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Arresting Images: Crime and Policing in Front of the
Television Camera (review)

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Aaron Doyle

Arresting Images: Crime and Policing in Front of the Television Camera.
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. 198 pages.

As the popularity of ‘reality’ TV shows continues to increase, more and more television programming has engaged in constructing its own ‘real world’ for TV in programs, such as *The Amazing Race*, *Survivor*, *The Simple Life*, or *The Apprentice*. Aaron Doyle’s work enables us to rethink the ways in which these various ‘reality fiction’ dramas interact with the world outside television sets, influencing institutions beyond media and popular culture. Examining the various impacts of ‘live’ crime coverage on the criminal justice system, *Arresting Images: Crime and Policing in Front of the Television Camera* provides us with an interesting and insightful analysis of the ways in which made-for-TV ‘reality’ has broader political and social implications. While most scholars in sociology and communications would not argue that media and popular culture influence how the public, police, and politicians conceive of crime and criminals, the extent and range of influences these visual mediums have on their audiences has been difficult to document empirically. Recognizing such limitations with audience reception studies, Doyle offers us an innovative approach to evidencing television’s influence, focusing on “the media as a direct player in particular political and organizational contexts.” (p. 10) Rather than studying the ways in which television programs affect individual audience members, Doyle asks how media influences other institutions, or more specifically, “how does television reshape the criminal justice situations it records?” (p. 29)

Building upon the work of three distinct, but related, approaches to examining media’s influence on institutions, *Arresting Images* situates medium theory, media logic, and the sociology of news production in relation to one another, exploring how the different ways in which these sociological theories on media effects offer various visions of television’s relationship to the broader culture (pp. 13-31). Doyle’s case studies, however, encourage us to rethink all three theoretical frameworks by asking us to consider how media’s effects on culture and institutions might be understood in relation to the proliferation of criminal justice events captured ‘live’ by the TV camera. Doyle’s four case studies—the United States’ popular ‘reality’ TV series *Cops*, the use of surveillance footage and home videos in TV news, the live recording of Vancouver’s Stanley Cup Riot, and the staged for TV activism of Greenpeace—reveal the ways in which other institutions and organizations both shape and are shaped themselves by ‘live’ or ‘reality’ TV.

In his analysis of *Cops*, for instance, Doyle explicates production decisions in what to air and what to edit out, the program’s documentary form, and the narrative strategies that elicit identification with the police (pp. 32-63). *Cops* is an example of ‘reality fiction’; the producers “turn “reality” into entertaining narratives for television” (p. 35). According to Doyle, the effects of this program are far reaching; police behavior is tailored for the

program while media coverage heightens the shame and humiliation of the experience for suspects and / or victims (pp. 57-59). *Cops* also influences how would-be police imagine the job; some even see the program as “training” (p. 60). For Doyle, the media effects of this series demonstrate the “dynamic and circular” relationship of media and the criminal justice system in creating and disseminating “law and order ideology” (p. 38). Key to creating and disseminating “law and order ideology” is what Doyle terms the “authorized definition” of events (p. 46). The “authorized definition” is the interpretation of events as reported by law enforcement or other powerful political actors.

In each of Doyle’s case studies, the “authorized definition” is even more salient than the video evidence. In his fourth chapter, Doyle demonstrates that not all crime footage can be constructed or packaged as indisputably ‘true’ as the ‘reality fiction’ of *Cops*, illustrating Stuart Hall’s assertion that an “event must become a “story” before it can become a *communicative event*.”¹ For example, Doyle notes, “with amateur video, seeing is not believing” (p. 79). The “truth value of video evidence” is called into question more often when the footage has been shot by a civilian (p. 78). Amateur video is not automatically granted the same veracity as surveillance footage. Surveillance footage, as shown on the news, is akin to *Cops* because it is often pre-packaged. Unlike amateur videos, police dictate what surveillance footage can be shown on the news and provide the official interpretation or ‘authorized definition’ of the images (p. 72).

In chapter five Doyle indicates that the “authorized definition” can even override visual evidence. Contrary to eye witness accounts that often held the police accountable for the chaos of Vancouver’s Stanley Cup Riot, the three reviews of the riot (by the city, B.C. Police Commission, and Vancouver police) all used the seized local television stations’ videotapes to more explicitly blame the crowd and the media for the riot while minimizing the role of the police. Although the tapes were potentially damaging to the Vancouver police, the interpretations of the police and politicians ultimately mattered much more than the visual images themselves. As Doyle elucidates in chapter six, this is why organizations such as Greenpeace carefully orchestrate their media stunts. Like the police, Greenpeace provides the “authorized definition” of their dramatized activities in order to contain and constrain alternative interpretations. Interestingly, Doyle contends that in containing their protest campaigns as media-friendly messages, Greenpeace also constrains its own activism. Not only are its messages simple, but its organizational goals have become more narrow and its public more passive (pp. 124-130). Furthermore, in order to communicate clear simple messages, Greenpeace’s televised stunts rely on appealing to the status quo, which also provides the organization with more credibility for their ‘authorized

¹ S. Hall, “Encoding, decoding” in S. During, ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 90

definitions' than more radical environmental groups, such as Earth First! and the Sea Shepard Society (pp. 120-121).

Importantly, Doyle's research reveals that even when criminal justice events are caught directly on camera, they are always still ambiguous, always still in need of an authority's interpretation. In other words, an "authorized definition" is often crucial to construct 'live' crime footage as actually 'reality.' The constant and persistent depiction of black and brown bodies as criminal in news media and television drama, however, has perhaps made the "authorized definition" less necessary for racialized images. As Ruby C. Tapia reminds us, race has so pervaded visual culture that it "functions as an ideological landscape and cultural code necessary to communicating concepts that are not only about race."² Doyle does note that *Cops* overrepresents black and Latino criminals, white police officers, arrest rates, and poorer neighborhoods, which all function to present a 'reality' that supports dominant ideological understandings of race, class, crime, and policing (pp. 50-53). While this 'reality fiction' is constructed, it has very real resonances in policing practices and unequal sentencing, which have contributed to the ever increasing incarceration of blacks and Latinos from disadvantaged neighbourhoods, in the United States, or of Aborigines in Canada. For these reasons, it seems that situating race and neighborhood within the larger cultural and political contexts of the 1980s and 1990s would enrich Doyle's insightful analysis of crime, policing, and reality TV. Chapters three and four seem especially relevant to consider alongside Jimmie L. Reeves and Richard Campbell's *Cracked Coverage* and Herman Gray's *Watching Race*.³ Nevertheless, a more in-depth look at race, visual media, and the criminal justice system would most likely lead to a similar conclusion about television's influence on other institutions: "we must be wary that the most powerful players in any context tend to shape the forms this media influence takes" (p. 145).

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² R.C. Tapia, "Un(di)ing Legacies: White Matters of Memory in Portraits of 'Our Princess'" (2001) 5:2 *Cultural Values* 263

³ See J.L. Reeves & R. Campbell, *Cracked Coverage: Television News, the Anti-Cocaine Crusade, and the Reagan Legacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994); see also H. Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness"* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995)