

True Crime and Television Archives

Mediation, Re-Enactment, and Self-Reflexivity
in Post-2010 True Crime TV Series

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◀ ABSTRACT

Within the true crime genre, archives play a crucial role – not merely as sources but as dynamic elements that shape the genre’s identity, contradictions, and narrative strategies. This paper explores how post-2010 television true crime series engage with television archives, questioning their function as repositories of information, tools for entertainment, and instruments of media self-critique. Focusing primarily on the tv series, *Dove nessuno guarda* (Sky, 2023), the study proposes a taxonomy of archival sources – national and local television archives; trial proceedings, which transition from personal or judicial archives to television archives. Finally, this study examines how, in contemporary true crime series, television archives themselves become subjects of storytelling, interrogating the media’s role in shaping public perception. Through a self-reflexive approach, these narratives position television archives as evidence in a broader discourse on media responsibility and truth-making processes.

KEYWORDS

Archive; Elisa Claps; local television; self-reflexivity; true crime

¹ Paragraphs 1 and 2 were written by Alessia Francesca Casiraghi; paragraphs 3 and 4 by Diletta Cenni.

1. Introduction

The true crime genre functions as a “mediation of mediations,” an expression coined by Anita Biressi (2021) to capture its inherently derivative nature – its tendency to re-narrate stories that have already undergone extensive processing through a range of media forms, including news reports, newspapers, anthologies, television programs, and books. This multilayered intermediality is especially pronounced in the Italian context, particularly in relation to crimes that occurred between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s. These cases permeated the national media landscape, giving rise to a dense and variegated body of archival material.

Investigating how this material is repurposed – what types of sources are employed, how they are selected and incorporated, to what narrative and ideological effect – allows for a deeper understanding of true crime itself. Indeed, it is also within the use of archival material that true crime renegotiates the core tensions that define its identity – between documentary and fiction, testimony and entertainment, memory and justice.

Yet, studying this phenomenon is far from straightforward. A key complication arises from the fluidity of archival sources themselves: they often shift categories over time, and their use is shaped by evolving power dynamics, varying levels of access, preservation concerns, and financial limitations. This preliminary study set out to address a series of key questions, as an initial step toward navigating this complex scenario: What types of archival sources are employed in Italian true crime narratives? What narrative functions do these sources perform? And how do the broader dynamics surrounding the archive shape the genre – its claims to authenticity, its aesthetic configurations, and its underlying tension between factual representation and sensationalism?

In order to unpack the implications, constraints, and epistemological issues surrounding archival usage, this chapter employs a comparative ap-

proach and adopts a multidisciplinary framework that integrates insights from true crime scholarship (Murley 2018; Horeck 2019), archival theory (Baron 2013), and production studies (Caldwell 2008).

This study focuses on a corpus of Italian true crime television series produced after 2010, which revisit high-profile cases from the mid-1990s to early 2010s – crimes that had already received extensive media attention. These productions rely heavily on archival materials, making the archive a central narrative and structural component. Particular attention is given to *Dove nessuno guarda* (Chora, Sky 2023), which exemplifies broader trends in the genre². The series revisits the murder of Elisa Claps, a teenage girl who disappeared in Potenza in 1993 and whose body was discovered 17 years later.

The analysis highlights how, within contemporary true crime narratives, a wide array of archival sources coexist and interact. Local television stations often provide the earliest and most visceral coverage. National broadcasters, by contrast, contribute institutional weight or commercial sensationalism, depending on their editorial orientation – public (RAI) or private (SKY). Judicial records and forensic materials reinforce the genre’s truth claim, often walking a fine line between documentation and spectacle. These sources do not operate in isolation, but in constant interaction – informing, reinforcing, or at times contradicting one another.

2. Mapping the Archive: Media, Memory, and Authority in *Dove nessuno guarda*

In *Dove nessuno guarda*, one of the most effective uses of archival material involves footage from local television broadcasters – specifically, 1990s filler images of people walking through city streets and panoramic views. This material anchors the narrative in Potenza in the early 1990s and helps reconstruct the affective atmosphere of the period. The grainy aesthetic evokes a culturally specific memoryscape, enhancing emotional resonance and nostalgic appeal. Yet the use of this footage is not without issues: the original archive from the local television La Nuova TV, preserved on analog tape, had deteriorated beyond use due to lack of digitization. The production

² The reconstruction of the series’ production process is based on an interview conducted by Diletta Cenni with Audrey Gouband, creative producer of the project.

therefore relied on footage from another regional station (TRMTV). While the substitution maintains visual plausibility, the images actually depict other cities, not Potenza – introducing a subtle distortion that challenges the narrative’s claimed authenticity. This reveals both the fragility of the archival chain and the genre’s dependence on precarious memory infrastructures.

A second category of archival material frequently employed in true crime narratives comprises footage from national broadcasters, both public (RAI) and private or subscription-based (e.g., SKY). This material – often consisting of excerpts from period newscasts and television programs that originally reported on the case – has the purpose of situating the case within a broader historical and media context. Unlike local archival footage, however, the use of national broadcast material is less governed by narrative logic than by economic and institutional contingencies. In *Dove nessuno guarda*, this becomes evident in the absence of material from *Chi l’ha visto?*, the Rai 3 program that followed the Claps case extensively. Despite its relevance, the footage was excluded due to high licensing costs, rendering access to RAI’s archive unaffordable for a low-budget production. Instead, the series relies on in-house material from co-producer Sky News – an editorial decision driven by production logistics rather than content relevance. This substitution underscores a key issue: while national broadcast footage is meant to enrich the narrative and lend credibility, its use is determined by the economics of media ownership and licensing. The result is a form of “archival bias,” where the visual memory of a case is constructed less by accuracy than by what is institutionally and financially accessible.

A third category of archival material consists of judicial and forensic sources, which form the backbone of narrative architecture in many true crime series by conferring an aura of institutional legitimacy and official truth. This archive is highly composite and fragmented, encompassing a range of evidentiary materials: scientific documentation (crime scene photographs, ballistic analyses, autopsy reports), surveillance recordings (CCTV footage, police interrogation videos), and personal documents or home videos belonging to victims and perpetrators, often included in trial proceedings. These sources are typically seen as “official” and thus carry distinct epistemological authority. Their inclusion serves not only to ground the narrative in factual detail but also to reinforce the genre’s procedural credibility and truth claims.

Here, the challenges are primarily legal and ethical. Although these materials are presented as evidence, they are often recontextualized to serve narrative

and emotional purposes – generating suspense, intensifying affect, and supporting the dramatic arc. In doing so, they blur the boundary between documentary intent and sensationalist spectacle. A particularly striking example in *Dove nessuno guarda* is the portrayal of Heather Barnett, Restivo's second victim. The series opens with an image of her bloodied feet in a bathroom, used as an immediate narrative hook. Later, in episode three, her mutilated body is partially shown. Such editorial choices exemplify how the violated female body is repeatedly deployed for shock value and emotional impact – raising critical questions about televisual ethics and the commodification of trauma.

Moreover, the evolving status of private footage – such as home movies – complicates its role in true crime narratives. Once incorporated into judicial records, these intimate materials undergo a categorical shift: no longer merely personal, they become part of the legal archive and, eventually, the media archive. A notable trend is the inclusion of the perpetrator's own voice, often sourced from family recordings. In *Dove nessuno guarda*, for instance, a home video shows Danilo Restivo casually commenting on a kite-surfing session in England. Rather than relying on third-party mediation or dramatization, the series offers direct access to his self-representation. This editorial choice creates a tension between identification and alienation, humanization and dehumanization.

3. Remediating the Archive: Self-Reflexive Strategies in Recent Italian True Crime

Thus, as illustrated by the case of *Dove nessuno guarda*, contemporary true crime extensive use of archival materials serves different functions: it can ground the narrative in historical and geographical specificity; lend epistemological authority; enhance emotional engagement and narrative suspense; and, at times, allow for psychological or moral introspection. At the same time, each type of archival deployment also raises distinct critical concerns, calling for an ongoing reflection on the ethics of true crime storytelling and its reliance on archival infrastructures.

Within this evolving landscape, a notable trend in recent Italian true crime productions – particularly those released over the past three years – is the emergence of a metanarrative and self-reflexive stance toward televisual archival material. In these cases, the archive no longer functions merely as a source of authentication or illustration; it becomes an object of interroga-

tion, a site where the processes of truth-making, mediation, and spectacle are explicitly explored.

This reflexive approach unfolds along a spectrum of remediation, ranging from minimal commentary to overt self-reflexivity. At the “zero degree” of this spectrum lies the strategic use of archival footage to distance the narrative from earlier modes of sensationalist crime reporting. Such materials are repurposed as evidence against problematic media practices that shaped contemporaneous coverage – often reinforced through voice-over commentary. A clear example is *Yara* (Netflix), where the archive becomes a tool to critically expose and indict the excesses of television journalism at the time.

In the middle of this spectrum lies the full reenactment of archival moments – particularly those that have crystallized into iconic images within the collective memory. A notable example is *Qui non è Hollywood*, a docudrama focused on the 2010 murder of Sarah Scazzi. The series meticulously reconstructs a now-notorious moment from *Chi l’ha visto?*, in which the presenter informs Sarah’s mother – live on air – that her daughter’s body has been discovered in a well. In restaging this scene with such precision, the series does more than reproduce a media event: it stages a critique of the televisual logic that transformed intimate tragedy into public spectacle. The reenactment is not a neutral restaging, but a deliberate act of emphasis and distortion. In *Qui non è Hollywood*, the performance accentuates the grotesque and dehumanizing aspects of the original broadcast, highlighting the moral discomfort of turning private grief into public spectacle. By amplifying the theatricality and emotional excess of the scene, the series exposes the rhetorical mechanisms of the media system, transforming the reenactment into a sharp critique of its original form.

At the far end of the spectrum lies archival television footage embedded within fictionalized scenes, producing a subtle but deliberate interplay between documentation and dramatization. A striking example appears in *Per Elisa – Il caso Claps* (Rai, 2023), a scripted dramatization of the Elisa Claps case. In the final scene, excerpts from actual television coverage of Elisa’s funeral are intercut with the fictional reconstruction. Particularly notable is a shot in which the actor portraying Maurizio Restivo, the father of the perpetrator, is shown watching the broadcast on television. While this moment is fictional, the archival footage he “watches” is real – creating a disorienting overlap between reality and invention.

This creative choice is especially charged: Maurizio Restivo was widely perceived as evasive and possibly complicit during the investigation. By

placing him – albeit fictionally – within the visual space of mourning, the scene symbolically confronts his absence, as if fiction could perform a gesture of belated accountability. The use of the archive here reflects a high degree of appropriation and interpretive freedom: far from merely illustrating facts, it becomes a vehicle for imaginative reparation. In doing so, the scene pushes the boundaries between fiction and historical record, approaching a postmodern mode in which the archive is not just referenced, but reconfigured to address moral and emotional gaps left unresolved by reality.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the archive emerges as a central and complex element in contemporary Italian true crime, functioning not only as a repository of factual material but also as a site of narrative construction, affective investment, and ethical tension. The recent turn toward metanarrative and self-reflexive strategies suggests that a sufficient temporal and cultural distance has developed to allow for a process of historical reckoning. These productions do more than recount events: they participate in the ongoing historicization of a pivotal era in Italian television, recognizing that media coverage was not merely a backdrop, but an integral part of the events themselves. For now, the third mode of metanarrative use of archival material appears as a further degree along the spectrum of remediation. Yet, as the corpus expands, it may come to constitute a distinct category in its own right - an evolution that will represent one of the possible future directions of this research project.

These reflexive gestures remind us that even those texts that seek to critique or distance themselves from the sensationalist logic of past media narratives are inevitably part of that very system.

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