

"Miami Vice" scores a hit

By Dean Bennett

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What is the allure of Miami Vice? Why does actor Don Johnson need two bodyguards to fend off groups when he goes out to eat in Miami?

How has this show overcome its inauspicious start (it languished in the bottom half of the Nielsen ratings in the first ten months when it ran head to head with Falcon Crest on Friday nights) to achieve perennial top-ten finishes, 15 Emmy nominations and four Emmy awards? It also captures the highest percentage of male viewers age 18-54 of any show on the air except Monday Night Football! How has this programme, in the words of NBC president Brandon Tartikoff, "redefined the cop-show genre?"

According to Dr. Peter Klovian of the University of Alberta's film studies program, there are four reasons why Miami Vice is changing the way television looks and sounds. These reasons are: a reworking of the conventions of the hard-boiled detective genre, a rock-synthesizer score, quick, rock video-like editing, and an (art deco) expressions mis-en-scene.

"In literature, there exists two kinds of detectives: the classical detective and the hard-boiled detective," says Klovian. The former category includes such vaunted sleuths as Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot. In classical detective stories, society is essentially good with crime being an abnormality committed for purely criminal motives. The classical detectives use reason and logic to defeat evil and the stories are marked by little or no violence. The problems of life are brought down to a simple clash of good and evil with good always triumphing.

The hard-boiled detective genre includes Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe, Mike Hammer and now the Miami vice cops, Sonny Crockett (Don Johnson), Ricardo Tubbs (Philip Michael Thomas), and Lt. Castillo (Edward James Olmos).

"In the hard-boiled genre, evil is believed to be intrinsic to the society. Evil, although it must be fought, will always exist; it can never be controlled. This genre is fraught with cynicism and violence.

"Beneath all the glitter and glamour of Miami is the definitive setting for the hard-boiled story. On a weekly basis Crockett and Tubbs do battle with scumbags, degenerates, cocaine cowboys,

smut peddlars, crazed youth gangs and even zombies from Haiti. Also, one favourite Miami Vice theme is the good cop turned bad.

"Miami Vice is part of the hard-boiled detective genre, but it takes it one step further. The cops don't just perform their job, they are their work. Crockett, Tubbs, Castillo, and the other four detectives on the squad (Switek, Zito, Gina Callabrese, and Tandy Joplín) must adopt criminal methods to survive and to succeed, but they are in no danger of becoming criminal themselves because they strictly adhere to an unwritten moral code. This moral code is based on four values: friendship, loyalty, duty, and honour. In every show, if they're not acting on these values, they're discussing them. By following this code, the detectives are able to salvage their dignity."

Klovian also believes the show transcends the boundaries of the hard-boiled genre because the detectives are very close and loyal to one another. "The hard-boiled detective is essentially a loner," he said, "but Miami Vice has seven hard-boiled detectives in a sort of surrogate family with Castillo as the head. They all will go to extraordinary lengths to help each other and to help other human beings. They're knights in shining armor. Crockett is even dressed in white."

The code these detectives follow is akin to Bushido, says Klovian. Bushido was the name given to the code of honour followed by Japan's Samurai warriors.

"Bushido — in its strictest interpretation — means 'code of knightliness,'" says Klovian. "The Samurai lived and died by Bushido. They were indifferent to pain or death, loyal only to the overlord. This is quite similar to the kind of dedication practiced by the seven detectives in Miami Vice. In every show, there is always some mystical reference to Vietnam, Cambodia or Southeast Asia. Crockett was with the 1st Air Cavalry in Vietnam and Castillo worked for "The Company" (probably CIA) in Thailand, Cambodia and Laos.

"Castillo provides a good example of what Bushido is. In one show, actually titled 'Bushido' Castillo finds out that friend of his turned outlaw. But Castillo has no moral dilemma. 'I can't let you walk,' he tells the friend. 'It's my duty. It's what I am.' This kind of dedication certainly goes beyond the hard-boiled detective and into Samurai

ethics."

Another contributing factor to the show's innovative look is its music. "Usually in television," says Klovian, "music is used to reinforce the action of, say, a love scene or a chase scene. In Miami Vice it is used to comment either directly or ironically on the action, like the chorus in ancient Greek theatre. For example, in one show over a shootout involving Crockett, Tubbs, and a gangster, we can hear the Clash singing 'No Peace in the Western World.' The lyric comments directly on the action and this creates emotional excitement."

Miami Vice's musical score is notable also for its use of original songs, not cheap made-for-TV imitations. If necessary, executive producer Michael Mann will spend \$10,000 per episode just to acquire the rights to an original work. According to Harpers Magazine, the budget of a single episode of Miami Vice is greater than the entire annual budget of the real vice squad in Miami.

"The visual style of Miami Vice," says Klovian, "has its roots in the expressionist elements of the later films of the West German director, the late Werner Fassbinder." In Fassbinder's later films, the whole screen is awash in flamingo pink and cobalt blue neon, the predominant colors of Miami Vice. But where Fassbinder's world was very grimy and seedy, Miami Vice is, in Klovian's words, "more streamlined for a cooler colour and a jazzier look."

Miami Vice's visual style is interesting for the dichotomy it creates. The world of Miami is a very polished one. (Before shooting night scenes, for example, the streets are watered down to get a nice smooth reflection of moonlight off the pavement.) Yet underneath this glittering world of polished streets and winking pastel nightclubs are sleazy degenerate dope dealers and outlaws. The setting for the show has been appropriately coined "glitter-sleaze".

There is one very strict rule on the Miami Vice set and that is 'no earth tones.' Pastel shades are definitely the rule and anything red or brown is strictly taboo. "One of the reasons for this," said Klovian, "is to reinforce the dream-like quality of the show."

Another appealing aspect to the programme is its quick, rock video-like editing.

"Miami Vice is the first show to use rock video-like editing," said Klovian. "In conventional television every shot must either

reveal character or advance the plot. It is linear narrative. Every shot must be self-explanatory so that if you leave the room for a few minutes you can still follow the few strands of plot when you return. It's like Dallas. Every three months or so I watch 15 minutes of it. Don't ask me why, but in those minutes I'm caught up in everything that's going on. The techniques of TV restrict the range of choices. Since every shot must be self-explanatory, one show is pretty much like the other."

"Miami Vice is quite different. It's full in non-linear fashion. Like Flashdance, gaps are left in the story. Each scene does not necessarily build on the preceding one. And after the first ten minutes the story doesn't give you a lot of exposition. If you miss the first few moments of the show, you're lost."

"The scenes themselves contradict the edicts of television. Usually the TV scene is a complete entity unto itself. There is a beginning and a middle and an end. Not so in Miami Vice. The viewer will enter a scene in the middle and leave before the end. Miami Vice likes to do this. It likes to challenge you. It throws you into the middle of something and lets you figure it out. Also the quick editing from one scene to another gives the impression of a dream.

The knock on Miami Vice has been style and sound at the expense of storyline, but Klovian does not see this as legitimate criticism.

"Miami Vice's audience doesn't read. It wants images and emotion and energy rather than plot or words."

Although he applauds Miami Vice for the innovative use of visual and aural techniques, he also sees the show's success in the context of television's just keeping up with the times.

"Forty years ago," he said, "the television screen was very small, as was the speaker. Because of this, the producers didn't bother with composition or mis-en-scene and paid little attention to the music score. Today, though the screens are much larger, the picture is better, and you can hook your set up to speakers the size of refrigerators. But television has refused to adapt. Their visual style is forty years out-of-date. Miami Vice is alluring and powerful because it uses modern techniques to present an ancient theme. I can't wait to see the number of imitations it will spawn."

