

# THE KIM WALL MURDER SERIALIZED: ETHICS & AESTHETICS IN HIGH-PROFILE TRUE CRIME

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates the dramaturgical, aesthetical and ethical implications of making television on the back of

a high-profile, internationally appealing and very recent murder case: the Kim Wall murder. During a trip in his self-made submarine, Peter Madsen, a known amateur space rocket and submarine builder, abused and murdered Kim Wall, a young Swedish journalist, who was supposed to do an interview with him. Less than three years later, a range of true crime productions had been made about the case, and this article analyses three of them. Preliminary findings suggest that meta-communication is highly important in high-profile true crime productions such as these, and that creators have to walk a thin line.

This article investigates the dramaturgical, aesthetic and ethical implications of making television on the back of a high-profile, internationally prominent and very recent murder case: the Kim Wall murder. During a trip in his self-made submarine, Peter Madsen, a known amateur space rocket and submarine builder, abused and murdered Kim Wall, a young Swedish journalist, who was supposed to do an interview with him. Less than three years later, a range of true crime productions had been made about the case, and this article analyses three of them. Preliminary findings suggest that meta-communication<sup>1</sup> is highly important in high-profile true crime productions such as these, and that creators have to walk a thin line. One production has not yet reached audiences' screens on account of critical media attention (*Into the Deep*, Netflix, 2020), another may have miscalculated social media feedback (*The Secret Recordings*, Discovery, 2020) while a third, despite initial reluctance in the media and the sensitive nature of the case, has seemingly fared well with critics and audiences (*The Investigation*, TV 2, 2020). The article illustrates how the murderer is depicted in very different ways – from occupying centre stage to being avoided at all costs – and how this affects the dramaturgy and ultimately the perceived ethics of the series. It also discusses the complicated interaction with the murderer, the press and the friends and relatives of the victim that productions such as these have to engage in, whether they want to or not. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of the true crime genre as well as the historical film, the article ultimately identifies four parameters of critical importance in true crime productions based on high-profile, recent events (Punnett 2018, Christensen 2020b, Robert Burgoyne 2008).

Thornley advocates methodological pluralism when studying adaptations of true events (2018: 4). Inspired by this, this article uses textual analysis coupled with key production interviews as well as contexts such as ratings, reviews and user comments on social media, striving towards a multi-stranded approach. These different approaches supplement each other and thus contribute to a better understanding of the dialectic between ethics and aesthetic choices in high-profile true crime. The production interviews are performed with producers and scriptwriters, or, as Caldwell would have it, with people 'above the line'. These people have a great share in their productions, and they are essentially doing me

a favour by talking to me, which may limit the boldness of my questions and the critical self-scrutiny in their answers (Caldwell 2008, Bruun 2014). This methodological circumstance is addressed by maintaining a critical distance when analysing the interviews.

## 1. THE TRUE CRIME GENRE

At the time of this writing, true crime as a genre has been academically accounted for on several occasions. A recent, exhaustive description of the genre, as it appears both historically and on contemporary television screens, is Punnett's *Toward a Theory of True Crime Narratives* (2018). According to Punnett, historically, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966) made it "respectable" to read about a gory crime (2018: 2). The fact that Punnett would put respectable into quotation marks points to the fact that the respectability of the genre is still disputed, and in some ways, this dispute holds centre stage for the analysis in this article. Respectable or not, the genre has had an audience even before 1966, for example in the form of American true crime magazines from 1920s and forward. As both Punnett and Granild point out, a revitalisation of the genre arguably took place starting with the podcast series *Serial* (WBEZ, 2014-) and was quickly followed by television streaming hits *The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst* (HBO, 2015) and *Making a Murderer* (Netflix, 2015-2018) (Punnett 2018: 2, Granild 2020: 140).

Punnett initially explains that "there is no over-arching theory that determines what is and what is not true crime" (2018: 2) but goes on to define it as "an occasionally controversial multi-platform storytelling genre that is most often associated with murder narratives and shares some common ancestral heritage with journalism, but always has been driven by different impulses." (2018: 3). Punnett recognises the vagueness of such a definition. Inspired by the theories of Bakhtin, Derrida, and Barthes, and through detailed analysis of 12 cases, he therefore goes on to establish eight different codes that together form his theory of true crime narratives. I shall go into these codes in some detail, because they shall later serve as tools in my analysis. Of these codes, the teleology – whether the facts of the story are truthful and accurate or not – always needs to be determined first, because if they are not, it is not true crime. The rest of the codes are:

- Justice: whether seeking justice is a primary occupation of the narrative or not.
- Subversive: whether the text seeks to subvert status

1 In this article, meta-communication is used as an umbrella term for all communication happening outside of the media text: marketing, communication with the press, dialogue with participants, etc.

quo or not.

- Crusader: whether the text calls for social reformation/change or not.
- Geographic: the impact of locality on the narrative.
- Forensic: the level of “visual portrayal of crime narratives, detailed description of crime scenes, autopsies, and scientific methods of crime detection.” (2018: 98).
- Vocative: the level of subjective, advocacy-positioning in the narrative (as opposed to an authorial listing of facts).
- Folkloric: the level of instructive fairy-tale embedded in the narrative, which may bend the truth a little.

Some of the codes overlap. Punnett is aware of this, but meaningfully justifies the existence of each code.

Christensen explores the differences between crime fiction and the true crime genre (2020b). He points to a range of similarities but argues that in crime fiction, the investigator is almost always depicted as having a troubled personal life, which is rare in true crime. Also, he states that the documentary form is a typical trait of the true crime genre. Following Eitzen (2018), Christensen highlights the sensationalist aspects of the true crime genre, illustrating how sensationalism can both be regarded as a parasitical marketing mechanism and as a justifiable tool in a call to action in cases of injustice.

The spectacular and high-profile nature of the Kim Wall murder deserves a bit more attention. The fact that it happened in a submarine is curious, but the gruesome character of the murder also makes it stand out. Madsen dismembered Wall in the submarine, spread her body parts in the ocean and flooded the submarine. Coupled with his inventive and adaptive lies about the crime, he ultimately made the investigation and solving of the crime difficult, expensive and time consuming. News media quickly caught scent of the spectacular nature of the murder, resulting in rigorous press coverage by Danish, Swedish and international media from August 11 2017, the day the submarine went missing, to April 25 2018, the day Peter Madsen was convicted of murder. This level of contemporality and media attention is atypical of cases investigated in recent true crime productions. Comparatively, *Serial* started out investigating a murder committed 16 years prior. The murders in *The Jinx* were committed 14, 15 and 33 years before the show was broadcast, and *Making a Murderer* revolved around a 30-year-old murder case. None of these murders had the same level of spectacular gruesomeness as the Kim Wall murder. *Serial*, *The Jinx* and *Making a Murderer* certainly had to consider questions of ethics, morality and tastefulness. Also, the time that had passed since the crimes

was in a sense adding to the urgency of the series, because maybe an innocent man had been incarcerated all these years, or maybe a guilty man had been escaping justice for decades. Nevertheless, none of these series had to walk as fine a line in terms of ethics as the series based on the Kim Wall murder.

## 2. THE SECRET RECORDINGS: KILLER ON CENTRE STAGE

*The Secret Recordings* (*De hemmelige optagelser med Peter Madsen*) is a five-episode true crime documentary built around 20 hours of telephone interviews with Peter Madsen performed by Kristian Linnemann, the journalist behind the series. It was aired on Discovery+, the Discovery network's streaming platform, a streaming service focusing on reality and true crime. The premise of the documentary is laid out by Linnemann in the beginning of the show:

There's still unanswered questions. Why did Kim Wall have to die? How much of the murder was planned? And why didn't PM confess? [...] What made Peter Madsen abandon his rocket building project and commit a murder as gruesome as this? What pushed him over the edge? (*The Secret Recordings*, 1.01).

Thus, the premise is built around the fact that Peter Madsen never confessed to committing the murder. During the trial, the prosecution successfully proved both the murder and the motive, even if Peter Madsen never admitted to doing it. In a sense, then, the series questions the work done by the prosecution or at least feels that the question of motive can be elaborated upon. The dramaturgy in the series mainly revolves around Linnemann presenting two experts, one psychiatrist and one former special police investigator, with excerpts from his talks with Madsen, and their analysis and reactions to this. Seen from a journalistic point of view, *The Secret Recording's* key *raison d'être* is the fact that Madsen in the series for the first time confesses to committing the murder. According to Tine Røgind Quist, producer on the series, the confession and the chance to explore and analyse the psychology of a ruthless killer were of public interest, justifying the series.<sup>2</sup>

2 Interview with Tine Røgind Quist conducted by the author, February 8, 2021.



FIG. 1. *THE SECRET RECORDINGS*, 1.01, 00:02:02; SLOW ZOOM ON PICTURE OF THE KILLER.

*The Secret Recordings* focuses on Peter Madsen, the murderer, with archived footage of him appearing time and again, often accompanied by disconcerting strings, slow zoom on a picture of him and sometimes a jump-scare use of sudden, high-pitched sound, in line with what Christensen has identified as sensationalist aspects of true crime (2020b).

The editing is built around set-ups, payoffs and cliffhangers. For example, the series will play an excerpt from the interviews with Madsen in which he poses a question, and then it cuts to something different, temporarily leaving the answer in the wind, setting up a cliffhanger. As the series is primarily built on a string of phone interviews, the camera often lacks an obvious motive. It dwells on Linnemann and the experts listening to the sound bites, trying to capture their reactions. Pictures of a sound recorder or still images of Madsen are also often used. The aesthetics and sound in the series use a great deal of tools from reality television and hence are much in line with other series highlighted on Discovery's online interface, the network branding itself on crime, reality and sports.

Seen through the lens of Punnett's true crime theory, *The Secret Recordings* primarily engages with the *forensic* and *folk-*

*loric* codes. The forensic level is seemingly important, as the series brands itself on the scientific, psychological dissemination and portrait of Madsen. However, the *folkloric* code is ultimately dominant – it is indeed an instructive fairy tale about a monster, and, implicitly, a warning to stay away from monsters such as Madsen. Despite the implicit warnings, Kim Wall is not depicted as careless for going into the submarine, but the point of nearly all scenes is that Madsen is a manipulative, egomaniacal, deliberate and perverted killer.

The programme embraces the tabloid press coverage of the case by using a journalist from a tabloid newspaper who covered the case as an expert and source of information. Also, there is no public cooperation with the Wall family. The series discusses ethical perspectives in the last episode by having Linnemann ask the experts if they think anything good came out of his talks with Madsen, briefly initiating a discussion as to whether or not the recordings and the show can be justified. While the experts condone the show, of course, and point to the series' contribution to profiling murderers, one of them recognises that some people will think the show inappropriate. *The Secret Recordings* was poorly reviewed in the press (Jakobsen 2020, Eistrup 2020), and it was read as

controversial by some. The production is widely critiqued by users on Discovery's official Facebook page. Popular comments include: "Stop giving that loser attention and airtime!"; and "Respect for the victim's family isn't really Discovery+'s thing, is it".<sup>3</sup> The reality television aesthetics and dramaturgy were presumably read as insensitive and sensationalist in so recent and gruesome a case as this. The very idea of granting a known and convicted killer time with a microphone is disputed. I shall develop and further discuss this response in the section on meta-communication in true crime below. According to Lena Bøgild, Discovery's PR & Communication director, the show generated a reasonable amount of traffic to Discovery's streaming service and lured in new subscribers.<sup>4</sup> Just like Netflix, Discovery does not share audience ratings on its streaming service.

### 3. ANTI-SENSATIONALIST TRUE CRIME?

*The Investigation* (*Efterforskningen*) adopts a different approach, documented in the following. It is a six-part miniseries based on the Kim Wall murder, made by Miso Film for TV2, Denmark, which is the highest rated television network in Denmark. The series was directed by Tobias Lindholm, who has previous experience with crime serials through his work directing episodes of *Mindhunter* (Netflix 2017-2019), and it features well-known Danish actors such as Pilou Asbæk (*Game of Thrones*, HBO, 2011-2019; *Borgen*, DR1, 2010-2013) and Søren Malling (*A Hijacking*, Tobias Lindholm, 2012; *Forbrydelsen*, DR1, 2007-2012).

*The Investigation* is a fictionalised, dramatized version of the investigation of the Kim Wall murder centred on Jens Møller, the lead investigator in the case. It follows the investigation through the initial uncertainties – was it a murder or an accident? – but quickly focuses on the time-consuming job of finding enough reliable evidence to ensure a conviction, in this case by having divers scouring the seas for body parts for months and months and coroners carefully examine the body parts found. The dramatized form makes it markedly different from the journalistic-driven documentary style of true crime that we see in *The Secret Recording*, *Into the Deep*, *The Jinx* and *Making a Murderer*, and the form clashes with Christensen's definition of true crime (2020b). Still,

the true crime *teleology* of the series is indisputable (Punnett 2018:98): *The Investigation* sticks very closely to the actual events, save for a few minor points, to which I shall return. Accordingly, I argue that it fits within the genre, albeit just barely.

In *The Jinx* and *Making a Murderer*, the premise is a critique of society (Granild 2020). The point of *The Jinx* is that if you have got money and powerful friends, it does not matter what you have done. Rich people in the US can get away with anything, even murder, due to a broken justice system and incompetent police. Similarly, *Serial* and *Making a Murderer* illustrate how allegedly innocent people are convicted in the US, also criticizing the justice system and police investigations. In many ways, *The Investigation* is the opposite. At the core of it, *The Investigation* is a praise to the police officers, lawyers, coroners, and divers who worked tirelessly to build the case against Peter Madsen, the now convicted murderer. If it were not for the thousands of hours put into making the case against him, which undoubtedly has cost Danish society a vast amount of money, he would probably have received a much milder sentence. This point – the sheer amount of work put into the case – is also the main new piece of information the series shares with the viewers, unlike the types of true crime series that seek to bring extraordinary new pieces of evidence to light. The serial form compliments the focus on the workload. Entire episodes are dedicated to depicting a lot of work, often resulting in only little progress.

*The Investigation* makes a number of choices that can be interpreted as an ambition to present the most sober and least sensationalist account of the murder case possible. The most daring of these is arguably the choice to not show the murderer, or even mention his name, at any point during the series. He only exists through his actions, and he only speaks through others. Contrarily, Kim Wall's accomplishments, goals and ideals are emphasised, primarily narrated through her parents. Though *The Investigation* clearly tries to have Kim Wall be more than just a victim, the primary focus is on the regular people who worked tirelessly to make the case against the murderer, and especially lead investigator Jens Møller. The camera follows him through most of the episodes, and the audience learn the facts of the case chronologically as he learns them. He is also the only character the audience sees in private settings having dinners with his wife and failing his daughter on account of the heavy workload from the case.

The series implicitly criticizes the press coverage of the murder, seeing things from the lead investigators perspective: Throughout the series he is continually contacted and often

3 Discovery on Facebook 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/discoveryplusDK/posts/1733288273503215> (last accessed 14-06-21).

4 Interview with Lene Bøgild conducted by the author, February 8, 2021.



FIG. 2. *THE INVESTIGATION*: MIMICKING CAMERA ANGLE IN COMPUTER GAMES.

interrupted by reporters. In the final episode, Jens comments: “In Denmark, 50 murders are committed every year. [...] It’s the lowest amount ever. It just doesn’t feel that way, because we hear about all of them”. Jakob Buch-Jepsen, the lead prosecutor, retorts with a twist on the famous Nietzsche-quote about gazing into the abyss: “Perhaps it’s like this: The more civilised we get, the more we need to gaze into the darkness”. Peter Bose, producer on the show, confirmed that he saw the series going in a different direction than the sensationalist press coverage:

We felt that it was an important story to tell. Especially seen in the light of the way in which the story had been told in the press: *Breaking news* again and again. It was almost like everybody was looking to the ocean, scouting for the submarine. It was crazy.<sup>5</sup>

As if to underline the sober intentions, *The Investigation* is dedicated to the memory of Kim Wall, and the epilogue promotes the Kim Wall Memorial Fund, an organisation funding female journalists who want to tell stories about subcultures

with “the undercurrents of a rebellion” (Kim Wall Memorial Fund 2020). This last point also hints at the fact that the series established full cooperation with Kim Wall’s parents (Johansen 2020)<sup>6</sup>. Finally, *The Investigation* employs a mostly sombre use of aesthetics and sound. *The Investigation* has a realist style with a great many scenes kept without any score, and others accompanied by mostly discrete strings. The series’ aesthetics emphasise identification with especially Jens Møller, but also at times Kim Wall’s parents. It does so by use of handheld camera positioned behind the person, mimicking the camera’s position and movements in video games such as *Call of Duty* (Activision, 2003-) or *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004-), which seek to establish identification between the user and the in-game avatar.

*The Investigation* primarily engages with Punnett’s justice, geographical and forensic codes. The show is heavily invested in seeking justice. Even though the audience is presumably acutely aware that Peter Madsen ends up getting convicted, the way towards the conviction is the primary dramaturgical engine in the series. This includes the meticulous gathering of evidence, the endless hours scouring the ocean for body parts and the dismantling of the killer’s lies. The *geography*

5 Interview with Peter Bose conducted by the author, January 4, 2021.

6 Interview with Peter Bose conducted by the author, January 4, 2021.

in the series is crucial, as the Øresund region's distinct aesthetics are highlighted, and the exact geographical properties of Øresund – the depth, current, and size of the strait – play key roles in the unfolding of the investigation. On the one hand, the *forensic* code permeates the core of the narrative with the finding and detailed analysis of body parts as well as reading of coroner's reports and dialogue with coroners as corner stones. On the other hand, the gory details are deemphasised. The camera mostly avoids the victim's body parts, and both the forensic details of the case as well as the sexual dominance and snuff movie-inspired motive of the crime are discussed in a professional way. Just as in *The Secret Recordings*, Kim Wall is not depicted as careless for going into the submarine with a man she did not know. On the contrary, *The Investigation* is a voice for Kim Wall's parents, who condoned her choices and who have founded a trust for other adventurous female journalists.

*The Investigation* generally sticks very closely to the facts of the case, which could perhaps be expected in a case as recent and sensitive as this one. Peter Bose commented: "We checked *all* the facts. We had a team go through everything. We had lawyers check any legal aspects. [...] Everybody thinks they know the details of the case. If you get it wrong, you risk upsetting a lot of people".<sup>7</sup> This is well known – fictions based on facts are often criticised for inconsistencies and "errors", which a historical production such as *1864* (DR1, 2014) exemplifies (Hedling 2016). However, *The Investigation* does bend the truth a little in a number of ways:

1. In line with a great many other film and television series scripts, *The Investigation* depicts a positive development in its main character (Mittell 2015). Jens Møller goes from workaholic, obsessive detective, estranged from his pregnant daughter, to caring family man at the end of the series. Peter Bose admitted that this development is a dramaturgical choice and that it is a creative interpretation of the truth. In reality, Møller was surely over-worked and under pressure from the case, but his conflict and falling out with his pregnant daughter is not factual.<sup>8</sup>
2. The Maibritt-character, a policewoman working for Jens Møller, was really a man. Bose says the choice to change the gender was made to give the show

a more diverse cast.<sup>9</sup> Such a choice illustrates that *The Investigation*, like many a historical film, is a product of the time it was made (Burgoyne 2008:10): Matters of representation are arguably emphasised in a great many countries in 2020, including Denmark (Ladegaard 2020).

Thus, Bose and Lindholm invest considerable time and resources into getting certain things right while knowingly bending the truth under the guise of creative freedom in other areas. Notably, the areas in which they felt comfortable bending the truth were related to character development and identification with the police officers. They were not related to the murder, the timeline of the investigation, nor the trial. They must have felt that the television series genre called for personal development – as Christensen (and many others) point out, the investigator with trouble in his or her personal sphere is a typical crime fiction genre trope (2020b). Bose and Lindholm must also have felt that changing the gender of a key investigator would make the series appeal to a broader audience – and that nobody would care about these changes, which turned out to be a correct assessment. The controversial aspect of the production was not these inconsistencies with the truth. It was the very existence of the series. This shall be explored in the following.

#### 4. META-COMMUNICATION IN TRUE CRIME

In true crime productions focusing on relatively recent events, there is high level of meta-communication involved, including communication with the victim's family and friends, communication with witnesses and key informants as well as very careful considerations when it comes to both the press and social media. This is evident from bumpy roads all productions about the Kim Wall murder have had to travel, and how in some cases the attention around the productions has led to changes in marketing strategies and sometimes even changes in and postponements of certain productions.

A prime example of this is *Into the Deep* (Emma Sullivan, 2020), the Netflix documentary about the case. Much like *The Investigation*, *Into the Deep* claimed to have good intentions, focusing not on the murderer but instead on the group of volunteers he managed to recruit for his various rocket building and submarine projects, and whom he ef-

7 Interview with Peter Bose conducted by the author, January 4, 2021.

8 Interview with Peter Bose conducted by the author, January 4, 2021.

9 Interview with Peter Bose conducted by the author, January 4, 2021.

fectively spellbound and deceived. Despite screening at the Sundance Festival in early 2020 to some level of critical acclaim (Jørgensen 2020), by early 2021 *Into the Deep* had not reached Netflix users' screens yet. This was because of a conflict between the production and Anja Olsen, one of Madsen's volunteers, who had developed second thoughts about her participation in the documentary, claiming that she was mentally fragile, and that the release of the documentary would traumatise her further (Christensen 2020a). Sullivan, the director, initially refused to remove the parts with Olsen from the documentary, instead insisting that Olsen saw the documentary to see its good intentions, also offering to pay for a psychologist. This prompted Olsen to speak out in the press, accusing Sullivan and the production team of cynical abuse of her and other participants in the production. This move made Sullivan remove Olsen from the film, which, at the time of this writing, is being further edited. The review from the screening at the Sundance Festival emphasises the shocking nature of one of the scenes with Olsen, in which Peter Madsen holds a sharp object inches from her eye and jokes about lobotomising her (Jørgensen 2020). Whether Sullivan manages to produce a poignant version without Olsen remains to be seen. In other words, *Into the Deep* failed in maintaining good relations with key participants, capsizing the production.

*The Secret Recordings* also ran into problems with meta-communication. Not with participants wanting out, but with users on social media and reviews in the press. The production is widely critiqued by users on Discovery's official Facebook page. As mentioned, critical comments on social media attacked the idea of giving Madsen airtime and suggested that Discovery was being disrespectful of the victim's family. The latter of these two types of comments could presumably have been avoided if the Wall family had publicly endorsed the series, as they did with *The Investigation*, but the comment about giving Madsen airtime touches upon the core of the series and could never be accommodated without changing the show's premise. Looking back at Christensen's discussion about sensationalism in true crime, *The Secret Recordings* may also have suffered from the fact that it is sensationalist without seeking to correct an injustice (Christensen 2020b). Madsen has been convicted with the longest sentence possible. No further justice can be obtained, unless one adopts the perspective that there is justice or solace in Madsen's confession. Notably, the production team behind the series did try to limit Madsen's airtime on anything but the murder. The 20 hours of phone interviews had resulted in his thoughts on a

variety of subjects, and most of this content was cut from the final production.<sup>10</sup>

A great deal of the comments on social media were presumably posted by people who had not seen the production, as they are posted on the day of the release of the series, and they do not comment upon the specific contents of the series. Rather, they take issue with the series' core premises: That a confession by Peter Madsen is newsworthy, that there is more to be said about the motive of the crime, and that profiling such a devious killer is in the public interest. The critique on social media found its way into several critical reviews of the series (Eistrup 2020, Jakobsen 2020). However, whether Discovery is truly concerned by comments such as these, or critical reviews for that matter, is an open question. As discussed by Jensen (2012), some television networks brand themselves on being the 'cheeky', young and daring alternatives to the safe and conservative channels that often dominate national television systems. That strategy would fit Discovery's brand and position in the Danish media system quite well.

As discussed, *The Investigation* made multiple attempts to present the most sober and least sensationalist account of the murder case possible. The production had a clear strategy with regards to the press: Make a short initial press release with focus on the sober aspects of the production and then avoid all contact with the press and interviews until the release on television, believing that the series would speak for itself.<sup>11</sup> It also had a public endorsement from and clear cooperation with the Wall family, with the parents appearing on set and the family dog even featuring as itself in the series (Johansen 2020). Despite all these precautions, the series encountered a problem very similar to that of *Into the Deep*. Ole Stobbe, Kim Wall's boyfriend, initially worked with the producers and the director. He felt forced into cooperation because he was told that the series would air whether he liked it or not, and while he should not expect much influence on the project, this was his chance to let his version of the story be a part of the final result (Stobbe 2019). Stobbe backed out of the project at some point in the process. Like Olsen, he also spoke out in the press. He explicitly criticized *The Investigation* and later repeated his critique on social media.<sup>12</sup> However, unlike Olsen, Stobbe merely questioned the

10 Interview with Kristian Linnemann conducted by the author, January 15, 2021. Interview with Tine Røgind Quist conducted by the author, February 8, 2021.

11 Interview with Peter Bose conducted by the author, January 4, 2021.

12 Ole Stobbe on Facebook 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/olestobbe> (last accessed 14-06-21)

morals and ethics of basing entertainment on such recent traumatic events. He never claimed that the series was putting him on the verge of an emotional breakdown, and his participation was not a cornerstone in the production. Stobbe's point of view was backed up by voices within the entertainment industry such as Katrine Wiedemann, a prominent Danish theatre and movie director (Wiedemann 2020). *The Investigation* stuck to the strategy of not addressing critique before the release and limited Stobbe's participation in the series to a bare minimum. After the series had been released, the production team opened up for contact with the press and interviews. Tobias Lindholm, the director, has defended the production, claiming that it is primarily a positive and necessary story about the things that work in society and Kim Wall as a person, and that he was persuaded by Kim Wall's parents and Jens Møller, the lead investigator on the case, to direct it (Johansen 2020). As discussed, *The Investigation* did well with the audience and most critics, and it has sold well internationally.<sup>13</sup>

These accounts illustrate that metacommunication is crucial in high profile true crime productions about recent events. *Into the Deep* made miscalculations in their interaction with participants, which led to problems in the reception. *The Secret Recordings* endured harsh criticism by social media users and in reviews in the press. Even *The Investigation*, with its clear press strategy and anti-sensationalist aesthetics and contents, could not escape being perceived as sensationalist true crime by some. Even before it was aired, critics have called it entertainment based on trauma (Stobbe 2019, Wiedemann 2020). However, *The Investigation's* approach to both meta-communication and the production itself prevailed.

Summarily, the following lessons can be learned about high profile true crime productions based on recent events:

1. Public endorsement from key members in the victim's family is key.
2. Productions need to tread carefully and think closely on the way they communicate with participants, friends and family members of the victim.
3. Productions need a clear press strategy. My findings indicate that keeping contact with the press to a minimum before release may be a good strategy.
4. The framing of the killer is of critical importance. Even attempts to demonise the killer can be interpreted as giving him or her unwarranted attention. In this

study, deliberately avoiding the killer seemingly proved beneficial with the wider audience, though a case can be made for smaller networks to pursue more daring strategies, embracing a 'cheeky' image and going against the mainstream channels. It is a delicate balance.

The production team behind *The Investigation* was not blind to the advantages of basing a show on well-known IP.<sup>14</sup> And interestingly, sensationalism is normally a key ingredient in true crime productions (Christensen 2020b). With the Kim Wall murder, however, things were arguably different. The case in itself may have been so spectacular and gruesome that it did not need any added sensationalism – on the contrary, the sensationalist aspects of the case had to be toned down in the productions about the case for them to be accepted by the mainstream audience.

In his work on historical Hollywood films, Robert Burgoyne frames historical films as *reenactments* of the past (Burgoyne 2008: 7). Following Burgoyne's line of thought, the reenactment entails a level of *rethinking* the historical event. In the productions this article has analysed, it is a reenactment of a very disturbing event. In the cases of *Into the Deep* and *The Secret Recordings*, the disturbing mind of the killer is *witnessed again*, and it is rethought as even more deliberate, cynical and disturbed than viewers could have imagined. But in the case of *The Investigation*, the rethinking emphasises the victim and the heroes who solved the case, and it greatly deemphasises the killer. That exact rethinking of the Kim Wall murder may have been one of very few welcome ways to present this very delicate source material to a wider audience.

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13 Interview with Peter Bose conducted by the author, January 4, 2021.

14 Interview with Peter Bose conducted by the author, January 4, 2021.

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