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PROFILING CONTEMPORARY TV CRIME DRAMA'S SPECIAL AGENTS: THE BYRONIC DETECTIVE IN NCIS AND CRIMINAL MINDS

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Abstract

This essay examines the main special agents of two contemporary TV crime dramas, *NCIS* (2003–ongoing) and *Criminal Minds* (2005–ongoing), claiming that they can be considered re-elaborations of the Byronic hero. In these TV series, the traditional literary figure combines traits of the classic Holmes-style detective and the hard-boiled private eye; thus, the resulting character is defined by using the neologism ‘Byronic detective’. To contextualize Byronic detectives, the essay provides a discussion on the main characteristics of the Byronic hero and his enduring remodeling as well as an outline of the inherent mobility of crime fiction as a genre, which well matches the ongoing vitality of the Byronic icon. Special attention is given to the return of emotions in recent crime fiction because these are a core feature of Byronic detectives, given that they tend to sacrifice family relationships to do their job at their best.

Key words

NCIS; *Criminal Minds*; *Byronic hero*; *Byronic detective*; *emotions*

Romanticism and its core elements are a constant presence in several research areas today, from philosophical theory – for example, thanks to *The Romanticism of Contemporary Theory: Institution, Aesthetics, Nihilism* (Clemens 2003) – to children’s literature, as highlighted by *Time of Beauty*, *Time of Fear: The Romantic Legacy in the Literature of Childhood* (McGravan 2012). Arguably, one of the most recurrently re-elaborated Romantic figures is the Byronic hero, envisaged by Lord George Gordon Byron in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812).¹ Atara Stein brilliantly discusses some of the most recent remodeling of Byron’s idea not only in literary texts, but also in film and television narratives, claiming that in many cases – such as in the *Terminator* saga, Clint Eastwood’s *High Plains Drifter*, and Anne Rice’s vampire novels – the protagonists can be considered present-day Byronic heroes with “superhuman abilities” (2009: 1); for this reason, Stein calls them Byronic superheroes. The fascination with and relevance of Byron’s hero are so strong within contemporary society that scholars Bogg and Ray analyze his influence on mate choice in the US (2002).² While a survey investigating the reasons why the Byronic figure is still so appealing, at least within Western culture, would be

illuminating, we can speculate that his complexity and rebellious yet vulnerable nature contribute to fueling the fascination surrounding him. Readers who are introduced to a Byronic character may want to discover the motives and origins of his moral ambiguity as if they were invited to solve a crime mystery.

The geographical extent of contemporary interest in the Byronic hero and his re-elaborations within various media and genres prove his vibrant vitality well beyond the literary realm. Indeed, Byron's idea has crossed media and genre borders in many ways, inserting well into a long-established trend of transmediation³ and re-elaboration of other highly successful literary figures who eventually found their way out of their contextual, genre, and formal origins. This is especially true in crime fiction: suffice it to refer to the television adaptations of Agatha Christie's books on Hercule Poirot (*Agatha Christie's Poirot* 1989–2013) and Miss Marple (*Agatha Christie's Marple* 2004–2013), the enormous success of Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat's *Sherlock* (2010–2017) TV series, or the Scandinavian (2005–2013) and English (2008–2016) *Wallander* series based on the original works by Swedish author Henning Mankell.

In crime fiction, the classic British Holmes-style detective has proved to be an extremely generative literary model, and so has been the North American Marlowe-style private eye. Many scholars have already discussed their most recent re-elaborations; thus, to take a step further, it is now necessary to consider this high degree of generativity and tendency toward remodeling as qualities that the detective and the private eye share with, and make them linked to, the Byronic hero. In particular, the three literary figures merged in contemporary TV crime drama, bringing to life a character that I define through the neologism 'Byronic detective' in order to highlight his combined features.

This article aims to shed light on this blended character. More precisely, it seeks to show how the Byronic hero is present in TV crime drama in the form of the Byronic detective by discussing the characteristics of the leading Special Agents in the TV police procedurals *NCIS* (2003–ongoing) and *Criminal Minds* (2005–ongoing). Before dwelling on these successful serials through close-reading analyses, it is necessary to take a step back and retrieve the characteristics of the Byronic hero as well as discuss why the Byronic detective can be perceived as a symptom both of the return of emotions in crime fiction (Ascari 2013) and the mobility of the crime fiction genre (Gulddal et al. 2019), which inserts this figure in the wider context of crime writing and linked scholarly studies.

Literary Figures on the Move

The Byronic hero is a Romantic idea that is inherently difficult to define. As it is known, Peter Thorslev's seminal study *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes* (1962) openly questioned two of Mario Praz's assumptions on this figure, including the fact that "he is a fatal and cruel lover" (Thorslev 1962: 7). Thorslev argues that he is not cruel: he is a "star-crossed lover" (8) who instantiates the classic Romantic hero's tenderness and loving attitude, and that he displays features drawn from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century heroes, including

the Child of Nature, the Hero of Sensibility, the Gothic Villain, and the Noble Outlaw.

Albeit diverging, Praz's and Thorslev's perspectives on the Byronic hero are not so irreconcilable as they may sound. According to Gabriele Poole (2010: 7), their differing views are due to an inherent contradiction in the Byronic hero: he is described in a way that does not find supporting evidence in his actions.⁴ Conversely, his deeds are in contrast with the expectations raised by his description. Like Thorslev, Poole believes that the Byronic hero finds his origins in past figures like the Gothic villain, but his behavior is different in the fact that, even considering his crimes, the Byronic hero is far less cruel than his enemies (9). This realization

brings into question the genuineness of the misanthropic level of his being, suggesting that, like his courtesy, the hero's misanthropy may be something of a constructed, or adopted, persona – a form of 'feigning' to return to Goffman's terms – that serves to protect the hero's more sensitive nature, his essentially noble and melancholy soul. (Poole 2010: 12–13)

Poole's point is that the Byronic hero is not simply a Gothic villain because he is not as guilty as he introduces himself to the reader⁵ and, once we look under the mask that he has put on, he is not as rude and antisocial as his literary precursor was.

Poole's convincing attempt to reconcile Praz's and Thorslev's opinions with each other has two positive effects: on the one hand, it highlights the potential of the literary figure in terms of versatility and re-elaboration; on the other hand, it presents the Byronic hero as a multifaceted character who is internally torn as well as hostile in appearance – in Owens's words, he is "someone who experiences frustration and defeat in both their public and private lives" (2015: 63). Stein further describes the Byronic hero as a self-sufficient, independent, and egotistical individual, "an outlaw and an outsider who defines his own moral code" (2009: 8).

It is unsurprising that a literary figure with such workable characteristics would be destined to be remodeled over time. Emily Brontë's Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Charlotte Brontë's Rochester in *Jane Eyre* (1847) are just two of his most widely known versions, while in more recent times scholars have identified Byronic characteristics in works by William S. Burroughs (Bellarsi 2016) and in the science fiction television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (Stein 2009). Undoubtedly, science fiction is not the only genre that has welcomed some of the Byronic hero's features. Stein's definition of this figure as "a loner who often displays a quick temper or a brooding angst, or both, and he lacks the ability to relate to others" (2009: 8) may resonate with Arthur Conan Doyle's readers equally well because these words can be easily applied to Sherlock Holmes. Despite Dr. Watson's presence as his right-hand man, Holmes is definitely a loner, "the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen" (Doyle 2020: 1) whose skills do not prove useful in terms of socialization.

In classic detective fiction, which mainly corresponds to the literary production of authors like Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, Sherlock Holmes

and similar characters are able to solve daunting cases thanks to their ability to analyze clues per se and understand their value in the wider context. These skills eventually allow them to connect everything in a logical and clear fashion, which stresses how they “are always in control” (Shade 1). This can be considered a characteristic of the contemporary versions of the Byronic hero as well, not only because they decide how egotistical they want to present themselves to readers but also because they define their own moral code (Stein 2009: 1). Similarly, US hard-boiled private eyes like Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* (1929) by Dashiell Hammett and Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep* (1939) by Raymond Chandler “are both lone outsiders” (Peacock 2015: 178), just like the Byronic hero. Moreover, this kind of detective and the Byronic hero also share their precarious position between good and evil: in hard-boiled fiction, moral ambiguity “systematically tempts the male protagonist, who is clearly tainted by his proximity to crime even though he is the only one able to move between social strata and the dual worlds of crime and respectability” (Moody 2003: 229–230).

Classic detectives, hard-boiled private eyes, and the Byronic hero are so well-established in popular culture that there is an endless number of re-elaborations across media and genres. For example, Doyle’s character is a boxer and this element is arguably brought much more to the fore by Guy Ritchie’s *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) film,⁶ while Nancy Springer’s *Enola Holmes* literary series (2006–2010) for young adults focuses on the adventures of Sherlock’s newly-discovered young sister.⁷ The hard-boiled private eye has his most recent echoes in late twentieth- and twenty-first-century English and North-American film, television, and literary products displaying maverick detectives, like Jack Bauer in the TV series *24* (2001–2014), and maverick cops like John McTiernan in the 1988 renowned film *Die Hard* (Peacock 2015: 180).⁸

In order to present the case of the Byronic detective as a contemporary cross-medial version of his predecessor enriched by classic and hard-boiled sleuths’ traits, it is productive to discuss the intrinsic mobility of crime fiction. This provides a useful basis onto which characters like Leroy Jethro Gibbs in *NCIS* (2003–ongoing) and Aaron Hotchner in *Criminal Minds* (2005–ongoing) lie because they are not grounded in literary counterparts nor are the TV series remakes of previous series, as it has been considered for the classic detective and the hard-boiled private eye so far.⁹

Profiling the Byronic Detective

Like successful literary figures, highly popular genres tend to move across time, space, and formal conventions. One such case is crime fiction. As Gulddal, Rolls, and King claim, “crime fiction, far from being static and staid, must be seen as a genre constantly violating its own boundaries” (2019: 1), including in terms of meaning, genre dynamism, and transnationality. The mobility of crime fiction is particularly evident if one considers its international appeal and diffusion: the genre is not

a British-American invention that has been adopted on a global scale, [rather, it] is inherently a transnational practice characterized by the multidirectional transmission and adaptation of styles, structures and themes across national borders. Crime fiction in all its multiple manifestations, its global production and readership and its transmedia adaptation and circulation is one of the most widespread of all literary genres. (Gulddal et al 2019: 14)

This transnational success is likely to derive from “the increasing hybridization and blending of forms” (21), where blurring lines of canonical tradition and genre conventions is conceived as a positive drive because it promotes generativity as well as unexpected and innovative mixtures.

A symptom of this constant tide-like mobility is the retrieval and modernized use of the genre characteristics. An example of this is the recent “progressive return of emotions to the scene” identified by Ascari (2013: 9). As the scholar writes,

[e]motions—which have been at the core of crime fiction right from its origin, as Greek tragedies show—regain their place at center stage. Today we are asked to read books with our body, not only with our mind. [...] The same is true for films or “visual fiction,” as Torben Grodal has recently argued. (15)

The emphasis on the private eye’s flaws, vulnerability, and emotions in hard-boiled fiction as well as the genre’s “domestic and social tensions that pave the way for the development of aberrant anti-heroes” (Ascari 2019: 105) were key to the development of the thriller literary formula. Later on, psycho-thrillers were crucial in retrieving emotions within crime fiction (Ascari 2013: 14).

The relevance of emotions can be directly linked to another ‘movement’ within the crime fiction genre – namely, the passage from infallible to fallible detectives. An unmistakably correct sleuth like Sherlock Holmes well suited late nineteenth and early twentieth-century positivist ideas (Ascari 2017: 10). Nonetheless, Holmes is both the epitome of the Golden Age detective and a fallible investigator, whose fallibility is precisely caused by his emotions: as Ascari reminds us (10), Holmes’s brilliant abilities are put to the test by sexual attraction in “A Scandal in Bohemia” (1891) and, to avoid ennui, he makes use of drugs.¹⁰ This fallibility makes him closer to flawed hard-boiled private eyes and, indeed, vulnerability and emotions continue to be center stage today.¹¹

Another instance of the detective’s fallibility as well as the return of emotions is the recovery of the Byronic hero in depicting TV crime dramas’ Special Agents, as it happens in *NCIS* (2003–ongoing) and *Criminal Minds* (2005–ongoing). Their leading characters guide a team of agents profiling and capturing criminals – from terrorists to sexual offenders, from robbers to serial killers – and, in turn, they can be profiled as Byronic detectives.¹² These figures are narratively built by sewing together traits of the literary Byronic hero and features traditionally attributed to the classic detective and the hard-boiled private eye.¹³ As the discussion in the following dedicated sections will show in more detail, in *NCIS* and

Criminal Minds Byronic detectives are independent and highly intelligent loners who tend to get angry easily. Their moral code coincides with that of the bureau or agency for which they work but, when their family is involved, they break those rules and adopt a personal moral code. They are able to understand the value of infinitesimal clues and place them in the right context, they never lose control regardless of how difficult or risky the situation is, and, for this reason, they successfully coordinate their team, instructing agents on how to proceed with a case. They have an innate ability to decode others' thoughts, intentions, and fragilities, both of criminals and agents in their team, but they are also internally torn by grief and sadness, unable to relate to others and constantly wary of showing emotions. They resort to violence and arms when necessary but they are also affectionate and caring towards their loved ones. Family relationships are at the core of the aura of guilt that these characters have in relation to their past, which is surrounded by mystery. Only after they have become known and appreciated as positive heroes, dedicated to their job and caring about their offspring, the audience is provided with an explanation about the Byronic detectives' past and guilt. These clarifying details prove that the characters own a specific quality inherited from the Byronic hero: the fact that they play a distant and egotistical "persona" (Poole 2010: 13) to hide their inner generous and tender nature.

In investigating "the resurgence of hard-edged maverick detective dramas" (Peacock 2015: 178) in twenty-first-century US and UK cultural products, Peacock contends that they result from the combination of traits from the 1930s-50s hard-boiled and *noir*, 1970s US police and vigilante thrillers, and 1970s UK television cop dramas. Their maverick detective "exhibits a state of principled but pathological hardness, punishing and violent, without any attempt to disguise unpleasantness" (178). Even though the Byronic detective tends to be a rude, unfriendly, and detached character, the maverick detective's "brutalism" and hardness to which Peacock refers (2015: 183–185) are not pivotal characteristics of *NCIS* and *Criminal Minds* Special Agents as far as the narrative construction of their protagonists is concerned. Grotesque violence – mainly in *Criminal Minds* – is shown to depict the criminal's deviated mind and is in contrast with the Byronic detective, who primarily makes use of his acumen and specialistic knowledge to locate the criminals. Only if necessary, he is engaged in physical violence and firefight.

The Byronic detective is another instance of the traditional "lone (or loner) detective" (Peacock 2015: 178): what makes him different from the Golden Age and hard-boiled sleuths (or combinations thereof) is that he blends traits of both in addition to the fact that he has elements derived from the Byronic hero – above all, his sense of guilt, mysterious past, and external modes that do not correspond to his inner, arguably truer self. Rather than his genius or cynical attitude towards society, the Byronic detective's chief characteristic is his troubled relationship with emotions, which most of the time remain hidden and yet they constantly influence his life. In *NCIS* and *Criminal Minds*, Byronic detectives guide a team of agents but they tend not to indulge in a frivolous chat with them. They seek family and work relationships but it seems that they know they cannot have them because of their professional role and its expectations. Consequently, they are torn between the desire to relate fully and openly to others and the impossibility

of doing so because they are the boss. Ultimately, they cannot have long-term relationships precisely because they are Byronic and, as such, they are imprisoned in a strict dichotomy: Byronic detectives are essentially loners; thus, if they want to grow a solid social life, they must give up their role as a boss. On the contrary, if they want to guide a team and be successful on duty, they are required to put aside social and family ties. Most often these characters have lost (or will lose) their wife and/or children, which is a clue to the fact that they cannot protect their family *and* their country at once, and that emotions and Byronic traits are incompatible. The discussion of the aforementioned case studies will show this better in the following paragraphs.

The Byronic Detective in *NCIS*

In Turnbull's words, TV crime drama "has become one of the most enduring and diverse genres of television" (2014: 2).¹⁴ Prior to Gulddal, Rolls, and King's words on crime fiction, Turnbull contends that "the genre of crime drama in all its diversity has (never) operated within a predictable or narrow set of parameters, as it has developed in different times and production contexts, not only the United Kingdom and the United States, but all around the world" (3). Indeed, some of the most successful cultural products for television of the latest decades are crime series that seem to appeal to a wide audience, such as *NCIS*, one of the longest-running television shows of all time (Capatides 2016). It is broadcast by the CBS network and it presents the investigations of a small team of Special Agents dealing with cunning terrorists, mysterious murders, and international intrigues involving the US Navy while developing the characters' individual stories. As it happened with *CSI* (2000–2015), its success brought about four spin-offs – *NCIS: Los Angeles* (2009–2023), *NCIS: New Orleans* (2014–2021), *NCIS: Hawai'i* (2021–ongoing), and *NCIS: Sydney* (2023–ongoing). The main series is still running, albeit without the character that has become identified with it: Leroy Jethro Gibbs.

While the prediction embedded in a poll published by *University Wire* – that the series would have lost most of its audience after the main protagonist's departure (Jacobs 2021) – may be wrong because *NCIS* already counts three seasons without Gibbs,¹⁵ it is quite likely that one of the reasons for its continuing success is the presence of stable characters. This encourages the audience's loyalty, as it can be inferred by Fiske's words:

The constant repetition of a character means that characters "live" in similar time scales to their audience. They have a past, a present, and a future that appear to exceed their textual existence, so that audience members are invited to relate to them in terms of familiarity and identification [...]. (2011: 151)

From the very beginning of *NCIS*, Gibbs is the boss of a close-knit team that comprises Special Agent Anthony "Tony" DiNozzo, IT expert Special Agent Timothy McGee, and a female colleague.¹⁶ Gibbs's team is supported by other pivotal and

long-running characters, especially lead medical examiner Dr. Donald Mallard and Abigail “Abby” Sciuto, a forensic scientist.

Gibbs is a former Marine and he is progressively depicted on screen as an intelligent, bossy agent with Byronic traits, which eventually make him a good example of a Byronic detective. For instance, he shows many symptoms that Stein ascribes to the Byronic hero: he displays “aggressive individualism” (Stein 2009: 1) and “he can be arrogant, contemptuous of human beings, bad-tempered, overbearing, cold, ruthless, and emotionless” (2). Gibbs is not used to praise his agents when they do their job well because they are supposed to always do their best: after joining his team, Agent Eleanor Bishop expects at least a smile for having been smart enough to provide the others with essential information for a case, but she is confused when Gibbs grants her only a puzzling glance (O’Hara 2013). DiNozzo and McGee dismiss her bewilderment with a light giggle, knowing their boss well. They both consider Gibbs’s modes rude and often make jokes about them, for example, when they refer to his cold look – which is known as “Gibbs’s stare” (Wharmby 2014) – and the fact that a single word is enough to make them go back to work because his steady gaze does the rest. However, Gibbs’s cold eyes and rough manners are also part of his attractiveness, which is another clue to the fact that this protagonist is rooted in the Byronic hero tradition. Emily Brontë’s Heathcliff is one of the most common examples of the tormented, rude, and seductive hero in this sense:

He had grown a tall, athletic, well-formed man [...]. A half- civilised ferocity lurked yet in the depressed brows and eyes full of black fire, but it was subdued [...]. He did not raise his [gaze] to her often: a quick glance now and then sufficed; but it flashed back, each time more confidently, the undisguised delight he drank from hers. (Brontë 2023: 86–87)

In a similar fashion, more than once women fall prey to Gibbs’s eyes and good looks (Whitmore 2011; O’Hara 2011bis; Horowitz 2017), not to mention the fact that he had three wives.

NCIS main Special Agent’s arrogance also makes its appearance before women with a strong character and a leading role. To solve a case with multiple jurisdictions (O’Hara 2010), Gibbs is forced to liaise with Abigail Borin, a female head agent of the CGIS (Coast Guard Investigative Service), and he is not willing at all to share his position of command. Not by chance, he always seems to have the situation under control: he is used to silently listening to the details discovered by his team, accruing information that adds to his own sources – about which his agents often do not know anything – and eventually ordering them how to proceed. Moreover, he usually shows up unexpectedly at their back, either concluding their sentences or contradicting them (Smith 2009; Wharmby 2009; Wharmby 2017), which intensifies the idea that he is always present and up-to-date on everything.

This protagonist is like an “old-school practitioner” (Peacock 2015: 184) because he uses an outmoded mobile phone with no Internet connection, rejects social media, and is known for setting his own rules, which may go against public laws or the NCIS standard procedure. For instance, he starts using an old cover

identity without alerting his team or the Director of the NCIS in order to interact with a major criminal, who has made his appearance after several years (Carroll 2017). Hunting offenders and doing his job well are Gibbs's priorities, while complying with general rules and dedicating himself to private life matters take second place. Deeply convinced of his approach, he expects others to behave in the same way: when assistant medical examiner James Palmer invites Gibbs to his wedding, he simply stares at Palmer, who understands that his request is rather inappropriate because there is an investigation going on. As if to confirm his thoughts, Gibbs leaves the office without saying a word, followed by the rest of the team (Wharmby 2012). Similarly, when McGee announces that he is going to be a father, Abby congratulates him by saying "You're gonna be a fantastic father", but Gibbs breaks the moving moment by commenting "And now it's time to be a fantastic agent, Tim" (Wharmby 2017).

Gibbs's excellent skills in having the situation under control when he is on duty are paralleled by extremely scarce results in doing the same on a personal level. A major example of this is Gibbs's emotional negation in which he lives after the loss of his daughter and first wife. Following his own moral code, Gibbs finds and kills their murderer out of revenge but, despite this, he is unable to go on with his life. Gibbs's guilt and mysterious past, which he inherits from the Byronic hero, are instantiated by the loss of his family, the fact that he could not do anything to prevent it, and his cold-blooded revenge. They evidently weigh his private and professional life: he marries and divorces twice (O'Hara 2011) and he has several flirts, but he is unable (and unwilling) to establish a lasting relationship. He is completely dedicated to work and routinely stays at the office until early in the morning, so much so that his team is not surprised to sniff Asian food when they arrive because they know that the nearby restaurant is the only one open until 2 AM (O'Hara 2011bis).

Gibbs's Byronic-style mysterious past remains so for a long time. Viewers are provided with fragmentary clues throughout the whole series, and they can trace only a partial chart of his story. Nonetheless, discovering more about his private life is almost inevitable because the main protagonists of crime films and TV series are subject to a process that, "almost as a rule, brings personal stories, plots, unfoldings, dilemmas, and confrontations of the main characters" on screen (Bjelajac and Filipović 2022: 15). In season 9, Gibbs gets shot and he dreams about his colleagues, friends, and family, who all discuss with him about his crucial life choices. Among them, Gibbs's murdered wife Shannon tells him that if she and their daughter Kelly had not died, he would not have become the agent he is:

Shannon: "If we hadn't died, you wouldn't have joined the NIS,¹⁷ and you wouldn't have become an agent."

Gibbs: "None of that mattered."

S: "No Tony, no Ziva, no team."

G: "But I'd have had my girls. I'd have had you."

S: "If you stayed a Marine, Gibbs, the loss would have fallen on us instead. Just think of all the cases, of all the lives you've touched, Gibbs."

You sacrificed everything to help these people.”

G: “But I wanted both.”

S: “It doesn’t work like that.” (Wharmby 2012)

Shannon tries to relieve Gibbs of his sense of guilt, a burden he has been carrying for a long time. At the end of the episode, Gibbs reunites with the team and goes to a crime scene, despite his precarious health: “My choice. I wouldn’t have it any other way” (Wharmby 2012). Once again, between personal and professional life, he opts for the latter, confirming his past choice of prioritizing work over his wife and daughter.

Another ghostly presence in Gibbs’s dream is his friend and mentor Mike, who tells him that he did what was to be done with his family’s murderer: in this sense, Mike voices Thorslev’s idea that Noble Outlaws – and, consequently, also Byronic heroes as their evolution – are quickly forgiven for any guilt haunting their past. This episode also portrays Poole’s claim (2010: 12) that Byronic heroes hide behind a persona that does not correspond to their inner self, an idea that is instantiated multiple times in *NCIS*. For instance, Gibbs asks his father to paint a few wooden Christmas toys that he carved for children at the pediatric ward. This is one of the few occasions when Gibbs’s emotional side indirectly comes to the surface, even though he explains that woodworking “settles my mind, Dad. Keeps my hands busy” (Brown 2009).

In order to meet his desire to have a family *and* be a team leader as well as to fill the emotional void he feels, Gibbs tries to form a new family within the *NCIS*. This is an attempt to overcome the limitations posed by the characteristics of Byronic detectives – the ‘either...or’ choice they are supposed to make between the private and professional spheres. In this way, he can have both under control by interconnecting them. An example of this is the attempt to balance the stormy meetings with his father by welcoming agents with equally problematic relationships, and eventually acting as a substitute parental figure to them: DiNozzo openly criticizes his absent father (Brown 2011), McGee was forced to join the Navy (Wright 2013), and Ziva¹⁸ abandons his father out of resentment because he trained her to be a “ruthless, soulless killer” (Libman 2009).

The merging of private and professional life in the effort to be both a Byronic detective and a father is the reason why viewers occasionally see Gibbs revealing his emotions, although only in climax moments and never in a plain way. When Abby finds out that her late parents adopted her, Gibbs indirectly tells her that she is like a daughter to him: “Family’s more than just DNA. It’s about people who care and take care of each other” (Smith 2011). Similarly, Gibbs gives his own father’s watch to McGee before the agent’s wedding, as if McGee were a son to him (Whitmore 2017). The overlapping professional-personal relationship that he grows with Ziva is more openly depicted only because she leaves her country and her biological father’s secret intelligence organization to live in the US and work at the *NCIS*. Even though Gibbs never admits that he metaphorically adopts Ziva as a surrogate daughter, there are several clues in her behavior and words. Firstly, Ziva tells him that she used to play baseball with her father, and they start playing (Smith 2010); secondly, she acknowledges the *NCIS* as her family (Wharmby

2013); eventually, she discloses that she expected Gibbs to behave like a father (O'Hara 2020).

Notwithstanding Gibbs's relationships with his agents, the precarious balance between personal and professional life that he believes to have found cannot last for two reasons. On the one hand, family connections are stronger than family-like connections at work: despite these new relationships, he is still sleeping on the sofa rather than in the master bedroom – a habit he developed after his wife's death – and he is still using the same cracked plate decorated by his daughter (Carroll 2017). Thus, he is invariably holding his past and he is unable to come to terms with it. Another example is Abby's decision to prioritize her work over her love for Gibbs. Abby owes everything to him, but she is not going to alter the results of her experiments before turning the report in, which means that she will expose Gibbs as the killer of his family's murderer (Smith 2010).

On the other hand, the second reason that makes Gibbs's precarious relational balance destined to fail is the fact that he is deeply aware of the sorrow and sense of guilt that weigh him down. In season 9, Tony is in love with Ziva but Gibbs's rule number 12 for the team is "Never date a co-worker" (Wright 2004).¹⁹ Unsure about what to do, DiNozzo goes to Gibbs's house in an attempt to win his approval:

DiNozzo: "Family and job. Two different cups."

Gibbs: "That's right."

D: "And if I couldn't fill both, that was my problem. What if I can now?"

G: "Then get out of my basement. Man up and move on."

D: "Like you have?"

G: "Don't be like me. Learn from it. You're not gonna find what you're looking for down here, DiNozzo." (Smith 2011bis)

Through his words, Gibbs betrays his appearance of an insensitive boss by showing that he is (also) a man who is suffering for the loss of his family because he was unable to protect them.

Portraying the detectives' human side is a narrative theme recovered from hard-boiled fiction, which showed their flaws and vices along with their pursuit of justice. Nonetheless, characters like Gibbs weave a complex web of interconnections with Byronic features. The result is a Special Agent who has unparalleled logical and physical skills²⁰ and, at the same time, he can be perceived as a flawed and deeply human individual because he had a family and he feels sorrow – ultimately, because he is fallible (Ascari 2017: 8; see also Owens 2015). In murdering his family's killer, Gibbs breaks the law but cannot escape it, at least in a metaphorical sense, because revenge does not settle his grief and he eventually leaves the team. Narratively speaking and considering the character's construction, such a decision perfectly matches the Byronic detective's destiny: either he protects society at large, emotionally isolated from others, or quits his role. Special Agents like Gibbs bring home excellent results on duty, but being Byronic detectives comes at a price, namely, the impossibility of having an ordinary life (see Stein 2009) and solitude derived from emotional instability. Arguably, Holmes cannot

live a socially satisfying life because his genius seems to imply loneliness, while the hard-boiled private eye cannot fully integrate into a deeply corrupted society: the Byronic detective's professional pursuit coincides with the benefit of the world, but he is unable to find a peaceful place within society (Stein 2009: 68). If he finds it, it means that he is no longer a Byronic detective.

Gibbs's end as a Byronic agent takes place in season 19 when he flies to Alaska with McGee to solve a young girl's murder that echoes his daughter's. After they arrest the killer, he informs McGee that he is not going back (O'Hara 2021bis). After all, his NCIS family-like team is dismantled – DiNozzo, Ziva, and Bishop left the agency – and he has no relatives left because his father died. During this last case, the killer even blew up Gibbs's wooden boat, named after his daughter, on which he has been working for years. Eventually understanding his friend's idea that chasing criminals is not going to fill his void (O'Hara 2021), to fulfill once and for all his desire for an ordinary life he has no other option than leaving the NCIS. He will live off duty, fishing and feeling some emotional comfort at last: "This sense of peace... I have not had this since Shannon and Kelly died. And I am not ready to let it go" (O'Hara 2021bis).

The Byronic Detective in *Criminal Minds*

Another example of a Byronic detective can be found in the successful CBS series *Criminal Minds* (2005–ongoing), almost as long-running as *NCIS* and so far counting two spin-offs, *Criminal Minds: Suspect Behavior* (2011) and *Criminal Minds: Beyond Borders* (2016–2017).²¹ In *Criminal Minds*, Special Agent Aaron "Hotch" Hotchner works within the FBI Behavioral Analysis Unit (BAU), an elite group of profilers dealing with the most dangerous serial killers. He is the boss of a team of extremely qualified and highly prepared agents who can be defined as "specialists" (Turnbull 2014: 125) or "experts" (Izzo 2018: 15; see also Bjelajac and Filipović 2022); these populate recent TV crime dramas, at least after the broadcasting of *CSI* (Izzo 2018).

Like the protagonist of *NCIS*, Hotchner is a Byronic detective because he blends multiple narrative traits. Despite working on the front line alongside the rest of the team, he is essentially an outsider and a loner because he always maintains a detached position. Often portrayed alone in his office (Ellis 2005), he does not participate in the team's casual chatting. His social detachment is also depicted through visual details, such as in season 1 when he has not assumed his leading role yet and obeys his boss, Jason Gideon.²² While the unit is working on a case on a college campus, Gideon orders the agents to disguise themselves so as not to let the killer know that the FBI is there (Haid 2005). Going unnoticed is not an easy task because most of them have a dark suit and dark glasses, while students wear more casual clothes; eventually, they opt to take their jackets and sunglasses off, but Hotchner removes only the latter, which makes him an outsider within the unit. When he is on duty, he always wears a suit and tie, a habit which sometimes turns against him, for example when he is taken hostage by a criminal who almost strangles him with his tie (Ellis 2005): after being saved by

the team, Gideon half-teases and half-reproaches him by commenting “Take your tie off once in your life, uh?” (Ellis 2005).

The early seasons of *Criminal Minds* are more focused – as the title suggests – on the criminals’ minds and deeds but, as time passes, the exceptional skills of each component of the team become center stage. These profilers show extraordinary abilities to find their way into the criminal’s life, motivations, and actions, especially Gideon and Hotchner. Given that they must think as the criminals do to find and arrest them, this talent makes the two bosses particularly close to the offenders they profile – a characteristic that can be considered an echo of the Byronic hero’s origins in the Gothic villain (see Thorslev 1962).

Hotchner is able to be as close to criminals’ minds as he is unable to emotionally connect with victims – except for children. On a crime scene, young Agent Jennifer Jareau starts crying after seeing the victims and Hotchner tries to reassure her by revealing that, since his son Jack was born, he has always feared to work on a case involving children, and he adds: “most of the victims are women, and most of them are about your age. It’s OK if you lose it every once in a while. It reminds people that we’re human” (Gallagher 2007). When she makes him note that he has never lost control over his emotions on duty, Hotchner replies “Maybe I should have” (Gallagher 2007) as if he is admitting his emotional shield, a typical Byronic hero’s trait, as already discussed (see Poole 2010).

Hotchner combines professional acumen with physical skills in live action, for example when he risks his life to locate a bomb in a mall (Bee 2006). This episode is revealing of his internal struggle between dedication to his job and love for his wife and son because his family is supposedly at that shopping center, and he knows that he cannot alert them to the bomb so as not to cause a breach of security. Only when Agent Derek Morgan pushes him to prioritize his family over rules because if he loses it, he “won’t have a life” (Bee 2006), Hotchner calls his wife even though the investigation is still going on. When the threat is over, he runs home and checks up on his son: since his job as a Byronic detective is done, his personal life and inner emotions can find room on the screen.

However, as said for Gibbs, a Byronic detective cannot have an ordinary life, or he will not be Byronic anymore. Hotchner initially tries to balance work and family – his Byronic role and the expected duties as a father and husband – by separating the two worlds: in *Criminal Minds*, his debut on the scene is in casual clothes, in a familial setting (Shepard 2005). He is discussing his child’s name with his wife in front of a cradle. Suddenly, a work call interrupts them and the following scene shows him at Quantico, wearing his dark job suit. Throughout the series, Hotchner’s love for his family cannot parallel his duties as a Byronic detective at BAU. He and his wife often argue about his dedication to his job, which always seems to take first place in her eyes. When he is suspended for two weeks pending an investigation and he might be moved to another unit (Bernero 2007), she considers this an excellent opportunity for all of them. His family could count on his being at home for dinner instead of waiting for him for hours or days because he is working on a case far away: “Getting suspended was a blessing in disguise. We deserve a normal life” (Bernero 2007). After thinking it over,

Hotchner seems to be convinced to accept the new job, but his team tries and persuades him not to leave because they all need him as a boss.

As Peacock writes about Henning Mankell's Chief Inspector Kurt Wallander, "No matter how hard the maverick detectives try to disappear to find solitude in the countryside and at the ocean's edge, their commitments to the community keep pulling them back" (2015: 187). During the suspension, Hotchner continues working on a case at home and his wife surprises him while he is scrutinizing photographic details of the crime scene. As soon as she leaves after another verbal fight, Hotchner calls the team to share what proves to be a vital clue because he does not really want to change his job. Afterward, he tries to explain his decision to his wife Haley and discloses what his priorities are:

Haley: "When this case is over, there will be another one. And another one and another one. It is never going to stop."

Hotchner: "This is who I am."

Ha: "No... This is what you do."

Ho: "I'm trying to do the right thing, here and there, and I would really appreciate a little support."

Ha: "Oh... That's right. 'cause you always need to be the hero."

Ho: "Don't give me that."

Ha: "No. Obviously a happy life isn't enough for you. Aaron, I need you here."

Ho: "And I'll be here. As soon as this case is over." (Bernero 2007)

Eventually, Hotchner reaches the team and they successfully solve the case but, when he gets back home, his wife and son have left. As it happens with Gibbs, losing his family is a hard hit and his reaction is to dedicate even more to his job, spending free time at the office because he does not know if they will ever come back (Alcalá 2007).

As an FBI agent, Hotchner is tough and cold-blooded, even when he is shot by a serial killer called The Reaper who has broken into his house (Bernero 2009). At the hospital, Hotchner is debilitated, and yet he succeeds in analyzing the details of what happened, realizing that The Reaper's next victims will be his wife and son. Consequently, they both enter protective custody. While saying goodbye to his wife, he dissimulates his real thoughts and reassures her that he will be safe: "He wants to see me suffer. Knowing that my son is out there and that I can't see him is better than killing me" (Carroll 2009). However, Hotchner gives utterance to his emotional overload after she leaves: "If he stops killing, we have no way of tracking him. He stopped killing for ten years just for the pleasure of watching Shaunessy's life fall apart. What's Jack gonna remember about me in ten years?" (Carroll 2009).

As Bjelajac and Filipović write about contemporary investigators in film and television products, "the burden of doing this work is huge, and the ultimate price they have to pay to be successful in this business often jeopardizes their private and social lives" (2022: 17). Considering Byronic detectives, the other side of such a claim is that, to prioritize their private life, they must quit their job. It

is narratively impossible for them to carry on their role and protect their family at the same time: protective custody is just a temporary solution because Hotchner's wife is eventually murdered by The Reaper (Bernero 2009bis), which proves Hotchner's fallibility (see Ascari 2017).

Trying to keep focused while holding back tears, Hotchner's resort to his negotiating skills proves useless with The Reaper. While he is reaching their former family house, the killer is already there and sadistically allows Hotchner to talk with Haley over the phone before murdering her, all the while commenting on his words. In particular, The Reaper aims at establishing Hotchner as the guilty party for what is going to happen:

The Reaper: Did you even tell her what this was about? About the deal?

Hotchner (to Haley): He's trying to make you angry.

TR: Well, she should be. She's gonna die because of your inflated ego. [...] I'm sure you don't want her to know this part either. You know, all he had to do was stop looking for me and you wouldn't be in this mess.

Haley: What is he talking about? [...]

Ho: You're so strong, Haley. You're stronger than I ever was. I know you didn't sign on for this. I am sorry for everything. (Bernero 2009bis)

Since The Reaper's attention is temporarily focused on his wife, Hotchner tries to gain time to save at least his son Jack by telling him, in a secret code, to go upstairs and hide. This action also spares him from witnessing his mother's imminent death; thus, it can be considered an example of how Hotchner protects his child while giving up on his role as an agent trying to influence The Reaper's mind through FBI-style negotiation.

Hotchner's stubbornness in locating and arresting The Reaper has provoked Haley's death. During her funeral, he is composed until he discloses his wife's own priorities, in stark contrast with his. Visibly moved, he reveals: "If Haley were with us today, she would ask us not to mourn her death but to celebrate her life. She would tell us... to love our families unconditionally and to hold them close because in the end, they are all that matters" (Haid 2009). His commemorative words hint at his inner torment and sense of guilt for not having placed his family before his job, but this will change. When another serial killer repeatedly threatens his child's life, Hotchner leaves the team to better protect him and they both enter the FBI witness protection program. Agent David Rossi later informs the unit that "he's now decided that he can't put himself and Jack in danger again. He just sent in his resignation" (Gubler 2016bis). Foregrounding his duties as a father means that he cannot be the Byronic guide of the team anymore.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *NCIS* and *Criminal Minds* are TV crime dramas portraying Byronic detectives who are another proof not only of the return of emotions in crime fiction (see Ascari 2013) and the constant mobility of the genre (see Gulddal et al

2019) but also of the enduring vitality and generative power of the Byronic hero. In particular, they show how the Byronic figure is multifarious and adaptive in mixing traits of the classic detective and the hard-boiled private eye; the result of this process is the Byronic detective, a cultural product that crosses literary traditions, geographical locations, and media.

Gibbs and Hotchner are leading characters who love their family and job, but they usually give priority to the latter. As Byronic detectives, they dedicate themselves completely to their role and sacrifice emotions; alternatively, they can seek an ordinary life by quitting their job. *NCIS* and *Criminal Minds* provide the audience with “fallible” (Ascari 2017: 10) protagonists who try to balance professional and personal duties by separating the two and hiding emotions. However, the more they try to conceal them, the more they disclose their weaknesses, such as are feeling guilt and grief, and seeking social relationships that they cannot have. Byronic detectives like Gibbs and Hotchner tend to feel a kind of inner torment because they are divided between the desire to have a social and family life alongside their job and the impossibility of living it. They are constantly wary of showing feelings and they assume a self-assured professional stance to stay detached from others, as their role expects them to do. At the same time, the occasional cracks in this self-imposed persona reveal that, despite their appearance, they constantly fight with repressed emotions.²³

In combining elements inherited from the Byronic hero, the detective, and the private eye, Gibbs and Hotchner are worth considering in conversation with each other and with these long-established literary figures because they are an example of successful blending and remodeling, if only for the fact that both *Criminal Minds* and *NCIS* have been a steady presence on television screens for more than twenty years and, therefore, can be considered two representative samples of TV crime drama. The two series have a similar structure, given that almost every episode concludes with the solution of the main case, but they differ in how they depict evil. *Criminal Minds* represents extremely brutal murders, it explores the killers’ peculiar psychological deviations, and its team is quite often on the line, being able to capture the criminals after they have committed other homicides, while they are torturing their victims, or right before a murder. *NCIS* is ‘cozier’: it usually shows one single murder that has already been committed, it does not dig much into the assassins’ mental instability, and, by contrast, it dedicates more time to office scenes. Despite these variations, the leading character in the two series is a Byronic detective, a new term that is offered here for the first time. Byronic detectives can be seen as model characters who are likely to have a long and bright future ahead of them. This poses a basis for further research on other series from the varied constellation of TV crime drama, within and outside the Anglophone production, in order to identify more examples and, possibly, to draw comparisons with similar figures in crime fiction.

Notes

- ¹ See Thorslev (1962) and Poole (2010) for a more comprehensive discussion about the origins and development of the Byronic hero.
- ² In addition to established scholars and researchers, it is interesting to note that university students seem to be captivated by the Byronic hero: several recent Bachelor's and Master's theses explore his legacy and parallelisms with other popular literary figures; for example, see Iacopelli (2010), Guðmundsdóttir (2012), and Janssens (2015). This might be investigated more deeply to understand the icon's enduring popularity and its connection with the young.
- ³ For details on transmediation, see Peña & James (2023).
- ⁴ In particular, Poole contends that "The Byronic Hero is typically characterized by a marked split between his external appearance and his interiority" (2010: 7).
- ⁵ Thorslev claims a similar point about the Noble Outlaw: "The Noble Outlaw is also largely a sympathetic character. He is figured as having been wronged either by intimate personal friends, or by society in general, and his rebellion is thus always given a plausible motive. And no matter what his outlawry may seem on the surface, he is never by nature cruel or sadistic, as was his cousin, the Gothic Villain" (1962: 69–70).
- ⁶ On the re-elaboration of classical figures in television series, see Palatinus (2014).
- ⁷ Directed by Harry Bradbeer, the *Enola Holmes* film (2020) is based on Springer's literary series. The idea of equipping Sherlock Holmes with a sister is a narrative pattern that is used also in Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat's TV series *Sherlock* (2010–2017), where she is a mastermind whose absence of emotions blurs all lines between good and evil and, at the same time, proves how family connections are essential.
- ⁸ For a comprehensive study on US and UK TV crime drama origins and history, see Turnbull (2014) and Moody (2003).
- ⁹ *NCIS* main characters derive from *JAG* (1995–2005), a legal drama mainly concerning the US Navy, but *NCIS* is different in genre and style right from the beginning.
- ¹⁰ It is well known that there are references to drugs in "The Adventure of the Yellow Face" (1893).
- ¹¹ For example, Season 4 (2017) of the already mentioned TV series *Sherlock* (2010–2017) is a gradual descent into the detective's psyche and childhood.
- ¹² In this article, 'detective' is used in generic terms and, as such, it should be intended as encompassing 'agent' and similar terms.
- ¹³ Peacock has already discussed the fact that modern versions of classic-style detectives display characteristics borrowed from their hard-boiled counterparts (2015: 182), but he does not refer to the Byronic hero.
- ¹⁴ See also Moody (2003: 244): "Screen crime has a close relationship with print fiction and has boosted book sales as well as turning (sic) detectives into cultural icons".
- ¹⁵ Gibbs left *NCIS* at the beginning of season 19 and, at the time of writing, season 22 is already scheduled.
- ¹⁶ Within Gibbs's team, the third Special Agent is usually a female individual who changes over time: at the beginning of the series, there is Caitlin Todd until season 2, next Ziva David until season 11, then Ellie Bishop until season 18, and Jessica Knight until the ongoing season (21).
- ¹⁷ NIS stands for Naval Investigative Service; it is the old acronym of the *NCIS*.
- ¹⁸ As specified in note 16, Ziva David is one of the female agents belonging to Gibbs's team, from season 3 to season 11.
- ¹⁹ For the full list of Gibbs's rules, see "Gibbs's Rules".
- ²⁰ As a Marine, Gibbs was a sniper and his aim is still unparalleled.
- ²¹ *Criminal Minds: Evolution* is a revival of the main series with the addition of the subtitle from season 16 onwards.
- ²² Gideon acts as team leader and main profiler in seasons 1 to 3; Hotchner is his

deputy and takes over his role when Gideon cannot recover from losing a former college mate murdered before his eyes (Muzio 2007).

- ²³ Gibbs's and Hotchner's features discussed in this contribution can also be detected in other characters belonging to contemporary international crime drama productions. While it would certainly be useful to compare the two agents to other figures coming from different national backgrounds, this is beyond the scope of the present article, which aims at delineating the blended narrative type called 'Byronic detective'. Considering a geographically wider pool of case studies can surely be the starting point for further, much-needed research.

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