

What Hot Criminals, Anti-Heroes, and Bob Dylan Can Teach Us

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In 2015, Jeremy Meeks signed a modeling contract after much public exposure. What makes this unique is that Jeremy Meeks was heralded “one of the most violent criminals in the Stockton area.”¹ Meeks’ exposure is interesting because it had nothing to do with his crimes, rather it was his looks that dubbed him “Hot Felon.” The weeks that Meeks was featured on various news outlets emphasize our society’s fascination with criminals (especially if they’re very good looking). Western culture’s fascination with crime, criminals, and everything in between is nothing new. And, certainly, western culture seems to get a sort of scopophilic pleasure watching people behave badly, and our media reflects this. The depiction of the criminal element in popular culture speaks to the fact that the public is more than willing to invite criminals into their homes via their entertainment systems.

When Bob Dylan sang “to live outside the law you must be honest” in “Absolutely Sweet Marie” in 1966,² it would have been inconceivable for him to foresee the rise of the crime drama that marked American television in the 1990s³. Two decades later, there has been a shift in popular media from series that depict law and order to series that glorify the criminal lifestyle. Part of this fascination with criminality owes much to the image of the “tragic hero” who is described as being “what we want to be and what we are afraid we may become.”⁴ The essays in this collection investigate this struggle in complex ways and challenge us as consumers of popular culture to consider how and why the criminal lifestyle has become such a large part of our entertainment options.

The editors and contributors of this special edition of *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy* are pleased to present Volume 6, Issue 2, “Criminals as Heroes: Problems and Pedagogy in Popular Culture.” Our collection begins with two articles that acknowledge criminal heroes as a response to an oppressive system. Courtney Watson’s article “Bad Girls: Agency, Revenge, and Redemption in Contemporary Drama” traces the evolution of the “bad girl” in the wake of recent cultural and political events such as the #TimesUp and #MeToo movements. Watson argues that these cultural events have sparked

the need for a sophisticated female criminal whose actions will result in positive change. Similarly, James Tregonning's article "Breaking the Rules: Playing Criminally in Video Games" analyzes two video games, *Papers, Please* and *Orwell*, that provide an opportunity for players to undermine or subvert a fictional authoritarian regime. Tregonning uses the world of gaming to parallel some hauntingly familiar aspects of our own culture—surveillance, social media presence, and our own broader online existence.

Like cultural movements and video game cultures, our next contributors also engage with entertainment outside the traditional television viewing structure. Melissa Vosen Callen's essay, "AMC's Infamous Criminal Partnerships: Suppressing the Female Antihero" offers an examination of the female half of the iconic anti-hero partnerships featured in the network's critically-acclaimed dramatic series and their complex relationships with their male partners. Vosen Callen goes one step further by questioning how stereotypical gender roles actually disempower the empowered female anti-hero. A questioning of expectations is also at the root of Amanda DiPaolo's article, "If Androids Dream, Are They More than Sheep? *Westworld*, Robots, and Legal Rights." DiPaolo asks readers to consider what makes someone human, good or bad, redeemable, or irretrievably lost. Utilizing HBO's *Westworld*, she examines the broader societal implications and ensuing legality of artificial intelligence.

The last essay in this collection revives the age-old debate of nature versus nurture through an examination of one of AMC's most iconic series. Max Romanowski's essay, "Nature vs. Nurture in Albuquerque: What *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul* Teach Us About How We Talk About Criminals," demonstrates the pros and cons of this debate through the lead characters' evolution. Romanowski further challenges readers to consider how we talk about criminals and what we can learn from that discourse.

As guest editors, we hope this collection initiates a dialogue that will continue to question our cultural perception of criminality and the fictitious dichotomy of good and bad.

— *Kathryn and Roxie*

ENDNOTES

¹ du Lac, J. Freedom. "'Hot mugshot guy' Jeremy Meeks has been sentenced to 27 months in federal prison." *The Washington Post*. February 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/02/06/hot-mugshot-guy-jeremy-meeks-has-been-sentenced-to-27-months-in-federal-prison/?utm_term=.1d54ab6b1d58. Accessed 3 May 2019.

² Dylan, Bob. "Absolutely Sweet Marie." *Blonde on Blonde*, Columbia Records, 1966.

³ Rapping, Elayne. Introduction. *Law and Justice as Seen on TV* by Rapping, New York UP, 2003, pp. 1-18.

⁴ Warshow quoted in Douglass 30. Douglass, Wayne. "The Criminal Psychopath as Hollywood." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*. vol. 8, no. 4, 1981, pp.30-39, DOI: 10.1080/01956051.1981.10661877.

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