

D I A R Y

TALES FROM THE CUTTING-ROOM FLOOR

The reality of "reality-based" television
By Debra Seagal

Yesterday I applied for a job as a "story analyst" at *American Detective*, a prime-time "reality-based" cop show on ABC that I've never seen. The interview took place in Malibu at the program's production office, in a plain building next door to a bodybuilding gym. I walked past rows of bronzed people working out on Nautilus equipment and into a dingy array of padded dark rooms crowded with people peering into television screens. Busy people ran up and down the halls. I was greeted by the "story department" manager, who explained that every day the show has camera crews in four different cities trailing detectives as they break into every type of home and location to search, confiscate, interrogate, and arrest. (The crews have the right to do this, he told me, because they have been "deputized" by the local police department. What exactly this means I was not told.) They shoot huge amounts of videotape and it arrives every day, rushed to Malibu by Federal Express. Assistants tag and time-code each video before turning it over to the story department.

After talking about the job, the story-department manager sat me in front of a monitor and

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gave me two hours to "analyze" a video. I watched the camera pan through a dilapidated trailer while a detective searched for incriminating evidence. He found money in a small yellow suitcase, discovered a knife under a sofa, and plucked a tiny, twisted marijuana butt from a swan-shaped ashtray. I typed each act into a computer. It took

me forty-five minutes to make what seemed a meaningless record. When I got home this afternoon there was a message on my phone machine from the story-department manager congratulating me on a job well done and welcoming me to *American Detective*. I am pleased.

MAY 18, 1992

Although we're officially called story analysts,

in-house we're referred to as "the loggers." Each of us has a computer/VCR/print monitor/TV screen/headphone console looming in front of us like a colossal dashboard. Settling into my chair is like squeezing into a small cockpit. The camera crews seem to go everywhere: Detroit, New York, Miami, Las Vegas, Pittsburgh, Phoenix, Portland, Santa Cruz, Indianapolis, San Jose. They join up with local police teams and apparently get access to everything the cops do. They even wear blue jackets with POLICE in yellow letters on the back. The loggers scrutinize



each hour-long tape second by second, and make a running log of every visual and auditory element that can be used to “create” a story. On an average day the other three loggers and I look at twenty to forty tapes, and in any given week we analyze from 6,000 to 12,000 minutes—or up to 720,000 seconds of film.

The footage comes from handheld “main” and “secondary” cameras as well as tiny, wirelike “lock-down” cameras taped to anything that might provide a view of the scene: car doors, window visors, and even on one occasion—in order to record drug deals inside an undercover vehicle—a gear-shift handle. Once a videotape is viewed, the logger creates a highlight reel—a fifteen-minute distillation of the overall “bust” or “case.” The tapes and scripts are then handed over to the supervising producer, who in turn works with technical editors to create an episode of the show, each of which begins with this message on the screen: “What you are about to see is real. There are no re-creations. Everything was filmed while it actually happened.”

There are, I’ve learned, quite a few of these reality and “fact-based” shows now, with names like *Cops*, *Top Cops*, and *FBI: The Untold Stories*. Why the national obsession with this sort of voyeuristic entertainment? Perhaps we want to believe the cops are still in control. The preponderance of these shows is also related to the bottom line: they are extremely inexpensive to produce. After all, why create an elaborate car-chase sequence costing tens of thousands of dollars a minute when a crew with a couple of video cameras can ride around with the cops and get the “real” thing? Why engage a group of talented writers and producers to make intelligent and exciting TV when it’s more profitable to dip into the endless pool of human grief?

I’ve just participated in my first “story meeting” with the supervising producer. He occupies a dark little room filled with prerecorded sounds of police banter, queer voice-over loops, segments of the *American Detective* theme song, and sound bites of angry drug-busting screams (“Stop! Police! Put your hands up, you motherfucker!”). A perpetual cold wind blows from a faulty air duct above his desk. He is tall, lanky, in his fifties; his ambition once was to be a serious actor. His job is to determine what images will be resurrected as prime-time, Monday-night entertainment. He doesn’t look miserable but I suspect he is.

There are six of us in the story meeting, the producer, four loggers, and the story-department manager. Each logger plays highlight reels and pitches stories, most of which are rejected by the producer for being “not hot enough,” “not sexy.” Occasionally, I learned today, a highlight reel is made of a case that is still in progress, such as a stakeout. Our cameramen then call us

on-site from their cellular phones during our story meeting and update us on what has been filmed that day, sometimes that very hour. The footage arrives the next morning and then is built into the evolving story. This process continues in a flurry of calls and Federal Express deliveries while the real drama unfolds elsewhere—Pittsburgh or San Jose or wherever. We are to hope for a naturally dramatic climax. But if it doesn’t happen, I understand, we’ll “work one out.”

MAY 26, 1992

I’m learning the job. Among other tasks, we’re responsible for compiling stock-footage books—volumes of miscellaneous images containing every conceivable example of guns, drugs, money, scenics, street signs, appliances, and interior house shots. This compendium is used to embellish stories when certain images or sounds have not been picked up by a main or secondary camera: a close-up of a suspect’s tightly cuffed wrists missed in a rush, a scream muffled by background traffic noise. Or, most frequently, the shouts of the cops on a raid (“POLICE! Open the door! Now!”) in an otherwise unexciting ramrod affair. Evidently the “reality” of a given episode is subject to enhancement.

Today the story-department manager gave me several videotapes from secondary and lock-down cameras at an undercover mission in Indianapolis. I’ve never been to Indianapolis, and I figured that, if nothing else, I’d get to see the city.

I was wrong. What I saw and heard was a procession of close-up crotch shots, nose-picking, and farting in surveillance vans where a few detectives waited, perspiring under the weight of nylon-mesh raid gear and semiautomatic rifles. Searching for the scraps of usable footage was like combing a beach for a lost contact lens. The actual bust—a sad affair that featured an accountant getting arrested for buying pot in an empty shoe-store parking lot—was perhaps 1 percent of everything I looked at. In the logic of the story department, we are to deplore these small-time drug busts not because we are concerned that the big drugs are still on the street but because a small bust means an uninteresting show. A dud.

Just before going home today, I noticed a little list that someone tacked up on our bulletin boards to remind us what we are looking for:

DEATH
STAB
SHOOT
STRANGULATION
CLUB
SUICIDE

JUNE 3, 1992

Today was the first day I got to log Lieutenant Bunnell, which is considered a great

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honor in the office. Lieutenant Bunnell is the show's mascot, the venerated spokesperson. Only two years ago he was an ordinary narcotics detective in Oregon. Today he has a six-figure income, an agent, fans all over the country, and the best voice coach in Hollywood. He's so famous now that he's even stalked by his fans, such as the strange woman who walked into our office a few days ago wearing hole-pocked spandex tights, worn-down spike-heeled backless pumps, and a see-through purse. She'd been on his trail from Florida to California and wanted his home phone number. She was quietly escorted out the door to her dilapidated pickup truck.

At the beginning of each episode, Lieutenant Bunnell sets the scene for the viewer (much like Jack Webb on *Dragnet*), painting a picture of the crime at hand and describing the challenges the detectives face. He also participates in many of these raids, since he is, after all, still a police lieutenant. The standard fare: Act I, Bunnell's suspenseful introduction; Act II, Bunnell leads his team on a raid; Act III, Bunnell captures the bad suspect and throws him in the squad car, etc. The format of each drama must fit into an eleven-minute segment. So it is that although *American Detective* and its competitors seem a long way from *Dragnet*, *The Mod Squad*, *The Rookies*, et al.—all the famous old cop shows—they follow the same formula, the same dramatic arc, because this is what the viewers and advertisers have come to expect.

JUNE 10, 1992

The producers are pleased with my work and have assigned me my own beat to log—Santa Cruz in northern California. Having spent several summers there as a teenager, I remember its forests, its eucalyptus and apple orchards. But today, two decades later, I strap on earphones, flip on the equipment, and meet three detectives on the Santa Cruz County Narcotic Enforcement Team. Dressed in full SWAT-team regalia, they are Brooks, an overweight commander; Gravitt, his shark-faced colleague; and Cooper, a detective underling. The first image is an intersection in Santa Cruz's commercial district. While an undercover pal negotiates with a drug dealer across the street, the three detectives survey an unsuspecting woman from behind their van's tinted windows. It begins like this:

[Interior of van. Mid-range shot of Commander Brooks, Special Agent Gravitt, and Detective Cooper]

COOPER: Check out those volumptuous [sic] breasts and that volumptuous [sic] ass.

BROOKS: Think she takes it in the butt?
COOPER: Yep. It sticks out just enough so you can pull the cheeks apart and really plummet it. [Long pause] I believe that she's not beyond fellatio either.

[Zoom to close-up of Cooper]

COOPER: You don't have true domination over a woman until you spit on 'em and they don't say nothing.

[Zoom to close-up of Gravitt]

GRAVITT: I know a hooker who will let you spit on her for twenty bucks... [Direct appeal to camera] Can one of you guys edit this thing and make a big lump in my pants for me?

[Zoom to close-up of Gravitt's crotch, walkie-talkie between his legs]

JUNE 15, 1992

I'm developing a perverse fascination with the magic exercised in our TV production sweatshop. Once our supervising producer has picked the cases that might work for the show, the "stories" are turned over to an editor. Within a few weeks the finished videos emerge from the editing room with "problems" fixed, chronologies reshuffled, and, when necessary, images and sound bites clipped and replaced by old filler footage from unrelated cases.

By the time our 9 million viewers flip on their tubes, we've reduced fifty or sixty hours of mundane and compromising video into short, action-packed segments of tantalizing, crack-filled, dope-dealing, junkie-busting cop culture. How easily we downplay the pathos of the suspect; how cleverly we breeze past the complexities that cast doubt on the very system that has produced the criminal activity in the first place. How effortlessly we smooth out the indiscretions of the lumpen detectives and casually make them appear as pistol-flailing heroes rushing across the screen. Watching a finished episode of *American Detective*, one easily forgets that the detectives are, for the most part, men whose lives are overburdened with formalities and paperwork. They ambush one downtrodden suspect after another in search of marijuana, and then, after a long Sisyphean day, retire into red-vinyl bars where they guzzle down beers among a clientele that, to no small degree, resembles the very people they have just ambushed.

JUNE 23, 1992

The executive producer is a tiny man with excessively coiffed, shoulder-length blond hair. He is given to wearing stone-washed jeans, a buttoned-to-the-collar shirt, and enormous cowboy boots; he also frequently wears a police badge on his belt loop. As I log away, I see his face on the screen flashing in the background like a subliminal advertisement for a new line

of L.A.P.D. fashion coordinates. He sits in on interrogations, preens the detectives' hair, prompts them to "say something pithy for the camera." He gets phone calls in surveillance vans and in detective briefing rooms. With a cellular phone flat against his ear, he even has conversations with his L.A. entourage—Lorimar executives, ABC executives, other producers—while he runs in his police jacket

JUNE 25, 1992

Today I logged in several hours of one detective sitting behind a steering wheel doing absolutely nothing. How a man could remain practically immobile for so long is beyond my comprehension. He sat and stared out the window, forgetting that the tiny lock-down camera under his window visor was rolling. After an hour, it seemed as though I had become the surveillance camera, receiving his every twitch and breath through the intravenous-like circuitry that connects me to my machine and my machine to his image. There was, finally, a moment when he shifted and looked directly at



behind the cops through ghettos and barrios.

I am beginning to wonder how he has gained access to hundreds of cop cars from California to New Jersey. Clearly the cops don't fear they will be compromised; I see the bonding that takes place between them and the executive producer, who, after a successful raid, presents them with *American Detective* plaques that feature their own faces. Their camaraderie is picked up continuously by the cameras. One of my colleagues has a photograph of our executive producer and Lieutenant Bunnell with their arms around a topless go-go dancer somewhere in Las Vegas; underneath it is a handwritten caption that reads, "The Unbearable Lightness of Being a Cop."

the camera. For a second our eyes met, and, flustered, I averted my gaze.

JUNE 26, 1992

Today would have been inconsequential had not the supervising producer emerged from his air-conditioned nightmare and leaned over my desk. "We'll have a crew covering Detroit over the weekend," he said. "Maybe we'll get a good homicide for you to work on." I was speechless. I've never seen a homicide, and I have no interest in seeing one. But I'm working in a place where a grisly homicide is actually welcomed. I am supposed to look forward to this. After work, I prayed for benevolence, goodwill, and peace in Detroit.

JUNE 29, 1992

My prayers must have worked—no Detroit homicide case came in today. That doesn't mean, however, that I'm any less complicit in what is clearly a sordid enterprise. This afternoon I analyzed a tape that features detectives

busting a motley assortment of small-time pot dealers and getting them to “flip” on their connections. The freshly cuffed “crook” then becomes a C.I. (confidential informant). Rigged with hidden wires and cameras, the C.I. works for the detectives by setting up his friends in drug busts that lead up the ladder. In exchange for this, the C.I. is promised a more lenient sentence when his day comes up in court. Some of the C.I.’s have been busted so many times before that they are essentially professional informants. Ironically, some have actually learned how the game is played by watching reality-based cop shows. This is the case with a nervous teenage first-time pot seller who gets set up and busted in a bar for selling half an ounce of pot. When the undercover cop flashes his badge and whips out his cuffs, a look of thrilled recognition brightens the suspect’s face. “Hey, I know you!” he gasps. “You’re what’s-his-name on *American Detective*, aren’t you? I watch your show every week! I know exactly what you want me to do!”

The cops are flattered by the recognition, even if it comes from a teenage crook caught selling pot. They seem to become pals with the C.I.’s. Sometimes, however, they have to muscle the guy. The tape I saw today involves a soft-spoken, thirtysomething white male named Michael who gets busted for selling pot out of his ramshackle abode in the Santa Cruz mountains. He’s been set up by a friend who himself was originally resistant to cooperating with the detectives. Michael has never been arrested and doesn’t understand the mechanics of becoming a C.I. He has only one request: to see a lawyer. By law, after such a request the detectives are required to stop any form of interrogation immediately and make a lawyer available. In this case, however, Commander Brooks knows that if he can get Michael to flip, they’ll be able to keep busting up the ladder and, of course, we’ll be able to crank out a good show.

So what happens? Hunched in front of my equipment in the office in Malibu, this is what I see, in minute after minute of raw footage:

[Michael is pulled out of bed after midnight. Two of our cameras are rolling and a group of cops surround him. He is entirely confused when Brooks explains how to work with them and become a confidential informant.]

MICHAEL: Can I have a lawyer? . . . I don’t know what’s going on. I’d really rather talk to a lawyer. This is not my expertise at all, as it is yours. I feel way outnumbered. I don’t know what’s going on. . . .

BROOKS: Here’s where we’re at. You’ve got a lot of marijuana. Marijuana’s still a felony in the state of California, despite whatever you may think about it.

MICHAEL: I understand.

BROOKS: The amount of marijuana you have

here is gonna send you to state prison. . . . That’s our job, to try to put you in state prison, quite frankly, unless you do something to help yourself. Unless you do something to assist us. . . .

MICHAEL: I’m innocent until proven guilty, correct?

BROOKS: I’m telling you the way it is in the real world. . . . What we’re asking you to do is cooperate . . . to act as our agent and help us buy larger amounts of marijuana. Tell us where you get your marijuana. . . .

MICHAEL: I don’t understand. You know, you guys could have me do something and I could get in even more trouble.

BROOKS: Obviously, if you’re acting as our agent, you can’t get in trouble. . . .

MICHAEL: I’m taking your word for that? . . .

BROOKS: Here’s what I’m telling you. If you don’t want to cooperate, you’re going to prison.

MICHAEL: Sir, I do want to cooperate—

BROOKS: Now, I’m saying if you don’t cooperate right today, now, here, this minute, you’re going to prison. We’re gonna asset-seize your property. We’re gonna asset-seize your vehicles. We’re gonna asset-seize your money. We’re gonna send your girlfriend to prison and we’re gonna send your kid to the Child Protective Services. That’s what I’m saying.

MICHAEL: If I get a lawyer, all that stuff happens to me?

BROOKS: If you get a lawyer, we’re not in a position to wanna cooperate with you tomorrow. We’re in a position to cooperate with you right now. Today. Right now. Today. . . .

MICHAEL: I’m under too much stress to make a decision like that. I want to talk to a lawyer. I really do. That’s the bottom line.

[Commander Brooks continues to push Michael but doesn’t get far.]

MICHAEL: I’m just getting more confused. I’ve got ten guys standing around me. . . .

BROOKS: We’re not holding a gun to you.

MICHAEL: Every one of you guys has a gun.

BROOKS: How old is your child?

MICHAEL: She’ll be three on Tuesday.

BROOKS: Well, children need a father at home. You can’t be much of a father when you’re in jail.

MICHAEL: Sir!

BROOKS: That’s not a scare tactic, that’s a reality.

MICHAEL: That is a scare tactic.

BROOKS: No, it isn’t. That’s reality. . . . And the reality is, I’m sending you to prison unless you do something to help yourself out. . . .

MICHAEL: Well, ain’t I also innocent until proven guilty in a court of law? . . . You know what, guys? I really just want to talk to a lawyer. That’s really all I want to do.

BROOKS: How much money did you put down on this property? . . . Do you own that truck over there?

MICHAEL: Buddy, does all this need to be done to get arrested? . . .

BROOKS: Yeah. I’m curious—do you own that truck there?

MICHAEL: You guys know all that.

BROOKS: I hope so, 'cause I'd look good in that truck.

MICHAEL: Is this Mexico?

BROOKS: No. I'll just take it. Asset-seizure. And you know what? The county would look good taking the equity out of this house.

MICHAEL: Lots of luck.

[Commander Brooks continues to work on Michael for several minutes.]

MICHAEL: I feel like you're poking at me.

BROOKS: I *am* poking at you.

MICHAEL: So now I really want to talk to a lawyer now.

BROOKS: That's fine. We're done.

[Brooks huffs off, mission unaccomplished. He walks over to his pals and shakes his head.]

BROOKS: That's the first white guy I ever felt like beating the fucking shit out of.

If Michael's case becomes an episode of the show, Michael will be made a part of a criminal element that stalks backyards and threatens children. Commander Brooks will become a gentle, persuasive cop who's keeping our streets safe at night.

JULY 1, 1992

Today I got a video to analyze that involves a car chase. It includes the three Santa Cruz cops and a few other officers following two Hispanic suspects at top speed through a brussels-sprout field in the Central Valley. Our cameramen, wearing police jackets, are in one of their undercover vans during the pursuit. (One of them has his camera in one hand and a pistol held high in the other. The police don't seem to care about his blurred role.) When the suspects stop their car and emerge with their arms held high, the detectives bound out of their vans screaming in a shrill chorus ("Get on the ground, cocksucker!" "I'll blow your motherfucking head off."). I watch. Within seconds, the suspects are pinned to the ground and held immobile while cops kick them in the stomach and the face. Cooper is particularly angry because his van has bounced into a ditch during the pursuit. He looks down at one of the suspects. "You bashed my car," he complains. "I just got it painted, you motherfucker." With that he kicks the suspect in the head. Our main cameraman focuses on the detectives ambling around their fallen prey like hunters after a wild-game safari; a lot of vainglorious, congratulatory back-slapping ensues. Our secondary cameraman holds a long, extreme close-up of a suspect while his mouth bleeds into the dirt. "I feel like I'm dying," he wheezes, and turns his head away from the camera. I watch.

This afternoon, in the office, the video drew a crowd. One producer shook his head at the violence. "Too bad," he said. "Too bad we can't use

that footage." This was clearly a case of too much reality for reality-based TV. I couldn't help but wonder what the producers would do if these two suspects were beaten so badly that they later died. Would they have jeopardized their own livelihoods by turning over the video to the "authorities"?

SEPTEMBER 21, 1992

I'm losing interest in the footage of detectives; now it is the "little people" who interest me, the people whose stories never make it past a highlight reel. I am strangely devoted to them. There is "the steak-knife lady" who waves her rusty weapon in front of a housing project in Detroit. I replay her over and over again. There is something about her: her hysteria, her insistence on her right to privacy, and her flagrant indignation at the cameras ("Get those cameras outta my face, you assholes!"); the way she flails her broken knife in self-defense at a drunk neighbor while her gigantic curlers unravel; the way she consoles her children, who watch with gaping mouths. This woman is *pissed*. She is *real*. Little does she know I'm going to be watching her in Malibu, California, while I sip my morning cappuccino, manipulating her image for my highlight reel. I feel like I'm in the old Sixties movie *Jason and the Argonauts*,

in which Zeus and Hera survey the little humans below them through a heavenly pool of water that looks, oddly enough, like a TV screen.

And there is a skinny, mentally disturbed red-head who took in a boyfriend because she was lonely and friendless. Unknown to her, he is selling heroin out of her apartment. But in the eyes of the law she is considered an accomplice. When the cops interrogate her, all she can say about her boyfriend is, "I love him. I took him in because I love him. He's a little bit retarded or something. I took him in." Later she breaks down sobbing. She is terrified that her father will throw her into a mental institution. "I need love. Can't you understand that?" she cries to the policeman who is trying to explain to her why they are arresting her boyfriend. "I need love. That's all I need, sir."

There are, too, the hapless Hispanic families living in poverty, stashing marijuana behind tapestries of the Virgin Mary and selling it to some of the same white middle-class couch potatoes who watch reality-based cop shows. There are the emotionally disturbed, unemployed Vietnam veterans selling liquid morphine because their SSI checks aren't enough to cover the rent. And there are AIDS patients who get busted,

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their dwellings ransacked, for smoking small quantities of pot to alleviate the side effects of their medication.

In our office the stories of people like these collect dust on shelves stacked with *Hollywood Reporters*, cast aside because they are too dark, too much like real life. I feel overwhelmed by my ability to freeze-frame their images in time-coded close-ups. I can peer into their private lives with the precision of a lab technician, replaying painful and sordid moments. I am troubled that something of their humanity is stored indefinitely in our supervising producer's refrigerated video asylum. Some of their faces have even entered my dreamworld. This afternoon when I suggested that such unfortunates might be the real stars of our show, my boss snapped, "You empathize with the wrong people."

SEPTEMBER 28, 1992

This morning I realized that watching hour after hour of vice has begun to affect me. After a raid, when the detectives begin to search for drugs, money, and weapons while our cameras keep rolling, I find myself watching with the intensity of a child foraging through a grassy backyard for an exquisitely luminous Easter egg. The camera moves through rooms of the unknown suspect as the detectives poke through bedrooms with overturned mattresses and rumpled, stained sheets, through underwear drawers and soiled hampers; into the dewy, tiled grottoes of bathrooms, past soap-streaked shower doors and odd hairs stuck to bathtub walls, clattering through rows of bottles, creams, tubes, and toothbrushes, their bristles splayed

with wear. The exploration continues in kitchens, past half-eaten meals, where forks were dropped in surprise moments earlier, past grime-laden refrigerators and grease-pitted ovens, past cats hunched frozen in shock, and onward, sometimes past the body of a dog that has recently been shot by the police, now stiffening in the first moments of rigor mortis.

In the midst of this disarray the police sometimes find what they are so frantically looking for: abundant stacks of \$100 bills stuffed in boots, behind secret panels and trap doors; heroin vials sealed in jars of cornmeal stashed in the dank corners of ant-infested cupboards; white powders in plastic Baggies concealed behind moldy bookshelves; discarded hypodermic needles in empty, economy-size laundry-detergent boxes; and thin, spindly marijuana plants blooming in tomato gardens and poppy fields. And, finally, on a lucky day, the guns: the magnums, automatics,

shotguns, machine guns, and, in one case, assault rifles leaned against walls, their barrels pointed upward.

I feel as though my brain is lined with a stratum of images of human debris. Sitting at home in my small bungalow, I have begun to wonder what lurks behind the goodwill of my neighbors' gestures, what they are doing behind their porches and patios.

SEPTEMBER 30, 1992

Today was stock-footage day. I spent ten hours finding, cutting, and filing still-shots of semiautomatic rifles and hypodermic needles. I am starting to notice signs that I am dispirited and restless. I spend long moments mulling over camera shots of unknown faces. Today I took my lunch break on the Malibu pier, where I sat transfixed by the glassy swells, the kelp beds, and minnows under the jetty. I know I can't go on much longer, but I need to pay the rent.

OCTOBER 1, 1992

I've just worked through a series of videos of the Las Vegas vice squad as they go on a prostitute rampage with our cameramen and producers. Pulling down all-nighters in cheesy motel rooms, the detectives go undercover as our camera crew, our producers, and some of the detectives sit in an adjacent room, watching the live action through a hidden camera. It is, essentially, a voyeur's paradise, and definitely X-rated. The undercover cops' trick is to get the call girls into a position where they are clearly about to accept money for sexual acts. The scam goes something like this: "Hi, I'm John. Me and my buddies here are passing through town. Thought you gals might be able to show us a good time..."

"What did you have in mind?" they ask. The detectives respond with the usual requests for blow jobs. Maybe the undercover cops ask the girls to do a little dancing before getting down to real business. They sit back and enjoy the show. Sometimes they even strip, get into the motel's vibrating, king-size bed, and wait for just the right incriminating moment before the closet door bursts open and the unsuspecting woman is overwhelmed by a swarm of detectives and cameramen.

"He's my boyfriend!" many insist as they hysterically scramble for their clothes.

"What's his name?" the cops respond while they snap on the cuffs.

"Bill. Bob. Uh, John..."

It doesn't matter. The police get their suspect. The camera crew gets its footage. The cameras keep on rolling. And what I see, what the viewer will never see, is the women—disheveled, shocked, their clothes still scattered on musty

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hotel carpets—telling their stories to the amused officers and producers. Some of them sob uncontrollably. Three kids at home. An ex who hasn't paid child support in five years. Welfare. Food stamps. Some are so entrenched in the world of poverty and pimps that they are completely numb, fearing only the retribution they'll suffer if their pimps get busted as a result of their cooperation with the cops. Others work a nine-to-five job during the day that barely pays the rent and then become prostitutes at night to put food on the table. Though their faces are fatigued, they still manage a certain dignity. They look, in fact, very much like the girl next door.

I can't help but see how each piece of the drama fits neatly into the other: one woman's misery is another man's pleasure; one man's pleasure is another man's crime; one man's crime is another man's beat; one man's beat is another man's TV show. And all of these pieces of the drama become one big paycheck for the executive producer.

OCTOBER 5, 1992

Today the executive producer—in the flesh, not on tape—walked into the office and smiled at me. I smiled back. But I was thinking: one false move and I'll blow your head off.

OCTOBER 9, 1992

It would seem that there could not be any further strangeness to everything that I've seen, but, in fact, there is: almost all of the suspects we film, including the prostitutes, sign releases permitting us to put them on TV. Why would they actually want to be on TV even when they've been, literally, caught with their pants down? Could it be because of TV's ability to seemingly give a nobody a certain fleeting, cheap celebrity? Or is it that only by participating in the non-reality of TV can these people feel *more* real, more alive? I asked around to understand how the release process happens.

Usually a production coordinator—an aspiring TV producer fresh out of college—is assigned the task of pushing the legal release into the faces of overwhelmed and tightly cuffed suspects who are often at such peak stress levels that some can't recognize their own faces on their driver's licenses. "We'll show your side of the story," the production coordinator might say. Sometimes it is the police themselves who ask people to sign, suggesting that the cameras are part of a training film and that signing the form is the least of their present concerns. And to anyone in such a situation this seems plausible, since the entire camera crew is outfitted with police jackets, including the executive producer, who, with his "belt badge," could easily be mistaken for a cop in civilian attire. And, clearly,

many of those arrested feel that signing anything will help them in court. In the rare event that a suspect is reluctant to sign the release, especially when his or her case might make for a good show, the *American Detective* officials offer money; but more frequently, it seems, the suspect signing the release form simply doesn't adequately read or speak English. Whatever the underlying motive, almost all of the arrested "criminals" willingly sign their releases, and thus are poised—consciously or not—to participate in their own degradation before the American viewing public.

OCTOBER 16, 1992

Today I saw something that convinced me I may be lost in this netherworld of videotape; I did, finally, get a homicide. The victim lived in Oregon and planned to save up to attend Reed College. She was a stripper who dabbled in prostitution to make ends meet. On the tape the cops find her on her bed clutching a stuffed animal, her skull bludgeoned open with a baseball bat. A stream of blood stains the wall in a red arc, marking her descent just three hours earlier.

The guy who killed her was a neighbor—blond, blue-eyed, wore a baseball cap, the kind of guy you'd imagine as the head of a Little League team, or a swim coach. He has that particularly American blend of affability, eagerness, and naiveté. When the cops ask him why he bludgeoned her repeatedly after clubbing her unconscious with the first stroke, he replies, "I don't know. I don't really know."

She was Asian, but you would never have known it from what was left of her. What one sees on the tape is that bloody red stain on the wall. We never know why he killed her. We never really know who she was. But it doesn't really matter. She is "just another prostitute." And she will be very good for the show's ratings.

OCTOBER 19, 1992

This morning I explained my feelings to my boss. I said I "didn't feel good" about the work and had decided to quit. He understood, he said, for he'd once had certain ideals but had eventually resigned himself to the job.

Before departing, I asked a colleague if he was affected by the grief and vice on our monitors. "They're only characters to me," he replied. I noted this quietly to myself, and, with barely a good-bye to my other co-conspirators, I slipped out of the *American Detective* offices into the noon blaze of the California sun, hoping to recover what it is I've lost. ■

Editors' Note: American Detective was canceled last summer by ABC, despite good ratings.