NETFLIX AND LAW: A LEGAL REALIST ANALYSIS OF HOW POPULAR LEGAL DRAMA SHOWS SHAPE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF JUSTICE

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ABSTRACT

Using a legal realism approach, this essay argues that the following three Netflix legal dramas- Suits, How to Get Away with Murder and The People v. O.J. Simpson are popular and shape the average individual's perception of justice and the law. Legal realism places more emphasis on the social and human elements influencing legal practice compared to a formalist viewpoint. This research paper explores how dramatizations of moral dilemmas, power struggles, and courtroom strategies in such shows influence perceptions about justice. The results highlight a clear media effect in popular expectations about legal justice and integrity, and also demonstrate complex yet arguably distorted views of the legal system arising from such dramatization.

Keywords: Netflix legal dramas, Legal Realism, Public perception of justice, Media influence on law

1. INTRODUCTION

Legal drama series on streaming websites such as Netflix play a fairly vital role in shaping the string public perception towards justice and the legal profession in this digital streaming modernity where anything and everything can be accessed at the touch of a button. Shows such as Suits, How to Get Away with Murder (HTGAWM), and The People v. O.J. Simpson have drawn millions into their follies through the intricate legal issues and courtroom battles and dilemmas that judges and lawyers alike often have to contend with. Although these all had the veneer of mere entertaining shows, they are very much forging opinions about the judicial fairness and the way a legal system works and the professionalism of the legal players. By employing the prism of Legal Realism, a jurisprudential philosophy which emphasizes the practices of the institutions, societal norms, and human behaviour over formalistic notions of law, this paper critically analyses these representations.

By arguing that the law should be interpreted in practice rather than as it is written in books, legal realism questions conventional wisdom. This method is in line with the analysis of legal dramas, which combine theatrical aspects with factual events to arouse viewers' intense emotions. This paper examines the ways in which Netflix legal dramas influence the public's occasionally erroneous views of the legal system and the effects that these representations have on how the general public views morality and the law. We investigate the connection between dramatized legal dramas and the audience's expectations of justice by looking at a few chosen case studies using Legal Realism as a theoretical framework.[1]

2. RESEARCH QUESTION

How do Netflix fictional legal dramas shape ideas about justice, and what might Legal Realism contribute to analyzing these portrayals?

3. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study examines how popular courtroom dramas on Netflix affect the public's opinion of the legal system through case studies of these shows. The study analyses the practical and subjective aspects of law as they are portrayed in Suits, How to Get Away with

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[1] Jane McGrath, *Do courtroom dramas change people's understanding of the law?*, HowStuffWorks (Mar. 11, 2011), https://people.howstuffworks.com/culture-traditions/tv-and-culture/courtroom-dramas-change-understanding-of-law.htm.

Murder, and The People v. O.J. Simpson, using Legal Realism as a theoretical framework. The sources used to illustrate how these dramas affect viewers' views of justice, morality, and institutional procedures come from a variety of peer-reviewed research, media assessments, and cultural criticisms. This study examines the relationship between social perspectives on law and dramatized legal narratives, identifying recurrent motifs through comparative research.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1 American Legal Realism: Theoretical Grounding and Media Representations of Law

Early in the 20th century, formalist thinking—which viewed the law as an objective, predictable system subject to stringent codes—was challenged by legal realism. Pioneers of legal realism like Karl Llewellyn, Jerome Frank, and Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. held that society, human factors, and individual biases greatly affect the law, making it inherently arbitrary and adaptable. Holmes famously said that "the life of the law has not been logic: it has been experience" (Holmes, 1897),[2] implying that rather than rigorous adherence to abstract principles, court rulings frequently result from pragmatic or experience-based judgments. Realist academics argued that in order to comprehend the law, one must examine how it is actually applied, where social conditions, institutional behaviour, and human judgment influence court decisions. Legal Realism is a helpful framework for examining how the law is portrayed in the media, particularly in well-liked legal dramas on Netflix. Even though these shows occasionally dramatize or deviate from actual legal methods and ethics, Legal Realism helps us analyse how these shows reflect cultural values by emphasizing the subjective, practical components of judicial decisions.

According to studies, the media significantly affects how the general public views justice and the law, especially through judicial dramas. For viewers who are not familiar with the court system directly, these representations frequently act as their main source of legal information. Viewers' perceptions of the legal system are shaped by these representations, which present both chances for education and possible misunderstandings. Studies on how the law is portrayed in popular culture reveal that dramatizations can affect perceptions of anything from guilt and punishment to justice and equity.[3] In addition to providing entertainment, shows like

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[2] Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Path of the Law*, 10 Harvard Law Review 457 (1897).
[3] *Is Popular Culture influencing our perception of Justice?*, :: Culture Decanted :: (Dec. 13, 2014), https://culturedecanted.com/2014/12/13/is-popular-culture-influencing-our-perception-of-justice/.

Law & Order and How to Get Away with Murder also gently educate viewers by fusing social issues with legal concepts and influencing how they regard lawyers and their moral quandaries. For instance, How to Get Away with Murder depicts criminal defence as a high-stakes conflict where morality and the law frequently collide, impacting viewers' perceptions of the ethics of legal profession, whereas Law & Order portrays the criminal justice system as morally motivated and dedicated to enforcing justice.

Despite a number of works into the portrayals of law in the media, it is unknown how streaming services, for instance, like Netflix, help shape modern views of justice. The popularity of Netflix among younger audiences presents a new avenue for media consumption and engagement with legal-related issues. This study aims to fill this gap via an exploration, with a Legal Realist perspective, of how legal dramas on Netflix have contributed to the legislature's impression of the legal system held by the masses. Inasmuch as they humanize the legal system, Netflix dramas are highly relevant to Legal Realism since they highlight human being's motives, feelings, and ethical dilemmas. They provide an emotionally rich yet somewhat exaggerated picture of the law-a version, however, that remains consistent with Legal Realist theory, which sees law as deriving from the human experience and cultural constants. Furthermore, Legal Realism challenges romantic notions of justice through its assertion that court decisions are often influenced by social customs, relations of power, and individual biases. These complications are regularly brought to light in Netflix's legal dramas, which show attorneys debating morally dubious decisions, power battles, and ethical conundrums.[4] These tales illustrate the realist belief that justice is a process characterized by human conflict and uncertainty rather than being simple and predictable. By exposing the discrepancy between idealized legal conceptions and the actual functioning of the court system, these representations question and influence viewers' preconceptions about justice and the law, demonstrating the applicability of legal realism in modern media studies.[5]

4.2 Case Studies: How Legal Dramas Portray the Legal System

4.2.1 Case Study 1: *Suits* – Legal Ethics and Strategic Manoeuvring

Plot Overview and Themes

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[4] Karl N Llewellyn, *Jurisprudence: Realism in Theory and Practice* (1962).
[5] Brian Bix, *Jurisprudence Theory and Context* 193-205 (6th ed. 2012).

The drama series Suits focuses on the lives of corporate lawyers in New York, especially the connection between Mike Ross, a young guy hired as an associate despite not having a formal law degree, and Harvey Specter, an experienced attorney. The show delves into the specifics of corporate law, emphasizing issues of ambition, ethics, and loyalty in a highly competitive setting. Numerous plots emphasize ethical boundaries and strategic thinking, portraying the practice of law as a game of calculated manoeuvres in which moral principles are frequently forsaken in the name of career advancement.

Legal Realist Analysis

The show Suits exemplifies a rather lively, although definitely not an accurate, description of "law in action" from the angle of Legal Realism, wherein the principal motivating forces behind the characters' decisions are social and psychological influences as opposed to legal principles. The show presents the conception of law as a multi-purpose tool, one used by those apparently very astute in administering difficult situations. Mike Ross questions the notion of law being considered to be a rigid profession characterized only by degrees and certificates. Harvey meant to be a legal realist; indeed, his representations imply the strategic victories and end results at the expense of strict ethical compliance. In many respects, this representation stresses on the emphasis of Legal Realism as being concerned with how the choices, dispositions, and interpretations of practitioners affect legal outcomes rather than mere deference to doctrines.

Impact on Public Understanding

The popularity of Suits has contributed to the public's impression of corporate lawyers as people who put their own interests and tactical success ahead of the rule of law. Viewers may conclude that breaking the law is both necessary and, occasionally, admirable as a result of Harvey and Mike's moral uncertainty and numerous ethical transgressions. In line with the Realist concept that law is as much a human endeavour as it is a profession, Suits perpetuates for many viewers the notion that success in the legal industry depends on systemic manipulation rather than rigorous adherence to justice and ethics.[6]

4.2.2 Case Study 2: *How to Get Away with Murder* – Criminal Defence and Moral

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[6]'Popular Legal Dramas: Fact vs Fiction in the World of Law' (IILS India, undated) https://www.iilsindia.com/blogs/popular-legal-dramas-fact-vs-fiction-in-the-world-of-law/ accessed 3 November 2024.

Ambiguity

Plot Overview and Themes

The plot of How to Get Away with Murder centres on Annalise Keating, a law professor and criminal defence lawyer who gets entangled in a complicated murder case alongside her students. The show explores criminal law, examining themes of guilt, innocence, and the fuzziness of morality through a complex narrative structure and dramatic storytelling. It eloquently demonstrates the ethical conundrums that occur in criminal defence, when professional obligations frequently clash with personal allegiance.

Legal Realist Analysis

The show highlights the difficulties defence lawyers encounter while defending clients accused of heinous crimes by presenting the legal system through a theatrical lens. Annalise Keating is presented as a morally dubious individual who employs every strategy at her disposal to ensure favourable results for her clients, frequently working in dubious ethical domains. This image is consistent with legal realism, which holds that human prejudices, power dynamics, and legal experts' strategic manoeuvres influence criminal case results in addition to legal text. The Realist view that law is an extension of individual volition and circumstance rather than an impersonal application of rules is supported by Annalise's portrayal.

Impact on Public Understanding

The way criminal defence is portrayed in How to Get Away with Murder has a big impact on public opinion, especially when it comes to the representation of defence lawyers as morally reprehensible people who put victory ahead of the truth. Because criminal defence is portrayed as a subject where strategic manoeuvring frequently takes precedence over justice, viewers may grow sceptical of the practice. Public expectations of what "justice" means in high-stakes criminal cases may be shaped by such an image, which could give the impression that criminal defence attorneys are more concerned with influencing the system than with protecting the innocent or enforcing justice.

4.2.3 Case Study 3: *The People v. O.J. Simpson* – Legal Realism and the Role of Media

Plot Overview and Themes

A miniseries called The People v. O.J. Simpson dramatizes the notorious O.J. Simpson trial, highlighting topics like racial injustice, the power of the media, and the shortcomings of the American legal system. It looks at how the trial affected American culture and exposes flaws in the legal system when public opinion and media coverage play a significant role in high-profile cases.

Legal Realist Analysis

Through this series, one can see Legal Realism in action, demonstrating how public opinion, racial tensions, and media may affect the trial process. The media manipulates public opinion to create a manufactured narrative that affects the courtroom proceedings and the outcome, turning the trial itself into a spectacle. Legal realists argue that the O.J. Simpson trial is an example of the way society shapes justice, for court rulings on guilt or innocence are influenced by media representations and public demands. The show highlights court outcomes shaped by statutes and larger cultural and social contexts, including racial problems and media sensationalism.

Impact on Public Understanding

The dramatization of the O.J. Simpson trial underscores how vulnerable the legal system remains to public and media criticism. This presentation puts into question the viewer's opinion of the justice system as influenced by external influences, instead of being the pursuit of an unbiased truth. Thus, the series makes the audience joyfully-aware of how popular opinion and sensational media treatment can have an impact on even the most infamous cases that they in all likelihood already heard about; and thus instilling in the viewer the realist dialogue that social and media influences are inextricably intertwined with the law.

4.3 The Media's Role in Constructing Legal Realist Narratives

Through overt depictions of subjective and human-guided elements in law, legal dramas on platforms such as Netflix serve a dual role: one that entertains while altering public knowledge about legal systems. Legal realism emphasizes the law in action; thus, this relates well to these dramatizations, giving an account of law as a matter of consideration and personal discretion within decisive processes.[7] This emphasis on subjectivity is consistent with media theories like

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[7] Id.

Cultivation Theory, which perch on the belief that because of prolonged exposure to certain narratives, audiences' perception of social institutions has changes over time so sculpted (Gerbner & Gross, 1976).[8] Viewers, therefore, may come to embrace a Realist vision of justice in which compromise, bargaining, and manipulation become central elements to the practice of law. Legal experts are portrayed as motivated by aspects other than merely executing the basic law and practice, which coincides with a Realist vision, consistent with viewers' distrust of institutions in reality. Research finds that for many viewers not privy to direct experiences of the justice system, entertainment media has emerged as the primary source of legal insight. Accordingly, Netflix legal dramas belong to the "CSI Effect," some academic researchers label this by the impact of dramatized portrayals in shaping public expectations about real-life courtroom cases, often causing viewers to anticipate resolution and clarity at times when ambiguity might realistically apply into [9]a real-world situation that should be construed inside our laws, or perhaps from a judicial perspective (Cole & Dioso-Villa, 2009)[10]. Legal dramas reinforce the idea that justice results from subjective judgment rather than objective decision-making, causing their audiences to believe that the legal systems are fundamentally flawed and (unjustly) influenced by personal prejudices.

4.4 Perception of Legal Professionals and Ethical Boundaries

A Realist viewpoint that stresses the human elements in legal proceedings is reflected in Netflix's legal dramas, which frequently highlight the morally dubious situations in which solicitors work. The Realist notion that lawyers are motivated by ambition, personal beliefs, and social context is reinforced by television programs such as Suits and How to Get Away with Murder, which portray lawyers as strategically and morally complicated. This portrayal improves viewer engagement and shapes views of legal ethics by allowing viewers to examine the ethical aspects of the legal profession without having to strictly adhere to procedural accuracy. According to research, fictional stories have a big influence on how the general public views professional ethics, particularly in highly crucial societal domains like law and medicine. Robson asserts that legal dramas frequently provide the sense that attorneys are morally duplicitous individuals who will violate the law and take advantage of legal loopholes in order

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[8] George Gerbner & Larry Gross, *Living With Television: The Violence Profile*, 26 Journal of Communication 172-199 (1976).

[9] Simon A Cole & Rachel Dioso-Villa, *Investigating the 'CSI Effect' Effect: Media and Litigation Crisis in Criminal Law*, 61 Stanford Law Review (2009).

[10] Id.

to accomplish their goals. Realist criticisms of formalist conceptions of the law as inflexible and unbiased are consistent with this portrayal.[11] Rather, legal dramas show how attorneys may put their own goals and client loyalty first, frequently using unethical practices that can give the impression that legal ethics are pliable and manipulable.[12]

4.5 Implications for Public Trust in Judicial Institutions

Complex public perceptions of judicial institutions are influenced by the Realist viewpoint that underpins many court dramas on Netflix. These depictions of justice as a product of social influences and human motivations can inspire admiration for the judicial system as well as scepticism. Younger audiences, who account for a sizable share of Netflix's watching and might not have had any prior exposure to the inner workings of the legal profession, are especially affected by this effect. According to research, these audiences would start to regard the legal system as a forum for moral discussion rather than as a rigidly regulated establishment, which would be consistent with the Realist belief that court judgments are inevitably arbitrary and situational.[13] These programs encourage viewers to interact with the constraints and moral dilemmas of the legal system by dramatizing the law through character-driven conflicts and moral ambiguity. Even while dramatized portrayals are frequently simplified or exaggerated for narrative purposes, viewers may understand them as reflections of real-world dynamics, a phenomenon characterized by media researchers as the "media realism effect" (Morgan, Shanahan & Signorielli, 2009).[14] Because of this, Netflix's legal dramas do more than merely amuse viewers; they also have an impact on their general perception of justice and the law, which may change public perceptions of and expectations for legal experts.

5. Conclusion

In order to properly conclude this research, it is very essential to recognize a major, complex impact Netflix's portrayal of courtroom dramas has on public perception regarding justice and the law. Through this prism of Legal Realism, these portrayals affect viewers' understanding of justice in ways that exceed simple storytelling. These shows dispute the standards of impartiality and equity typically associated with a few of the legal institutions, by revealing legal systems as inherently subjective and human. Because of it, justice gets to be seen by the

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[11] Peter Robson & Jessica Silbey, *Law and Justice on the Small Screen* (2012).
[12] "Anthony D, *The Limits of Legal Realism*, 87 Yale Law Journal 468-513 (1978).
[13] Id.
[14] Mary Beth Oliver et al., *Media Effects Advances in Theory and Research* (4th ed. 2019).

public as something dynamic-formed by social pressure, moral ambiguity, and individual motivations-than as an absolute concept. As mentioned, these dramas may also affect the audience's expectations of actual judicial behaviour. Once a Realist respect to law is absorbed, the audience may see legal practitioners through the eyes of a mixture of curiosity and scepticism-in other words, if the ethics of law became optional, that more restrained interpretation may affect one subtlety of public confidence and what law maintains social order because it expresses the trend towards a more critical interrogation of the judicial systems in the large culture. In a certain sense, jurisprudence and entertainment work hand in hand to inform the public discourse on justice and reveal the intricacies of law in action and its ripple effects on contemporary society. Court dramas thus indirectly modulate the public imagination concerning the legal system's ability to deliver justice and accountability by encouraging a nuanced knowledge of justice in these stories, if still dramatized. It is of great interest. The final analysis also puts forth an opportunity for media producers, legal scholars, and legislators alike to exploit media narrative power in bridging the gulf between dramatic representations and the application of law, thus resulting in an audience that will be, as it were, better informed.