TELEVISION CRITIQUE:

Criminal Minds and George Gerbner’s

Concept of Mean World Syndrome

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George Gerbner believed that while violence on television did not directly impact a person’s behavior, it did have a far more nefarious impact on society as a whole. This believe led to the development of his idea that “heavy television viewing cultivates a response” causes Mean World Syndrome (MWS), which essentially means that a society exposed so incessantly to violent television drama leads to the belief that the world is more dangerous than it is in reality (Hanson, 2016). Even more prevalent than the violence reported on the nightly news is a host of crime drama television programming like the myriad of *Law and Order* series, *Dexter,* *Breaking Bad,* *CSI* and its variants, *Bones*, *Sons of Anarchy* and the like. *Criminal Minds* is just one among many, and is a long-standing crime drama series that plays on network television and feeds directly into Gerbner’s idea of Mean World Syndrome.

Every episode of the wildly popular crime drama, *Criminal Minds*, revolves around an intensely heinous crime or, more likely, a series of heinous crimes committed by some sociopath, psychopath or any otherwise insanely dark criminal(s). Suffice to say, this show is not about normal street crimes like theft or domestic dispute, but rather criminal behavior so horrific that one wonders what kind of mind comes up with these plotlines. The shows’ protagonists are the uncommonly good-looking members of the Behavioral Analysis Unit (BAU), based out of Quantico, VA and comprise “an elite group of profilers who analyze the nation's most dangerous criminal minds in an effort to anticipate their next moves before they strike again (IMDB, 2015).”

*Criminal Minds* is a widely available show for audiences. It is in its 11th season, is in syndication on cable network stations, available via box sets off DVDs, streaming from CBS, and available via various other streaming media outlets. One could very easily immerse themselves completely in this one show for hours and hours which would make for some very heavy viewing. The content is dark and depicts the absolute worst crimes of humanity including rape, murder, kidnaping, torture, pedophilia, molestation, dismemberment, and the list goes on and on. Oh, and the audience loves every second and has for 11 seasons, which further indicates heavy viewing in the sheer popularity of the show. George Gerbner’s concept of Mean World Syndrome (MWS) indicates that this show and shows like it impact the viewer’s perception of the society in which they live as more dangerous than it actually is in reality. That somehow, *Criminal Minds*, perpetuates the belief that people in the world are not to be trusted and that anything beyond the threshold of your own front door is inherently dangerous. So, instead of going out and experiencing life, viewers choose to stay inside and watch shows about how horrible it really isn’t out there!

"This kind of television viewing can lead to 'mean world syndrome" where people start to think about the world as a scary place," contends Sparks. "Some people develop a fear of victimization, and this belief can affect their feelings of comfort and security (TV Crime Dramas Skew Perception of System, 2009)." This quote comes from a USA Today Magazine article based on a quantitative study conducted by Glenn Sparks and Sarah Sarapin on The Effects of Crime-Drama TV Watching on Mock Jurors in a Murder Trial. The article goes on to point out Sarapin’s belief that "many people die as a result of being murdered in these types of shows, and we found that heavy television-crime viewers estimate two-and-a-half times more real-world deaths due to murder than nonviewers (TV Crime Dramas Skew Perception of System, 2009)." In that sense, *Criminal Minds*, contributes to the belief that murder is much more commonplace in the real world than what current statistics indicate.

*Criminal Minds* explores the very depths of fictional human depravity and yet through the members of the BAU, allows the audience to connect with the interpersonal relationships depicted. The show often enacts some of the very violent threats upon the characters that the audience has developed a fondness for, which serves to further perpetuate the belief that violence is a very real and dangerous part of everyday life. When these crime-fighters and beloved characters become the very targets of these criminals and their deeply dark intentions, the story now becomes more real to the audience as they have spent a great deal of time investing in relating to those characters. The audience does not (one would hope) connect with the maniacal killers that come and go from episode to episode. The audience is rarely given a chance to identify with the victim either, unless the intent is to ultimately have the BAU rescue them. On the other hand, when a member of the BAU becomes the target or victim, the crime becomes all the more real to the audience.

In many instances, crime dramas are based on some real circumstance, organization, or scenario, which lends credibility and realism to the show, making it all too visceral to the viewer. The BAU is real. Not in the sense that it exists on the fictional *Criminal Minds*, but it exists and it exists in four parts; 1) counterterrorism, arson and bombing matters, 2) threats, cyber, white collar crime and public corruption, 3) crimes against children, and 4) crimes against adults. These units fall under the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime as a division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Critical Incident Response Group, 2015). This information is readily found on the FBI’s website. Until the inception of *Criminal Minds*, the general public was likely not so cognizant of the existence of such an organization or its mission parameters. *Criminal Minds* serves not only to expose their audience to the kinds of criminal acts these units are investigating, but to take liberties in how they go about these investigations and the pursuit of the fictional perpetrators of such crimes.

Mostly, though, *Criminal Minds* is about entertaining an audience who, over the years have made crime dramas some of the most popular forms of entertainment on television. *Criminal Minds* is only one in an impressive lineup of shows all too eager to feed into the fears and insecurities of a society captivated by violent brutality and depravity. Gerbner began the development for his idea, Mean World Syndrome, through studies conducted in 1967 (Hanson, 2016). Other scholars have picked up on his studies and continued them throughout the years, but it would be an interesting comparative analysis to study the difference between violence on television in 1967 to the levels of violence on current television and the impacts on social interaction and interpersonal relationships.

# REFERENCES

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