

CSI and the CSI Effect: Transforming Audiences

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Original Abstract:

Post-9/11 need for justice expressed through CSI and its real life impact through the *CSI Effect*

The O.J. Simpson trial (1995) presented a new language most of the audience following it did not understand and led to bafflement in regards to the trial's end, with a perceived failure of the judicial system. Coupled with the events of 9/11 (as well as the open ended nature and missing culprit) and the general uncertainty and doubt in traditional institutions, shows itself in the wide-spread enthusiasm for a new genre of television shows - the forensic drama, especially CBS's CSI: Crime Scene Investigation. (CSI, currently in its 7th season, was the #1 scripted drama of the 2006-2007 season on US television. It hit the #1 spot for the first time in its 2nd season, which was the season aired after 9/11.)

The paper will explore how the self-contained episodes that present a culprit (thus closure) at the end of 45 minutes reflect the newly emerged need for clear-cut answers and justice in a post-9/11 society. It will also look at the real life effects the show has had on the judicial system through the so-called *CSI Effect* that has had an impact on American courtrooms and how such a misconception of real-life trials and procedures are furthered by the show. A special focus will be on the way the show uses the real life anchor of CBS' Las Vegas News in fictitious news segments throughout the show to create a more realistic portrayal of events and establish credibility – on the one hand blurring the line of an audience's trust in news anchors, on the other hand using that established trust to create believability. This mixture of “real life news” and scripted drama thus furthers the inability to distinguish between fact and fiction in certain segments of the audience through their need of such clearly defined concepts of justice and consequences.

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Introduction:

When Anthony Zuiker, creator of CSI (*Crime Scene Investigation*), tried to sell his story idea to the networks, nobody believed the show to have a chance and he was subsequently turned down by every major network – the show being deemed “too brainy” by execs at ABC. Only after actor William Petersen showed interest in the pilot script did CBS order a number of episodes. Still, there wasn’t that much faith the show would be a success and CSI was placed in the 2000 fall season, scheduled to air after *The Fugitive* on Friday nights. Seven years later, no one even remembers the remake of *The Fugitive* and CSI has turned into a power-house franchise, single-handedly propelling CBS towards the number one network spot and spawning two spin-offs (*CSI: Miami* and *CSI: New York* respectively), as well as a slew of rip-off shows while also creating the new subgenre of the “forensic drama”. It did so well in its first season, CBS was confident enough to put it in a new time slot on Thursday evenings, against NBC’s hit comedy *Friends* where the show continued to grow and has remained to this day.

Why did this show become such a success with viewers despite its heavy load of science and gruesome murders? Timing was a major contributing factor to this success, coming in on the heels of several high profile trials which relied heavily on forensic evidence. It was five years after the OJ Simpson trial, which had left many viewers of the proceedings confused with the forensics involved in the case that was plastered all over American television and news outlets, so there obviously was an interest in this new kind of procedural drama that might shed some light onto these things. And it cannot be a coincidence that CSI became the number one scripted network drama after the events of 9/11. Another big factor was the high production standard, heavily influenced by one of its producers - Jerry Bruckheimer. Previously, Bruckheimer was mainly known for successful Hollywood blockbusters with more special effects than actual plot; all of which this paper will explore.

But aside from being one of the most successful television franchises since Star Trek, it has also created some real-life controversy and became the namesake of the so-called “CSI Effect” – a phenomenon taking place in courtrooms across America where jurors hand down the final verdicts and apparently have become armchair forensic experts. If and to what extent this effect exists will be explored in the conference’s context of how audiences today are being transformed and affected by what they watch – in this case CSI – as well as possible reasons given that go hand in hand with the above mentioned high production values as well as the fact that the show, set in Las Vegas, uses the real life CBS Vegas news anchor in order to create more realism and believable stories

1 - Fade In: INT. LAS VEGAS CRIME LAB - NIGHT: The Premise

They trust only the evidence to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves -- the victims.

(CSI Companion, 2004)

CSI Las Vegas follows the night shift of the Las Vegas Crime Lab, helmed by Gil Grissom (William Petersen), and the cases they solve on a weekly basis. The self-contained episodes of 45 minutes each (with a few exceptions of two-parters or a storyline involving a serial killer that is spread out through a whole season) they incorporate anything from one to up to four cases that are solved by the episode's end. The civilian CSIs are assisted in this by police officers and various experts from specialized fields of forensic science

What sets the show apart from previous procedural dramas is its heavy focus on forensics. Where shows like *Law and Order*, *NYPD Blue* and *Homicide* would cut away the moment the scientists entered a crime scene to follow the more gung-ho and action-oriented police detectives, CSI shifts the focus to just these fingerprint dusters and lab geeks. It's more the new generation of *Quincy* or *Columbo* than previous police dramas. Cases aren't solved by exciting car chases or questionable interrogation techniques by detectives, but through the smallest piece of evidence that is found at the crime scenes. The evidence and the science are the actual stars of the show; to the point that the visual trademark that has made the show instantly recognizable is devoted to this evidence and its processing - the so-called CSI-shot. This shot consists of CGI sequences that portray something like the effect bleach has on DNA or a bullet entering a human body in close-up and great detail. It was actually a moment in the 1999 movie *Three Kings*, which first had a crude version of a shot like the above described, that convinced producers the required science could be portrayed in an understandable way on a primetime television drama (NY Times, April 6, 2003). It has since gone on to be widespread in other shows, for example *House MD*, which uses it to highlight medical procedures. Despite the violent subject matter and graphic nature of such shots, CSI still manages to be tasteful and non-gratuitous, although the occasional moment of morbid humour does occur, generally delivered by the medical examiner, Doctor Al Robbins (who aptly described a severed head that had been hit by multiple cars with: "His face looks like hamburger meat."¹).

¹ Episode 2 of Season 8 "A La Cart"

It's never goriness for goriness' sake though, but always in the name of detailing the exact processes that occur in a violent death or natural progression in death, like the detailed study of body decomposition. Despite frequent accusations of being too violent, it can be argued that it shows the effects and consequences of violence better than most shows or movies. This is done both by being coldly scientific about it, as well as showing how such violence affects families and friends of the victims. It also, ultimately, leads to the killer's capture, restoring justice by the end of an episode.

Still, it also speaks to viewers on a baser level. Violence has always been oddly attractive and appealing, a forbidden realm that could be lived out viscerally through movies and TV shows in the safe comfort of a cinema chair or the living-room couch. The show offers that as well, granting the viewer an almost voyeuristic look into the underbelly of society, filled with violence, sex and drugs. Yet it also offers absolution in the end, when the culprits are caught, the good guys prevail and a balance of justice is restored - as well as the viewer's conscience for having indulged in such violence. This appealing format of the show is aided by its setting. No other city in the United States holds the same promise of cheap thrills, gambling, sex and, ultimately, an escape from the confines of every-day reality as the city the show is set in - Las Vegas.

2 - Fade In: EXT. LAS VEGAS SKYLINE - NIGHT: The Setting

The superficial attraction of Sin City for TV is obvious - sin. (Time, 2004)

Anthony Zuiker, the show's creator, hails from Las Vegas and got the idea for the show when he accompanied a friend of his who worked for the forensics unit of that city (The Paley Center for Media interviews, 2001). Another conscious choice by the writers to use Vegas was based on the fact that the city's crime lab is the second busiest in the United States (after the FBI lab in Quantico) and it's the fastest growing city in the US - the population almost doubled in the 1990s (Rothman 2003, p. 139). Coupled with the millions of tourists who are visiting every year, this provides a constant source of new storylines and characters. The old label of "Sin City" promises sleazy characters and (for network standards) risqué plots, as sex does sell, especially in combination with violence. CSI also makes use of Vegas history by

adding a semi-recurring character who is a Casino owner with ties to the old mob of the Rat Pack days. Lastly, the Strip and its casinos are instantly recognizable to anyone, so that it is easy to convince viewers the show is shot there by providing constant stock footage of the city, although the actual show is shot in Los Angeles and the cast travels to Vegas only three times a year.

But these are mainly important factors for the producers. There is another reason why Las Vegas provides the perfect backdrop for a television show like CSI. Time Magazine calls the city a “barometer of the nation’s morals or lack thereof” (Time 2004). It has always attracted people who want to go there to leave every-day routine behind; as the saying goes: “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.” And in a sense that is true not only for actual visits, but also for a virtual visit through CSI, as the previous status quo will be restored by the end of an episode. The audience gets a chance to revel in that “sin” without ultimate consequences, although the city itself has long since ceased to be that mob-ruled capital of sin and has been transformed into an utterly commercialized Disneyland of family friendly attractions and lightshows. It is the epitome of “fake”, with it’s pseudo-European casinos like the Paris or the Venetian and stands as the living embodiment of Baudrillard’s simulacrum – a hyperreality – which consists of nothing more than signs and superficial trappings, just like the fake copies of pseudo European casinos and the whole Strip itself.

On the one hand, it is just that fakeness that makes the setting so attractive to the show, with whole episodes structured around events that can only happen that way in Vegas.² Other shows also embody the commercialization of Vegas by vying for viewer sympathy for casino owners, like the show *Las Vegas*. It is actually telling how in its first season, CSI had troubles setting episodes in real casinos – they, for once, did not want the stigma of fictional crimes happening in their establishment looming over them and the show also couldn’t possibly pay them enough to shoot in an actual casino, due to the lost revenue from gambling that would result from shutting down a section for filming, even for just a few hours. By now, with the show’s popularity, casino’s have grown more accepting of TV shows or movies being set there, having recognized them as essentially free advertising.

On the other hand, the show has also always tried to dispel that stigma of fakeness by looking beyond the Strip and at suburban Vegas – a suburbia as in any other city in the United States with its heartland, middle-class families and daily troubles. By that, the show perfectly em-

² Season 3’s “Figh Night” spins three tales of crime amongst a fake price fight in Ceasar’s palace, combining such illustrious characters as a former rapper cum fashion designer and Texan millionaire, who would never be in the same place otherwise

bodies a “metaphor for our split moral personality, what happens in Vegas will stay... on TV.” (Time, 2004) A split personality that on CSI, at least, is resolved by the end of an episode where moral integrity is restored and the good guys prevail. A message that has had a direct impact on the show’s audience.

3 - Fade In: INT. COURTROOM - DAY: The CSI Effect

“The CSI Effect is basically the perception of the near-infallibility of forensic science in response to the TV show.” (The Triple Helix, 2006).

Considering the ever growing number of articles referring to the CSI Effect, a term which first appeared in 2003, three years after the show’s premiere (Ibid.), the problem seems to be widespread across US courtrooms. Yet, as of now, only a few representative studies in individual jurisdictions have been conducted, the most thorough by the Maricopa County Attorney’s Office in June, 2005. (Maricopa County, as stated in the survey, is the fourth most populous county in the United States). The survey questioned 102 prosecutors with jury trial experience regarding their experiences with the CSI Effect. Some of the results were:

- More than half (61%) of prosecutors who ask jurors if they watch forensic crime television shows feel jurors “seem to believe the shows are mostly true.” (Question 14)
- Seventy-five percent try to have fingerprint or other expert witnesses available to counter the effects on juror perceptions created by forensic crime television shows. (Question 18)
- The vast majority of Maricopa County prosecutors have changed the way they prepare arguments and evidence to counteract the CSI Effect.
- 38 percent of prosecutors believed they had at least one trial which resulted in either an acquittal or hung jury when forensic evidence was not available to corroborate testimony that should have been sufficient by itself to sustain a conviction. (Question 10)

Source: CSI: Maricopa County 2005

The study also points out that prosecutors have begun asking potential jurors whether they watch CSI before they are appointed to jury duty, as a positive reply may be grounds enough

for being excluded – a development that has since spread to other jurisdictions (WBNS-10TV 2007) .

Ultimately, the CSI Effect is being felt in courtrooms across the US and prosecutors feel the need to counteract it as audiences are indeed influenced by the show to such an extent that they have no doubt to disbelieve what they witness in the episodes on a weekly basis. What is it about the show, then, that it manages to have such a transforming effect on the viewer?

For once, the science on CSI is accurate – in principle. An entire research department is solely devoted to making sure the procedures depicted on the show are realistic and up to current standards in the field of forensics. Two of the researchers, David Berman and Jon Wellner, portray reoccurring characters on the show – one in the morgue and one in the lab, respectively. Additionally, CSI has always used former real life CSIs as consultants, going so far as to utilize actual cases they have worked on for storylines on the show. One consultant, Liz Devine, who used to work with the LA Sheriff's department, even became a writer on the show.

The set itself is a crime lab most labs in the world would love to have. As creator Anthony Zuiker explains in the foreword to the CSI Companion:

“I go down to the stages knowing that all of the laboratory equipment decorating our set is authentic and operable. (In actuality, we have better instrumentation on our set than most of the crime labs in America. This is an unfortunate fact that needs to change.)” (CSI Companion, p. 8)

The producers have access to cutting edge technology most labs in the United States simply cannot afford. Companies send new equipment to the show, in order to have their products advertised on air through product placement. So, ultimately, everything that is shown in the episodes is indeed possible from a scientific or technical standpoint. The problems arise from the fact that most actual labs do not have the funding needed to be as cutting edge and people's expectations from watching the show have raised complications in real-life courtrooms as shown in the above study by demanding the same kind of evidence they see on the show – the definition of the CSI Effect.

This effect arises from the depiction of forensic procedures on the show itself. Due to practical reasons and cinematic license, many of these processes are sped up for story-telling pur-

poses. In a show with the format of self-contained episodes, it is not possible to correctly convey the actual time something like a DNA analysis would take, so creative liberties are taken in order to fit storylines into the 45 minute time-frame of each episode. It simply would not work as a series if DNA evidence was submitted for processing and the results were not to be known until three episodes later. This abbreviated time format is understandable, as the main goal of the show is to entertain and provide interesting stories to the most common denominator of the audience, not to educate. A problem is that the average viewer does not actually realize this is not how it works in real life and some prospective jurors do have difficulty with that distinction, leading to fewer convictions, as shown in the study:

- In *State v. Everett Black*, on September 21, 2001, the defendant was caught with drugs which were in a cigarette pack in defendant's pocket. He admitted the pack was his but denied the drugs were his or that he knew the drugs were there. The foreperson later said he watched CSI and that investigators should have done extensive fingerprinting, DNA testing, and other forensics, and that he did not think the prosecutors did enough. He had convinced the entire panel that on television they do so much more and that the police officers did not do a good job.
- In another recent Maricopa County case, the defendant was driving a stolen car and was pulled over and arrested by a police officer. The jury still wanted to know if his fingerprints were found in the car—despite the eyewitness testimony of the officer.

Source: CSI: Maricopa County 2005

A closer look has to be taken on the show itself to find out possible reasons why it has had such an impact.

One reason why the show is so believable lies with the characters and the aforementioned production values. Every character on CSI is unquestionably a good guy. They know their work. The main character, Gil Grissom, can always draw from a seemingly unlimited supply of arcane facts and scientific knowledge, presented in such a way that the viewer does not need a PhD in Biology to understand it. That is, the science usually only scratches the surface, but is delivered in such an assured and believable way, the audience does not doubt what it is being told. This is also borne out by the fact that, with few exceptions, the bad guy is always caught by the end and justice is delivered, thus adhering to the old Hollywood adage of "crime does not pay".

The overall high production standard that gives the show its sleek look is largely influenced by one of its main producers, Jerry Bruckheimer. When presented with the concept of the show, his main contribution was the order to quicken the pace. Lengthy experiments are cut up into shorter segments to show time progressing, all overlaid with a usually upbeat exogenous soundtrack to give it the look as if one were zapping through programs, never standing still. The main bulk of information is delivered visually, aided by CGI effects and actually filmed experiments. And it's all very, very convincing. It's no wonder the show was the namesake for the CSI Effect if looking at these factors.

Another area of controversy the show has had to acknowledge is the accusation that it actually educates potential criminals. By showing how crimes are solved in minute detail, it also shows what to avoid in order to escape the law. This accusation seems to hold some truth, if taking this real-life case as an example.

“Jermaine “Maniac” McKinney, 25, allegedly broke into a house, killed a mother and daughter and used bleach to remove their blood from his hands, prosecutors said. He also allegedly covered the interior of a getaway car with blankets to avoid transferring blood.” (Chicago Sun-Times, 2006)

The self-described CSI fan apparently took hints from the show and also attempted to dump the murder weapon in a lake, where it was later found, due to the lake being frozen. As of November 2006, McKinney has been sentenced to two life sentences, but the case exemplifies the possible influence the show has had on the criminal mind. “People are getting more sophisticated with making sure they're not leaving trace evidence at crime scenes.” states the Chief of the Criminal Division in the Ohio county these murders took place in. (Chicago Sun-Times, 2006)

The show's producers are very aware of these accusations and real-life influences. Many of the actors have commented on them, functioning as the spokesperson for the show due to their media presence and have raised opposing opinions. As much as the show may influence criminals, it has also shown potential victims how to act in the case of falling prey to a crime. As the actress Marg Helgenberger, who plays CSI Catherine Willows on the show, has stated in an interview:

“We also educate the people who may have the misfortune of actually being involved in some kind of criminal act, because now they know (when they’re being attacked) to pull the hair out by the ‘skin tag’ so the criminalist can get that skin-tag and get the DNA attached to it.”
(contactmusic.com, 2006)

The ultimate influence, then, goes both ways when it comes to criminals and potential victims. Yet the fact remains that the show has had the biggest influence on potential jurors in the way it gives them the false impression of being more educated about forensic procedures.

3.1 – Fade In: INT. DNA LAB – NIGHT: Sequence Analysis for the CSI Effect

“Yeah, but when cut it together? I’ll only take, like, 30 seconds.” (Hodges, “I Like to Watch)

As shown so far, CSI has had a direct transforming influence on viewers in various areas – be it possibly educating criminals or potential victims or, mainly, having a direct effect on viewers who might eventually be called up for jury duty. The reasons for that have been shown to be the way the stories are told as well as the creation of characters that viewers trust. Another area that needs closer scrutiny is the trademark of the show – the CSI shot – and the way it is utilized in episodes; specifically why it has such an impact on the audience to make them susceptible to the CSI Effect.

This point was addressed directly by the show in an episode of season six, entitled “I Like to Watch”. This episode revolves around the idea that the CSIs are being filmed by a (fake) reality crime television film unit for their reality crime show; another phenomenon that has cropped up since the show’s premiere with popular examples such as *Medical Investigation* or *Forensic Files*. “I Like to Watch” blurs the lines between a slick network drama and reality TV by switching between cinema standard footage of the show as the viewer usually sees and shaky, grainy video footage taken by the episode’s reality film crew. It even almost breaks the

fourth wall, by having characters address the video camera directly in response to questions posed by the reality TV crew. These questions all mirror the real life accusations the show has faced, with the closing moment devoted to the problem of possibly educating criminals (to which Grissom replies: "Everyone learns from science. It all depends on how you use the knowledge.").

This postmodern self-reflexivity goes so far, as to have one character exclaim, upon learning they are to be filmed throughout the case, "There are already too many forensic shows on TV." This is doubly ironic, as the line is delivered by William Petersen, an actor who has been very expressive about his disdain for CBS's own spin-offs and turning CSI into a franchise (commenting in one interview: "I mean, what are we, McDonalds?" [Chicago Sun-Times, 2002] thus neatly expressing the interconnectedness of "his" show as art with the inescapable demands of commercialization).

The most interesting moment in the episode in regards to the mapped out problem of how science is presented and sped up and thus contributing to the CSI Effect is a highly self-aware moment that occurs roughly 10 minutes into the episode. It at the same time addresses yet also visualizes the very problem that has led to the CSI Effect.

The sequence revolves around David Hodges (Wallace Langham), the resident lab geek who has always shown a desire to be the centre of attention. It is no surprise that he's vying to be caught on video by the film crew for a segment of their show. An earlier scene showed him primping to look good on camera and scoffing at the filming of other departments of the lab, such as audio/visual, which to the reality TV viewer would seem more exciting.

In the beginning of this segment, one of the CSIs, Nick Stokes (George Eads), finds Hodges as he is about to perform a complicated substance analysis involving laser ablation (a process that involves directing a laser beam at a substance in order to determine its composites based on depth of laser penetration) – stating how effective it would be for a reality TV crime show as it is "both visual and dramatic". As Nick rightfully points out, it would not make much sense to film this process for a reality TV show, as it literally takes hours to perform. The meta-moment arises when Hodges takes that information and replies (in close-up) "Yeah, but when cut it together? I'll only take, like, 30 seconds," therein neatly expressing the main reason so many people have trouble distinguishing between the show and reality.

Then, to make the point, the scene immediately shifts to a trademark CSI-shot of said laser ablation – nifty CGI effects showing the laser chipping away at the substance to be analyzed with overlaid exogenic soundtrack showing us that process – which lasts *exactly* 30 seconds

in real time and is also immediately followed by the CSIs getting the eventual results in a walk-and-talk shot right afterwards. The sequence at once exposes the show's self-awareness of how such scenes have shaped viewer expectations, while at the same time demonstrating just how the Hollywood dream machine can fabricate such false realities by manipulating the viewer through use of CGI, believable established characters, editing and use of music. This brief scene demonstrates how this kind of viewer manipulation is done, while at the same time doing it itself. Commenting on it, yet also being guilty of the same thing, it is at once a critique of such practices, while also exposing how the show itself relies on it to tell a weekly story.

Possibly, it may make the manipulation clear to viewers who were previously unaware of necessary post-production needs to make a story work on a TV show by blatantly pointing out the process involved and then showcasing it. At the same time, it also strengthens how believable such sequences are to the everyday viewer in shaping their perception of the science involved and what it apparently can do in order to solve a crime. The prevalent conflict is: most episodes use that very same technique without the self-referencing of film-making practices and instead present it as reality in order to make a story work in a "realistic" fashion.

This episode is indeed an exception looking at the great lengths it goes to in order to expose its own mechanizations and have it stand in sharp contrast to the desire to make the usual episodes look as realistic and believable as possible on a weekly basis. At the same time, it does so by using self-reflexivity just enough to provide some inside jokes for the more educated viewer and fan of the show, while simultaneously delivering a storyline around a murder case as any other episode would do. The ending itself is pointed, as the killer is caught, but – unlike in most episodes – not until after the tragic loss of yet another innocent life the CSIs were unable to prevent. The show is more willing to have main characters fail than other crime dramas, which is much more common in real-life police work. Yet the proportion of episodes where the killer avoids capture pales in comparison to the episodes in which the bad guys are caught and punished, as convention would dictate.

This is also expounded by how the show is willing to showcase characters' shortcomings in every-day, personal situations which seems natural to the science geeks they are portrayed to be (aside from an in-house romance, none of the characters seem to possess a personal life aside from their work and the viewer rarely, if ever, gets a glimpse of the characters outside of the confines of the lab or a crime scene). Yet the one area none of the characters will ever fail in is their work and the science involved with that, thus cementing their believability in the

crime-solving process as well as the unquestionable truths science itself seems to promise, as there *always* is that one clue that leads to the perpetrator's capture.

To tie in the previously mentioned fact of the show's use of real-life cases, this is another factor in the CSI Effect. Former forensics expert Katherine Ramsland raises the point:

“The public has viewed shows that have hypothetically solved real-life cases before the actual cases have gotten to trial, so some jurors believe they have gained “insight” from the media's amateur sleuthing. In other words, a person's guilt or innocence may be decided before the evidence is even heard.” (Ramsland, 2006, xiv)

This mixing of fiction with real-life cases compounds the problem of the CSI Effect, even though a lot of the cases that are presented on CSI are shown after the fact. One popular example is the 4th season episode “After the Show”, which is a fictionalized account of the murder of Linda Sobek that went through the press and was solved by CSI's own adviser Liz Devine. Yet, while the actual case took years to solve, CSI manages to do so in a mere 45 minutes, thus upholding the myth of what science can do as well as raising people's expectations of what should be possible in an ideal crime-solving world.

4 - Fade IN: INT. CBS Las Vegas NEWS ROOM - DAY: The Use of Real News Anchors

The above mentioned blurring of real life with fiction is taken to a whole new level when looking at some of the episodes that include fake news segments. The segments themselves are shot and incorporated in such a way that, to a viewer happening to switch on CBS in the middle of the show, they are virtually indistinguishable from actual news announcements of the “Breaking News” kind that are prone to happen in the middle of a primetime TV broadcast in the US.

To exemplify that, let's look at a sequence from the season 5 episode entitled “Harvest” and then explore how the sequence works in terms of drawing the viewer into the story, as well as

the implications this has through utilizing a real news anchor for the fictional account of that episode's kidnapping.

The sequence is the very beginning of the episode "Harvest" and thus has to establish that week's premise, the crime and the main players of that case.

We begin with serene music and an extreme long shot of Las Vegas, thus establishing the setting. In a succession of shots, we see statues of Mary and Jesus, as well as school children and nuns at the end of a school day at the Catholic School. The camera then cuts to a mother waiting in her car and honking as she is approached by one of the nuns and learns that her daughter was not at school that day. In a medium close-up we then see the mother receiving a phone call from her older daughter with the news that her younger daughter has been kidnapped. As the music grows more frantic, we get a succession of quick shots of the mother arriving at the crime scene, jumping out of her car and slapping her older daughter, as the pace is constantly quickened through cuts and camera moves. Thus the basic crime is established and the frantic pace also showcases that in a kidnapping, time is an important factor.

With a flash cut the music grows slower again and the camera pans right in a slow arc as we see Detective Brass (Paul Guilfoyle) question the older daughter. The pace is slowed down, the camera more stable again and the individual shots grow longer. This is mirrored in subsequent shots showing us Grissom photographing the older sister's car, by that introducing the main CSIs of the episode as well as conveying a sense of calm when they're around. The camera then subtly moves in on Grissom as the parents are approaching, hinting at a developing conflict. Questioning Grissom about what he's doing to find their daughter, the CSI sees bloodstains on the mother's blouse – emphasized through an extreme close-up of the stains – by that hinting at suspicions Grissom, inscrutable behind sunglasses, may harbour already. The building conflict that is established through the use of more extreme close-ups and quicker cutting is then brought to fruition as the mother takes off the blouse and throws it into Grissom's face. Off Grissom's look, we cut to the credit sequence.

What the sequence cannot convey on DVD is that upon initial airing of the episode in the US, the show is interrupted by commercials at this point.

We come back to the episode after the commercial break with frantic music and various shots showing Las Vegas, as well as Brass on the phone and personnel at the lab. It then immediately cuts to the CSB Las Vegas News logo and graphics for a breaking news report complete with "news" music, not unlike what would occur in the middle of a program when an impor-

tant piece of news reaches a local station. This sense of disorientation on the viewer's part is then heightened by switching to a close up of Paula Francis in the news studio, the actual CBS news anchor for the Las Vegas area, as she announces an Amber Alert having been issued for a young child. It is only when that description registers on the viewer's mind as matching the one given previously in the episode that fits the fictional one, that the audience realizes this is all part of the actual episode itself and not, in fact, a real news broadcast that occurred during the airing of the episode. The editing is so flawless and so resembling a real-life breaking news broadcast, the audience, for a moment, is unable to tell the difference between a fictional episode of CSI and the reality of a world existing outside of that scripted world that has been unfolding on the screen.

That effect is compounded by not using an actor to play the anchor, but by using the real-life anchor to deliver that piece of "news" (who, by now, has her own imdb entry³). It is as jarring as it is effective.

It is effective because of how realistic the sequence is done. When a script has gone through final drafting stages, producers send in the portion of the script requiring a fake news broadcast to the actual news room in Las Vegas. It is then filmed, in the real surroundings of the news studio and read by the anchor, as she would film any piece of real-life news. This is then incorporated into the episodes back in LA.

It is jarring, because it so flawlessly mirrors how such an event would look in real-life, where it an actual announcement of breaking news and not a mere part of a fictionalized network drama.

This sequence shows how effectively the premise of an episode is conveyed in a mere two minutes, as well as already showing the viewers that the CSIs can be relied on, by slowing down the pace as soon as they are on screen, through that heightening viewer identification with the CSIs.

The use of Paula Francis as the fictional/real anchor further blurs the line between reality and fiction, which is aided by the realistic fashion of the way that "news broadcast" is flawlessly incorporated into the episode. Traditionally, any sort of news program relies on the audience's trust of the program to be successful. That trust hinges on the anchor, who is the face of the network and the news itself and has long been established as someone the viewers can believe in when they hear about the events of the day. Bennett argues in *News. The Politics of Illusion*

³ <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0290283/>

that one feature of American news broadcasts is the personalization of news that occurs by putting the focus on the human interest part of news, as opposed to more abstract underlying problems of any given event (Bennett 2001, p 35)⁴. I would go further and say that this personalization is also aided by the use of trustworthy anchors who come to people's living rooms on a daily basis and have been established as a trustworthy source of news.

This trust, then, is used by the producers of the show solely in order to further their fictional story and imbue it with a sense of realism that would not be possible by using an obscure actor to read the fictional news coming out of Las Vegas on the show. Together with the utterly believable way science is presented on the show, as shown through the previously analysed sequence of the CSI-shot, one can see how the show itself relies on this fake sense of reality to tell their stories and make them believable to such a point, that some audience members have difficulty to not equate it with actual reality. One part of the process that has led to the CSI Effect.

5 - Fade OUT: EXT. NEW YORK - DAY: 9/11

Having shown that the CSI Effect does exist and looking at reasons how the show itself has contributed to it, the question remains just why CSI (and similar shows after it) have managed to capture such a large audience – a prerequisite for having such a lasting effect on large parts of the population. On a weekly basis, as many as 70 million Americans watch CSI or similar shows, as is shown in recent Nielsen ratings:

⁴ He also argues that another feature is the visualization of news, which can also be tied to CSI's visualization of science (Bennett 2001, p 37)

Top Ten Broadcast TV Programs For the Week of October 15, 2007:

Rank	Program	Network	Rating	Viewers
01	CSI	CBS	12.9	21.219
02	Dancing With Stars Mon	ABC	12.8	19.403
03	Grey's Anatomy	ABC	12	18.035
04	FOX MLB ALCS Game 7	FOX	11.7	19.154
05	Dancing With Stars Tues	ABC	11.5	17.304
05	Desperate Housewives	ABC	11.5	18.214
07	NCIS	CBS	10.9	17.55
08	CSI: Miami	CBS	10.5	15.592
09	Samantha Who?	ABC	9.9	14.424
10	Criminal Minds	CBS	9.5	15.028

Source: Nielsen Media⁵

Looking at the Nielsen ratings of primetime network television, it is striking how, out of the 10 top placed shows (scripted or not), four of those fall under the sub-genre of the “forensic drama” (all airing on CBS to boot). Combining the highlighted shows that fall under this genre, that’s 69.4 million viewers, with almost 37 million for CSI and CSI: Miami alone.

The numbers become even more obvious if taking into account cable shows, such as Showtime’s *Dexter*, which features a serologist working for the Miami Dade Police Department as it’s main protagonist. (Cable shows are somewhat outside the measured ratings, as cable channels have traditionally appealed more to certain niche markets as opposed to the general audience, since they don’t rely on income through advertising.) It is telling, though, that a cable channel would schedule a show aimed at viewers interested in the more science oriented drama. (Even more telling is CBS’s reliance on that genre, as *Dexter* airs on Showtime, a channel of the CBS/Viacom group.)

One reason for the popularity of CSI is, unquestionably, the timing. The OJ Simpson trial comes up in various interviews with people involved on the show itself as well as observes, but it was ultimately the events of 9/11 that seem to have created a more pressing need for something that CSI seems to offer. As the lead actor, William Petersen stated:

⁵ See appendix for explanation of ratings and process to determine them

"The culture had just been through this postmodern period of green tea and Buddhism, with everybody asking the big questions," he said.

"People were lost. These guys had answers." (Chicago Tribune, March 2006)

The show itself has never referenced 9/11 directly, unlike the spin-off *CSI: New York*, whose main character Mac Taylor (Gary Sinise) lost his wife in the attacks on the Twin Towers. It did, however, impact the show, albeit subliminally.

It was in the show's second season, in the middle of shooting the sixth episode "Alter Boys" that 9/11 occurred. The cast was scheduled to shoot a scene involving the discussion of religion between Grissom and a Catholic priest that very day, although everyone was given the day off after the morning's events became clear. The cast and crew returned to the set the day after to shoot the scene, but it had undergone slight changes.⁶ As the writer, Anne Donahue (now executive producer on *CSI: Miami*) states in the DVD commentary for that episode, the actor William Petersen called her up the day before with some suggested changes in terms of his character's lines. As the comparison between the shooting script and aired scene shows, references to questioning the direct existence of God were exchanged with dialogue between Grissom and the priest, indirectly referencing the events of 9/11. To Grissom's question about how many wars had been fought in the name of God and how many people had lost their lives for the sake of religion, the priest comes back with "Fundamentalism, not religion." to which Grissom replies "Semantics. They're still dead."

Overall, *CSI* has been rather gutsy when it comes to portraying Western religion ever since, with its main character a lapsed Catholic questioning the existence of God and struggling with combining his beliefs with science and priests usually only appearing when suspects in a crime.⁷

The impact of 9/11 on the show's audience tells another story, though. Albeit doing well in its first season, it was after 9/11 that the show suddenly surged to the number one spot for scripted dramas in the US, as borne out by the following Nielsen ratings :

⁶ Infos on the exact changes of the scene taken from the DVD commentary of the episode, as well as a script to final aired scene comparison .

⁷ Examples on the show are episodes like Season 7's "Post Mortem" or season 8's "Go to Hell"

Season 1 (2000/2001)					
Episode	Title	Airdate	Time	Day's Ranking	Ratings
1x01	Pilot	Fri 10/06	9:00	#8	11.8/21
1x04	Pledging Mr. Johnson	Fri 10/27	9:00	#27	9.8/17
1x23	The Strip Strangler	Thu 5/17	9:00	#6	12.4/19
Season 2 (2001/2002)					
2x02	Chaos Theory	Thu 10/04	9:00	#07	12.6/19
2x10	Ellie	Thu 12/06	9:00	#01	14.9/23
2x12	You've Got Male	Thu 12/20	9:00	#01	15.0/24
1x07	Unfriendly Skies (repeat)	Thu 12/27	9:00	#01	12.0/20

source: Nielsen Media Research⁸

As the numbers show, CSI had a surge in ratings post-9/11, so that event cannot be underestimated as an influence on audience behaviour. Despite competition through *Grey's Anatomy* since the 2006/07 season (which moved opposite CSI on Thursdays in its second season), it has, to this day, remained the #1 scripted drama on US television; not a small feat for a show that is in its eighth year. The reasons for this surge again lie with the actual event and the impact it had, as well as the show's format, which seems to compliment the post-9/11 viewer behaviour.

Looking at 9/11 itself, one has to consider sociologist theory of trauma. As Kai T. Erikson argues in *Everything in Its Path*⁹, trauma itself falls under various subgroups, ranging from personal trauma (immediately witnessed events) to cultural trauma (mass trauma witnessed via television, for example, that has grown to such proportions it begins to define part of a cultural myth).

Unquestionably, anyone who witnessed the events of 9/11 via their television sets falls under the category of mass trauma (or secondary trauma as Douglas and Vogler refer to it in *Witness and Memory*) and the event itself constitutes a cultural trauma. The experienced events have been firmly lodged in personal and cultural memory and only recently have works of fiction surfaced that deal with this trauma specifically.

⁸ See appendix for explanation of ratings and process to determine them

⁹ A study of the impact of a mudslide on a West Virginia community that had longer lasting effects going beyond personalized trauma

This paper does not want to claim that CSI as a show is a direct reaction to that trauma, nor does it consciously try to deal with it in episodes that have been produced after 9/11. The overall format itself though, does seem to anticipate such a trauma and at the same time, seems to provide a certain kind of reassurance on a fictional level that does not exist in the real world today as “These guys have the answers.”. To open up the scope, one only needs to look at the victims of 9/11 or the tsunami catastrophe in SE Asia in 2005 that have been identified through DNA analysis, thus providing closure to affected parties that would not have been possible without that kind of science.

At the same time, as has been mapped out before, the way this science is portrayed on a show like CSI does seem to provide (somewhat fake) reassurance in a world that is in dire need of it. The self-contained episodes of CSI again and again seem to show that certain truths do exist and certain methods and quantifiable measures can be used to arrive at these unquestionable truths. Just as the bad guy is caught at the end of an episode, the show carries the message that justice can indeed be restored, as well as comfort provided on a weekly basis through the use of science and personified in the CSIs themselves. The viewer is taken through a traumatic experience like a crime committed, only to be reassured good will prevail after 45 minutes and common values as well as the basic justice system will, inevitably, be restored and strengthened in the end. It is this very appealing format of the show, which speaks all the more strongly to viewers after 9/11, that has led to its success and thus has opened up the possibilities of reaching a large enough number of viewers to transform their habits and opinions in other areas as well.

Conclusion:

In the end, it is not difficult to see why CSI and the genre of the “forensic drama” that it has created is so appealing to a large number of the television audience. Be it the direct effect of 9/11 or widely publicised cases like the OJ Simpson trial that have created an interest and a need in a show like it, it at the same has managed to reach an amazing numbers of audiences. Not only in the US, as a study of ratings in 20 representative countries has show that CSI: Miami is the most-watched television drama in the world (BBC News, 2006).

Yet with that high number of viewer ship also comes the burden of having a direct influence on these viewers – resulting from the timing, the format, the writing, the production value as well as the reassuring message the show seems to carry. Looking at the production itself, the constant blurring between fact and fiction, be it in how it presents science as being infallible

or how it consciously uses real news anchors to further a fictional story, the effect on the viewer becomes clear. As has been shown, the show has had a direct influence on real life through the CSI Effect as well as the fact that it does educate (to a certain extent) specific portions of the audience; ranging from the criminal mind, over potential victims, to college students signing up for forensic classes in droves.

The influence a franchise like CSI has on audiences cannot be underestimated in the way it has and continues to shape viewer expectations. While the inevitable commercialization of the franchise presents an appealing product to the producers and network involved, it has also managed to have a direct impact on real-life proceedings and has been ingrained into our culture to such an extent that one does not question newspaper articles that report a perpetrator being caught based on DNA evidence – a report that would have been unthinkable in the way it's understood by its recipients pre-CSI.

Eventually, viewers will have to be re-educated about what they perceive to be truths and facts as seen on TV, but the impact that any kind of a cultural phenomenon like CSI manages to have on the audience at the same time also shows what kind of influence a TV show can have on the average viewer and showcases potential dangers a commercial undertaking can have when it takes on a life of its own.

Appendix:Cast and Crew of CSI:

SERIES REGULARS:

Gil Grissom: William Petersen
Catherine Willows: Marg Helgenberger
Warrick Brown: Gary Dourdan
Nick Stokes: George Eads
Captain Jim Brass: Paul Guilfoyle
Sara Sidle: Jorja Fox
Greg Sanders: Eric Szmanda
Dr. Robbins: Robert David Hall
Hodges: Wallace Langham

WRITING AND PRODUCTION STAFF:

Carol Mendelsohn: Executive Producer/Writer (Showrunner)
Naren Shankar: Executive Producer/Writer
William Petersen: Executive Producer/Actor
Anthony Zuiker: Co-Executive Producer/Writer
Josh Berman: Co-Executive Producer/Writer
Kenneth Fink: Producer/Director
Richard J Lewis: Producer/Director

Nielsen Ratings explained (as seen on pp. 16 and 18):

The ratings chart two numbers – households as well number of television sets. 11.8/21 for example means that 11.8% of all households were tuned in, with 21% of total television sets in the US watching. The day's ranking is compared to any other show, scripted or not, which aired that day. For comparison, the highest rated CSI episode ever, the Season 5 finale directed by Quentin Tarantino, had a rating of 35 million viewers in the US. The ratings themselves are established through equipping a representative number of households with "Nielsen Boxes" that record individual viewer habits (the so-called "Nielsen Families"), as well as surveys conducted during the sweeps period. (Condry 1989, pp. 32-34)

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