CSI
DEREK KOMPAIRE
Praise for CSI

“This book acutely ‘follows the evidence’ of CSI’s spectacle, setting, and seriality. Unusually for academic work, Derek Kompare also pays close attention to the show’s developing characters. Careful, subtle, intelligent; Kompare takes CSI seriously not just as a brand, but as classic American television.”

*Matt Hills, Cardiff University*

“Kompare shows that we should take CSI seriously as a dense and fascinating example of American popular culture which has appealed to millions of viewers over ten seasons and established itself as the most important network franchise of its time.”

*Roberta Pearson, University of Nottingham*
Wiley-Blackwell Studies in Film and Television
Series Editors: Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker

Experienced media studies teachers know that real breakthroughs in the classroom are often triggered by texts that an austere notion of the canon would disqualify. Unlike other short book series, Wiley-Blackwell Studies in Film and Television works from a broad field of prospective film and television programs, selected less for their adherence to definitions of “art” than for their resonance with audiences. From Top Hat to Hairspray, from early sitcoms to contemporary forensic dramas, the series encompasses a range of film and television material that reflects diverse genres, forms, styles, and periods. The texts explored here are known and recognized worldwide for their ability to generate discussion and debate about evolving media industries as well as, crucially, representations and conceptualizations of gender, class, citizenship, race, consumerism, and capitalism, and other facets of identity and experience. This series is designed to communicate these themes clearly and effectively to media studies students at all levels while also introducing groundbreaking scholarship of the very highest caliber. These are the films and shows we really want to watch, the new “teachable canon” of alternative classics that range from silent film to CSI.
Contents

List of Figures vi
Acknowledgments ix

Introduction: Why CSI Matters 1
1. Science, Spectacle, and Storytelling 8
2. What Happens in CSI’s Vegas 36
3. Finding Balance: Professionalism in Serial Narrative 55
4. CSI Effects 80

Conclusion 102
Appendix: CSI Episode Guide, 2000–9 105
Notes 129
References 135
Index 137
List of Figures

Crime and investigation: Catherine and Grissom investigate a dead body in a Strip hotel room 11
Teamwork: Sara and Nick discuss a case as they walk through the crime labs 13
Arriving at the scene: Catherine and Grissom search for clues late at night on a desert highway 27
Investigation: Sara and Warrick piece together the chain of events in a road accident 29
Investigation: Warrick attempts to match a blown-up film image of the Stratosphere Tower to the view from a dilapidated hotel room, in order to find the scene of the crime 29
Transparent science and justice: Sara and Hodges discuss evidence in the lab 31
The autopsy room: Grissom and Doc Robbins diagnose the cause of death (COD) 32
The interrogation room: Catherine and Brass confront the suspicious parents of a dead child 33
The Strip, in nocturnal glory 40
Death in Sin City: Grissom and Brass at another apparent murder in a Strip hotel 43
Sam Braun, icon of Old Vegas, keeping secrets from Catherine 50
Death in the Wilderness: Grissom, Catherine, and Brass at a triple murder scene in the Mojave Desert 52
Death in the Wilderness: Grissom studies a headless body buried up to its shoulders in a remote forest 53
Soulmates, or kindred intellects?: Grissom and Lady Heather get intimate 61
Through one-way glass, Sara sees Grissom obliquely confess his feelings for her 62
Searching for “the rush”: Catherine searching for an incriminating frame of film 65
Fleeting connection: Catherine and Warrick share an (almost) intimate moment, helping fuel fan speculation about their unrequited passions 68
Tenacity: Sara investigates every scrap of evidence at the scene of the accident 70
Focus: Warrick tests a ladder for blood traces 72
Empathy: Nick calmly gets a teen boy to confess to masturbation, in order to account for traces of semen found on a shirt in the suspect’s house 75
Exuberance: Greg triumphantly shows off an incriminating evidence sample 77
Reality/fiction: Technical consultant and former criminalist Elizabeth Devine displays real lab equipment on the CSI set, like this polarized light microscope 94
Watching the detectives: Catherine and Grissom encounter a reality TV camera crew 96
Mediated justice: Brass, Grissom and Warrick meet the press after the arrest of Hollywood star Tom Havilland 97
LIST OF FIGURES

Public justice: Greg faces the media after the mixed findings of the coroner’s inquest which ruled the death of Demetrius James “excusable” 100

Forensic science on trial: Warrick is cross-examined about a knife found in a defendant’s car 101
Researching and writing about an individual, though long-running, television show has been a particular challenge, and I am very grateful to those who have assisted me along the way.

First, I cannot thank enough the series editors, Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, for their support and guidance throughout this process. Their understanding, encouragement, and comments helped provide a supportive environment throughout its development, and ultimately made this a stronger book. Similarly, I must thank Wiley-Blackwell’s acquisition editor Jayne Fargnoli for introducing me to this book series, and for her support of all of its titles.

I am grateful to the Division of Cinema-Television and the Meadows School of the Arts at Southern Methodist University for allowing me a research leave that enabled me to thoroughly research *CSI* and begin writing this book. The time spent researching crime fiction and the history of Las Vegas, and viewing and annotating each episode was immeasurably valuable, and I am thankful for this academic support. This research work has also led me to create a new course on crime television, so my SMU students are already getting a return on their investment!

I must also acknowledge the unconditional support of my family: my children Ben and Rose, and especially my wife Sally, for putting up with my obsessive viewing routines and persistent work schedule for many months. Similarly, I thank my brother John for hosting me in Las Vegas for several days, and showing me around many facets of this fascinating city. Creative projects are shared not only by those who
create, but also by those who live with the creators, and I am thankful that they have allowed me to share it with them.

Despite what one may think, an extensive analysis of a long-running TV series is not necessarily a pleasurable experience. Thus, I would also like to tip my hat to the cast and crew of *CSI*, for inciting my interest in this intriguing series nine years ago, and consistently delivering on its promise in surprising and rewarding ways for over 200 episodes. It has indeed been a pleasure, and I hope this study can contribute to an appreciation and understanding of this engrossing, classic and popular (yet still relatively overlooked) series.
Introduction
Why CSI Matters

Bodies tell a story because we interpret them the way our predecessors taught us to. Just because we don’t see something we’re supposed to see doesn’t mean that it’s not there.

(Grissom, 2.3, “Overload”)

On the surface, CSI: Crime Scene Investigation (CBS, 2000–) appears nearly identical to the dozens of crime-based television dramas that preceded it. A murder has apparently occurred. The police investigate. The crime is solved. The guilty are brought to justice. The pattern is well entrenched in popular culture, and particularly on TV. However, as chief crime scene investigator Gil Grissom tells his team of criminalists (science-trained forensic investigators, also known as CSIs) we must look more closely at the available evidence. What seemed obvious at first is now thick with meaning and mystery. A murder has apparently occurred . . . but why is the blood spatter on the walls from someone else? The police investigate . . . spending as much time in the lab as on the street. The crime is solved . . . only after the painstaking processing of a wide array of evidence, from crushed cars to human DNA. The guilty are caught . . . but they have yet to be tried in court. CSI takes the formula of classic detective fiction, extending from literature to television, and injects it with conspicuous spectacle and style, creating a contemporary mythos of science and the law, and entralling tens of millions of regular viewers.

However, despite its great cultural and industrial success over the past decade, CSI has never been much of a critical darling. While it
has rarely met with outright derision, it is widely regarded as workmanlike, and considered the epitome of unchallenging, “by-the-numbers” television in some quarters. As Steven Cohan points out in his monograph on the series, CSI “has not achieved high visibility as either a critical favorite or cult show” (2008: 4). Indeed, the term “another CSI” has become a euphemism for broadcast network conservatism, in much the same way “another Mad Men” has indicated the opposite quality, that is, cable network innovation. Such dismissive treatment sells the series far short, denying its formal and ideological achievements, as well as its pleasures. While the series is indeed “formulaic” (to take one common epithet), that formula is itself a rich, deep text, built upon a long history of spectacle, crime fiction, and melodrama, and a more contemporary tableau of high technology, excessive style, and professional ethics. The dismissal of CSI ignores how even mainstream, crowd-pleasing television is a complex dance of many factors, and fails to understand its impact on television and popular culture more broadly in the 2000s. I am not arguing that CSI is important only because it is watched by tens of millions of people every Thursday night; rather, I believe it is important because it is one of the decade’s most formally intriguing and influential cultural texts. It has not topped many critics’ lists, won Emmys (though it has been nominated), nor (until recently, at least) attracted much scholarly attention, but it has undoubtedly changed the standards and expectations of procedural drama and televisual style, and has contributed to public debates about science, technology, professionalism, and criminal justice.

As it happens, it is also one of television’s most consistently engaging series. While The Sopranos (HBO, 1999–2007), Lost (ABC, 2004–10), The Wire (HBO, 2002–8), Battlestar Galactica (Sci-Fi, 2003–9), and Mad Men (AMC, 2007–) have had to function with stratospheric narrative and stylistic expectations with virtually every new episode, CSI has quietly (or as quietly as a top-five series can get) dominated its more modest terrain: episodic detective stories, with a touch of horror, comedy, melodrama, and serialized professional and personal angst. Ten years on, while it may have slipped up on occasion (e.g., Nick’s season six haircut), it continues to deliver on its promise.
At points in long runs where other series are generally exhausted, *CSI* has mined new veins of drama and spectacle. The fact that its seventh season (2006–7) is arguably its best speaks volumes for its consistency in this regard. Moreover, it has done this with largely the same creative team it started out with a decade ago.

As a popular and formally dense text, *CSI* thus challenges our assumptions about the role and power of mass-appeal television in the “post-network” era of the 2000s, as narrowcast channels and programming have commanded most critical and industrial attention. The dominant trend in both mainstream and academic television criticism during this time has been towards what may be regarded as “art TV”: programs which have garnered critical attention – and small, loyal, and (not unimportantly) affluent audiences – precisely for their divergence from “typical” television conventions. As HBO’s famous slogan put it, these are programs that are somehow “not TV.” While there are certainly antecedents for both such programming and such critical attention (such as *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993–9), *Twin Peaks* (1990–1) or even the MTM dramas of the 1980s), the current cycle arguably begins with HBO’s *The Sopranos* in 1999, a morally and aesthetically complex drama about a New Jersey mobster and his colleagues and family. The critical success of the series inspired the development of similarly audacious serial dramas throughout the 2000s, including, among many others throughout broadcast and cable television, HBO’s *Six Feet Under* (2001–5), FX’s *The Shield* (2002–8), ABC’s *Lost*, and Sci-Fi’s *Battlestar Galactica*. Each of these series has been taken up by both journalistic and academic critics as examples of the medium’s maturation, and even as evidence of a new television “golden age.”

The emphasis in much of this academic criticism has been on the television text, that is, on the formal qualities of programs (and particularly on their narrative styles). While this move has certainly enriched our understanding of television form, it has also separated criticism a bit from an approach that focuses on how television functions as *popular culture*, that is, as media that successfully connects with sizable populations by resonating with its interests and identities. However, as the development of television drama, in particular, thus far in the twenty-first century has indicated, “popular television” is an increasingly ambiguous
concept. Audience fragmentation has greatly diminished popular television’s ceiling – its largest audience. As recently as the mid-1990s, the top-rated series on American TV (like NBC’s long-running ER) could command over 40 million viewers a week. By the end of the 2000s, the top-rated show on TV, Fox’s American Idol, typically drew around 20 million viewers. Put another way, American Idol, the most-watched show on American television, is a series that over 90% of Americans never watch. Moreover, while ratings are certainly not a transparent indicator of a series’ popular success, they are still the primary currency upon which the television industry revolves. The ceiling and floor of acceptable ratings may have both lowered over the past 20 years, but the name of the game is still getting more viewers (and particularly more 18–49 year old viewers) than the other channels. Increasingly, however, the ratings are only one industrial and cultural measure of how a series is faring. Programs may also be gauged by how they are recorded and played back on DVRs, viewed on on-demand channels or streaming network (or licensed) websites, downloaded (legitimately or not), and sold on DVD. In addition, as Jonathan Gray (2010) argues, the paratexts of a program – its surrounding promotional materials, ancillary products, fan discourses, and critical coverage – may also extend its ostensible “popularity” even wider and/or deeper.

By any of these industrial measures, CSI is clearly popular television. At the time of this writing, it has been a top 10 network series for each of its 10 seasons, a top five series for eight seasons, and was the top-rated series on TV for two consecutive seasons (2002–4), drawing over 26 million weekly viewers at its peak. It has inspired two high-rated and long-running spinoffs (CSI: Miami [CBS, 2002–], and CSI: NY [CBS, 2004–]), and has reshaped the CBS prime-time schedule in its image. Its reruns continue to draw viewers on cable networks and broadcast stations, and its DVDs continue to be purchased by fans. It has prolonged and expanded the forensic investigation subgenre on reality TV, on programs like Cold Case Files (1999–) and Forensic Files (1996–). Off the screen, it has inspired licensed museum exhibits, novels, comic books, video games, and even old-school pinball machines. Simply put, CSI is, by industry standards, the most successful dramatic television franchise of the past decade.