



Tall Tales and Truth Claims

The Forms and Functions of True Crime Stories in Crime Discourse

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Introduction

Most people have come across some form of the opening statement 'Based on a true story', which has been used to frame many kinds of entertainment ranging from horror movies to documentaries and books. In today's media climate, this statement is perhaps especially pervasive when it comes to the true crime genre's stories about deviance, victimization, and punishment. However, as a form of entertainment, true crime content is curated and edited based on entertainment values, and the extent of truth behind the stories is often difficult for the average viewer to confirm. As such, the genre's popularity might have less to do with to what extent true crime is *actually true*, and more to do with the fact that it is *framed as true*. Departing from this distinction, this paper ponders how the more-or-less-true crime genre might relate to broader questions of crime (policy) discourse.

I dedicated my PhD research project to exploring how horror iconography shapes the narratives available in commercially published prison autobiographies (Fredriksson 2021). Like any autobiography, prison autobiographies are marketed as true. However, it is most likely the *idea* of them being true that intrigues their readers, since it is more or less impossible for readers to ascertain the extent of the novel's truthfulness (cf. Valier 2002, p.321). While prison autobiographies are considered as true accounts of prison life, they are also a commercialized form of entertainment (especially the ones that are picked up by publishing houses, and/or turned into movies). This process of editing, publishing, and marketing a novel brings inevitable layers of fictionalization to what might have started as a true account (Cecil 2015). Moreover, these novels are not only fictionalized but also gothicized, which is evidenced by their reliance on gothic themes, tropes, and iconography (e.g. dungeons, darkness, and monsters). This has led me to consider the broader implications of the true crime phenomenon and its seemingly inherent reliance on horror conventions (Cecil 2015).

During the years I have studied prison autobiographies, public interest in true crime seems to have increased, both in the Nordic region and elsewhere: an unending amount of true crime content from across the globe has crept into today's streaming services, and increasing amounts of conversations on



the topic can be found all over social media. With that in mind, while this essay springs from a study of prison autobiographies, this discussion deals with the true crime phenomenon that houses them more broadly.

With some exceptions, the true crime genre is a sensationalist, shock-and-horror oriented format, often featuring individualistic, hyper-masculine, and alarmist narratives. Moreover, many of the stories within this genre are told from punitive, uncritical perspectives (e.g. by uncritically constructing the police's descriptions of events as true, while framing convicted people as untrustworthy), or told in ways that sensationalize and glorify (male) violence as the result of cunning or even genius-rather than in ways that problematize the shortcomings of the police work surrounding their cases (consider, for example, the tone of many documentaries and films about e.g. Ted Bundy or Jeffrey Dahmer). In addition to often lacking critical perspectives and problematizing discussions, conversations both in- and about true crime often lack reflections on how true crime content exists in a grey area, where fact and fiction merge and become difficult to separate (Valier 2002). Focusing on these broader implications of true crime, this essay functions as a space for discussing the ubiquity of gothic horror tropes within the true crime genre, and as a space for considering how the increasing popularity of globally produced true crime content might fit into more specific questions of Nordic crime discourse.

1. True? Crime?

The ways societies make sense of questions of crime and punishment is largely communicated through different types of media and (popular) culture (Carrabine 2008). Moreover, how certain actions become considered as crimes depends on collective ideas about (un)desirability. A historical perspective on legislation unveils how crimes phase in and out of existence and are taken more or less seriously across time (while the *actions themselves*, of course, can remain largely the same) (Garland 1990; Tham 2018).

Studies have suggested that gothic tropes help articulate the governing ideas about who and what is undesirable and should be criminalized, and in what ways (see e.g. Higgins & Swartz 2018; Sothcott 2016; Rafter & Ystehede 2010; Valier 2002). If concepts of criminality are articulated through gothicism, it is perhaps unsurprising that studies of the emergence of infotainment and true crime have observed a link between these genres and the gothic as well. For example, Valier notes that »Gothicism is a powerful set of conventions that codes the reconfiguration of boundaries between the legal and the extra-legal, and between the public and private spheres, and in which the politics of the new terrain of infotainment are played out« (2002, p.333). This shows how true crime ought to be regarded as a fictionalized as well as a gothicized genre, existing in the space *between* the factual and the fictional. It is a narrative



space where boundaries between the real and imagined, as well as politics and spectacles, become blurred and reshaped.

The exploration of true crime as a gothicized genre is a project for cultural, visual, and narrative criminological methodologies. As narrative criminologists have pointed out, »stories are very much about creating boundaries between self and others« (Sandberg & Ugelvik 2016, p.132). Few genres of storytelling have paid as much attention to boundaries (and their collapse) as the Gothic (Botting 2014; Chaplin 2011). As such, to explore the interplay of infotainment, criminology, and the Gothic, we must decide on what we mean by gothic. As Valier stated above, gothicism is »a powerful set of conventions« (2002, p.333). Since this essay deals with true crime as a genre, I will limit my scope to gothicism as a set of genre conventions here. These include settings that are dark, desolate, and dreary; characters that are strange, ghostly, and threatening; narrative frames like found manuscripts or found film footage to bolster a sense of real-world immediacy; and plots that are unsettling, frightening, or even outright gory. Imprisonment is a common theme in gothic storytelling, be it in dungeons, asylums, attics, basements, or actual prisons. The trope of damsels in distress (who are often, but not exclusively, women) is common as well, as are the monsters that assail them and the (generally masculine) heroes who save them. Studies of gothic fiction have pointed out time and time again how gothic narratives express a discourse of fear and disgust related to various, and shifting, socially undesirable traits (e.g. Khair 2015). What the gothic is about, in other words, is largely the same as what legal discourse and crime policies are about: normalcy, deviance, and how to define, punish, and banish said deviance.

Next, an exploration of true crime also necessitates a critical engagement with what we mean by, and expect from, truth in a social sense. While we are all familiar with some form of the opening statement 'Based on a true story', we are equally familiar with feeling suspicious of it. Sometimes the phrase is sincere, and sometimes just added for flavour. The story has barely just begun and already, we are at a loss: is this a representation of real-world events, or is the story just in line with the gothic convention of the found manuscript (cf. Chaplin 2011)? And even in documentary efforts, where the fact themselves check out, the average viewer cannot know how much the story is framed for sincerity and how much it is framed for suspense. This actualizes a socio-political layer, since it raises questions about who speaks about whom or what, in what way, and whether or not they are critiqued or questioned when they do. Who do we believe tells the truth, whose stories do we find worthy of (re)telling, and in what way? The true crime phenomenon, then, is an arena that actualizes Becker's famous question (1967): whose side are we on? Some voices are amplified and/or distorted when stories are told and re-told across books, podcasts, blogs, films, and TV-series, while others are not heard at all or are actively silenced. In an era of social media, misinformation, 'shadow



bans', and 'fake news', these issues become both more pressing and more sociologically intriguing.

2. Gothicism and Fear of Crime

Given the affinity gothic tropes and themes have with (Northern & Western) legal and crime policy discourses (Sothcott 2016; Surette 2007; Swalve & DeFoster 2016), true crime is a gothicized genre both in terms of form and in terms of content. The importance of studying true crime stories, then, lies in the question of (i) how (ii) what stories are told (and popularized). Whose stories are worth sharing, and how are they framed? From whose point of view? What underlying assumptions about viewer or reader allegiances are made in order for these stories to make sense as entertainment? All in all, these are questions about the discourse that true crime fits into. This discourse, moreover, is arguably globalized as well as regional. It is also home to many levels of commentary: true crime content can be produced and spread by a range of creators, ranging from amateurs to professionals. Through today's broad selection of streaming services for anything from books to podcasts to film, true crime content is both produced and consumed across and between regions as well as different levels and types of knowledge production. With all of this in mind, there is reason to explore how both international and more regional true crime content fits into the Nordic regions' broader crime policy discourse. For example, studies have shown that the media coverage and socio-political concerns about crime that we encounter in our formative years influence what crimes we fear later on in life (Gray et al. 2019). In today's media landscape, different types of crime are discussed simultaneously, across a broad range of documentary and infotainment content that maintains a truth claim akin to that of news reports while largely conveying these claims through the horror iconography of gothicity and horroresque entertainment. As such, it might be worthwhile to investigate how the true crime genre's rise in popularity correlates with both contemporary and future fears and anxieties about crime.

3. Truth Claims and Public Criminology

Calls for harsher punishments have spread across Nordic public crime policy debates in recent years, and this trend shows no signs of slowing down today (e.g. Hermansson 2019; Tham 2018). This seems to coincide with an increased public access to and interest in true crime content. I am not one to argue that exposure to certain types of media causes certain opinions or behaviours. However, these trends might be part of the same discursive shift regarding



how societies feel about and make sense of crime and punishment in the Nordic region.

The question of the social work true crime content performs in society-and to what extent it relies on fictional and gothic tropes to do so-is important because of the genre's inherent truth claim. It is also important because it shows how contemporary times are, in a sense, gothic times. The prevalence and popularity of dreary, miserable infotainment speaks to the state of our social world. Moreover, even when core parts of the story are true, *how the story is told* goes a long way towards unveiling underlying assumptions and ideologies. For instance, sensationalist content that vilifies people convicted or suspected of crimes, while not criticizing the authorities or legal systems that put them there, speaks to Becker's hierarchy of credibility (1967). As such, the true crime phenomenon can tell us a lot about normative thinking about (un)just punishment, especially when true crime content is created for and marketed towards broad audiences (e.g. when it is made by national public-service outlets or made to sell well).

4. Going forward

It might seem like a stretch to derive policy implications from a genre study. However, given the increasing popularity of true crime in recent years, there might be reasons to consider some. Ending on questions rather than answers, I will conclude this essay with some thoughts about what might be useful for future studies as well as for future ways of communicating research to the public. For instance, public perceptions of deviance and suitable punishment might shift in different ways depending on how opinions become mis/informed and mis/shaped by true crime content. Going forward, it might be worthwhile to investigate whether an increased public interest in true crime stories correlates with changes in that public's stance on punishment, and if so, in what direction. In the long run, how might the stories we tell about real harm (and the ways we tell them) impact how we, as a society, think, feel, and legislate when it comes to criminalization and punishment? Does an interest in tall tales lead to tall orders being placed on punitive measures? Or does it encourage critical perspectives in the general public? Arguably, well-informed, critical perspectives is what we would hope for. Then should we, as criminologists, engage with true crime storytelling in order to offer less sensationalist, shock-and-horror oriented narratives? This field of knowledge production could benefit from criminological findings and insights. For instance, critical and compassionate true crime content might perform similar functions to the vignettes and follow-up discussions in Balvig et al.'s study (2015), where increased knowledge about criminal cases and the people involved in them made respondents less likely to argue in favour of harsher punishments. This speaks to ongoing discussions about public criminology



(Henne & Shah 2020; Loader & Sparks 2013), and what universities' role could and should be vis-à-vis the public, outside of our classrooms. Maybe bringing criminological research to a broader audience through the true crime medium is something we ought to consider (albeit, perhaps, reluctantly)-both for the sake of spreading research findings in new ways outside university walls, and for the sake of nuancing the truth claim-narrative in what is otherwise an often alarmist, uncritical, and punitive arena.

About the Author

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