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TELEVISION

Especially heinous

What's the deal with True Detective's sex-crime fetish?

BY: LARA ZARUM

By the end of the fourth episode of HBO's crime drama *True Detective*, the show had become the equivalent of a new iteration of iPhone: obsessed over, blogged about, hyped beyond belief. Since its January debut, *True Detective* has drawn viewers and critics down a rabbit hole, searching for hidden clues to the show's central mystery and exhuming 17th-century fiction in the hopes of solving the case.

True Detective's fixation on violence against women is made clear in the first episode. Detectives Marty Hart and Rust Cohle (Woody Harrelson and Matthew McConaughey, respectively) investigate a case where a young woman named Dora Lange is found dead—and naked, of course—in a deserted field, bent forward in prayer and adorned with a crown of antlers. It's the kind of elaborate set-up that might feel bleakly rote on a traditional police procedural like *Law & Order: SVU*, the long-running NBC drama.

Instead of dealing with a different case every week, *True Detective* stretches one puzzling incident over eight episodes. (The first season ends on March 9; the second will feature all new characters and situations.) The structure is straightforward: In 2012, Cohle and Hart are interviewed, separately, about the Lange case. Flashbacks show the partners trying to solve it back in 1995. Cohle, who has deteriorated into a mangy, grey-haired lush by the time he sits down for his interview, casts a shadow over the affair. He spews forth a stream of remarks that are either inexplicably brilliant or batshit crazy: "Time is a flat circle"; "Vision is meaning. Meaning is historical"; "Nothing is ever over."

If *True Detective* cautiously circles around the tangle of the ritualistic Dora Lange murder, *SVU*, with Mariska Hargitay as Olivia Benson, an NYPD detective in the Special Victims Unit, hacks its way through rape-and-murder cases with a machete. The show's creator, Dick Wolf, took his inspiration for the *Law & Order* spinoff from the infamous "Preppie Murder" case. In the introduction to an "unofficial companion" to the show published in 2009, Wolf wrote, "I wanted to get deeper into the psychology of crimes like that, the role of human sexuality." *SVU* attempts to shed some light on the persistence of sex crimes; *True Detective* is a fungus that thrives in the dark.

Yet despite Wolf's intentions, it seems like the only thing to be gleaned from *SVU's* torrent of female victims is that there are a lot of fucked-up people out there. Rather than parading a

succession of sex crimes across 15 seasons, *True Detective* comments on the cyclical nature of these atrocities. It doesn't try to explain why they happen—it accepts them as an ugly but permanent facet of human nature. Maybe Cohle and Hart will solve the case by the eighth episode, but when it comes to sexual violence in the abstract, there's no big mystery there.

True Detective tells us, over and over, that horrific sex crimes have happened before and will happen again; *SVU* shows this succession of crimes—often ripped from the headlines—in one episode after another. That relentless procession of cases tends to depersonalize individual instances of violence—watch enough episodes and they start to bleed into each other, creating an unfathomable, aggregated Worst Case Scenario. By grounding the show in one case, *True Detective* drives home the fact that this kind of violence happens to real people with full lives, rather than the archetypes that appear on *SVU*.

Some critics have derided *True Detective* for its paper-thin female characters—Hart's wife and mistress, his two young daughters, the odd teenage prostitute. Others have suggested the lack of a strong female presence is intentional, meant to reflect a world in which victimized women form an enduring and invisible backdrop. The problem isn't that the female characters on *True Detective* are almost exclusively victims; it's that whether they're strong or weak, they don't come to life the way Hart and Cohle do. The focus on our bedraggled yet virile heroes implies it's a man's job to rescue hapless ladies. That backdrop of formless women mirrors *SVU*'s own relation to the pervasive theme of pretty girls being defiled and disposed of on TV. The fact that it's become the televised equivalent of wallpaper is a chilling testament to our collective ability to look the other way. Another week, another woman raped and hacked to pieces. Oh, look, Keith Urban's a judge on *American Idol* now. I wonder if Bob Costas still has pink eye. What else is on?

TAGS HBO, Matthew McConaughey, True Detective, Woody Harrelson

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