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The case of the speculative detective: Aesthetic truths and the television 'crime board'

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Preliminary proceedings

The critical project of media studies, in its conventional form, sets out to decipher, demystify, and disentangle. Its established practices of analysis endeavour to solve the mystery of media objects and institutions. The study of media is then, like the philosophical traditions that underpin it, 'a work of forensics', a process of 'establishing the modus operandi of the world by reconstructing the evidence it leaves behind from the crimes it commits'.[1] Yet in the 21st century, the academy no longer has exclusive jurisdiction over this investigation. In a digital culture, where media is frequently self-referential in both content and form, 'media tends to theorise itself'.[2] In this essay I offer one expression of this tendency: the crime board, also known variously as the 'case board' or 'murder board', a ubiquitous object in 21st century television drama.

In its central concern with questions of epistemology and problems of knowing, detective fiction has, to some extent, always theorised itself. Over and above any particular crime, the practice of investigation has always supported a broader inquiry into how the world might be interpreted, into how different types of evidence might render the truth of this world know-able, and where the limits of certainty about this knowledge might lie.[3] The crime board is, in this sense, what Ronald Thomas has called a 'device of truth', a representational technology that lends authority to a mode of

detection long established in crime fiction. This is a mode in which 'unique interpretive powers' render crimes visible 'only to the eyes of the detective', powers that remain inseparable from the development of forensic technology.[4] The typical crime board not only gathers together and arranges facts yielded by such technologies, it is also a technology of truth in itself, serving a meta-investigative function by visually rendering a theory of causality, association, and guilt.

I want to draw attention to the tendency for crime boards to both express and perform conditions in which human knowledge of the world is in crisis. These are crime boards that exemplify an aesthetic practice of detection, a practice that operates beyond the humanist category of reason, resonating with our contemporary experience in a manner that cannot be reduced to questions of genre. To adopt Steven Shaviro's terms, there is a tendency for the crime board to confront '*what it feels like* to live in the early twenty-first century', when human subjectivity is conditioned and imperiled by neoliberal spacetime, by digital processes and procedures that render us 'overstimulated and hypermediated'.[5] This essay examines crime boards that problematise rather than uphold the representational authority of 'truth', crime boards that mark an encounter with phenomena that exceed human powers of detection but also provoke a more *speculative* practice, a mode of detection in which the world might still remain aesthetically knowable. Performing the crisis of subjectivity in the digital, contemporary television detectives and television viewers alike encounter 'truths' decoupled from evidence, truths that are incompatible with a humanist image of thought.

The case for the prosecution

Before inspecting the evidence, let us consider detection according to Marshall McLuhan, a lifelong fan of detective fiction (Figs 1, 2).[6] To the young McLuhan, the detective was uniquely equipped for the 'insecurity and confusion' of accelerated social change.[7] He identified such a quality in Edgar Allan Poe's C. Auguste Dupin, whose appearance in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* is generally recognised as the inception of detective fiction. Here the science of 'detached observation' shields the detective against the vicissitudes of technologically-induced upheaval, an invulnerability made possible by access to total knowledge, which in turn permits access to an analyti-

cal power that 'provides the means of escape'.[8] McLuhan in fact argues that Poe 'embalms the mystery of the sleuth' in another of his short stories, *A Descent into the Maelström*, in which a sailor, caught up in a terrifying oceanic vortex, is able to escape the horror of his situation 'by a trick of analysis', by taking 'a "scientific" interest in the action of the storm'.[9] In this initial account, investigative detachment offers readers a formula to enact their own escape from what McLuhan called the 'age of anxiety', from the horror of a world transforming around them.[10]

Figs 1, 2: Marshall McLuhan, theorist as detective (images courtesy of The Innis Herald, University of Toronto).

McLuhan later revised this position, claiming instead that the detective is not simply an analyst, but is also proficient in an *aesthetic* mode of investigation. This is a mode more appropriate to the conditions of an era in which media processes operate pervasively and environmentally, actively conditioning 'our perceptual life' but denying direct perception of the environment itself.[11] For McLuhan, human existence is continually and noncognitively worked over by processes of mediation, but certain practices of detection can nonetheless produce an encounter with the truth of these conditions. Here, detached observation is stripped of its privilege. McLuhan came to associate the point of view with an era in which media operated at slower speeds, whereas the accelerated and tactile culture of electronic media, with its intensified 'outering' of the human senses, is instead characterised by acts of exploratory probing, by attempts to 'sensuously [...] perceive the new environment'.[12] Probing is disinterested rather than detached: undirected, conducted without strategy, and entering into relations with media objects and processes without reducing such relations to the question of how they

might be put to use. As Shaviro puts it, 'aesthetic experience is *intense* precisely to the extent that it is devoid of interest', it is a matter of affect rather than cognition.[13] In McLuhan's account, the detective possesses a particular affective attunement to the media environment.

Crucially, this is immanent to the *form* of detective fiction which, for McLuhan, is a 'derivative' of accelerated transformation in the media environment. He highlights Poe's serial publication in newspapers, which meant that his stories were constructed backwards, beginning with consequences and then reconstructing the scene of the crime simultaneously – as a pattern rather than a linear narrative.[14] This form is reflected in the investigative technique of Poe's detective Dupin, who begins with the experience of 'pure effect, divorced from its rational and material causes'.[15] Here, detection neither offers access to a visually comprehensible totality, nor provides an escape from a mutable media environment, but instead involves attunement to simultaneity, to multiplicity, to a totality that is felt sensorially. Hence the most radical implication of McLuhan's insistence that '[t]he detective story was one of the first anticipations of electric technology' is that the detective does not simply uncover meanings, facts, or truths, but instead participates in aesthetic processes through which such values are produced.[16] For McLuhan, detection foregrounds the conditions of mediation and it is this, rather than any claim of direct access to the truth, that he identifies in his own method.[17]

However, the problem with McLuhan's interest in the fictional detective is that it centres on how such individuals deploy sensorial probes 'consciously and systematically'.[18] There is, in his theory of a media environment, a residual anthropocentrism that understands the arrangement of human and nonhuman relations to constitute an environment *for us*. Ironically, McLuhan's aesthetic mode of detection offers an anaesthetic defence against the 'pain' inflicted by accelerated technological change, in which a succession of historical extensions to the physical body is reversed in the form of an 'implosion', leaving the human forced to encounter the terrible fate of interdependence.[19] In fact, media relations do not coalesce in an arrangement that naturally privileges the human, but instead take an ecological form, wherein the human exists in a dynamic and entangled process of becoming with nonhuman media objects. Yet McLuhan's detective ultimately maintains the strongest of its aesthetic bonds with the sailor in Poe's *A Descent into the Maelström*. Human agency, McLuhan contends, can probe

and programme the turbulent force of the nonhuman 'before it translates us'.[20]

It is, then, notable that McLuhan's account of Poe's story overlooks the fact that its narrator is 'broken in body and mind' by exposure to the vortex.[21] I propose that, quite apart from an incidental footnote, these pathologies are in fact central to another kind of aesthetic detection. If there is already, in the figure of the classical detective, an originary pathology – an 'unnamed nervousness' as Thomas puts it, linked to the genre's emergence from particular techno-historical circumstances – then contemporary television drama accelerates this pathological condition.[22] This shift expresses the computational rhythm and intensity of post-Fordist capital, whereby power seeks to exploit the generative and volatile potential of relationality, rather than preserving a closed and entropic system of stable connections.[23] This is the context for the survey of television shows I present here, one that culminates in a traumatic mode of detection experienced in circumstances where the affective intensity of mediation overwhelms both intellectual inquiry and street-smart intuition. The protagonists of these shows have lost control. For them, detection involves an act of probing that admits to being probed back, it involves an abductive rather than deductive form of investigation, a speculative mode of detection in which human subjectivity is carried away beyond itself.[24] Here the detective is impelled, incited, or allured by their media ecological circumstances, and it is precisely the detective's inability to control such encounters that makes them aesthetic. Media relations remain ungraspable, impossible to reduce to an anthropocentric environment, and the weirdness of its entanglements cannot be recuperated or rationalised.[25] Yet as Thomas Elsaesser points out, in an epistemological *and* ontological crisis induced not simply by 'our contemporary network society' but also by the recognition that media environments are not and have never been *ours*, certain pathologies are altogether 'appropriate', even 'productive'.[26] It is the space opened up in the actualisation of these posthuman propensities that is at stake in such television shows. In the accelerated and hypermediated conditions of neoliberal capitalism, McLuhan's comparatively conservative fears are surpassed. The television detectives of the 21st century – and those of us who watch them – are tested, modulated, and reengineered in ways that may make it possible to endure such conditions, or may just optimise mechanisms of control.

I will now offer several exhibits into evidence. Exhibit A surveys crime boards that either purport to preserve rational perspective or reflect on the

complex circumstances in which any such defence is frustrated. The crime boards presented as Exhibit B establish how rationality is increasingly substituted for the aesthetic pathologies of relationality, and how investigative agency is distributed beyond the investigative subject but remains susceptible to exploitation. Exhibit C demonstrates the impossibility of recuperating this mode of detection within a humanist framework of knowledge. Finally, this case will close with concluding remarks on how the tendency of certain crime boards to aggravate this crisis – rather than simply reflect on it – is a particular quality of 21st century television drama.

Exhibit A

Debate over the so-called 'CSI effect' addresses assumptions about detection that are increasingly based on fictional technologies and procedures.[27] Here the figure of the 'scientist-detective', who dominates the universe of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000-2016), expresses a 'cultural shift toward forensic fetishism' ignorant of both juridical process and actual technique.[28] The usual critique of *CSI* is that it recklessly blurs the line between science and science-fiction, and that, despite foregrounding technology in the form of elaborate special effects, it is ultimately the crude and superficial power of a 'forensic gaze' that solves crimes and identifies otherwise hidden truths.[29] Forensic methods are just pretence, and technologies are nothing more than contrived plot devices. In an era of 'quality' television, the guilty pleasure of *CSI* involves tolerating a brash style that fails to pay close attention to the crime itself.

This is not simply a convention of the police procedural, but is bound up in how these conventions are accelerated in the show. Take, for example, the final iteration of the franchise, *CSI: Cyber* (2015-16), a show that exploits the moral panic surrounding the deep web and follows a specialist FBI team tracking down criminal hackers. On a formal level, the show employs rapid cuts, glitch effects (in transitions, onscreen text, and soundtrack), fragmented zooms, and snappy, frenetic dialogue. These are, in Carol Vernallis' terms, 'accelerated aesthetics' which 'bear some similarities' to the space, time, and rhythm of 21st century life.[30] Vernallis emphasises the diagrammatic relation between this style of digital editing and the everyday infiltration of 'global financial and work flows that themselves are digitally enabled'.[31] *CSI: Cyber* can be seen to formally express the neoliberal con-

ditions of digital 'speedup', which demand that we maintain simultaneous attention to multiple streams of information, and that we adopt a distracted mode of multitasking even if rational perspective is engulfed by such flows.[32] Significantly, though, the *CSI* detectives themselves employ a bulwark against the deleterious effects of the digital, and in so doing remain thoroughly rational. This takes the form of a giant screen, which mediates much of the cartoonish investigation both as expository device and as computational crime board (Fig. 3). This crime board helps reestablish what Vernallis calls 'a sense of ground, balance, and centre.'[33] Against the flux and flow of digital culture, it provides a crucial point of spatial and temporal orientation, a stabilising and abstracted point of view, from which the subject is empowered.[34] If, in the rest of the franchise, this point of view affords interpretive access to the truth of the body, *CSI: Cyber* affirms corresponding access to the truth of networks, information, and code. So despite various allusions to interaction, this crime board remains an inert epistemic tool, a tool used to rationalise the truth of a world under investigation, and to validate the forensic expertise, and gaze, of the investigative team.

Fig. 3: CSI: Cyber, season 1, episode 11.

Such techno-fetishism is actually an expression of nostalgia for the certainty and equilibrium of a viewpoint that today feels unachievable. Other more highly revered shows take such nostalgia to extremes. In *Fargo* (2014-present), the crime board evokes the fantasy of an era in which human intelligence reassuringly dominates. Here the crime board is a prosthetic extension of the detective's investigative power, and the less technologically spectacular the better, be it hand-drawn in marker pen (Fig. 4), compiled

from photographs and sticky notes (Fig. 5), or pinned to the wall in a home office (Fig. 6). Cautious deceleration, signified by the small town setting, allows the detective to visualise the real complexity of a case, schematically rationalising interrelated events, objects, and individuals. Big city FBI agents praise this 'tremendous' and 'impressive' work (Fig. 7), yet their awe is not inspired by the crime board itself, which again remains withdrawn into the background, but by the way it represents a truth that is subordinate to the detective's will and the correlate of her investigative intellect.[35]

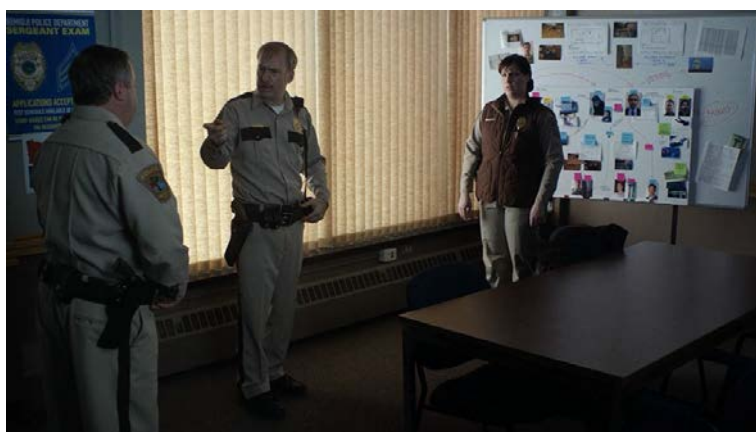Fig. 4: Fargo, season 1, episode 7.

Fig. 5: Fargo, season 1, episode 8.

Fig. 6: Fargo, season 1, episode 8.

Fig. 7: Fargo, season 1, episode 9.

Formal or narrative deceleration does not, though, *only* express a yearning for access to a truth-as-neat-resolution. It can also serve a reflexive function, where a crime board reveals the inadequacy of a truth it otherwise promises to represent with authority. *The Wire* (2002-2008) has been described as a 'reflexive study on what modalities of mapping and representation are bearers of effective knowledge'.[36] In *The Wire*, investigations begin with a symbolically empty crime board (Fig. 8), which gradually becomes a chaotic patchwork of clues (Fig. 9), and remains continually subject to both reorganisation (Fig. 10) and extension (Fig. 11). Though abstracted from the world, the crime board is a repository for information about it, information that can be sorted and dissected, even as it multiplies and bifurcates. Yet in

contrast to the epistemological certainty that links detection with quiet poise in *Fargo* and brash self-assurance in *CSI: Cyber*, the crime board in *The Wire* 'is never a truly "totalising" tool', it can never simply reveal.[37] Here, detectives do not simply use media technologies to render networks visible, instead these networks are *generated* in the act of investigation.[38] *The Wire* detectives, and its viewing audience, become affectively attuned to relations that cannot be represented in full, parts that never add up to a whole.

Fig. 8: The Wire, season 2, episode 5.

Fig. 9: The Wire, season 2, episode 10.

Fig. 10: The Wire, season 2, episode 11.

Fig. 11: The Wire, season 2, episode 12.

This emphasis on the 'provisionality of knowledge' underwrites the much-praised authenticity of the show, via, in Patrick Jagoda's terms, a 'network realism' reflexively suited to the social assemblage under investigation: Baltimore's intersecting political, economic, and technical worlds.[39] Where, in *CSI* and *Fargo*, the crime board serves to narrowly endorse a relationship between the truth and its representation, *The Wire* self-referentially acknowledges the role of both television detective and television viewer in constituting the ultimate limits of such truth. In the show's multiple but necessarily partial perspectives, access to a true Baltimore – for detective and viewer alike – is restricted to the realm of representation,

which the show acknowledges can only reflect an occluded and highly mediated image of the city in its material reality.

Crucially though, there remains something dualistic about this reflexivity in that the world continues to be held at a distance – even in its unknowability it remains something separate, with the process of detection taking the form of an interaction between apparently preexistent subject and object. In *CSI* and *Fargo* knowledge of the world is resolutely subject-centred, but in *The Wire* the world still cannot be encountered outside of the detective's investigative rendering. When the investigative agency of the detective-as-subject is somehow frustrated, there is presumed to exist 'an unbridgeable epistemological gap between knower and known'.[40] This dualistic conception of relationality always denies real access to the material conditions from which truths emerge. The panoramic ambition of the investigation encounters a traumatic limit point of human rationality, and in the end the only course of action is to acknowledge defeat, to pack the crime board away (Fig. 12). Nonetheless, other television detectives treat the inherent limitations of positive knowledge as a catalyst for speculative inquiries, pathological inquiries into the relations that constitute human existence but remain independent of human cognition and the human as subject. It is to these detectives that we now turn.

Fig. 12: The Wire, season 2, episode 12.

Exhibit B

'You're not yourself,' Saul Berenson agonisingly admits to his protégé, Carrie Mathison. 'I can't follow you. You're talking very fast, your thoughts are running together. All these ideas – I can't understand.'[41] The US is facing an imminent terrorist attack and Saul needs Carrie to slow down, to start making sense. Yet Carrie – CIA analyst and lead character in *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-present) – is recurrently frustrated by intelligence data that 'doesn't make sense' to her, that doesn't *feel* right, precisely because Carrie's process of sense-making differs to that of her colleagues.[42] Her investigative practice is concerned with 'connecting the dots', a recurrent phrase in the first season, but her ability to perceive such connections is a symptom of the bipolar disorder she initially keeps secret from her superiors.[43] Even at the height of a serious manic episode, Carrie is thus able to perceive data relating to the activity of a major terrorist in a way that remains obscured to everyone else. She aesthetically maps connections between complex phenomena, colour-coding intelligence files strewn around her apartment based on speculations about the target's emotional history (Fig. 13). Carrie has no need to sort this material into a visually coherent or linear form; indeed linearity impedes velocity, hindering her ability to intuit underlying patterns. Saul, by contrast, accustomed to the formal rationality of the CIA operations room and its bank of screens, needs the material to be arranged in the form of a conventional timeline, a crime board that will ensure Carrie's findings are taken seriously (Fig. 14). It is a question of specificity. Asked what it is they should be looking for, exactly, she replies, '*Exactly*, I don't know [...] It's not one thing, it's everything.'[44] Connecting the dots means *being connected*, maintaining an intimate sensitivity to the whole mediated environment, from which she is already inseparable.

Fig. 13: Homeland, season 1, episode 11.

Fig. 14: Homeland, season 1, episode 11.

Haunted by the failures of government intelligence in the lead-up to the terrorist attacks of September 2001, Carrie embodies the crisis of rational intelligence in an era of 'big data', as described in the ur-text for the series, *The 9/11 Commission Report*. The report questions why patterns in data had gone unrecognised, and why established investigative practices made it impossible to 'connect the dots'.[45] A fixation on hard facts had rendered national security insensitive to potentials that elude calculative modeling and analysis. Such virtuality remains perceptible only by methods previously deemed irrational, even crazy. Hence the report's radical implication: the urgent need to explore a speculative image of thought, one based on

'routinising, even bureaucratising' cognitive, perceptual, and sensorial processes beyond the supposedly human limitations of rationality.[46]

This retooling of cognitive and noncognitive powers, in response to the conditions of information society, is hardly limited to the military-industrial complex. Indeed it is the very condition of contemporary labour, where 'pathological' potentials of human subjectivity are newly productive. In neoliberal conditions that demand flexible commitment to a set of continually transforming relations, Elsaesser contends that

> [b]eing able to discover new connections, where ordinary people operate only by analogy or antithesis; being able to rely on bodily 'intuition' as much as on ocular perception; or being able to think 'laterally' and respond hyper-sensitively to changes in the environment may turn out to be assets and not just an affliction.[47]

In Shaviro's Marxist-McLuhanist critique of such 'assets', this amounts to the 'real subsumption' of aesthetic practices, whereby affects, powers of intuition, and the whole sensorial realm are preemptively exploited and thus always already a function of capital.[48]

Seen in this context, the role of the contemporary television detective is somewhat suspect, especially given the emerging dominance of an unstable or otherwise 'autistic' detective. At first glance, the caricatural condition that forms the basis of this televisual trope simply pathologises activity misaligned with so-called neurotypical behaviour, often crudely rendered in terms of social dissociation and communicative detachment. For example, Saga Norén, detective protagonist of Swedish/Danish crime drama *Bron/Broen* (SVT/DR, 2011-present), is rarely depicted with a diagnostic specificity that extends beyond quirks and eccentricities. Yet aside from any superficial dissociation or insensibility, this detective's investigative technique relies on extra-associational sensitivity. In Erin Manning's terms, Saga 'dwells in an ecology of practices that creates resonances across scales and registers of life, both organic and inorganic, not solely in the so-called human realm'.[49] While exploiting the inaccurate cliché of empathic and relational disorder, *Bron/Broen* also plays on the fact that social marginalisation of autism is a reactionary response to the tendency for autistic experience to *privilege* relations and ecological entanglements over the human itself. Such experience encounters the world non-anthropocentrically and in its becoming rather than by dissecting the world into subjects and objects.[50]

This experience informs a key sequence in the first season of *Bron/Broen* (and its international remakes) involving the dismantling of a crime board. The detectives are racing to find a clue before a killer claims his next victim. They discover the killer's vast archive of research material, largely arranged as his own ultra-rational crime board (Fig. 15). The board is dismantled, the files are brought back to the station, but there is just too much information to examine properly. It is impossible to identify what is relevant by employing the usual methods, so rather than working through the data one file at a time, Saga takes a box and spreads its contents out on the floor, shifting the paper around intuitively (Fig. 16). For Saga, the truth of the world is not an object to be discovered but something constituted in the detective's entanglement with and as part of the world. This printed information is not simply a record of the world but part of the world's 'dynamic configuring, its ongoing articulation'.[51] Saga does not have custody over investigative agency but gives herself up to patterns of 'intensive relationality'.[52]

Fig. 15: The Bridge, season 1, episode 9.

Fig. 16: The Bridge, season 1, episode 10.

In the show's British/French remake, *The Tunnel* (Sky/Canal+, 2013-present), Elise Wassermann, Saga's French equivalent, accelerates this affective mode of detection yet further. In their examination of the material, her colleagues transform the office into a baroque crime board, with files pinned to every surface, again according to the killer's own system (Fig. 17). Rejecting this system, Elise dumps the files into one large pile on the floor, and in montage we see her walking through them barefoot, as more files flutter down from above (Fig. 18). We see her lying down in the files, stirring them around with her hands, feeling out information rather than scrutinising for detail, affecting and being affected by a distributive investigative agency to which she concedes authority. Finally, knowledge emerges from this material configuration and the chase is on.[53]

Fig. 17: The Tunnel, season 1, episode 9.

Fig. 18: The Tunnel, season 1, episode 10.

The autistic detective is just one expression of a tendency to present the more-than-human potential of the pathological realm as a superpower, one that can be utilised only when the humanist remainder of investigative rationality is purposefully abandoned. In a later episode of *Homeland*, for example, Carrie tactically comes off her medication precisely because it annuls the productive capacity of her pathologies.[54] Yet this is true not only of how such powers are represented in television drama, but also in the narrative complexity of such shows which, although tending to demand new levels of viewer participation, also involve ceding control to a mutable 'informative truth', a truth that is only encountered after numerous twists, switches, and other moments of 'epistemological reversal'.[55] Central to these shows is the contradictory idea that posthuman subjectivity can remain intentional, that an aesthetic mode of detection can be willed, controlled, or systematised, and thereby remain a subversive force that transcends external dominance. Elsaesser argues that these protagonists, and the form of the shows in which they feature, are in fact symptomatic of the preemptive exploitation of such powers, and drama of this kind instead 'rehearses and readies the human sensorium' for the affective labour of the 21st century.[56] Nonetheless, in this subsumption and methodisation of the aesthetic, a crucial disinterestedness is lost, and it is here that we might identify the most speculative of detectives.

Exhibit C

Mr Robot (USA, 2015-present) is a complex, ambitious, and often confusing show about the mediated conditions of subjective experience under neoliberal capitalism. It ostensibly explores two kinds of conspiracy: a global cryptocracy headed by E Corp, whose invisible hand is felt in the interrelated forces of speculative finance and smart devices, and a hacktivist group whose knowledge of system protocols and network infrastructure might allow them to identify the decisive exploit, the vulnerability that will precipitate capitalism's collapse. Both are involved in a struggle for 'God access': the former determined to 'play God without permission', the latter working to hack the world-as-system through what main protagonist Elliot Alderson describes as 'the programmatic expression of my will'.[57] For Elliot, hacking is a kind of detection, a way of investigating a world replete with automated software processes that condition everyday life but remain 'gray' and recessive.[58] Yet the show explores the impossibility of the control upon which supposedly illuminating access to this grayness is premised, the impossibility of hacking without being hacked.

Elliot self-medicates in an attempt to suppress the influence of seemingly dangerous external agencies. He takes the amphetamine Adderall to eliminate the influence of 'Mr Robot', a version of his deceased father who appears to him as a result of a dissociative identity disorder. Mr Robot is not simply an image or ghost, he is an agentic force, acting through Elliot even though these actions remain largely hidden from Elliot himself. The big twist of the first season – in which it is revealed that Elliot *is* Mr Robot, and vice versa – discloses the full extent of his pathological condition, and confirms that the viewer's entire experience of his story has been mediated by a fabulatory perspective. What it also reveals is that Mr Robot serves to express a delay between action and cognition, forcing Elliot to admit that 'his' knowledge of the world is not really his at all, and that 'his' mode of being in the world is instead a result of non-conscious processes which inhabit and possess his subjectivity. Thus, Elliot's 'disorder' is simply an accelerated form of the condition experienced by all characters in the show, namely the conditioning of conscious human intelligence by a technological non-conscious, whereupon the aesthetic relations characteristic of digital culture are generated by opaque processes of mediation, processes that possess 'an *active* capacity of their own to shape or manipulate the things or people with which they come into contact'.[59] This strange 'contact at a distance'

informs the show's signature cinematography, where characters are framed with a disregard for standard compositional techniques like lead room, head room, and the rule of thirds, and are instead frequently 'short sighted', or positioned at the extremities of the frame, destabilising any normal sense of balance.

For Elliot, the drugs are a last desperate attempt to stabilise experience under the command of consciousness, a single 'I' capable of perceiving the truth of the world according to a correlation between knower and known. Yet Elliot can neither will an aesthetic encounter with the world, nor can he resist it. He is probed and provoked by his entanglement with systems that normalise paranoia and amnesia, systems of surveillance and archiving which confirm that, in the 21st century, the only kind of personality is a multiple personality. In *Mr Robot*, mania is not episodic, it does not break from an otherwise equilibrial state, it is instead the background against which all experience occurs. Elliot is forced to accept that the drug of humanist perception can wear off. He survives the crash – his 'internal fatal error' – precisely because any destructive tendencies of this 'posthuman splintering' can be productively and preemptively recuperated.[60]

This is the role of hacking in the show, superficially a subversive or transgressive act. The use of Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks, Remote Access Trojans (RATs), and various other types of malware, are aimed at corrupting or overloading computer systems, pushing them to breaking point. For Elliot, though, this point of collapse is always postponed. He seeks a truth apparently accessible by penetrating or breaking through capitalism, but something always awaits him on the other side, a force of creative destruction exemplified in the show by an imagined crypto-currency under government control, and personified by a psychopathic E Corp executive who eagerly supports the attack on his own organisation. Insofar as his processes of detection probe the threshold of the actual, and enter into intense, intimate contact with the virtual, Elliot is a neoliberal subject par excellence. In the 21st century, transgressive activity simply 'opens up new territories to appropriate, and jump-starts new processes from which to extract surplus value'.[61] As Shaviro emphasises, in a world of cultural capital, where invention power is increasingly privileged over everything else,

> nothing is more prized than excess. The further out you go, the more there is to accumulate and capitalise upon. [62]

Hence, when the second season concludes with the dramatic and stylised disclosure of a crime board, which purports to expose Elliot's hacktivist network in its totality (Figs 19, 20), this crime board is fooling no one, the illusion of a single truth is no longer convincing.[63] This is because, under the 'new contract' between viewer and what used to be called media text, clarity is displaced by enigma, and the *form* of the show is also what the show is *about*, as much as any narrative.[64] Viewing *Mr Robot* demands transmedial engagement, by way of the storyworld's extension into evolving online platforms, and in the interaction demanded by episodes themselves. In one memorable scene, Elliot – who addresses the viewer directly, as another voice in his head – appeals for help identifying clues in his apartment: 'Can you look? Do you see anything?' he asks, as the camera pans slowly from one side of the room the other.[65] As Elsaesser suggests, techniques like this test and reorganise both perceptual assumptions and attentional habits by aggravating a crisis in the usual 'spectator-screen relationship'.[66] In this context, the crime board – a reductionist network diagram that apparently resolves the show's complexity – in fact precipitates a traumatic encounter with the limits of representational knowledge. This crime board confronts the more radical implication of the show's preoccupation with unseen exteriorities, namely that agency is not only a distributed phenomenon – an assemblage of human and nonhuman forces – but also that such relations do not exist *for* humans, nor to be rendered accessible by them. There is an inherent opacity to the relationality that defines mediation itself, one that resists diagrammatic illumination.

Fig. 19: Mr Robot, season 2, episode 12.

Fig. 20: Mr Robot, season 2, episode 12.

And yet, crime boards that malfunction when confronted with epistemolog-ical limit points – crime boards that fail to diagram the truth of the world – can still provoke an encounter with truth as an emergent property, with truths that not do preexist the generative becomings in which humans and nonhumans are entangled. The fundamental impossibility of converting such encounters into a cognitive system, together with the realisation that 21st century life increasingly involves the exploitation and programming of this non-conscious realm, induces in us the very sensation McLuhan chose to bracket out in his valorisation of Poe: *terror*. It is perhaps here, in a terror induced by the speculative intensification of contemporary media ecologies,

rather than seeking to 'solve' them according to nostalgic principles and criteria, where aesthetic possibilities remain.

Closing argument

Let us review the evidence. We have heard testimony to the fact that material and cultural conditions, through which practices of aesthetic detection come to be recognisable, are generated by transformations to a capitalist media ecology. Such practices are not simply a determinate consequence of these technological conditions. Instead, by cultivating and accelerating the human's ecological entanglements – the relations from which investigative intuition and hunches have *always* emerged – new forms of power seek to exploit the value of the human's immanent outside. What escapes such capture is a growing sense of how, at least in modern times, practices of knowing and processes of becoming have been artificially separated according to the dominant image of a rational, autonomous, human subject. As this image loses its potency, established humanist certainties – the knowable truths of the world – are thrown into crisis. I have argued that a preoccupation with the crime board in popular television drama both expresses and performs such a crisis. I have also established that television crime boards do not all operate in the same way. There is a difference between those that regressively assert access to the truth in its totality, and those that treat the impossibility of such access reflexively. There is also a difference between crime boards that deny epistemological access to the material conditions from which the truth emerges, and those that support an aesthetic, posthuman practice of knowledge-making that is always a relational enactment of the material world itself. My interest here has moved toward a consideration of what these television shows might contribute to the theorisation of an aesthetic mode of knowledge, a practice of detection that is beyond systematisation, beyond cognition, beyond the investigative control of the detective.

To this end, let us conclude with the crime board assembled by detectives who are thoroughly entangled with the dynamic trajectories of contemporary media ecologies. This crime board is a 'poor image […] a visual idea in its very becoming'.[67] It is a crime board put together during investigations, typically conducted from dark and seedy hotel rooms (Figs 21, 22), which are the product of overpowering obsession, even psychosis. The poor

image is compressed, distorted, imperfect, and produced at speed – it is a crime board pieced together from inexplicable fixations and conspiratorial connections, one that fails to help make sense of the world, that offers no evidence but is instead a strange rendering of hyper-mediated conditions, a disturbing encounter with the ontological truth of contemporary capitalism.

Against the critical tendency to privilege 'quality' drama, these crime boards are just as likely to appear in trashy high concept shows that make *CSI* look nuanced by comparison. Yet as expressions of media that theorise themselves through the hyperbolic exaggeration of the present, these crime boards negate Elsaesser's dichotomous game of power and resistance, a game where such boards are only ever linked to the training of newly flexible subjects, or to defensive inurement against living more intensely with nonhuman objects, processes, and systems.[68] Instead, the figure of the cognitively paralysed and affectively bewildered detective, ensconced in his or her weird nest of paper and string, is significant precisely due to its lack of nostalgia for the coherent human subject.

Fig. 21: Legends, season 2, episode 1.

Fig. 22: American Horror Story, season 5, episode 4.

In its rejection of forensic fetishism, its rejection of humanist perspective and the cult of investigative genius, such figures admit to the impossibility of separating oneself from flows of mediation, to the impossibility of an 'outside'. These detectives undoubtedly serve as prototypes for the hyper-capitalist subject, but their investigative encounters are not entered into consciously or systematically, cannot be willed, and do not involve making claims about the truth of the world. The shows in which such characters feature demonstrate what Shaviro identifies as a crucial disinterestedness – they depict practices of detection that neither subscribe to an illusory trans-gression of limits, nor offer false hope, but instead simply expose us to the reality of a humanist image of thought in crisis.[69] For the viewer, there is a different 'quality' to such drama, a quality of terrifying yet irresistible fascination. Nothing is solved here, but exposed to such sensation we are compelled to question the findings of long established investigations, to reopen old cases.

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Notes

[1] Singleton 2014, p. 25.

[2] Rombes 2009, p. 6.

[3] McHale 1987, p. 9.

[4] Thomas 1999, pp. 2, 3.

[5] Shaviro 2010, pp. 2, 115.

[6] See Scharfe 1978, pp. 7, 19-23.

[7] McLuhan 1946, p. 623.

[8] Ibid., pp. 623, 634.

[9] Ibid., p. 634.

[10] McLuhan 2001, p. 5.

[11] McLuhan 1966, p. 90.

[12] McLuhan 2001, p. 86; 1966, p. 90.

[13] Shaviro 2009, p. 5.

[14] McLuhan in McLuhan & Zingrone 1995, p. 201. See Marchessault 2005, pp. 64-66.

[15] Shaviro 2009, p. 6.

[16] McLuhan in McLuhan & Zingrone 1995, p. 227.

[17] Ibid., p.236.

[18] McLuhan 1966, p. 91.

[19] McLuhan 1997, p. 7; 2001, pp. 38, 56.

[20] McLuhan 1966, p. 92.

[21] Marchand 1989, p. 68.

[22] Thomas 1999, p. 2.

[23] See e.g. Elsaesser 2008, p. 19.

[24] Shaviro 2016, pp. 12-14.

[25] Shaviro 2009, p. 4.

[26] Elsaesser 2009, p. 26.

[27] Durnal 2010.

[28] Weizman 2014, pp. 31, n.7.

[29] Byers & Johnson 2009, p. xiv.

[30] Vernallis 2013, p. 707.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid., p. 709.

[34] Steyerl 2012, p. 24.

[35]   Shaviro 2014, pp. 48-49.

[36]   Toscano & Kinkle 2015, p. 152.

[37]   Ibid.

[38]   Jagoda 2016, p. 122.

[39]   Bignell 2007, pp. 169-170.

[40]   Barad 2007, p. 88.

[41]   *Homeland* 1:11.

[42]   *Homeland* 1:12.

[43]   E.g. *Homeland* 1:2.

[44]   *Homeland* 1:12.

[45]   Wolfowitz cited in Kean et al. 2004, pp. 559, n. 75.

[46]   Kean et al. 2004, p. 344.

[47]   Elsaesser 2009, p. 26.

[48]   Shaviro 2015, pp. 27-31.

[49]   Manning 2013, p. 150.

[50]   Shaviro 2016, p. 60.

[51]   Barad 2007, p. 379.

[52]   Manning 2013, p. 8.

[53]   In *The Bridge* (FX, 2013-14), the American iteration of Saga identifies the key file almost imme-
       diately. Here, 'autistic' sensibility simply equals newly efficient rationality.

[54]   *Homeland* 5:3.

[55]   Galloway 2006, p. 94.

[56]   Elsaesser 2009, p. 33.

[57]   *Mr Robot* 1:1, *Mr Robot* 2:5.

[58]   Fuller & Goffey 2012.

[59]   Ibid., p. 5.

[60]   *Mr Robot* 2:3. Shaviro 2016, p. 161.

[61]   Shaviro 2015, p. 31.

[62]   Ibid., p. 32.

[63]   Shaviro 2009, p. 15.

[64]   Elsaesser 2009, p. 37.

[65]   *Mr Robot* 2:10.

[66]   Elsaesser 2009, p. 38.

[67]   Steyerl 2012, p. 32.

[68]   Elsaesser 2009, p. 39.

[69]   Shaviro 2015, p. 39.