Adapting true crime events: teasing solutions to *The Staircase*.

"This man… is a liar. He lied about Everything. Everything! The whole time, he lied" (Sophie Broussard [Juliette Binoche] Ep.8 *The Staircase* 2022).

This article explores the migration of a true crime story, from crime scene, to book, to documentary and fiction series. We are using the term migration in the fluid sense described by Westerstahl Stenport and Traylor (2015) and Leitch (2022) wherein content "migrates from, to, and between genre, medium and device" (Westerstahl Stenport and Traylor, 75). This is because, in the case of a real event, the story evidence cannot be confined within each adaptation. It exists beyond the boundaries of each text, like an interconnected discourse hovering within and around each narrative space. Our central question is – if adaptations can be seen as repositories of interconnected and competing information about events, is there any point in discussing which best presents the truth of the events, or is the purpose of each adaptation to simply add new properties? To quote Thomas Leith, does each example "encourage members of their audience to return, more richly informed" (5), or do they simply converge, compete, or cancel each other out?

Our discussion focuses on media representations of the true crime case concerning Kathleen Peterson (a corporate executive) who died from head-injuries at the foot of a staircase at her home in Durham North Carolina on December 9th, 2001. The primary focus is on the thirteen-episode documentary series, *The Staircase* (De Lestrade, 2004-2018) and the eight-part fictionalised adaptation *The Staircase* (Campos, 2022), although we will reference other texts to provide context. Each adaptation of events seeks to provide a solution to the case - either in proving Peterson's guilt and/or exploring other possibilities and motivations. To summarise the case as far as it is known, the events are as follows: Kathleen's husband, Michael Peterson (a novelist and journalist) – the only other person in the home at that time – has maintained that Kathleen's fatal injuries were the result of a fall, but he was convicted of her murder in 2003 and sentenced to life in prison. Nine years later, malpractice within the State Bureau of Investigation cast doubt on the forensic evidence presented in several criminal convictions in Durham, including Peterson's, and the case was reviewed. Yet, there was no legal exoneration here, as Peterson's release was contingent upon an Alford Plea – an unusual legal declaration wherein the defendant pleads guilty to manslaughter, while being able to maintain their innocence. As Diana Rickard (2022) notes, "Alford pleas allow guilt and innocence to co-exist; they suspend the notion of truth, freezing the legal narrative in a state of uncertainty and ambiguity" (6). While it could be argued that such a plea does not actually serve the interests of justice, in some ways, it provides an appropriate conclusion for both television series discussed here. Neither of our primary adaptations attempts to eliminate uncertainty and ambiguity from the Peterson case. Instead, each text is built upon opinions, and the events and objects that for ease we call 'hint' markers. These markers are pieces of evidence, or hints at motivations that suggest themselves as evidence, but in the end cannot be proven beyond doubt. Discussed together, both the series provide a useful example of the dialogic relationship between differing media representations of a criminal case and in consequence, our discussion suggests that such adaptations are not competing or threatening to cancel each other out. Further, we contend that true crime texts are too often dismissed as exploitative, or sensational, when closer examination shows they are also capable of illuminating important social topics; these include critiques of legal

processes, as well as acknowledging the burdens the same processes encounter in attempting to prove a truth beyond doubt.

Discussing Truths

At first glance, the documentary form appears to provide greater access to the truth of an event. This is because documentary is historically associated with 'actuality', or the presentation of facts. Bill Nichols (1991) suggested documentary as akin to discourses of sobriety as found in science "since it is seldom receptive to 'make-believe' characters, events, or entire worlds" (3). However, he qualifies this by stating "documentary, despite its kinship, has never been accepted as a full equal" (4). Such inequality lies in the fact that documentary, just like written testimony, or fictional interpretations, includes elements of reconstruction and adaptation. To access the truth of an event is an idealistic and unattainable goal even in a factual retelling. Errol Morris' landmark true crime documentary *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) provided a documentary assessment of truth through the elegant, systematic reconstruction of eye-witness testimonies from a murder trial. The finished film demonstrated both the subjective nature of truth, and the practical inabilities in attempting to capture the truth of a passed event on film. It could also be argued that Morris' reliance on cinematic reconstructions affected this assessment, as his film emphasised the constructed nature of such testimony, however Dirk Eitzen's (2018) discussion of documentary in a post-truth society suggests our tendency to question the truth of representation is not solely dependent on the textual form so much as it is an innate human response to information. He argues that our current fears of lies and fakery in the news is not actually a 'new' phenomenon but is in fact a part of human nature. We are drawn to explanations or opinions that align with or validate our world view. In other words, we prefer to receive information in forms similar to that found in gossip. He states; "with gossip, who you believe depends largely upon who you trust" (96). Hence, the tradition of documentary as akin to sobriety may encourage a sense of 'trustworthiness', and this may encourage viewers to favour the information it offers. However, recent trends in documentary that emphasise entertainment, character creation and/or sensationalism, especially in topics such as true crime, Eitzen argues, may well threaten this trust and thus affect how viewers judge the content. So what does this mean for our discussion here? How might trust inform an assessment of adaptations of a true crime event? Our discussion will explore various adaptations to examine their processes of construction, how truth is presented and where the trust in such truth may lie.

Books and Podcasts

While there are fissures in the narratives of the documentary and miniseries, and opportunities for images to contradict words, each of the two key books about the case argue that there is no room for doubt on the verdict, albeit with opposing conclusions. Diane Fanning's book on this case, *Written in Blood: the Kathleen Peterson case* (2005) is adamant about Peterson's guilt. Indeed, as the expanded title of the book's second edition makes clear, it is a challenge to De Lestrade's series: *Written in Blood: innocent or guilty? an inside look at the Michael Petersen case, the subject of the hit series, The Staircase* (2018). Fanning's position is closely aligned with that of Kathleen's sister, Candace Zamperini (though the forward also contains a statement of support from Michael Peterson's sister, Anne Christensen). Motivation for writing the book is evidently based on a desire to find truth in the assignation of guilt despite the lack of evidence. The language and narrative structure focus on persuading the reader to agree with the author's desire to present definitive conclusions. Fanning not only accuses Peterson of murdering Kathleen, but also of the murder of Liz Ratliff (the mother of his adopted daughters). There are significant similarities between the two deaths, as Ratliff, a family friend, died at the foot of the staircase at her home in Germany, in 1985, a few hours after Michael Peterson was witnessed leaving her house. Initially, the death was not deemed suspicious, but following Kathleen Peterson's murder,

Ratliff's body was exhumed for an autopsy, which concluded that her injuries indicated a "homicidal attack". In contrast, Petersen's autobiographical accounts unsurprisingly emphasise his innocence. In *Behind the Staircase* (2019) and *Beyond the Staircase* (2020) Peterson discusses his childhood, military service, and his bisexuality, while repeatedly affirming his love for Kathleen. He asserts that Kathleen's death was the result of a fall, and that following his call to the emergency services, "I held her in my arms, staring into her sightless eyes, urging her silently to live" (2020: 197). Discussing the truths presented in any of these books depends almost entirely on the reader's trust in the authors. While Peterson's direct association with the crime gives him unique access, his position as the accused may disrupt a reader's trust in his voice. In comparison, Fanning's forensic analysis of both the evidence and Peterson's past suggests strong research and attention to detail, but the dogmatic approach and close alliance with the prosecution is evident.

In addition to contemporaneous news media reports, several podcasts have focused on this case. Recent examples (which confirm that interest has not waned) include *The Staircase: True Crime Obsessed* (Apple, 2022) which focuses on episodes of De Lestrade's documentary, and *The Staircase: The Real Story* (BBC, 2022) that features members of Kathleen's family, including her sister, Candace Zamperini as well as interviews with some members of the jury, who still believe that their original guilty verdict was correct. Podcasts offer a more discursive presentation of the case than the books, because multiple viewpoints are included, but the desire to formulate a conclusion and lean towards definitive truths influences all such debates. Also, while interpretations of evidence may differ, it's notable that each retelling of the case highlights the same key elements - including the revelation of Michael Peterson's bisexuality (following the discovery of gay pornography and messages to a male escort on Peterson's computer during the police investigation); the parallels between the deaths of Kathleen Peterson and Liz Ratliff; and the search for a murder-weapon.

Migratory adaptation in this case results in all of these texts having a symbiotic relationship, in that they all engage with an 'original' event that is ill-defined at best. The truth of the case continues to be elusive so that all any adaptation is capable of achieving is a truth agreement with audiences primarily based on trust. Furthermore, such trust is most often established by engaging audiences in the processes of a search for truth. For instance, while a definitive truth remains elusive, each retelling offers moments, glances, gestures, or comments that tease audiences towards a potential solution. Hence, the appeal of multiple interconnected adaptations can be found in their reflections of database culture, wherein each text replicates the thrill of the search and is punctuated by such moments - or 'hint' markers, that focus on specific evidentiary detail, and emphasise the continuing search for truth – or, in this case, a confirmation of individuals' perceptions of Peterson himself. Part of our study will consider the migratory process in light of the above quote from Sophie where she brands Michael Petersen a liar in the final episode of the HBO fictional series (2022). Our article, in part, responds to Sophie's words to ask, can we demand truthfulness, or is that demand outdated in database culture, and particularly in a case where definitive truth remains unknown? Are questions of truth simply an irresolvable distraction that stops us from appreciating other, equally important, elements? If our perception of truth is found in narratives we trust, then how is that trust created and reinforced?

***The Staircase*(s)**

De Lestrade's film crew were given a remarkable degree of access to Peterson, his family, and his legal team, before, during and after the trial. Observational footage dominates the episodes, with Peterson as the key subject, but there are also inserts of crime scene photographs, news media reporters, that

contrast with the 'insider' perspective that the documentary provides. The series opens with a television news reporter announcing the death of Kathleen Peterson, "after apparently falling down the stairs," before we cut to Peterson's account of their last evening together, as he leads the off-camera film-crew through the garden and to the swimming pool. During this scene, Peterson outlines the events of that evening – that he and Kathleen watched a rental video of *America's Sweethearts* (ironically, a comedy about a sham marriage) and drank wine beside their outdoor pool before Kathleen returned to the house, and then, sometime later, Peterson found her bleeding, but still breathing, at the foot of the staircase. Peterson delivers his account in a calm, matter-of-fact tone that contrasts sharply with the recording of the 911-call and the grainy police video of Kathleen's body. So, from the outset of the series, De Lestrade challenges us to connect these very different impressions. The cosy middle-class home, the happy marriage, and the violent death.

The first eight episodes provide a chronological account of the investigation and murder trial, concluding with the guilty verdict and the start of Peterson's prison sentence. De Lestrade resumed filming in 2011, when Peterson's verdict had been deemed unsafe, and the five additional episodes of *The Staircase* follow Peterson during his release from prison and his subsequent reflections on the case. Throughout, the documentary maintains a sense of immediacy – a prevailing 'nowness' that seeks to capture the participants' 'in-the-moment' emotional reactions to developments in the case, and the setbacks they encounter. However, while most true crime narratives seek to provide a definitive resolution by establishing the guilt or innocence of key suspects, *The Staircase* documentary ends with Peterson's ambiguous Alford Plea hearing, and his reflections on the case.

De Lestrade's 13-part documentary provides an 'insider' perspective as it follows Michael Peterson after he has been charged with the murder of his wife. The first eight episodes were broadcast after the guilty verdict was delivered in 2003, and De Lestrade returned to this subject in 2011, when Peterson began his appeal. The latter episodes follow Peterson's release from prison and the ambiguous resolution of the case. After his incarceration, Peterson appears as a frailer, more vulnerable presence – a change that he acknowledges, against a montage of photographs of his more youthful self, when he says, "I wanted to come back to who I was, but I can't" (Episode 9). During the scenes that take place in the courtroom (Episodes 4-8) the camera is a more distant observer, but in Peterson's domestic space and in the offices of his lawyer, David Rudolph, the camera is an acknowledged presence, with comments addressed to the unseen film-crew behind the lens. Additionally, the extensive use of mobile camera adds a degree of intimacy to the scenes inside Peterson's home. Here, discussions about the case and trial are intercut with scenes of mundane familial activity – conversations taking place in the kitchen, or around the dinner table, and Peterson talking to his bulldogs. This homely warmth contrasts sharply with the crime-scene images of Kathleen's body and blood-spatter, and the explicit autopsy photographs that reveal the extent of her head injuries. The motivation for this documentary appears to be grounded in a mistrust of the American judicial process, evidenced in its focus on Peterson's legal and personal position as the accused. Audiences familiar with de Lestrade's previous documentary *Murder on a Sunday Morning* (2001), which shone a spotlight on dubious prosecution tactics in a legal trial, might assume *The Staircase* seeks to unveil similar concerns.

It's clear that De LeStrade's documentary privileges Peterson's defence, but that is not to suggest that the series is wholly sympathetic to Peterson. Rather, he remains a mercurial, somewhat unreadable presence, speaking earnestly, and sometimes cheerfully to De LeStrade's film-crew, his family members, and the legal team. Notably, he is convincing when he tells David Rudolph's witness coach (from a witness stand in an empty courtroom) that Kathleen knew about his sexual relations with men, but "wasn't bothered by that – because I loved her," (Episode 2) though subsequently, Peterson admitted that this was not true. Hence, the documentary is at pains to suggest it offers a fully-rounded

characterisation of its central subject. In summary, the chronological structure, as well as the focus on evidence and legal procedures, suggests a discourse of sobriety that will appeal to audiences who prefer this approach rather than more creative storytelling. But also, the intimacies gained from insights into Peterson's life and family connections appeals to audiences interested in the human story. Trust is gained by the way this documentary series utilizes these foci to progress an investigation. As Eitzen states "in contemporary documentaries investigation is treated largely as a storytelling device: the promise of knowledge as a lure to viewers" (100). De Lestrade's documentary series encourages audiences to have faith in its presentation of events. Eitzen is careful to remind us that having faith in something is not the same as expecting it to be unbiased fact. What the documentary achieves is to encourage trust in its search for facts. In light of this, we argue that the migratory nature of such adaptations, with their focus on shared materials, emphasises the practice of 'searching' as a marker of truth. Texts that highlight the search - even in contradictory ways - can appear more truthful, because trust is suggested through the shared desire to find a truth.

HBO Series

The HBO fictional adaptation, because it is fictionalized and has the greatest distance between production and events should feel least able to reflect the level of fidelity suggested in the documentary, books or podcasts. Produced twenty years after the events, *The Staircase* miniseries features a star cast, including Colin Firth as Michael,Toni Collette as Kathleen, and Juliette Binoche as Sophie (Michael's lover after his incarceration). The narrative is not limited to the investigation and trial, but rather, extends to include an examination of Kathleen prior to her death, and the way that the lives of her extended family are affected by the case. Freed from the constraints of 'reality' and the immediacy of unfolding events, the miniseries foregrounds the inherent ambiguity of the case, with an inconclusive narrative that, instead of aligning itself to finding a singular truth, emphasises the impossibility of doing so. Further, the miniseries disrupts narrative chronology and includes imagined scenes that are beyond the documentary's frame (including separate and contradictory depictions of Kathleen's death). This series is not unique in offering a multi-perspective narrative in true crime, as this practice has been utilised in such texts as the previously mentioned Errol Morris documentary, *Thin Blue Line* (1988) or his book *A Wilderness of Error* (2012), and in fictional narratives, most famously, Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950). But ironically, in not aligning itself to one perspective or a singular truth, the miniseries is arguably the closest to presenting the 'facts' as far as they can be known. Moreover, the final scenes, which include Sophie's line, "this man… is a liar," is not only an accusation against Michael Peterson, but also an acknowledgement that in this case, there's no conclusive answer to the question of Peterson's guilt, and as such, demands for certainty, or a belief in a single truth are naive and missing the point of the events.

The key differences between the documentary and the HBO miniseries is the high quality production and utilisation of star personae that shape audiences' perception of the fictionalisation. At first glance, Firth seems an unlikely choice to portray Michael Peterson (whose public persona was widely known from the news media and the documentary series). While Firth faithfully reproduces Peterson's cadence, there is little physical resemblance between the two men. Indeed, for many film and television audiences, Firth's star persona is linked to understated heroism, upper-class Britishness, and romance – including Mr Darcy, in the TV series, *Pride and Prejudice* (1995), and Mark Darcy, in *Bridget Jones's Diary* and its sequels (2001, 2005, 2016). Another recurring feature of his performances can be found in many of his characters' difficulties with communication. We can see this in Mr Darcy's awkward attempts at conversing with Elizabeth, and in the language barrier between Jamie and Aurelia (Lucia Moniz) in *Love Actually* (2003). In addition, difficulties with communication are at the heart of Firth's role in *The King's Speech* (2010). In these films, close-ups of Firth's face emphasise his difficulties, and

the delay between thoughts and utterances, indicating the character's vulnerability and sensitivity. In *The Staircase*, we see a similar textual strategy, but here, these moments serve as indicators of the character's duplicitousness. For example, in Episode 3, during a scene in the kitchen, when Peterson (on his return from a homosexual encounter at a sex store) informs Kathleen that more money is needed for his sons' support, Kathleen accuses him of manipulating her (albeit good-naturedly), she continues to chide him, while the camera remains focused on Firth's face, as he watches her, seeming to calculate his strategy. Later in the same episode, De Le Strade (Vincent Vermignon) comments on Peterson's untrustworthiness, saying, "even when I know that he's telling the truth, it can sound like a lie". Hence, casting Firth offers immediate access to a complex characterisation because of his acting pedigree and association with initially misunderstood, or hesitant individuals. It encourages audiences to warm to Peterson, or perhaps even see him as a similar understated hero to one of Firth's previous roles, but importantly for us it utilises his verbal hesitancy in an uncharacteristic way. Consequently, it draws close attention to the words used and may encourage audiences to oscillate between ease and unease at Peterson/Firth's behaviour. This is excellent casting because it encourages a close critical assessment of every hint marker in the narrative.

Toni Collette's onscreen history contains a succession of maternal characters that (for a variety of reasons) are struggling with the responsibilities of parenthood. Examples include, *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *About a Boy* (2002), *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), *Hereditary* (2018), and *I'm Thinking of Ending Things* (2020), where her character is simply known as 'Mother'. Collette's 'down-to-earth' persona makes her relatable to audiences without the need for lengthy exposition. It is quite easy for audiences to accept her as Kathleen Peterson, a mother under pressure, struggling to balance the needs of her blended family, with her job, and Peterson's mayoral campaign. The casting of Collette also highlights the filmmaker's commitment to the victim – something true crime documentaries too often ignore – and her star presence emphasises the importance of Kathleen's life and voice within the narrative. However, many of her scenes are distressing or tense. For instance, her need for a neck-brace is a constant reminder of her frailty, it imposes a stiffness to her movements, while also limiting her vision. Kathleen/Collette cannot turn her head to see what lies at the periphery – or, by implication, the truths about her husband.

Finally, Juliette Binoche's career extends across European Art Cinema and Hollywood, and as Ginette Vincendeau notes, at the core of her star persona are the qualities of seriousness, fragility and melancholy as well as a 'high quota of scenes in which we see her cry or with tears welling up in her eyes' (2015: 138). For much of her screen-time in *The Staircase*, Sophie/Binoche is strident in her proactive efforts to clear Peterson's name, investigating other possible causes of Kathleen's death (including the theory that Kathleen had been attacked by an owl – which is one of the possible deaths enacted in the series). But this emotional fragility comes to the fore in the final episode of the series, when, after finally being released from prison, Peterson ends their relationship. In the penultimate scene of the miniseries, we see Sophie, sitting alongside De LeStrade, watching Peterson's videoed admission that his assertion that Kathleen knew about his bisexuality was a lie and Sophie responds the with quote cited at the head of this article. Here, the camera lingers on Sophie's tearful face, as her emotions shift from shock, to sadness, to anger, and when (on video), De LeStrade asks Peterson if he killed his wife, Peterson's answer is ambiguous: "Kathleen's death was an accident". Quality writing and production encourages critical praise. For instance, reviewer Wenlei Ma suggests it as "a masterfully composed and tonally strong drama that captures the same unsettling vibe which bewitched fans of the docuseries" (2022). Nick Allen of Rogerebert.com calls it a "veritable feat of calibrated performances, framing and editing, scene after scene" (2022). While the fictional adaptation of the events surrounding Kathleen's death and Michael's conviction might well have been furthest from any presentation of

truths, it in fact creates a sense of trustworthy verisimilitude through its casting, its script and production, its attention to a variety of viewpoints and the presentation of multiple possible scenarios to explain Kathleen's death. The series does not attempt to offer definitive conclusions, but instead embraces the ambiguity at the heart of it all.

Indeed, this continuing ambiguity about the cause of Kathleen's death is the central problem but arguably also the main audience appeal in all the media texts related to *The Staircase.* In the end, the case hinges on Michael Peterson's character and truthfulness. The evidence is not wholly conclusive and there were no other witnesses to Kathleen's death. Hence, in parallel to the police investigation, media texts that examine the case must select and interpret aspects of the evidence, while extrapolating what that evidence may mean. As we have already noted, the importance of truths in these texts are most readily connected to the ways in which each text structures the search, rather than housed in their conclusions. In true crime narratives where only partial, or subjective elements are known, audiences are encouraged to see certain symbols, or objects as having an exaggerated sense of 'meaning', as if participating in closer analysis of them will provide the key to unlock the mystery, or the link to a truth or authentic moment.

This focus on specific items or moments in both the documentary and the fictional series is similar to the 'high intensity incident' structure described by John Corner's (2002) study of popular documentary where he suggests key revelations or twists are consciously inserted or manufactured within a narrative to keep audiences engaged and entertained. However, these moments could also be a reflection on the need for each text to gain its audiences' trust by offering concrete evidence that they take the search for truth seriously. In the Peterson case, no murder weapon was found at the scene but subsequently, the prosecution suggested that the family's blowpoke (a long, hollow fire-poker, with a sharpened protrusion at one end) was used as a murder-weapon. This piece of evidence has been used in adaptations of the case as a key 'hint marker' in the search for truth. This focus on evidentiary detail is not just a way to hook audiences, but also, can be seen as a continual attempt to emphasise that each retelling as evidential and authentic, and that each text must prove its worth in terms of its connection to the original event. Does this suggest that they also attempt to cancel each other out? Or is it more likely that each text operates as a repository of evidence, or testimony that adds to the overarching story, an ever-expanding database of debate about a story that does not have fixed, or stable markers of truth? In this case, we argue that the HBO series reflects on the evidential processes involved in competing interpretations of events, while offering an implicit critique of the documentary series, and the primacy of documentary 'truth'. Hence, the fictionalized retelling encourages its audiences to return more richly informed to the original events. It does this by reflecting on the evidential processes involved in competing interpretations of events.

The narrative of the HBO miniseries extends beyond the documentary's timeline, with non-chronological scenes encompassing the periods before Kathleen's death, and Peterson's experiences inside the prison. Further, while Kathleen's only presence in the documentary is as a still image (in photographs taken before and after her death), Toni Collette's performance adds voice and personality. We see Kathleen juggling career pressures, financial problems, familial demands, while subtitles at the beginning of scenes provide an ominous countdown of the days until her death. The emphasis on Kathleen's thoughts and feelings, elicit audience sympathy – more so, as we see her husband's betrayals. In Episode 2, for example, while Peterson is on the telephone, arranging a date with another man, we cut to a scene in which Kathleen is working hard to coordinate a party for his mayoral candidacy. The focus on Peterson's duplicitous character fleshes out – albeit in fiction – the various hints made about his behaviour in the documentary.

Most importantly, the miniseries includes the documentary crew as significant protagonists in the story. The documentary series acknowledges the presence of the film-crew, but aside from one (uncredited) appearance, where De Lestrade hugs Peterson outside the courtroom, the filmmakers remain off-screen. In contrast, the miniseries includes the documentary film-crew as not only present within the frame, but also as active agents in the narrative. For instance, Vincent Vermignon as De LeStrade engages with the Peterson family, rather than operating as a dispassionate observer. The narrative also includes the romantic relationship between editor Sophie Brunet (renamed Sophie Broussard and played by Juliette Binoche) and Peterson. The focus on this relationship and her diligent campaign for Peterson's release provides the strongest indicators about Peterson's duplicitous character and the consequent impossibility of knowing the complete truth about events. Brunet is depicted as a highly intelligent woman whose belief in Peterson's innocence is only questioned in the final scenes. Brunet can be seen as a stand-in for the informed audience who, even after consuming all the evidence provided across the media texts, is ultimately confounded by the irresolvable enigma of Peterson's character. Hence, while it is a work of fiction, the miniseries – perhaps because it is the furthest away from events in time and structure - is able to reflect on the processes of evidential truths, and in conclusion finds them all open to interpretation.

As emphasised by the reuse of the title, the documentary is Campos's key point of reference for the miniseries, with re-enactments of, and references to specific scenes from the earlier series. While this may suggest it is simply a critique of documentary practice, it is more akin to a migratory reassessment of evidence that includes the documentary as part of the evidentiary process. In Episode 2, for example, we see Colin Firth re-enacting the documentary's introductory scene of Michael Peterson's walking through the Durham house and garden, detailing his and Kathleen's final evening together. Firth's costume matches Peterson's clothing in the documentary, and the setting (the home, garden, and swimming pool) is stylistically faithful to the original location. However, there are notable differences in the miniseries re-enactment. Peterson's mention of the Blockbuster video-store in the documentary is omitted from this scene in the miniseries, though in Episode 3, Peterson visits an adult video store for a homosexual encounter, before bringing home a rented version of *The Omen* to watch with Kathleen. Further, after filming Peterson's opening account is completed, the scene concludes with De Lestrade asking Peterson to "do it again… with more emotion," implying that the elements of the documentary were staged. Though De Lestrade was given a 'executive producer' credit for the miniseries, he subsequently criticised the producers in a *Vanity Fair* interview, seeing this as undermining the documentary. "I understand if you dramatize. But when you attack the credibility of my work, that's really not acceptable to me" (quoted in Miller, 2022). De Lestrade's response is understandable, but the re-imagining of such scenes in this case shows the constructed nature of both documentary *and* fiction; either has the ability to present an unfiltered chronicle of events.

If we can construct a hierarchy of verisimilitude, the documentary series, with its *evidence verité* and first-hand testimony, should provide the most accurate representation of true crime events - hence De Lestrade's dismay at the miniseries' suggestion of his text as a construction. A dramatization – with its staging, invented scenes, its dialogue, performances, and stars – is generally viewed as further from the truth because it is an authored interpretation of those events. Yet, when comparing the documentary series to the dramatized mini-series, we can see the ways in which such assumptions can be challenged. While the documentary series offers an 'insider' perspective, with access to Michael Peterson's home, his family, and the discussions of the legal team hired to defend him - like all documentaries, it is a partial, edited account. This comparison is due in part to the framing of a narrative. As Marie-Laure Ryan (2019) states "fictionality is not a matter of degree of truth of a text with respect to reality, it is a matter of framing" (10). If a text is published/produced as based on real events then it is presenting itself to

audiences as having a relationship to fact. Such framing influences the way audiences respond to the text and can elicit trust in its veracity irrespective of whether it is a documentary, or a dramatization.

As noted by Bruzzi (2016) and Rickard (2022) among others, there are parallels between true crime documentaries and criminal trials. Both foreground evidentiary detail as it pertains to a particular case, and both seek to construct a persuasive narrative about how and why a crime was committed. Such texts imply that *the* truth will be revealed, and that we can come to know how and why a crime was committed. In short – that certainty will be established, but as previously noted, audiences do not rely solely on evidentiary materials in their construction of truths. De Lestrade's dismay at the miniseries portrayal of his documentary techniques is valid in this context because it would seem the miniseries has the documentary, as well as Peterson, on trial for its portrayal of events. In short, the fictional series is questioning the blind trust audiences might have in the documentary form. However, in the context of providing alternative voices on events the miniseries is simply suggesting the documentary is a constructed account, rather than objective evidence. A recurring element in true crime documentaries, is '*evidence verité'* (Bruzzi 251) – such as crime scene photographs, first-hand testimonies, and in the example of *The Staircase*, autopsy photographs. The inclusion of these 'primary sources' bring audiences 'closer' to the investigative aspects of the case – encouraging them to actively engage in the search for truth – while also inviting evaluation of the evidence being presented. This 'jurified' position of spectatorship (255), where audiences evaluate the potential guilt, or innocence of the suspects, is arguably, one of the shared pleasures of the genre. In terms of adaptation, rather than cancelling each other out, each *Staircase* adds more evidence and encourages audiences to consider its veracity within each specific narrative context. Hence, in this case, if we only assessed each text in relation to its presentation of truth, this would distract from other, equally important, elements that are shown, such as the broader critiques of judicial processes and the difficulties of determining guilt.

Hint Markers and Evidence

Two interconnected elements drive the narratives of true crime: the exhaustive examination of evidence and character-analyses of the key suspect(s). For audiences/readers of true crime, there's an implicit invitation to consider the motivations and/or alibis of the suspects and evaluate the interpretation of evidentiary detail. Unlike fictional whodunits, the knowledge that these crimes actually occurred brings additional gravitas to this evaluative engagement, particularly where questions remain about the case - as here, where there's no irrefutable evidence to determine Peterson's guilt or innocence.

In true crime texts, a particular piece of evidence, or an item associated with a notable case, can take on a symbolic quality, becoming emblematic of the whole crime. For example, the much-reprinted photograph of JonBenet Ramsey wearing her 'Miss America' pageant costume featured widely in the news media, as well as documentaries and dramatizations of the case (including *Casting Jonbenet,* 2017, a documentary that opens with several young girls wearing the identical costume. This 'Miss America' image, then, can be seen as having a synecdochical relationship to the case, forging a link (perhaps unintentionally) between the faux sexualisation of her pageant appearances and theories about her murder. As well as being emphasised by the title, images of the staircase feature prominently in both the documentary and the miniseries. This narrow, windowless, liminal space located at the rear of the Petersons' home is a visual signifier of what audiences (and investigators) suspect, but do not know. Similarly, after being identified as a potential murder weapon, the blowpoke (a long, metal fire-poker) takes on a greater significance. Originally, a gift from Kathleen's sister (Candace Zamperini), the blowpoke has associations of family and the warmth of the hearth, but its shifting importance corresponds with the vicissitudes and uncertainties of this case.

As both the documentary and miniseries emphasise, the blowpoke was introduced into the case, as Candace Zamperini's imagined solution to the problem of a missing murder weapon, though no forensic evidence connected the Peterson family's blowpoke to Kathleen's death. As the documentary reveals, the Peterson family blowpoke is missing at the beginning of the trial, but the idea that this is the murder weapon is introduced in DA Jim Hardin's opening statement at the trial (Episode 4 of the documentary). Hardin presents Zamperini's blowpoke to the jury, connecting the item to the lacerations on Kathleen Peterson's skull – injuries that (according to the state's forensic pathologist) could not have been caused by a fall. Later (in Episode 7) the missing blowpoke is discovered in the family garage (covered with cobwebs). But knowing this, did not convince the jury to ascribe 'reasonable doubt' to their verdict. During Peterson's prison term, the SBI's forensic evidence is found to be unsound, and in the documentary's final episode, David Rudolph notes that the police had known about, and taken photographs of the blowpoke during their initial searches of the premises.

The blowpoke is introduced in Episode 2 of the miniseries, firstly, during a scene in the Zamperini household, where the family refuse to accept Peterson's call from prison, and we see the blowpoke being used. Later, when Caitlin (Olivia DeJonge) – now estranged from the Peterson family – views autopsy photographs of her mother in the DA's office, while Assistant DA (Parker Posey) reveals that they believe that Peterson murdered Kathleen, but they are yet to identify a weapon. In the final scene of the episode, Catlin is at the home of Candace Zamperini (Rosemary DeWitt) discussing her mother's injuries with her two maternal aunts. Abruptly, Candace retrieves a blowpoke from the fireplace, before using it to repeatedly strike a cushion, saying, "That son-of-a-bitch used a blowpoke." The anger of the moment is directed toward Peterson, and the fact that the pillow is embroidered with the words, 'Home is where your mother is,' underscores the emotional need to prove his guilt. Notably, in the various scenarios of Kathleen's death depicted in the miniseries, none enact her murder with the blowpoke. In the scenario that suggests Peterson's guilt, we see him slam Kathleen's head against the stair, and then wait, while she convulses and dies.

The changing significance of the blowpoke alerts us to a process of meaning wherein the item is constructed, and then deconstructed in such a way as to hint at a solution, while at the same time constantly suggesting itself as lacking in evidential clarity or finality. Further, as we look at representations of the case as a whole, this lack of clarity regarding evidence continually circles back to Peterson's ambiguous character. In the documentary, De LeStrade includes recurring shots of Peterson's introspective moments, as he gazes into the distance, lost in his own thoughts. In Episode 4, for example, we see David Rudolph's team conducting a meeting inside Peterson's home, while autopsy report for Liz Ratliffe's death arrives online. As pages of the report rattle from the printer, De LeStrade repeatedly cuts to a close-up of Peterson's profile, pipe in his mouth, looking at the report, and then, staring into the distance, muttering, "oh God". These shots, and the many similar moments during the documentary series, encourage audiences to reflect on Peterson's character. Is his reaction to the report an indicator of guilt, or innocence?

Campos uses a similar technique in the miniseries by incorporating extended close-ups of Peterson's (Firth's) face to elicit audiences' speculation about his emotions and motives. The miniseries opens with a close-up of Peterson's horizontal face, as he wakes up alone. The date-stamp (February 24, 2017) indicates that this is the day of Peterson's Alford Plea, and reverse shots indicate that he is looking at a framed picture of Kathleen. The same date stamp opens the final episode of the miniseries, along with another close-up of Peterson's face, this time seen on the monitor of a video-camera. As the camera pulls back and pans, we see De LeStrade watching. He asks Peterson what he wants to talk about, Peterson's answer – 'baseball' – is unexpected. The wall-clock shows 3:05, and then, following the opening title sequence, we return to the same scene, with the clock at 3:37, and Peterson says: 'that's

all I got to say'. Later in the episode, after Peterson has ended his relationship with Sophie, De LeStrade shares Peterson's video, revealing that baseball reference refers to Peterson's autobiographical realisation of his bisexuality during a childhood baseball game.

> I discovered I was bisexual at 11 though I didn't know the term for it then. I was madly in love with Melanie, a girl in my 6th grade class. I fantasized about her, but one night the shortstop on my baseball team popped into a masturbatory fantasy. […] I realized then that I was attracted to guys as well as girls (2020: 218).

Peterson discusses this awareness of his sexuality in the final episode of the documentary, adding that, "it would have been fun" to discuss his sexuality with Kathleen, because "she would have made it right," implicitly acknowledging that the details of his bisexuality weren't shared. The series ends with a shot of Peterson, smiling as he listens to "his favourite" song, Leonard Cohen's 'Everybody Knows' – implicitly linking this to his new openness about his sexuality.

In the final episode of the miniseries, Peterson (Firth) discusses the same dream about his childhood fantasy following a baseball game, therein merging accounts from Peterson's autobiography and the documentary. In the closing scene, Peterson is lying on the poolside deckchair, and an apparition of Kathleen refers to their children's lives after her death, and then asks, 'Why didn't you tell me?" Over a montage of their adult children, Peterson talks about a moment of knowing who he was, but then admits dishonesty (though not murder):

> It wasn't a lie. It just wasn't the whole thing. But what two people ever know each other really? Most of it is just smoke and mirrors. People don't actually know who they're with.

The closing shot of the miniseries is another close-up of Peterson (Firth), this time audiences know that Peterson is a liar (to quote Sophie), and as he stares into the camera-lens, his expression shifts between sadness and a brief knowing smile. Here, at the close of the series, and long after the conclusion of the trial, it is evident that Peterson is essentially unreadable. His lies are offered as 'hint' markers of his possible guilt, and while they are not definitive evidence, Sophie's judgement of him as a persistent liar, implies that his defence may be untrustworthy. However, there is no determination of guilt here, and her final assessment simply underlines the fact that the truth will never be found. Peterson is both victim - as the wrongly accused widower, and perpetrator - as the prime suspect and persistent liar. The interplay of victim and perpetrator encourages the audience to engage with aspects of his character as evidence. However, this irresolvability gives space for audiences to act as armchair jurors and to proclaim their own judgement of him.

Conclusion

To return to our original question regarding *The Staircase* - our discussion has revealed the following results. The representation of truth in retellings of an event is not only tied to the structure of each retelling but also to the level of trust audiences have in the position of such. If we consider these adaptations as repositories of interconnected and competing information about events, then there is no constructive reason to focus primarily on truths. The purpose of these adaptations of a true crime case is to add new information, interrogate previous accounts and expand the discussion. We would argue that while successive adaptations are further removed from events, and each offers different subjectivities and limitations - the process of adaptation is one of expansion and enrichment – with a layering of additional information that encourages audiences to engage with the complexities of the story presents. Rather than repeating events, the miniseries offers new perspectives on the case and importantly adds Kathleen's presence throughout. A definitive truth, as in a solution to the case, may

remain elusive, but the fictional series builds on previous accounts in such a way that adds new properties and in so doing encourages audiences to recognize the human tragedy at the heart of the story while still teasing at the hope for resolution.

Our discussion of various textual interpretations of Kathleen Peterson's death has implications for the wider study of adaptation. Acknowledging texts as databases of information and the adaptive process as dialogical, helps to illuminate the ways audiences are encouraged to actively participate in the construction of meanings. The desire to solve mysteries or provide conclusions to a beloved story is traceable among many examples of adaptation. The enjoyment of searching for clues and identifying anomalies is as prevalent in adaptations of fiction as it is in fact. For unresolved true crime cases, while each new adaptation must maintain a direct connection to the original event, audiences can operate as armchair jurors, formulating opinions using evidentiary detail, such as 'hint' markers. These practices are key to soliciting audience engagement and enjoyment because it encourages participation in the creation of truths or meanings and thus heightens trust between creators and receivers. In exploring the interconnectedness of media texts involved in processes of adaptation, our discussion cautions against the privileging of any one adaptation especially based simply on their genre. Furthermore, while the lack of definitive conclusions may suggest audiences are not more 'richly informed' by each adaptation, we argue that these texts encourage an informed reflection on the difficulties of solving a criminal case, especially one that hinges on one person's account of their actions. While they do not attempt to solve the case, *The Staircase* documentary and miniseries provide the space for audiences to construct their own assessment of the enigma of Michael Peterson and the tragedy of Kathleen Peterson's death.

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