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Level: Grades 9-11

About the Author

Adapted, with permission, from a unit developed by Mark Zamparo, an Ottawa-based media educator

Introduction

Crime Drama Teaching Units (Including Crime Drama Lesson Plan)

Overview

This unit on crime-based television shows explores the aesthetic, structural and commercial underpinnings of crime dramas and reality-based cop shows. The four lessons, which are listed at right, include:

- A crime quiz to help students to understand the difference between real life and the reality portrayed in crime dramas and reality-based cop shows.
- A lesson about viewing crime dramas that helps students understand how stereotypes and technical devices in crime dramas affect real life attitudes and perceptions.
- A lesson about the scripting process to help students understand crime show plot formulas and structures.
- A lesson where students analyze the differences between Canadian and American crime shows.

Learning Outcomes

Students will demonstrate:

- An understanding of the commercial and ideological implications in crime dramas and reality-based cop shows.
- An appreciation of the aesthetic elements of the crime drama and reality-based television genres.
- An understanding of the process involved in creating and producing television shows.

Key Concepts

There are several key media concepts that students should understand in approaching this unit.

1. Crime shows are constructed realities, responding to the demands of the market, the needs of advertisers, and the requirements of the drama itself.
2. Crime shows construct versions of reality that will sell shows.
3. Crime shows contain commercial lifestyle and product messages.
4. Crime shows embody values and ideologies such as the acceptance of authority; violence as a means of solving problems; the cause of crime as an individual responsibility; and the nature of crime as violent acts by young people.
5. Crime shows have their own formulas and language: the chase, the solution, the criminal with negative appeal.

Crime shows can be enjoyed and appreciated through knowledge of their patterns and an aesthetic appreciation of the visuals and sound.

Student Growth

Before

- accepts crime shows as being realistic
- thinks that the advertisements are the only commercial content
- is unaware of the effects of crime shows on his/her views about crime and society
- uncritical enjoyment of the conventions of crime drama
- watches TV passively, without critical skills

After

- recognizes that crime shows use plot formulas which are limited reflections of reality
- understands the commercial implications of the shows
- recognizes the power of crime shows to influence our attitudes and views about society
- identifies and understands the techniques used in crime dramas
- increases enjoyment and appreciation of drama through knowledge and understanding of its components

Approaching the Unit

In order to heighten student interest, ask them to contribute items for a display about crime drama. Items may include: promotional material supplied by the police; clippings from newspapers and magazines on crime or crime drama; promotional material from TV stations; posters of crime films; artifacts such as clothes or toy guns; crime novels; old radio crime dramas, if available.

Arrange for guests, such as police officers, reporters, former criminals (half-way houses are a good source), to "feed" the "reality checks" throughout this unit.

Note: Students should receive credit for contributing this material.



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Lesson Plan

Comparing Crime Dramas

Overview

This lesson encourages students to analyze the differences between crime shows in Canada, Britain and the United States. Students discuss the general differences between Canadian, British and American television dramas as well as the specific differences between crime dramas from these countries. Groups of students then view, evaluate and compare two crime dramas from different countries and report their findings to the class.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- understand how dramas construct reality
- appreciate the differences between the constructed reality of crime dramas and crime in real life
- appreciate the different approaches to this genre in the United States, Canada and other countries
- understand how the technical aspects of the filming of a crime drama contribute to its overall effect
- understand the plot formulas that underpin crime drama
- understand how crime dramas relate to the drama genre

Preparation and Materials

Photocopy:

- *Drama Comparison Assignment*
- *Group Oral Presentation Contract*
- For some background on a Canadian crime dramas, read a few of the articles, listed on the right sidebar, about "Cold Squad," "Da Vinci's Inquest" and "Blue Murder."
- To find a list of crime shows (past and present), and Web sites on those shows, check the Yahoo Directory listings of Canadian, American and British cop shows, on the right sidebar.

Procedure

Guided Discussion

Ask students to brainstorm the titles of American and Canadian and British dramas on television and, together, consider the following:

- Is there a difference between dramas that are produced in the United States and dramas that are produced in Canada or in Britain? (Comparing two similar programs is a good starting point in identifying differences.)
- What are the differences? (Write student suggestions onto the blackboard.)

Regarding crime dramas, ask your students:

- Do the generalizations that have just been listed apply to crime dramas?
- Do you think that crime shows offer an accurate portrayal of law enforcement

- and crime?
- What are some of the differences that exist between Canadian, British, and American crime dramas?
- What about crime dramas from countries other than these?
- Compared to American crime dramas, why haven't Canadian cop shows had much of a presence on TV?
- What is the 'American Formula' for cop shows?
- What are the traits of a Canadian cop show?
- Do you agree that Canadian cop shows have to be distinctly 'Canadian'?
- Do you think that a distinctly Canadian cop show would appeal to an American audience? Why or why not?

Once students have compiled a list of differences, maintain this list for comparison at the end of the lesson.

Activity

Group Assignment

In this assignment, students will evaluate and compare two crime dramas, from different countries.

When comparing crime dramas, students will find that American programs far outnumber Canadian programs. Students might include British crime dramas, which appear on channels such as PBS, TVOntario, Bravo and Showcase in their comparisons. Often, American stations will adapt British programs for American audiences; for example, the British crime show "Cracker" was adapted by ABC. One group might find it interesting to compare the British and American versions of this program

- Divide your class into four groups. Each group will select two dramas to analyze — one from Canada or Great Britain, and one from the United States.
- Once this is done, the group will complete, and submit, the Group Oral Presentation Contract.
- Distribute a [Drama Comparison Assignment](#) to each group member.
- Review terms and assignment criteria with class.
- Group members will complete their assignment sheets and prepare an oral report of their findings to present to class.

Note: in order to facilitate in-depth study, the programs that are viewed might also be taped. If there are facilities available, groups might use class time to review portions of their tapes as they prepare for their presentations.

When all presentations have been completed, students should state two or three generalizations about the programs produced in these three countries and compare these generalizations to their original list.

Evaluation

- The teacher and students will evaluate the group oral presentations.

Related Resources on the Media Awareness Network Web site:

- *Crime Drama Teaching Unit:*
 - *Overview*
 - *Crime Perceptions Quiz*
 - *Viewing a Crime Drama*
 - *Scripting a Crime Drama*

Recommended Reading, Viewing, Surfing

- *Yahoo Directory of Web Sites for TV Cop Shows*
http://dir.yahoo.com/Entertainment/Television_Shows/Drama/Law_Enforcement/

Web Pages about Crime Dramas

Canadian:

- *Blue Murder*
<http://www.bluemurder.tv>
- *Da Vinci's Inquest*
www.davincisinquest.com/

British:

- The Unofficial Cracker Home Page
<http://www.crackertv.co.uk/>
- Prime Suspect
www.museum.tv/archives/etv/P/htmlP/primesuspect/primesuspect.htm

American:

- NYPD Blue
<http://abc.abcnews.go.com/primetime/nypdblue/index.html>
- Law and Order
http://www.nbc.com/Law_&_Order/

Articles about Canadian Crime Dramas, from Canoe's JAM Web site:

- *Blue Murder*
http://jam.canoe.ca/Television/TV_Shows/B/Blue_Murder/
- *Cold Squad*
http://jam.canoe.ca/Television/TV_Shows/C/Cold_Squad/
- *DaVinci's Inquest*
http://jam.canoe.ca/Television/TV_Shows/D/DaVincis_Inquest/

Drama Comparison Assignment



When comparing the crime dramas that your group has chosen, be sure to include similarities and differences, under the following headings.

- plot structure, typical patterns or twists, the relationship between plot structure and placement of commercials
- treatment of themes: realistic, farcical, superficial, complex, sensitive.
- technical aspects — camera work, lighting, special effects, stunt work.
- editing — what is the pace of the action within the show?
- sound — sound effects, music, silence.
- sets, costumes, props (cars)
- values — what values were imbedded in the shows? Did the commercials reflect these values?
- advertisements — list the advertisers; identify the target audience; describe and analyze the ad's appeal (visual, auditory, humorous).
- characters — describe the major characters; identify stereotypes (social, cultural, racial, gender-related).
- mass appeal techniques — jolts per minute, choice of characters, choice of actors, issues, events, music.
- time slot — time (prime time?) and day of shows, program competition, programs on before and after, the rating of shows from Neilson, Television Trends, or the daily newspaper (ratings are published four times a year).

Group Contract: Oral Presentation

Names of group members:

Crime drama title:

Audio-visual aids needed for presentation:

Date of presentation:

Signature of members of group:

Teacher's signature: