**Genre, cycles and Sunshine Noir television**

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**Abstract:**

This article explores the concept of television cycles, using the American sunshine noir cycle as an example. To conceptualise television cycles, this article draws heavily on Amanda Ann Klein’s work on American film cycles (2011) and puts the television cycle in relation to notions of genre, sub-genre and individual texts. In a second step, this article will analyse a specific example, the sunshine noir, a cycle present in American television in the 1980s and 1990s and most commonly associated with *Miami Vice* (1984-9). The sunshine noir is part of the crime genre and describes detective narratives that draw on film noir of the 1930s and 1940s and neo-noir films from the 1980s and 1990s and reconfigure elements of style and narrative to fit the narrative and industrial needs of television.

**Keywords**: television, genre, cycle, crime drama, film noir, neo-noir, television noir, television genre

This article will explore the concept of the television cycle. Closely linked to concepts of television genre and sub-genre, the term cycle describes the occurrence of ‘copycat’ texts that recycle themes, imagery or stock characters from other TV dramas. Cycles may be described as relatively short-lived tendencies within genres and sub-genres, though they can reach beyond this. This article draws on Amanda Ann Klein’s work on film cycles (2011), reconfiguring her theory for television, and using the American sunshine noir cycle as a case study. The term designates television detective dramas that draw on film noir themes, style and aesthetics, but are set in the daytime in sunny locations like Miami or Hawaii. Important aspects of this cycle are its reconfiguration of film noir characteristics and its strong emphasis on the objectification of its main characters. My focus here is American television, limiting discussion to this specific national and industrial context. The American sunshine noir cycle, as identified here, is largely limited to the 1980s and the 1990s. I will first introduce the concept of the television cycle and its relationship with the overarching concepts of television genre and sub-genres, before exploring in more detail the sunshine noir cycle and its relationship to industrial and genre developments.

My conceptualisation of the television cycle relies largely on Amanda Ann Klein’s *American Film Cycles* (2011). However, the shift in medium from film to television means that her concept of film cycles needs to be reconfigured to take into account the different industrial conditions and narrative conventions of television. Klein observes a blatant commercialism in film cycles, but this is a quality traditionally assumed for television, most obviously via the use of commercial breaks. Broadcasters routinely ‘copy’ successful formulas, particularly relatively cheap programming like game shows, reality TV or chat shows, until the market seems over-saturated, at which point the cycle dies down. Terms like ‘formula’ or ‘format’ are integral to television programming, implying the repetition of the conventions of other successful programmes. This ‘copying’ goes beyond following genre conventions to include specific settings, imagery, character relations, central conflicts, themes and tropes. It is this industry practice which is described and analysed under the term cycle, a concept highly relevant for any understanding of the medium.

To develop an understanding of television cycles, this article will clarify the relationship between cycle, sub-genre and genre, particularly focussing on the crime and detective genre as an example and the umbrella genre for the sunshine noir cycle. Establishing this relationship is particularly relevant for forming an understanding of what television cycles are. Yet, as Klein argues, ‘film cycles are not subgenres, minigenres or nascent film genres’ (2011, location 144). Similarly, television cycles can transcend genre and sub-genre, but also have the ability to fundamentally influence how we view and conceptualise a genre at a specific point in time.

My analysis of sunshine noir will look at specific textual characteristics and how the cycle develops. The cycle is limited to the 1980s and 1990s, and discussions of crime dramas of the era tend to focus on the highly innovative texts *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-7), *Miami Vice* (1984-9), *Twin Peaks* (1990-1), *NYPD Blue* (1993-2005), *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993-9) and the exceptionally successful *Law & Order* (1990-2010) franchise. Many of these dramas have had an influence beyond the genre, from the way *Hill Street Blues* reconfigured narrative structures (see Nelson 1997: 31) to *Law & Order*’s franchise model, which, as Jonathan Nichols-Pethick argues, has played a key role in shaping the post-network television industry (2012: 127-50). The dramas discussed here do not tend to overhaul established genre formulas, aesthetics, or become symptomatic of changes to broader industry practices (with the exception of *Miami Vice*). Instead, sunshine noir largely follows established narrative conventions and draws heavily on film noir predecessors and neo-noir contemporaries. But in this, it reconfigures noir narratives for 1980s and 1990s television, a period when significant changes in the American industry took place. The cycle’s relationship with noir predecessors thus remains dynamic throughout. I will also discuss one key factor which appears crucial to the cycle: the excessive objectification of characters. This seems to be determined partly by the setting in sunny locations and by influences from contemporary neo-noir films. This feature of the cycle can be read as capitalist critique and voyeuristic pleasure alike, thus embodying a central tension of the cycle.

The American sunshine noir cycle spans an era in US television reaching from the proliferation of cable channels in the 1980s to the overhaul of the industry through digitalisation and the move away from defining ‘television’ as necessarily tied to the television set (see Hills 2007). It is arguable here that the sunshine noir’s persistence throughout the 1990s is largely because of the increased number of channels and programmes, while its end was, at least partially, due to the innovations to cable and network television in the late 1990s (see Pearson 2011; Lotz 2014, location 588-1287). Sunshine noir is absent from contemporary American television, and even the British *Death in Paradise* (2011- ), set in Saint-Marie, relies more on the tradition of British literature, like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories or Agatha Christie’s novels, rather than noir. But sunshine noir’s relationship with the crime and detective genre during a time of significant change within the American television industry makes it a potent example of the television cycle.

**Television cycles**

Klein outlines the concept of cycles in relation to film as follows:

Like film genres, film cycles are a series of films associated with each other through shared images, characters, settings, plots or themes. However, while film genres are primarily defined by the repetition of key images (their semantics) and themes (their syntax), film cycles are primarily defined by how they are used (their pragmatics). In other words, the formation and longevity of film cycles are a direct result of their immediate financial viability as well as the public discourses circulating around them, including film reviews, director interviews, studio-issued press kits, movie posters, theatrical trailers, and media coverage. Because they are so dependent on audience desires, film cycles are also subject to defined time constraints: most film cycles are financially viable for only five to ten years. After that point, a cycle must be updated or altered in order to continue to turn a profit (Klein 2011: location 125-131).

Television cycles work significantly differently to film. Most television programmes (though the focus here is on serialised drama) run much longer than films and are often weekly appointments for years. Yet, similar to films, successful dramas breed copies, and the repetition of elements. On TV, this usually happens while the first text is still enjoying a successful run. For example, *Magnum, P.I.* (1980-8), which can be considered the ‘origin text’ of the sunshine noir cycle, was made for eight years. Even before it had finished its run, other dramas, like *Riptide* (1984-6) and *Miami Vice*, sought to capitalise on its success by copying aspects of its formula, such as the sunny setting, and the objectification of male stars. The industrial requirements of the 1990s – i.e. cheap programming in first-run syndication, often in the context of CBS’ Crimetime After Primetime programming slot (weeknights at 10pm) – led to the further development of the formula through shows such as *Sweating Bullets* (1991-3), *One-West Waikiki* (1994-6), *Silk Stalkings* (1991-9) and, produced by All American Television, *Acapulco H.E.A.T.* (1993-4)and *V.I.P* (1998-2002)*.*[[1]](#endnote-1) There are notable shifts in their gender politics, and more importantly, the politics of objectification, in these latter examples, and the settings also shift to less common locations, like Acapulco, Waikiki or Palm Beach. The sunshine noir cycle may have been relatively short-lived, but other cycles can go on for much longer and develop in different directions.

Another difference between television and film cycles is their respective economic implications. As Klein notes, a film cycle ‘is a commodity to be assembled, packaged, and sold as quickly as possible, not a timeless piece of art’ (ibid: location 206). Similarly, many television cycles, particularly in the genre of reality TV, are exploitative and highly commercialised. But television draws attention to its commercialisation through ad breaks, and even more ‘artful’ programming is cancelled if it lacks commercial success – in the case of fictional drama, sometimes before it has ‘finished’ solving central enigmas.

The notion of successful formulae being copied has been quite common since the earliest years of television. As Sue Turnbull notes in relation to crime drama:

Competition for early viewers was fierce, with the already familiar outcome even in the 1950s that those television series that did not catch on quickly being rapidly cancelled while those that did rate well being possibly mined for spin-offs or copied by rival networks. In terms of copycat shows, a television series seen to be doing well on another network might well inspire a similar but different show on a rival network. (Turnbull 2014: 99)

Yet, while these kinds of ‘copycat shows’ mark the years of competition between the ‘big three’ – the three US network channels CBS, NBC and ABC – the 1980s witnessed a different situation. Fox started broadcasting as a network channel in 1986, and cable television became increasingly popular throughout the 1980s: ‘In 1980, cable was in only 18% of households. By 1997, cable penetration reached more than 67% of households’ (Einstein 2004 123). With this adoption of cable came a proliferation of channels. Mara Einstein notes that most cable systems have room for about 150 channels (ibid.), compared to the three nationally broadcasting channels of the network era.

This increase in the number of channels also meant a surge in original programming, broadcast on comparatively small or unremarkable cable channels, in competition with the budgets and advertising revenue of the big networks. As such, it necessarily had consequences for the ways genres developed and cycles emerged. Furthermore, (international) first-run syndication was introduced as a means to continue *Baywatch* (1989-99) after its cancellation by NBC in 1990. This meant that the series was sold to cable channels and European markets without the investment (or commitment to buy) of a US network or cable channel (see Bonnan and Lewis 2000: 83). As Mara Einstein explains:

There are two types of syndication – first-run and off-network syndication. First-run syndication includes talk shows, game shows, court shows and some dramas […]. These are programs that have been specifically produced for the syndication market and have never appeared on a network schedule. Off-network programs, on the other hand, are programs that developed their popularity from initially appearing in network prime time. (2004: 129-30)

All American Television, the production company originally founded to produce *Baywatch*, was one company that produced relatively cheap content to sell to cable or local television stations as well as in foreign markets. The company is particularly important for the sunshine noir cycle as it produced *Acapulco H.E.A.T.* and *V.I.P.* for first-run syndication. Unable to replicate the success of *Baywatch*, All American Television underwent a variety of mergers in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which ended in the company ultimately becoming part of the German RTL Group, a subsidiary of Bertelsmann.

The implications of the increase of cable channels in the 1980s for genre products are that this environment fostered the creation of cycles; with a vast proliferation in channels and texts, several genre developments run in parallel. To return to the example of the crime genre, the 1980s saw a range of major programmes appear as diverse as *Hill Street Blues*, *Miami Vice* and *Murder, She Wrote* (1984-1996). While some diversity did exist before, the 1980s and 1990s saw a much broader variety, with different dramas following a number of narrative and thematic patterns, often spawning their own cycles (see Jenner 2015b: 89-100). These cycles ran in parallel, conveying the different directions a genre, or a sub-genre, can take; they were a necessity in an environment where industrial developments force genres to become more diverse. It is therefore important to position television cycles in relation to notions of genre and sub-genre. Jason Mittell understands television genre as discursive clusters:

Discourse theory offers a model of such stability in flux – genres work as *discursive clusters*, with certain definitions, interpretations, and evaluations coming together at any given time to suggest a coherent and clear genre. However, these clusters are contingent and transitory, shifting over time and taking on new definitions, meanings, and values within differing contexts. (Mittell 2004: 17, italics in the original).

Genre in itself is always in flux, but this state of (as Mittell puts it) stability in flux, is viewed here as a result of developments in sub-genres and, more importantly, cycles. To understand this relationship, we can invoke John Frow’s systemic approach to genre. Frow defines genre as a system and discusses it in terms of frameworks that organise cultural practice, produce meaning and are created to impose some sort of ‘order’. Furthermore:

Texts work upon genres as much as they are shaped by them, genres are open-ended sets, and participation in a genre takes many different forms. At the same time, no text is ever unframed, even if it is the case that the act of citation or of translation or merely survival from one moment in time to another all alter the generic framework within which texts are read. (Frow 2006: location 627)

Thus, the relationship between genre and text is reciprocal and fluid, with the fluidity partially indebted to genre hybridity. But it is also owed to the existence of genre across media, or its specificity to some media rather than others. We can untangle the different ‘levels of fluidity’, by imagining a range of sub-systems. In other words, genres take a specific form in different media, and each genre system consists of a range of sub-genres, which, in turn, include cycles. Thus, cycles are sub-systems of sub-genres, describing tendencies within the sub-genre or the broader umbrella genre. Cycles are, thus, ‘the lowest common denominator’ within a system of genre. But, being also a sub-system in its own right, cycles can reach across genres, particularly in the case of cycles that encompass generic hybrids.

To apply this to a specific example, the term crime genre is understood here as an umbrella genre, following work in film and literature studies, such as that of Thomas Leitch in *Crime Films* (2002) or John Scaggs’ in *Crime Fiction* (2005). The crime genre includes a range of sub-genres like the gangster genre, the serial killer genre and the detective genre (see also Jenner 2015a: 17-19). Cycles are part of these sub-genres, but can also reach across them, forming cycles of genre hybrids, which, in turn, can change sub-genres. An example of this is the way *Twin Peaks*’ use of supernatural elements can be viewed as influencing other hybrids which used elements from detective dramas as well as horror or fantasy: *The X-Files* (1993-2002) or *Medium* (2005-11) follow this example. Yet, while cycles can be seen as epitomising the ‘flux’ that Mittell discusses, every single text, whether it is part of, or an ‘origin text’ for a cycle, or neither, shapes sub-genres and genres. Text, cycles, sub-genre and genre are, thus, always reciprocal systems or sub-systems.

Not every text within a genre or sub-genre spawns a cycle or is even part of one. As Klein argues, there are films that are so recognisable in their visual style or narrative that they cannot be boiled down to a formula that can be copied:

[…] it is important to keep in mind that not every successful film has the ability to start a cycle. The originary film must have a set of images that are recognizable enough to be easily duplicated in several more films. *Forrest Gump* [Zemeckis, 1994], to name one prominent counterexample, was a critical and financial hit at the time of its release. […] However, *Forrest Gump*’s most successful elements – its folksy, handicapped protagonist and its historical vignettes – could not be easily duplicated in a series of films. Consequently, this successful film did not lead to the establishment of a film cycle (2011: location 267-274).

To apply this to television, specifically the sunshine noir cycle, a series with a look as distinctive and unique as that of *Miami Vice*, for example, is difficult to boil down to a formula. Even recent dramas set in Miami, such as *Nip/Tuck* (2003-10) and *Dexter* (2006-13), are careful to avoid emulating the look of *Miami Vice*, or even showing Miami’s artdeco architecture. Whilst *Miami Vice* can be viewed as part of the sunshine noir cycle, other dramas of the cycle stick more closely to the look and formula of *Magnum, P.I.*. Thus, the role of *Miami Vice* within the cycle is less dominant than critical and popular debate might suggest. But being too dominant or distinctive is only one reason a text may fail to generate, or even be part of a cycle. Another reason could be its marginal success or its reliance on star power. Programmes like *Murder, She Wrote*, *Matlock* (1986-95) and *Diagnosis Murder* (1993-2001) have little in common except for their function as vehicles for aging stars Angela Landsbury, Andy Griffiths and Dick Van Dyke, respectively. Whilst their formula may be easily replicated, their exploitation of star power is much more difficult to recycle, making their position as a cycle tenuous at best. A distinction also needs to be made between franchises and cycles. Franchises can play an important part in cycles, particularly in a post-network era where they are central to how US network channels shape their brand (see Nichols-Pethick 2012: 127-50). But cycles reach beyond franchises and individual networks to describe tendencies and popular formulas within a genre. These tendencies are tied to specific historical moments, even if they can span several decades.

As Klein argues, cycles predate genres, so an individual cycle can spawn an entire genre or sub-genre. Mittell highlights that it is not only text that defines genre, and, following that logic, also sub-genre and cycles: audience reception or industrial discourses also play a vital role in establishing what a genre, sub-genre or cycle is. In fact, commercial success and the ability to attract audiences are key to the formation of cycles. The focus here is on text, but cycles are created through commercial incentives more than artistic ones, so are ultimately shaped by industrial conditions, as outlined above.

**The Sunshine Noir cycle**

The term sunshine noir is most commonly used by scholars looking specifically at *Miami Vice*, particularly James Lyons (2010) and Steven Sanders (2010), but Jeremy Butler (2010: 70-102) and Richard Martin (1997: 29) have also discussed the decidedly noirish features of the series. Film critic J. Hoberman (2007) defines sunshine noir in an essay for *Artforum* as a range of films that reflect on the city of Los Angeles and Hollywood myths, usually with an element of nostalgia. He positions *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950) as the ‘origin text’, but argues that this sensibility is mostly present in colour films from *The Long Goodbye* (Altman, 1973) and *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974) onwards, discussing, for example, *L.A. Confidential* (Hanson, 1997), *Hollywoodland* (Coulter, 2006), *The Black Dahlia* (De Palma, 2006) and *Mulholland Drive* (Lynch, 2001). The television cycle seems to consciously avoid the urban environments of the California cities San Francisco and Los Angeles, which are usually associated with film noir and neo-noir. In cinematic sunshine noirs, crime functions as a ‘seedy underbelly’ unmasking the Hollywood ‘dream machine’ as a place of nightmare scenarios ranging from prostitution and drugs to sadistically violent murder. But crime is also at odds with TV sunshine noir’s sunny vacation spots and their associated dreams of luxury, relaxation, summer romance and the escape from everyday life and problems.

In his book *Miami Vice* (2010), Lyons points out:

Widely recognized as a self-conscious descendent of 1940s and 1950s crime melodramas termed ‘Sunshine noir’, films such as *Chinatown* in part exchanged the dark nighttime streets for crimes no less shocking (often more so) for the fact that they played out in brilliant sunshine. […] *Miami Vice* sets up a play of light and dark very much in keeping with ‘Sunshine noir’, one that would typify the show, and provide the basis for its distinctive light/pastel-dark/neon juxtaposition. (2010: 42)

Sanders (2010) analyses the series’ links with film noir in more detail. He identifies a range of stylistic elements and plot devices where *Miami Vice* draws on the film noir heritage of the crime genre to express chaos, fragmentation and the loss of unifying grand narratives. *Miami Vice* marks an aesthetic high point of the cycle, the genre and even the medium of television itself, making it no surprise that it is central to scholarly debate. Yet, I would argue that the term sunshine noir can also be applied to other dramas of the era and, in fact, a whole cycle. The combination of narrative tools (like voiceovers), stylistic features, the thematic emphasis on chaos in sunny daytime settings, as well as the visual emphasis on commodity fetishism and blatant objectification of characters, are present in other dramas of the era. Male sunshine noir detectives, in particular, seem haunted by their own past; in the 1980s this often involves the Vietnam War, and in the 1990s in less unifying narratives of experiences in various branches of law enforcement. The cycle is marked by a variety of features that draw on film noir heritage and contemporary neo-noir, but also renegotiate their style and themes for television.

The term noir evades exact definition, but it is understood here as referring to an aesthetic, thematic and philosophical sensibility associated with a range of American crime films from the 1940s. A particularly distinctive aesthetic feature of film noirs like *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Garnett, 1946) and *Murder, My Sweet* (Dmytryk, 1944) is an emphasis on shadows, especially those thrown by window blinds. In film noirs, the similarity of these shadows to prison bars often foreshadows a crime. In television sunshine noirs of the 1980s and 1990s, this stylistic feature is also common. However, this tends to be ‘play’ with the stylistic features of noir rather than a foreshadowing of crime (or punishment). As Richard Martin argues, contemporary neo-noir films also often offer no more than postmodern ‘play’ with noir conventions:

In the majority of cases, the eighties texts’ evocation of the iconography, narrative patterns, and character types of classic film noir constitutes little more than a superficial, primarily visual re-creation of film noir rather than the dynamic thematic reinvention of the genre represented by the no less allusive texts of the sixties and seventies. (1997: 91)

Martin discusses film rather than television, but his argument can be applied to the television sunshine noir cycle, which often references noir through relatively superficial stylistic means.

As already outlined, the term sunshine noir is usually applied to describe *Miami Vice*, where themes of alienation are united with an accomplished aesthetic style. As a range of critics argue (see, for example, Creeber 2013; Sanders 2010; Lyons 2010; Bignell 2009), *Miami Vice*’s aesthetics did much to further television style in general, with its distinctively noirish visuals and themes:

[…] *Miami Vice* adds widescreen composition, fast editing, music video-style montages, and such stylistic devices as overhead shots, tilted angles, color analogues of expressionist noir lighting, slow motion, aerial shots and freeze-frame endings. *Miami Vice* uses a wide variety of visual means to convey the ambiguity of personal identity and the threatening nature of the noir universe. (Sanders 2010: 41-2)

Thus, the series combines noir aesthetics with a worldview of moral ambiguity. But apart from using noir-like aesthetic features, the series also develops its own recognisable look, particularly emphasising the colours of white, pink and turquoise, and the art deco architecture of Miami. The series remains so dominant, and its look so recognisable, that it is often avoided rather than copied. Few later dramas of the sunshine noir cycle, particularly in the 1990s, could match the series’ budget of an unprecedented $1.3 million per episode (see Sanders 2010: 2) or hope to emulate its accomplished aesthetics. Yet, I would argue that some significant elements present in the series, such as commodity fetishism, objectification, and sunny locales, are ‘copied’ from previous dramas of the cycle, most importantly *Magnum, P.I*.. *Miami Vice* takes these elements from the earlier series and refines the cycle. Its visual style, the way it integrates MTV aesthetics, its use of contemporary pop music, and its attraction of well-known guest stars, is unmatched and, in many respects, cannot be copied. Though exceptional, the programme remains integral to the sunshine noir cycle and its use of stylistic features associated with film noir should not be viewed in isolation.

Apart from stylistic features, the noir influence on the broader cycle is also evident in the construction of the detective characters, reminiscent of Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) in *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston, 1941) and Philip Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart) in *The Big Sleep* (Hawks, 1946). These films are adaptations of novels by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, two key authors in establishing the so-called hard-boiled mode in detective literature. The (almost archetypal) American P.I. hero – who expresses anti-authoritarian attitudes, often has an antagonistic relationship with the police and an explicitly expressed financial interest – is strongly linked to hard-boiled literature. Though many film noirs are not detective narratives, those that are express a sense that crime cannot be solved through the distanced, rational deduction performed by the likes of Sherlock Holmes, but an approach that relies more on ‘instinct’ or ‘hunches’. This more emotive approach often leads to resolutions that can be somewhat unconvincing or come with a sense that underlying problems, such as corrupt power structures, remain intact; this uncertainty can be read as pessimistic alienation. This tone is not carried into in the ‘origin text’ of the sunshine noir, *Magnum P.I.*, but the title character’s methods of detection (see Jenner 2015b: 14-38) are instinctual, based on hunches and involve much coincidence as well as spectacular car chases and fist fights, much like in the cases of his hard-boiled predecessors. The series also draws upon film noir detective films with its first-person voiceover, narrating from Magnum’s perspective. With a cast of trusted friends and allies by his side, the hero may not be as alienated as his noir predecessors, but the trauma of the Vietnam War looms large and is referred to in most episodes. In ‘No More Mr Nice Guy’ (season four, episode thirteen), Magnum even explicitly states that he ‘lost his youth’ in Vietnam.

*Magnum, P.I.* draws on a range of influences from American television, from 1950s detective dramas like *Martin Kane, Private Eye* (1949-54) and *Peter Gunn* (1958-61) to the somewhat snarky attitude of James Garner’s Rockford in *The Rockford Files* (1974-80) (see also Flitterman 1985: 44). Suzy Flitterman notes the importance of the main character for *Magnum, P.I.*:

The most obvious and thus easily notable distinguishing characteristic is the masculine magnetism of its star, which functions, as I have noted, as a sort of pivot for the repeated reflection on the social construction of gender. This, of course, is only possible because the Magnum/Selleck image is somehow larger than life, somehow transcends the generic definitions of the private eye. (1985: 45)

With a combination of a Hawaiian setting, and a virile, easily objectified hero in shorts and Hawaiian shirts, and with his chest partially exposed, *Magnum, P.I.* created a new kind of hero for the 1980s. Despite the fact that the cars and house are not actually Magnum’s (just like Crockett’s [Don Johnson] and Tubb’s [Philip Michael Thomas] clothes, watches or cars are not theirs), there is a clear visual focus on commodity fetishism, along with an objectification of Selleck’s body. It is this willingness to be objectified (by men and women alike) that seems to dominate the cycle. *Riptide* is one of the series that copies this formula, with Perry King and Joe Penny as its muscular heroes, contrasted by Thom Bray. This tradition of excessive objectification is carried into the 1990s, though the focus is shifted more onto women. This can, at least partially, be attributed to the runaway success of *Baywatch*, and dramas with lower budgets like *Acapulco H.E.A.T.* and *V.I.P.* put a particular emphasis on the spectacle of sex, by featuring former Playboy Playmates Alison Armitage and Pamela Anderson, respectively.

But this objectification should also be read in the context of contemporary noir, or rather neo-noir films. In particular, the television sunshine noir cycle’s focus on objectification and sex is linked to contemporary neo-noirs that focus on femme fatales (such as *The Last Seduction* [Dahl, 1994], *Basic Instinct* [Verhoeven, 1992], or *Single White Female* [Schroeder, 1992]). Objectification is, of course, not a feature that is unique to the sunshine noir cycle, but the overall emphasis on commodities serves to heighten the object-status of the female and male bodies in a capitalist system. In the introduction to their edited collection *Neo-Noir* (2009), Marc Bould, Katrina Glitre and Greg Tuck conclude their definition of neo-noir cinema as follows: ‘Neo-noir, unlike so many of its protagonists, is hardly lacking in self-knowledge, and […] it reworks, works up, works over, works with and works against classical noir” (2009: 8). As difficult as categories like film noir and neo-noir are to define, neo-noir is understood here as imitating a specific attitude towards the world. At the same time, some elements are revised to fit contemporary social conditions. With neo-noir films that focus on femme fatales, for example, the characters and the threat they pose fit contemporary attitudes towards women and labour, while more explicit images of sex and female nudity on screen become common. Though women’s sexuality is inevitably depicted as dangerous and pathological in these films, what they and their commercial success bring to the surface is a need to discuss sex in a society where gender relations, but also the inherent dangers of sex itself, have changed significantly. Linda Ruth Williams specifically focusses on femme fatales that exert revenge for having been wronged in one way or another and points out that:

From *Fatal Attraction* [Lyne, 1987] through to the *Wild Things* [McNaughton, 1998] franchise, female scorn has been expressed (and perhaps neutralised) through female spectacle: getting even has been preceded, and facilitated, by getting naked. (2009: 176)

The femme fatales of the neo-noirs of the 1980s and 1990s tend to be intent on destroying the male characters in their path. Yet, as Suzy Gordon points out, many of these texts seem hyper-aware of feminist discourses surrounding their noir ancestors. She argues that ‘*The Last Seduction*, for instance, almost drowns in the self-conscious irony of its portrayal of Bridget Gregory (Linda Fiorentino) as castrating phallic woman’ (2009: 207). What goes along with these portrayals of hyper-sexualised femme fatales is an excessive, sometimes ironic, objectification of the female body. On television, this excessive objectification of the female body is not just incorporated into the (mostly network) dramas of the sunshine noir cycle. As David Andrews (2006: 79-89) outlines, softcore films could function as cheap late-night programming for cable television, conceptualised as ‘feminised’ in opposition to the home video porn market. These had to comply with the ‘spicy, but not obscene’ dictum one HBO programmer describes (ibid: 84), featured female protagonists, and were often influenced by contemporary neo-noir films.[[2]](#endnote-2) Though the late-night dramas *Silk Stalkings* and *Sweating Bullets* sometimes deal with women exacting revenge or simply seeking wealth at all costs, the main commonality with contemporary neo-noir is sex. The comparatively explicit sexual imagery of films with a mainstream appeal, ranging from *Fatal Attraction* to *The Last Seduction*, *Single White Female* to *Basic Instinct*, signals a general comfort level with sex scenes in the cinema. With the splurge of softcore films on cable television from the 1980s onwards, this influence may have extended to television, where the rules of sexual imagery were also being re-negotiated.

*Silk Stalkings* and *Sweating Bullets* both ran as part of CBS’ Crimetime After Primetime before the slot was taken over by *Late Show with David Letterman* (1993- ), though *Silk Stalkings* continued its run on the USA Network. The Crimetime After Primetime slot before the 11pm news featured a different crime drama every day. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the regulatory body for US television, refrains from enforcing indecency standards between 10pm and 6am local time, arguing that content is unlikely to endanger children during this time (see fcc.gov). The liberties with sex and nudity that *Silk Stalkings* and *Sweating Bullets* take becomes particularly obvious when compared to the later primetime CBS series *One-West Waikiki*, which focusses more on banter between its two main characters than sex. The role of sex shifts in the sunshine noir dramas of the 1990s, with it becoming less and less associated with dangerous or criminal behaviour. In particular, *Sweating Bullets*’ detective Nick Slaughter is frequently shown in bed with different women. The late-night slot allows for relatively graphic and frequent imagery (for network television) of heterosexual sex, often including images of women’s bare breasts. The excessive objectification at work in the sunshine noir cycle, heightening in the 1990s, can thus be viewed as indebted to the reimagining of the femme fatale in more explicitly sexual terms.

The dynamics played out in the noir films tend to be relatively straight-forward, with men being manipulated by women who yield enormous sexual power (particularly in *Basic Instinct* and *The Last Seduction*), but with the main male and female characters usually working *against* each other. Furthermore, this dynamic can generate sexual tension. In TV sunshine noirs, particularly those of the 1990s, detectives of opposite gender often work together: *Silk Stalkings*, *Sweating Bullets* and *One-West Waikiki* all feature teams of two detectives of opposite genders, and *Acapulco H.E.A.T.* has a large team where male and female detectives are often brought together. Unlike in their film equivalents, it is clear that they are ultimately on the same side. *Sweating Bullets* and *Silk Stalkings* in particular feature a range of cases involving women who use their sexual power to manipulate men (often also the male detective), but there is little doubt as to the male detective’s allegiance and loyalty to his female partner. These male-female partnerships are governed by much sexually or romantically charged banter, and this relationship takes precedence over other relationships, making it impossible for the detectives to be fully seduced or blinded by femme or homme fatales. This even applies in *Sweating Bullets*, where later seasons put less of an emphasis on romantic and sexual tensions between Nick and Sylvie (Carolyn Dunn) and the discourse of romance is replaced by one of intense loyalty and friendship.

In the 1990s, central female detective characters become increasingly common for the cycle. All these are smart and self-sufficient, well versed in martial arts and skilled with a gun. In this way, the dramas draw on *Charlie’s Angels*, which featured highly objectified, but also capable and competent women. Indeed, the character of Claudio in *Acapulco H.E.A.T.*, played by model Fabio, fulfils a similar function as Charlie, the unseen employer in *Charlie’s Angels*. Yet, the difference is that he is visible, displaying his own to-be-looked-at-ness (see Mulvey 1985: 309). As Linda Mizejewski points out:

[…] the Angels worked without Charlie’s direct help and without competing for his approval. They *looked* like traditional sex goddesses or heavenly creatures, but their jobs and scripts were anything but traditional. Not only were they agents of adventure, but their stories would not end in romance. Even more radical for the 1970s was their teamwork. (2004: 60, italics in the original)

In the teams of *V.I.P.* and *Acapulco H.E.A.T.* women are treated as equals to their male partners, often even more competent than them. Female characters can also outnumber male teammates, and women are in charge of the teams. In *Silk Stalkings*, it is Rita’s (Mitzi Kapture) voiceover that accompanies the story, as opposed to the male ones of film noirs and in some earlier television sunshine noir texts. Thus, the objectification and sexualisation of main female characters is in tension with their skills in hand-to-hand combat or deduction. One reading of this tension is that they are allowed to be competent and intelligent, only at the cost of objectification. But it can also be argued that an objectified body can only be displayed if it is accompanied by a smart and skilled mind. At any rate, the tension shows that the objectification of the bodies of the female detectives is more complicated than that of the non-recurring, often nameless women in bikinis that are part of the iconography and mise-en-scène of sunshine noir dramas.

In the case of male characters that are being objectified, their ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ is often combined with commodity fetishism, particularly regarding the latest communications technology (as in the case of Fabio). This results in a tension between voyeuristic pleasure, capitalist reverence of skill and entrepreneurship, and commodity fetishism. Similar tensions were already visible in the 1980s. As Jonathan Bignell notes in relation to *Miami Vice*:

Commodities like clothes, cars and stylish homes and nightclubs are signs of wealth and the possibility of pleasure, and might be gained by the sanctioned American ideology of upward mobility and gaining wealth, but they may also be the masks and dubious rewards of crime. Crockett and Tubbs take on these signs as a disguise, but in doing so they become fetishized objects of fascination for the camera’s look and for the looks of other characters, for the narrative is frequently displaced by attention to the visual appearances of the two cops, as well as the sumptuousness of the locations. (Bignell 2009: 25)

Furthermore, Don Johnson’s Sonny Crockett is clearly constructed as a desired object along with a range of (often nameless) female characters lounging in bikinis on boats and beaches. This idea of borrowed wealth is foregrounded in *Magnum, P.I.* and *Miami Vice*, but the conflation of commodity fetishism and the objectification of human bodies remains a key feature of the cycle. In this context, objectification can be read as a critique of the commodification of the human body, as well as in terms of voyeuristic pleasure. Furthermore, the cycle’s links to film noir, with its associated themes of alienation, and the sunshine noir’s own emphasis on fragmentation and chaos, allows for a reading of this convention as critical of consumer culture. Thus, the objectification of male and female characters happens on different terms, with male detectives usually displaying their bodies as well as other commodities, and their female counterparts caught in a tension between their objectified bodies and their competence and skill.

The late 1990s witnessed a significant change in the American television landscape. HBO’s success with dramas like *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) and *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) shifted sexual imagery into a context of ‘quality TV’, thus moving it out of ‘illicit’ late night network dramas. In so doing, the visual spectacle of the sunshine noir was reframed and invested with much higher production value. But beyond that, cable dramas took increasing advantage of their status as being regulated under First Amendment rights (see Santo 2008: 21-5), making it possible to have graphic violence and offensive language. Thus, some important elements of sunshine noir were used in different contexts and made more ‘respectable’.

This new focus on quality programming also had a significant effect on network dramas, and particularly the crime and detective genre. Network television reacted to the challenge from cable channels by focussing on innovative prime time programming, such as *Desperate Housewives* (2004-12) and *Lost* (2004-10). Meanwhile, the detective sub-genre, particularly on network television, became dominated by forensic shows following the overwhelming success of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000- ).[[3]](#endnote-3) *CSI*, as Turnbull puts it, ‘espoused the televisual episodic narrative form with a vengeance’ (2014: 91), thus innovating new narrative patterns for the detective genre. The innovations brought about by the programme, such as the ‘*CSI*-shot’ – digitised imagery of the inside of the human body – meant that sunshine noir dramas were pushed out of the genre landscape. CBS’ Crimetime After Primetime slot had already been taken over by *Letterman* in 1993, to be followed by a surge in late night comedy and chat shows, pushing crime series featuring more sexually explicit imagery to cable, which also turned away from the sunshine noir in favour of ‘quality’ programming.

**Conclusion**

Klein notes that:

While the study of genres reveals the stories that audiences are drawn to over a period of decades, its intrageneric cycles [i.e. cycles that originate within a genre] can serve as a cross-section of one specific moment in time, accurately revealing the state of contemporary politics, prevalent social ideologies, aesthetic trends, and popular desires and anxieties. (2011: location 226)

With its inherent tension between objectification and commodity fetishism, its stylistic and thematic imitation of noir, its ironic tone, and its gesturing, at least, towards female empowerment, the cycle connects with a number of contemporary social discourses. But it is also framed and shaped by fundamental changes in the American television industry. The existence of cycles as a sub-system of genre seems driven by these changes, as a proliferation of channels led to a larger variety in genre and sub-genre texts.

By the 1990s, the sunshine noir cycle was offering little innovation, apart from an ever-increasing excess of objectification. My analysis of the cycle suggests that Thomas Schatz’ model of the evolution of genre may serve well to conceptualise this shift:

[…] a form passes through an *experimental* stage, during which its conventions are isolated and established, a *classic* stage, in which the conventions reach their ‘equilibrium’ and are mutually understood by artist and audience, an age of *refinement*, during which certain formal and stylistic details embellish the form, and finally a *baroque* (or ‘mannerist’ or ‘self-reflexive’) stage, when the forms of embellishments are accented to the point where they themselves become the ‘substance’ or ‘content’ of the work (Schatz 1981: 37-38).

While difficult to apply to the way genre develops, mostly because genre tends to remain ‘stuck’ in the baroque stage, the concept may be more easily applied to cycles. Where genres continue, even if they die down for a while or mutate into a different form, cycles *end*. With *V.I.P.*’s ironic tone, particularly regarding Pamela Anderson’s star persona and the excessive objectification of her body, the cycle seems to have reached the baroque stage. At this point, the cycle adopted an ironic tone rather than seeking a reinvention of themes or narrative, thus having little to offer in a television landscape where generic hybridity, innovation and ‘quality’ programming were now important. Unlike a genre, a cycle cannot evolve further. This does not necessarily mean that other versions or evolutions of the cycle will never reappear, or that new texts will not draw on it in different ways, but the sunshine noir cycle clearly ended with its baroque stage.

This idea that cycles ultimately end highlights one of the major differences between television cycles and television genres. As has been suggested, this is not the only difference: cycles are also more open to generic hybridity, with the repetition of cycle conventions much more integral than commonalities with a vast range of genre texts. While genres and cycles have much in common – such as the repetition of themes, storylines, iconography, settings, stock characters, and so on – texts of one cycle are much closer to each other. For example, where television crime dramas are often set in urban settings, but can really be set anywhere, sunshine noir dramas are inevitably set in sunny settings with beach locations. As such, the norms and conventions of television cycles are much stricter than those of genre. As argued, we can divide genre into a range of sub-genres, with cycles as sub-systems of sub-genre. Points of intersection with other genres are common and consequences for the overall genre can be vast (though they don't have to intersect). Television cycles are understood here as part of the discursive cluster of genre (as Mittell argues). This does not mean that cycles cannot be viewed as discourses, or even discursive clusters, in themselves. As the ‘lowest common denominator’ of genre, an understanding of television cycles can advance an understanding of the medium itself.

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**Television Programmes**

*Acapulco H.E.A.T.* (1993-4, US: All American Television)

*Baywatch* (1989-2001, US: NBC, All American Television)

*Charlie’s Angels* (1976-81, US: ABC)

*CSI: Crime Scene Investigations* (2000- , US: CBS)

*Death in Paradise* (2011- , UK: BBC)

*Desperate Housewives* (2004-12, US: ABC)

*Dexter* (2006-13, US: Showtime)

*Diagnosis Murder* (1993-2001, US: CBS)

*Hill Street Blues* (1981-7, US: NBC)

*Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993-9, US: NBC)

*Law & Order* (1990-2010, US: NBC)

*Late Show with David Letterman* (1993- , US: CBS)

*Lost* (2004-2010, US: ABC)

*Magnum, P.I.* (1980-8, US: CBS)

*Martin Kane, Private Eye* (1949-54, US: NBC)

*Matlock* (1986-95, US: NBC, ABC)

*Medium* (2005-11, US: NBC, CBS)

*Miami Vice* (1984-9, US: NBC)

*Nip/Tuck* (2003-10, US: FX)

*One-West Waikiki* (1994-6, US: CBS)

*Peter Gunn* (1958-61, US: NBC)

*Riptide* (1984-6, US: NBC)

*Sex and the City* (1998-2004, US: HBO)

*Silk Stalkings* (1991-9, US: CBS)

*Sweating Bullets* (1991-3, CN, USA: CBS)

*The Rockford Files* (1974-80, US: NBC)

*The Sopranos* (1999-2007, US: HBO)

*The X-Files* (1993-2002, US: Fox)

*Twin Peaks* (1990-1, US: ABC)

*V.I.P.* (1998-2002, US: syndication)

1. *Acapulco H.E.A.T.* and *V.I.P.* were produced by All American Television. The production company was bought by Pearson plc. in 1997 and became Pearson Television in 1998. Pearson Television merged with CLT-UFA to become RTL Group in 2000 and Pearson Television became FreemantleMedia. Efforts to contact the production company about the original US broadcaster for the two series have remained unsuccessful, but imdb.com lists the original US airdate for *Acapulco H.E.A.T*. as 28 September 1993 and for *V.I.P.* as 26 September 1998, with the US as the primary market before international markets. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Incidentally, much like in *Acapulco H.E.A.T.* and *V.I.P*., the star of many of these softcore neo-noir films was also a former Playboy Playmate, Sharon Tweed [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. As Derek Kompare noted in 2010, *CSI* ‘has been a top 10 network series for each of its 10 seasons, a top five series for eight seasons, and was the top-rated series on [American] TV for two consecutive seasons (2002-4), drawing over 26 million viewers at its peak’ (2010: 4) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)