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Crimesploitation

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Summary and Keywords

Crimesploitation is a kind of reality television programming that depicts nonactors committing, detecting, prosecuting, and punishing criminal behavior. In programs like *Cops*, *To Catch a Predator*, and *Intervention*, a real-life-documentary frame creates a sense of verisimilitude that intensifies the show's emotionally stimulating qualities and sets it apart from fictional crime stories. Crimesploitation programs create folk knowledge about the causes and consequences of criminal behavior and the purposes and effects of criminal punishment. That folk knowledge, in turn, reflects and reinforces two ideologies that legitimized the ratcheting up of harsh punishment in the late-twentieth-century United States: law-and-order punitivism and neoliberalism.

Keywords: cultural criminology, visual criminology, reality television, neoliberalism, punishment

Introduction

From nightly newscasts to fictional police procedurals like *Criminal Minds*, the contemporary media landscape is filled with spectacles of crime and punishment that aim to attract wide audiences and generate profit. Crimesploitation is a particular iteration of this kind of spectacle. We use the term to refer to reality television programming that has, since the 1980s, depicted nonactors committing, detecting, prosecuting, and punishing criminal behavior. As we have argued elsewhere (LaChance & Kaplan, 2015), its documentary style works to generate a sense of verisimilitude that intensifies the spectacle's emotionally stimulating qualities and distinguishes it from fictional crime stories and nightly news coverage. Viewers are constantly reminded that the drama unfolding on the screen has real-life consequences.

Crimesploitation offers a wide range of content aimed at different audiences. As a subset of reality television programs, it encompasses everything from heroin users injecting drugs in shows focused on addiction to prison inmates being extracted from cells by correctional officers in shows focused on prison life to the apprehension of men seeking sex with minors in shows depicting sting operations. Many versions of it are readily recognized as "trashy" and voyeuristic; others, though, are critically lauded. For example, a new wave of crime reality programs in recent years, exemplified by the Netflix original documentary series *Making a Murderer*, have garnered praise for exposing problems with the criminal justice system.¹ We argue, though, that these differences mask fundamental similarities. Crimesploitation always exploits human suffering under the pretense of teaching audiences about the causes and consequences of criminal behavior and the purposes and effects of criminal punishment. The knowledge it disseminates, we argue, constitutes a kind of folk criminology and folk penology.

Because it is created by entertainment and news industries more interested in garnering high ratings than in disseminating scholarly knowledge about crime and punishment, however, crimesploitation's folk criminology and folk penology differ from their academic counterparts in important ways. First, because they are widely broadcast, crimesploitation programs arguably have a farther reach than academic research.² Moreover, while the objectives of criminology and penology are to explain criminal behavior and punitive practices, crimesploitation is anti-explanatory. A tacit goal of the study of crime and punishment is to reduce the frequency of crime and punishment; crimesploitation, by contrast, thrives on the subject. It is in this sense that crime-reality programs are exploitative. Beyond exploiting the mostly unpaid persons who appear on its various programs, crimesploitation takes advantage of harmful acts—self-destruction, property damage, extreme punishment, and the like—to make profits for its producers and corporate investors—or, in the rare case of nonprofit media organizations like National Public Radio, to grow their audience base. Crimesploitation is thus a form of what Rafter (2007) and Rafter and Brown (2011) refer to as "popular criminology": it is a

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key source of people's understanding of crime and punishment, but it is not interested in explaining either criminal behavior or responses to such behavior in any empirically or theoretically sophisticated way.

This brief history of crimesploitation explores its significance to cultural criminologists and proposes that it offers important insights for scholars seeking to understand the relationship between popular culture and the revival of a retributive approach to criminal justice in the late twentieth century. Since *Cops* debuted in the late 1980s, these programs have reinforced the two dominant ideologies underlying that revival: neoliberalism and law-and-order punitivism.

A Brief Genealogy of Crimesploitation

Depictions of actual persons engaging in illicit behavior and suffering the consequences of that behavior are not new. Gallows narratives—printed accounts of executions that often described the crimes and confessions of the offenders in detail—circulated widely in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century North America (Banner, 2002). The advent of motion pictures in the early twentieth century dramatically expanded Americans' capacity to consume deviance and, by offering sight and (later) sound, intensified the experience. From 1920 to 1960, entrepreneurial filmmakers made thousands of inexpensive films catering to mostly male audiences' interest in sex, violence, and the exotic. Film historian Eric Schaefer (1999) identifies these as "exploitation" films and delineates the central elements of their "classical form": a promise of "shocking truths and fearless frankness" (p. 3); a focus on a forbidden topic, often at the expense of narrative coherence; cheap production values and narrative incoherence; independence from the major media production, distribution and exhibition systems of the era (Schaefer, pp. 5–6); a distinction from illegal pornography in their preference for coy displays of nudity over raw copulation (p. 6); a professed educational mission (p. 18); and a tendency to map deviance onto "the Other" (p. 12). Under the pretense of deterring their audiences from committing taboo acts, classical exploitation offered stimulating depictions of the forbidden—nudity, narcotics, encounters with exotic "others."

Classical exploitation films disappeared in the 1960s for a number of reasons, notably, the Supreme Court legalized pornography, and a voluntary ratings system replaced the motion picture production code that had previously regulated film content. In this context, classical exploitation films gave way to new films that exploited sex, drug use, violence, and "the other" without the veneer of a pedagogical purpose (see Schaefer, ch. 9). It was during this period that media analysts began to make a portmanteau of the word "exploitation" and the subject being exploited, such as "sexploitation" and "blaxploitation."

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While crimesploitation programs differ from classic exploitation films, as well as their 1960s and 1970s offspring,³ they share three of their predecessors' characteristics: an appeal to the voyeuristic desire to witness scenes of transgression and punishment; the veiling of that appeal with assertions of the content's pedagogical, civic value; and low overhead production costs made possible by a simple format.

Crime Tourism

Classical exploitation films assumed a working and middle-class audience that was unfamiliar with deviant behavior, attracted to it, and in need of dissuasion from engaging in it. A large portion of the people depicted were "drug addicts" and prostitutes fallen from the ranks of the once respectable. For example, after the notorious Harrison Narcotic Act (1914) banned opium and cocaine, a wave of exploitation films focused on "middle or upper class individuals abusing a variety of substances and eventually becoming derelicts" (Schaefer, 1999, p. 220).

Like these classical films, crimesploitation is aimed at working and middle-class audiences. In contrast to the classical films, though, crimesploitation spends noticeably less time portraying its subjects as once-respectable people with whom the audience might identify. It instead depicts a vivid assortment of "others" ranging from petty thieves to sexual predators, who become objects of both curiosity and disgust. The audience is addressed as law-abiding citizens who need knowledge about the criminal justice system that will help them to protect themselves and support law enforcement efforts.

Despite addressing viewers as respectable citizens, however, crimesploitation offers a voyeuristic voyage into worlds where behaviors and experiences that are normally off limits are commonplace. The focus of, for example, *To Catch a Predator*, *Cops*, or *Gangland* is the commission of, apprehension for, and response to illegal behavior, often in the same show. Episodes of *To Catch a Predator* show what it is like to cross a line from Internet sexual fantasy to a real-life encounter with a forbidden partner; episodes of *Cops* display the risks of selling drugs to strangers on the street; *Gangland* offers inside knowledge about how gang members decide to kill enemies.

Educational Values

Classical exploitation films presented themselves as earnest efforts to educate audiences about the darker elements of the world they inhabited. Censorship practices meant that these films could not have been screened if they did not cloak their titillating purpose with a claim of educational value. An entire subgenre of classical exploitation is the "sex hygiene film," which offered glimpses of the nude female body under the pretense of warning males about venereal disease.⁴ Other classic exploiters drew inspiration from the new field of cultural anthropology that was blossoming in the early twentieth century. They produced fake "ethnological" films that depicted travelers experiencing exotic thrills

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in jungles across the ocean. These movies featured white men in pith helmets, topless “native girls” (who were often from California), and hoax cannibalism (Schaefer, 1999, pp. 265–285). Schaefer argues that these “exotic” films drew on and constructed middle-class attitudes about civilization and chaos to construct an “ur-jungle” populated by terrifying others. But they also titillated with images of alluring, friendly “native women” who were “unconstrained by pressures of the modern consumer economy under capitalism” (p. 271).

Like these voyeuristic films of the 1930s, contemporary crime-reality programs attempt to appear respectable. Crimesploitation presents its mission as education rather than titillation. It offers access to behaviors that are prurient and off-limits under the pretense of teaching working- and middle-class consumers about the perils and consequences of sex, drugs, and violence. Network and basic cable broadcast standards, however, limit the scope of what crimesploitation programs can show audiences. They sometimes show partial nudity or dead bodies, but they never show actual sexual activity or death. They are in this sense distinct from pornography or the self-produced scenes of murder perpetrated and disseminated by drug cartels or terrorist organizations. These latter texts do not withhold; they end with a graphic, unflinching display of the climactic moment of pleasure or horror. Crimesploitation, by contrast, stokes the desire to witness forbidden pleasures or horrors but offers only partial substitutes.

Crime-reality television’s pedagogical façade is perhaps most evident in programs devoted to gangs. *Gangland*, for instance, presents itself as an ethnographic exploration of a gang’s cultural scene by depicting its shibboleths, norms, preferred modes of criminal behavior, and so on. But as crimesploitation, *Gangland* is different from criminological ethnography⁵ because it rarely addresses the structural forces involved with the gang’s formation, history and development.⁶ Instead, capitalizing on viewers’ transgressive desires, *Gangland* invites working- and middle-class audiences to escape boredom by identifying with the deviant “gangbanger” and indulging vicariously in his unconstrained, “bad-ass” displays of power. At the same time, such representations mark the gang member as foreign in his dangerousness and dangerous in his foreignness—a source of adrenaline-inducing anxiety. Instead of attempting to explain or contextualize the harms caused by gangs, gangsploitation makes a spectacle of gang violence, which in turn reinforces middle-class fetishes and phobias about young men of color.

Low-Cost Production Techniques and a Simplistic Format

Classical exploitation films depicted the sensational at the expense of narrative coherence. As Schaefer (1999) points out, producers on tight budgets in the classical era often sacrificed a coherent storyline in their quest for quick dollars (p. 5). Cost-saving methods included recycling material from previous films in fresh productions, adding superfluous scenes of “small-time acts” performed by dancers, acrobats, or singers to the

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film, and introducing the film with a “square-up,” a time-filling “prefatory statement about the social or moral ill the film claimed to combat” (p. 69).⁷

Like their predecessors, crimesploitation programs are cheap to produce. Time-squandering content is aired and re-aired in the same episode. The introductory segment of most crime-reality TV shows contain preview snippets of scenes that will unfold in more detail during the main body of the show. *Cops*, the original crimesploitation hit, always launches with a preview medley of chases, fights, and shots of bad guys in squad cars. *Lockup*, *Intervention*, and *Gangland* start off similarly, showing highlight reels of enticing scenes to be appreciated in more detail after the commercial break. Pieces of these introductory montages are frequently deployed before every commercial break, increasing their cost-saving value. Crimesploitation shows also begin with a more generic version of the classical era’s square-up: “Due to mature subject matter, viewer discretion is advised,” viewers are warned before the programs begin. This warning, usually spoken in ominous tones by a deep-voiced male actor, both primes the viewer for titillation and fills time at a very low cost. It is used repeatedly after commercial breaks during the course of a single show.

An emphasis on titillation precludes sustained character development, rendering impossible the depiction of criminals or authority figures as complex human beings. *Intervention*, for example, follows addicts as they spiral downward in their dependency, hit bottom, and then enter rehabilitation after a tearful confrontation with loved ones. Yet it mostly does not place their addiction in the context of a broader life. Unlike *Intervention*, most programs do not allocate sustained time to one particular figure; they instead string together short miniature episodes of crime commission, apprehension, or punishment. While vaudeville-like performances do not periodically round out crimesploitation productions, the formulaic and repetitive nature of these programs’ format make them much more focused on offering moments of excitement rather than narrative closure.

The Ideological Content of Crimesploitation

Crimesploitation’s consumers likely have various responses to the programs—from ironic, critical detachment to uncritical absorption—but the shows work to naturalize a conservative understanding of the world. Cultural criminologists (e.g., Ferrell et al., 2015) and sociolegal scholars (e.g., Ewick & Silbey, 1998) have demonstrated that stories produced about law and law enforcement are carriers of ideologies, malleable systems of ideas that people use to make sense of the world. It is through the process of sense making that an ideology can “embed” or subvert a person’s consent to a set of political arrangements that favor some groups and disfavor others. Dominant ideologies reinforce existing relationships of power; subversive ones invite criticism of the status quo and motivate the bearer to imagine and demand alternatives (Ewick & Silbey, 1998, p. 225).

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Crimesploitation reflects and reinforces two distinctive, yet complementary, conservative ideologies in late-twentieth-century political culture: neoliberalism and law-and-order punitivism.

Neoliberalism

Crimesploitation emerged in the 1980s shortly after a major reorientation of mainstream economic thought. Since World War II, mainstream Republicans and Democrats had subscribed to a liberal consensus which held, in part, that an interventionist state ought to serve as a regulator of the economy and a guarantor of the population's health and well-being (Hodgson, 1976). Economic crises in the 1970s unsettled this consensus, and a new political-economic vision, which scholars have called neoliberalism, grew in influence and reach. Neoliberalism, as its name suggests, revived and retooled a classical economic position that an unencumbered market expands the wealth of a society. This kind of thinking justified the deregulation of industries, the movement of manufacturing to states or nations with lower labor costs, and the contraction of social welfare spending (Harvey, 2007). To legitimize the withdrawal of the state's affirmative obligations to its citizens, neoliberalism holds that the absence of governmental efforts to socially engineer the health and welfare of the population is good. It cultivates persons who are entrepreneurial, autonomous, and responsible. Freedom is cast in negative terms—in the absence of government provision, it flourishes.

In the domain of criminal justice policy, neoliberalism undermined a midcentury approach to policing and punishment that understood crime as partly an economic problem that could be solved through social spending. Programs aimed at ameliorating poverty, this way of thinking held, would reduce the conditions in which persons turned to crime. Meanwhile, counseling and educational programs for those who did commit crime would turn them into productive members of society. Rejecting that approach as costly and failed, neoliberal politicians sought to scale back the state's preventative and therapeutic responses to crime. In their place, the state adopted new, less costly strategies. Driven by a rhetoric of personal responsibility and a logic of risk management, the state would incapacitate, through incarceration, known criminals. Conversely, driven by a desire to shrink the affirmative obligations of government, the state would shift more responsibility for crime control onto private citizens and corporations, who would increasingly be relied upon to manage their property and behaviors in ways that reduced their susceptibility to criminal predation. David Garland (2001) calls this process of offloading public responsibility for crime prevention onto private actors "responsibilization" (p. 124).

Crimesploitation draws on and buttresses neoliberalism in several ways. Some programs present themselves as pedagogical, offering helpful information about criminal behavior so that viewers can take steps to prevent crime, thus facilitating their adjustment to a world in which the state's responsibility for crime prevention has shrunk. *To Catch a Predator* (2004–2007) illustrates this dynamic. The show depicted men getting caught attempting to meet with "underage teens" (actually adult actors) they had solicited online

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in Internet sting operations. Its producers presented itself as a consciousness-raising exercise, alerting parents to the existence of online dangers and teaching them how to reduce their children's vulnerability to them by, say, placing Internet-connected computers in common areas and installing tracking software on them.⁸ Another classic of crimesploitation, *America's Most Wanted* (1988–2012), appealed directly to the notion of public participation in crime control by asking viewers to phone in with tips on cold cases.

Crimesploitation also reinforces neoliberal understandings of human behavior as the product of individual will rather than structural conditions. Various programs frame their wayward subjects as poor decision makers (e.g., *Cops*) or as persons individually capable of overcoming personal challenges and achieving redemption through good choices (e.g., *Intervention*). They present the source of social problems as individual acts of free will or failures of personal responsibility rather than the asymmetrical distribution of wealth or biased law enforcement practices. As one scholarly account of a reality prison program puts it:

[S]pectacles of incarceration actively construct notions of criminality as individual choice, effectively casting the eventual exclusion that results from criminality as a product of that "choice." The protagonists in these shows thus play the unwitting role of drawing audiences further away from conceptualizing even the possibility that crime and criminality are intricately connected to structural systems of inequality.

(Riofrio, 2012, pp. 149–150)

Finally, crimesploitation reinforces neoliberalism by portraying the danger of attempting to escape the psychological pressure of being self-disciplining in a society with a poor and shrunken social safety net. Depicting a drug user's sigh of relief as she injects heroin or a perpetrator's excited approach to the scene of an illegal tryst, some programs seem to invite viewers to identify with the pleasures of dropping out of society, losing control of their desires, or disclaiming responsibility for themselves. And yet these programs ultimately push the viewers to regard the uncooperative or out-of-control subject with contempt. *Intervention*, for instance, always depicts its addicts in states of utter disrepair—nodding out, screaming hysterically, destroying furniture, falling down. These persons are failures as parents or workers; they become examples of what not to be. Although *Intervention* often acknowledges that its subjects suffered childhood trauma, the show devotes as much or more time depicting them as frustratingly stubborn resisters of private help offered by their families.

Law-and-Order Punitivism

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Crimesploitation also reinforces the ideology of law-and-order-punitivism, which complements, yet is distinctive from, neoliberalism.⁹ LaChance and Kaplan (2015) have defined law-and-order-punitivism as an

illiberal, reactionary discourse that arose out of the backlash against the Warren Court's criminal jurisprudence and the fear generated by the dramatic rise of violent crime in the 1960s. This ideology celebrates police or executive authority while casting suspicion on judicial decision making; bemoans commitments to due process and the rights of criminal defendants; constructs criminals in simplistic terms as evil and monstrous others; presents victims as innocents whose purity and goodness the community affirms in the act of punishment; and, finally, authorizes the harsh, extra-legal, and humiliating elements of punishment as a crucial and necessary counterpart to its modern, rule-bound, institutional logics (pp. 3-4).

In the most straightforward sense, crimesploitation supports law-and-order punitivism because it almost always depicts law enforcement officers positively. Programs like *Cops* (1989–present), *LAPD: Life on the Street* (1995–1999), and *Real Stories of the Highway Patrol* (1993–1999) follow law enforcement agents working in patrol cars or conducting undercover prostitution stings. Officers are portrayed sympathetically. As they editorialize about human nature and the criminal justice system while driving through potentially dangerous streets, they appear tough and world-weary, yet ultimately good-hearted and fair-minded. Programs set in jails or prisons usually depict similarly sympathetic visions of correctional officers as tough, yet professional.¹⁰

But crimesploitation also reflects the dimension of law-and-order punitivism that finds pleasure in bucking professionalism and doling out punishment to guilty criminals. Law-and-order punitivism emerged in part from a frustration with excessive due-process and a sense that guilty criminals were exploiting legal technicalities to evade punishment for their crimes. A subcategory of crimesploitation addresses this frustration by blurring the line between the detection and punishment of crime and its punishment. Shows like *To Catch a Predator* (2003–2007) and others such as *Bait Car* (2007–2012), *Southern Fried Stings* (2010–2011), *Undercover Stings* (2012), and *Smile! You're under Arrest* (2008–2009), invited viewers to enjoy observing the humiliation that occurs when local police, sometimes partnering with vigilante organizations, catch offenders and inflict an extralegal shaming punishment onto them on national television. By delivering punishment on the spot, these shows undermine a presumption of innocence and bypass legal procedures justified by it. In the instant justice they deliver, they reinvest the act of punishment with a moral righteousness that bureaucratic and legalistic institutions so often seem to drain from it.

The Seductions of Crimesploitation

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We have argued that crimesploitation works to reinforce acquiescence to a punitive culture. It does so not only by inculcating particular norms (like the capacity for self-discipline or a desire for social stability), but also by offering structured, temporary escapes from the psychological burdens that upholding those norms create. Life in a world that is increasingly rationalized often lacks primal, heroic, dangerous, or awe-inspiring experiences. Since the nineteenth century, social theorists like Max Weber (1992) have been chronicling the emergence of a widespread rationalization of late modern life and its enervating effects.¹¹ As Jeff Ferrell (2004) has incisively pointed out, whatever crime may be, it is usually not boring. Engaging in acts of crime offers a “vivid experiential and emotional resistance to rationalized control” (Ferrell, 2004, p. 5). Inflicting punishment, we suggest, can create similar sensations. On screen, offenders and law enforcement officials transcend the mundaneness of everyday life by committing crimes and inflicting punishments.

A major part of the appeal for working- and middle-class consumers of crimesploitation may be, then, the subversive sense of aliveness these programs depict. Viewers are invited to experience vicariously the transgression of ordinary behavior in the pursuit of deviance or punishment. They can use these programs to temporarily escape from modernity’s mundane predictability while never incurring any actual risk. The programs operate seductively, often by illustrating in detail the techniques criminals and law enforcement officials use to achieve adrenaline-filled experiences.

To seduce viewers, these programs fetishize the preludes to crime and punishment. In their portrayal of criminals and law enforcement officials, crime-reality television shows portray a process similar to the steps hobbyists undertake before they lose themselves in their work. Gomart and Hennion (1999) have shown how musicians take rational steps—what they call “*dispositifs*”—to achieve the blissful mindlessness of performing with others in a group. For instance, a band member will rehearse endlessly in isolation in order to perfect her part, exerting a kind of self-conscious discipline that is the opposite of the mental state she achieves in the actual performance.

Crimesploitation depicts criminals and law enforcement officials in an analogous manner. *Intervention*, for example, reveals the painfully complex processes addicts follow in order to obtain, prepare, ingest, and enjoy their intoxicant of choice. It depicts a metaphysical transformation from varied *dispositifs* rife with anxious anticipation—frantic phone calls attempting to raise cash, tense moments in cars waiting for dealers, panicky flights from the police—to sudden overwhelming, if fleeting, pleasure. Habits and practices of law enforcement officers are also extensively displayed in crimesploitation. *To Catch a Predator*, for instance, lingers on the rituals of setting up and running the sting operation in which men seeking sex with adolescents are apprehended. The audience sees blueprints illustrating the placement of surveillance cameras and cameras pan through a “mission control” center filled with vigilantes making contacts with men in online chatrooms. The programs’ elaborate focus on the means used to commit or punish crime

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reveals their strategy of seduction: viewers are invited to become absorbed in the pursuit of extreme states that are all too often absent in modern life.

The act of viewing crimesploitation can also become a *dispositif* for consumers who are amateur criminologists and penologists. Learning the details of how to manufacture and distribute methamphetamine (e.g., *Drugs, Inc.*), or wanting to know the shibboleths and norms of gang life (e.g., *Gangland*), or having intense curiosity about techniques of the sting operation (e.g., *To Catch a Predator*) all add up to something like the requirements for being a “passionate amateur” of crime and punishment.

Crimesploitation also offers a more satisfying alternative to modern penal practices. Despite the prominence of law-and-order punitivism in the United States, a yawning gap separates retributive rhetoric from actual penal practices. Retributive rhetoric returned the expression of moral outrage to the center of public justifications for harsh punishment. In reality, however, those convicted of crime disappeared into bureaucratically managed, warehouse-like prisons closed off to the public gaze—a place shaped more by security considerations than by moral denunciation.

The consequence of punishment’s invisibility may be significant. Through controlled experimentation, scholars in economics and psychology have demonstrated that punishment is more satisfying for the observer when the punished person articulates, in some way, a recognition that he is being punished *and* that his punishment is just.¹² Such satisfaction is stymied by the contemporary way in which we punish (Ewick, 2013). By warehousing prisoners in isolated penitentiaries, the state denies the public access to the response of punished persons to their punishment. The opaque nature of prisons has kept the public from experiencing the promised return of punishment: a sense of justice being done. This, of course, is not a new feature of incarceration, but its dissatisfying effects are more keenly felt in a culture that has made harsh punishment (rather than provision) the collective response to many social problems (Simon, 2007), including crime (Garland, 2001).

Shows like *Lockup* and *Dog: The Bounty Hunter* have worked to counter that reality by inviting viewers to see and hear from the punished as they experience their punishment.¹³ *Lockup* enacts a longstanding mythology of punishment as an experience that regenerates, through the degrading experience of civil death, the criminal (Smith, 2009). Many episodes dwell on those entering the prison and those leaving it, vowing to begin life anew. This kind of attention to entry and exit conveys an image of prison as a finite, and potentially productive, experience in an era when many inmates are often sentenced to prison for the rest of their lives. Shows that depict more informal punishment—like the captured bail-jumper of *Dog: The Bounty Hunter*—often showcase a remorsefulness in the offender that is triggered by the experience of a humiliating apprehension by an authority figure. By enabling the public to gaze upon persons while they are experiencing formal and informal punishment, these shows create opportunities to observe its salutary effects. In the end, crimesploitation works to bridge the gap

between the rhetoric of law-and-order punitivism and the reality of a modern penal system that invisibly incapacitates those it convicts of crimes.

Conclusion

In his historical study of classical exploitation, Schaefer (1999) concludes:

The pictures may have railed against the dangers of pursuing pleasure, but they supplied it in the form of titillating spectacle ... [Their] paean to a stable social and moral order was expressed in a form that lacked stability and order. The films reveled in the exotic but were exceptionally provincial. They professed a concern about education but went about it in a slapdash fashion. They claimed to expose truth but did it in a leering and suggestive way. They took a moral high ground but engaged in morally questionable practices.

(pp. 341-342)

A similar set of contradictions characterize crimesploitation. Crimesploitation presents criminals as examples of the dangers of extreme self-indulgence, yet it makes a spectacle of them, stoking and satisfying audiences' desires to watch people engaging in transgressive behavior. Crimesploitation overtly favors conformity to a conservative moral order, yet it appeals to a taboo desire to witness disorder. It frames itself as ethical, but it exploits pain for profit.

Those contradictions make crimesploitation a valuable, yet ethically fraught, object of study. Cultural criminologists have raised questions about the ethics of displaying and talking about crime-related images, particularly images of suffering. Eamonn Carrabine (2014), for instance, has noted the Frankfurt School's longstanding concern with photography's "ability to beautify suffering" and commodify pain (p. 143). Crimesploitation may one day come to be widely recognized as media that does just that. Future historians may one day debate the ethics of exhibiting crimesploitation media to memorialize the punitive culture of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Now, though, critical engagement with crimesploitation is essential to countering its unproblematic presence in American culture. Cultural criminologists can begin to disrupt the normality that such ubiquity generates by denaturalizing crimesploitation, marking it as a symptom of a particular historical moment. It is only by confronting crimesploitation directly that scholars and activists can hope to counter the harmful "regimes of representation" it perpetuates (Carrabine, 2014, p. 154).

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Notes:

(1.) *The New Yorker's* Kathryn Schulz (2016) argues that they represent a distinguished new wave of true crime “extra-judicial investigations” (p. 60) by journalists: “In the past fifteen months, this canon [of journalistic innocence investigations] has grown considerably in both content and prestige” (p. 60). Moreover, crimesploitation should probably include subcategories such as “gangsploitation” and “drugsploitation.”

(2.) The sheer number of crimesploitation shows that have emerged since *Cops* premiered in 1988 demonstrates its success. Laurie Ouellette (2011) catalogued this large, and yet still incomplete, list: *Real Stories of the Highway Patrol* (1993-1999), *LAPD: Life on the Beat* (1995-1999), *American Detective* (1991-1993), *Rookies* (2008-2009), *Top Cops* (1990-1993), *Lockup* (2005-), *Lockdown* (2007), *The Wanted* (2009), *Video Justice* (2006-2007), *Manhunters* (2009-2011), *Breaking Down the Bars* (2011), *Hard Time* (2011-), *Breakout* (2010-), *Homeland Security USA* (2009), *Police Women of Broward County* (2009-2011), *Bounty Girls: Miami* (2007), *Southern Fried Stings* (2010-2011), *Undercover Stings* (2012), *Jacked: Auto Theft Task Force* (2008), *Speeders* (2008-), *Parking Wars* (2008-2012), *DEA* (2008), *Bait Car* (2007-2012), *Mall Cops* (2010), *Alaska State Troopers* (2009-), *Operation Repo* (2008-2014), *Jail* (2007-2013), *Cajun Justice* (2012), *Jail: Las Vegas* (2015-), *I (Almost) Got Away with It* (2010-), *Inside American Jail* (2007-2009), *No Excuses with Master P* (2009), *T.I.'s Road to Redemption* (2009), *Smile! You're under Arrest* (2008-2009), *Steven Segal: Lawman* (2009-2014), *Intervention* (2005-), *Gangland*

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(2007–2010), and *Dog: The Bounty Hunter* (2004–2012). And while they don't often outrate highly-popular fictional programming, these shows can beat well-known television personalities. For example, on April 15, 2011, *Lockup* was the highest rated show on MSNBC and CNN, beating out Anderson Cooper and Rachel Maddow (Joyella, 2014).

(3.) Crimesploitation, for instance, is produced by mainstream, corporate production companies and broadcast to home audiences during prime time. Its revenue comes from advertising aimed at major demographic groups, not tickets sold to a niche audience.

(4.) See Schaefer (1999, ch. 5).

(5.) Classics include *Bourgeois* (2002) and *Vigil* (2002).

(6.) Rafter (2007) argues that the dichotomy between popular criminology and academic criminology may not be so clear.

(7.) See Schaefer (1999, ch. 2) for a detailed analysis of the mode of production and style of classical exploitation.

(8.) Kohm (2009, pp. 200, 201–202) argues that *To Catch a Predator* inspired criticism for two main reasons: first, viewers' presumed familiarity with the fluid nature of online identity prompts them to imagine that they might "perhaps unwittingly or inadvertently, be drawn into the trap and be subjected to the terrifying process of exclusion." Second, the "gonzo-style" punishment "may ultimately be read by audiences as a terrifying failure of public criminal justice." LaChance and Kaplan (2015) make a different argument, focusing instead on how viewers' own illicit fantasies and anxieties about self-governance, rather than their fear of being mistaken as a deviant (or persecuted by "gonzo" deviant vigilantes), can undermine the show's capacity to engineer acquiescence to its punitive ideology.

(9.) Perhaps most importantly, these two ideologies reject structural explanations for the social problems of poverty (neoliberalism) and crime (law-and-order punitivism) by appealing to classically liberal conceptions of the person as an autonomous actor endowed with free will and therefore moral responsibility for his or her actions. Neoliberalism emerged after law-and-order punitivism, yet, as we have seen, it has deeply informed crime control policy.

(10.) The recent explosion of cell phone footage of police misconduct provides an important contrast to the edited imagery of police-focused crimesploitation; on *Cops*, audiences never see officers breaking the law by physically abusing suspects.

(11.) For contemporary criminologists who have elaborated on this theme, see Bauman (1992) and Ferrell (2004).

(12.) See, for example, Carlsmith et al. (2008); Carlsmith (2006); Funk et al. (2014); and Nadelhoffer et al. (2013).

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(13.) It is also true that there are exceptions that prove the rule on punishment's opacity—revived practices such as the chain gang (Allen & Abril, 1997) and the many exploits of ostentatious punisher Maricopa County Sherriff Joe Arpaio—demonstrate that while distant warehousing is the main project of American punishment, public humiliation takes place institutionally in other spaces than on reality TV.

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