

Appreciating Nietzsche in Episodic Drama: The Highbrow Intertextuality and Middlebrow Reception of *Criminal Minds*

Michael Wayne

Introduction

For the majority of its history, from Newton Minow's "vast wasteland" to the anti-TV activist groups who proclaimed the medium a public health concern akin to illegal drug use, television has been a low status cultural form. As television entered the post-network era in the late 1990s, however, this began to change and some critics now assert the cultural significance of televised serial drama has surpassed that of Hollywood film (see Polone, 2012; Wolcott, 2012). Culturally legitimated content, like HBO's *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) or AMC's *Mad Men* (2007-present), is frequently conceptualized as the product of an "artist of unique vision whose experiences and personality are expressed through storytelling craft" (Newman & Levine, 2012, p. 38). In addition, courses addressing HBO's *The Wire*, offered at a variety of elite colleges and universities, attest to the ongoing institutionalization of the medium as a highbrow cultural form (Newman & Levine, 2012, p. 169). Yet, traditional crime dramas produced by major networks are often maligned by critics as "lacking ambition" (see Owen, 2012) and understood by scholars as supporting the hegemonic ideologies of the post-welfare, neoliberal state (see Bonnycastle, 2009).

I begin this analysis with a discussion of televisual intertextuality and argue that the dominant understanding of what I term "highbrow intertextuality"¹ in

¹ Here, I define highbrow intertextuality as the tendency for post-network television shows to explicitly make reference to texts associated with more traditionally prestigious cultural forms like fine art, literature, philosophy, film, etc. The explicit verbalization of the allusion that connects a post-network television text to a highbrow cultural text is analytically central. Using *The Sopranos* as an example, the Soprano family's discussion of Nietzsche, initially called "Nitch" (2:7), is considered an instance of highbrow intertextuality in the context of this analysis because both the author and the content of the text being referenced is made explicit for the audience. In this case, Tony Soprano's (played by James Gandolfini) son A.J. (played by Robert Iler) makes explicit reference to the content of *The Gay Science* when he explains to his father

the post-network era assumes a literary relationship between niche text and educated audience. In the following section, I justify the choice to use *Criminal Minds* as a case study by using critical reviews to demonstrate that the show's deployment of highbrow intertextuality lacks the appeal of similar elements in culturally legitimated drama and briefly describe the research methodology used to gather audience reception data regarding this quantitatively popular network show. Next, I use sociological research addressing American middlebrow culture to frame online fan discussions of *Criminal Minds* to highlight the pleasures provided by highbrow intertextuality in episodic crime drama. Lastly, I conclude by noting the use of intertextuality exclusively with reference to literary allusions in culturally legitimated content marginalizes the viewing experiences of network audiences.

Television Intertextuality in the Post-Network Era

In the broadest sense, the term "intertextuality" refers to the ways in which the meaning of a particular text is shaped by other texts. Originally coined by Kristeva (1996), contemporary scholars use the term in a variety of contexts for a variety of purposes ranging "from those faithful to Kristeva's original vision to those who simply use it as a stylish way of talking about allusion and influence" (Irwin, 2004, pp. 227-228). In the sub-field of television studies, intertextuality has a long history extending back to Raymond Williams' (1974) work on flow and John Fiske's (1988) exploration of the distinction between horizontal and vertical intertextualities. In describing the emergence of television's second golden age during the 1980s and 1990s, Robert Thompson characterizes "quality TV" as "literary and writer-based" and notes the frequent use of highbrow cultural allusions in shows like *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987) and *Picket Fences* (1992-1996) while asserting that "the classier cultural references... serve to distance these programs from the stigmatized medium and to announce that they are superior to the typical trash available on television" (1997, pp. 14-15). As the post-network era began in the early 2000s, highbrow intertextuality remained central to the medium's increasing cultural legitimacy (Newman & Levine, 2012).

In the recent critical darlings frequently described as "artistic" (Nussbaum, 2009), "difficult" (Martin, 2013), and "revolutionary" (Sepinwall, 2012), high-

that Nietzsche's existentialism doesn't deny the existence of God but rather proclaims that God is dead.

brow intertextuality helps a text forge relationships with educated audiences by demanding active viewing (Mittell, 2006) or providing opportunities to demonstrate high levels of knowledge (Lavery, 2006). Film scholar Dana Polan (2009), for example, argues that the use of highbrow allusions in *The Sopranos* is particularly important in the context of the relationship between Tony Soprano as a working-class mobster and his upper-middle-class psychiatrist Dr. Jennifer Melfi. For example, in "Fortunate Son" (1:1), Melfi likens Tony's experience of recalling his first panic attack while eating cold cuts in his mother's kitchen to Proust's madeleines. The exchange continues:

Tony: What? Who?

Melfi: Marcel Proust. Wrote a seven-volume classic, *Remembrance of Things*

Past. He took a bite of a madeleine — a kind of tea cookie he used to have when he was a child—and that one bite unleashed a tide of memories of his childhood and ultimately, his entire life.

Tony: This sounds very gay. I hope you're not saying that.

According to Polan, the reference to Proust in this scene allows "the viewer who gets the reference" to "both feel superior to Tony and be impressed by his talent at clearing away the verbiage and getting to the core of the situation" (Polan, 2009, pp. 52-53). Discussions of other culturally legitimated television programs conceptualize the function of highbrow intertextuality in similar terms. In his analysis of HBO's *The Wire* (2002-2008), for example, Erlend Lavik asserts that textual features like "behind-the-scenes cameos and amateur performers playing versions of themselves" can be understood "as trivia that separates those in the know from the rest, and lends the series a ludic spot-the-reference quality" (2011, p. 61). Regarding AMC's *Mad Men* (2007-present), Jeremy Butler argues the show's intertextuality provides audiences with a similar the opportunity as its "style showcases historical specificity and urges us to engage with it" (2011, p. 69). Like Thompson's (1997) earlier conceptualizations, however, these understandings of highbrow intertextuality in culturally legitimated prime-time drama assume a literary relationship between text and audience.

According to David Lavery, the use of allusions on television, which he defines as "direct or indirect references in a work of art," possess a "kind of literary cache" resulting from their "bookish past" (2006). However, to claim

the deployment of literary allusions in *The Sopranos* and *ABC's Lost* (2004-2010) implies "a mutual 'fund of knowledge'" that acts "as a testimony to the medium's increasing sophistication," as Lavery does, largely glosses over the different relationships such as highbrow intertextuality establishes with post-network audiences. If culturally legitimated cable drama, as discussed above, provides educated audiences with opportunities to demonstrate their intellectual superiority, then references to famous philosophers in a network drama like *Lost* "can be understood as 'nerd bait'" an attempt to draw audiences into "transmedia" extensions like DVDs, affiliated web sites, videogames, novels, and comic books thereby ensuring that viewers who invest more time with the show (and its related paratexts) are rewarded with more valuable interactions (Clarke, 2012, p. 5). To further explore the variable relationship between highbrow intertextuality and contemporary audiences in other parts of the post-network landscape, it seems useful to ask, how do such textual elements function in content that is not legitimated? What kind of relationship does highbrow intertextuality create with audiences engaging with traditional episodic narratives?

***Criminal Minds*, Critical Reception, and Fan as Audience**

To begin addressing the role of intertextuality outside of culturally legitimated content as it is understood by viewers with literary relationships to television texts, *Criminal Minds* is a useful case study for several reasons. Among the episodic prime-time network dramas like those of CBS's *CSI* franchise or NBC's *Law and Order* franchise, one of the ways in which *Criminal Minds* distinguishes itself is through the deployment of highbrow intertextuality at the beginning and ending of each episode. In fact, during the twenty-two episodes of the first season, there are quotations from a wide range of intellectuals, artists, scientists, and authors including Albert Einstein, William Faulkner, Samuel Johnson, Euripides, William Shakespeare, Ernest Hemingway, Carl Jung, Voltaire, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Yet, in the majority of episodes, the references are only one or two sentences long. At the conclusion of the pilot episode, for example, a character provides the following voice-over: "Nietzsche once said, 'When you look long into an abyss, the abyss looks into you'" (1:1).²

² Some episodes include more instances of intertextuality which are typically deployed in the context of a puzzle created by a serial killer who is being pursued by the BAU

Aside from this narrative technique, the show also distinguishes itself from other network procedurals by featuring protagonists that are neither police detectives nor forensic analysts. Instead, they are a team of criminal profilers working for the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Behavioral Analysis Unit (BAU) who travel the country assisting local police departments to identify and capture serial killers. The cast includes many actors with previous network television experience including Thomas Gibson of *ABC's Dharma and Greg* (1997-2002) as Supervisory Special Agent and BAU Unit Chief Aaron "Hotch" Hotchner and long time network staple Joe Mantegna as Supervisory Special Agent David Rossi. Furthermore, unlike many culturally legitimated programs produced by cable channels for niche audiences, the network show *Criminal Minds* is quantitatively popular. During its sixth season, for example, *Criminal Minds* reached the top ten with an average weekly viewership above fourteen million (Gorman, n.d.). In 2010, *Criminal Minds* entered syndication and reruns are shown on multiple cable channels including the A&E Network and ION Television (Albiniak, 2008). Most importantly, however, *Criminal Minds* is ideally suited to highlight the relationship between televisual intertextuality and post-network audiences because of the disjuncture between critical and popular reception of the show. Simply stated, critics do not enjoy *Criminal Minds*. Of the forty-two reviews published in major American newspapers between August 1 and October 31, 2005 (*Criminal Minds* premiered on September 22), identified by the Lexis-Nexis Academic search engine, all but three of the professional television critics in the sample gave the show mixed or negative reviews. Matthew Gilbert (2005) of the *Boston Globe*, for example, writes, "*Criminal Minds* faces an uphill battle to distinguish itself from the many other crime procedurals already on TV, most of which similarly borrow from Silence of the Lambs. It's not a cool-science show, but its crimes blur together with what we already see on the *CSI* series, and its supporting cast is indistinct." Similarly, New York Daily News television critic David Bianculli (2005) writes, "Sometimes a new show seems so old—so familiar, so utterly recycled—that the term *déjà vu* doesn't come close to describing it. It's more like *tréj vu*. *Criminal Minds*, the newest crime drama from CBS, is one of those shows... It's a premise that feels almost insultingly derivative." Alt-

team. However, this analysis is primarily concerned with the references that bookends each episode.

though these complaints might seem mundane, the overwhelmingly negative critical attitude to *Criminal Minds* is significant precisely because many find the show's intertextual efforts to be particularly unappealing. Entertainment Weekly's Nicholas Fonseca (2005), for example, gives his readers the following advice, "Do yourself a favor and read some Nietzsche instead of watching this junk." Similarly, Robert Bianco (2005) of USA Today notes, "The only possibly novel touch is the reliance on quotes from such historical giants as Beckett, Nietzsche, Faulkner and Churchill, men who don't deserve the guilt of this association." According to David Kronke (2005) of the Daily News of Los Angeles, the use of "lofty voice-overs cite epigrams from philosophers and statesmen" justifies the show's "seediness with pseudo-philosophizing." Whether related to the show's episodic narrative structure or its resemblance to other network crime dramas, these evaluations strongly suggest the appeal of the intellectual references in this show differ from similar textual elements in more culturally legitimated content.

To understand the role of highbrow intertextuality in prime-time network drama, this research combines elements of cyberethnography and content analysis to explore the ways in which *Criminal Minds* establishes relationships with viewers. Historically, examinations of American television audiences using traditional methods such as qualitative interviews or ethnography have been complicated by the homogenous nature of production and the medium's association with feminine passivity, laziness, and mass culture (Seiter, 1999, p. 131). However, recent scholarship examining online "fan" communities indicates the opposite (see Gray, 2005; Hills & Luther, 2007).³ Despite this theoretical and methodological uncertainty, I began monitoring message boards like the "Criminal Minds Fan Wiki" (CMFW) and "Criminal Minds Fanatic Blog" (CMFB) as well as the official *Criminal Minds* community message boards hosted by the network (CBS.com) and one of the cable channels that syndicates the show (AETV.com) at the beginning of the show's seventh season in the fall of 2011. I discovered that viewers of *Criminal Minds* discuss the show's intertextuality using phrases like "opening quotes," "closing quotes," or "bookend quotes." Using these terms,

³ Although some scholars suggest meaningful differences between analytically active "fans" and passive "consumers" (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998, p. 145), comparing the reception of presumably more engaged fans with presumably less engaged general audience members is outside the scope of this research.

I also used Google Search to identify data on websites like Tumblr, Squidoo, and Wordpress. In an effort to address televisual intertextuality within a larger cultural context, during data collection, I cataloged any public information regarding the basic demographics of a given audience member along with their posts. While the amount of available background varies from only a screen-name with a blank avatar to extended autobiographic accounts, and as such, cannot approach the level of nuance typical of traditional qualitative methodologies, these details are particularly useful as they help position *Criminal Minds* fans outside elite audiences such as critics and scholars.

Subjectivity, Morality, and Network Intertextuality

Although the division between highbrow and lowbrow cultures is never "fixed and immutable", as Lawrence Levine observes, sociological research indicates that middle-class orientations to culture predictably vary with socioeconomic status (1988, p. 8). The most common American middle-class taste culture, as literary theorist Janice Radway (1999) describes in her investigation of The-Book-of-the-Month Club during the 1920s and 1930s, is defined by the prominence of individual subjectivity. In particular, this "middlebrow personalism" both requires and supports a worldview in which taste is a reflection of "individual, idiosyncratic selves" (Radway, 1999, p. 283). The importance of critical assessment associated with highbrow cultural forms is mirrored by the significance of individual, subjective assessment in middlebrow cultural worlds and, not surprisingly, much online discussion of *Criminal Minds* is dedicated to viewers identifying what they find most appealing in the text.

In general discussions of the show, audience members frequently reference the value they associate with highbrow intertextuality. On CMFW, reabrease, a middle-aged white male living in Pennsylvania who describes himself as a "long-time woodworker," explains, "I believe that *Criminal Minds* is the best show on television... The show does not use trite or sarcastic dialogue as is done on other programs such as CSI. I really like the use of quotes from major writers—it adds sophistication and class to the entire scenario." In addition to general discussions, discussions asking viewers to identify their favorite quotes from the series are some of the most popular threads on a variety of fan websites like, for example, the "Favorite

Quotes' forum on CBS.com which has fifty-five topics and more than 1400 individual messages. Posts like this one written by thn0715, a retail employee living in Alabama, are very typical: "My favorite is from 'Seven Seconds' [(3:5)] at the end when Hotch is sitting in his son's room watching him sleep. I can't remember who said it, but it was... 'Fairy tales don't teach children that dragons exist. Children already know dragons exist. Fairy tales teach children that dragons can be killed.'" Highbrow intertextuality is also frequently discussed when audience members claim a particular quote is their favorite part of a given episode. In a discussion of "Mosley Lane" (5:16), ILDRSR, a student living in Colorado whose username is a derivative of the phrase "I Love Dr. Spencer Reid" (played by Matthew Gray Gubler), writes, for example, "***teengirlmoment** OH-EM-EFF-GEE It was perfect. It was awesome. I FRICKEN LOVED IT. My favorite part was how the quote at the beginning was about hope being torture and ended with hope saving all. Ah! I loved it! Ah!" Although fans often include the relevant quote in their post, in some cases, like when it has already been posted by another user on a particular message board, fans commonly assume the content is shared knowledge and simply state a preference for either the opening or closing reference.

In addition to the prominence of individual subjectivity, Radway (1999) also notes middlebrow taste is ideologically based upon the recognition that cultural engagement is a highly variable experience (277) and this is frequently reflected when audience members reference their emotional response to theighbrow intertextuality of *Criminal Minds*. On CMFW, woskxn4848, a young woman from Texas, writes, "Okay boys and girls, I'm pretty new here, but I've found the one thing I love reading are the quotes, the sad ones, the intense ones, the funny ones ..." Similarly, on the CBS forum addressing "Tearjerking lines/quotes," meikat518, a young Asian-American woman in an unspecified white-collar occupation, writes, "...the quote at the ending of 'House on Fire' [4:19] sort of gave a lump on my throat." Such comments are largely in line with Gans' sociological understanding of "lower-middle culture" in which quantitatively popular texts are considered "user-oriented" since they were produced the intention of being entertaining for the audience rather than fulfilling for the creator (110-111). And, one of the most common reasons fans cite to explain the pleasure of *Criminal Minds* is that intertextual references serve as a source of inspiration. On CMFB, for

example, crochet95, a medical records clerk with some college education from North Dakota, writes, "I love the quotes. They are one of the many reasons why I love this show so much. They put perspective into life and the show itself... You can take the quotes and put them into your own life... inspiration." Furthermore, viewers like riffjim4069, a "Lowly Defense Contractor" from Dallas whose interests include "Beer'n', Bikin', Bassin', Shoot-in, and VoOmin," assert this inspiration generates real-world benefits. In a forum for technology professionals dedicated to CBS shows, he writes:

Besides serial killing, I find these quotes often apply equally well to marriage, family, and the workplace. For example, I used the following quote ["Without a family, man, alone in the world, trembles with the cold." ~ Andre Maurois] when discussing family commitments with my wife, and I was showered with love and affection. Who would have thought *Criminal Minds* would give inspiration to relationships with family, friends and coworkers.

White riffjim4069 was the only audience member who reports being showered with love and affection, as these examples indicate, the entertainment value of intertextuality is closely related to the practical value of inspiration for many viewers. Yet, in a notable contrast with critics, the lack of context associated with the deployment of these allusions is largely unproblematic. Although audience members frequently refer to the intellectual value they associate withighbrow references, they do so through a middlebrow framework emphasizing individual subjectivity where the ability to appreciate the televisual text does not require preexisting knowledge. Shadow007, for example, an unemployed twenty-six year-old white male from California, starts a thread on AETV.com by writing, "I like how they start & end each show with deep, thought provoking, famous quotes." In the remainder of the post, he simply lists a few of his favorites and their authors. In fact, many audience members explicitly acknowledge that the historical/intellectual context of the references remain unaddressed. On her WordPress blog dedicated to the show, Chrissiemusa, who is studying to be a teacher, notes, "The quotations used in *Criminal Minds* to relate to each case can be both inspiring, interesting, dark, but they are all amazing and delivered extremely well... The quotations used may not be the full versions, they may have been edited or 'slimmed down' for the shows purpose." Most viewers, like Shadow007 and Chrissiemusa, have little interest in using references to

demonstrate cultural capital. This is frequently reflected when individuals assert that the inability to "get it" or "be in the know" is unproblematic. On her Tumblr page cataloging the references, Betweenhebars, a college student studying psychology, explains her interest in the following terms, "As all you *Criminal Minds* fans know, each episode begins and finishes with a quote. This is a blog dedicated to all those quotes. I often find them inspirational or sometimes I don't quite understand them. But I love the concept of this in the show." Yet, while primarily concerned with the pleasures provided by the text rather than the cultural capital associated with the reference, the pleasure many viewers associate with intertextuality has a distinctly moral character.

According to Gans, a central characteristic of drama in lower-middle-culture is the tendency to "express and reinforce the culture's own ideas and feelings" (1999, p. 111). In this cultural context, as media sociologist Todd Gitlin argued of network era television, definitive moral conclusions are particularly important because they encourage the ideological belief that large-scale social problems are "susceptible to successful individual resolutions" (1982, pp. 259-261). Contemporary scholars make similar arguments regarding prime-time network crime dramas. As Hohenstein argues regarding CSI, for example, the "scientific examination of facts leads to clear and concise conclusions" which "offer easy answers to complicated conflicts" in the criminal justice system (67). Among audiences, viewers understand *Criminal Minds* use of intertextual references in exactly this context. Sylvia Rolife, "a webmaster, a writer, and internet marketer and mommy to 5" living in Canada, employs this framework in a Squidoo page dedicated to "*Criminal Minds* Quotes --> Season Two." She writes, "[The ending quote] ties the episode up in a neat little package, and pretty much gives you the moral of the episode right there for you, without you having to decode it and try and figure out what the hidden meaning was." The moral appreciation of intertextuality, however, often extends beyond middlebrow narratives. As Gitlin (1982, p. 259) and Gans (1999, p. 111) both argue, ideologically, narrative resolution also confirms the validity of traditional morality and the institutions that promote such values. Take, for example, Wbisbill, a retired pastor from Tennessee speaking on the behalf of himself and his wife Barbara. On his Squidoo page explaining "Why The *Criminal Minds* TV Show Is So Successful," it is clear Pastor Wait (as he identifies himself) understands the

references through the moral binary of good and evil. He writes, "The *Criminal Minds* TV Show is one of our favorite programs. My wife and I DVR it every Wednesday night, and watch it after church... We root for the good guys, laugh at the humor, anticipate the well timed quotes given in each episode, marvel at the insights of the team, and rejoice at the capture of the serial killers." Unlike Sylvia Rolife, the value viewers like Wbisbill ascribe to the show's intertextuality is directly related to traditional notions of morality commonly found in lower-middle-culture.

Although many in the *Criminal Minds* audience understand intertextuality through subjective and moral middlebrow frameworks, there are other interpretations. In some cases, individuals find the deployment of particular references problematic and in other instances, audiences members research the source of a particular reference as part of their search for symbolism. In a CMFW forum addressing "Demonology" (4:17), for example, maurescue writes, "About the snow, I started by researching the comments that Prentiss and Rossi made at the end... While reading about both of these references I began reading more about James Joyce... Well, there is a reference to snow in a discussion about one of James Joyce's books... So was the snow in this episode also symbolism?" Although some viewers do indeed relate to the intertextuality of *Criminal Minds* in critical or literary ways, this kind of engagement is uncommon.

Conclusion

Perhaps the differences between professional television critics and quantitatively large audiences of network content in the post-network era is not very surprising. Where the CBS viewer finds inspiration and confirmation of traditional values in stories where the majority of conflicts are resolved at the conclusion of the hour, professional critics see pseudo-intellectual commentary about human nature in a thoroughly unrealistic show where Federal employees have access to a lear jet and successfully stop the non-existent scourge of rampaging serial killers week in, week out. Despite such divergent interpretations, the dominant theoretical understanding of high-brow intertextuality on post-network television as a means by which legitimated content appeals to cultural elites by providing opportunities to demonstrate literary cultural capital cannot be applied to non-elite audiences of quantitatively popular content.

Like film during the 20th century, the increasing status of any cultural form is dependent on the degree to which it develops its own "intellectual viability" (Baumann, 2007, p. 3). And, as Newman and Levine convincingly argue, the increasing legitimacy of post-network era content is only possible with the support of cultural elites who invest "the medium with aesthetic and other prized values, nudging it closer to more established arts and cultural forms and preserving their own privileged status in return" (2012, p. 154). Nevertheless, from a scholarly perspective, it is only by recognizing the ways in which such class-stratified understandings are socially constructed that the increasing legitimacy of post-network television ceases being taken-en-for-granted. Like the increasingly common arguments regarding the emergence of a new golden age which require an ahistorical conception of television, the association between intertextuality and qualitative superiority in the post-network era ignores the broader context of the medium's increasing legitimacy. By exclusively addressing highbrow intertextuality in legitimated post-network drama, scholars universalize the view experiences of culturally elite audiences while simultaneously marginalizing network audiences by denying the very real middlebrow pleasures viewers associate with traditional episodic content. As such, the contrast between the values fans find in the highbrow intertextuality of *Criminal Minds* and the reasons scholars assume educated viewers celebrate the use of Proust in *The Sopranos* indicates the perpetuation of a status-based hierarchy.

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CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON AUDIENCE AND NARRATIVITY

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ISBN-13 Paperback edition: 978-3-8382-0679-0

ISBN-13 Hardcover edition: 978-3-8382-0680-6

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Stuttgart, Germany 2014

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Printed in the United States of America