

How to watch police shows in the age of Black Lives Matter

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The crime genre glorifies police violence, but should we ban such shows, or reappraise them with a critical eye?



A still from US reality TV show Cops, which has been pulled after 32 series. Photograph: Bryan R Smith/AFP/Getty Images

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In a 2017 episode of Brooklyn Nine-Nine, the acclaimed police comedy show, Sergeant Terry Jeffords (played by Terry Crews) is racially profiled while walking in his own neighbourhood. He later tells his captain, Raymond Holt (played by Andre Braugher), who is also black, that he wants to lodge a complaint. Captain Holt responds that he should not; doing so will make it difficult for him to advance in the NYPD, which comes with the prospect of making an even bigger change. This is also the route, Holt explains, that he took: he endured years of abuse as the only black, gay detective to become police captain so that he might make the NYPD less racist and anti-queer. In

either case, the culprit is clear: racism in the NYPD. The solution is equally clear: change from within.

This is one of the more progressive of the crime genre's Black Lives Matter episodes, by which I mean those episodes that were clearly written in response to the movement, which started in 2013, against a racist state and state-sponsored violence. Consider, for instance, the 2015 episode of *CSI: Cyber* in which the protagonists respond to a video of the police shooting an unarmed black man, only to discover that the cops did not kill him, absolving them of all guilt. (Other shows with BLM episodes include *Law and Order*, *Chicago PD* and more.) By contrast, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* seems radical.

Yet even this episode of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* disseminates the myth that there are good cops and bad cops, and that if there are enough good cops, the police will no longer kill us. This belief that police reform will end racist violence dates at least as far back as the 1950s, as political scientist Naomi Murakawa documents in *The First Civil Right*. It also runs counter to the demands to defund the police in cities across the United States and divert resources to useful ends, such as social work and healthcare. Even the best copaganda can't bring itself to ask for less investment in the police, let alone to limit its power.

The crime genre's general support of police has led some thinkers and writers to condemn such shows. In *Color of Change's* report *Normalizing Injustice*, Rashad Robinson writes, in the foreword: "The crime genre glorifies, justifies and normalises the systematic violence and injustice meted out by police, making heroes out of police and prosecutors who engage in abuse, particularly against people of colour." Consequently, the report recommends that crime shows ought to address state, and state-sponsored, racism and to hire more diverse staff with a wider variety of experiences of the prison

industrial complex, among other things. The industry on the whole, the report continues, should develop new standards for the crime genre and hold show-runners accountable for producing racist shows.

Other writers and thinkers have begun to wonder if cultural reform is possible, or whether the crime genre is racist by nature. Writing for the *Washington Post*, Alyssa Rosenberg agrees with *Color of Change's* recommendations but also suggests that networks should stop making cop shows and movies altogether. Somewhat surprisingly, network executives seem to agree. After 32 seasons, Paramount has finally cancelled *Cops*, the famously violent, voyeuristic show that splices together documentary footage of real-life policing. The mood-change on the streets, in other words, may be coming to our screens.

While I have neither an attachment to the crime genre nor any qualms with cancelling all such shows, I do think there is another option: viewing these shows critically and educating others to do the same. Just as the journalist and scholar Joan Morgan argued that feminists can listen to hip-hop without accepting or reproducing its sexism, so, too, can audiences watch the crime genre while rejecting its racist premises.

Consider, for instance, James Baldwin's writing about the famous 1967 cop film, *In The Heat of the Night*. The film stars Sidney Poitier as a Philadelphia detective working on a case in Mississippi, who is subjected to racism from the locals and from his white partner while solving a crime. The racist partner eventually comes to respect Poitier; the force may be anti-black, the film admits, but one good black detective in pursuit of justice is enough to change the mind of one white racist and, perhaps, the world. After Baldwin notes all the ways in which the movie was wildly implausible, he writes, "a black man, in any case, had certainly best not believe everything he sees in the movies".

We need to teach more viewers to be like Baldwin because the troubling beliefs upholding the prison industrial complex are not just limited to the crime genre. Many 20th-century African-American novels, for instance, upheld and disseminated the myth that police violence only affects black *men*. In *The Long Dream* (1958), Richard Wright represents such violence as castration, while Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1951) gives no attention to the historical incident of police violence against Margie Polite in its representation of the Harlem riot of 1943, which Polite's treatment sparked. A careful reader with a little knowledge of history, however, knows that the police also persecuted black women such as Jessie Mae Robinson, to say nothing of many others. Critical reading and viewing, in other words, can succeed even where popular culture fails.

To better interrogate cultural material about the police, people need to be better educated about them, as well as about what police and prison abolition means: uprooting the prison industrial complex and producing new systems to keep people safe and hold people accountable. For those looking for a place to start, read black feminist scholars and activists such as Beth Richie, Mariame Kaba, and Andrea Ritchie, who have revealed the police's racist, sexist, and anti-queer distribution of violence. And read Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, whose work on abolition has made it possible to imagine a world without the prison industrial complex, a world other than the one that crime shows insist we must live in. After you've done so, regardless of whether or not you laugh at the episode of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, you'll know not to believe everything you see.

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