◆   **Chapter 2**

**Making a Viewer: Cervantes and the Discerning
Reader in the Age of Inflationary Media**

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In 2015, the streaming content platform Netflix launched *Making a Murderer*, a documentary that explored the judicial problems of Steven Avery, who spent eighteen years in prison for a crime that a later DNA test proved he didn't commit. Two years after his release from prison, Avery was tried and sentenced for the murder of the photographer Teresa Halbach. The documentary traces the potential inconsistencies and failures in the judicial process and brings to the fore the possibility that the entire forensic and judicial process was a possible setup in order to convict Avery and, thus, not have to compensate him for the period he spent in prison due to his first sentence.

The series quickly became a success, reaching unprecedented audience numbers on the streaming platform. These figures were not the result of an isolated phenomenon, but rather reflected the culmination of a genre that in recent decades has gained more and more followers and whose productions occupy a large part of the streaming service's grid: *true-crime*. The term itself already presents a certain declaration of intent by detaching itself from the so-called *crime fiction* genre, which comes to represent productions in which the narrative does not have a direct correlation with reality and remains purely in the fictional field. However, the terminology of true-crime hides certain pretensions that seem to emphasize that, in this type of production, the search for the truth and the "objective" exposition of the facts prevails over the narrative medium itself, which remains in the background of the pursuit of the hidden truth but cannot avoid the "constant tension between, [. . .] the foundational importance of practice and routine in the production of representations of reality and [. . .] the epistemological claims of the form to certainty and truth" (Buozis 255).

One of the great successes of *Making a Murderer*, as well as other true-crime shows such as *The Staircase*, *The Night Stalker,* or *Evil Genius* (to name

just a few examples from the same platform), is its ability to create a new type of spectatorship that poses the possibility of a "prevalent notion of the listener or viewer as a 'desktop detective' or an 'internet sleuth'" (Horeck 7). This new system seems, a priori, to stimulate a new type of participatory viewer who, impelled by the premise of being able to reveal a truth hidden by the official discourse, falls into the fantasy of being able to unravel the secrets of the perfect crime.

However, under these narrative structures that appeal to activate the viewer's ability to unravel the truth behind the unsolved cases, is hidden a system of affective demand, a mechanism "generated and mobilized within networks and cannot be attributable to the agency of individual actors" (Horeck 3). In other words, a mechanism that exploits the affective response of the viewers by means of a suturing strategy that depletes a great part of their agency as a critical spectator.

Therefore, what remains of that spectator-detective is merely a zero-sum game; the hidden crime that remains to be solved is nothing more than an escape room where all the pieces of the puzzle and the resolution of the crime have been arranged beforehand. The fundamental success of this process consists, on the one hand, of the concealment of the artifice and, on the other hand, of the exploitation of what Calabrese identifies as the stretching of limits:

> A second vision of the world derives from our feeling of the verifiability of the real. New audiovisual technologies annul our faith in a personal verification of facts. The illusion of truth is created less by the actual vision of a football game than by its re-vision in television playback. Techniques of representation produce objects that are more real than the real, more truthful than the truth. In this way, the distinguishing features of certainty are transformed. They no longer depend upon the security of our own subjective apparatus of control but are delegated to something that appears to be more objective. Paradoxically, however, the objectivity reached in this way is not a direct experience of the world, but the experience of a conventional representation. (55)

This juxtaposition between modernity and classical baroque and their respective representative strategies is what David Castillo and William Egginton have elaborated in *What Would Cervantes Do?*, an expansion of their previous work *Medialogies* in which they reveal the concomitance between

our current modernity and the culture of the Hispanic baroque and its models of artistic and epistemological production. In the fifth chapter of *What Would Cervantes Do?*, the authors question the reasons that have led to the rise of the appearance of antihero characters in television fiction that have become a kind of sublimation of the "revenge fantasy of the middle class" (52). When Castillo and Egginton question the connections between this phenomenon and the institutional and political crisis that is plaguing the United States, they are right to point out that "while eminently enjoyable, ultimately they constitute a self-indulgent response by the gilded class to an economic reality that continues to benefit them. The fantasy is, in fact, unethical because it passes the buck on personal responsibility" (53).

As Castillo and Egginton point out, the ethics within visual production can be raised from the perspective of the internal narrative of said productions, but also in the formal resources that have proliferated in recent years, and which are closely related to the desubjectivation of the viewer and the way in which the mass media exert their influence on the dissemination of what has been called "post-truth." Some of these formal resources can be found, for example, in disinformation campaigns in social media and traditional media, in nonstop screen exposure practices like the endless scrolling patterns of Facebook and Instagram, in the automatic reproduction of content in Netflix that invites the viewer to watch uninterruptedly, in the algorithmically tailored content that pops up in the feed of the RRSS based on habits and ideological tendencies, as well as the reward system that promotes content production and consumption based on emotional responses such as validation and reassurance.[1]

Regarding this question and, returning to the phenomenon of true-crime, we can observe that these productions have, in most cases, the objective of shedding light on one or several unsolved aspects of the crime they deal with, which may be the identity of the perpetrator, overseeing some aspect of the legal process, or deciphering the psychological motives that have led a serial killer to commit their murders. Although this research and its subsequent disclosure seek to give voices to the victims or find new information that leads to closure, it is important to be aware of the procedures by which this type of visual production generates a new model of spectatorship.

For Tanya Horeck, this type of spectatorship is mainly based on "interactivity across multiple media platforms, the mobilization of affective reaction and response, and the commodification of true-crime as a multi-modal entertainment 'experience'" (1). These mechanisms reconfigure the relationship between the viewer and the visual object, establishing a relationship of codependency through affective stimulation by means of what Kaja Silverman calls *suture*, a process whereby "the inadequacy of the subject's position is exposed in order to create the desire for new insertions into

a cultural discourse" (Silverman 231). Horeck also warns of the complexity of these narrative artifacts by stating that:

> While it is important to take seriously the affective pleasures of contemporary true crime and explore its potential for opening up debates about social justice, I want to sound a cautionary note about the rhetoric of interactivity that infuses recent iterations of the genre. [. . .] true crime's overt solicitation of emotional responses from viewers does not necessarily equate to meaningful social involvement or "action." However, this is not to say that true crime is without its ethical and political merits: the key assertion of this book, after all, is that to explore the spread of true crime images in mainstream popular culture is to explore profoundly ethical questions regarding what it means to watch, listen, and "witness" in a digital era of accessibility, immediacy, and instantaneity. (11–12)

This accessibility, immediacy, and instantaneity are characteristic marks of our age of inflationary media, where the distribution of information through increasingly rhizomatic channels allows the configuration of horizontal connectivity and resistance systems (Castillo and Egginton 24). But as the authors of the *What Would Cervantes Do?* point out, the emergence of this new model is not inherently beneficial or liberating, but rather is subject to its articulation within the major or minor strategy (24). For this reason, to the aforementioned characteristics we must add a new factor that runs through much of this second medialogy that manifests itself clearly in the true-crime phenomenon: intimacy.

Žižek analyzes this point by addressing director Kristov Kieslovsky's transition from documentary to fiction cinema. The filmmaker found serious formal difficulties in the documentary when it comes to representing certain aspects of reality due to the immediate and contingent nature of this type of cinema. Contrary to fiction, the documentary, due to its narrative limitations, prevents a closer approach to the experience of the Real since it is reality itself that blocks the symbolization process (Žižek 45). For Žižek, this type of approach establishes a "domain of ghostly intimacy which is marked by a 'No trespass!' sign and should be approached only via fiction, if one is to avoid pornographic obscenity" (72).

The new true-crime productions, however, in claiming to be investigative exercises in which the main premise is the principle of truthfulness, execute formulas that rely on the inclusion of these models of intimacy through

productions that rely more and more on the editing room. These editing processes blur the difference that Bazin made between those who put faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality (43).

A priori, there should be no space for this type of intimacy in the traditional documentary, where there instead prevails a journalistic criterion of objectivity and the expression of this objectivity through disembodied reporters (Lindgren 2).

However, the new true-crime breaks with this principle by establishing mechanisms of seduction and saturation where the viewer simultaneously becomes the body that watches and the body-object. This operation, however, is not revealed in an obvious and self-reflective way, so one might wonder if this type of production would fall under the category of the major strategy proposed by Castillo and Egginton. Before answering this question, we can explore examples that are outside of true-crime that share great formal similarities and that will help us understand the fixation of television programming on truth and the ways it is represented.

Another genre that has taken over the television scene in recent decades is the reality show. Like true-crime, its own terminology underlines a premise of truthfulness that offers the viewer the promise that what they are going to see is reality. Although a few years ago reality shows about coexistence in controlled spaces (*Big Brother*, *Survivor*, etc.) dominated the audience sphere, today they share success with other types of reality shows such as *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, *Pawn Stars*, or *Jersey Shore*. Leaving aside other types of formal differences (the use of a camera on the shoulder vs. static, closed space vs. open space, changing protagonists in each edition vs. fixed protagonists), we will focus on the use of a confession technique employed in this genre. In the first group of reality shows, the participants use the mechanism of confession as a therapeutic escape through which to externalize their feelings within a "safe space," away from the pressure of group coexistence within their confined space.

In the second group of reality shows, however, the method of confession, while maintaining the formal structure of the previous group (an isolated individual in a position opposite the camera), loses part of its original function and becomes one more tool of resignification of the semantics of the image. This occurs because the "real" time of the action within the development of the program is broken and the participants not only narrate a specific experience but also add, a posteriori, a story about something that the viewer sees interspersed.

Confession, like the use of testimony within the picaresque genre (as we will see later) is transformed into what Foucault called "practices of the self" where:

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presences (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile. (61–62)

In the reality show *American Pickers*, protagonists Mike Wolfe and Frank Fritz are dedicated to going through garages and barns throughout the United States in search of collectibles, mainly antiques. In Season 3 Episode 1, these treasure hunters visit an old amusement park from the early twentieth century. Upon arrival, the current owner of the abandoned park shows them all the objects that he wants to sell. As Mike and Frank walk through the bumper car section in search of valuables, the camera intercuts scenes of them touring the place and talking to the owner with scenes where the protagonists speak directly to the camera.

Frank: Do we think we're going to buy a Ferris wheel? No. Do we think we're going to buy a carousel? No. But we might be able to buy some pieces off a ride. Signage, clown stuff. . . .
Mike: I'm dreaming about the canvas, the billboard . . . You know, the freakshow stuff, like the world's tallest man riding a camel, swallowing fire or something. I want to buy that.

At first glance, the montage may go unnoticed since there is a certain organic connection in the narrative between the events that occurred and the confession scene that refers to them. The use of the present and the present continuous tense during the confessional interjection is unmitigatedly unnatural and should be more than enough to reveal the artifice of the montage. However, the effect achieves the opposite; the use of the so-called "historical present" or "dramatic present":

[. . .] emphasize[s] "the rapid progress of the action." [. . .] it ignores and annuls the time which has elapsed between the events narrated and their reproduction in the mind of the listener or reader so that the latter, in his imagination, participates in these events as if he were an eye-witness. (von Fritz, 186)

It is difficult not to see the parallels of this narrative formula (second media-logy) within the novelties around the construction of meaning and "truth" that the picaresque genre brought about in the sixteenth century (first medialogy). However, the introduction of the narrator "I" within the picaresque allows the "struggle for authority, for ownership of the discourse, between the writing I and the inscribed reader" (Sánchez and Spadaccini 302) and creates a space where the very limits imposed by the use of the narrator in the first person, together with the questioning of the reader ("Su Majestad" in the case of the Lazarillo), gives way to formulas of fragmentation of the point of view that will be the germ of the modern novel (in the Cervantes sense). These formulas invite an anamorphic rereading that invites the reader to discover the artifice behind the text.[2]

For this reason, the fundamental difference lies in the fact that, while the picaresque genre "relied on the trope of 'undeceiving' their audiences" (Cas-tillo and Egginton 12), the reality show moves away from all self-reflexivity and self-ironizing, approaching the forms of Lope de Vega's theatricality. It does this by creating a (fake) disembodied spectatorship through the exploita-tion and commoditization of the values of truth and reality. This type of strate-gy, as Castillo and Egginton remind us, had already been criticized during the first medialogy by Cervantes's *El retablo de las maravillas*. In this *entremés,* the spectators of an itinerant theater accept the chimera posed by Chanfalla's troupe in which only Old Christians are capable of seeing the spectacle.

But like the spectator of the first medialogy, modern viewers "are not hypnotic, or suffering from communal delusion of any kind; rather, they are voluntarily invested in the hypocrisy required" (Castillo and Egginton 67). In the seventeenth century this was achieved thanks to the use of the notions of honor and purity of blood to force the insertion of the spectator into the ideological system of the time, while in this second medialogy, as these values have given way to others, they maintain the framework of the historical baroque tradition which pivoted around "the instability and untrustworthiness of 'reality' as a 'truth'" (Ndalianis 14).

These concepts of truth and veracity around visual culture are intimately related to true-crime, the theme with which we opened this essay. If reality shows blur the space between the viewer and the image, expanding the sphere of hyperreality, true-crime also achieves a dialogic connection between the two by creating the desire for truth. This desire acquires a certain pornographic meaning since it uses crime and violence against the body (which, in many cases, is female) as an object of gratification for the viewer. Here we should clarify that said visual pleasure is not generated merely by the exposure of the murdered body but by the promise of finding the hidden truth that lies behind the crime that caused it, and this reveals an ethical problem about

the realization of this type of approach. While true-crime certainly has a journalistic justification and seeks, in most cases, to bring justice to cases that have not been resolved, some of the practices it carries out make us question the underlying ethics behind it.

In the first place, true-crime is experiencing an unprecedented moment of popularity and it coincides with the rise of forms of audiovisual consumption in which the *binge-watching* phenomenon has permeated these practices. *Bingeing* consists of compulsively consuming episodes of a series, keeping the viewer as long as possible in front of the screen. In this second medialogy, the mass culture to which Maravall referred acquires a greater meaning here since it is not only the spectator but the object of consumption itself that becomes massive. Streaming platforms have exploited this form of viewing and it is increasingly rare to see productions of only a few episodes, as well as completely self-contained or standalone episodes. The fundamental reason behind this practice lies, of course, in the capitalization and monetization of time spent in front of our screens.

It is not by chance that in the current audiovisual scene there is a proliferation of remakes, spin-offs, alternative plots, or the artificial lengthening of series by adding more seasons. But the most paradigmatic practice to highlight here is the excessive use of cliffhangers or plot twists to keep the viewer's attention. This type of narrative tool generates a suspension of the plot that in turn generates expectations that persuade the viewer to continue consuming the product. Although this type of practice can be applied more easily in fiction, in true-crime, due to its documentary nature, the very "reality" of the cases imposes limits of what can be told. The way, therefore, in which the cliffhanger is articulated in this type of product is not so much (or not only) in the suspension of the story, but in the continuous displacement of the truth, since most of these true-crime shows (or at least in the most popular ones) deal with unsolved cases.

The problem lies, in our opinion, in the use of this repressed truth as an object of desire to be exploited, and within the true-crime phenomenon, as one more symptomatic element of the polyhedral problem of post-truth. On this relationship between desire and true-crime, Fiona Peters has studied, through Žižek and Lacan, the fascination with the figure of the serial killer in our current society, stating "So, when examining the phenomenon of true-crime narratives, the *sinthome* is evoked and functions to sustain the fantasies of the commentator, the obsessive and the collective readers/viewers, not the murderous perpetrator (or innocent party) the objet-a" (36).

In the case of true-crime, the Lacanian symptom is revealed as the compulsive need to find the evidence and truth that give meaning to lack or absence (the identity of the murderer and the evidence that demonstrates the injustice of a

case) that the viewer experiences. The link created between the spectator and visual production allows, a priori, the appearance of a type of spectatorship based on participation in the search for justice. However, this link is manifested, as we have already said, through the constant displacement of truth, and therefore truth as lack, which makes it the Lacanian *objet-a*, becoming the unattainable object of desire and generating the fantasy and the desire for fulfillment.

Under this same premise lies the problem of the construction of truth and the relationship of the subject with what is called reality. Castillo and Egginton already addressed this issue in their previous work *Medialogies* in which they used the term "theatrical delusion," or a "solipsism, or a radical skepticism as to the existence of anything outside of my own mind" (173). This distortion of rational skepticism has served, among other things, as a breeding ground for the proliferation of conspiracy theories and denialism around environmental disasters and may be due, in part, to the hyper-saturation of information flows and the articulation of the channels of truth as tools of discursive dopamine, responsible for generating dependency in the viewer by prioritizing the continuous flow of content (like minute-by-minute TV coverage of a specific event) over its critical analysis.

Based on these observations, Castillo and Egginton continue to work to launch new proposals that, through Hispanism, can help us reread and learn from the strategies inherited from early modernity and that are repeated today. *What Would Cervantes Do?* moves away, however, from establishing temporary hierarchies. The first medialogy and the second are not phenomena of historical repetition (as D'Ors defended) but are folds of the same phenomenon that catalyzes the two types of strategies, major and minor. Nor does *What Would Cervantes Do?* claim to be an axiological interpretation of this phenomenon, but rather invites us to reflect through the critical spirit of Cervantes to recognize ourselves as part of this media reality and acquire the devices for our own dealienation.

What would Cervantes Do? is both a title and a reflection that serves to demonstrate the validity of Hispanism when participating in cultural debate in the United States. It is a convenient question that allows us to engage with political and cultural discourse not only from the academic sphere, but also (in the case of this essay) from our couch enjoying true-crime and reality shows.

Notes

1. As we write these lines, the Spanish television channel *Antena3* has made headlines for its coverage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The program *Espejo público* of

said channel has broadcasted images of the video game *Arma 3*, passing them off as real videos of the conflict.

2. I borrow the term from how Castillo uses it in *Baroque Horrors* to define María de Zayas's literary production which "resist[s] our critical attempts to make sense of them from univocal or totalizing explanatory schemes" (134)

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