look) it was the fact that it was said at all.

If, as in Mittell's view, it is time to incorporate our opinions into our scholarly and pedagogical practices, then it is important that we should 'not hide their tastes and value judgements away in the closet, bringing them into public only when off-duty' (ibid).

Many thanks to Adrian Wootton.

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