

Crime Storytelling as a Gender-driven Narrative: A Feminist Overview of the True-Crime Documentary

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Abstract

True crime narratives, as evident in major digital platforms, offer a unique lens to examine profound societal inequalities, particularly those emerging from gender constructs. This paper explores how gender inequalities critically condition violent crimes and their portrayal in true-crime storytelling, particularly documentaries. It investigates how society copes with the gruesome nature of gender-driven crimes and addresses the collective responsibility these narratives evoke. Section 2 delves into the discursive framework of true-crime documentaries, analyzing how multimodal traits are influenced by gender ideologies during production. Section 3 examines the relationship between gender and victimhood representation, challenging traditional passive portrayals and advocating for a view of victimhood as a form of agency. The paper aims to critique the passive condition often associated with victims and highlight the dynamic, gender-informed nature of victimhood. By focusing on gender-driven narratives, this study underscores the potential of true-crime documentaries to trigger meaningful change in addressing gender-conditioned crimes. The concluding section synthesizes these insights, emphasizing the importance of a nuanced, gender-sensitive approach in true-crime storytelling.

Keywords: True-crime documentaries, Gender, Traumatic Testimony, Victimhood.

1. INTRODUCTION

Real-life crimes, and particularly violent and gruesome, inflicted deaths, have consistently fascinated people across time and cultures. While their more or less explicit, almost-cinematic, narrative description has been a common theme in world literature, both canonic and popular, the morbid, graphic representation accompanying those narratives seems to be associated to the alliance between visual culture and the media in the last two centuries. Proof of it is the fictionalization of Jack the Ripper in the British newspapers of the late-eighteen hundreds, whose illustrations and pervasive, highly graphic discourse have possibly laid the ground for the multimodal developments of the genre.

What true crime posits, as a narrative and judgment of the gruesome taking of a human life, is not new. The thrill it triggers on the audience is not new either. While technology has helped evolve its codes, the core and essence of this thrill responds to quite primitive, and yet effective narrative qualities that have been known and used since time immemorial. Possibly, such qualities alone are responsible for building a

powerful bond between the spectacle of the ultimate tragedy and human nature. My exploration of this subject takes this ability of true crime narratives to disturb the most innate human instincts to discuss a fundamental truth: the unequal power differentials of death, despite John Donne's famous assertion that it "[...] makes us all equal [...]". As a quick look at any major digital platform's true-crime offer reveals, true crime is a privileged space to tackle society's most profound inequalities in their crudest form: upon the violent, inflicted death of another human being. My particular interest here, then, lies in how a basic form of human inequality, that emerging from gender constructs, critically conditions such death. The undeniable/inescapable? presence of gender inequalities in real crime conditions not only the actions of the agents involved, but, crucially, their portrayal in a true-crime narrative. How does society cope with the gruesome when gender differences have been determining, and thus evince a sort of indirect, collective responsibility for the crime?

This paper targets instances of true-crime storytelling, particularly documentaries, as a gender-driven narrative. As such, it understands gender-driven true-crime narratives as those which take up the responsibility of portraying crimes motivated by gender differences and inequalities. Those narratives have the power to trigger meaningful change in this inevitable conditioning of crime by gender. With that purpose, Section 2 will focus on the discursive tissue of true-crime documentaries. It will also assess and illustrate, through real examples, how their defining multimodal traits can be shaped under the gender ideologies guiding their production. Section 3 will tackle the critical relationship between gender and the representation of victimhood in true-crime narratives, challenging traditional views of it and reflecting on the consequences and dangers of its audiovisual display. Importantly, the scope here will be enlarged to offer a complex and dynamic, always gender-informed survey of victimhood, favoring a critique of its usually passive condition, and defending it as a form of agency. Finally, section 4 will provide some concluding remarks.

2. GENDER AND THE STRUCTURE OF TRUE-CRIME NARRATIVES: AN OVERVIEW

This section intends to survey the identity traits of the true-crime documentary, and, through the analysis of an example of true-crime documentary, Carles Porta's *Crims* (2021), assess their potential to conform to what could be deemed as 'feminist narratology'. According to Lanser (1983), "(...) gender is a category that is relevant to the analysis of the structural features of narratives" (Gymnich 2013:). Gymnich, a proponent of this term, nevertheless refers to 'gender' and 'feminism' as equally and ambiguously embedded in, or a driving force of, these narratives. Feminism, in my view, is the ideological drive behind them, and gender is the social variable around which feminist narratological operations revolve. As such, gender constructs are the key element in discerning the ideology under which a story is (re-)enacted, especially when the trauma justifying its interest for society bears strong, gender-inequality connotations.

As illustrated throughout this paper, crime, in general, and true-crime in particular, seem to have constituted what we could deem as a global genre, where geographically- and culturally-diverse societies

repurpose a discreet number of elements into new, more or less ideologically-dense narratives of fact. Gender-driven true-crime narratives may be crafted on the basis of different generic conventions, either belonging to the literary or the media realms, to fact and fiction. This may result in quasi-cinematic novels and newspaper chronicles, giving verbal and yet very graphic detail on gruesome murders; as well as in journalistic or pseudo-journalistic products, like true-crime documentaries, wisely resorting to the novel's most effective stunts, and somehow fictionalizing reality.

Thus, since the imitation of multiple communicative channels is obvious in the criss-crossed nature of true crime, attention to multimodality in discourse becomes indispensable. In what follows, I will discuss the core discursive traits of true crime documentaries, and systematically connecting them with a potentially strategic, ideological positioning of gender in each narrative. Since the goal of this paper is to offer an overview, the last sub-section will briefly reflect on a gender-driven implementation of such traits in various well-known true-crime documentaries which feature a corrective, gender-conscious lens.

2.1. A Preliminary Sketch of True-Crime Narratives

This section will underscore a number of key features of true-crime documentaries which can be effectively operated through a gender-sensitive lens. With regard to the more general, overarching characteristics of the genre, a fundamental aspect of any authentic crime documentary is an underlying comprehension of the concept of "film as montage," a term introduced by Russian formalists (Schmidt 1975). This feature, true of any introspections into the meaning-making process of filmic products, becomes particularly relevant to documentaries, especially true-crime ones, where at least two temporal storylines coexist: the narration of a crime, which generally took place in the past, often including an investigative sub-plot, and the present reconstruction, which can be more or less present in its engagement with the audience, and intrusive in its interspersing with the crime plot. The importance of plot interspersing as a source of destabilization and critique becomes obvious in productions such as Netflix's *The Ripper* (2020). This four-episode miniseries revisits the crimes of the so-called Yorkshire Ripper (1975-1980), who terrorized West Yorkshire and its surroundings with his killing spree of women, whom both the Police and the Press were too quick to label as prostitutes. The documentary denounces this degrading and inaccurate profiling of the victims as explanatory of the mishandling of the case, drawing an important lesson on police protocol and media ethics. Here, two main timelines constantly criss-cross: a chronological timeline of the killings, with an embedded intra-story of the two institutions criticized, the Police and the Press, and a present-time narrative. Here, the contemporary testimonies of the same taskforce and journalists originally involved, guided by the producers' questions and editing, allow for this underlying critique of the gender-discriminatory establishment to unfold. Thus, any documentary is a sort of patchwork, with cut and edited interviews, vintage documentary footage, recordings, transcripts, photographic stills and even fictional re-enactments. In season 2 of TV3's true crime series *Crims* (Catalan for "crimes", 2021), for instance, real transcripts of former police officer and convicted

criminal Rosa Peral and two men, also members of the taskforce, are played, and their WhatsApp messages juxtaposed on photographic stills and fictional re-enactments. The result is a multimodal, chronological reconstruction of the crime which both Peral and one of the men, her lover, orchestrated against the other, her partner. The same set of messages and transcripts will progressively evolve till a very different portrait of Peral and her lover is drawn for the audience. Indeed, multimodal interaction builds a master timeline, which bears in itself the weight of logical interpretation for the audience. In this case, exceptional as the main perpetrator is a woman, Peral's lover is portrayed as fool in love, who just helped her dispose of the body and destroy any evidence. Her apparently sustained claims that her partner was violent are given very little prominence.

Some authors discuss the "temporal framework" resulting from film editing as "(...) organized storytelling or rhythmic patterning through a shooting script" (Jones 2020: page?), connecting it with the so-called "observational films", or even a sort of "voyeurism" (Vedric and Little 2022), which is explained by the audience's morbid curiosity. Vedric and Little (2022: page), indeed, support the possibility and even necessity of this "documentary gaze": "like the movies, the most accessible documentaries should refrain from controlling narration". This, as they claim, " (...) allow[s] the power of film to build". In my view, However, this observational quality of documentaries, usually connected with journalistic objectivity, denies the very principle of multimodal discourse, by which the final message grasped by the audience is a result of simultaneously processing all modes of communication concerned (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001). Film and image, which are generally cut, transposed and re-arranged in various ways for a documentary, are supplemented by voice-overs and other kinds of audio input. What is more, in itself, their interspersing provides meaning which overtly contradicts or nuances the visual information *per se*, reflecting the particular re-arrangement of facts promoted by the producers.

The constant switch between spoken-of objects and speaking subjects, past and present, photo stills and fictional re-creations, creates a sense of unprocessable abundance, of *horror vacui*, nevertheless with an underlying logical thread, reinforced by the narrator's voice and editing hand. Authors such as Biressi (2004) further underscore this impossibility of dealing with true-crime documentaries as neutral journalistic productions. Falling into the category of pseudo-journalism (Romero-Domínguez 2021), they make a clever use of "(...) crises that punctuate the film: emotional breakdowns or confessions" (Biressi 2004: 410), usually coincidental with new revelations of details of the crime, breakthroughs in police investigation, or the progressive identification of the killer's identity. More often than not, unfortunately, the cumulative effect of describing the corpses of new victims, in the case of serial killers, acts as punctuation for true crime narratives, the gruesome injuries shared by all bodies often motivating the murderers' nicknaming by the press under newspaper-selling criteria. Such is the case of the Yorkshire Ripper, as explained in detail by journalists in *The Ripper*, or of the "Torso killer", a sex-worker-killer featuring in *Crime Scene: The Times Square Killer* (2021), although the series opts for avoiding this reference to body mutilation in its title.

Importantly, interview excerpts are often the orchestrated channel of such punctuations. Traumatic testimonies can also bear this revealing, and therefore have a punctuating effect. For instance, in *American Nightmare*, where a woman of kidnapping and rape is unfairly accused of a federal charge for allegedly making up her story, a climax is reached when she finally takes the stand, and we start learning her story not from the police footage and interviews, or from her husband's narrative, which open up the documentary, but from herself. Her truth progressively unravels with her testimony, flipping her initial portrait as a fraudster. Confessional material thus confronts other factual sources displayed with new perspectives, which make the audience's opinion of the case evolve. Thus, true-crime documentaries may present different narrative standpoints, usually presented through the testimony of different agents involved in the event, in order to tell the story in different and shockingly opposed ways. For instance, in the case of *Crims* (2021), out of the three episodes focusing on Rosa Peral's killing of her partner, Pedro Rodríguez, the second and the third narrate the crime through her and her lover and accomplice's opposed testimony during the trials, as they blamed each other for the crime. Theoretically, this allows the audience to take a stance on which version of the facts seems most plausible. Yet, the culmination of the documentary's master plot usually clarifies the authorial voices' main positioning.

Time, as Cortázar suggested (1980), is far from being an objective factor in narratives. Chronology, and particularly seriality and repetition, are elements which have been analyzed from different standpoints in regard with the true-crime documentary. From a formal perspective, seriality responds to a chronological, thematic progression of the plot and, with it, to the gradual disclosure of the truth. Generally, the chronology of the crime constitutes a common temporal arrangement in traditional crime narratives, especially since the progressive investigation of the case by the detective's leading voice accompanies the public in the discovery of an indisputable truth. Postmodern and particularly feminist crime fiction and non-fiction encourage disrupting the process of truth-grasping, precisely in the means of de-stabilizing such truth, as well as formerly unquestionable notions such as blame and evil. Such is the case, again, of *American Nightmare* (2024). Here, what apparently seems to be the main plot, Denise Huskin's unfair treatment and defenselessness (Am) after being kidnapped and repeatedly assaulted, structures an underlying, traditional detective narrative, unveiling a number of, thus far, unconnected serial rapes. An additional sub-plot, based on interviews to both the Federal agents who charged Huskins and the local police officers who solved her case, unravels a critique of police protocol distorted by gender-driven prejudice.

Seriality, on its part, is most commonly implemented in the narrative tissue of a true-crime documentary production in various ways. Firstly, the mini-series sub-format allows to dose the thrill down into a number of thematically progressing, and generally long episodes. While the episodic frame intends to extend such thrill, it also structures the narrative, sometimes with an overtly ideological tone. This is seen in *The Ripper's* (2020) structuring in four episodes: "Once Upon a Time in Yorkshire", "Between Now and Dawn", "Reclaim the Night" and "Out of the shadows". This title sequence actually reflects part of the authorial voices' thesis, who intend to narrate how women took hold of their own lives and overcame fear to walk the

streets of West Yorkshire, forcing the authorities to change their discourse and strategy against these famous femicides. The effect of episodic frames, however, could be certainly questioned given the global population's statistically predominant consumption patterns, considering the flexibilization of viewer consumption patterns (see Barker & Wiatrowski 1988). Importantly, this format seems to have overtaken the traditional full-length documentary. From a sociological perspective, Jones (2020: X) argues that seriality reflects "(...) the idea of repetitious consumption". True-crime addiction, indeed, is being identified as a pattern among viewers, posing questions on what "(...) what our binge consumption and spectatorship of programmes about serial killers might reflect".

2.1.1. Polyphony

Another important/key? feature of true-crime documentaries is their extensive use of traumatic testimony, reconstructed with interviews from various sources, and often presented with a psychological, almost novelistic, quality. The incorporation of testimony in digital media, whether through recorded voices or filmed interviews, is essential for advancing the themes within true crime. Traumatic testimony has been frequently examined as a means of fostering connections within human communities (Felman & Laub 2012; Gandhi 2006). Moreover, it is argued that societies build their principles for interpreting reality around trauma (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2004). This underscores the significance of constructing narratives of trauma as collective experiences through the media, which is a central aim of true crime.

Given its emotional weight, confessional material, or interviews by multiple agents, from victims and their families, investigators, journalists, forensic or other kinds of experts, are key not only content-wise, but also as a powerful structuring element in the narrative, breaking it down into different parts, shifting the perspective, the time, space of the theme dealt with, and also, sometimes by virtue of the editing process, reacting with other positionings shown in the documentary. As Biressi (2004: 405) claims, "(...) the slow revelation of facts and the deferral of knowledge (...)" are crucially operated through testimonial pieces, which are "intercut" and consciously alternated with other sources. Here, we can easily refute that "witness and testimony, deposition and refutation, accusation and denial-- all depend on direct encounter and physical presence" (Biressi *op. cit.*: 411). What is more, the true-crime documentary genre proves that such inference processes, expected to freely occur among the audience, do not necessarily depend on the content, the speaker's performance or their overall emotional density. An external arrangement of interview cuts can well induce inference processes in spectators. Importantly, the documentary's authorial voices tend to avoid direct appearance, but are ultimately in control of the interviews themselves (Biressi 2004). In *The Ripper* (2020), Richard McCann, one of the children of the Yorkshire Ripper's first victim, is interviewed. His testimony, appearing only after the generally disparaging interventions of the police officers in charge of the case, is powerful enough to re-draw the portrait of his mother, an alleged prostitute, as a victim of gender-violence who, after her divorce, did whatever it took to make ends meet for her extended offspring. A photograph still of the victim is then superposed to her son's recollection of her suffering, looking much more

complex and different than when it had been previously shown, at the beginning of the first episode. Importantly, the editing of the different sequences includes transcripts of key naming practices addressed to the victims by the police, juxtaposed to their powerful, complex portraits, in a way which emphasizes their superficial dealing with their cases. This questioning is key in educating the public on the investigative hypotheses to follow: on when to qualify or disqualify a testimony. Their piecemeal re-arrangement of filmic interview fragments crucially guides spectators to validate a particular narrative of the facts.

In line with the previous example, photograph stills, as well as recording from locations connected with the crimes, or even random vintage footage from the time when the event took place are displayed as the interviewee's/witness' speech acts as a voice-over. Again, *The Ripper* (2020) displays such technique as journalist Christa Ackroyd describes the degrading living conditions of Yorkshire Ripper's victims, suggesting for the first time that what they truly had in common was economic vulnerability and social ostracism. This reinforces the intersemiotic creation of meaning which characterizes multimodal discourse. Hence, their sociological, historical or even political digressions divert the audience's attention towards relevant social critique, which indirectly affects our current perception and processing of the crime. Experimental visuals are particularly prominent in such cases, and, as Biressi (2004) observes, display particular aesthetics, often indebted to horror films. The music, either non-verbal and composed explicitly for the documentaries, or widely recognizable and often vintage, could reinforce the gloomy atmosphere of the narrative, as much as strike an oddly merry chord, floating over the ominous landscape. Such is the case of those vintage crimes where, for instance, the 70's funky atmosphere is effectively mingled with the gruesome details of the crimes narrated in documentaries such as *The Sons of Sam: A Descent into Darkness* (2021). Here, key musical hits of the time period portrayed act as the soundtrack of the gloomiest reconstruction of New York's darkness, then known as the City of Fear.

70's disco glamor is also mixed up with terrifying aesthetics of the Mafia's extreme violence in *Fear City: New York vs the Mafia* (2020). Here, The Tramps' famous *Disco Inferno* ("burn, baby, burn") plays, acquiring sinister meanings, with the also uncontrollable background of a corrupted New York city, which, as in the case of *The Sons of Sam* and *Crime Scene: The Times Square Murder*, bears a strong social and political critique. Sound, thus, is another crucial element to be considered when analyzing multimodal discourse, processed by the audience simultaneously to the rest of the elements provided (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001). In some cases, the apparent aesthetic paraphernalia becomes so relevant that authors such as Corner refer to the resulting productions as 'thick text documentaries': formats which incorporate the aesthetics and narrative devices of fictional and art film forms (...)" (Biressi 2004: 405). Again, the borders between fact and fiction, journalism and art, etc. become blurred. Dangerously enough, parallels are also drawn between the criminal and the genius, or even the artist.

Polyphony will be dealt with in depth in the next section, where the most typical agents involved in any true-crime documentary will be characterized. This sub-section's goal has been to analyze their role as elements structuring the true-crime narrative, conditioning the meandering thread of its plots.

2.1.2. Audience engagement

As Jones (2020: page?) claims, our current societies' soft spot for true crime is a thrill for "(...) compulsively return[ing] to the scenes of these crimes". This thrill seems to lie on the fact that true-crime narratives swing between the psychological novel and classical detective fiction (Biressi 2004), building for audiences a sort of sinister, real-life Cluedo, which they need to solve. Beyond the inspiration taken from horror films, the exhibition of trauma seems indebted as well to what Biressi (2004) deems as "confessional television culture", as well as reality or factual television, where traumatic experiences at full display trigger the audience's voyeurism. As part of the poststructural understanding of readership, Vedric and Little (2022) talk about "spectatorial dominance", in the means of accounting for the centrality of audience engagement in the production of true-crime documentaries, and, in some peculiar cases, the actual empowerment of such audience over the display of violence, verbally and/or visually described, with the murdered body as the object of such violence.

One general contention on managing audiences and audience reaction in true-crime documentaries is that, under the aforementioned "documentary gaze", it should be semantically and ideologically non-deterministic (Vedric & Little 2022). While the camera is operated in a way which intends to uncondition interpretation, the explicitness of the pseudo-journalistic, creative process, and awareness of the medium operating are ineludible. Such is, on the other hand, the "forensic gaze" (Vedric & Little 2022), which will be dealt with further below, and which turns the audience into either verbal or even graphic scrutinizers of dead bodies, without explicitly positioning themselves. Thus, they seem to embody investigators and forensic experts in their quest, processing every piece of evidence, and dissecting every word in the relevant testimonies presented. This approach may be observed in Carles Porta's aforementioned *Crims* (2021). This production is highly original in that it takes a radio-podcast format, and is therefore available as podcast on TV3's website, to narrate different crimes multimodally. Thus, journalist Carles Porta appears at a radio station, seemingly hosting and conducting the shows. In this sort of metadiscursive thread, Porta instructs the audience to act as investigators, and to listen to the opposing testimonies about to be disclosed without prejudice, for instance, in Rosa Peral's case. His final intervention, nevertheless, guides the audience towards the potentially most plausible explanation to her contradictions and lies: her guilt.

The emotional positioning stirred by the crime is a third element which the audience should ideally develop freely, which nevertheless progresses in perfect line with the plots. A number of feelings have been identified by authors as resulting from their true-crime consumption patterns, and doubtlessly encouraged by the production. Interestingly, despite Wattis' and other authors' warning against an all-female target for this kind of studies, all contributing authors have implemented gender-conscious forms of critique, and have therefore focused on the reaction of women spectators who watch gender-driven violent crimes on the screen: relief, discipline and danger awareness, risk enjoyment, and perpetuation.

Regarding relief, in examining the consumption of true crime literature by women, Browder (2006) contends that these texts may serve a therapeutic function. Apparently, women who have been victims of male violence may find comfort and reassurance in reading about female victims who have endured similar experiences (Wattis 2021). This perspective aligns with the broader discourse on the therapeutic potential of media, such as Elsaesser's (2001) concept of "therapeutic television." Elsaesser suggests that films can act as traumatic yet transformative experiences, offering a cathartic release to their audiences (Horeck 2019). Further supporting this view, the "therapeutic imperative" has also been proposed as a societal drive towards self-healing that is increasingly reflected in confessional and autobiographical narratives (Biressi 2004). These insights collectively underscore the significant role that media can play in the emotional and psychological processing of trauma.

In terms of a potential development of self-protective discipline and danger awareness, Jones (2020) observes that, despite the relatively low incidence of this type of crime when compared to random violent attacks between men, the disproportionate sensationalism surrounding the murder of women by strangers acts as a form of discipline exerted over the female subject. This sensationalism reproduces the effects of the crime itself on a larger societal scale. Such disproportionate coverage of serial murders reinforces this disciplinary effect, inviting women to develop an acute sense of danger perception. Similarly, and despite the dangerous romantization of gender-based violence which these analyses entail (Browder 2006), the female audience's soft tooth for true crime seems to be rooted into "(...) a vicarious enjoyment of fear and risk" (Wattis 2021: [page?](#)), always from the safe positioning of spectatorship which invariably reminds us of that provided by fiction. This distancing from a gruesome reality may be responsible for making the extreme violence and cruelty of some of the most successful documentaries bearable. Again, one seems to be solving a based-on-real-facts Cluedo.

Finally, a crucial question posed by many experts today, especially in sight of the graphicness of violence in these productions, is that of the ethical concerns triggered by true-crime entertainment. As inert proxies of the victims, injured bodies are "commodified" (Vedric and Little 2022), their suffering fueling a lucrative narrative which allows the audience, and particularly women, to enjoy a sort of "vicarious fear" in a theoretically "safe environment" (Wattis 2021). Motive is a key development in the progressive dissection of the case, and, as already indicated, new currents of criminological insight pursue a less punitive, sociological understanding of evil (Vedric and Little 2022). Yet, many authors underscore the active search for "disproportionate sensationalism" (Jones 2020) in the choice of cases, generally with "newsworthy victims" (Gilchrist 2010) entangled in particularly gruesome patterns of gender-based violence, which overlook or, when dealt with, oversimplify the statistically most frequent cases, those of intimate-partner violence (Vedric and Little 2022). True-crime narratives, finally, cannot be dealt with as non-reactive to our present condition as a society. They often are sold by the criminals themselves, in the means of paying off their legal defense, and are therefore coetaneous to any connected legal processes. Furthermore, as Hamad (2023) points out, thanks to social media and new technologies, the launching of true-crime documentaries

can ignite debates about the ancient crimes featured, connecting them with contemporary ones, or suggesting common pathways between such behavior and our modern society.

3. GENDER AND THE PORTRAYAL OF CRIME-CONNECTED AGENCIES IN TRUE CRIME

The fundamental impact of true-crime storytelling in general, and the portrayal of any crime-connected agencies in particular, has recently become a focal point for researchers, who see in so-called popular criminology the ultimate tool for shaping social understandings of good and evil (Horeck 2019). Indeed, popular criminology considers widespread discursive representations of crime, victimhood and perpetration as more pervasive than those produced in the scientific spheres. True-crime storytelling does, to a certain extent, document the legal system, and reflects on any psychiatric or sociological insights relevant to the study of victims and criminals, among many other phenomena relevant to the re-construction of a crime. However, the combative nerve of investigative journalism also encourages defying scientificity in an ideologically overt questioning of structural inequality, as a basic product of judiciary dynamics. For Vedric and Little (2022), indeed, social groups with particular non-hegemonic intersectional traits see in true-crime narratives a distinctive opportunity to fight oppositional authority. Similarly, the evolution of crime storytelling, both fictional and not, points at depriving criminals of their former aura of singularity, not just by trying to explicate the root of their cruelty, instead of simply condemning it, but also by desingularizing their existence, thus granting visibility to certain, more spectacular profiles of both victims and perpetrators over others.

Positive change lies at the core of most true-crime productions' fixation with gender-driven violence, reflecting on the deficiencies observed in its combating by not so distant forms of society. However, such fixation also has its drawbacks. As we are about to see, more and more forms of criminality (and therefore variations of victimhood) are being brought to our attention. Yet, criminality and deviance are, unfortunately, the attractive part of the equation, triggering further interest than the victims' condition, their supposed defencelessness and weakness. Be that as it may, discourse on both victims and perpetrators is ultimately adjusted to marketing and gains, thus drawing on well-known stereotypes of both profiles to wide audiences. Traditional archetypes of femininity such as motherhood or chastity shake the so-called "Reasonable Woman Standard", which tacitly seems to apply, in legal expert Naomi Cahn's words (1991) in the parallel judgment which the court of public opinion often passes on victims. While re-victimizing them, this bears coercive power on society at large (Vedric & Little 2022) through the identification of non-normative, punishment-prone behaviors. Doubtlessly, also, when choosing which cases to narrate, producers apply what is known as newsworthiness criteria (Bednarek & Caple 2017), that is, they assess the potential interest which a certain event can trigger in the audience, choosing certain types of cases, such as serial killings and rapes, over others, which could nevertheless shed further light on how our current societies work. As a result of this, true-crime discourse focalizes its portrayals on simplistic maxims or binomials, such as the traditional

whodunnit or the innocent/guilty dilemma (Vedric & Little 2022), and, in the victims' case, in even worse, perfect/imperfect dialogics (Vedric & Little 2022).

In what follows, this paper will analyze the construction of agency in true-crime documentaries, swinging from the usually targeted, absolutely opposed poles of victimhood and perpetration to identify, through the lens of gender-driven behaviour and stereotypes, the actual multiplicity of roles involved in any event eligible for true-gender frenzy. A wider overview of this traditional dialogics also implies considering the variety of traits which each agency can entail, thus favoring a gender-driven de-construction of the ancient archetypes often re-produced by these narratives.

3.1. Constructing Victimhood

The perpetrator-victim binomial takes the gender metaphors (Chamberlain 2018) between basic power differentials to the extreme. A pervasive, male-strong/female-weak dichotomy is reinforced here. The construction of the victim's identity, which is of discursive nature, is thus further complicated by the lack of subjective agency we observe in the text of true-crime documentaries. True-crime storytelling takes diverse points of departure, often rooted into the victims and their entourage, lifestyle, and daily routine, etc., to draw an even stronger contrast with the narrative of their horrid deaths, about to unravel. However, the master plot quickly adjusts this informational flow to pose the classical *who did it?* question, navigating towards the perpetrator's personality and motivations. It is thus the "killer's narrative" (Vedric & Little 2022) that truly guides the documentary's inquest of horror. In what amounts to mostly male-produced narratives (Hoffman & Hobbs 2015), the murderer, and particularly the male murderer's story, as well as the morbid temporal materialities of his crime(s), keep punctuating most true-crime narratives. Fascination, as indicated earlier, is built upon the murderer and his exceptionality as the male character in a novel (Hoffman & Hobbs 2015). In contrast with, and at the expense of the victims, they have been masters of their fate, building their own, bloody path to fame. A most blatant case is *The Jinx* (2015), where the serial killer Robert Dunst himself, although guided by the producers' questioning, takes considerable control over the narrative by accepting to reproduce it in front of a camera. In contrast, the presence of their victims amounts to third-person references in his and other narratives, only materialized as the finding of various destroyed bodies is described. In line with Horeck's discussion on the possibility of creating feminist true-crime narratives (2019), various, generally female-directed productions have attempted to re-tell well-known real-crime stories by switching the narrative focus from the criminal to the victims. Unfortunately, the extent to which this does not reinforce expected archetypes of female vulnerability is sometimes questionable. Women's testimony (or testimony about them) is made to conform to the 'female victim' pattern we know too well. Instead of releasing the complexities of an individual, victimhood acts as a distinctive, gender-specific role which immobilizes the speaker and conditions her narrative. In *The Ripper* (2020), for instance, this becomes clear as the murderer's only survivor, Maureen Long, becomes the much-anticipated star of the second episode. Her testimony, nevertheless, does little but contribute the master narrative of the atrocities to which her life

is permanently tied. She gives us detail on her confusion and suffering as she was attacked, acting as an interesting loose thread of an otherwise relentless criminal. Our meeting Long through the worst day of her life immobilizes her as the image of weakness.

The body, particularly the gendered body, its injuries and suffering, is a passive element, further illustrating the monster's deviance. Here, the aforementioned, "forensic gaze" (Vedric & Little 2022) promoted by the narrative encourages in the audience the search for what I would deem as "the materialities of death", an often unjustifiable recreation on the cause of death. This constitutes a major source of ethical concern in true-crime documentaries. How explicit does the narrative need to be in this sense, especially the accompanying graphic material, from photographs to fictional re-enactments? Do other true-crime formats, such as the podcast, spare the atrocities of describing destroyed female bodies (Hoffman & Hobbs 2015)? Here, the performativity of language is certainly underestimated by many in monomodal discourses. Furthermore, third-parties' traumatic testimony, from emotionally attached acquaintances to forensic experts and law enforcement, does nothing but objectify even further any graphic references to the corpse: the way and state in which it was found, or the injuries and suffering it had endured. 'Forensic narratives', as Neale (2015) sees them, are based on the audience's CSI-induced thrill with scientific evidence (Lam 2014), which leads mistreated gendered bodies to be dissected again and again, both in real life and in the true-crime narrative, as central, not-fully-explored pieces in the quest for the criminal. In *The Alcàsser Murders* (2019), indeed, a great deal of expectation revolves around the victim's exhumation and second autopsy, in the means of righting the wrongs of a widely criticized first autopsy.

Motive, on the other hand, is often equally erosive in the gendered victims' portrayal as agents in their own right, since the narrative will dissect her life in search of any deviant behavioral patterns leading to a fatal fate, which more often than not are conflictual from a gender perspective. This portrayal is often unfair and prejudicial. In the gruesome *American Murder: The Family Next Door* (2020), where a man kills both his pregnant wife and two daughters in order to start off a new life with her lover, his wife is subtly presented as an obsessive control freak. Somehow, as Vedric and Little indicate (2023), the women in the male criminal's life, including his victims, are often showcased to downplay his guilt. Additionally, and even if most true-crime documentaries start off by presenting the victim, to gradually disclose the tragedy and the hints potentially leading to a suspect, most victims' portrayals already tacitly conform to a certain *profilage*, which is usually defined by the type of crime perceived, and therefore to the perpetrator's personality and inclinations. Thus, the average spectator can join the dots and take a coercive lesson on how to stay safe. In *The Alcàsser Murders* (2019), similarly, the fact that the victims hitch-hiked to a club in their area was given much attention at the beginning of the docuseries, with the parents explaining how this was common practice in the area, comprising small villages.

If, instead of a body, the narrative features survivors, their speech in true-crime documentaries is immobilized, often guided by the authorial voice's questions and lead, conforming to a particular "readymade lexicon" (Biressi 2004: 411), identifiable by society at large as that of defeat, suffering, and weakness. While

gender-driven differences in speech are by no means conclusive in the study of discourse (Cameron and Culick 2003), the audience's expectations are usually met, especially in traumatic testimony connected to gender- and sex-motivated injuries. The degree of explicitness varies as such aggression varies, with taboo and euphemistic language being key elements in its analysis. In this sense, *American Nightmare* (2020) is once again interesting for a variety of reasons. Discourses by the police, and the media, as well as her partner's own narrative are presented in the first place, pointing first at a potential case of murder on his boyfriend's part, then, as she turns up at her parents' home after disappearing for weeks, at a fraudulent disclosure of trauma on hers. Nevertheless, as she takes control over her own experience, what was once made to sound ridiculous by the court of public opinion, suddenly finds opposition in the narrative of an unapologetic survivor. She recalls her forceful stay at an unknown location, and the various rapes to which she was subjected, without ever seeing her kidnapper's identity, her eyes permanently covered in his presence.

Melodrama, a key contribution of reality television (Biressi 2004), is sadly also expected as part of the victim's entourage upon disclosing their own recollections. In retrospective, however, most true-crime documentaries stand against the sensationalist media coverage of the cases revisited, drawing a lesson on the victim's representation not only through ruthless description, but also via exploitation of what will be discussed in the following section as an often ignored form of victimhood: vicarious victimization. *The Alcàsser Murders* (2019) is quite a paradigmatic case in this sense, as follow-ups of the victims' parents reveal the different, and often highly traumatic coping mechanisms each has developed since the tragedy. Since the case is unresolved, and its main suspect fled and disappeared long ago, one of the parents firmly believes that important celebrities and authorities were involved in the case as regular consumers of snuff videos involving minors, a hypothesis for which no evidence has been found. Yet, it has been steadily analyzed ever since by multiple outlets. Another form of exploitation of vicarious trauma and traumatic testimony by the media, also very present in *The Alcàsser murders*, is collective victimization. Collective victimization stands on the fact that some individual tragedies seem to point are greater structural evil, affecting society at large. The lucrative side of this, unfortunately, is that these tragedies are therefore worthier than others of hitting the lines of national newspapers, or, in this case, national television. The true-crime documentary reflects on the media circus orchestrated by journalist Nieves Herrero. As the search for the bodies progressed, and with it the families' despair. Nieves Herrero? hosted an ominous example of reality TV by delving into the entourage's trauma live. This cost the journalist her career as the news corporation having aired the special weighted on the ethical implications of one of the most-watched shows in the history of Spanish television.

3.2 Non-conventional Forms of Gendered Victimhood in True Crime

This sub-section will dwell on of two gendered agencies actually comprised by such denomination, seldom dealt with in the relevant literature, accounting for their diversity. Once again, examples of true-crime

documentaries will illustrate such agencies, some of which seldom fall into the victim category in other analysis, nor connected to trauma.

The first of such forms of agency is crucial to the filmic montage which helps the audience navigate through the crime's chronology: vicarious victimization. Vicarious victimization is defined as "(...) witnessing or learning about victimization that happens to others and anticipating that one will be criminally victimized", which can even lead these indirect victims to engage, in their turn, in criminal behavior (Kort-Butler 2010: 497). According to Lee & Kim (2018: 190), vicarious victims are only rarely the target of the criminological studies available. Yet, a series of gender-marked personal bonds sustain the traumatic witnessing which makes the reconstruction of the crime possible. One of them is motherhood. Motherhood is a key aspect to apply the "Reasonable Woman's Standard". For instance, in *The Disappearance of Madeleine McCann* (2019), the master plot examines the extent to the neglect to which Madeleine's parents, and somehow particularly her mother, subjected the child was key in her disappearance. The mother's attitude ever since has been criticized more consistently than her father's, held coldness constantly scrutinized. Trauma, then, is gender-sensitive in as much as it must conform to the reasonability of the gender constructs marking the individual's identity. In contrast, as Vedric and Little's critique of motherly love (2022) focuses on how the traumatic testimony of a male criminal's mother acts as an attenuating factor in his portrayal.

A second, related form of vicarious victimization is that of the victim's offspring. In *The Ripper* (2020), first victim Wilma McCann's son, Richard emerges in the master narrative after the policemen in charge with the investigation of his mother's death had already provided a flat, superficial prostitute her as a prostitute. Richard, on the other hand, speaks as the photo still of her failed marriage contrasts with his account of an abusive father and husband, the ensuing divorce, and a woman's desperate fight to take away her four children with barely no state help. This "bad mother" tag is applied to many of the Ripper's victims by the police officers given their practice of prostitution, despite having a family and sometimes a husband unable to provide for them. The weight born by their children, a number of which choose to openly discuss their perceptions of the case at the time, is in sharp contrast with the crude dissection which the Police make of the victims.

Another non-conventional form of potentially gender-driven victimhood in true-crime documentaries stems from what experts know as 'collective victimization', a negative term which emphasizes the act of simultaneously subjecting a group of non-hegemonic individuals to a continuous form of violence, with further reinforces such non-hegemony as a common trait of the individuals concerned. Unfortunately, criminologists tend to place the emphasis on the lack of agency and passiveness of collective victims, instead of on the forms of resistance which they develop against such violence. Importantly, gender-based violence seems to have been connected with forms of collective victimization mostly in contexts of armed conflict, upon the generalization of such violence for the purpose of bellicose hegemony (Jalušič 2004). Similarly, intersectionality is often necessary, that is, an additional form of discrimination besides that of gender, so that collective victimization is connected with gender-related violence of any kind, as it happens

with the crimes systematically committed against indigenous women in white-settler nations such as Canada or the US. While these are generally considered general hate crimes, a strong gender component to these murders and attacks is undeniable, especially considering the nature of the crimes, such as eugenics and sterilization (Perry 2008). Such is the case of the brave true-crime documentary *Murder in Big Horn* (2023), where violence against native women is portrayed as a systemic plague.

In true-crime documentaries, given the predominant *whodunnit?* drive and an obsession with the murderers' pathological traits, the systemic nature of gender-based violence (Hoffman & Hobbs 2015) may be somehow diffuse. An example of a true-crime production fully targeting such systemic quality of this violence is Alex Crawford's *Women at War* (2023), a docuseries following women whose living conditions and environment force them to fight daily battles against violence for survival. Yet, many of the docuseries who initially target cases of gender violence as intimate-partner, and therefore individual instances, reflect on the lack of legal and institutional support which victims had in past times as a form of collective victimization. Such is the case of the aforementioned *The Ripper* (2020), where the narrative reinforces women's collective victimization as they were forbidden to walk the streets of West Yorkshire. Nevertheless, it also portrays their agency and reaction against not just the Ripper murders themselves, but against the system's inaction and strategy to take further control over women. Similarly, in *Nevenka* (2021), Spanish ex-politician Nevenka Fernández recalls the legal system's gender-based prejudice as she sued her former colleague at her party for sexual harassment.

4. CONCLUSIONS

True-crime documentaries, viewed through a gender-sensitive lens, reveal a complex interplay of narrative techniques and socio-cultural critique. Central to these documentaries is the concept of "film as montage," where multiple timelines—past crimes and present reconstructions—intertwine to create a layered narrative with clear ideological positionings in regard with victim and perpetrator which often draw on gender constructs. They also often employ a multimodal strategic approach, combining interviews, archival footage, transcripts, and re-enactments to construct a cohesive narrative. This technique allows for a chronological yet, again, interested portrayal of events, guiding the audience through what the master narrative posits as a logical interpretation, and openly seeking emotional engagement which exploits gender archetypes.

True-crime multimodal discourse, far from being objective, is thus carefully crafted in true-crime productions to convey the producers' intended message, but also to challenge conventional narratives and highlight social critiques. Moreover, the documentary/docuseries format harness the power of traumatic

testimony, using interviews to create emotional depth and structure the narrative. This interviewing technique is not only a storytelling device, but also a means of fostering audience engagement and emotional investment. The confessional nature of these testimonies, coupled with meticulous editing, often leads the audience to form evolving opinions about the cases presented. As seen through the multiple examples discussed above, gender constructs, and importantly prejudices, are at stake here, from the careful selection of interviewees to the guidance offered as they answer the producers' questions, which end up offering recognizable portraits within the parameters of the perfect/imperfect victim and the innocent/guilty perpetrator. While gender should be an enriching factor in their portrayal, more often than not it is made to reinforce the archetypes which both the producing team and the audience relentlessly apply on them.

Audience engagement, as shown, is hence another critical component, with true-crime documentaries tapping into viewers' fascination with crime and their psychological need to solve mysteries. This engagement is furthered by the use of voyeuristic elements and the aforementioned "documentary gaze," which invites the audience to scrutinize the evidence and form their own interpretations. Such gaze is often achieved at the expense of the victim's image, which viewers are left to construct from the 3rd-person accounts, often revolving around the search for the genius (male) criminal, and the forensic descriptions which depersonalize the suffering inflicted to their bodies. Victims, particularly if they are female, often appear as an incidental element of the plot orchestrated by the criminal mind.

True-crime documentaries must be considered within the broader socio-cultural context. They often commodify trauma and violence, raising ethical questions about the portrayal of agencies and the sensationalism of systemic forms of violence such as gender-based violence, which, all in all, becomes singularized instead of denounced as part of a perverse behavioral pattern in our societies. Despite these concerns, the genre's popularity continues to grow, reflecting a societal compulsion to revisit and reinterpret these harrowing stories. True-crime narratives hold significant power in shaping societal perceptions of crime, victimhood, and perpetration. Positioned at the intersection of popular and scientific criminology, they play a pivotal role in shaping public understanding of moral dichotomies (Horeck 2019).

Despite their potential to document legal systems and reflect on psychiatric and sociological insights, true-crime stories often prioritize sensationalism over scientific rigor, challenging structural inequalities and giving marginalized groups a platform to contest authority. The evolution of crime storytelling has seen a shift from merely condemning criminals to exploring the roots of their cruelty, thereby desingularizing their existence. However, this shift often prioritizes the allure of criminality over the victim's condition, reinforcing stereotypes to appeal to broader audiences. Traditional femininity archetypes continue to shape victim portrayals, impacting societal judgments and reinforcing punitive attitudes towards non-normative behaviors. The selection of cases based on their newsworthiness perpetuates simplistic narratives, reducing complex situations to clear-cut dichotomies.

In analyzing the construction of agency within true-crime documentaries, it becomes evident that these narratives often reinforce a male-strong/female-weak dichotomy. The focus frequently shifts from the

victim's life to the perpetrator's motives, driven by the "killer's narrative" (Vedric & Little, 2023). Efforts to create feminist true-crime narratives sometimes inadvertently reinforce female vulnerability stereotypes. The portrayal of victims and survivors is often immobilized by a "readymade lexicon" of defeat and suffering (Biressi 2004), with the forensic gaze emphasizing the explicit details of their injuries, raising ethical concerns. Non-conventional forms of gendered victimhood, such as vicarious victimization and collective victimization, are critical yet underexplored areas in true-crime storytelling. These forms highlight the gendered nature of trauma and societal scrutiny, portraying systemic violence against marginalized groups.

In conclusion, while true crime narratives provide a platform to challenge structural inequalities and highlight marginalized voices, they also risk reinforcing harmful stereotypes and ethical concerns. A nuanced and critical approach to these narratives is essential to balance the portrayal of victimhood and perpetration, ensuring that the complexities of these stories are adequately represented and understood.

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