

"The Evidence Lies': Review of Lindsay Steenberg's *Forensic Science in Contemporary American Popular Culture: Gender, Crime, and Science*" by Lilla Farmasi

*Forensic Science in Contemporary American Popular Culture: Gender, Crime, and Science*

Lindsay Steenberg

New York: Routledge, 2012.

ISBN-13: 978-0415891882

ISBN-10: 0415891884

It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of forensic science in contemporary American popular culture. Television shows such as CBS's *CSI* franchise or FOX's *Bones* hardly require an introduction; in fact, they have quickly become so deeply embedded in popular culture that Lindsay Steenberg, who has set out to trace the evolution and the influence of mediated forensics, not only claims that American consumer culture has experienced a "forensic turn," but that it has already developed a "post-forensic" culture. Steenberg is a Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at Oxford Brookes University. Her research areas include feminism and gender studies, crime and violence on film, and American culture. Her *Forensic Science in Contemporary American Popular Culture: Gender, Crime, and Science* is a monograph dedicated to investigating the history, characteristics and influence of forensic science in American popular culture from the 1990s to the present.

Steenberg introduces the syntax, vocabulary and iconography of forensic themed cultural products; she examines several different genres, media and places of forensic entertainment from crime television to art galleries and cookbooks. She uses the term "*tabloid forensic science*" to separate the subject of her inquiry from forensics proper, due to its distinct mode of articulation: a "mixture of sensation, realism, nostalgia and the grotesque" (Steenberg 2012, 9). This phenomenon is understood in the context of the cultural theories of Mark Seltzer's "wound culture" and Toby Miller's "risk society," both of which emphasize violence, danger and voyeurism as central concepts of contemporary culture, but Steenberg approaches her subject from a variety of contemporary cultural, social and gendered aspects, including feminism and postfeminism in media culture.

A feminist examination of female characters and bodies is of crucial importance in the study. The sub-genre, insisting on avoiding gender bias, builds “a way of managing and denying feminism in postfeminist culture” (14), and Steenberg aims at deconstructing this process, stating that “[a] narrative economy so invested in female victims should [...] be a feminist concern” (53). In the center of her analysis is the figure of the female investigator, “a now conventional character who emerges at the same time and in the same spaces as the forensic turn” (175). Female investigator characters are often celebrated as women who have succeeded in breaking into a masculine genre, representing the empowered, successful woman, the idyllic figure of postfeminism.

These characters are in for reconsideration here, since Steenberg claims that they embody the anxiety accompanying the relationship between women and science and professionalism. She persuasively points out that

the expert female investigator often fails at many of the benchmarks of postfeminist success: female friendship, romance, family and participation in consumer culture. In both her successes and her failures, the female forensic scientist on film and television represents a focal point for postfeminist anxieties around the career woman. (59)

Gender politics is a central concern of the sub-genre, which obtains authority at the expense of women: while male experts are often portrayed as geniuses, female characters usually follow their intuitions, and this constant difference results in “a ‘separate and almost equal’ logic advocating a gender bifurcated articulation of expert knowledge” (64). Furthermore, Steenberg claims that male investigators are habitually doubled with the killer while the female expert is coupled with the (female) corpse she examines, and she herself “depends as much on her performance of sexual desirability as on her forensic or moral authority” (58). The author presents numerous examples and case studies throughout the book and convincingly replaces the popular myth of the postfeminist female investigator with a more sensitive reading of the figure.

The volume is divided into two parts. The first one addresses the most common and most academically acknowledged forms of forensic entertainment. It analyzes works in the forensic genre from the crime fiction of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and his contemporaries (the “forensic origin stories”) to contemporary American crime television. This part is dedicated to the sub-genre itself, theorizes the thematic amalgam of forensics and the Gothic (an important literary movement in feminist scholarship), and analyzes its themes, characters, and elements of its peculiar aesthetics. In Steenberg’s view, the forensic genre harbors several traits that carry gendered aspects besides its practice of characterization. Among others she examines the morgue, a space that is present in all forensic films and shows that, due to its “almost gastronomic” (4) arrangement of instruments and (female or feminized) bodies, earned the name “New Age sushi bar,” and the famous device of the genre, the *CSI* shot, the “proof of the violence visited on the victim’s body,” which is compared with pornography’s “money shot,” a method of providing “proof of sexual pleasure/desire/closure” (5). Such features gender and sexualize both living bodies and corpses, and strongly tie violence, sex and consumption together, also rendering forensic film and television texts fairly problematic from a feminist aspect.

However, fascination with forensics is not limited to a medium or a genre, and neither is Steenberg’s scope of analysis. One of the most intriguing characteristics of the study is that it examines products from all corners of popular culture, and the second half of it focuses on what forensics has to offer beyond crime stories. It examines the so-called *CSI* Effect(s): the process during which “media portrayals of the criminal justice system” (101) affect the justice system itself, the crime genre, or academia among other sites of contemporary American culture (for example there is a steady increase in enrollment in university forensic science courses).

A whole chapter discusses the way tabloid forensics—a genre that arranges its spectacles applying an archival logic—enters the higher cultural sphere of museums, which in turn exploit the popularity of forensic science and create “museum blockbusters.” These interactive exhibitions are understood as “an idealised project of education through spectacle” (148), illustrating the potential of forensic science, which has already “established itself as a distinct mediated and mixed knowledge form” (125) but which often

makes “no distinction between the mythical, the cultural and the natural” (126). Therefore the sub-genre is understood as a policing tactic, especially as its gender politics extends into different sites of culture, functioning at its best in makeover shows, magazines and other lifestyle media, generally addressing women in the first place. The “live or simulated autopsies as scare tactics in lifestyle programming” (149), for example in Jamie Oliver’s cooking/diet show *Eat To Save Your Life* and the makeover series *Make My Body Younger*, are apparently inspired by tabloid forensics.

Steenberg understands the current state of forensic culture as one that is already on the way of becoming exhausted. As the author explains, this observation is not to imply that forensic culture is disappearing; she says that “[w]e are living in a post-forensic mediascape in which our familiarity with forensic procedures has made them household words and simultaneously rendered the sub-genre predictable and derivative” (20). Moreover, the texts’ self-reflexive “play with our expectations [...] for example the serial killer as criminalist in *Dexter*” (180) also indicate a decline. Steenberg concludes her analysis by portraying the future of this cultural trend. As she convincingly argues throughout the second half of the volume, it seems that the discourse of forensic science is getting more and more assimilated into mainstream American culture as an “overlapping flashpoint between commerce, franchise branding, public pedagogy and interactive new media” (126). Last but not least, the monograph “treats forensics as a cultural barometer, which can provide a unique insight into American culture and its preoccupations” (175).

*Forensic Science in Contemporary American Popular Culture* is a methodical, clearly structured work, illuminating relevant insights on a relatively recent cultural phenomenon, tied to a number of different theoretical fields. The author’s objective was to investigate all cultural sites where the forensic resonates and this approach makes this book both versatile and rich. The Filmography at the end of the volume counts over two hundred films and television programmes; but Steenberg also discusses literature, video games, exhibitions and other events related to this topic. Besides (re)considering much-theorized films and forensic noir series, this work introduces a set of new concerns to the sub-genre and its cultural reflections, the most significant of which is Steenberg’s gender-sensitive reading of forensically themed texts.

*Forensic Science in Contemporary American Popular Culture: Gender, Crime, and Science* is primarily a work of academic interest, targeting humanities scholars and students in the first place, but it remains an approachable reading for larger audiences interested in forensic issues, since its language does not pose a challenge for readers who might be unfamiliar with any of the fields it incorporates. The author states that in a whole cultural trend claiming to offer an unbiased system of knowledge production, we should keep in mind that, contrary to what tabloid forensic science tries to sell us, sometimes even “the evidence [...] lie[s]” (181). Yet Steenberg does not dismiss tabloid forensic discourse as entirely negative or necessarily sexist, and above all, she approaches her subject with obvious enthusiasm, which makes her work a really thrilling read.