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Web Sleuths in Contemporary True Crime Documentaries

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Abstract

In this thesis, I analyze the web sleuth and its depictions in the contemporary true crime documentaries *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel.* Web sleuths – private citizens who conduct independent research and investigative efforts on criminal cases online and in conjunction with others – encapsulates the popularity of the true crime genre, as well as its participatory nature in a popular culture occupied with violence, crime and detection. While both the true crime genre and the web sleuth are well known in popular culture and scholarly discourse, this thesis seeks to contribute further by understanding the figure through its depictions in two contemporary true crime texts. In doing so, I discuss the ways in which the texts depict, situate and relate to the somewhat controversial and contentious web sleuth figure, a phenomenon that is so intrinsically linked to the genre itself. Performing a comparative textual analysis of *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*, I specifically examine and interpret the series' differing tone – the attitudes the texts imply to the web sleuth. In doing so, I argue that their respective depictions are somewhat paradoxical. *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*, while regarded as sensitive and handling its subject matter with care, arguably refrains from critically engaging with the somewhat controversial aspects of websleuthing. *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*, while justifiably critiquing the web sleuths in the case of Elisa Lam, ends up participating in the sensationalism it reprimands the web sleuths for.

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1 Introduction

The true crime genre is undeniably popular. Arguably, it has been so for a long time – from the glossy true crime magazines of the 1920's and 1930's, the in-depth explorations of serial killers and murderers of true crime books from the 1960's onwards, fiction films occupied with portrayals of violence, to the true crime docudramas and detective series on television, and the early installations of true crime documentaries from the 1980's onwards (Murley, 2008). Despite the longevity of the genre, the 2010's has seen an influx in true crime narratives across several mediums – true crime blogs, true crime YouTube videos, true crime podcasts, and, notably for this thesis, true crime documentaries. "Audiences, it would appear, cannot get their fill of media content that focuses on criminal investigations…" (Stoneman & Packer, 2020) and streaming platforms such as HBO and Netflix provide such narratives in abundance.

The contemporary true crime documentary contains several characteristics that make them such riveting entertainment. They are of high production value, stylistic and visually pleasing (Bolin, 2018), they present capturing narratives of mystery and violence, and furthermore, often call upon the viewer to react and engage in return. This is perhaps one of the key features of contemporary true crime documentaries – whereas true crime narratives of prior were generally more conservative, presenting crime stories with strong narrative conclusions and upholding a law-and-order ideology (Murley, 2008, p. 102), contemporary true crime documentaries often concern themselves with miscarriages of justice, and furthermore, sometimes directly influence and interwene with the criminal investigations they depict. Some re-examine closed cases, retrospectively assess past trials and judgements, or demand for them to be reopened due to perceived miscarriages of justice (Bruzzi, 2016, p. 266).

Some would argue we live in an infotainment culture – infotainment referring to information through different mediums being presented in a stylized, edited way – an intermingling of fact and fiction, resulting in entertaining presentations of news, facts and information (Yardley et. al., 2016, p. 85). True crime is an iteration of such infotainment, and the genre's inherent violent nature is perhaps another feature which draws the audience in. Depictions and narratives of crime and violence, both real and fictional, it seems, have sparked fascination and intrigue for centuries – but not without controversy. American popular

culture's seeming occupation with violence has continuously been discussed and dissected – often concerning whether representations of violence on screen has negative effects on its audience and society at large (Grønstad, 2008, p. 25-28). Similarly, true crime narratives are continuously reprimanded for depicting and divulging in *real* life crime and trauma. Some point to true crime potentially desensitizing its audience to violence, or participating in glorifying killers, or perhaps most pertinent, that true crime can exacerbate trauma for the victims involved – the ethicality of the genre is as such a constant point of contention.

It is perhaps such depictions of real life crime and trauma that captures audiences. Some point to true crime reflecting society's most apparent fears at given moments (Murley, 2008), or that women, who seem to disproportionately consume true crime content, do so as a means of perseverance or confronting fears of being victimized (Grande, 2021). Some argue that we live in a "wound culture", where violence and trauma attracts and gathers audiences (Yardley et. al., 2016, p. 86). There are many reasons and theories as to why society is seemingly drawn to true crime, but one thing is reasonably clear – the element of participation and discussion the genre invites. As Elizabeth Yardley, Adam Lynes, David Wilson and Emma Kelly state in their 2016 article: "Audiences have never been docile recipients of true crime infotainment, passively absorbing the content they consumed. They have discussed, dissected and speculated around cases with others" (p. 86). With the onslaught of the internet, participation, speculation and discussion is made far more accessible, and with it, the main object of analysis in this thesis emerges – the web sleuth.

Web sleuths are private individuals who become invested in criminal cases and consequently conduct their own independent research and investigative work, often online and in internet forums where theories and speculations are exchanged with others (Tallerico, 2021). Dedicated networks, such as that of the subreddit "Reddit Bureau of Investigation" and the forum "Websleuths.com" allows for web sleuths to congregate and work together in crime solving – ranging from investigating unsolved cold cases to attempting to identify perputrators of specific incidents like terrorist attacks. Such operations have not been without controversy, though. With examples such as the manhunt that ensued following the Boston bombing in 2013, resulting in wrongful accusations made against innocent people, the reputation of such web sleuth communities has arguably been tainted (Pantumsinchai, 2018, p. 774). Despite their intentions of crime solving, the web sleuths run the risk of causing further harm – potentially spreading misinformation, sensationalizing stories of victims,

participating in weaponized visibility and hindering investigations. Proponents of websleuthing might argue that such collective efforts can help solve cases, functioning as an added resource when police investigations fall short, or garner attention and visibility to crimes and injustices – reflecting a seeming genuine belief in the collective intelligence model, a confidence in the notion that individuals working together towards a common goal will bring justice and closure. There have been instances where web sleuths have achieved such goals – unidentified murder victims have been identified, and cold cases have been reopened due to pressure from web sleuths (Hardwick, 2021). The web sleuth phenomenon is undeniably complicated, which will be further illustrated throughout this thesis.

I (along with several scholars) argue that the web sleuth is a sort of culmination of true crime narratives and participatory culture. The true crime genre lends itself to discussion and participation – its inherent shocking and emotionally charged nature inevitably sparks reaction. With streaming platforms such as HBO and Netflix allowing for a large consumption of true crime narratives, social media platforms provide spaces to react and discuss its contents. We arguably live in a culture of detection, where everyone has access to tools that allow for researching and detecting – furthermore, the public is often directly invited to participate in crime solving through social media networks, with security footage, mugshots and missing persons posted to various networks such as Twitter and Facebook (Horeck, 2019, p. 4-6). The affordances of the internet and the participatory nature of the true crime genre, I argue, facilitates in the web sleuth becoming somewhat of a prevalent phenomenon.

Following this brief introduction of the true crime genre, the contemporary true crime documentary and the web sleuth (which will be further and thoroughly explored throughout this thesis), I will now turn to this thesis' contributions on the matter, as well as a brief summarization of my findings. Where both the true crime genre and the web sleuth have been researched and covered in academic circles, as well as popular culture, I examine the web sleuth and its depictions within the narratives it arguably emerges from.

1.1 Research Question

In this thesis, I examine the depictions of the web sleuth in two contemporary true crime documentaries – specifically, *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* (Garbus, 2020) and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* (Berlinger, 2021). To do so, I employ the method of textual

analysis, performing a comparative textual analysis of two chosen scenes from each text. The research question I pose for this thesis, is as follows:

- How are web sleuths depicted in *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*?

Throughout the analysis and consequent discussion of the series', I argue that certain attitudes implied to the web sleuth become apparent. I will interpret and examine several stylistic and narrative choices in the texts, such as editing, composition, lighting and color grading. The material that I will be analyzing consists of two fairly short scenes from each series – amounting to a couple of minutes each. This, I argue, ensures an in-depth analysis, allowing for a close reading of the material I have chosen. To adequately answer the "how" of the research question, I have chosen to analyze and interpret many of these choices in terms of their tone – what I interpret to be the attitudes the texts implies to the web sleuth and the subject matter. Tone, as Douglas Pye contextualizes it, is of a somewhat intangible nature – it is not as apparent as style, for instance, but rather, is highly interpretable and not clearly stated within the text. Yet, as Pye states, I argue that analyzing the texts in terms of their tone reveals the relationships of the series' to its material, its traditions, and its spectator (2014, p. 7).

It might be useful, then, to briefly present the two texts I will be analyzing in this thesis. *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* is a documentary series based on the book with the same name, directed by Liz Garbus, and released on HBO in 2020. The series revolves around author Michelle McNamara and her quest to find the identity of whom she has dubbed the Golden State Killer, a prolific serial rapist and killer in 1970's and 1980's California. McNamara was a web sleuth, and a successful one at that, collaborating with police detectives and securing a book deal in the process of her research. The series follows two primary storylines – that of McNamara writing her book and investigating the case in the 2010's, and the chronological timeline of events of the rapes and murders during the 1970's and 1980's. The series was generally well received, both by critics and wider audiences, and is regarded as a sensitive, dignified true crime documentary series.

Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel is a documentary series concerning the mysterious disappearance and death of Elisa Lam at the historic Cecil Hotel in downtown Los Angeles in 2013. Directed by Joe Berlinger, the series was released to Netflix in 2021. Lam, a

Chinese-Canadian student aged 21, was solo-traveling in the United States when she suddenly vanished from the Cecil Hotel she was staying at. Located near skid row, the hotel has a long history of deaths, suicide and murder since its opening in the 1920's. Similar to *I'll Be Gone in the Dark,* the series follows two primary storylines – that of Elisa Lam's disappearance, death and investigation, as well as the history of the infamous Cecil Hotel. The case of Lam garnered massive media attention because of its bizarreness, and web sleuths flocked around the case in search of finding out what happened to her. The series was arguably less favorably received by critics and audiences, regarded as somewhat clichéd and sensational.

In this thesis, in answering the research question "how are web sleuths depicted in *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*?" I will firstly provide a broader history of the genre to identify its major developments and conventions, provide insights on screened violence and ethical dilemmas, as well as situate the web sleuth figure and its conceptualizations. This extensive theory will serve as a backdrop to the comparative textual analysis I will perform, being used throughout the analysis and following discussion. As mentioned, tone will be central in interpreting the attitudes implied to the web sleuth, but additionally, it is in my assessment a fitting application when analyzing true crime texts. In my argument, what often separates a highly regarded and legitimate true crime text from the less favorable and sensational, is whether they manage to strike the right tone. Elements and characteristics that I argue constitute a certain sensitive tone, is amongst other things that of refraining from stylistic and graphic reenactments. Consequently, in addition to analyzing scenes depicting the web sleuth, I will analyze the series' different usages of reenactments. The analysis reveals what I deem a paradox within both series – I argue that *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*, while handling the subject matter and victims of the Golden State Killer with sensitivity and care, falls short in examining the web sleuth critically. *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* is in my assessment justified in its sometimes harsh critique of the web sleuth, but loses some of its validity in its aestheticized reenactments of violence. Lastly, I will discuss the web sleuth beyond the bounds of the texts, providing some insight on its sociopolitical contexts. The web sleuth, I argue, is the culmination of true crime in a participatory culture, and while the analysis of the two series is limited to the two texts and therefore cannot be representative of all web sleuth depictions, I argue they illustrate an occupation with and a wish to examine and present that of the web sleuth within the genre it so intrinsically is a part of.

1.2 Project structure

How are web sleuths depicted in *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*? In answering this question, a large section is devoted to existing literature on both the true crime genre and the web sleuth. This thesis does not seek to invalidate previous research, rather, it seeks to build on it – where the contribution of this thesis is the analysis of the depictions of web sleuths in two true crime texts, revealing the attitudes implied to the web sleuth. As mentioned, the findings therefore are limited to the two texts in question. I will now briefly outline the project structure of this thesis.

In the next chapter, a literature review of existing literature on the true crime genre, the contemporary true crime documentary, as well as the web sleuth will be provided. This serves as an overview of not only the scholarly contributions on the subjects, but an introduction to several books and articles that will be referenced throughout this thesis. In the third chapter, a thorough exploration of the true crime genre will be provided, outlining its lineage and history from true crime magazines to true crime documentaries, and the common themes and conventions that have emerged. In addition, the chapter explores a discussion of violence on screen, as well as true crime ethics. Following, the web sleuth, its history and conceptualizations are outlined, before the chapter ends with a brief discussion of true crime and gender. In the fourth chapter, I will outline the method of textual analysis and why and how the comparative textual analysis is conducted. Furthermore, an explanation of tone and how I will interpret it throughout the analysis is included.

In the fifth chapter, the comparative textual analysis that aims to answer the research question of "how are web sleuths depicted in *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*?" is conducted, with the theory and methodology provided prior, employed and used throughout. The material from the two texts are analyzed separately, where several comparisons are made directly in the analysis. Specific stylistic and narrative elements, such as editing, color and reenactments are analyzed, and interpretations are made regarding tone and the attitudes implied to the web sleuth. In the sixth chapter, a broader discussion of the findings, the series' mood, as well as an exploration of the series' critical receptions are made, before the web sleuth is discussed in a larger sociopolitical context. Lastly, the seventh chapter summarizes the findings throughout this thesis, before providing some concluding remarks.

2 Literature Review

2.1 True Crime

The true crime genre and its history has been extensively covered by authors such as Jean Murley in *The Rise of True Crime* (2008) and Anita Biressi in *Crime, Fear and the Law in True Crime Stories* (2001). Murley, whose book is used in a considerable amount throughout this thesis, examines the genre from a cultural perspective, describing the major developments in the genre from the true crime magazines of the 1920's and 1930's, true crime books, true crime films, both fiction and non-fiction, true crime television shows and true crime internet material of the 2000's. Murley and other scholars, such as Harold Schechter (2012), and Travis Linnemann (2015) often attribute the birth of the modern true crime genre to Truman Capote's highly successful book *In Cold Blood* from 1966, which is still brought forth today as a highly influential piece which altered the tradition of non-fiction crime writing.

2.2 The Contemporary True Crime Documentary

Where books such as *The Rise of True Crime* (2008) focus on how the genre and its common narratives and conventions has manifested itself throughout history to the present, as well as what the genre means for the American culture in which it has arisen, the true crime genre and its supposed "boom" in popularity in the 2010's is not accounted for. This so called increase in popularity, traced to releases such as *The Jinx* (2015) on HBO, *Making a Murderer* (2015) on Netflix and the podcast series *Serial* (2014), is not necessarily an indication that there is more interest in the genre, but that the preferred medium has changed - from books and television to high production value documentaries on easily accessible streaming platforms (Sayles, 2021).

The true crime podcast genre has received extensive scholarly attention, with articles discussing "the *Serial* effect" and the ecosystems of true crime podcasts (Sherrill, 2020), studies of podcast audiences and their motivations (Boling & Hull, 2018), as well as applications of feminist theory when examining such audiences (Pâquet, 2020). Where podcasts are a relatively new medium, and the true crime podcast thereby is a fairly new phenomenon, the true crime documentary is not. As will be outlined further in the following

chapter, documentaries such as *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) introduced and changed many standards of murder narration as well as calling the trust of the criminal justice system into question. Whether the contemporary true crime documentary of the 2010's could be described as a new incarnation of the medium is up for debate, but the increase in not only popularity but frequency at which true crime documentaries are released, has prompted further discussions.

Stella Bruzzi examines the genre in her article "Making a Genre: The Case of the Contemporary True Crime Documentary" (2016). In the article, she recognizes the similarities and conventions of some of the most popular true crime documentaries to date at the time, namely *The Staircase*, *The Jinx* and *Making a Murderer* along with the podcast *Serial* amongst other texts. While finding it difficult to give a retrospective on a trend that is seemingly still in motion, she argues that the recent escalation is in need of examination, focusing particularly on the way in which such documentaries relate to and represent the law, evidence and miscarriages of justice, both proving and problematizing the inherent narrative qualities of real life crime cases. Bruzzi additionally provides insight on the usage of reenactments in true crime documentaries, referring to film critics such as Richard Brody (2015) and Bill Nichols (2008), which is frequently mentioned throughout this thesis.

Ian Case Punnett's book *Toward a Theory of True Crime Narratives: A Textual Analysis* (2018) examines the genre from the true crime magazines of the 1920's and 1930's to contemporary true crime documentaries of the 2010's through textual analysis. Punnett argues that despite the lineage of the genre being extensively explored by authors such as Murley, there does not exist a conclusive definition of what qualifies as a true crime text in the first place. Through close textual analysis of 10 true crime texts, Punnett proposes a coding scheme that identifies the most common characteristics of the texts, thereby creating a definition of certain characteristics that constitute a true crime narrative.

There is additionally a plethora of material, both academic articles and think pieces, on true crime as potentially harmful or indicative of a culture occupied with violence and voyeurism. Ethan Stoneman and Joseph Packer discuss the potential extra-juridical punitive power of true crime documentaries and harm as a by-product of the genre in a 2020 article called "Reel cruelty: Voyeurism and extra-juridical punishment in true-crime documentaries". Stoneman and Packer argue that whether one is opposed to or defend true crime documentaries in their potential to exacerbate trauma, either downplaying the potential or regarding trauma as an

"unwanted byproduct" of true crime narratives, they both simultaneously suggests a universal moral standard as to how justice and law should be administered, as well as concealing "...the dual possibility (...) that the design of certain true-crime documentaries constitute an exercise of extra-juridical punitive power; and (...) that viewers are capable of deriving pleasure from such an exercise" (Stoneman & Packer, 2020, p. 401).

Stoneman and Packer mentions several articles where cultural critics raise ethical concerns regarding the genre's surge in popularity. Alice Bolin for Vulture, for instance, details the difference between "highbrow" and "lowbrow" true crime documentaries, with the former representing the critically acclaimed, high production value true crime documentary of the 2010's (Bolin, 2018). She argues that the difference between such documentaries merely is an aesthetic one, and that the well received contemporary true documentary is particularly important to examine because of its perceived legitimacy and seriousness (Bolin, 2018). Ethical concerns that are often raised regarding the genre, range from the ethics of retelling another person's trauma, the possibility of narratives interfering with real lives and criminal proceedings (Bolin, 2018), true crime on streaming platforms paired with social media facilitating in constant entertainment and polarized discussions (Horeck, 2019) to the more general assessment that harm is an inherent byproduct of true crime narratives (Houpt, 2018).

Defenders of the genre, as Stoneman and Packer state, counter such arguments with the potential positive functions that true crime documentaries can serve. Some argue that true crime narratives can counteract the notion that the police and criminal investigations are without flaw and fail-proof, offering a sort of informative function that diminishes the belief in the justice system as infallible (Miller, 2014). Billy Jensen (2019) in his book *Chase Darkness with Me* argues that true crime narratives can help with solving unsolved murders and crimes. In this line of thinking, true crime creates true crime enthusiasts that can participate in private investigations of their own online, spread awareness around cold cases, and potentially help solve cold and dorment cases (Stoneman & Packer, 2020, p. 402). Jensen's argument describes the phenomenon of the web sleuth, the main object of analysis in this thesis, and I will now look at further literature discussing and exploring this figure.

2.3 The Web Sleuth

Web sleuths – private citizens who conduct their own independent research and investigations online, exchanging theories with other web sleuths – are well known in popular

culture, but have arguably been granted less attention scholarly. There are however several articles on the topic from the last decade, ranging from discussing specific incidents of web sleuthing, to news media representations, theories on digital vigilantism and studies on websleuthing communities. Following is a brief outline on some of the conceptualizations of the web sleuth.

Web sleuths, also known as armchair detectives, citizen detectives, cyber detectives and digital vigilantes are not a new phenomenon – Keith Soothill comments on the use of the public in crime investigations through televised shows such as *Most Wanted* and *Crimewatch UK* in an article from 1998. Yet, the internet and its affordances have arguably made the figure a more frequent and apparent phenomenon, as stated in Elizabeth Yardley, Adam Lynes, David Wilson and Emma Kelly's "What's the deal with 'websleuthing'? News media representations of amateur detectives in networked spaces" (2016). Stating that "...websleuthing is the embodiment of true crime infotainment in a wound culture", the article studies media representations of the figure through the lense of cultural criminology, ultimately arguing that it should be understood as a consequence of contemporary society's occupation with true crime infotainment, a sort of materialization of digital culture's norms and values (Yardley et al., 2016, p. 105).

Daniel Trottier, quoted in the Yardley et al. article, writes about citizens' usage of networked spaces to impose a form of criminal justice in his article "Digital Vigilantism as Weaponisation of Visibility" (2016). Digital vigilantism occurs when "...citizens are collectively offended by other citizen activity, and coordinate retaliation on mobile devices and social platforms" (Ibid, p. 55). Such offenses can be anything from violations of social norms, to terrorist attacks – the retaliation in response can range from shaming online, to doxing private information and harassment both on and offline. Trottier argues for a theoretically nuanced and empirically grounded perspective on digital vigilantism, drawing on literature on both vigilantism and surveillance, where he situates digital vigilantism as a continuation of digital media practices that produce citizen-led policing (Ibid, p. 68).

In the article "Armchair detectives and the social construction of falsehoods: an actor–network approach" (2018) Penn Pantumsinchai discusses two specific instances of large online investigations led by citizens – the Boston bombing in 2013 and the Bangkok bombing in 2015 respectively. Pantumsinchai looks at web sleuths and their operations using actor–network theory, as well as discussing the collective intelligence model where knowledge is

created through collaborations of many. He argues that the collective intelligence model can cause feedback loops and lead misinformation to spread, with the specific examples of the communities surrounding the Boston and Bangkok bombings being unsuccesful in their pursuit of the perputrators (Ibid, p. 774).

In a 2018 article called "'Not your personal army!' Investigating the organizing property of retributive vigilantism in a Reddit collective of websleuths", David Myles, Chantal Benoit-Barné and Florence Millerand explore the subreddit "Reddit Bureau of Investigation" (RBI), a community of over 70,000 members. Drawing on organizational discourse theory, they analyze the subreddit and their discursive practices – such as memes, metaphors and rules – to reveal how they enforce digital vigilantism, participacion and collective efforts in crime solving. RBI is controversial, as it amongst other things participated in the investigation of the aforementioned Boston Bombing, and Myles et al. argue that members of the subreddit has an ambivalent relationship with police authority - recognizing their authority while justifying their websleuthing because of its limitations, simoultaneously distancing themselves from their reputation of retributive vigilantism (2018, p. 317).

As outlined above, the true crime genre has arguably been extensively explored throughout the decades, a multifaceted genre across many mediums such as magazines, books, tv, film and the internet, remaining a somewhat controversial and continuously discussed phenomenon in its inherent depictions of real crime and violence, sparking further examination since its seeming surge in popularity in recent years. From the long history of the genre (Murley, 2008), to the common narratives and conventions (Punnett, 2018), to what constitutes a contemporary true crime documentary (Bruzzi, 2016), and the many discussions of the genre's ethicality (Stoneman & Packer, 2020), literature of both a non-academic and academic nature exists and will be extensively used throughout this thesis, both in the chapter on theory to follow and the comparative analysis of two true crime documentaries. The web sleuth has arguably been given less scholarly attention, yet, the articles outlined above illustrate an interest in the phenomenon and its potentially troublesome consequences – viewed as an embodiment of society's occupation with true crime infotainment (Yardley et al., 2016), engaging in citizen policing by digital vigilantism (Trottier, 2016), and the spreading of misinformation through the collective intelligence model (Pantumsinchai, 2018) among other things.

In this thesis, I will draw on the theories surrounding both the true crime genre and the web sleuth outlined above when conducting the comparative textual analysis. For as the web sleuth is often understood and discussed from a perspective of cultural criminology, potentially interfering with criminal investigations, retaliating perceived wrongdoings, and how the phenomenon relates to criminology and law, I argue that there is value in examining its depiction in true crime documentaries. If the web sleuth is the culmination of true crime infotainment and the participation that networked spaces facilitate, I find it interesting to analyze how true crime documentaries depict, perceive and relate to this figure that is intrinsically linked to the genre. There are several examples of the web sleuth being portrayed in recent true crime documentaries – *Don't F*ck With Cats* (Netflix, 2019), *The Disappearance of Maura Murrey* (Oxygen, 2017), *The Killing Season* (A&E, 2016), and the two texts of analysis in this thesis – *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* (HBO, 2020) and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* (Netflix, 2021), a testament to the figure's occupation i popular culture. I believe that the analysis of two differing depictions in two different true crime documentaries can reveal the series' implied attitudes to the web sleuth, and how they choose to engage with a somewhat controversial figure that is a consumer and manifestation of the narratives they depict, adding to the existing discourse on both the contemporary true crime documentary and the web sleuth itself.

How are web sleuths depicted in *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel?* To answer the research question of this thesis, I will in the following chapter provide an expansive exploration on both the genre and the web sleuth, along with theories on violence, voyeurism and gender.

3 Theory

The True Crime genre, while arguably garnering newfound popularity and intrigue in the 2010's, has a longstanding foothold in popular culture. To properly situate and contextualize the true crime documentaries that will be analyzed in this thesis, I will provide a broader history of the genre, leading up to the contemporary true crime documentaries of today. I wish to illustrate the changes, from the true crime magazines of the 1930's to the true crime documentary series of the present, which involves but are not limited to a changing audience, changes in the depictions of violence, changes in the prominent narratives featured, and changes in the genres legitimacy. This extensive theory and exploration of the genre and its conventions and critiques will further be used in the fifth chapter of this thesis, where I perform a comparative textual analysis to answer the question: How are web sleuths depicted in *I'll be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*? The web sleuth in modern contemporary true crime narratives such as the ones analyzed in this thesis is in my argument yet another development in the long-standing tradition of true crime, and a thorough exploration of the web sleuth will follow after I outline the genre, as well as explore some of the genres ethical considerations.

3.1 True Crime - A Continuous Fascination

I do not think it would be an overstatement to say that true crime, or more generally, crime and the macabre, continually has evoked fascination in people. While avoiding to start the lineage too far back, scholars often attribute the birth of the modern true crime genre as we know it to Truman Capote's highly successful book *In Cold Blood* from 1966. The book, regarded as the first true crime book by many, details the 1959 murders of the Clutter family from Kansas, the two killers, and the trials culminating in the perputrators' hangings (Clarke, 2018). While I will not go into detail about the contents of the book itself, Capote has been celebrated for creating a riveting story surrounding a true murder case and trial, with "...the artistic detail and aesthetic beauty of lyrical fiction" (Linnemann, 2015, p. 515). *In Cold Blood* would go on to generate several films, as well as many a debate, as the detailed and brutal descriptions of the slaying of the Clutter family and their killers stood in contrast to other fictional crime books of the time, and proved to fascinate and capture the attention of readers (Linnemann, 2015, p. 515).

In Cold Blood is naturally not the first true crime book to ever exist, though. An article by Harold Schechter (2012) states that the notion that the genre began with Capote's book is a blatant misconception. Instead, he asserts that the first true crime texts were published over 400 years ago: "No sooner had Gutenberg invented movable type than enterprising printers began churning out graphically violent murder ballads" (Schechter, 2012, p. 6). While it may be true that the dawn of the genre could be placed 400 years ago, or even prior, this thinking could bring the lineage back to the bible for that matter, if one so chooses to define the genre as a more general exploration of violence. As Schechter states, although books of quality were published prior to *In Cold Blood*, the genre was yet to be recognized as "serious" literature (2012, p. 7). Capote's book, in its popularity and enjoyableness, brought legitimacy to the genre of true crime, and while not the first installment of true crime media, it can be regarded as a cornerstone in the modern, contemporary true crime tradition.

3.2 The True Crime Genre and its Lineage

To continue oulining the lineage and rise in popularity of the true crime genre, I will look to the book *The Rise of True Crime: 20th Century Murder and American Popular Culture* (2008), where Jean Murley details the true crime genre, including books, magazines, television, films and internet material. Murley too concurs that true crime has been of interest for many centuries, but instead of emphasizing *In Cold Blood* as one of the works that established the contemporary true crime genre, she brings forth true crime magazines from the 1930's and onward as the earliest installments of the modern genre (Murley, 2008, p. 2). I find this starting point to be particularly interesting for my thesis, as I believe some of the genre's pitfalls – namely how some true crime content comes to be considered legitimate and some are not – are illustrated in her lineage, which will come to use in my analysis.

A quote from the introduction reads: "More than a single popular literary genre or even a set of technical narrative conventions, true crime has become a multifaceted, multigenre aesthetic formulation, a poetics of murder narration" (Ibid). I would argue her book adequately outlines the history and conventions of the genre, but considering the book was published in 2008, the onslaught of contemporary true crime documentaries in the 2010's and their popularity are perhaps not adequately discussed. I will therefore continue outlining the contemporary true crime documentary of the 2010's – a wave of various true crime documentary series that have gained large interest in popular culture throughout the last decade. I will in this section use her writings to get a further overview of the genre as it has

manifested itself, focusing mostly on some of the conventions that are seemingly prominent for the genre, as well as the attitudes ascribed to it.

3.2.1 The True Crime Magazine

From the 1920's up until the 1960's, magazines were the main medium of the true crime genre, and while some were being published up until the early 2000's, they inevitably fizzled out as other mediums such as books and TV became more prominent. Evenso, as Murley argues, the thirty year period in which they flourished has impacted the genre moving forward (2008, p. 15).

The contents of true crime magazines, (one of the most prominent, popular and long-standing publications was the magazine "True Detective Mysteries") started out featuring both true and fictionalized crime stories, where the most sensational story would be headlined on the cover, accompanied by photographs which were meant to display story elements such as characters and objects surrounding the crime (Ibid, p. 19). The magazines would sometimes print actual crime scene photos of corpses and the like, where such pictures and crime stories in general were supplied by journalists or provided by contacts in the police, among other means (Ibid, p. 20-21). The typical stories that were featured were according to Murley a mix of short length stories and longer editions, mostly true, with some embellishments (Ibid).

Highly stylized and sensational, the true crime magazines were, according to Murley, meant for a specific demographic: the average, middle-class, white American (Ibid). The stories featured were almost exclusively about white victims, as well as white assailants, where black people only were present as perpetrators or in police line-ups (Ibid, p. 20). Using the advertisements as an indicator of their imagined consumer, Murley deciphers that they rarely appealed to any other demographic than that of the white male – an interesting point, as it seems to contrast what is known of the genre as of today – where true crime is seemingly most popular among female audiences (Ibid, p. 18). The gender of true crime audiences is an interesting topic which will be dedicated a section of its own in this chapter, but I will leave it at that for now.

Although the information provided above is a limited insight into the magazines themselves - they were after all printed for 80 years and inevitably changed and evolved over time - I believe one can summarize this medium as sensational, shocking, and attention grabbing,

while remaining straight-forward and easily digestible for its intended audience. Ignoring many societal structures, issues and realities (such as only featuring white, middle-class crime), the magazines sustained a low status in the literary genre throughout its existence (Ibid). Nevertheless, as Murley argues, the magazines impacted and shaped the true crime genre of books, television, films and the internet to follow - and is often overlooked when examining the genre (Ibid, p. 41). Perhaps of particular significance, Murley states that the magazines, in their limited nuance and sensationalism, portraying themselves as "crime news", lay the groundwork for crime infotainment TV shows that would become popular in the 1980's and forward (Ibid). These TV shows will be discussed following the outlining of true crime books, films and documentaries.

3.2.2 The True Crime Literary Genre

True crime as a literary genre has been popular and well known (as previously discussed) since Capote's hit in 1966, and books of the genre still have a steady readership as of today. To bring forth an obvious example from the last decade which is relevant to this thesis, would be the successful and critically acclaimed *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* (2018) by Michelle McNamara – the book in which one of the series of analysis in this thesis is based on. The genre, according to Murley, has its roots in the true crime magazines of prior – but the medium of books affords a far more in depth and detailed approach to crime cases, where authors can explore the crime, the investigation and trial more thoroughly than what is possible in a column of a magazine (Ibid, p. 43). Truman Capote's book marked the beginning of a long-standing true crime tradition, where the genre really began to flourish in the 1970's and 1980's - at this time, the genre's conventions were also properly instituted and standardized (Ibid, p. 44). Using Murley's explanation, one can summarize these conventions as such:

The book format allows for the author to personalize the case and give a far more detailed biography of the killer, the victims, the setting and so forth, providing greater context and creating emotional connections to the case (Ibid, p. 43-44). Most often, true crime books feature one specific crime or criminal, or explores a distinct kind of crime (for example, serial killings or sexual murders). They tend to focus on the personal lives of the perputrators and their inner workings, examining why they turned to murder. Additionally, the social contexts surrounding the crime are often explored, along with the time period, the area, and the victims. In varying degrees, authors sometimes take creative liberties to flesh out the

narrative, e.g. fictional, imagined conversations of real people that are featured in the story. Authors are also sometimes in direct contact with the killer and others involved, such as police detectives, gaining "inside information" on the case. As for the structure, they are often written with a "...four-part structure of events: murder/background/trial/execution or imprisonment…" where some books focus on unsolved crimes and therefore lack the same narrative conclusion of a trial and sentencing (Ibid, p. 44). Books of the true crime genre typically follow these conventions and formulas, although there of course are variations (Ibid).

Murley further poses some theories as to *why* true crime books came to be so popular in the 1970's and 1980's – arguing that the rise in popularity was in direct correlation with the rise of American crime rates at the time. In the decade between 1964 and 1974, the amount of homicides committed doubled – in the same period, knowledge about criminal issues and its vocabulary increasingly became part of the public's general knowledge (Ibid, p. 46). A higher consumption of true crime narratives might have been a way to manage the growing fears of violent crimes, for as Murley states, "...as murder rates rose, the genre expanded in tandem, and more killers were metaphorically caught and punished in its pages" (Ibid). As mentioned, the 1970's were arguably the formative decade of the true crime genre, where certain themes that remain popular to this day emerged. Notably, female victims, sex crimes and serial killers are topics of the genre that seemingly garner the most interest - where writers of the genre at the time were most often male (Ibid, p. 59).

In the 1980's and 1990's, true crime became a genre of mass production and publishing. The popular culture of the time was highly invested in serial killers (such as Ted Bundy, Richard Ramirez and John Wayne Gacy), and the genre mirrored this in its subject matter (Ibid, p. 71). Advancements in forensic technologies and criminology also became part of the public's vocabulary, and several fictional TV shows centered themselves around the FBI, the pursuit of the serial killer, and the criminal profiler (Ibid). Where "stranger danger", random violence and serial killings seemed to threaten the society of prior, the late 1990's saw an increased attention to domestic murder - the most common types of murder to occur (Ibid, p. 72). Stories of intimate partner and family violence became a larger anxiety, and is reflected in the modern true crime genre where murders committed by husbands, wives, parents, in-laws and so forth seems to occupy many true crime narratives (Ibid). Additionally, authors of the genre as of present are increasingly female, whereas most authors of true crime books in the 70's

and 80's were male (Ibid, p. 72, 59). True crime books remain popular, although the genre as of late could be said to be most prolific in other mediums, such as the documentary and the internet. Murley ends her chapter on true crime books by stating that:

> American true crime writing both responds to and reflects its context and historical circumstance, showing changes and shifts in widespread philosophical and political understandings about crime, public policy debates, definitions of insanity, and shifting perspectives on the meaning and mystery of radical evil (Ibid, p. 76-77).

I find Murley's contextualization of the true crime genre, and how it seems to reflect society's most apparent fears and anxieties at different points in history, to be particularly interesting. If certain topics and common themes of the genre, such as serial killers, represent the public's concerns, I argue one can analyze other tropes, and perhaps, figures of the true crime genre, by this same notion. The web sleuth, which I have yet to properly introduce (a thorough exploration of the web sleuth will be provided following the outlining of the genre and the true crime documentary) could perhaps illustrate another set of fears and anxieties in society - a point in which I mention now, but will explore further in the analysis and discussion of this thesis. First, let's continue with Murley's descriptions of true crime films, documentaries and TV shows.

3.2.3 The True Crime Fiction Film

Parallel to the development of the true crime book, true crime films have existed since the last half of the 20th century, influencing the genre as a whole. True crime films, according to Murley, encompass several different genres of cinema – such as book adaptations, documentaries, and fiction films that are based on real life events (Ibid, p. 79). Despite the fictionality of many such films, Murley explains the tremendous impact that cinema has had on the evolution of true crime in American pop culture – popularizing the genre and its many tropes and figures, such as the depraved psychopath (Hannibal Lecter from *Silence of the Lambs*, for instance) and additionally, "...documenting a simultaneous decline in the ability of the police to contain deviance" (Ibid).

While I would personally not categorize films such as *Silence of the Lambs* (loosely based on serial killer Ed Gein) or any other film loosely or highly based on a serial killer, psychopath or crime in general as a clear-cut part of the true crime genre, horror films and thrillers have undeniably influenced the genre. Violence and gore, however fictional, have through film become tolerated and expected, arguably even yearned for, by audiences (Ibid). Some films

aim to critique this very sensationalization of crime and violence that is sometimes (arguably, often) a key feature of true crime – and interrogate the glorification of violence as well as audiences' fascination with it (Ibid). Murley too emphasizes that the true crime film genre is difficult to define – some films that depict murder "based on a true story" often become muddy when distingushing between fact and fiction – in fact, as Murley states, some of the most popular films in existence are of this nature (once again, e.g. *Silence of the Lambs*) (Ibid, p. 81). The sheer quantity of films of this type could serve as a testament to a certain fascination with violence and crime that is present in American popular culture.

As opposed to true crime magazines and books previously discussed, film has obvious audiovisual affordances that the other mediums lack. And as with magazines and books, certain narrative (and visual) conventions have emerged alongside it (Ibid, p. 80). Murley continues to detail the genre of true crime films by looking at specific examples of films from different decades – and while I will not go into too much detail about each example, I find it fruitful to outline some of the genre conventions that have inevitably influenced the contemporary true crime documentary to come.

First and foremost, films, in their audiovisuality, makes the consumption of true crime a "multisensory experience" - with visuals, sound, lighting, editing and the like (Ibid). The visuality that the film medium affords lends itself to further discussions and controversy surrounding the depiction of violence – and the fears that such depictions can result in real life violence. As Murley states, "film has always produced intense social effects and had unintended consequences on people's behavior, one of which is strong, often irrational fear about the interconnectedness of real and screened violence" (Ibid). Going off on a slight tangent surrounding this topic, I would like to discuss the depiction of violence on film a bit further, as well as the many ethical dilemmas that constantly surround the genre of true crime.

3.3 Violence On Screen

In the book *Transfigurations: Violence, Death and Masculinity in American Cinema* (2008)*,* Asbjørn Grønstad argues for an aesthetically oriented discussion of violence on screen. Narrations of violence have been a staple part of American cinema since its inception, yet, as Grønstad argues, the discourse surrounding such depictions has often surrounded the effects of violence on screen (2008, p. 25). "Monopolized" by social sciences and psychology, the

research on violence has often fallen into three categories: studies pertaining to censorship and regulations of the medium, studies examining cultural and ideological frameworks surrounding the violence depicted on screen, as well as theories of gender, genre and spectatorship (Ibid, p. 26). In the first chapter of the book, Grønstad outlines what he deems "the five fallacies" in which violence on screen often is understood. I will briefly outline his conceptualizations and critiques of these five branches.

Empirical studies concerning unfavorable effects on audiences exposed to screen violence (particularly young people and children) are plentiful, often aiming to establish some connection between violence on screen and social behaviors (Ibid, p. 27-28). What is often missing in such empirical studies conducted by social scientists and psychologists, Grønstad argues, is the crucial point of contextualization. Isolating violent scenes from the rest of the text and accessing the audience's response, ignores the affordances of textual analysis which can reveal the many different contexts of meaning in which the violence occurs (Ibid, p. 29-30).

Another branch of examining screen violence is that of aristotelianism, or, the theory of catharsis, in which those who align with this theory believe that the act of viewing violent material produces catharsis, a sort of purging of violent tendencies within the self - and thereby becoming a morally beneficial process (Ibid, p. 32). The viewer is exposed to violence, and can therefore confront fears or destructive behaviors, purifying the audience, a sort of therapeutic activity. Based on Aristotle's concepts of pity and fear, Grønstad argues that catharsis theory ignores the many emotions apart from pity and fear that a spectator possesses prior to and during a viewing experience (Ibid, p. 37). Furthemore, the notion that perceiving fictional violence produces catharsis, a purging of negative emotions, is far from proven to occur (Ibid).

Mythologism is a myth-based approach where violence is situated as a foundational part to the logic of mythologies which society lives by. Grønstad states that a plethora of film and media theorists ascribe to this notion, where violence is either seen as the core of all mythical formations, that the American history is based on a mythology of regeneration through violence, or that violence is woven into the structure of narrativity itself (Ibid, p. 49-50). Grønstad argues that pointing to such grand, cultural mythologies in the analysis of cinema has become somewhat obsolete, stating – "A work of fiction is never just a rewriting of a

grand narrative, but contains more – such as something that goes beyond the perimeters of mythic speech" (Ibid, p. 56).

The last fallacy Grønstad outlines is that of mimeticism. The mimetic fallacy, as he puts it, is the tendency to conduct symptomatic readings which imply that the violence on-screen is a reflection of the real world – movies are violent because society is violent – often resulting in implications of a simplistic correlation between reality and fiction (Ibid, p. 57). Mimeticism thereby ignores the many complexities of a work of fiction, reducing a text to a standardized recording, according to Grønstad. Furthermore, Grønstad points to the unlikeliness that the majority of audiences are exposed to violence in any proportionate way as to what they witness on screen, and lastly, states that fiction films are "...fundamentally shaped by generic, aesthetic, and philosophical traditions whose continuities may supersede those that exist between fiction and society" (Ibid). To better understand violence on screen, Grønstad argues that one should avoid the tendency to ascribe such a mimetic correlation between fiction and real life, instead understanding the text on its own merits (Ibid).

The third fallacy Grønstad outlines, which I find is of particular interest in regards to this thesis, is that of aestheticism. Aestheticism expresses the desire to distinguish between different types of violence, and their differing aesthetic qualities – separating the necessary, or artistically justified violence of art films from the inartistic violence of mainstream films (Ibid, p. 39). In some cases, depictions of violence might even be celebrated for its stylistic elegance or provocative nature, despite questionable moral values - whereas a more "morally responsible" film lacking in artistic value should be censored. Interestingly, this distinction between art and entertainment can often have the reverse effect - the violence of a movie is deemed harmless *because* of its lacking artistic value, whereas the art film, potentially far more insightful and revolutional in its depictions of violence, is the one that is censored (Ibid).

The term aestheticization is intrinsically linked to the process of beauty – as Grønstad explains, whether a person praises or rejects the aestheticization of violence in a scene, they are both referring to a "process of beautification" in the image of the film – where the violent scenes are more visually attractive than the material that does not contain violence (Ibid, p. 40). However, Grønstad argues that film violence *cannot* be aestheticized – because, by definition, film violence already is aesthetic - therefore, questions of whether it is beautiful or not becomes insignificant (Ibid). Instead, the close association to beauty can hinder critical

aesthetics in understanding complexities of different textual forms – especially in regards to violence (Ibid, p. 41). As stated, whether violence in a film is commended or condemned, it is because of "the perceived beauty of its composition" – either outweighing potential ethical issues because of its aesthetic qualities, or, in the opposite scenario, is harmful because of its beautifying of violence, disguising the reality of the material (Ibid). While it may be true to some that, say, a thought provoking art-film is superior in its depiction of violence as opposed to an "exploitative" blockbuster action film, the perception of what is beautiful is rather an experience than something inherently in its representation (Ibid, p. 42). Depictions of violence at its core comes down to specific stylistic choices that are available from a variety of options, and what options that are privileged at a certain time is influenced by "extra-textual factors", such as what technical options are available, the style of the director, the narrative context, the censorship practices, etc. (Ibid). Why some of these choices are given value in terms of beauty and others are not, is in Grønstad's assessment, not clear – "from a stylistic point of view, all technical options are equally valid as vehicles of artistic beauty, since the aesthetic function does not rely on the beautiful but on the formal qualities of the work" (Ibid). Furthermore, the judgment of what is deemed beautiful, when speaking of aesthetics, is inevitably a subjective endeavor on part of the critic, but additionally, bound to the politics of taste – and the social and cultural opinions of what can be deemed as art (Ibid, p. 43-44). Without going too in depth on Grønstad's criticism of aestheticism, he argues that if the problematic interconnectedness of aesthetics and beauty are severed, it could make way for a much more useful approach of the term – aesthetics as a theory removed from the connotations of beauty is better equipped to analyze the form of violence, narratively (how the violence is constructed within the context of the narrative) and stylistically (how the violence is depicted through different technical choices of the medium, and how these choices can be explained within the context of the film and wider historical context) (Ibid, p. 49).

Now, the aim of this thesis is not to critically analyze the depiction of violence in *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* or *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*, but I argue that the fallacies Grønstad outlines illustrates some of the different approaches that are applied to understanding, analyzing and critiquing violence on screen – additionally, it illustrates the constant occupation with and debates surrounding the topic of violence on screen, both scholarly, in the mass media, and in the public. However inherent to human nature, or embedded in American culture, fictional violence seemingly always sparks controversy –

whether it is a question of negatively affecting the youth, whether it serves a cathartic purpose, whether it is aestheticized and exempt from critique, whether it is foundational to the myths of society, or a reflection of society's violent nature. In some ways, I would argue that the critique and controversy surrounding fictional violence mirrors the discourse that continuously surrounds true crime. Violence is arguably an inherent part of all true crime narratives – and furthermore, the violence of such narratives are that of real life occurrences. Where Grønstad critiques mimeticism, for instance, for suggesting an inherent relationship between fictional violence and real violence, I argue the keyword is just that: fictional. An added layer of ethical issues of sorts, the recreation, or rather, reenactment of real life crime inevitably poses further questions. While reenactments are in and of itself fictional, as they are merely recreations of real life occurrences, their representations are often up for discussion when discussing true crime narratives.

Reenactments and its different forms and presentations are further explored throughout this thesis, both in this chapter and the comparative analysis of my two chosen series. I argue that reenactments of the violence which has taken place, plays a significant role in the perceived tone of the respective documentaries – where tone will be outlined properly in the fourth chapter on methods. While on the topic of violence and ethicality, I will further discuss some of the many ethical dilemmas that seem to constantly surround the true crime genre.

3.4 The Ethical Dilemmas of True Crime

Before continuing the discussion of the contemporary true crime genre, I find it important to address some of the pressing issues that seem to constantly surround it, a sort of elephant in the room that is present whenever the topic of true crime comes up. Given the nature of the genre – present in its very name – *true* crime – there are moral and ethical dimensions of the discussion that are impossible to overlook. Considering that the genre at its very core deals with real life trauma, it is a talking point that inevitably comes up throughout this thesis, despite the fact that ethical dilemmas surrounding true crime are not the main objective of this thesis.

Some of the concerns that often surface in discussions of the genre include whether the victims and their families are harmed by the documentaries, if society becomes desensitized to crime and violence (reminiscent of empiricism, the concern of unwanted effects caused by consumption of screened violence (Grønstad, 2008, p. 27), whether documentaries can

glorify killers, and possibly interference with criminal investigations and court proceedings. Positive outcomes are also debated – perhaps documentaries can lead to solving cases, shed light on potentially wrongful convictions and faults in the legal system or bring further justice to or provide agency for the victims and their stories. Discussions as such seem to constantly be present regarding the positives and negatives of the genre with every new documentary release (Stoneman & Packer, 2020, p. 2).

The article by Schechter that I briefly mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, explains the legitimacy that *In Cold Blood* brought to the genre, as true crime literature of prior lacked a sort of seriousness (2012, p. 7). Furthermore, Murley ascribes this same notion of illegitimacy to the true crime magazines of prior, and as will be illustrated further, true crime television shows who sometimes engage in less favorable depictions of real life crimes. This shroud of illegitimacy is something I would argue still lingers today – and will be illustrated further throughout this thesis. Murley poses several questions in the introduction of her book that through my research I have found reiterated several times:

> Why is there such an easy acceptance of murder as entertainment? Why are we so preoccupied with sexual violence against women, and what is the appeal of the genre for women, who make up the majority of its audience? Why do the vast majority of true-crime depictions deal with white, middle-class killers and victims, thereby ignor- ing the real dimensions of homicide in America, which is statistically more prevalent in urban communities of color? (Murley, 2008, p. 2).

Critical questions such as these have been prevalent and continue to be so. As Murley explains, ever since the 1960's when true crime literature was instated as serious and found its place in popular culture, proponents of the genre have tried to either answer or avoid these questions (Ibid, p. 2). Murley even suggests that the genre and all its problematic tendencies can be viewed as a counter effort to the social progress that has taken place since the 60's – such as feminism and multiculturalism (Ibid, p. 3).

It is easy enough to answer *when* the contemporary true crime genre began to rise in popularity – a more complicated question is *why* it did. One can theorize that humans are naturally drawn to crime, murder and mysteries, and that people possess a sort of morbid curiosity, an innate fascination with the darkest parts of ourselves and the world, a way to confront our deepest fears and anxieties. This could fall in line with the argument of mimeticism – true crime reflects our society, or even catharsis, a way to alleviate fear. Some propose that women in particular, which seem to be disproportionately interested in true crime, may consume true crime to confront the fear of being victimized, or learn from such

narratives as to not be victimized themselves – an argument I will return to later in this chapter.

Consumers of true crime might find the genre appealing for many different reasons, but on a larger, societal scale, Murley attributes the increase in popularity as a response to rising crime rates in America, stating that "true-crime depictions have formed a momentous cultural response to a frightening rise in violent, seemingly random crime in our society between the 1960s and the present" (2008, p. 3). With spiking crime rates, the fear of social chaos, and the threat of depraved killers such as the Manson family murders and psychopaths on film, true crime helped "make sense" of such tragedies in the 1970's. In the 1980's and 1990's, true crime further made its way into popular culture, and made forensics and technical aspects of investigations available and part of the general public's knowledge. As Murley states, "We have become a nation of violent crime pseudoexperts, with many ordinary people able to speak intelligently about blood-spatter patterns and "organized" versus "disorganized" serial killers" (Murley, 2008, p. 3). This sentiment, I argue, relates to the main object of this thesis – the web sleuth – with ordinary citizens taking on the role of internet detectives, both aiding and interfering with investigations. In this line of thinking, the true crime documentary's rise in popularity in the 2010's could be argued to be caused by a decreased trust in the American justice system, where one could theorize that the web sleuth is a culmination of this tendency, a way to seek justice on their own within a system that is seemingly fraught with corruption and misuse of power – this argument will be discussed further in the analysis in chapter 5.

When becoming popular, the true crime genre simultaneously informs consumers of crimes and killers, and exacerbates the fears of said crimes and killers. Murley argues that true crime creates a world-view of paranoia of crime – people have intimate and extensive knowledge about violence and killers, which both heightens the anxieties of becoming a victim while also making the possibility of random violence seem less plausible (Ibid, p. 3). True crime narratives, according to Murley, enforces an outlook of "good vs. evil" – it gives us insight into the minds of the killers, the psychopaths, the monsters, the ones that do the bad deeds – who are not like the rest of us. Murley sums up this argument by stating:

> Through representational strategies which posit certain kinds of killers as "monstrous" or outside the realm of normative human morality, the emergence of the figure of the sociopath/psychopath, the creation of a textual and visual landscape of paranoia and fear of "stranger- danger," and by portraying these conditions as reflective of ordinary American reality, the true-crime aesthetic both managed and helped create fears of crime and violence (Murley, 2008, p. 3-4).

Another way to conceptualize the consumption of true crime, or rather, violence in general, is to regard the act of looking as a necessary voyeurism. In the book *Ethics and Images of Pain*, Mark Ledbetter explores the ethical integrity of voyeurism, arguing that to look and gaze at every moment will allow for participation – the gaze will be returned, and an ethically beneficial process of sorts will take place. To look – whether it is invited, embarrassing, or shameful – enables involvement, one becomes emboldened and embodied, and can thereby embark on an ethical performance within (Ledbetter, 2012, p. 3). While acknowledging the potential of violation when looking both in private and public, to look *empathetically* is to be violated in return, a sense of blame, responsibility and empathy calling one to act. For as Ledbetter states, we are all voyeurs – it is how the looker, in framing the ethical moment and assessing its implications, decides the reaction in response that is the crucial moment (Ibid, p. 5). In this line of thinking, one could perhaps view the consumption of true crime as a necessary voyeurism – imagining an audience that engages with true crime narratives introspectively, empathetically, and in turn react in response. This may be true to some extent, but can be further problematized – Tanya Horeck, in her book called *Justice on Demand: True Crime in the Digital Streaming Era* (2019) argues that readily available true crime content, and particularly, the act of binge watching true crime documentaries, elicits affective involvement for the spectator while diminishing the ability to reflect on the nature of the content. Despite the long-form, bingeable true crime documentaries emphasizing the potential of deep immersion and critical reflection in its audience, she argues that the reason such content performs well is due to their solicitation of emotional responses (Horeck, 2019, p. 130). As such, a large consumption of true crime narratives might hinder the ability of an ethical performance within.

Now, returning to Murley and her lineage of the true crime film genre – with its long-lasting and plentiful examples, the medium of film has produced many different iterations of true crime – from sympathetic or pathologizing portrayals of killers, to highly devoted portrayals or critiques of the police and the justice system, and critiques of the media and the true crime genre itself (Murley, 2008, p. 81). Let us briefly go through some major developments and conventions of the genre.

Murley situates the period from 1948-1973 as "the early cautious years" – her first example being *The Naked City* (1948), American film noir regarded as the "prototype" for films and TV shows depicting police procedurals (Ibid, p. 82). The film, instead of focusing on a lone

detective (as was typical for film noir), follows ordinary police officers with ordinary lives, solving and combating a crime-stricken New York. The film aimed to showcase a realistic portrayal of police work and crime, and introduced tropes that are a staple in police procedurals - good cop/bad cop, interrogations, victim identifications and crime scene investigations to name a few (Ibid). Further, the film introduced tropes and themes that are still integral to the true crime genre, such as "...voyeurism, seriality, the voice over, the menacing but mundane landscape, and violent death as an inevitable fact of modern life" (Ibid, p. 83).

Skipping ahead to 1960, one of the most influential horror films of all time was released: *Psycho* by Alfred Hitchcock. Based on serial killer Ed Gein, the antagonist of the film (Norman Bates) embodies the figure of the evil psychopath that has permeated popular culture ever since (Ibid, p. 85-86). The cinematic figure of the psychopath draws on the fear that anybody, however seemingly unthreatening, could be a monster beneath the facade – coinciding with the common fear of the cold war and the "lurking communist" narrative in 1950's America (Ibid). The psychopath was further implemented in popular culture with the release of the film adaptation of *In Cold Blood* in 1967. The film, shot at the real location of the Clutter family murders, explored two types of killers: the morally bankrupt, easily identifiable murderer Dick Hickock, and the seemingly sympathetic but revealed to be psychopathic Perry Smith (Ibid). The film additionally brings forth a theme that Murley deems paramount when it comes to true crime – figuring out *why* and *how* murder takes place. In this period, investigating the personality, background and motivation of the psychopath became the target in true crime films – much like its literary counterpart (Ibid, p. 87).

In Cold Blood refrained from depicting the explicit and gory details of the Clutter murders, opting instead for a more "descreet and tasteful" presentation of violence - never showing the actual shootings, but rather depending on a gothic atmosphere and expressions of the victims - cutting away at the most gruesome moments (Ibid). Given the location of filming (the actual Clutter home) the depiction is chilling, yet, the film was praised for its tastefulness in recreating the murders (Ibid, p. 88). In the 1960's, motion picture production codes still lingered, and it was still uncommon for filmmakers to display explicit violence – in the following decade, however, experimentations with aestheticized, bloody and gory depictions

of violence began to become the standard in fiction films (Ibid, p. 89). Concluding the section on true crime films, I will now continue with the true crime documentary.

3.5 True Crime on Television

Television and true crime have a close relationship, with three main types which Murley outlines - the crime documentary, the detective fiction program and the crime drama, using real stories as plotlines (Murley, 2008, p. 109). As a medium, true crime on television has had several consequences - it has helped reinforce a "law-and-order" ideology, further teach the public about forensic technologies and criminal procedurals, as well as being a popular and prolific genre for television networks (Ibid, p. 110).

I would further argue that the many prolific crime shows, reality based or fictional, have aided in the evolution of the websleuth. Along with magazines, books and films, true crime television in particular has helped create what Murley calls "…a nation of crime pseudoexperts…", where the viewers find themselves familiarized with the world of crime and crime solving (Ibid, p. 110). A feature of many crime shows such as *CSI* is the showcasing of tedious forensic work and investigative techniques, made "sexy" for the viewer, implementing a language of crime and crime solving in popular culture – so much so that "the CSI effect" has become a term – a phenomenon where jurors who consume *CSI* come to expect all serious criminal cases to have some sort of forensic science part of the trial (Ibid, p. 112). Shows such as *America's Most Wanted* directly invite the public to participate in crime solving, asking for the audience's help in identifying suspects and apprehend criminals – further reinforcing the public as harbors of criminal knowledge and familiarization with the language (Ibid, p. 111). Another affordance of the TV medium is to bring true crime into the home, providing an additional intimacy with both murder and criminal proceedings, becoming another form of entertainment alongside the plethora of other genres that are hosted by the medium (Ibid). Television true crime has arguably brought on a further closeness between the audience and the genre and its language, which I argue has aided in creating communities of web sleuths who desire to investigate and solve real life crimes on their own. Further fueled by the affordances of the internet, I will continue this discussion in the section on the web sleuth later in this chapter.

3.5.1 The Early True Crime Documentary

In 1988, the highly influential true crime documentary *The Thin Blue Line* by Errol Morris was released. Murley argues that *The Thin Blue Line* has been paramount in its impact on the genre, changing the standards of murder narration as well as calling the trust of the criminal justice system into question (Murley, 2008, p. 99). The documentary deals with the wrongful conviction of Randall Adams, accused of murdering police officer Robert Wood. It is heavily implied that Adams was framed by a corrupt system, and the documentary calls his guilt into question - Adams ended up being acquitted of his charges upon appeal (Ibid, p. 99). Morris' documentary, as Murley puts it, "...introduced a strong critical and investigative impulse into true-crime filmmaking and altered the stylistic and thematic direction of the genre", with stylized reenactments (which I argue is a staple of the genre), interviews, ambiguity, and a dark and moody look, as well as a sort of merging of fact and fiction (Ibid). Where Murley explains (and as previously mentioned throughout this account) that the genre usually has dealt with solved cases and the perpetrators' reasons as to the why and how, *The Thin Blue Line* instead deals with the why and how of the aftermath – why and how the justice system failed, how Adams was framed, and so forth (Ibid, p. 99).

The Thin Blue Line brought awareness to the threat of false imprisonments and miscarriages of justice, a tradition that has continued within the contemporary true crime genre – and will be further illustrated as I outline the true crime documentary of the 2010's. What was previously thought of as appropriate measures to the threat of increasing crime in the 1970's and 1980's, with mass amounts of incarcerations, was called into question. The justice system was revealed to the public to not be as just as was thought, especially as DNA and other forensic technologies became more sophisticated and trustworthy than that of previous tools, such as polygraph tests and confessions that are easily coerced (Murley, 2008, p. 100).

Murley argues that the true crime genre, in both the medium of books and films, is generally "conservative" in that the narratives most often involve solved cases with seemingly strong narrative conclusions, which often elicit strong emotions and in turn uphold a need for "law and order" (Ibid, p. 102). *The Thin Blue Line* was the first of many in the sub-genre of true crime which Murley terms as "justice-gone-wrong" – "Since *The Thin Blue Line* was made, crime documentarians and fiction filmmakers alike have made murder narratives with more varied and critical postmodern themes and narrative styles" (Ibid, p. 102). I would like to mention the two documentaries that I will be analyzing in the fifth chapter of this thesis, *I'll*

Be Gone in the Dark and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*. The former concerns the serial rapist and killer, dubbed the Golden State killer, and could be described as a traditional, conservative true crime narrative in the sense that the perpetrator is caught within the span of the series, offering a fairly neat conclusion to the case. The latter is likewise in that the case of Elisa Lam is closed, yet, there are still some questions surrounding the case. Additionally, *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* features elements of "justice-gone-wrong" – not necessarily aimed at the police, but rather, the operations of the websleuths. This will be explored more thoroughly in the analysis and discussion.

The self-reflexive habit, Murley argues, has increasingly become part of true crime documentaries.

> As true-crime film has developed, matured, and interacted with other mediums, it began to more frequently challenge and question itself, in some cases profiting from the very appetites it reprimanded the viewer for having. Beginning in the 1980s, writers and directors (...) started to interrogate the construction of serial killing as a subject of pop culture preoccupation, along with the larger issue of the American infatuation with aestheticized representations of violence (Ibid, p. 104).

Throughout the 1980's and 1990's, several fiction films, such as *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1986), direct a critical look at the consumption, or voyeurism of violence in American audiences. Some films displayed serial killers in all their depravity, a sort of nihilistic approach that delves into the darkness and negativity of the modern world fully, as the exploration and fascination of violence is arguably inherent to humans – a furthering of the self-exploratory tendency that Murley describes – which also resembles Grønstad's (2012) conceptualization of the mimeticism fallacy, where fictional violence is believed to reflect the violent nature of the real world.

In the 2000's, true crime fiction films such as *Zodiac* (2007) were adapted from books, and shine the spotlight on the writers' *obsession* rather than the killers they investigated, depicting the backstory and creation of the books (Ibid, p. 108). Murley argues that this tendency, which she calls "meta-nonfiction" – character stories of people surrounding the murders, the writers and their conceptualizations of the killers, could be the future of true crime narratives. Interestingly, I believe she was somewhat right in her assessment – not only in fiction, but in documentary narratives. *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* (based on the book with the same name) which I will be analyzing later in this thesis – while focusing on the golden state killer, is mainly concerned with writer Michelle McNamara and her obsession and pursuit of the killer. *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel,* while not focusing on a writer, is similarly

"meta" – instead of just exploring the death of Elisa Lam, it is also highly concerned with the web sleuths who devoured the case online, and the effect it had on the investigation and unfounded suspects. Indeed, these examples are far more concerned with the surroundings of the crimes than the intricate details of the crimes themselves – although they are still very much present and depicted in the series.

3.6 The Contemporary True Crime Documentary Series of the 2010's

Murley's book was released in 2008, and the true crime documentary has inevitably continued to evolve since her exploration of the genre. In this following section I will continue outlining the true crime documentary series of the 2010's – where the genre seemingly saw a rise in popularity with successful and renowned releases on streaming platforms such as HBO and Netflix. Some examples are *Tiger King* (2020), *Don't F**k with Cats* (2019), *Making a Murderer* (2015) and of course, the two series of analysis in this thesis, *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* (2020) and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* (2021) among an abundance of others.

Why this current cycle has occurred could be the result of several developments in the last decade, such as the heightened production value of true crime documentaries released on streaming platforms like HBO and Netflix, where several have become critically renowned (Bolin, 2018), and furthermore, facilitate binge watching and "devouring" of such gripping narratives (Horeck, 2019). Whereas I mentioned the medium of television bringing true crime into the home, no less can be said for the streaming platforms that have come to dominate spectatorship in the 2010's. Furthermore, I would argue that the increasing access to the internet has provided additional interest in the genre, allowing more people to gain deeper knowledge on crime cases. I argue that the figure of the web sleuth – and the main object of analysis in this thesis – encapsulates this notion. A thorough rundown on this figure is soon to follow, but first, let's explore and situate what I deem the contemporary true crime documentary series through some articles and scholarly contributions on the matter.

In a 2018 article for Vulture, Alice Bolin details the difference between "highbrow" and "lowbrow" true crime documentaries, with the former representing the critically acclaimed, high production value contemporary true crime documentary. Bolin takes notice of the newfound popularity of the genre, and finds it a peculiar pop culture phenomenon in that it is rather an acceptance of an old obsession than a new genre or type of narrative (Bolin, 2018).

As has been illustrated through the account of true crime's long history in popular culture above, the genre has indeed been present and popular for centuries.

Where Bolin takes issue with the trend as of recent, is the ethicality surrounding such "highbrow", critically acclaimed documentaries. She claims that "the difference between highbrow and lowbrow in the new true crime is often purely aesthetic", and stresses how the new, well-received documentary is increasingly important to examine, as it is "taken seriously" as opposed to the more sensationalist, "campy" lowbrow true crime content such as that of the TV shows outlined in the previous section (Ibid). Bolin further argues that the smart, prestigious true crime documentary of the 2010's focuses on individual cases in minute detail, instead of questioning the systemic injustices in the legal system and society at large. Using the term "post-true crime" to describe the criticism of the contemporary true crime documentary, she explains that "post-true crime is explicitly or implicitly about the popularity of the new true-crime wave, questioning its place in our culture, and resisting or responding to its conventions" (Ibid). While I do not necessarily align this thesis with the "post-true crime" term, Bolin poses some interesting questions about the evolving genre. So what exactly does a contemporary true crime documentary of the 2010's look like, then?

Stella Bruzzi examines the genre in her 2016 article "Making a Genre: the Case of the Contemporary True Crime Documentary", looking at several examples from the 2000's to the 2010's, and discussing some of the trend's major and distinctive elements (p. 250). In the article, she recognizes the similarities between some of the most popular true crime documentaries to date at the time, namely *The Staircase*, *The Jinx* and *Making a Murderer*. Bruzzi, as with Bolin, takes notice of the trend as of late – and while she deems it difficult to give a retrospective on a genre that is seemingly still in motion, she adequately highlights some of the genre's conventions - which I will now detail and explore.

Starting off with *The Staircase* (2004), a documentary series by Jean Xavier de Lestrade, which follows the trial and eventual conviction of Michael Peterson, accused of murdering his wife Kathleen in 2001 (Bruzzi, 2016, p. 250). The documentary presented an intimate look into the Peterson family and the case in general, as de Lestrade followed both the Petersons and both legal sides of the trial as it happened in real time, beginning filming only six weeks after Kathleen's death. Despite having access to both sides, the prosecutors were less open and willing – and the documentary as a result mostly features and favors Peterson's side to the story – de Lestrade stated that he believed Peterson's account, and would be

unable to make the documentary if he didn't – yet, as Bruzzi states, "...after two and half years of close proximity to Peterson, de Lestrade still did not know 'for sure' whether his subject was innocent or guilty, a lack of certainty he shares with many later true crime documentary directors" (Ibid, p. 251).

The Staircase, while released after the guilty verdict against Peterson, follows a chronological narrative structure. The episodes focus on one particular piece of evidence, peculiarity or coincidence, and features crime scene evidence heavily – Bruzzi even remarks it as fetishistic (Ibid). *The Staircase*, among many other true crime documentaries to come, called into question the validity of evidence that is commonly presented as reliable in US courts – such as footage of confessions and crime scenes (Ibid). Another aspect that made the series so memorable and influential, according to Bruzzi, was its exploitation and usage of the narrative that is inherently part of a real trial – "...the most affective, dramatic narrative comes from reality not fiction…" and many documentaries of the genre employ this same method (Ibid, p. 252). To summarize the impact and influence of *The Staircase*, Bruzzi explains that the documentary managed to showcase the way in which following trials make such great entertainment, while also complicating the idea that trials make the perfect subject matter because of their narrative cohesion (Ibid).

While on the topic of *The Staircase* (2004) – in recent years, several true crime documentaries have spawned fictional TV series based on the original documentaries, or at least the popularity the documentaries garnered around the case. *The Staircase* (2022), for instance, is a miniseries on HBO which is centered around the case of Michael Peterson, his family, the death of his wife, the documentary he partook in (de Lestrade is featured as well, granted a storyline of its own), as well as the trial. While I have not watched the series, it seems to be a prestigious headlining project for HBO, with heavy-weight actors such as Colin Firth as Michael Peterson and Toni Collette as Kathleen Peterson, among others.

The adaptation had been in the works for several years, but upon release, de Lestrade and the crew of the original *The Staircase* took great offense to some of the series' depictions of their work, arguing that the new miniseries misconstrues their impartiality and portrays them as biased in Peterson's favor (Miller, 2022). Other examples of fiction series based on true crime documentaries are *The Dropout* (2022) based on a podcast with the same name, *The Act* (2019) and *Joe vs. Carole* (2022) among several others. The tendency to create crime dramas based directly on or off the backs of the popularity of true crime documentaries (or

podcasts) is an interesting development in the true crime genre as a whole, arguably another "meta" aspect in the evolution of true crime where fiction series depict the documentaries that depict the "reality" - potentially dramatizing and misconstruing "reality" of the making of a documentary as with *The Staircase,* sort of replicating reality twice removed. An interesting phenomenon that perhaps needs further investigation, I now move on with Bruzzi's exploration of the contemporary true crime documentary.

The Jinx, a documentary series from 2015 by Andrew Jarecki tells the bizarre story of Robert Durst. Bruzzi's discussion of the series – which she deems glossy, with a heavy usage of reenactments and a dominating score – leads into a discussion of how documentaries treat and relate to their subjects. Some follow cases to their conclusion, such as *The Staircase*, and some re-examine closed cases, retrospectively assess past trials and judgements, or demand for them to be reopened due to perceived miscarriages of justice (Bruzzi, 2016, p. 266). Many, like *The Jinx, Serial,* and *Making a Murderer*, become directly involved in the legal process, some becoming contributory in bringing cases to trial (Ibid).

The Thin Blue line, as previously discussed, directly influenced the real life case and led to the acquittal of Randall Adams. The Jinx, similarly stylized and filled with reenactments, had a direct legal impact when Robert Durst, the eccentric subject, confessed to murder on audio in the finale of the series. This shocking twist caused some controversy, and it has been debated whether Jarecki obtained this confession secretly, and whether the confession would be admissible in court or not (Bruzzi, 2016, p. 267).

One of the largest criticisms of the Jinx, which is also a common criticism of true crime documentaries in general, is the heavy-handed use of reenactments (Bruzzi, 2016, p. 268). In an article by the New Yorker, which Bruzzi also references, Richard Brody comments on the use of reenactments in true crime documentaries, arguing that excessive fictional reenactments hinder the imagination of the viewer, while also disrupting the tone and authenticity of the work (Brody, 2015). Bruzzi then asks –"What do re-enactments add and what roles do they play? Can they, even obliquely, serve an investigative function or are they always 'flannel' that merely detracts and distracts from the investigation being undertaken?" (Bruzzi, 2016, p. 269). Scholars and critics seem to have differing opinions on the matter – some argue that reenactments aim to confirm the narrative that is presented, something of particular interest when the documentary serves an investigative function – disguising itself as a form of evidence, teetering on fact, when it is mere fiction (Ibid, p. 270). Bill Nichols

remarks that reenactments present themselves as depicting something historically unique –
the events have already happened, and are inaccessible – resulting in a sort of uncanny sense
of repetition (Ibid). Then there is the likes of Brody, who additionally critiques the usage for
its lack of imagination – for imagination is essentially imagining what is not there, and
reenactments therefore serve as a "short-circuiting" of the process (2015). In the comparative
analysis to come, *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil
Hotel*'s usage of reenactments will be discussed at length – and how I believe their different
presentations constitute certain tones and attitudes implied to the material – returning to this
argument in the analysis, I will further explore the contemporary true crime documentary.

Bruzzi continues with the true crime documentary *Making a Murderer* (2015) as well as the
successful podcast series *Serial* (2015) – both, she deems the most high-profile true crime
narratives as of recent. For the purposes of this thesis, I will refrain from going too in depth
on the latter, although true crime podcasts are a massive, popular medium of its own, and an
inevitable part of the contemporary true crime genre. As Bruzzi states:

> Serial is part of a much more variegated media world in which true crime documentaries come in so
> many forms: short episodes or long, to be downloaded or streamed online, watched via (and sometimes
> funded by) subscription viewing services such as Netflix or Amazon Prime, not just to be watched but
> also scruti- nised in tandem with continually updated webpages and breaking news stories. It is
> likewise becoming ever increasingly apparent that the contemporary media viewer does not uniformly
> pigeonhole their watching or listening into sharply delineated boxes such as 'documentary', 'fiction',
> 'television', 'radio' or 'download' but flip between them with alacrity (2016, p. 274-275).

Making a Murderer by Moira Demos and Laura Ricciardi for Netflix became a global
phenomenon upon its release. Like *Serial,* it revolves itself around a potential miscarriage of
justice, but as Bruzzi argues, it is highly partial in that the filmakers followed the Avery
family and the case for over ten years, driven by a belief that Stephen Avery and his nephew
are innocent. Avery, first convicted of rape and attempted murder, to then to be exonerated
after 18 years of imprisonment, was charged with the murder of photographer Teresa Halbech
along with his nephew Brendan Dassey (Ibid, p. 275). In terms of style, the series is in
Bruzzi's words "ordinary" – it does not have stylized reenactments, and the filming style is
straight-forward, which in turn arguably asserts a certain transparency (Ibid, p. 277). It is as if
the series tells the audience – the jury – that they would have reached a different verdict
(Ibid).

3.7 The Web Sleuth

Following the detailing of the rise of the true crime genre and the contemporary true crime documentary and its conventions, I now turn to my preliminary research question for this thesis: How are web sleuths depicted in *I'll be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*? To answer this question, I must first establish the figure, its history and why the act of websleuthing seemingly has increased, before examining the representations of it in the chosen documentaries through textual analysis. If the psychopath was a staple figure of fascination in true crime in the 1980's, I would argue that the web sleuth figure (albeit less threatening) has become a staple of the contemporary true crime genre as a whole. While not new, the internet has inevitably made their practices and presence more noticable. Following is an exploration of the figure and how scholars conceptualize it.

The web sleuth figure, while well known through pop culture discourse, has seemingly received less attention scholarly. Other terms that are often used to describe this figure include, but are not limited to: internet sleuths, cyber detectives, digital vigilantes and armchair detectives (Yardley et al., 2016, p. 82) I have chosen and will be using the terms "web sleuth" (the person/figure) and "websleuthing" (the act/verb) for consistency throughout this thesis, and will provide a brief explanation of the terms. "The Web" is defined in the Merriam-webster dictionary as "the part of the Internet that can be looked at with a special program (called a browser) and that is made up of many documents which are linked together —often used before another noun" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). "Sleuth" is defined as "detective" in the Merriam-webster dictionary, whereas sleuthing is defined as *acting* as a detective. In conjunction, web sleuth or the verb web sleuthing can thereby be further defined as an online detective/online detective work. Let's now explore the web sleuth.

Web sleuths are private individuals who become invested in criminal cases and consequently conduct their own independent research and investigative work, often online and in internet forums where theories and speculations are exchanged with others (Tallerico, 2021). In an article by Elizabeth Yardley, Adam Lynes, David Wilson and Emma Kelly, the operation of the web sleuth is described as follows: "any private citizen with an interest in crime and a smartphone, laptop or tablet can now go online and connect with others in crowdsourced

amateur investigations" (2016, p. 82). While the true crime genre has been popular for what now has been established as centuries, the internet has certainly made the possibility of participation in investigative efforts much more attainable. True crime enthusiasts have the ability, with the internet as a tool, to delve further into specific cases that spark their interest. Websleuthing is often done through designated online forums, where some examples are the website aptly called "websleuths", as well as different forums on Reddit. Yardley et al. in my assessment adequately summarize the behavior of the web sleuth in their article by stating that

> They engage in varying levels of amateur detective work including but not limited to searching for information, uploading documents, images and videos, commenting, debating, theorising, analysing, identifying suspects and attempting to engage with law enforcement and other organisations and individuals connected to the cases (Yardley et al., 2016, p. 82).

In an article from 1998, called "Armchair Detectives and Armchair Thieves", Keith Soothill discusses the use of the public in crime investigations through televised shows such as *Most Wanted* and *Crimewatch UK*. Airing in 1984, *Crimewatch UK* was one of the first installments of TV programming where the police and the media worked in cooperation to involve the audience. While the article mainly discusses the implications and "dangers" of these types of shows – like increasing fear of crime in audiences, putting a prize on information, inspiring and learning "the trade" of criminals, and not emphasizing prevention – I find that the article, along with Murley's (2008) assessment outlined in the section on true crime television, illustrates that the involvement of the public in crime solving is a long upheld tradition. A quote from the text reads: "The bold assumption seems to be that the millions of 'couch potatoes' watching the programmes are members of the armchair police, a viewing 'neighbourhood watch' scheme…" (Soothill, 1998, p. 158).

The web sleuth, or perhaps more accurately termed "armchair detective" when pertaining to the 80's and 90's, is thereby not a new phenomena. An armchair detective is originally a term describing a fictional figure in crime fiction - a detective who does not conduct an investigation themselves, but either has someone recount information to them or read about it, and thereby solve crimes from their armchair (*Armchair Detective*, n.d.). This figure leaves room for the reader to solve the crime alongside the fictional detective, making it a popular literary figure. Yardley et al. comment on Soothill's text and elaborate on the web sleuth post-internet, stating "developments in computer hardware and software and innovations in networked technologies have given the armchair detective (Soothill, 1998) a new lease of

life" (2016, p. 82). Whereas the web sleuth of prior had access to newspapers, secondhand information and shows like "Crimewatch", the web sleuth of today has access to a vast collection of information.

Cultural criminology further offers some insights as to how to conceptualize web sleuths and the reason for the influx in websleuthing. Using the term "infotainment", which refers to "representations characterized by an intermingling of fact and fiction, imagined and real, combining both information and entertainment" (Yardley et al., 2016, p. 85), the article by Yardley et al. explains that true crime, as part of the infotainment culture, continuously has had an audience interested in participation and discussion. With the presence of the internet, however, participatory involvement is made far more attainable, making the audience able to produce their own observations and share with others - without any training or knowledge on the matter. Web sleuths, according to Yardley et al., are "... active meaning-makers. Their activities are in constant dialogue with – and reflective of – other social phenomena" (Yardley et al., 2016, p. 86).

Feminist media studies scholar Tanya Horeck in her book *Justice on Demand: True Crime in the Digital Streaming Era* (2019) provides some further insight on the contemporary true crime genre fascilitating in participation from its audience. Focusing on the affective power of true crime in networked spaces, Horeck argues that true crime, across multiple platforms and mediums, invites audiences to respond and engage with its emotionally charged narratives and content (2019, p. 3). Not only does the onslaught of social media and interactivity of the internet spread true crime stories to wider audiences – the genre in itself lends itself to such platforms and solicits viewer engagement (Ibid, p. 7). Referring to Mark Andrejevic and his notion of a "culture of detection", she argues that there is an undeniable turn to detection in popular culture – for many, googling, researching and sleuthing on social media sites is a common occurrence (Ibid, p. 4). Furthermore, the public is often invited to become involved in crime solving, with CCTV footage, mugshots and missing persons circulating on facebook and twitter for people to comment, react and theorize on – a sense of a need for collective involvement in crime solving more than ever before (Ibid, p. 6).

While I agree with Horeck's assessments, I would perhaps argue that there is a distinction to be made between the general culture of participation and the devout web sleuth. One could perhaps argue that this culture of detection would make everyone a web sleuth to some degree – but I find it fruitful for this thesis to situate the web sleuth as someone who is

explicitly dedicated to crime solving, as outlined by Yardley et al., for instance. To be clear, it is the depiction of the definite web sleuth that will be analyzed in the following comparative analysis. Nevertheless, Horeck's conceptualization explains the culture that facilitates the prominence of the web sleuth in the first place, and furthermore, "...provides a vital backdrop for the proliferation of true crime texts that have taken hold in the last two decades" (Horeck, 2019, p. 6).

In the article "Armchair detectives and the social construction of falsehoods: an actor–network approach" (2018) Penn Pantumsinchai discusses two instances of large online investigations led by citizens, sparked by the Boston bombing in 2013 and the Bangkok bombing in 2015 respectively. Pantumsinchai explains the affordances of "web 2.0", and how the internet has changed the production of knowledge, similarly to Yardley et al. and Horeck. The article describes how online communities rely on collective intelligence, stating "in essence, knowledge can be created not just from one individual, but from the collaboration of many…" (Pantumsinchai, 2018, p. 763). Online communities, such as web sleuth communities, distribute knowledge amongst each other, creating a sort of shared supply of information made up by individuals. Pantumsinchai further explains that misinformation is bound to occur within the collective intelligence model, because of its very nature. In the cases of the Boston bombing and the Bangkok bombing, the online communities' crowdsourced search for the perpetrators were unsuccessful – resulting in false accusations and humiliation. Pantumsinchai writes:

> Collective intelligence was seen as the online community's greatest strength, and many hoped that with thousands of minds and eyes debating all the possibilities and scanning all the available imagery, the amateur investigations would be successful (Pantumsinchai, 2018, p. 774).

Yet, the collective effort to find the perpetrators would lead to feedback loops and the spreading of misinformation and falsehoods. Pantumsinchai ultimately deems that collective intelligence's greatest obstacle is the fragile nature of the "truth". Claims made online become truths through repetition, and "if a claim for the truth has a strong network of interactions backing it, those in the network will see it as truth" (Ibid, p. 774). Connecting this to web sleuths and web sleuth communities, the quest for crime solving amongst private citizens may lead to wrongful accusations and misinformation. Despite concerns surrounding collective intelligence, websleuthing and its consequences are complicated and nuanced.

Drawing on the same example as Pantumsinchai – the Boston bombing – Yardley et al. elaborates on the relationship between the web sleuths and the police. In this instance, police were dismissive towards the web sleuths' efforts, claiming they were hindering the investigation rather than helping (Yardley et al., 2016, p. 83). While it ultimately would cause more harm than good in the aftermath of the Boston bombing, one could argue, as Yardley et al. mention, that additional help from the public can be of great value. There is also a significant difference in how different web sleuth communities operate (Ibid). For instance, there are those that congregate towards a specific injustice, such as a terrorist attack, and those that are more organized and varied in their approaches to identify criminals, such as groups devoted to cold cases – like the efforts of Michelle McNamara and other web sleuths featured in *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* or the web sleuths that congregating around the Elisa Lam case in *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* (Ibid). One huge proponent of websleuthing, Billy Jensen (who was interestingly a websleuthing partner of Michelle McNamara, helping to finish her book after her passing) in his book *Chase Darkness with Me: How One True-Crime Writer Started Solving Murders* (2019) expresses his genuine belief in the act of websleuthing and crowdsourced investigations. In the epilogue of his book, he addresses the reader directly, calling for anyone with an interest and time to fully immerse themselves in the endeavor. He further poses some rules to follow while websleuthing – do not name names in public, do not expect credit, and lastly, be safe (Jensen, 2019, p. 419-427). Acknowledging instances such as the Boston bombing, Jensen states: "Whenever someone attempts to start a debate on the merits of crowdsourcing investigations, a detractor tosses in the Boston bombing as a conversation ender. Only positive examples of real results can change that" (Ibid, p. 423). His arguments illustrate the supporters of websleuthing's faith in the phenomenon – with the right intentions and determination, web sleuths can be the answer to crime solving. While this may be true under ideal circumstances, it has been shown to not always be the case.

Web sleuth communities, as alluded to, can additionally facilitate in retaliating wrongdoings. As was mentioned in the literature review, referring to media and communications researcher Daniel Trottier (2016), the Yardley et al. article states that "digital vigilantism is conceptualized as a form of *weaponised visibility*, whereby retaliation for perceived wrongdoing takes the form of exposure to public scrutiny and has real, embodied consequences" (Yardley et al., 2016, p. 84). When it comes to a broader, societal context, Trottier makes the claim that digital vigilantism is not inherently a form of weaponized

visibility - the practice should instead be viewed as "...manifestations of the values and norms of digital cultures" (Ibid). Networked spaces, such as Reddit or other social platforms, make information flows possible, thereby creating communities that allow for commenting, collecting and peer surveilling (Ibid). "In a society where to be is to be seen…", digital vigilantism is perhaps a reflection and/or symptom of the culture online in social media networks – somewhat reiterating Horeck's arguments outlined above (Ibid). While web sleuths might partake in digital vigilantism, it is perhaps not a title most web sleuths choose to align themselves with.

In a 2018 article by David Myles, Chantal Benoit-Barné and Florence Millerand, the collective of web sleuths called the "Reddit Bureau of Investigations"- abbreviated to RBI - and their discursive practices are examined. This subreddit (subreddit refers to specific communities on the social network site Reddit) has over 70 000 members as of 2018. A quick search of the subreddit in January of 2022 reveals that the community has grown vastly in numbers: now boasting 519 000 members – perhaps suggesting a growth in web sleuths within the last few years since. The community explains that their motive is to solve crimes and mysteries, where their main goal is to help people in the process – under the "about" section, a statement that reads "Using the power of the internet to solve real-world problems" is included (*RBI: Reddit Bureau of Investigation • r/RBI*, 2012).

The subreddit usually has 1-5 posts a day (or threads, as they are commonly referred to), where the posters often seek help from other redditors – whether they themselves are involved with or know someone involved with a mystery or crime. Myles et al. explain that reddit, while a vast site of countless subreddits, has become intrinsically linked to websleuthing. As some of the controversies showcased above – such as the Boston bombings and other vigilante efforts with negative concequenses – Reddit has, as a result, been scrutinized in fascilitating this kind of behavior. In response, Reddit implemented several rules and regulations against doxing and other punishments enacted by the users - the community amongst themselves also recognized that the individuals participating in the Boston bombing manhunt were violating their common goal, reorganizing their practices and norms (Myles et al., 2018). As was stated in the literature review, the web sleuths of RBI maintain an ambivalent relationship with the police. Throughout their discursive analysis, Myles et al. find that the community tend to distance themselves from the notion of vigilantism – urging users to collaborate and contact police with information, discouraging

retributive vigilantism, and adopting police language in organizing the community. The article states that "Overall, the antagonistic configuration established between police authority and the specter of retributive vigilantism haunts the RBI and largely (but not exclusively) contributes to its daily organization" (Ibid). This points to the community distancing themselves from the somewhat tainted reputation the web sleuth has been ascribed due to controversies such as the Boston bombing, trying to uphold a sense of law and order. The web sleuth is perhaps shrouded with the same illegitimacy that surrounds the genre of true crime – a point which will be returned to in the upcoming analysis and discussion of the depictions of web sleuths in *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*.

3.7.1 The Web Sleuth - An Internet Stereotype?

In the book "Cyberbullies, Cyberactivists, Cyperpredators: Film, TV, and Internet Stereotypes" (2016b), Lauren Rosewarne looks at how different media, such as film and TV, portray and often villainize figures of internet culture. In the fourth chapter, Rosewarne discusses the representations of the "cyberactivists" - more commonly referred to as "hackers" - which I in turn would argue are somewhat closely related to the websleuths, at least in as far as how they are depicted on screen.

Hackers have for a long time been a character commonly seen on screen, being part of narratives as far back as the 1960's, or even prior (Rosewarne, 2016b, p. 119). Rosewarne attributes some of the popularity of this character to entertainment, where hacking and hackers can provide more interesting visuals and story elements to a narrative revolving around technology or the internet, as opposed to the somewhat less interesting typing on keyboards and computer screens filled with code (Ibid).

However popular and common of a figure on screen, though, it is also the receiver of many a criticism, often revolving around the blatantly wrong depictions of what hacking is and how it is done. Hollywood's depictions of hacking is somewhat notoriously, and to some, amusingly, removed from reality. While some tend to forgive such discrepancies in lieu of creating interesting and entertaining scenes to watch (as hacking in reality might not be as exciting in practice), others find wrongful portrayals downright insulting (Ibid, p. 120). Rosewarne argues that the criticisms surrounding the portrayals of hacking is nothing new, but instead a reiteration of the criticisms that continuously surround artistic portrayals of

technology on film (Ibid, p. 121). This argument will be further explored in the analysis of the series' in chapter 6.

Rosewarne continues to outline some of the different archetypes of the hacker. Of particular interest to my thesis, and which I believe somewhat aligns with the depictions of the websleuth figure, is that of the lone vigilante. This archetype is a common one seen on screen – an outsider, hacking either in spite of or in helping the police. An outlaw, the hacking skills are often seen as a virtue, but a virtue that belongs to those of the underground (Ibid, p. 122). Rosewarne brings forth several examples of this figure, and continues with illustrating that the label of outsider is not reserved for the explicitly criminal hackers – being a hacker, with extensive knowledge about computers and code outside the scope of a normal person, is often presented as different – these characters have different interests and skills, talk differently, and some even dress differently (Ibid, p. 123). While many hackers are portrayed as criminal outlaws, attempts, mostly in recent decades, have been made to give the hacker character more nuanced motives, other than just criminal gain.

"Black-hat hacking", Rosewarne explains, is a type of hacking where any weakness in a network or system is exploited for personal gain – this could be embezzlement of money, collecting personal data, blackmail – the list goes on, with Rosewarne drawing on several examples from movies and television (2016b, p. 124). Its counterpart, "white-hat hacking", is then using the same systems and tools as the black-hat hacker, but on the basis of other more virtuous motivations, doing things such as exposing security flaws in networks, exposing black-hat hackers and other criminals (a trope seen several times being that of exposing child predators), and generally being the good guys of hacking (Ibid).

Another variety, the gray-hat hacker, is neither concerned with security or stealing, instead having a "greater goal" of a political nature, such as freedom of information (Ibid, p. 125). An example of this archetype could be the protagonist of the popular TV series "Mr. Robot", named Elliott, who regards himself as a "vigilante hacker". His goal is not monetary gain, rather, he hacks to improve upon society. Similarly, as Rosewarne brings forth, Julian Assange, real life hacker, notes information freedom as his main motive – which is consequently portrayed in the films made about him (2016b, p. 126). Rosewarne argues that the popularity of the gray-hat, seen in several films and shows in recent years, is because of the public's heightened knowledge of hackers through organizations such as "Anonymous" and the WikiLeaks case (Ibid, p. 127). Further, the gray-hat is portrayed as operating in a sort

of moral gray area – breaking the law by hacking, but doing so in the name of helping and improving society. This juxtaposition and ambiguity of hackers, often portrayed as sort of anti-heroes – criminal yet morally just – can make for interesting stories.

Another interesting point Rosewarne makes about the hackers' portrayal in popular media, is that of them often being villainized and othered. Cyberphobia, as she states, has been commonly seen in depictions of the internet on film and TV. In an article she has written on the topic of cyberphobia from 2016, she describes how the internet, while such a common and usually mostly benign part of our lives, very often is presented as a negative in cinema. Increasingly becoming part of narratives, the internet is often presented as an indicator of something dangerous, or a risk – Rosewarne brings forth examples like gaming, dating or shopping online being used as signaling flaws in a character, a danger or a risk, a threat to society, a tool used for evil (Rosewarne, 2016a). The fear of technology is nothing new though, as she explains – technophobia, the broader term for the fear of advancing technology, has been present in narratives for long. Yet, the hacker adds another dimension of fear, becoming the dangers of the internet personified.

What does the hacker have to do with the websleuth, though? I would argue there are several parallels that could be found between these two stereotypes, or figures, portrayals on screen. Now, it goes without saying that not every websleuth is a hacker, and vice versa, yet, I find some commonalities in their characteristics, which will be further explained in the analysis of the two series' depictions to come. It is perhaps the archetypes of the white-hat and gray-hat hacker who evokes the most associations with the websleuths, motivated by a greater goal, improving society, retaliating against wrong-doings and seeking justice. As was illustrated in the section pertaining to the websleuth, they additionally could be said to operate in a moral gray area much like the hacker is often portrayed to be. While operating in the name of crime solving, the results can sometimes be that of weaponized visibility and spreading of misinformation, where wrongful accusations and scrutinization of investigations can occur. Parallels between the websleuth and the hacker and the way they are portrayed will be further explored in the analysis of this thesis, where *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* especially evokes such associations in their portrayal of the websleuth.

3.8 A Gendered Genre

The true crime genre, as Murley alludes to several times in her book, is seemingly most popular amongst women. As I find it an important aspect and dimension of the genre, I will outline some of the research done on the demographics of the genre, which will be further discussed in the discussion of this thesis. Where the assumed reader of the true crime magazines and books were thought to be middle class males, research has shown this to not be true.

A study conducted by the University of Illinois, lead by Amanda Vicary from 2010 revealed that women are far more likely to choose true crime books as opposed to men when choosing between violent reading material - women gravitated towards true crime stories of victims similar to themselves, where the gender of the author seemingly played no role, whereas men opted for non-fiction about war or gang violence (Yates, 2010). The study firstly analyzed Amazon reviews, finding that 70 percent of true crime book reviews were written by women - 82 percent of books about war were written by men (Ibid). Several follow-up studies alluded to the same tendency, where women were also more interested in books with female victims (Ibid). But why?

It was somewhat surprising to the researchers that women seemed to favor true crime stories over men, as it is and has been a known fact that men are overwhelmingly represented in perpetrating violent crimes. The researchers theorized that women are drawn to stories of victims similar to themselves as a sort of a means of preservation. As one of the researchers states in the article, "...there may be an evolutionary benefit to learning from others' negative experiences…" (Yates, 2010). Women tend to be more fearful of violent crimes, and in turn, reading and learning about such stories can help them avoid or fend off a potential attack to themselves - a means of alleviating the fear of becoming victimized. This argument, I find, has some associations with the theory of catharsis, which I briefly outlined earlier in this chapter. Not so much in that women are purging violent or negative tendencies, but rather, a way to empathize with the victims of true crime narratives and confront the fear of potentially becoming victimized themselves. As mentioned, Grønstad states that viewing violent material is not proven to produce catharsis (Grønstad, 2008), and I would argue that the notion that women consume true crime as an evolutionary benefit is far from proven as well, although it is an interesting theory.

While it may be true that women are more likely to consume true crime literature – as was stated in the true crime book section, true crime authors are also increasingly female – could the same be said for the consumers of true crime documentaries? According to some articles, it appears so. Vicary, who conducted the initial study on true crime literature in 2010, expressed that the same tendencies have remained true with the onslaught of the contemporary true crime documentary and its popularity. In an article written by Laura Grande for Slice, Vicary is quoted as stating:

> Although my original study was conducted on true crime books, I firmly believe the results would remain the same whether I studied podcasts, television shows [and] documentaries (...) If you look at the statistics regarding crime podcast listeners, you'll see that it skews heavily female. It's clear that women are into true crime, regardless of the specific medium (Grande, 2021).

This popularity is perhaps best documented in the podcast genre, where the podcast *Wine and Crime,* for instance, stated that their audience were 85% female in 2018 (Grande, 2021). This might be due to the fact that many such podcasts (with other examples such as *My Favorite Murder, Crime Junkie* and *Drunk Women Solving Crime*) are hosted by women, and contain a sort of informal and personal tone, often directly catering to female audiences in elliciting a sort of "listening to friends discuss true crime" feeling (Horeck, 2019, p. 1). A study on true crime podcast consumers in general revealed the same tendency - a study from 2018 revealed that 73% of all true crime podcast listeners were female (Grande, 2021).

If one is to ascribe this same tendency to the true crime documentary, as Vicary argues, one can imagine that the contemporary true crime documentary is also more popular amongst women – Horeck too attests that the core audience of true crime texts is that of women. Yet, there is another important distinction to make when discussing the genre's popularity amongst women - that is, whiteness. Women who consume true crime are predominately white, several studies reveal (Grande, 2021). The reason why has arguably been alluded to several times in this thesis already – for as with the true magazines of the 1930's, where the stories were almost exclusively about white victims, and the 1970's true crime books' preoccupation with serial killers who targeted white women, and the 1990's books, TV shows and films turning to domestic violence and crime, the orientation towards narratives about white victims, and specifically, white women, remains in the genre.

An article by Aidan Milan for Metro UK discusses the racial bias of the genre, and similarly points to the genre continuously catering to white women, both in its subject matter and advertising. It is perhaps not that strange that white women predominantly consume true

crime when their likeness is overrepresented in the genre. "Missing white woman syndrome" is a term that refers to the idea that news media overwhelmingly cover stories of young, attractive, white middle-class women (Milan, 2021). In contrast, the many missing and murdered indeginous women, which is described as an epidemic in North America, gets little to no coverage (Ibid). Whose stories get featured in true crime narratives is another important aspect in constant need of examination within the genre.

Both true crime documentaries of analysis in this thesis, have female victims as their subject matter. Michelle McNamara, a white woman, investigates the crimes committed on white women (The Golden State Killer also killed the husbands and partners of the female victims, but the rapes exclusively targeted women. McNamara herself was additionally a victim of sexual assault). Elisa Lam, however, was Chinese-Canadian, but fits the profile in other ways – young, attractive, and passing away in a bizarre and gruesome way that would be further sensationalized. While white women, and young, attractive women are overrepresented in true crime narratives, it is not necessarily respectable or empowering inclusions. Horeck states in her book that "...too often, the potential for true crime to offer a feminist analysis of violence against women is overlooked in favor of delivering a series of microaffective nuggets or thrills" (2019, p. 28). True crime has continuously reveled in sensationalized, affect-inducing portrayals of women being brutalized, and Horeck calls for increased intersectionality within the genre (Ibid, p.171). Continuing this discussion in the sixth chapter, I will now outline my methods for the comparative analysis.

4 Methods

In this thesis, I aim to answer the research questions: How are web sleuths depicted in *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*? In this chapter, I will therefore outline the methods and methodologies I will employ to do so. The fundamental characteristics of the question - "how are web sleuths depicted in…" the two distinct texts, I find, lends itself to the qualitative method of textual analysis. With the choice of analyzing two texts, I will conduct a comparative textual analysis, examining the two series' differences and similarities in their depictions of the web sleuth. I argue that this will reveal the two text's implied attitudes to the web sleuth, or "how" they are depicted. The textual analysis paired with the historical and sociopolitical context of the web sleuth and the true crime genre itself, can reveal the broader implications of this figure, both within the texts and outside of them.

As the two series consist of multiple episodes - *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* has seven episodes, each lasting roughly an hour, *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* has four, lasting roughly fifty minutes each - there is an abundance of material to choose from. I have selected two scenes from each series, with durations of a few minutes per scene. This allows for a close textual analysis of the selected material, and an in depth exploration of the series' depictions of the web sleuth, analyzed within the context of the series, the web sleuth, and the theory that has been extensively outlined in the previous chapter.

Continuing, I will therefore define the method of textual analysis, why I have chosen this method, as well as the specific cinematic techniques that I will examine within the textual analysis. Textual analysis, at its core, is making informed guesses of the most likely interpretations of a specific text (McKee, 2003, p. 2). Within the method of textual analysis, there is an abundance of different methodologies and approaches that produce different results when making such interpretations - in this thesis, I will be specifically examining style, as well as tone, in order to understand the series' depictions of the web sleuth.

4.1 Textual Analysis

Textual analysis, as alluded to above, can be used for an array of purposes and exist within different methodologies. In the book *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, Jennifer Morey Hawkins outlines the method, stating that "textual analysis is a methodology that involves understanding language, symbols, and/or pictures present in texts to gain information regarding how people make sense of and communicate life and life experiences" (2017, p. 2). Used across several studies (e.g. cultural studies, media and communication studies, philosophy studies, etc.), the interpretation of texts can reveal the way in which cultures and people "make sense" of the world (McKee, 2003, p. 2). Such messages that are interpreted through the text, are additionally often understood through and as a result of larger societal contexts and structures, which influence the interpretations that are made of the text in the first place (Hawkins, 2017, p. 2). This is ofcourse a broad and simplified condensation of the method, and researchers often pair textual analysis with other methodologies to get a broader understanding of their object of analysis.

While "texts" in relation to textual analysis can refer to images, literature, physical objects, or literally anything that one can make meanings and interpretations from (McKee, 2003, p. 4), this thesis surrounds itself around two audiovisual texts, specifically two true crime documentary series, as mentioned. When deciding what method to employ, there must first be a question - in this instance, the question I pose is: How are web sleuths depicted in *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*? This question then directs me to analyze the depiction of web sleuths in these texts - to do so, I argue textual analysis is the proper method to find the answers I seek. While I could have chosen to focus on one singular text, I find that in order to gain a proper insight into the depiction of the web sleuth, comparing and contrasting two differing texts might reveal the common ground, and discussing the different findings result in some universal tendencies in the web sleuth's depiction. It is then not necessarily the case that such insights are indicative of the whole genre and how every documentary treats the figure, but I argue it produces some interesting observations on the web sleuths, which further can aid in the broader discussion of the figure outside of the bounds of the texts.

I chose these particular series for several reasons. Admittedly, I watched *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* first, and found its centering of Michelle McNamara and the general celebration of her

work and personhood very interesting. Becoming a sort of reference point, I then found *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* to compliment the former, in that it is very different both in its depiction of the web sleuth, as well as its overall style and tone.

As Hawkins states, the goal of a textual analysis is not to conduct a complete analysis of the whole text, but rather, to locate the material in the text that specifically and most adequately addresses the research question at hand (2017, p. 5). To garner such insights, I have chosen two scenes from each series - one scene depicting the web sleuth, and one scene with an example of a reenactment. As mentioned, each scene is of short duration, which allows for a close look at the elements I believe to pertain to my research question. The two analyses of the scenes chosen from each series will be conducted separately, their differences and similarities discussed more thoroughly in the discussion to follow, but comparisons will also appear throughout the analyses.

Textual analysis is always of an interpretative nature, and the researcher's understanding of the world in turn influences the interpretations that are made (Ibid, p. 3). The poststructuralist perspective aims to acknowledge the different ways in which cultures view the world and make sense and meaning - there is no right or wrong interpretation, and the goal for the researcher is to find a reasonable interpretation based on specific materials in the text, which can be substantiated by information within the text (Ibid). Additionally, understanding the context within which the text was created, is important. Hawkins states that "interpretation involves understanding the text under investigation within the multiple facets of the historical, cultural, and social understandings of the world at the time the text was created" (2017, p.4) - to accomplish such an understanding, the previous chapter of extensively outlining the genre and the web sleuth, along with theory on violence and gender, will aid in understanding the depiction of the web sleuth within the genre it is situated, and the societal surroundings of its existence.

To provide an efficient amount of depth in a textual analysis, the text must be understood within multiple contexts. Among such contexts is that of the type of text at hand - in this instance, true crime documentaries - which affects the way in which the stylistic elements are understood (Ibid, p. 5). Furthermore, the texts should be understood within series of texts, meaning my primary texts (*I'll Be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*) need to be viewed within a series of texts, which I argue the outlining of the genre and the exploration of the true crime documentary genre's conventions, ensures.

Moreover, texts that exist in the public realm and explicitly relate to the primary texts - in this instance, I have looked at critical reviews written about the series - provides a broader understanding, not just on how I interpret the series' and how they depict the websleuth, but how other members of the public understand them as well (Ibid). Lastly, Hawkins states, "...knowing the broader context of cultural communities provides insights into how the communities may provide understanding to the text's message" (Ibid). I have therefore throughout the previous chapter tried to provide some insights on the American popular culture and its seeming occupation with violence, the true crime genre, and how it reflects society's most prevalent fears, along with some gender theory pertaining to the genre as well. This, I argue, will provide broader context to understanding the websleuth, its depictions in the texts, and the reasons why and how the web sleuth and web sleuth communities exist and behave.

Continuing, I will outline some of the specific cinematic techniques that will be analyzed in the comparative textual analysis to come. While I am not distinctly examining the style of the two texts, I will in the textual analysis analyze several techniques the series' employs, such as lighting, color grading, editing and composition, and therefore, find it useful to very briefly outline some style theory. In the book *Poetics of Cinema* (2012), David Bordwell explains cinematic style and its history through several essays. Referring to Andrew Sarris, film critic and promoter of auteur theory, Bordwell explains how identifying style in films helps reveal common practices, procedures and conventions. Style, which encompasses "...a rich ensemble of concrete choices about camerawork and lighting, performance and cutting…" (Bordwell, 2012, p. 260), can reveal differences in directorial abilities, show distinctive techniques that are employed in different periods and how they evolve through time, as well as help separate different genres and their conventions. In this thesis, I have already outlined some of the stylistic elements that are typical of the true crime documentary, which in turn will be identified in the analysis. Rather than closely examining the style of the series, I will focus on tone, meaning I will interpret several stylistic and narrative elements that I believe implies a certain attitude towards the web sleuth, and more broadly, the way in which I argue the tone affects the reception of the texts and their perceived legitimacy.

4.2 Tone

In the book "Close-Up 02" (2014), Douglas Pye details the concept of tone in cinema. In his initial explanation of the concept, he argues that tone has been somewhat overlooked in critical analysis of cinema. Where critics tend to look at the text and derive implied meaning from specific stylistic choices, examining tone can reveal "...the ways in which the film addresses its spectator and implicitly invites us to understand its attitude to its material and the stylistic register it employs" (p. 6).

Tone is something we tend to pick up on easily, both in cinema and as a concept outside of film analysis and criticism, such as in social settings - it is a seemingly automated, habitual, instinctive process to identify tone. Yet, as with social interactions, the tone of a film can divert from our expectations, disturbing this automated process, and can become unsettling or surprising (Ibid). Tone, Pye argues, is such an obvious, undeniable part of the film experience - yet, it has often been avoided in film criticism, perhaps because of its ambiguity. Tone, while undeniable, is arguably somewhat intangible. It is not a clear-cut concept as, say, style of editing or camera angles, but a "voice" of sorts, something that is highly interpretable, up for debate and not clearly stated within the text. Nevertheless, as Pye states, tone "...gestures towards some of the most crucial issues for film analysis: the relationships of a film to its material, its traditions and its spectator" (Ibid, p. 7).

A central concept in literary criticism, Pye details the 20th century tradition and its development of understanding tone. In poems and novels, tone became crucial in understanding how the work communicates to the reader. This was not limited to the implied emotion of a text, such as "angry", but broader topics of class, implied intelligence, moral sense, etc. - where the concept of tone becomes the general "voice" of the work, the ethos, the sense of an "authorial presence" (Ibid, p. 7). Continuing, tone, as conceptualized by literary critics such as M.H Abrams, conveys several different forms of "attitude" in several dimensions of a text - the author's attitude to himself, his audience, the subject matter, and the "speaker" within the text. Additionally, tone encompasses the speaker's attitude to himself, the audience, and the subject matter - altogether, a complex culmination of attitudes and their relationships with one another (Ibid, p. 12). Yet, Pye argues that this conceptualization, developed to suit the language driven medium of literature, needs a translation to be applied to narrative film analysis, where language is only one of the ways of

communicating. In literature, the difference between speaker and author is well known and established - in film, not so much (Ibid). A voice-over-narrator may be present, but that is, as mentioned, only one mode of narration, where images often are one level of narration as well. Pye therefore argues that this distinction in literary criticism, between speaker and author, is of little use in film analysis (Ibid). Removing the attitudes of the author, one instead should look at the attitudes the film implies. Transforming the model of literary criticism, Pye states:

> The remaining dimensions of tone derived from this initial model will therefore be the attitudes implied to:
> the film's subject matter;
> the film's audience;
> the conventions the film employs or invokes;
> the film as a film (...). (Ibid, p. 13).

Even prior to watching a film, one tends to have certain expectations as to what the experience will be like. Referring to a quote by Deborah Thomas, Pye describes these preparations and expectations of a film to have a bodily dimension. When one is gearing up to watch an action packed movie or a movie where one anticipates struggles and hardship for the characters, one might feel tense or uneasy, whereas preparing for a feelgood movie or movies with a perceived lighter tone might evoke relaxation of the body (Ibid, p. 15). One anticipates and prepares for the mood of a film, what the film will demand of us, and therefore, conditions us as to how we will experience the film and its tone. As a quote from Thomas reads, "Settling down to watch a film is, crucially, a case of getting in the mood for the sort of film one is about to watch" (Ibid). The opening of the film further directs the spectator for what is to come, its language, its world, and the way in which the film will address its viewer. This dialogue between the spectator and the film - between the expectations of the viewer and what is actually delivered - is not only tone setting, but one of the pleasures of viewing film, creating elements of surprise when conventions that viewers expect are different.

Pye further proposes some distinctions - namely between mood and tone. There are two dimensions of tone - "...the dominant or systemic aspects as opposed to the more local and variable". Pye explains that the dominant or systemic aspects can be categorized as the mood of the text, which includes aspects such as predispositions of the spectator (which was outlined by Thomas above), to the films more overarching atmosphere, often perceived in the

beginning of a film, setting the expectations for the experience - what emotions one will encounter throughout. Pye states:

> As a complex of pervasive orientations mood is intimately linked to apprehension of a fictional mode and/or genre; individual films work variations on the moods associated with modes and genres and simultaneously develop their specific tonal registers (Pye, 2014, p. 18).

If mood is established in the beginning of a film, setting the expectations for the text and the emotions one will encounter, tone then refers to the second dimension - the local and variable. As the narrative of the film plays out, tone is subsequently implied by what we gradually learn of the film's world, and how narrative developments are treated and framed (Ibid, p. 23). All kinds of tones can be achieved through the voice of the film and our understanding of its language, where basically all decisions of storytelling, such as subject matter, narrative events and characters help shape the mood and tone. When probing such materials in the name of analyzing tone, Pye proposes that one should theorize other ways in which the material could have been presented - alternative imaginations of the events and choices that take place - to properly understand the outcome of the specific decisions that are in the film (Ibid). The way in which we choose to interpret these specific decisions and choices, however, depends on how we interpret the film itself - its intentions, what we believe it aims to make us think and feel - and thereby place weight on certain aspects of its material that one believes constitutes a certain tone (Ibid, p. 11).

I argue that analyzing the tone of the two chosen scenes is essential to answer the research question of this thesis – *How* is the web sleuth depicted in *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*? With emphasis on the *how*, I argue that tone is paramount. Looking at specific stylistic choices in the texts – such as color grading, editing, composition, lighting – as well as dialogue, I will thereby interpret what I believe to be the implied attitudes ascribed to the web sleuth. In addition to examining the specific tonal properties – the local and the variable – I will, following the analysis, examine the mood of the texts – what Pye deems the dominant and systemic. In doing so, I argue that the text's implied attitudes to the web sleuth will be revealed. What separates a "good" or well received true crime narrative from the less highly regarded, is arguably closely related to the perceived tone of the text. I argue that true crime, which is so often bound to ethical considerations and pitfalls, is perceived as more acceptable when handling the subject matter with care – striking the right tone. As will come to show in the analysis, the two

documentaries are in my assessment somewhat paradoxical in that they depict the web sleuth in a certain way that juxtaposes their depictions of violence. Coming to fruition in the analysis, let's turn to the texts in question – *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel.*

5 Comparative Textual Analysis of *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*

In the previous chapters, I have outlined the rise of the true crime genre, the contemporary true crime documentary and its common conventions, the websleuth figure, the genre in relation to gender and race, as well as the methods which will be employed in the comparative analysis to come. I shall now, using the theory provided, delve into the endeavor of answering the research question of this thesis: How are websleuths depicted in *I'll be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*? To do so, I will analyze the two series respectively, dissecting two chosen scenes both portraying the web sleuth and the reenactments which the series' employs. After executing the two analyses, I will contrast and compare the two – and how they depict the web sleuth in different manners. Drawing on the theory provided previously, specific choices in the material, such as stylistic choices, tone and reenactments will be discussed, before I will move the discussion of the web sleuth further, beyond the realm of the true crime documentary and its broader sociopolitical contexts.

5.1 I'll Be Gone in the Dark

I'll Be Gone in the Dark is a HBO series from 2020, directed by Liz Garbus, where we learn the story of crime writer Michelle McNamara (1970-2016) and her quest to solve the mystery of "The Golden State Killer", a prolific rapist and murderer in the 1970's and 1980's (Chaney, 2020). The series originally consisted of six episodes each lasting about an hour, with an additional seventh episode being released in June of 2021 (Garbus et. al., 2020-2021).

The series is based on the book with the same name, written by McNamara, and published in 2018 - two years after the author's untimely death. *I'll Be Gone in the Dark: One Woman's Obsessive Search for the Golden State Killer* (2018) is written from McNamara's perspective, detailing the timeline of the crimes and her own growing obsession and pursuit of The Golden State Killer. The case of The Golden State Killer (dubbed so by McNamara) remained cold and seemingly unsolvable for several decades. The perpetrator, finally revealed to be Joseph James DeAngelo in april of 2018, committed fifty sexual assaults and ten murders at the minimum in 1970's and 1980's California (McNamara et al., 2018, p.17).

As a true crime book, I would argue that *I'll be Gone in the Dark* aligns with Jean Murley's descriptions of the conventions of the genre - a present, involved narrator, a single killer, female victims, and an interest in the motives and psyche of the perpetrator. While McNamara never personally met or interacted with DeAngelo (as he was yet to be caught), she continuously describes a feeling of getting close to the killer through her investigation, or rather, the killer increasingly occupying her mind and thoughts.

McNamara is in my assessment undoubtedly a web sleuth, exchanging ideas and theories through internet forums, tracing leads and contacting detectives that were active on the case. Paired with her websleuthing and online research, McNamara would also visit the areas and sites of the crimes. Her book details her chase to find the serial killer that had remained anonymous for four decades, reporting the timeline of the rapes and killings, of the police's evidence, leads that went cold, and her own meticulous research and findings. In the introduction to the book, written by Gillian Flynn, she describes McNamara as a diligent researcher with an attention to detail while always remaining attentive to the victims stories, creating a vivid description of the people, time and places the golden state killer terrorized California (McNamara et al., 2018, p. 17).

Her persistent websleuthing and involvement in the case would ultimately take a toll on her mental health. Remaining a central theme in the TV-series, the consumption of decades worth of evidence - often having a high probability of being traumatic given the very nature of the crimes and crime scenes - impacted McNamara's personal life. Describing in her book an incident where she almost hit her husband with a lamp when he startled her one night, she acknowledges the effects of constantly contemplating the intricate details and clues of the case (Ibid, p. 320). Continuously describing her interest in the case as an obsession throughout the book, the portrayal of said obsession is, as mentioned, central in the TV-series. Michelle McNamara would pass away at 46 years old, prior to finishing her book. The portrayal of what might be deemed as a symptom of incessant web sleuthing will be explored further in this thesis.

5.1.1 Citizen Detective

I will now look at the depiction of the web sleuth figure in the series *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*. While the series does not have an entire episode dedicated to the topic of web sleuths, it

instead has scenes scattered throughout the series that mention and discuss McNamara as a web sleuth, or rather, a "citizen detective" as the series terms it, the message boards used by her, the friends and collaborators she met through said message boards, and the affordances the internet granted her in her research. The web sleuth figure is not a main point of contention or analysis, or an object that is given any particular scrutiny or attention, however it is an integral part of the story in that McNamara herself was a web sleuth, a highly successful one at that, who went beyond the "normal" scope of what web sleuths tend to achieve – and she herself often attributes her research and success to the internet and its affordances. A talented writer, her personableness and professionalism was able to grant her actual connections with the police force, detectives actively working on the case, and the evidence and material they possessed – gaining inside knowledge that, for the "average" web sleuth, would be difficult to achieve.

Generally, I would say the series portrays websleuthing, or perhaps more specifically, McNamara's websleuthing, as a net positive – in that she is successful and seemingly made the case progress. Yet, the series refrains from engaging in any further discussion of whether websleuthing as a whole has any potentially negative outcomes or implications on a larger scale, such as articles by Yardley et al., Pantumsinchai and Myles et al. tend to bring forth in their discourse on the matter. However, the series does continuously discuss the personal effects the researching and websleuthing had on McNamara, and that her devotion to the case came at a cost. Continuing this discussion further in the analysis, lets now look at the scene in question, located in the first episode, "Murder Habit" (Garbus, 2020).

5.1.2 Analysis

At 00:21:38, the scene begins with a close-up of two hands typing on a keyboard, a piano music score in the background. Cutting to a Google search page, "east area rapist original night stalker" is typed into the search bar, followed by a rapid montage of different search results that pop up. Audio of McNamara from a previous interview plays alongside these visuals, where she describes being gripped by Larry Cromptons book and thereby searching the terms on the internet. The rapid montage stops at a search result of an internet message board, as McNamara describes finding the link to the "cold case files" message board.
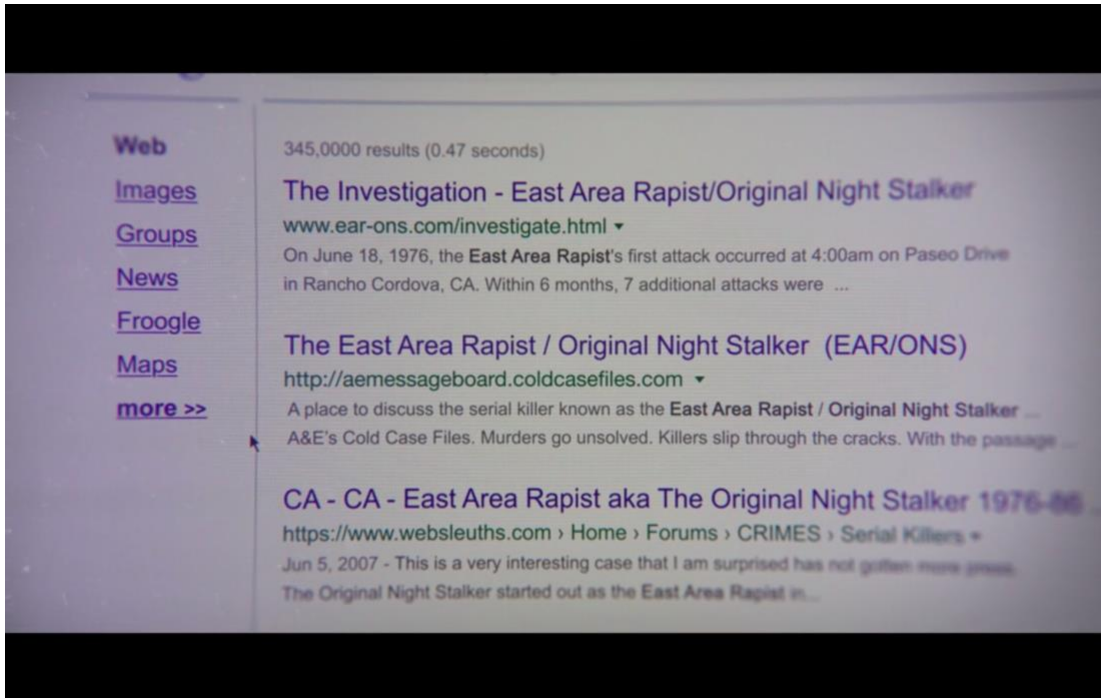
Figure 1:Google searches (00:21:51) In Garbus, 2020 "Murder Habit"

The mouse hovering over the link clicks, and the frame whips to the cold case message board. McNamara, in voice over, describes being in awe after finding out that so many people would, like her, spend so much time on cold cases. The camera zooms in and pans to posts and comments, illustrating the number of people and threads on the site.
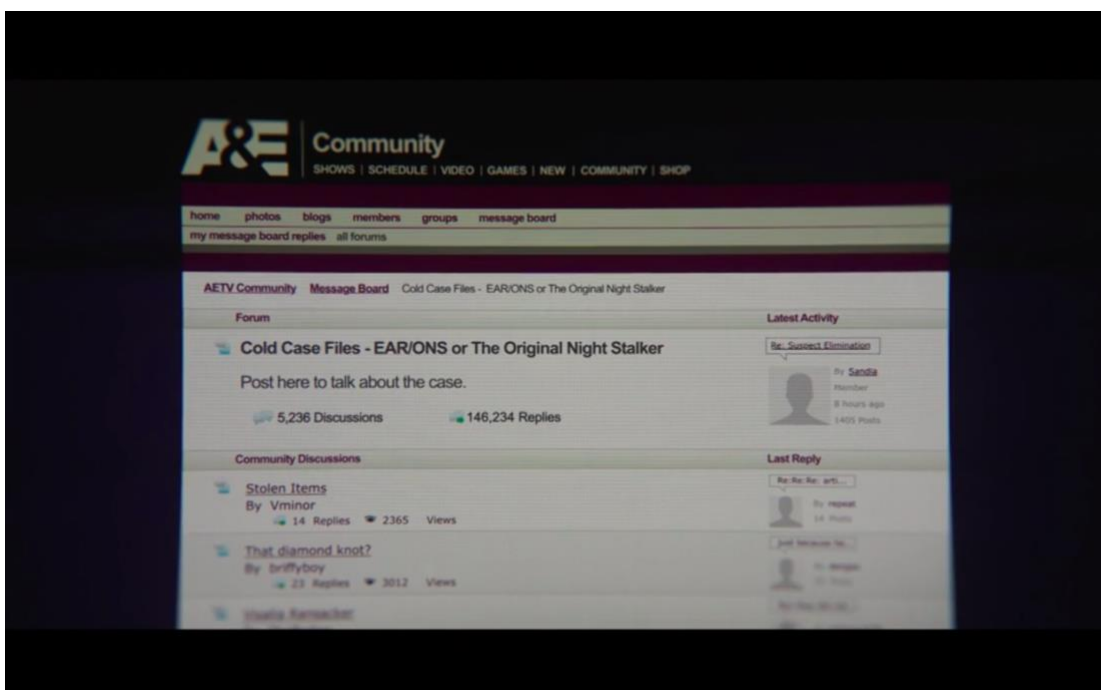

Figure 2:Google searches (00:21:51) In Garbus, 2020 "Murder Habit"

The mouse further clicks on several posts, and the frame fades between different posts on the message board, slowly panning down each post with the mouse hovering, emulating a person reading and clicking through them, but not leaving enough time for the audience to actually absorb each post and text.

I would like to briefly discuss this style of editing. Drawing on the lineage that Murley outlines of the genre, I would argue that the editing style is in line with, or influenced by, that of the Hollywood movie. In the book *The way Hollywood tells it: story and style in modern movies* (2006), David Bordwell describes the style of the modern Hollywood movie. The cutting pace of modern movies has notably accelerated since early cinema, becoming gradually faster throughout the decades, speeding up from the 60's onwards, and as of the time of his writing, having an average 5 seconds (often less) between cuts (Bordwell, 2006, p. 121-123). Action movies tend to have the fastest cutting pace, but the fast tempo is true for all genres (Ibid). The true crime documentary, as told by Murley, is undeniably influenced by genres such as horrors and thrillers - and *I'll be Gone in the Dark* is in my assessment no exception, with montages such as the one described. Cuts are made in pans and zooms, creating a somewhat discombobulated look and feel, making it near impossible to read the entirety of the posts shown, instead just leaving an impression of what is said in the message boards, or as Bordwell puts it, creating energy, interest and excitement (Ibid). This style of editing is not true for the series as a whole though, as *I'll be Gone In the Dark* also boasts scenes with sophisticated, almost still moving long-takes and establishing shots. I would argue that the purpose of the quick cutting in this scene in particular is to visualize the vastness of the internet, or specifically, illustrate the vastness and large amount of web sleuths congregating on the message board McNamara frequented.

Visualizing the internet is somewhat notoriously known to be a difficult task. In an article for Inverse (2016), Megan Logan explains this phenomenon. As the internet and all its different usages have increasingly become part of the human experience in the last decade, it has also increasingly become part of plots and stories, urging filmmakers to find ways to portray the internet on screen. Logan argues that filmmakers have yet to figure out how to do so adequately, drawing on the example of the movie *Snowden* from 2016 – aiming to represent data transfers, and in doing so, opting for flickering lights and lines bouncing across the

screen, an abstract and "sci-fi" like style (Ibid). The intangible nature of the internet often makes portraying it a complicated endeavor, with visuals as described often being the result. I would additionally argue that one can look to Rosewarne's explanation of cyberphobia, which was outlined in chapter 3, as a factor in why the representation of the internet often results in such visualizations. This point is perhaps more pertinent to the second series of analysis, *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*, where cyberphobia and web sleuths will be discussed more thoroughly. Logan further argues that instead of trying to visualize codes, lines and lights, one should focus on what makes the internet a compelling story element in the first place – the way humans interact with it – an argument we will return to shortly.

At 00:22:10, the internet message board cross dissolves to the hands typing on the keyboard, before quickly cutting back to the message boards, as McNamara begins to explain her perception of them. She explains that the community of people all had different reasons for being there, where some had grown up or lived in the Sacramento area and still wished to see the case solved. The visuals continue to illustrate her observations, as the computer seems to scroll through different posts, boldening certain sentences. The scene cuts to a side profile of a woman drinking coffee, mid-shot, to the right of the frame. In the left of the frame, text is superimposed on screen, with a pink font reading "The Social Worker", appearing to be the username of the woman. The camera cuts to a close-up of the woman's hands typing on a computer keyboard, as McNamara continues to explain the people congregating on the message boards, stating "...others were more kind of just, um… data mining, sleuth kind of people" (Garbus, 2020, 00:22:26 - 00:22:31). The scene cuts to a kitchen, showing another username in pink font, same placement as previously, reading "The Kid", with a man in the right of frame, medium full shot, typing at his computer as text from posts pop up and fade out beneath his username.
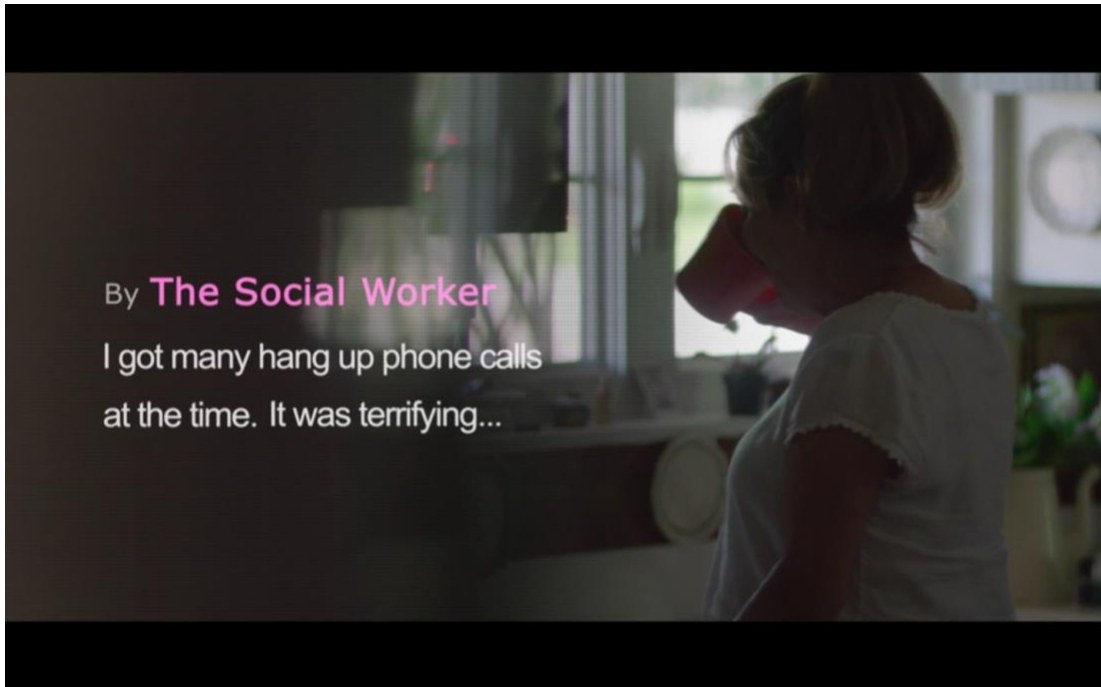
Here we see how *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* chooses to insert the humans behind the web sleuth's usernames, in line with Logan's argument of humanizing stories of the web. As McNamara explains the different kinds of web sleuths she encountered on the message board - the ones that had a personal connection to the case, for instance - we see the woman calling herself "The Social Worker" on screen alongside posts she has written, putting a face to her online persona. Her real name being Melanie Barbeau, she lived in the Sacramento area and experienced the crimes of the EAR close hand as they were happening in the 70's. She would become a friend of McNamara's, corresponding online as well as meeting in person, and is featured prominently throughout the series - embodying a certain type of web sleuth that is personally invested, experiencing the threat of the rapist first hand, and wishing to see the case solved in the decades later, websleuthing as a result. Simultaneously, McNamara's statement of differentiating between the ones that have a personal connection to the case and those that are "sleuths" may be telling in how she views the web sleuth community, a point that will be returned to shortly.

McNamara continues in V.O, explaining that she had never been part of such a community, and found it unique. The scene returns to the message board, with the computer mouse clicking on several posts, the camera zooming in on certain phrases, panning and scrolling through posts at a rapid pace - while McNamara explains that "they throw around clues, you

know, you just, you go down the rabbit hole, kind of gleefully, oh there is just this unending thread of information that I can find" (Garbus, 2020, 00:22:39 - 00:22:50).

A web page called True Crime Diary (McNamara's blog) is shown, where a blogpost about EAR/ONS is being written. A V.O by Amy Ryan reads the text as we see it being written out. We revert back to the man we saw previously, "the Kid", in a close-up, reading the blogpost on his computer. The camera cuts to a close-up of his hands typing on the computer, followed by a close-up of the post he is writing on the EAR message board, reading: "My favorite true-crime blogger just wrote about the EAR" (00:23:13). He explains that he had known of McNamara for several years, as he had read her entire blog and was a fan of hers. Accompanying his audio is several shots of b-roll, before returning to his close-up reading on the computer. Using a J cut, at 00:23:28, we see the man in an interview, speaking diegetically. He says that when she wrote about the EAR case, "...it was exciting" (Garbus, 2020, 00:23:25 - 00:23:29).

"The Kid", as his username reads on the message board, embodies the second type of web sleuth McNamara proposes - the data mining, sleuth kind of person. Another web sleuth featured heavily in the series, real name Paul Haynes, would also come into contact with McNamara through said message board. A younger man with no apparent connection to the case, in similar fashion to McNamara, had an interest in true crime that led him to the EAR/ONS community. A fan of McNamara's blog, he would eventually become a collaborator of hers, helping her with research for her book, which he states in the following part of the scene.

Returning to the excerpts from McNamara's blog, we once again hear Amy Ryan reading from a blogpost as we see it being written out on screen. "I'm obsessed. It's not healthy. I know the strangest details about him. I know his blood type…" The camera cuts to a webpage containing details of the killer, zooming in and panning down the text, the mouse highlighting the information she cites in the blogpost - "...I know his penis size" (Garbus, 00:23:32 - 00:23:40).

A central theme throughout the whole series, McNamara's obsession with the EAR/ONS case is here outright stated, as written by herself in her blog post. Perhaps another feature of the web sleuth figure, becoming completely entrenched and fascinated with one particular case is

what urges one to investigate and research. While McNamara seemed to love writing and researching, she also acknowledges the strain it had on her. A sort of double-edged sword when giving in to her fixation, simultaneously giving her success and gratification, a feeling of doing something important, while also traumatizing her and impacting her mental state in the process - a self-sacrifice of sorts. With wording like "obsessed" and "not healthy", her view of her own websleuthing is obviously complicated.

At 00:23:49, we return to Paul Haynes – a font located in the bottom right corner reads "Paul Haynes", beneath it, "Citizen Detective", "The Kid". The camera angle is different from the previous shots of him - he is facing the camera, medium full shot, to the left of frame, a classic interview composition, with even lighting, the camera slightly in motion. Haynes explains why he enjoyed McNamara's writing - "...She wasn't ghoulish, gorehound… There was nothing tasteless about her writing, it struck just the right tone" (Garbus, 2020, 00:23:57-00:24:03).

Here, Haynes reiterates what seems to be the general consensus portrayed in the series of McNamara as a web sleuth, writer and person. She is described as talented, with a certain sensitivity when describing and researching the case and its victims, and as he states, "struck just the right tone", setting her work apart from other true crime content that might be perceived as "ghoulish, gorehound or tasteless". A recurring outlook on some of the true crime genres' contents, the aforementioned shroud of illegitimacy, mentioned by Murley and others, obviously lingers. Sensationalist true crime content, like the magazines of the 1920's, or the TV docudramas of the 1990's, or even true crime content of today that receive criticisms like that of dramatic reenactments, fail to strike the right tone. Perhaps the common conception of true crime enthusiasts is a poor one, reverting back to the many ethical dilemmas of the genre and the act of reveling and delving into other people's pain, I would argue there is a sort of shamefulness connected to embracing true crime. Remembering Myles et al. (2018) explorations of RBI and the urge to distance the community from the label of retributive vigilantism in the wake of controversies, Haynes' statement, I believe, illustrates the perceived importance of distinguishing McNamara's work from other "worse" true crime content - her approach was righteous and good, she struck the right tone, justifying her work as a web sleuth.

Continuing, it might be useful to return to some of Pye's conceptualizations of tone, as several comments on tone will be made going forward. As I have stated, my aim is not to decipher the series' tone as a whole, but rather, look at certain stylistic choices in the material and thereby interpret their tone – before I will discuss and compare the findings in the two series further. These maneuvers are of course my opinion, and thereby up for debate, however, I argue they are useful in analyzing how the web sleuth is portrayed. As Pye states, and previously mentioned, tone commonly pertains to the *how* of any discourse – such as "How are web sleuths depicted in *I'll be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*?" for instance – how attitudes are implied to the film's subject matter, the film's audience, the conventions the film employs or invokes, and the film as a film (Pye, 2007, p. 13). I therefore argue that identifying tone, in these instances, is crucial in uncovering the series' attitudes implied towards the web sleuth. In the analysis, I will be looking at tone in the sense of the local and variable, the specific choices in the material. Following the analysis, when the two scenes will be discussed further, I will explore the mood and tone more extensively, interpreting the attitudes implied to the web sleuth.

Figure 4:Google searches (00:21:51) In Garbus, 2020 "Murder Habit"

Returning to the scene where we see Haynes in an interview, I would argue the style of the scene, or even the style of the series as a whole, substantiates and corroborates the notion of striking the right tone. In this scene in particular, as pictured in the photo above, the interview is set in daylight. There are no harsh contrasts, Haynes is sitting in a homely setting, presumably a living room or kitchen, windows to the left of him, providing the scene with

natural lighting. In the background, there is a bookshelf, a plant, a table, a chair, an open cardboard box, and overall clutter. When looking at his posture and position, it appears that Haynes is sitting cross-legged on the floor.

If I, to follow Pyes suggestions, was to imagine a different approach to this interview, I would surely think that the frame would look cleaner and less distracting without the clutter in the background. Being a prestigious, costly and well-thought out production, it would be hard to imagine the clutter is not there deliberately. I would therefore argue that all of these stylistic elements – the natural lighting, Hayne's position, the clutter in the background – implies a certain attitude, a casual one, informal, and homely. In turn, Haynes seems approachable, not stiff or uptight, but maybe a bit quirky, disorganized, even charming as a web sleuth.

Cutting back to McNamara's blog post, Amy Ryan continues to read an excerpt by McNamara, describing the community as "impressive", and states that "...unlike other unsolved mystery communities, the EAR/ONS community's desire for justice feels strong and sincere" (Garbus, 2020, 00:24:03 - 00:24:15). Once again, a point is made about tone and motive – here in direct relation to the web sleuth community. McNamara alludes to the notion that "other" communities do not possess the same amount of sincerity or genuineness as the EAR/ONS community does. There seems to me that there is an urge to distance oneself from the somewhat stained perception of web sleuths, as mentioned. Tainted by incidents of previous, like the aforementioned Boston bombings for instance, the web sleuth's reputation could also be said to be shrouded with illegitimacy, just like the TV docudramas or the true crime magazines. The series proposes that there is a right and a wrong way to be a web sleuth, with McNamara, Haynes, Barbeau and their community having a strong and sincere desire for justice - alluding to the notion that others do not, acting in bad faith. We're not like them, we actually do it for the right reasons, and that makes our operations righteous.

Furthermore, the title that the series chooses to describe the web sleuths, "Citizen detective", has a somewhat different ring to it than web sleuth. I would argue it is a "fancier" title with more weight and authority than that of "web sleuth". As I outlined in chapter 3, the definition of "sleuth" is a detective – or to *act as* a detective. The term "sleuth" is arguably most commonly used for amateur detectives, and not police detectives by trade – perhaps making it a less favorable title to some who view their sleuthing as more than amateur, in a sense. To

switch out "web" with "citizen" does in my opinion allude to the notion that the web sleuths in the series were not confined to the internet in their investigations, and were more than "web" sleuths if one is to use the definition literally, or at least regarded themselves as more than. While I can only speculate as to why the series chose this title for their web sleuths, I believe this somewhat loftier wording heightens the web sleuths' perceived authority and skill level - more than a web sleuth, but a citizen detective. This is in line with the presentation of McNamara throughout the series, going beyond the normal scope of web sleuth, investigating not just on her computer, but cooperating with the police, and so forth. The "Citizen Detective" title is another choice in which I argue adds to a certain tone, an attitude towards the web sleuth in which they are heightened in authority, and given a certain ethos.

Moreover, this entire scene I have laid out could be described as a reenactment. Using audio from previous interviews with McNamara, along with V.O reading out excerpts from her blog and book, the visuals paired alongside the audio is essentially there to illustrate the actions she explains taking. When she explains finding the message board, the camera emulates the movements she would have done – a set of hands on a keyboard, the mouse hovering, typing on the search bar, scrolling through posts, the camera moving as if reading different posts, and so on. When her blogpost is read out, we see it being typed out on screen. When Paul Haynes explains discovering her blogpost about the EAR, the camera similarly traces his steps on the computer, writing out his post in the websleuth community, reenacting his movements of the time.

As was detailed in chapter 3, reenactments are somewhat of a staple stylistic choice of the true crime documentary, or more broadly, the documentary genre as a whole. Stella Bruzzi details how the reenactment can sometimes be controversial and criticized, referring to an article written by Richard Brody called "Why Reenactments Never Work" (Bruzzi, 2016, p. 268). Brody essentially condemns the usage, arguing that the use of reenactments are insulting to the audience, implying they lack imagination. Furthermore, he regards them as hindering the authenticity of the story being presented, being fictional and completely disconnected from reality. What perhaps comes to mind, and what type of reenactment Brody is referring to, is that of the grandiose, highly stylized reenactments of events that involve the crimes and deaths that are often part of true crime narratives. Specifically, the true crime documentary The Jinx is used as an example, where the death of the mother of Robert Durst

(the subject of the documentary) is reenacted in dramatized detail, showing a woman's body falling from the roof in slow motion, laying posed dead on the ground. Bruzzi argues that reenactments as such serve several narrative functions – it deleviates ambiguity, adding weight to the narrative being presented (where in the case of "The Jinx", Durst is a unreliable narrator, suspected to have murdered several women) (Ibid, p. 270). Reenactments, as Bruzzi puts it, are not evidence, but can be persuasive in building up a certain narrative.

Now, I am not arguing that the reenactments described in this *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* scene are of this nature – as Bruzzi also attests, not all reenactments have this function. As I argued previously, these reenactments serve more of an illustrative function, where the visuals substantiate the voice overs – for example, when McNamara explains finding the web sleuth community, we see a reenactment of her doing so – a way of visualizing the internet and retracing the steps she took. Outside of this scene, though, the series does contain reenactments in which one could, in line with Brody's argument, critique the usage.

I would therefore like to include an example of this other type of reenactment, situated in the same episode, "Murder Habit". In this scene, Kris Pedretti tells the story of the attack she endured by the EAR in 1976, when she was 15 years old. The attacker snuck up on her when she was home alone one night, playing the piano, and proceeded to rape her for several hours. At 00:44:32, the camera slowly begins to pan towards a piano, situated in the middle of the frame. The focus, which starts out blurred, becomes increasingly in focus as the camera moves closer. The living room, in which the piano is situated, is decorated with Christmas ornaments and lights, and looks warm and cozy – a family photo sitting on top of the piano, sheet music on the music shelf, a calm piano music score in the background. As the camera inches closer to the piano, Pedretti explains the events – hearing a sound, but ignoring it and continuing to play, before she suddenly felt a presence next to her – the camera then begins to tilt to the right, shadows washing over the room – she felt a knife at her throat, the camera continuing to pan and tilt towards the piano. The shot lasts approximately 30 seconds (Garbus, 2020, 00:44:32 - 00:45:03).

Figure 5:Google searches (00:21:51) In Garbus, 2020 "Murder Habit"

This recreation of the scene of the crime is typical for the series as a whole – slow-panning long-takes of stylistically cinematic locations – homes, backyards, streets. There are no people in the frame, yet, the set design (the christmas lights, the family photos, the open piano) implies a lived in atmosphere, of people being present, but remaining unseen. The pan is steady and the lighting is warm and inviting until Pedretti explains the perpetrators' presence and attack on her – it is then the camera begins to tilt, and shadows engulf the room, changing the mood and previous inviting atmosphere, becoming off and unnerving, as one imagines the events play out in the empty space.

Firstly, with Bruzzi's explanation of the criticisms often brought forward of reenactments in mind, there is a distinction that I think should be mentioned. Reenactments, although not actual evidence, can be powerful in creating a convincing narrative about the depicted events. The examples used in the article are series such as *The Jinx*, where the documentaries' inevitably serve an investigative function, in that they revolve around cases that are unsolved or under investigation. *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* (and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel,* aswell) however, are solved - there is no longer a question as to who the perpetrator is, and the testimony made by victims such as Pedretti are not really up for debate or disputable. In this instance, I would argue the usage and style of reenactments have a larger impact on the tone and voice of the text. I further argue that the choice to leave out

reenactments of people, refraining from recreating the rapes, the violence and the attacks, but instead showing the environments they took place in, suggests, once again, a certain attitude implied to the material. Withholding reenactments such as those that are described in *The Jinx* – the stylized and somewhat sensational recreations of deaths and brutality – is to me another element in the text that corroborates the series' "striking the right tone" – a sort of parallel to McNamara's efforts to strike the right tone as a websleuth as well.

5.2 Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel

Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel is a Netflix series from 2021, directed by Joe Berlinger, and details the history of the Cecil Hotel and the death of Elisa Lam in 2013 (Tallerico, 2021). The series consists of four episodes released in february of 2021, lasting roughly an hour each. The series both tackles the legacy of the historic Cecil Hotel in downtown Los Angeles and the mysterious death of one of its occupants in 2013, student and lone traveler Elisa Lam.

A quick google search of the aforementioned hotel reveals the infamy and mystique that surrounds it in popular culture - titles such as "Every Creepy Detail You Need to Know About the Cecil Hotel" (Hanrahan, 2021) and "The Cecil Hotel Has Been Dubbed "A Hotbed For Death" — Here Are 16 Scary Facts About The Establishment" (Osifo, 2021) are among the results. Its reputation for being "creepy" and "scary" stems from the supposed large number of deaths and crimes that have occurred there, but the most famous and sensationalized death, at least as of recent, is that of Elisa Lam – a 21 year old Canadian student traveling across the US, who was found deceased in the water tank of the hotel 19 days after being reported as missing (Baggs, 2021).

Lam's death would receive massive attention online, with the strange behavior leading up to her death, security cameras capturing her bizarre last moments in the elevator of the hotel before vanishing, and the mysteriousness of how she ended up in the water tank where she was found dead sparking many a conspiracy theory and speculation, both in designated true crime communities and mainstream media alike. The 2021 series tackles both the infamy of the Cecil Hotel, Elisa Lam's story and the conspiracies that flourished surrounding the case, taking a somewhat critical look at the sensationalist theories that both in 2013 and onward follow the tragic passing of the young woman. In similar fashion to *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*,

the series primarily follows two storylines – that of the Cecil Hotel and its history, told through the former general manager, employees, residents and historians, as well as the timeline of Elisa Lam's stay at the hotel, her disappearance and the investigation and media frenzy that followed, told through reenactments of Lam, excerpts from her blog and people involved in the investigation of her disappearance.

5.2.1 A Web Sleuth Feeding Frenzy

How does the series *Crime Scene:Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* depict the web sleuth figure? Now, as opposed to *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*, *Crime Scene: Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* takes a far more critical stance in regards to the web sleuths congregating around the case of Elisa Lam. The web sleuth is a main theme and point of discussion – the impact the web sleuths had on the investigation, potential suspects, and the legacy of Lam herself, could be read as a sort of cautionary tale of when websleuthing is taken too far or gets out of hand. As will be argued throughout this analysis, the critique of the web sleuths is quite apparent in the text. The scene I will be analyzing is situated in the second episode, "Secrets of the Cecil" (Berlinger, 2021).

5.2.2 Analysis

At 00:04:47, journalist Josh Dean, in an interview, talks about the elevator video of Lam going extremely viral online. He states that "...in the web sleuth community, it created this feeding frenzy" - thereby cutting to a montage of short clips from several YouTube videos - four to be exact - all introducing the mystery of "Elisa Lam" - some in different languages (Berlinger, 2021).

In this short clip of a few seconds, the series already illustrates the reach of the case, showcasing several YouTubers discussing the matter. Another way of visualizing the internet instead of resorting to articles and forums as discussed in *I'll Be Gone in the Dark,* the continual use of YouTube videos discussing the Lam case is perhaps a more visually engaging way of exemplifying the web sleuth community. The YouTube true crime space is an interesting phenomenon in itself, with many creators having large followings, exclusively discussing true crime cases - a sort of one-person production of true crime documentaries in a way, with their own commentary on the cases they present. While I will not go into detail about YouTube true crime creators, one can place them in the category of web sleuths – a

way in which the series chooses to present them. With videos in several languages, the series leaves the impression that the case went international in its virality. Moreover, Deans wording, "feeding frenzy" has certain association attached - its ecologic meaning referring to predators in the wild having an abundance of prey to feed on, and used to describe aggressive and competitive human behavior (*Feeding Frenzy*, n.d.), I argue this description already situates the websleuth community as aggressive, even animalistic, in their pursuit of the Lam case.

At 00:05:01, with audio from one of the YouTube videos continuing in the background, we see a brief clip of a dark, blurry, greenlit room. A blurry figure, perhaps better described as a silhouette, sits down and begins to watch the elevator video on a computer. Cutting to several other computers, we see YouTube videos being watched, all talking about the mystery. The different computers - all seemingly in different rooms - illustrate different people watching and learning about the case, again reiterating the reach it had. At 00:05:10, we see a greenlit room once again (Berlinger, 2021).
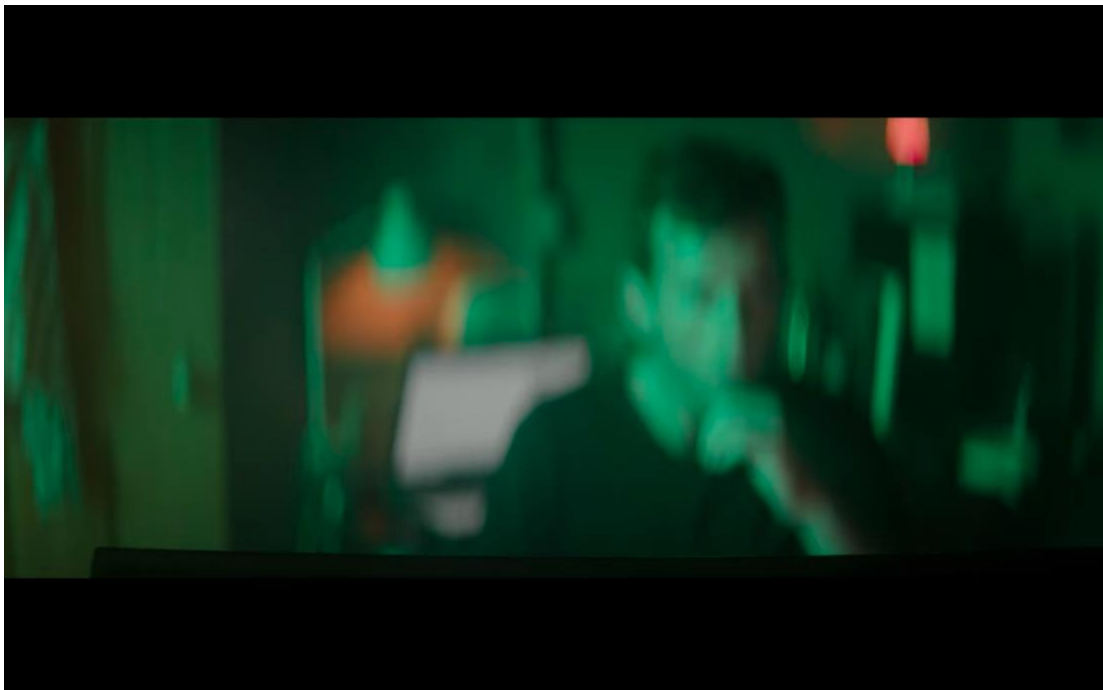
Figure 6:Greenlit web sleuth (00:05:10) In Berlinger, 2021 "Secrets of the Cecil"

The camera is still out of focus, a man sitting in a medium shot, slightly to the right of the frame. The image is too blurry to make out distinct facial features, making him an anonymous figure. In front of him, there is a computer screen, where he is seemingly watching one of the YouTube videos. Behind him, there is another laptop open, the room

looking cluttered and dull as a whole. The lighting is perhaps the most noticeable, and is highly stylized - dimly lit, with stark contrasts, and a green color grade enveloping the whole frame. The camera cuts to another room, panning towards the right, where a woman is looking at a computer, situated in a close-up in the right of the frame. The focus is still highly blurry, and the same green grading encompasses the frame – another web sleuth of many.

The color green saturating the brief clips of the anonymous web sleuths could be interpreted in several ways. Color in general helps set the tone of a scene, suggesting a certain mood and feel. Interpretations of the color green in cinema can range from "nature" – often in relation to the green of grass and trees, the "naturally" occurring one - to "danger", "corruption" or "darkness", a synthetic type of green, unnatural or even sickly (*DigitalSynopsis*, 2021). I would argue this scene illustrates the latter – a green tint over a dark room, with blurry silhouettes of humans - in turn, creating an ominous look and tone. While perhaps a surface level reading at first glance – "green = ominous" – I do find it interesting that the series chooses this particular tint to overlay the web sleuths, time after time throughout the series. Paired with a synth-like score and the audio from YouTube videos discussing the mystery of the Lam case, the stylistic choice of a distinctly green frame, in my opinion, creates a depiction of the common web sleuth as ominous, wrong, or off. It creates a certain voice, an attitude implied to the web sleuth, perhaps even a generalization of them - the hoards that flocked to the case like a "feeding frenzy", hiding behind a screen in their dark, cluttered rooms, green and not virtuous, implying bad faith or intentions when encountering the Lam case.

The example above is not the only way the web sleuth is portrayed in the series, though. Several prominent web sleuths are heavily featured in the series – such as John Lordan, a YouTuber who created several videos and theories on the case, and John Sobani, a web sleuth who created a facebook group dedicated to the case. These men are seen in interviews, with retrospective outlooks on their thoughts, theories and behavior at the time of the case. In similar fashion to *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*, the web sleuth is personalized, a face brought to the figure, with their personal motives and feelings divulged throughout the series. In the last episode, they reflect on their somewhat misguided distrust in the investigation and recognize the faults in their spiraling theories and speculations, resulting in a fairly sympathetic characterization of the two. I would argue that the series in turn creates a sort of twofold image of the web sleuth – the web sleuths like Lordan and Sobani, who were at their core

acting in good faith, with the right intentions - and the masses, the hoard, the feeding frenzy that congregated around the Lam case, ominous, greenlit and dangerous.

At 00:05:17, Josh Dean begins to define the web sleuth in his own words, explaining that they are a community of people online who "live to solve crimes", with cases where they have been "genuinely helpful to investigators". Accompanying this audio are several clips – firstly, blurry close-ups of glasses with the same green hue, a computer browsing news reports, and several news reports verifying Dean's statements of web sleuthing leading to solved cases. Here, some nuance is added with Dean's statement of web sleuths sometimes being "genuinely helpful", accompanied by visuals that confirms his assessment – A way of briefly acknowledging the good that the websleuths can accomplish, before moving on to the less flattering and more scathing presentation as it happened with the Lam case.

Cutting to Dean's interview, where he is in a close-up, blurry background, with dim lighting and high contrasts, he states that "...It's a hobby for people, and I think it's a hobby that becomes an obsession" (Berlinger, 2021, 00:05:31 - 00:05:34). Obsession, referring to being obsessed with someone or something, often has negative connotations, such as Merriam-Webster's definition - "...a persistent disturbing preoccupation with an often unreasonable idea or feeling" (*Obsession*, n.d.) It is a word that, as illustrated in the prior analysis, also is brought up often in relation to McNamara's web sleuthing, both by her and others. The continual use of the terms "obsessed" and "obsession" in both series, I believe, alludes to the perception of web sleuths as detrimentally occupied with crime solving. It is unhealthy and harmful, it seems to be portrayed. Moreover, perhaps unreasonable, a dangerous activity that is bound to cause harm – either to the websleuths themselves, as with McNamara, or the investigation, victims and suspects, as with the Lam case. This is a discussion point I will return to in the discussion, but firstly, onward with the analysis.

In similar fashion to the analysis of *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*, I would like to look at the style of the interviews in *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*. As described in the paragraph above, Dean is shown in a close-up, with high contrast lighting on his face. The room appears to be artificially lit, and judging by other scenes and interviews in the series, as with the general manager of the hotel, as well as one of the police detectives, Dean appears to be situated in a location meant to look similar to the Cecil Hotel – or at least, a replica or something of a similar look, as the hotel was closed at the time of filming. If we remember Haynes' interview and its composition in *I'll Be Gone in the Dark,* I argued that the stylistic

choices – the lighting, seemingly natural in daylight, the setting, a living room/kitchen, could be interpreted as casual, even homely. As Pye states, a useful way of identifying tone, is to imagine another way a specific choice in the text could be executed. Here, I argue, we have two differing examples of an interview's composition – one darker, more stylized, and impersonal (*Crime Scene*) and one lighter, more casual and personal (*I'll Be Gone in the Dark*) - adding to the series', in my opinion, respective differing voices.


Figure 7:Josh Dean interview (00:05:33) In Berlinger, 2021 "Secrets of the Cecil"

It is also an interesting choice, as I see it, to place the interviews in locations that at least resemble the color and decor of the Cecil Hotel. In Dean's interview, as an example, he is situated in the right of the frame. As stated, the background is blurry – behind him, we only see a beige wall, but in the left of the frame, a red pendant light with fringes is situated, omitting warm, orange light. It looks to be a vintage lamp, perhaps in the art deco style, in line with the hotel's interior in its hay day. Described as a character in itself, the hotel and its troubled history has an air of mystique, allure and darkness – also being the location of Lam's death. I believe this location, which I argue to be reminiscent of the hotel, adds to the overall feeling of the hotel having an almost supernatural presence, the site of many travesties, and in doing so, the series aims to capture its atmosphere in their storytelling.

Following Dean's statements, the scene cuts to another greenlit room. In the foreground, there is a computer in the right of the frame – several cords protruding out. In the

background, a silhouette of a man is located in the left of the frame, presumably looking at a computer screen, and sounds of typing on a keyboard is heard.
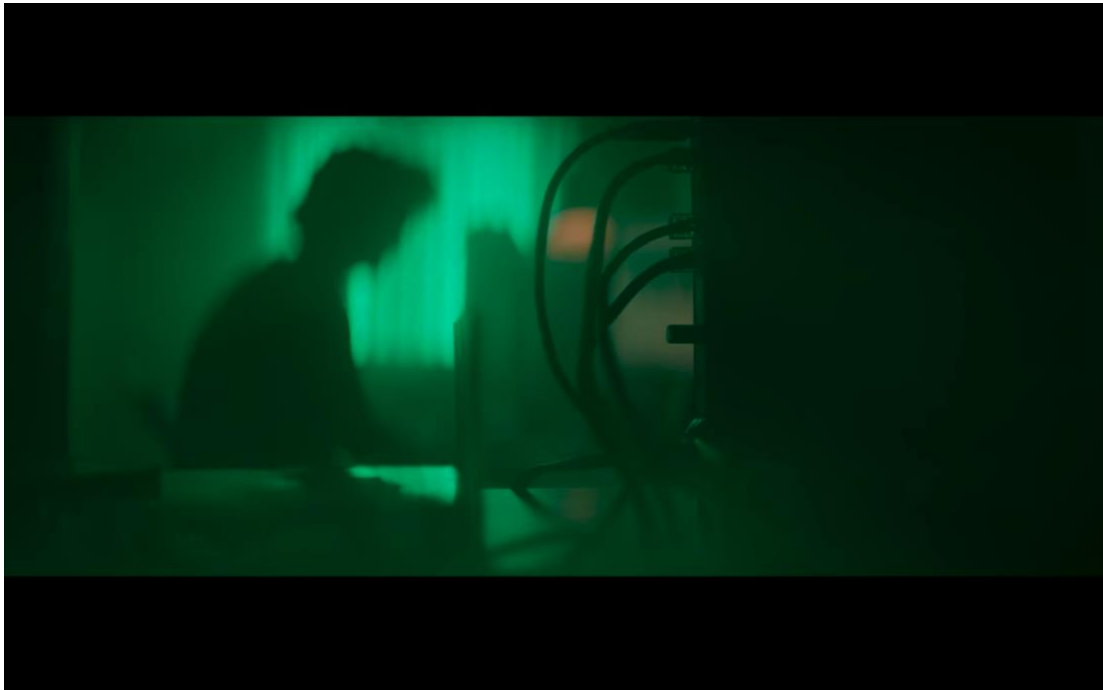
Figure 8:Greenlit web sleuth 2 (00:05:34) In Berlinger, 2021 "Secrets of the Cecil"

The camera then fades between several internet forums discussing the case and possible theories, as we hear John Lordan exclaim that there must be more to the story in a voice over. Fading to cords and wires, with the same green tint, the cords are superimposed on several images – a set of eyes in a side profile and a microphone, before the camera pans upwards towards a desk with a set of hands. The scene then cuts to Lordan, who states that "...if we get our brains together, we can work on solving something together" (Berliner, 2021, 00:05:46 - 00:05:48).

This short montage – the typing sounds of a computer keyboard, the continual images of computer cords, the lone, black clothed silhouette, the set of eyes intensely looking at a presumed internet forum – to me, evokes strong associations of the representations of hackers in film and television. While I am not arguing that the series aims to portray the web sleuths *as* hackers, I believe they enlist similar stereotypes of this figure when presenting the web sleuths. Returning to Rosewarne's discourse on the matter of hackers, the archetype of the lone vigilante comes to mind – a sort of underground, outsider, gray-hat hacker, motivated to improve upon society, and web sleuth for the greater good (2016, p. 125-126). This is further exemplified in Lordan's statement of working together to solve the Lam case – if all the lone

web sleuths put their brains together, a greater goal can be achieved. The hacker being a popular figure in narratives about the internet, it is perhaps not so strange that the series chooses to enlist similar characteristics when depicting the web sleuth. Evenso, I argue that the usage of such images – the blurry, anonymous, greenlit silhouette, the computer cords and the sounds of typing – in conjunction with the series general critical stance towards the web sleuths' behavior in the case of Lam, suggests a certain attitude implied to the material.

As Rosewarne explains, the portrayals of hackers in popular media have often been a villainizing one. Popular culture has a longstanding tradition of portraying technology, computers and the internet as scary, and the hacker is yet another element that is perhaps even more threatening than the otherness of technology – the bad guy of the internet personified (Rosewarne, 2016, p. 128). Hackers pose threats such as stealing identities and personal information, leaking personal or classified data, attacking institutions, extortion, and robbing bank accounts (Ibid).

Web sleuths, as extensively explored in chapter 3, can similarly threaten society – such as the collective intelligence model resulting in the spreading of misinformation (Pantumsinchai, 2018), hindering police investigations and weaponizing visibility (Yardley et al., 2016), as well as producing manhunts and potential "doxings" of private people (Myles et al., 2018). In the case of Elisa Lam, the collective intelligence model could be said to have produced several falsehoods that spread throughout the community, and furthermore, the mass media. As stated in chapter 3, claims made online become truths through repetition, and "if a claim for the truth has a strong network of interactions backing it, those in the network will see it as truth" (Pantumsinchai, 2018, p. 774).

As depicted in the series, many web sleuths began to believe the theories that flourished. Lam could not have gotten to the roof of her own and into the water tank, because the lid was closed when she was found – thereby, someone with access, e.g an employee of the hotel, must have done it. A tuberculosis outbreak happened on skid row right after her death – thereby, her death was a government conspiracy meant to spread the disease. The history of the hotel was troubled, with many deaths and suicides – thereby, the hotel caused her death in some supernatural fashion. These theories, while extreme and bizarre, could have been caused by such faults in the collective intelligence model that Pantumsinchai outlines, where theories become plausible to some through repetition in the web sleuth communities. As with the Boston bombing, collective intelligence was seen as a strength – similarly, I argue that

Lordan's statement in this scene: "if we get our brains together, we can work on solving something together" illustrates this faith and confidence in the collective intelligence model – if the web sleuths come together towards a common goal and exchange ideas and theories, they can solve the case together.

The series' inclusion of the somewhat outlandish theories that surrounded the Lam case, arguably further implies a certain attitude towards the web sleuth. I would imagine that some web sleuths, if not most, would not subscribe to such notions of a government conspiracy or paranormal activity described above. Yet, the focus on such bizarre theories further situates the web sleuth as dangerous – returning to the notion of the web sleuths as "obsessed", in thinking of it as an unreasonable obsession, the web sleuths in the Lam case appear to have spiraled into such lines of thinking. As I argue, the series depicts the web sleuths in a similar fashion to hackers in popular media, and within the context of the series (where web sleuthing has gone *wrong*), these visuals aid in creating a certain tone.

The last stylistic element I wish to analyze in *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*, is that of its reenactments, in similar fashion to the discussion of *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*. The scene I will be looking at is situated in last episode, "The Hard Truth" (Berlinger, 2021), where Greg Kading (LAPD homicide detective), Judy Ho (clinical and forensic neuropsychologist) and Jason Tovar (forensic pathologist) lay out what is deemed the most plausible lead up and cause of Elisa Lam's death. Suffering from a psychotic episode, it is theorized that Lam, in her delusions, thought that she was being followed. Trying to escape from the threat, she paced around the hotel and hid in the elevator (explaining the famous elevator footage), before making her way up to the roof. Perceiving the water tank as a hiding place, Lam climbed up the ladder, removed the lid, and jumped inside. Once in the water, it was impossible for her to get out, removing her clothes to stay afloat – eventually drowning.

Kading, Ho and Tovar are mostly heard in a voice over, with reenactments of Lam's most probable last steps shown. Actress Viveca Chow, dressed in the same red hoodie that Lam wore, stumbles through the hotel hallway, the camera shaky and the focus blurry. She makes her way up to the roof and climbs up the ladder, a long-shot displaying the roof and its four tanks, Lam standing on top. We see the profile of her face in an extreme close-up as she is about to enter the water tank.
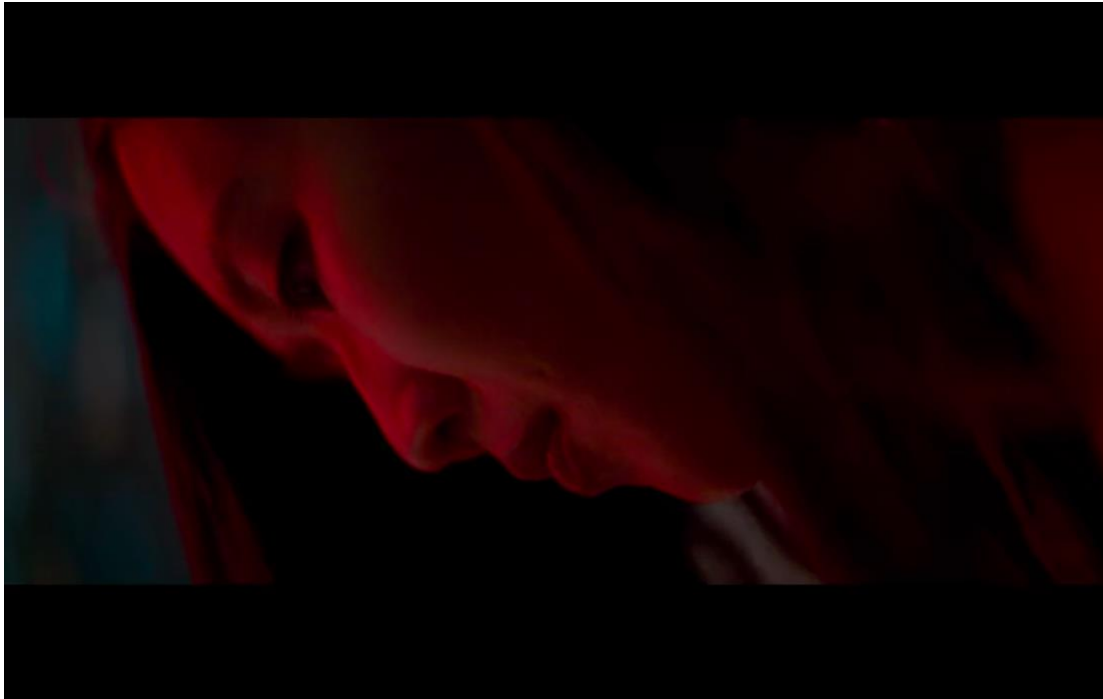
Figure 9:Lam close-up (00:32:12) In Berlinger, 2021 "The Hard Truth"

Greg Kading describes Lam jumping into the water tank, while we see the actress from below, thrashing around in the water. Forensic pathologist Jason Tovar explains his theories of her death. If the water tank had been full with water, one could pull oneself out. As the water tank was in use, the water was likely to sink, and reaching the top would be impossible. Kading thereby thinks she was trapped, treading the water and staying afloat as much as she could. All the while, we see the recreation of Lam, swimming, thrashing, and removing her clothes as they slowly sink to the bottom. Kading explains that she could have suffered from hypothermia, which would explain the removal of her clothes. She ultimately succumbed to drowning, Kading says, as we see the body of Lam from below, lifeless, still, floating face up towards the opening of the tank, light from above shining down. (Berlinger, 2021, 00:31:53 - 00:33:41).

Figure 10:Water tank (00:33:38) In Berlinger, 2021 "The Hard Truth"

Now, remembering the discussion of reenactments in *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*, it is quite clear that the reenactments in *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* are of a different nature, or as I argue, tone. Where the former refrains from reenacting the rapes and murders, instead having slow, atmospheric long-shots of scenary and locations, the latter chooses to reenact the death of Lam in a very literal way. Her last movements and psychological breakdown, her facial expressions before jumping in the water tank, her painful and exhaustive struggle to stay afloat, her ripping of her clothes and exposing her naked body, and her eventual demise are all on full display, in stylized slow motion.

I would argue that this highly cinematic and stylized reenactment of her death, is reminiscent of "the beautification of violence". While Grønstad, as outlined in chapter 3, argues for a severing of aestheticism and beauty, I argue that there is value in examining such visuals as described above in terms of their beauty. When judgements are made on the aestheticization of violence in a scene, whether critique or appraisal, one inherently refers to a process of beautification in a scene, where violent material is framed as more visually appealing than the rest of the text (Grønstad, 2008, p. 40). While I would not argue that the scene in question is necessarily more beautiful than the rest of the visual material – as has been illustrated in the analysis, both the interviews and scenes pertaining to the web sleuth are generally cinematic in their presentation, with vibrant colors, high contrasts, and scenic locations and

compositions, the series is arguably highly stylized and visually appealing as a whole. What becomes more interesting, in my assessment, is the very detailed visualization and reenactment of Lam's death, and how it, again, constitutes a certain tone – in this instance, not necessarily indicating the attitudes implied to the web sleuth, but the attitudes implied to the web sleuth's target of sensationalism.

The beautification in the image of violence is often critiqued, both in American popular culture more broadly and within the true crime genre itself. An urge to confront the American popular culture and audiences' apparent occupation and fascination with violence is arguably ever present, illustrated in the section on Grønstad and his explanations of the five fallacies of analyzing violence on screen. Furthermore, as outlined in chapter 3, Murley details the increasing self-reflexive tendency that started to develop within the genre during the 1980's, increasingly becoming part of true crime narratives and fiction narratives alike (p. 104). This introspective tendency, I would argue, is present in *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*. As mentioned in chapter 3, one could even label it as a sort of "justice-gone-wrong" narrative, where the justice went wrong not on part of the police, but rather, the web sleuths that sensationalized the death and its circumstances, resulting in the wrongful accusations made against the artist Morbid, for instance. While reprimanding the web sleuths' operations in the case of Lam, it similarly engages in a sort of sensationalization itself, aestheticising her final moments and death. This, I argue, is somewhat of a paradox of the series, and will be explored further in the discussion.

While I find the reenactments of Lam's death particularly interesting within the context of the series' critiques of the web sleuths, the style is not distinctly unique or uncommon to the genre – it is arguably fairly typical. Television true crime, for instance, often avoids recreating violence and murder in the most graphic and gorey way, opting for visual techniques such as slow motion, blurred camera focus, and unbalanced camera angles (Murley, 2008, p. 128).

As was discussed in the analysis of *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*, the reenactment can substantiate certain narratives and make claims of what is reality and what has occurred. Murley, similarly to Bruzzi, argues that the reenactments as such can never portray the exact events of what happened, despite the series collaborating with police investigators or forensic experts – they are mere constructions, which in turn are continuously critiqued and contested within the genre (Murley, 2008, p. 118). Once again, one can draw on the example of *The Jinx*, with its

stylized reenactments which evoked scathing reviews from the likes of Richard Brody. Where I argued that *I'll Be Gone in the Dark'*s reenactments were of a different nature, I would here argue that *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* are far more similar in its style. Brody argues that reenactments hinder the authenticity of the work, they are not an extension of reality, but a disconnection, taking particular offense to a scene in *The Jinx* which depicts Durst's mother repeatedly falling to her death in slow motion (Bruzzi, 2018, p. 269). As described above, Lam is depicted as flailing and struggling in the water tank in slow motion, removing her clothes as they descend through the dark water, her body floating still and lifeless as she passes away. The parallels are apparent.

But perhaps the greatest critique of the reenactment in true crime documentaries, as discussed, is that of them imposing a distinct narrative, validating and substantiating the documentary's account. Reenactments, although not actual evidence, can be powerful in creating a convincing narrative about the depicted events. In series such as *The Jinx*, the documentary inevitably serves an investigative function, in that they revolve around cases that are unsolved or under investigation, or perhaps a justice-gone-wrong element (Ibid, p. 270). I argued that this dimension is not really an issue in *I'll Be Gone in the Dark,* as Pedretti's accounts of what happened to her have no need to be disputed or be called into question – after all, the perpetrator has been caught and convicted. The same can be said for *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* – Lam's death has been ruled as an accidental drowning with the contributing factor of bipolar disorder.

While I do not contest the documentary's account and portrayal of what most likely happened to Lam (it is of course, not my prerogative, the case is solved, and her family seems to agree with the ruling), if one were to look at this scene in light of the series' depictions of the web sleuth, one could argue that it strongly supports the narrative of the police. The scene is, as mentioned, located in the last episode. Up until this point, the several outlandish theories that flourished in the web sleuth community have been outlined and discussed throughout the series, and this scene in turn almost serves as the great, final reveal – this is what *actually* happened to Lam – told through the investigators and forensic pathologist that concluded on the cause of death.

Quoting Bill Nichols and his remarks on reenactments in documentary films, Bruzzi explains that reenactments create a somewhat uncanny feeling of repetition for the viewer – something "historically unique" is replicated, a sort of reconstruction of something that is lost and

inaccessible, disguising itself as a piece of evidence – but it can never confirm the reality of what happened (2018, p. 270). The actual events of Lam's death, and why and how she ended up in the water tank, is lost, already happened, and impossible to know. When supplying such visceral and specific visuals alongside the testimony of the police and pathologist, the series adds weight to their theory, offering a more conclusive narrative ending to a case that garnered so much attention because of its very mystique, bizarreness and inconclusiveness. What makes real life crime stories such riveting narratives, is often just that – they are real, and whether by documentary writers or lawyers in court proceedings, the narratives on display in true crime documentaries offers a neat conclusion to the events (Ibid) – even though such events in reality, as with the Lam case, are meaningless and chaotic. I would in turn argue that the series' inclusion of visuals that corroborate the police's conclusion, in juxtaposition to the web sleuths seemingly outlandish theories, is reminiscent of the genre's tendency to sometimes uphold a "law and order" narrative. Perhaps most present in the book, film and TV genre, Murley explains that true crime narratives with strong narrative conclusions, e.g solved cases, create strong emotions in the audience, and a stronger belief in the justice system (2008, p. 102). While many true crime documentaries have gone the direction of investigating such beliefs, I would argue that in the case of *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel,* the web sleuth is portrayed as the culprit of vandalizing the tragic passing of Elisa Lam, where the police investigators got it right.

6 Discussion

Rounding up the comparative textual analysis, It is now time to discuss my findings more thoroughly. So how do *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* depict the websleuth? To answer in the most simplified way, I would say that the former depicts the websleuth rather positively, but with the potential tragic side effects on the individual, through the character of Michelle McNamara and her websleuthing partners, tirelessly investigating the Golden State Killer case. The latter depicts the websleuth rather negatively, as a community spiraling out of control in their theories surrounding the Lam case, harming the investigation and leading to false accusations. This is of course an extreme condensation of my arguments, but I will now look deeper into the interpretations that I have made in the analysis above, the differences and similarities in their depictions, their differing tone as well as their critical reception. Additionally, I will try to understand the websleuth in its broader, sociopolitical context.

6.1 Mood

As was outlined in chapter 4 on methods, Pye explains that the dominant or systemic tonal aspects of a text can be categorized as the mood of the text, which includes aspects such as predispositions of the spectator, to the films' more overarching atmosphere, often perceived in the beginning of a film, setting the expectations for the experience and what emotions one will encounter throughout (2007, p. 18). In the analysis, I have looked at the local and variable, the specific narrative and stylistic elements that I interpret to constitute a certain tone. It might be useful, then, to situate these interpretations within the general mood of the texts. As Pye explains, the mood is often established in the beginning of a film (or series, in this instance), creating expectations for what emotions one will encounter throughout. Even prior to watching, the viewer already has some predispositions and expectations as to what they will experience, often in relation to the genre one will consume. When sitting down to watch a true crime documentary series, I argue one anticipates several things - to be shocked, to feel sad, angry or disgusted, to be moved, to sympathize with the story and its victims. There is also an expectation of violence or injustice, inherent to the genre, and one in turn arguably braces oneself to experience emotions that such visuals and depictions can evoke. What does the two series establish as their mood in the first episodes, then? Let's take a look.

The opening scene of *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* begins with several establishing shots of Los Angeles at nighttime. The moon rises behind a hill, palm trees rustle in the wind, and the camera pans down to the facade of McNamara's house, before a dial tone is heard. A montage then begins, where McNamara introduces herself over the phone several times. We see a clip-board with newspaper clippings on the EAR/ONS case, fingers typing on a computer keyboard, a fast paced montage of internet searches on the EAR, McNamara's blog, and a blogpost being written out. Excerpts and interviews of McNamara are read out, explaining her occupation with crime and crime solving - "I had a murder habit, and it was bad. I would feed it for the rest of my life", she states, before the title sequence begins. (Garbus, 2020, 00:00:00 - 00:02:32).

Figure 11:Moon (00:00:24) In Garbus, 2020 "Murder Habit"

Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel begins with a close-up of computer cords and wires, before a man sitting by his computer puts on a pair of headphones, all bathed in the same, green hue. A click is heard, and the man begins to watch several news stories surrounding the case of Elisa Lam and the notorious Cecil Hotel. In a close up of his eyes, the reflection of several videos is seen in his glasses as he clicks through, a montage of several videos ensuing, before a webpage on the Cecil Hotel leads into a dramatic, fast-paced montage on the matter. With whips, pans, zooms and startling sound effects between interviews, archival footage and reenactments makes the introduction to the hotel and its dark

history striking and dramatic. The case of Lam is also introduced, a montage of YouTubers discussing the case, before audio from an interview states that "the Cecil Hotel is this exalted place of crime…of violence…of spookiness…that just continues to call to us". A long-shot of the exterior of the hotel leads into the title sequence (Berlinger, 2020, 00:00:00 - 00:02:47).

Figure 12:The Cecil (00:02:45) In Berlinger, 2021 "Lost in Los Angeles"

Examining my observations on the series' implied attitudes to the websleuth, I would argue that the overall mood that is established in the opening scenes is indicative of the mood and tone of the texts as a whole. They are similar in that they both introduce the subject matter right away - *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* introduces McNamara and her obsession with the Golden State Killer, and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* introduces both the hotel, the case of Elisa Lam, and the media and web sleuth frenzy that surrounded it. The former is arguably more reserved, in a sense – the score is non-invasive and calm, the visuals are stylized and cinematic, but pleasing to the eye, and the editing, while somewhat fast-paced at times, does not obscure or confuse. The latter is arguably more striking and busy, launching into a multitude of visuals – the hotel, internet material, archival footage, interviews, reenactments, with loud and booming sound effects. It is similarly stylized, opening with the greenlit room as was discussed in the analysis – the visuals that I believe are reminiscent of hackers, already situates the web sleuth in a certain way.

What is interesting about the latter, I argue, is that the bustling and staggering opening scene comes across as highly sensational. It introduces the hotel and the Lam case, including the somewhat bizarre theories of the web sleuths (the hotel is haunted and Lam was caught in its darkness), but does not introduce the critiques it presents throughout, nor does it hint at the most plausible cause of Lam's death. It in turn, I argue, presents itself as flashy and sensational. This could be due to it aiming to create a hooking introduction, and furthermore, set up the series as conspiratorial in itself, to then reveal itself as critical of such tendencies later down the line. As will be seen in its critical reception and further discussion, this might have compromised some of the introspective and valuable assessments it tries to present.

6.2 Critical Reception

Throughout the analysis, I may have given off the impression that I find *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* to be a superior documentary to *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*. While I am not here to give value judgements on which documentary is "better", it might be useful to look at some of the critical receptions of the documentaries to better understand how their tonal properties and attitudes towards the web sleuth have been received by others than myself. If I were to give an honest critique of the two series, I would say I prefer the former. In reading reviews of the two series, this seems to be the general tendency as well. But through researching and writing this thesis, this opinion has been problematized. While I favor *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*, it is in its depictions of the web sleuth and of web sleuthing, which is the main object of this thesis, that issues start to arise. Opposite this notion, *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* is perhaps a more poorly received documentary series, but its critiques of the web sleuth are undoubtedly not unfounded, at least within the realm of the Lam case. Let's then look at some of the reviews, and discuss this paradox further.

6.2.1 Critical Reception of I'll Be Gone in the Dark

Looking at several reviews, I would argue that *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* was successful in establishing a mood and tone that is perceived as tasteful and legitimate, once again, "striking the right tone". In a review posted by The Guardian, Marianne Eloise exclaims that "Michelle McNamara's hunt for the Golden State Killer eschews gore in favor of a humane approach often missing from the genre" (2020). In a review posted on RogerEbert.com, Brian Tallerico says that "what separates *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*, the book and series, is the warmth and

humanity embedded in every aspect of it" (2020). In a review by Laura Miller for Slate, the title proclaims: "Finally, a Sensitive, Intelligent True-Crime Docuseries" (2020). On IMDB, the series has a rating of 7.4 out of 10 stars, on Rotten Tomatoes, an average "tomatometer" of 96%. Without going any further, I believe it is safe to say that the general consensus is that *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* is a very good true crime documentary.

More than a testament to its positive review and reception, I would argue the citations above further illustrate this "shroud of illegitimacy" surrounding the genre that I have continuously mentioned throughout this thesis. In the review for Slate, Miller even suggests that *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* is to the true crime documentary what *In Cold Blood* was to the true crime literary genre (2020) – a comparison that arguably situates the series as genre defining, containing a sort of seriousness that the genre apparently lacks. I find this observation interesting, for as has been mentioned by authors such as Murley and Bruzzi in the fourth chapter of this thesis, there are several documentaries that have been brought forth as aligning with this same sort of seriousness, self-reflection and sensitivity of sorts several years prior, such as *The Thin Blue Line* or *The Staircase*, for instance. I do not think that the many critically acclaimed documentaries released years prior to *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* are forgotten or less highly regarded, but rather, that despite the many documentaries that exhibit a genuineness, sensitivity, and self reflexive tendency, the true crime genre just cannot seem to shake its complicated reputation. Furthermore, statements such as those of Eloise for The Guardian, where the lack of "gore" is celebrated and longed for, is in my assessment another iteration of striking the right tone. As was explored in the analysis, the reenactments in the series are sophisticated recreations of locations, and refrain from ever depicting the brutalities and violence that took place, never reenacting the rapes and murders. I believe this is paramount in its reception as "sensitive" and "humane" – it seemingly avoids ever reveling in the brutalities of the crimes, it treats the victims' stories with care, much like how McNamara is described as a researcher both in the book and the series.

Interestingly, though, the series did receive some backlash from one of its participants. In the third episode of the series, called "Rat in a Maze", the murder of Charlene and Lyman Smith is presented. Lyman Smith's daughter, Jennifer Carole, appears in the scene, explaining the events that led up to her brother finding their father and his wife bludgeoned to death in their home. As Carole explains her brother walking into their home one Sunday morning and finding their father and his wife deceased, reenactments that are typical of the series are

shown – slow pans of the home, the bed, a bloody pillow, etc. Additionally, actual crime scene photos are shown – of the bedroom, the blood splatter and a set of tied up hands. Carole expresses the horrors surrounding the details of the murder, stating that it was much worse than anybody had thought. Detective Paul Holes goes on to theorize that Lyman Smith was tied up and forced to witness his wife's sexual assault, prior to them both being bludgeoned (Garbus, 2020, 00:21:05 - 00:23:30).

Figure 13:Crime scene photo (00:23:05) In Garbus, 2020 "Rat in a Maze"

Upon the episode's release, however, Carole was shocked to see the series include several of the graphic crime scene photos from her father's murder. On her podcast called "The Lawyer's Daughter", Carole spoke out against HBO, claiming that they had blindsided her (Dowd, 2020). She was of the impression that the crime scene photos which were included would be blurred, and showed several email exchanges with the production expressing her dismay and disappointment. The photos had never been released to the public, and Carole did not know how HBO were able to obtain them. Furthermore, the photos, in their graphic nature, were extremely traumatizing to witness. Carole stated that the murder of her father changed their familiy's lives forever, and the thought that her brothers and uncle could potentially and unexpectedly be confronted with such photos, was too much to handle for her (Ibid). Additionally, Carole took offense to the theory of Smith witnessing his wife's assault,

which Holes presents in the scene, asking for HBO for it to be removed. Liz Garbus, director of *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*, told the Ventura County Star that Carole's concerns would be addressed (Ibid).

Despite the series' efforts to maintain a sensitivity and handle its subject matter with care, as has been continuously expressed throughout this thesis – with reenactments that refrain from depicting violence and gore, and reenacting the victims' traumatic experiences – it is perhaps impossible to create a true crime documentary without exacerbating pain. Perhaps the notion of a "sensitive" true crime documentary is unattainable.

Now, I have dedicated a somewhat extensive amount of the analysis and discussion to the series' style of reenactments and how they in turn constitute a certain tone implied to the subject matter. One might ask how this pertains to the exploration of their depictions of the web sleuth. I argue that there exists somewhat of a paradox when pertaining to both series. *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* takes great care to treat both the victims of the Golden State Killer and McNamara herself with thoughtfulness. Yet, as mentioned in the introduction to the series, it rarely engages in any critical discussions of web sleuthing itself, apart from the effects and toll it took on McNamara herself. A review by Alan Sepinwall for Rolling Stone seems to echo this observation.

Although the series is clear on the fact that McNamara never had any knowledge or documentation that pointed towards the revealed assailant DeAngelo, and the break-through and solving of the case was due to a DNA profile that led to him, the series, and specifically, cold-case investigator Paul Holes celebrates McNamara for bringing attention to the cold case, arguing that her investigative efforts led to more resources granted to the investigation. Sepinwall states that "...it feels a missed opportunity for the show to more directly confront the fact that DeAngelo was an invisible man to McNamara and her collaborators" (2020). For as much time and dedication McNamara provided to the case in her obsession, both her and her web sleuth partners were in reality not able, or arguably, even close to, solving the case. This, Sepinwall argues, is a rudimental challenge to the field McNamara devoted her life to – that is, web sleuthing (Ibid). I agree with his assessment. Carole similarly commented on McNamara and her investigative efforts, quoted in the same article as previously mentioned:

> I'm so sorry that everybody wants to have this delusion that Michelle McNamara was going to solve this case. It's a shared delusion. It's magical thinking (...) But it also led a lot of people to do a lot of

For McNamara's involvement in the investigation was not without controversy. In the series' fourth episode called "The Motherload", McNamara gains access to a vast amount of old case files in Orange County that had been left vacant for many years. She was allowed to retrieve much of the evidence, and thereby used it in her own further investigation and writing of her book. In an article by Nick Gerda for the Voice of OC, the controversy surrounding this potential breaking of the chain of custody is explained. In a court filing, McNamara's description of her retrieval of the evidence in her book was brought up (Gerda, 2021). It was alleged that at least one sheriff's official helped McNamara sneak 35 boxes of evidence and thereby bring it to her own home. This in turn led Public Defender Scott Sanders to claim that the evidence could no longer be authenticated, as the chain of custody was broken (Ibid). District Attorney Scott Spitzer disputed the claims, arguing that the defense had been made aware of McNamara's possession of these case files, which he argued were mere copies and non-evidence – and that the chain of custody had never been broken (Ibid).

Whether McNamara, as Carole puts it, put the case at risk or not, this controversy illustrates the potentiality that web sleuthing could jeopardize investigations and case proceedings. The series' decision to withhold from engaging in discussions as such, is in my assessment not only a "missed opportunity" as Sepinwall (2020) puts it – but a further indication of the series' implied attitudes to the web sleuths in its depiction. As was argued in the analysis – the throwaway lines that claim their community was sincere, unlike "other" communities, the usage of "Citizen Detective" as a title as opposed to web sleuth, and McNamara being described as striking just the right tone unlike other "ghoulish, gorehound" content – situates McNamara and her fellow web sleuths above *other* web sleuths and web sleuth communities. In such statements, there is also an acknowledgement that web sleuthing can be problematic, and it perhaps a flaw that the series fails to engage with this figure more critically in its depictions, where it seemingly makes great efforts to handle the cases and McNamara with sensitivity and the right "tone".

6.2.2 Critical Reception of *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*

Looking at several reviews of *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*, I would argue that the series mood and tone resulted in it not being received as favorably. The general consensus is not necessarily that the documentary is *bad* - it is of a high production value, it

is, in my assessment, good looking, cinematic in its presentation, and highly entertaining. But its somewhat forcefulness and sometimes clichéed visuals - such as that of the hacker-reminiscent tropes, intrusive score, and it's entertaining of outlandish claims such as the hotel being haunted (as shown in the very opening scene, although it disputes and problematizes such claims throughout the episodes), makes many reviews reflect the notion of missing the mark.

In a review for The Guardian, Ellen E. Jones exclaims in the title that the series is not spooky, rather, it is just sad, stating that "the various attempts in this true-crime docuseries to lighten the mood with hints at a haunting are, at best, in very poor taste" (2021). Daniel Fienberg reviews the series in The Hollywood Reporter, arguing that the series, despite containing genuinely interesting and thoughtful explorations of the way Skid Row has been dealt with, for example, fumbles its supposed main objective, stating that "there's just a way to do a commentary on the corrosive effect of true-crime voyeurism without being so pervasively voyeuristic, and I wish *Crime Scene* had walked that tightrope more deftly" (Fienberg, 2021). In a review for Roger-Ebert.com, Brian Tallerico says that "some of the reenactments of internet investigators staring at computer screens feel silly, and it's a bit sad that the series doesn't really get to know Lam, not interviewing anyone who actually knew her" (2021). On IMDB, the series has a rating of 5.9 stars out of 10, on Rotten Tomatoes, a 52% on the tomatometer, with a "critics consensus" reading "a sad story poorly told, *Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* buries the heart of its tragic case under unsavory conspiracy theories and tasteless reenactments"(*Crime Scene*, n.d.). In summary, I would argue that the series, despite its efforts to examine the web sleuth community and the voyeuristic tendencies of the true crime community, fails to situate itself as legitimate and serious in its tone.

The self-reflexive habit that Murley argues has increasingly become part of true crime narratives, can sometimes, as she states, profit from the very appetites it reprimands the viewer for having (2008, p. 104). Although the series perhaps presents itself as conspiratorial and sensational by design, to then question and reprimand such tendencies later down the line, its inclusion of hacker-like web sleuth visuals and dramatic reenactments could be said to impair its ability to do so. I believe the web sleuth is in need of examination, especially in the case of Elisa Lam, and the series quest to do so is in theory admirable.

But I tend to agree with reviews such as that of Fienberg, and would argue that the exploitative nature of the series takes away from the genuinely interesting points it attempts

to make. This, I argue, is exemplified in the series' reenactment of Elisa Lam's death. Somewhat scolding the media and the web sleuth "feeding frenzy", all the while, participating in the same dramatization and aestheticization of violence, the interesting and thought provoking observations it tries to make, arguably becomes muddled by such distractions.

Another interesting point, I believe, is the fact that the documentary has no family or anyone remotely related to Lam featured in the documentary. Comparing this to *I'll Be Gone in the Dark,* where the series features both victims and victims' family members heavily, and arguably, (with the exception of Carole) with great sensitivity, the omission of Lam's family or friends, I argue, adds to the series sensational tone. Tallerico argues that this is by design, showcasing the fact that none of the people who speculated on the case actually knew her (2021), but whether this is the case or not, I argue it is detrimental to the tone of the series. The documentary discusses Lam's mental state at length, with psychologists drawing conclusions from Lam's extensive media presence, but fails to feature any friends or family with insights of her personhood. It is unbeknownst to me whether or not her family were briefed or included, whether they declined to participate or if they were asked at all, but regardless of this, the inclusion of such speculations and reenactments are arguably incompatible with handling the tragic death of a young woman with care. Where *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* perhaps missed out on the opportunity of examining the web sleuth more critically, *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel,* while making an honest and arguably much needed attempt at examining the web sleuth, loses its validity and legitimacy in such a discussion when it itself engages in such sensationalizations of the case of Elisa Lam.

6.3 The Websleuth Beyond *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*

In the third chapter of this thesis, the notion that true crime depictions reflect society's most apparent fears, was alluded to several times. Murley attributes the increase in the genre's popularity as a response to rising crime rates in America, forming large cultural responses to a seeming rise in violence and chaos since the 1960's. In the 1970's and 1980's, the psychopath and depraved serial killers threatened society, and true crime narratives in books and films reflected this fear. In the 1980's and 1990's, with the onslaught of many a true

crime TV show in their many different forms further introduced the public to the vocabulary of forensic science and technical aspects of criminal investigations, along with domestic violence becoming a more plausible and feared threat. True crime documentaries in the 1980's began to introspectively examine the American culture's infatuation with violence, and the true crime documentaries of the 2000's and 2010's increasingly evolved around narratives of justice gone wrong, flaws in the American judicial system, and "meta" aspects such as authors of true crime books or the surroundings of the crimes rather than the murderers themselves. After analyzing two texts that depict the web sleuth, I now wish to explore the figure and its implications further. If the narratives of true crime reflect society's most apparent fears, in the 2010's, with a never before seen access to the internet and social networks, what does the web sleuth then reflect?

Writing about the true crime genre on the internet, Murley attests that the internet affords something the other mediums of books, films and television lacks – namely, that of participation and interactivity (2008, p. 133). Additionally, true crime content has never been more readily available to enthusiasts and those who seek it, with true crime blogs, YouTube, dedicated websites, streaming platforms, and podcasts, there is an abundance of options for consuming true crime narratives and engaging in research and investigation. As the article by Elizabeth Yardley, Adam Lynes, David Wilson and Emma Kelly explains, with the internet as a tool, anyone with an interest in crime has the ability to conduct their own independent research and theorize with others in designated forums, whether it is to combat a specific injustice, such as a terrorist attack like the Boston Bombing, or a devotion to solve dorment cold cases such as that of the Golden State Killer (2016, p. 82). Web sleuthing is perhaps indicative of an online culture whose values and norms revolve around a schema of weaponized visibility and peer surveillance. Networked spaces allow for information flows and communities to be created, and thereby allows the participants to comment and control behavior. As stated in the article by Yardley et al., "In a society where to be is to be seen…" (Ibid, p. 84), websleuthing is perhaps a reflection and/or symptom of the culture online and in social media networks.

Since *The Thin Blue Line*, Murley argues, awareness has been brought to the notion that the American justice system might not be as just as thought, contrary to the more "conservative" true crime narratives of prior. Arguably, this tendency is only made more prevalent in the 2010's. With large social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter, a heightened

awareness of police brutality, systemic oppression, institutional racism and the inequality of the justice system among other depravities, leaves the general impression that the American justice system is broken. Could web sleuthing – independent online investigations by private individuals – be a response to an unjust justice system, taking the matter into their own hands? It could be argued that web sleuthing, in many instances, can prove helpful in investigations. As Josh Dean states in *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*, there have been cases where web sleuths have been genuinely helpful, with several cold cases of unidentified murder victims being solved. For example, "Tent Girl", an unidentified woman found dead in 1968, was identified as Barbara Ann Hackman Taylor thirty years later due to Todd Matthews taking an interest in the case and creating a website dedicated to her. Finding a listing of a missing person that matched her description, he successfully found her true identity (Hardwick, 2021).

Yet, it might be a stretch to label the web sleuth phenomenon as a response to a broken American justice system. Murley, discussing the many ethical questions surrounding true crime, suggests that the genre and all its problematic tendencies can be viewed as a counter effort to the social progress that has taken place since the 60's - such as feminism and multiculturalism (Ibid, p. 3). For as has been the case for the genre as it has existed for centuries, the prominent narratives featured continue to be that of white, female victims – furthermore, a fetishization of those very victims and the violence inflicted upon them. As was mentioned in chapter 3 in "a gendered genre", cases of white, young and attractive middle-class women are often the ones that get prominent coverage in the news media.

As Horeck states in her book, "…too often, the potential for true crime to offer a feminist analysis of violence against women is overlooked in favor of delivering a series of microaffective nuggets or thrills" (2019, p. 28). In the afterword of her book, Horeck further argues for a feminist, intersectional version of true crime. Instead of the affect-filled, judgment-soliciting narratives that so often dominate true crime, a feminist approach, she argues, can ellicit a "collective approach to social justice" – examining the causes of violence and crime more thoroughly. Horeck proposes some solutions, too – pointing to the podcast *Missing and Murdered* by Connie Walker, which focuses on violence against indegenous women in Canada and the wider history of systemic racism and gender oppression (2019, p. 171). Horeck praises the podcast, and states that

Instead of encouraging an aimless internet "sleuthing"—of chasing down "clues" and endlessly debating questions of guilt and innocence— Walker invites a form of critical listening that "connects the dots" of systemic institutionally sanctioned violence (Ibid, p. 176).

Her words poignantly fit this thesis. Despite the criticisms I posed of *I'll Be Gone in the Dark'*s depiction of web sleuths, the series handles the victims, and furthermore, McNamara with great care. *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*, while discouraging such web sleuth behavior Horeck reprimands, arguably participates in the same sensationalism, aestheticizing the death of Lam through reenactments.

It is perhaps more fitting to reiterate some of the arguments such as that of Yardley et al. and Horeck if one is to propose a theory as to what the web sleuth reflects in society. The nature of contemporary true crime content on streaming platforms and other mediums seems to elicit participation from audiences, and as Bruzzi and Murley both outline, a tendency in contemporary true crime narratives such as *The Jinx* and *Making a Murderer* is that of bringing to light faults in the justice system, inviting the audience to serve as jury. The increase in web sleuths could in turn be the result of a popular culture occupied with violence and true crime that invites involvement and engagement, a culture occupied with voyeurism and peer surveillance, a manifestation of the digital culture and its norms, the culmination of true crime and a participatory culture.

7 Conclusion

In this thesis, I sought out to answer the research question: How are web sleuths depicted in *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel?* The purpose of this thesis has as such been to examine the web sleuth and its depictions in contemporary true crime documentaries, and the way in which these texts relate to and situate the web sleuth within the genre, which I argue it is an intrinsic part of.

In doing so, an outlining of the true crime genre and its lineage, from the true crime magazines of the 1920's and 1930's, to the true crime books of the 1960's onwards, to true crime fiction films, true crime television and the early true crime documentary has been provided. Several themes and conventions emerged from the continuously popular genre that still remain to this day. An increased self-reflexive tendency and a growing attention to miscarriages of justice, along with introducing a vocabulary of forensic science to the public, are some of elements that have emerged throughout the genre's history (Murley, 2008). Furthermore, an exploration of American popular culture's apparent infatuation with violence on screen and the fallacies often applied to understand it have been divulged, illustrating common critiques and concerns. Similarly, the true crime genre and its potential ethical pitfalls has illustrated the continuous need to examine such narratives.

Following, the seeming boom in the true crime genre's popularity across mediums has been explored – with a specific focus on the contemporary true crime documentary. An abundance of true crime documentaries have been released on streaming platforms such as HBO and Netflix, with high production value and an audience that seemingly cannot get enough. Its narratives often revolving around percieved miscarriages of justice, directly influencing the criminal cases they depict, the audience in turn is invited to act as jury. As has been outlined, the participatory nature of true crime, with its inherent engaging and emotionally charged subject matter – *true* crime – has always led audiences to engage and react (Yardley et. al., 2016, p. 86). In turn, the web sleuth emerges.

While not a new phenomenon, the internet affords participation that the dominant true crime mediums of prior could not provide. The web sleuths – private citizens that investigate and research criminal cases online and in conjunction with others – congregate towards specific crimes, cold cases and specific injustices. Sometimes, they are successful (Hardwick, 2021). Other times, they run the risk of interfering with investigations, spreading misinformation,

and potentially, false accusations (Pantumsinchai, 2018). The web sleuth is as such a controversial figure, with several scholars examining their operations. What seems to be reiterated throughout this thesis, is that of the true crime genre facilitating participation in a culture of detection and infotainment (Yardley et. al., 2016, Horeck, 2019). The web sleuth, I argue, is the culmination of the two.

So how are web sleuths depicted in *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*? Following the exploration of the genre and its lineage, violence on screen, true crime ethics, the contemporary true crime documentary, the web sleuth, gender in true crime, as well as an outlining of the method employed, I have conducted a comparative textual analysis of the two true crime texts. To answer the "how", I have interpreted the series' differing tone – the attitudes the texts imply to its subject matter.

In the analysis, I have argued that the true crime documentaries *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* and *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* somewhat paradoxically depict the web sleuth – the former as righteous and good, yet, arguably refraining from critically examining the phenomenon as a whole – the latter as dangerous, resulting in falsehoods and sensationalism, yet, aestheticizing the victim within the text itself.

While the two examples analyzed in this thesis does not necessarily constitute a trend of the genre as a whole, I argue that it produces some interesting insights as to how true crime narratives relate to the web sleuth themselves. As has been argued, there is seemingly an almost symbiotic relationship between the modern true crime genre and the web sleuth – facilitating and encouraging participation and engagement within a culture occupied with true crime. *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*, a beautiful and sensitive true crime series at its core, arguably misses a critical opportunity to explore the downsides to web sleuthing. *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* is justified in criticizing the web sleuth and their handling of Elisa Lam's case, yet, arguably loses its credibility in its own handling of her death. Either way, the two series illustrate an occupation with and a wish to examine and present that of the web sleuth, positively or negatively, within the genre it so intrinsically is a part of, which I in turn argue points to the web sleuth as the culmination of true crime and participatory culture.

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