

Hallmark's Happy Crime Films

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Abstract

This paper highlights the significance of crime films to the resurgence of the much-maligned and critically dismissed form of the made-for-TV-movie, particularly in relation to the highly affective language used to promote Hallmark’s made-for-TV movies. Typical assessments of Hallmark movies as brimming with positive affect encourage us to take a closer look at the representational strategies that make such happiness possible in stories otherwise concerned with violence and death. In this article I draw upon theories of melodrama and film to look at which experiences are considered common or shared in these predominantly white, upper-class worlds, and how they create an orientation against which guilt and justice are determined. I also situate these made-for-TV-movies in relation to discussions about the status of filmmaking in Canada, as an example of the distinct shift in emphasis in Canadian cultural policy that now sees cultural texts as *products* and prioritizes commercially viable – and internationally desirable – media (often understood as distinct from a “national cinema”). I combine these critical perspectives to track the ways in which Hallmark combines high body counts, low violence, and white homogeneity into *happy* crime films – and what the mass-production of such happy crime films can tell us about the present and potential future of filmmaking in Canada.

Keywords: Hallmark, Canadian film, melodrama, affect, happiness, cozy mystery, crime film

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“Baking is like art,” chirps Hannah Swenson (played by Alison Sweeney) as she tosses ingredients into a mixing bowl at the start of *Murder, She Baked: A Chocolate Chip Cookie Mystery* (Jean 2015). “You can paint by the numbers, following a reliable recipe where measurements are exact and ingredients set in stone. Or,” she says, “baking can be an adventure.” After sliding a tray of cookies into the oven, Hannah goes for a jog along clean cobblestone sidewalks, with no idea that her quiet town is about to be rocked by not one but *two* murders, or that she will find herself at the centre of the action trying to figure out whodunit. Yet by the end of the film Hannah is back behind the counter of her small shop, grinning at the realization that she has not one but *two* dates on Saturday, one with a handsome doctor who’s just moved to town and another with the homicide detective brought in to solve the murders. “Baking is a metaphor for life,” she concludes, making the movie’s theme (even more) explicit. “One must follow a recipe for happiness by adding equal measure of reliable ingredients mixed with innovative spice in order to create a cookie that is satisfying, sweet, and full of adventure.”

Murder, She Baked: A Chocolate Chip Cookie Mystery is typical of Hallmark’s murder mystery made-for-TV movies. With its idyllic small town and indefatigably cheery female protagonist, *Chocolate Chip* initially seems nearly indistinguishable from the holiday-themed romantic comedies for which Hallmark is well-known. Yet these murder mysteries go in very different directions. Heroines like Hannah discover dead bodies, and often become the target of violence themselves. Their first run-in with the leading man – the meet-cute – is less cute, as the sleuths encounter their potential love interest at a crime scene, usually because he’s a police officer. But all these murder mysteries resolve on a tableau familiar from Hallmark’s holiday romcoms: the heroine safely surrounded by her (mostly White) friends and family and food, soundtracked by always-upbeat music. These films are playing a central role in both the resurgence of the made-for-TV movie as well as Hallmark’s audience and channel expansion at a time when most television networks are struggling just to maintain viewers. In the past decade, Hallmark has launched two new channels: Hallmark Movies and Mysteries (2014) and Hallmark Drama (2017), in addition to its flagship Hallmark Channel, which hit the air in 2001, and the complementary Hallmark TV streaming app in 2018.

Crime films are a cornerstone of this success. Movies and Mysteries now boasts more than seventeen mystery movie series, most of which are Canadian: shot in Canada, by Canadian production companies, with Canadians in prominent roles. Former Crown Media CEO Bill

Abbott, who supervised Hallmark's television networks from 2009 – 2020, has explained how the company has “intentionally branded ourselves as the happy place,” while frequent made-for-TV movie star Rachel Leigh Cook gushes that the networks' content “sits well with where I want to live emotionally” (Long 2017; Ng 2019). These typical assessments of Hallmark movies as brimming with positive affect may not initially appear suited to a genre that traffics in violence and death. Here I examine the shapes of Hallmark's tropes of happiness in their murder mystery made-for-TV movies. To do so, I ask: What counts as happiness in these films? What sorts of representational and narrational strategies make such happiness possible? What can the increasing production of these happy crime films tell us about the state and status of filmmaking in Canada today?

The Made-For-TV Movie and the Hallmark Brand

Films like *Murder, She Baked: A Chocolate Chip Cookie Mystery* are examples of the contemporary made-for-TV movie. Once a dominant part of the television landscape, the made-for-TV movie waned in cultural prominence with the rise of cable TV (Perren 2009). In the 1960s and 1970s, made-for-TV movies could be found on all three American broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC), and were considered prestige programming, with many winning awards and critical accolades (Copple Smith 2009; Edgerton 1991). Often focusing on timely social concerns, these films were television *events* – one-time broadcasts that could make use of their singular status to address controversial issues and convey politicized messages (Copple Smith 2009; Rapping 1992).

By the 1980s, “excessive recycling of storylines and overdependence on the form throughout the program schedule” led to an increasing perception of the made-for-TV movie as formulaic and overblown, and its prestigious status was downgraded to cheesy, low-brow entertainment (Perren 2009, 162). As the number of networks and channels expanded into the 1990s, made-for-TV movies moved successfully to cable television. Erin Copple Smith explains: “[A] number of the attributes of the made-for-TV movie correspond well with the programming needs of cable channels seeking to establish a particular identity and to break out of the vast glut of cable channels lacking word of mouth or an original appeal. The films can be imprinted with elements designed to echo any cable network's brand identity” (2009, 143-144).

For over 100 years, Hallmark has promoted itself as a company that values “comfort, positivity, connections” from its beginnings selling holiday-themed greeting cards to today’s holiday-themed romance movies (Larson 2019). As president of the Hallmark Loyalty Marketing Group, Scott Robinette (2001) proclaimed Hallmark a champion of emotion marketing: “the effective creation, utilization, delivery, or exchange of emotional value” (xiv). Hallmark’s cable channels – Hallmark Channel, Hallmark Movies & Mysteries, and Hallmark Drama, all part of the company’s Crown Media division – are compelling examples of the snug fit between cable television and the made-for-TV movie. After fully taking over and transitioning religious network Odyssey into the Hallmark Channel in 2001, Crown Media filled its schedule with its own Hallmark Hall of Fame content as well as other made-for-TV movies first aired on broadcast television (Larson 2019; Newman and Witsell 2020; Shields 2017). As part of former CEO Bill Abbott’s broader corporate project to “embody the brand on TV,” Crown Media decided to “lean into Christmas” and “started its own production company, taking control of development, costumes, locations, casting, and post-production” (Larson 2019). This strategy proved so successful that the company quickly ballooned it into additional themed seasonal programming, such as its Love Ever After block in February for Valentine’s Day and Fall Harvest in September and October.

Making Made-For-TV Movies in Canada

Hallmark can crank out a made-for-TV movie in just a few weeks, and for approximately \$2 million USD per film, while the median cost to make a movie in the 2000s is \$18 million USD, and romance films average about \$11 million USD (Follows 2019). In 2020, Hallmark aired 85 new original films across its branded channels; in Canada these films are carried on the W Network (originally Women’s Television Network, or WTN), the result of a content distribution agreement signed in 2018. Hallmark keeps its production costs down in part by filming most of their movies in Canada. Canada currently has substantial federal and provincial financial incentives for film and television productions, primarily in the form of tax credits. In order to take advantage of these funding opportunities, film and television productions are obliged to demonstrate their financial contributions and likelihood of success, including things like contracts with Canadian production and post-production services, and bookings for domestic and international exhibition (Canadian Heritage 2021). Today, Canada’s cultural policies evaluate

the health of the country's media industries in economic terms: jobs, revenue, exports. Ryan Edwardson (2008) labels this cultural industrialism: a structure in which "economic incentives and industrial point systems all placed Canadian content within the dynamics of profitability and cultural commodification" (20).

Cultural industrialism is only the most recent governance paradigm for Canadian media. Past practices have emphasized aspects like especially erudite content and/or material focused on particular peoples and places as appropriately Canadian. The foundational report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (1949-1951), otherwise known as the Massey Report, for instance, opens with the declaration:

That it is desirable that the Canadian people should know as much as possible about their country, its history and traditions; and about their national life and common achievements; that it is in the national interest to give encouragement to institutions which express national feeling, promote common understanding and add to the variety and richness of Canadian life. (1951, 4).

The Massey Report articulates the still-persistent feeling that arts and media are important points of differentiation between Canada and the United States, as well as an anxiety about American media's dominance and influence beyond its borders economically and culturally. We can see this in Canada's own made-for-TV movie collection, which is mainly made up of adaptations of Canadian novels as well as attempts to gauge audience interest in a potential TV series or spin-off by acting as an extended pilot episode – both strategies that try to leverage existing Canadian content and to offset the financial risks inherent in television production by offering "an advantage to broadcasters in selling to an audience already familiar with the product" (Gruben 2014, 282). Edwardson argues that while governance strategies may have shifted over time, they are nonetheless all iterations of what he calls Canadianization: "vesting a political construct with the feel of an inclusive familial entity or, in other words, of turning a federation into a nation" (2008, 5; see also Charland 1986). These patterns in cultural policy demonstrate a conviction that arts and media are important vehicles for what Benedict Anderson (1983) famously characterized as an imagined community: "*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6; emphasis in original).

The current emphasis on international commercial viability for Canadian content suggests that one of the outcomes of cultural industrialism is a host of Canadian cultural products that emulate “the grammar of international television” (Morley and Robins 1995, 223). Serra Tinic (2005) describes this as the global generic: “stories that follow the trends of whatever is currently popular or appealing to the preferred audience market: the United States” (112). Hallmark’s made-for-TV movies, originating in and currently anchoring the American cable television landscape, are a clear example of a generic formula easily repurposed to suit a range of programming needs – from holidays to seasonal themes to murder mysteries. Despite the rising popularity of streaming services encroaching upon and further fragmenting TV audiences, aspiring scriptwriters are advised to hew to Hallmark’s structure as an industry default, even when targeting international and/or nationally-specific platforms (ProPath Screenwriting 2021). Abbott suggests an unwavering “commitment to the formula” is one reason for the films’ popularity (quoted in Shields 2017). By dividing the narrative into nine acts, tightly timelining key moments of relationship drama and resolution, and putting clear parameters on both a character’s personality and development (ProPath Screenwriting 2020), Hallmark ensures that each movie unfolds at the same pace toward the same happily ever after, regardless of whether it’s slated for the Countdown to Christmas or Summer Nights broadcast schedule.

Hallmark’s Cozy Mysteries

This same formula also structures Hallmark’s murder mysteries. In these movies, seasonal challenges – like a cookie competition – are swapped out for investigative ones. The heroine, however, still has ample time to spend with friends and family in the picturesque community at the centre of every Hallmark story, for “violence and loss are explored within the same format that the Christmas movies use, with the same reliable happy-ever-afters” (Larson 2019). This “breezy and bloodshed-free” approach to crime is one indication that these movies fit within the genre of the cozy (Battaglio 2017). Indebted to the classic whodunits of the so-called “Golden Age” of detective fiction (Scaggs 2005), cozies are:

light-hearted texts [that] commonly feature a female amateur sleuth who lives, works, and loves in a tightly-knit, small-town community in which everything is in order save the occasional murder upon which the protagonist happens to stumble. The female sleuth is often depicted as nosy, more interested in good relationships and romance than in her

career, and more concerned about her family and friends than about herself. (Vester 2015, 31)

Typified by “nonthreatening content and nonviolent characters,” the cozy style of crime blends easily with Hallmark’s already-established made-for-TV movie formula (Stasio 1992). Like the (always heterosexual and usually White) couple at the centre of the brand’s feel-good romance movies, the “female sleuths are smart, feisty and independent; their male counterparts are attractive, sensitive and caring” (Stasio 1992). Many of Hallmark’s murder mysteries are adaptations of already established cozies: Charlaine Harris’ novels about crime-solving librarian Aurora Teagarden; Kate Carlisle’s books in which general contractor Shannon Hammer sleuths on the side; Joanne Fluke’s baking-themed Hannah Swenson stories; and Kate Collins’ series about flower shop owner-slash-amateur detective Abby Knight, among many others. This adaptation strategy is proving so lucrative that Crown Media launched its own mass market fiction imprint Hallmark Publishing in 2017 to act as a feeder system for both its romance and mystery made-for-TV movies.

Cozies are “strongly focused on the significance of home and of the community,” with narrative trajectories that move inexorably toward restoring order and harmony to insular social worlds (Waters and Worthington 2018, 199). For many critics, the cozy is an inherently conservative form, emphasizing “the satisfaction of a world that is unambiguous and in which chaos (as represented by the crime) can be overcome” (Vester 2015, 33). In a cozy crime is always individual and idiosyncratic, and is (re)solved simply by identifying the perpetrator, in contrast to the mean streets of other popular crime subgenres like the hardboiled and film noir in which crime and violence are signs of deeply entrenched social and political problems (Krutnik 1991; Rafter 2006; Walton and Jones 1999). The cozy “considers the potential disruption of the social group and the communal values that are at its centre,” and cozy stories spend much of their time showcasing these shared norms through characters and situations presented as ordinary (Waters and Worthington 2018, 201). Literary agent Sharene Martin argues that the “amateur sleuths in these books feel like friends and neighbours,” while senior executive editor of Berkley Books Natalee Rosenstein describes how they are “filled with everyday people” (quoted in Hart 2006).

These traits draw the cozy even closer to Hallmark’s own preoccupation with ordinary people, part of how the brand has become an exemplar of what Billy Stevenson diagnoses as

“mildness” (2020, 177). Unlike Hallmark’s themed romcoms, however, its murder mysteries are serial – each movie is another installment in an ongoing, evolving narrative (with as many as seventeen films and counting in some). Seriality makes the return to normal at the end of each movie only temporary, since another shocking crime will soon occur to throw the small town back into disarray. While these movies may appear to repeatedly restore and reaffirm the status quo, we can also read this repetition another way: as a continual contestation of their social norms, and an ongoing demonstration of their hegemonic instability (Hall 1977). Hallmark’s crime films struggle over and over again with “the creation of a safe place, where readers [and viewers] can literally ‘feel at home’, sharing recognisable spaces that are populated by characters with whom they can identify” (Waters and Worthington 2018, 200). In doing so, they expose what could or should be felt as home and happiness, and who can be recognized as having a good life. How are happily-ever-afters imagined by Hallmark’s everyday people, and what sense can we make of how these ordinary folk struggle to achieve this goodness in small towns that grow increasingly dangerous with each installment?

Good Feelings and Bad Feelings

Despite their strongly normalizing narratives (Ford 2020; Lipsett and Gray 2020), Hallmark insists that its made-for-TV movies are apolitical. Abbott describes Hallmark as instead having a “sensibility,” in one of the many analyses of Hallmark’s rising popularity that draw on both the brand’s own language as well as audience members’ impressions to characterize Hallmark’s programming as somehow beyond or outside of politics (quoted in Battaglio 2017; see also Hill 2017; Long 2017; Stevenson 2020). In *The New Yorker*, for instance, Sarah Larson (2019) recounts her own interview with Abbott, in which he characterized the network as “your place to go to get away from politics.” Hallmark’s made-for-TV movies are what Lauren Berlant calls juxtapolitical: movies “flourishing in *proximity* to the political” (2008, 3; emphasis added). A conceptual framework for thinking about the cultural work of pop culture products that resolutely deny having any political significance, the juxtapolitical describes a text “open toward politics but is abundantly on the outside of it, refusing its status as determining the real of power, agency, or experience” (2008, 267). These determinations are made elsewhere, in the realm of emotions and via affective claims. Hallmark’s made-for-TV movies create “a sentimental account of the social world as an affective space where people ought to be

legitimated because they have feelings and because there is an intelligence in what they feel that *knows* something about the world that, if it were listened to, could make things better” (2008, 2).

As one Hallmark fan explains, she watches these movies “because I want to feel good about life and feel good about the world” (quoted in Battaglio 2017). From this perspective, politics are *bad* feelings, and because Hallmark movies prompt *good* feelings they are read as disconnected from and perhaps even a solution to the bad feelings of politics. Some of this can be attributed to the demographics from which Hallmark tends to command its largest audience shares, for an “industry study given to the *LA Times* by another network, on the condition that the paper did not reveal which channel conducted it, discovered that Hallmark’s appeal is strongest in the Midwest and South, closely mirroring the electoral college map from the 2016 presidential election” (Hill 2017). Hallmark made-for-TV movies interpellate this audience via what Heather Long (2017) calls their “happy formula” – the carefully mapped out choices and actions that inevitably turn the heroine toward an ending that affirms traditional or conservative values. This formula directs the protagonists (and the audience) to some outcomes and away from others, showing how the “promising nature of happiness suggests happiness lies ahead of us, at least if we do the right thing” (Ahmed 2010, 29). Yet Hallmark’s happy formula seems less secure in its mystery movies, where seriality suggests a happy ending is only ever temporary while violence and danger are normal (see, e.g., Felson and Eckert 2018). “It is in striving to present a credible normality that [the cozy] is often surprisingly ambivalent,” and in its repetitive rebuilding of good feelings we can find an uncertainty about established attributions of happiness and how to get to the good life (Vester 2015, 33).

Berlant contends we are likely to find the juxtapolitical in emotion-driven storytelling. Melodrama makes space for engaging with and affirming affective claims about how the social world *should* be, and the “turn to sentimental rhetoric at moments of social anxiety constitutes a generic wish for an unconflicted world” (2008, 21). Linda Williams’ (2012) analysis of contemporary melodrama offers a guide to identifying these sentiments. Arguing that we should see it as a mode used *by* genres rather than a genre itself, Williams positions melodrama as an experience through which an “unrecognized problem or contradiction . . . becomes morally legible to its viewers” (530; see also Gledhill 1987). Williams offers some key starting points for critically considering Hallmark’s made-for-TV mystery movies as crime melodrama: suspense, moral legibility, and spaces of innocence. By tracking their operation we can see how

they function in and combine to create what Williams calls a “felt good” in Hallmark’s mystery movies (540).

This “felt good” is especially helpful as a point of contrast to crime films’ typical aesthetic and affective impact. Alison Young (2010) discusses the “affective crime-image,” and suggests that cinematic images, including ones of crime, are *felt*: their meanings and social significance are generated through affective as well as cognitive processes (9). She contends: “The cinematographic and the affective conjoin most acutely in the scene of violence, and it is the scene of violence, with its interpellation into an image of *suffering*, which poses the most direct address to the spectator” (12; emphasis in original). In other words, the crime-image can manifest as a *felt bad*, deriving some of its narrative power from its negative affect. So how do Hallmark’s made-for-TV movies navigate this generic tendency? Young’s emphasis on the cinematographic is an important reminder to include a film’s visual strategies in any examination of how it presents crime for its audience – how it remakes crime images into a *felt good*.

Suspense: Distance and Deferral

Williams’ traits of melodrama resonate with the structure of the cozy crime story. In her analysis, she defines suspense as “the prolonged anxiety produced by awaiting the outcome of a dangerous situation” (2012, 524). Hallmark’s made-for-TV mystery movies present their audience with two such situations, generating parallel lines of suspense: the dangers of the crime and of crime solving; and the dangers of remaining romantically single. The anxiety around the potential *felt bad* is managed by strategies of distancing and deferral to ensure that the movies return a happy affect even when central characters and even the community itself are threatened.

We can understand “the affective relation engendered by the cinematic representation of violence” in Hallmark’s mystery movies by identifying and interrogating patterns in these representations (Young 2010, 6). Hallmark movies are careful to minimize the display of violence, often opting for images that stand in for an offscreen act. This keeps crime at a distance, carefully contained by scenes that reference rather than repeat violence. In *Wedding Planner Mystery* (Oliver 2014), for instance, heroine and wedding planner Carnegie Kincaid (played by Erica Durance) has stepped out of a wedding to find an absent guest, only to hear screeching tires. When she makes it to the site of what turns out to be a car crash, the camera frames a single limp hand dangling out of the driver’s side. It then cuts to the next scene, in

which Carnegie is paying her respects to the deceased's family. Visual synecdoche is common throughout Hallmark's crime films as a way of indexing instead of directly representing violence, and can be combined with other distancing techniques like in *Chronicle Mysteries: The Wrong Man* (Ingram 2019) when a hiker stumbles upon a perfectly clean skeleton hand poking out of a pile of leaves in the woods. Here, distance is also temporal as the skeleton conveys that the violence is long over.

In some cases, the gap between audience and violence is presented more literally. In *Mystery 101: Dead Talk* (Jong 2019) we are witness to one victim's death, but at a substantial remove. A lawyer just home from a long day is sitting on his couch eating leftovers and reviewing some files when he looks up and addresses someone offscreen, who has entered through the sliding doors at the back of the house. As the victim's face displays a dawning realization of the danger he is in, the camera shifts to the backyard and zooms out to situate us at the very edge of the property. From so far away we can see only vague, blurred shapes inside the house; the gunshot is similarly muffled and indistinct. This representational pattern also persists when the heroine herself is at risk. In *Concrete Evidence: A Fixer Upper Mystery* (Jean 2017) protagonist Shannon Hammer (played by Jewel Kilcher) is ambushed by the villain and inadvertently drops her cellphone; the camera focuses on it while Shannon is dragged away in the heavily blurred background. Any violence the heroines commit is clearly coded as urgent self-defence: trapped by the villain, they reach for whatever is at hand (only villains carry weapons) to bonk the baddie soundly on the head and get away, in a quickly-concluded "moment of cathartic, justified violence" (Larson 2019).

Often, images of violence are elided altogether. For example, in *Mystery 101: Playing Dead* (Hayes 2019) the lead actor in a local play meets an untimely death. Heroine Amy Winslow (played by Jill Wagner) – an English literature professor with a specialization in crime and mystery stories – is helping stage the play, and learns of the actor's death via a phone call. Privy only to Amy's side of the conversation, the viewer is even further removed from the death at the centre of the story. Such second-hand access is common in Hallmark's mystery movies, in which important exposition about the crime and the victim is narrated through someone else. Remediation is the overarching structure of the *Chronicle Mysteries* (2019 – present). In this series, heroine Alex McPherson (played by Alison Sweeney) is the creator and host of a true crime podcast. In the first film *Chronicle Mysteries: Recovered* (Bourque 2019) she returns to

her rural hometown to cover the cold case of a friend who disappeared when they were in high school; in subsequent films she continues working with the editor of the town's newspaper to solve other local crimes. Each installment features multiple scenes of Alex recording her podcast and this is where the most detailed information about crime appears, made more comfortable – and less visible – by the tight framing of Alex and her microphone. In *Chronicle Mysteries: The Wrong Man* (Ingram 2019) for instance, Alex leans intently into her microphone to say “Here’s what we know...”. She carefully outlines how a body was found in the forest, and reviews the blood evidence recovered from the victim’s car. The entire time, the camera remains locked on Alex’s face partially obscured by the mic, emphasizing our detachment from the violent crime she’s describing by driving our attention instead to her calm, measured voice. This is underscored later in the film during another expository podcast segment, as the camera cuts between Alex at the mic and multiple other characters in their own homes listening intently to her words – keeping them at a distance from the events in which many of them were actually involved.

The protagonist is also the lens through which we see crime and violence in the *Martha’s Vineyard Mysteries* series (2020 – present). Currently the only set of Hallmark mystery movies to feature a male protagonist, these films follow former police detective Jeff Jackson (played by Jesse Metcalfe), who has retired to his childhood home in Martha’s Vineyard only to find himself helping the police solve the mysteries that pop up in the otherwise quiet seaside town – and reconnecting with an old flame, who is now the town’s doctor and coroner. Yet Jeff is haunted by traumatic events in his past, especially the terrifying shoot-out that took his partner’s life and left him too injured to continue his career. In *A Beautiful Place to Die* (Jean 2020), the audience learns of Jeff’s experience through his nightmares and flashbacks; slow-motion and sepia-toned, the deadly incident is situated not only in the past but also as a memory, a dual layer of distance for the audience.

Another common remediation technique is for the protagonist to learn of the crime’s seamier elements via an expert, usually someone within the judicial system. In the *Garage Sale Mysteries* series (2013-2020), for instance, antiques dealer and amateur sleuth Jennifer Shannon (played by Lori Loughlin) is good friends with police officer Detective Frank Lynwood (played by Kevin O’Grady) and town coroner Dr. Tramell (played by Jay Brazeau). Both of these characters provide Jennifer (and the audience) with key details about crime and violence, made

palatable by their authoritative position. Dr. Tramell in particular manages the possible distress his knowledge about the processes of death and decay may cause through his jolly disposition and goofy sense of humour; each time Jennifer seeks his help, he cushions their interaction with jokes, like saying he appreciates her coming by his workplace – the morgue – because “usually it’s pretty dead around here” (*Garage Sale Mystery: The Wedding Dress*). These various strategies assuage viewer anxiety around the movies’ dangerous situations by establishing barriers between the audience and representations of violence, and often rerouting violence through comfortable interpersonal relationships. Hallmark’s made-for-TV mystery movies become “a safer kind of entertainment than the traditional mystery, one that is defined in no small part to the cozy mystery’s lack of on-screen violence” (Ploskonka and Wigard 2020, 71).

This sense of safety is enhanced by how many of the amateur sleuths’ connection to the judicial system doubles as a romantic interest. The *Crossword Mysteries*, *Emma Fielding Mysteries*, *Gourmet Detective*, *Match Maker Mysteries*, *Morning Show Mysteries*, *Murder She Baked*, *Mystery 101*, *Picture Perfect Mysteries*, and *Ruby Herring Mysteries* series all feature a police detective in the role of likely love match. And almost all of Hallmark’s murder mystery protagonists are unmarried, extending the suspense beyond solving the crime to include the will-they-won’t-they dynamic of the movies’ romance narrative. The Hallmark mystery “slips between genre categories: is it a romance that revolves around a mystery; is it a mystery [that] involves two characters becoming romantically involved[?]” (Betz 2021, 12). Available alongside Hallmark’s popular romcoms – in which the relationship-affirming first kiss is *always* the final scene – the mystery movies continually defer “the kiss” to create a persistent, hopeful anxiety that the central pair will finally head in the right romantic direction.

For some, like Hannah Swensen in the *Murder, She Baked* movies, this means deciding between and committing to one of the two men she is dating: dashing dentist Norman Rhodes (played by Gabriel Hogan) or handsome homicide detective Mike Kingston (played by Cameron Mathison). Her romantic impasse is resolved in *Murder, She Baked: Just Desserts* (Tabori 2017), part of how the film is recognizable as the finale to the series. In the *Aurora Teagarden Mysteries*, Aurora’s (played by Candace Cameron Bure) concerns about commitment are a persistent problem, and a way to draw out the question of her relationship status from film to film, as she is reluctant to refer to someone she’s dating as a serious partner (e.g. *The Julius House: An Aurora Teagarden Mystery* 2016; *Aurora Teagarden Mysteries: An Inheritance to*

Die For 2019), struggles with the prospect of an engagement or having children (*Aurora Teagarden Mysteries: A Very Foul Play* 2019; *A Bundle of Trouble: An Aurora Teagarden Mystery* 2017), and at the time of writing, the trailer for the next release *Aurora Teagarden Mysteries: Til Death Do Us Part* (2021) pits a time-sensitive new mystery against her looming nuptials, ending with the ominous teaser of Aurora declaring “We have to postpone the wedding.” The romantic plotlines of these murder mysteries are a crucial pathway to happiness in crime stories, as the inevitable – if routinely postponed – moments in which the “dangerous situation” of unfulfilled heteronormative ideals are often resolved at the same time as the crime itself. We see this, for instance, at the end of *Aurora Teagarden Mysteries: A Game of Cat and Mouse* (Jean 2019). After a tense showdown in which Aurora’s potential new beau Nick Miller (played by Niall Matter) is held at gunpoint by a violently jealous colleague, Aurora recognizes her true feelings and now confidently labels her time with Nick as dating. Taking place in the final scene, and so (temporarily) taking the place of “the kiss,” this realization tells us “[h]appiness becomes a question of following rather than finding” (Ahmed 2010, 32).

Moral Legibility: Reading the Close-Up

The overlapping conclusions to the overlapping crime and romance plots also lend legitimacy to specific configurations of goodness and happiness – what Williams identifies as “the drive to achieve moral legibility in the eventual resolution of the suspense” (Williams 2012, 524). These configurations conflate social norms as social goods. Much of *Aurora Teagarden Mysteries: A Game of Cat and Mouse* is devoted to this process, for Aurora’s seeming complacency with not categorizing her connection with Nick as either platonic or romantic motivates both the romcom and crime story dynamics of the film. This open approach to their relationship is a problem for her friends and family, who continually insist that it *must* be a burgeoning romance. It’s also a problem for the villain: Nick’s colleague Bree (played by Tammy Gillis), whose unrequited love for him has turned into a dangerous passion. She targets Aurora precisely because her relationship with Nick is undefined and disorderly; after abducting her and holding her hostage, Bree shrieks: “I quit a job, a job that I loved, to pursue a relationship with Nick and then *you* came along and cut in line, when I was there first. He and I are perfectly suited.” Both storylines have the same outcome: Aurora and Nick headed out to see

a movie, with Aurora declaring to her gathered friends and family “And yes this is *definitely* a date.”

The parting shot of the community watching, pleased at two of its members publicly affirming their romantic interest, is a common Hallmark scene that helps script these choices as the right ones. It’s also a familiar framework for the cozy, which codes this behaviour as friendly – as part of everyday life in a small town, as what it means to call a community *tightly knit*. Characters’ lives are interwoven, so that their choices – both good and bad – impact everyone else’s happiness. The stories’ preoccupation with the average and the everyday is underscored by the villains’ motives, as cozy mystery writer Amanda Flower (2018) explains: “Rarely is the culprit an evil person. Instead, he or she is a person pushed to his or her limits . . . just a person who made a gigantic mistake,” like Bree, whose desire for something more than a work relationship with Nick takes a terrible turn. Similarly, in the first *Mystery 101* film (Hayes 2019), the villain is a father desperate to find some way to fund his son’s cancer treatment, and his plans quickly spiral beyond his control. Hallmark’s murder mysteries find affective purchase in the what Berlant flags as “the situation” – an experience scripted as shared or relatable, through which “the offer of the simplicity of the feeling of rich continuity with a vaguely defined sense of like others is often the central affective magnet” (2008, 7).

One way in which the moral landscape of these made-for-TV movies is made visible and legible is through their consistent use of the close-up to provide the audience with emotional proof that supersedes any official evidence for determining guilt. Discussing the role of the close-up in the soap opera (another melodramatic genre), Tania Modleski notes it is how we “witness the characters’ expressions, which are complex and intricately coded, signifying triumph, bitterness, despair, confusion – the entire emotional register” (1990/2008, 92). Part of her larger argument about how soap operas habituate women to the gendered task of emotional labour, Modleski tells us that “Close-ups provide the spectator with training in ‘reading’ other people, in being sensitive to their (unspoken) feelings at any given moment” (1990/2008, 92). Close-ups work similarly in Hallmark’s made-for-TV movies, focusing our attention on what characters are feeling in order to better understand and distinguish right from wrong – to find the *felt good*. These moments give us an emotional connection to the choices at the heart of the crime story, and reveal their relation to social norms around happiness and the good life.

A closer look at *Garage Sale Mystery: The Wedding Dress* (DeLuise 2015) helps to unpack the affective rhetoric and moral work of the close-up in Hallmark's made-for-TV crime films. In this movie, protagonist Jennifer Shannon purchases a vintage wedding dress from an estate sale, and finds a blood stain in the pocket. Certain that the stain is a sign of a crime, Jennifer tracks down the dress' original owner Helen (played by Cheryl Ladd), who explains how her husband Charles (played by Blair Penner) vanished without a trace immediately after the ceremony thirty years ago, and no one, not even his best friend Ted (played by Barclay Hope), has heard from him since. Undeterred, Jennifer continues to dig into Helen's past and discovers that shortly before the wedding Ted's ex-girlfriend had lied to Charles, telling him that Ted and Helen were having an affair. Before heading to the reception, Charles had confronted Ted and refused to believe Ted's insistence that it was all a hurtful rumour. When Charles had started to choke Ted, Helen had desperately intervened and stabbed him – fatally. Ted and Helen had hurriedly concocted a story about Charles fleeing, and hadn't spoken to each other since.

The roles of victims and villains shift repeatedly throughout *The Wedding Dress*, demonstrating how Hallmark's mystery movies rely on “realism in the staging of life lived at the emotional extremes” to construct “common sense” notions of moral – rather than legal or judicial – right and wrongdoing (Berlant 2008, 173). For it turns out that Helen married Charles out of a sense of duty: both came from wealthy local dynasties, and the marriage was intended to solidify recent business links between their families rather than to signify a love match. And by marrying Charles, Helen had selflessly let go of her chance at love with Ted, who loved her in return but kept quiet out of respect for their friendships. Now, decades later, their feelings can finally come out as Ted and Helen tell the truth about the past and reconnect in the present. *The Wedding Dress* also incorporates flashback sequences to take us through not just the crime but also its emotional contexts. The soft-focus flashbacks offer us a look at Charles' face twisted with rage as he throttles Ted, as well as Helen's panic when she's unable to convince Charles to stop and has to look for a weapon more powerful than words. In the present day, close-ups showcase Ted's agonized struggle between his loyalty to Helen and his guilt about the past, such as when Jennifer is explaining the evidence that points to Helen's guilt: he swallows repeatedly; his mouth tightens; he often closes his eyes and breathes deeply, as if to keep his emotions under control. A lie detector test provides yet another opportunity to match emotional states with

narrative truths when both Ted and Helen are interrogated about the circumstances of Charles' death as well as their feelings for each other.

Helen's actions are ruled justifiable homicide, a verdict that appeals to "the notion that love and sentiment can overcome capitalism and romantic heterosexual love [is] central to happiness" (Ford 2020, 33). This resolution feels good: Helen's culpability is duly identified, and she receives no formal punishment since she has spent decades hiding the truth and being estranged from her true love. "We like a melodrama," Williams says, "if it seems realistic and if its politics, or sense of the just, coincides with our own – when the good *we* believe in suffers and is, at least briefly, recognized" (2012, 540; emphasis in original). The movie wraps with Jennifer watching Ted and Helen walk hand-in-hand across a meadow; their images blur into ones of their past selves to affirm that the couple is finally back on their destined path, headed where they were always meant to be before crime intervened. In *The Wedding Dress* the perpetrators get what they deserve. As Sara Ahmed observes, "[i]deas of happiness involve social as well as moral distinctions insofar as they rest on ideas of who is worthy as well as capable of being happy 'in the right way'" (2010, 13). Hallmark's brand of happiness is most easily available to the White middle class. Like most Hallmark mystery movies, *The Wedding Dress* features a predominantly White cast of characters (only the *Morning Show Mysteries* series stars a non-White protagonist). The lack of racialized people and places is part of how Hallmark mysteries position themselves as happily apolitical. In these movies "whiteness, heterosexuality, Christianity, and affluence are the American standard, and anything that deviates from this standard needs to be justified and framed in order to avoid being read as 'issues-oriented' programming" (Lipsett and Gray 2020, 118).

Spaces of Innocence: Small-Town Living

The pastoral peacefulness of Ted and Helen's meadow is one example of how Hallmark's made-for-TV mystery movies lean heavily on what Williams terms spaces of innocence to "locate the goodness" underneath the crimes (2012, 525). As she explains: "Melodramas need this space in order to support the belief that moral good is possible" (2012, 525). In the cozy this space is frequently articulated to the perceived idyll of the largely White and upper-middle-class small town. Already a privileged part of Hallmark's romance movies, the small town is the kind of space the heroine needs to live out what Samantha Rose Hill (2017) calls the brand's "inverted

fairytale formula of career woman to girl next door, condo living to country farm.” Such associations resonate throughout Hallmark’s mystery movies as well, for they make use of some of the romcom’s typical strategies for representing small town spaces as serene and restorative.

One tactic is a sweeping aerial shot that lets us gaze down upon the town in its entirety, and in its geographical specificity. The aerial view emphasizes the small size of the town by showing its endpoints – where the town is bordered and even dwarfed by the nature around it, such as lakes and mountains. There is no creeping urban sprawl, but instead containment and cohesion: these overhead shots show us wide, tree-lined streets; the spires of an historic church; and lush green backyards. *Flower Shop Mystery: Mum’s the Word* (Walsh 2016) for instance, opens with a panorama tracking across the town of New Chapel, nestled into rolling hills, with its shining white buildings offset by the vibrant fall foliage that blends into the forest stretching across the top third of the screen. The camera cuts to a bird’s-eye view of the downtown, panning along main street and pausing to showcase the church roofline silhouetted against the hills and trees that surround the town. *Murder, She Baked: A Plum Pudding Mystery* also foregrounds “the mildness, gentleness and relaxation of Hallmark spatiality” by starting with a snowy vista of fields blanketed white with the occasional farmhouse enclosed in a stand of pine trees, mountains rising in the distance (Stevenson 2020, 175). The movie’s next shot looks down on the snow-capped roofs of the town, a colourful mixture of homes visible through the bare branches of the trees.

Such scenes recur throughout each mystery movie, anchoring us in this fantasy social space and “present[ing] it as the longed-for ideal . . . [which] makes the threats and tensions realistic, thus enhancing the cathartic release that resolution offers” (Waters and Worthington 2018, 203). Tellingly, the small town in the *Murder, She Baked* series is named Eden Lake; Joanne Fluke, author of the books upon which the series is based, says: “I write about a pretty nice town filled with primarily nice people” (quoted in Hart 2006). This niceness is frequently showcased through the main street walk-and-talk. A form of narrative exposition popular in television workplace programs (especially political and crime dramas), in Hallmark’s mystery movies the walk-and-talk frames the heroine as she moves through the downtown space, providing a glimpse of the harmony of small-town life. These are places that global conglomerates have yet to penetrate, and instead their main streets are full of thriving independent stores, creating “an appealing fantasy world in which . . . economically viable small

businesses in small towns or neighbourhoods offer goods and services that make people happy” (Knepper 2021, 27).

The main street walk-and-talk sets the sordid details of the crime against the backdrop of the community it impacts, a juxtaposition that reminds the audience of the goodness under threat and imagines the downtown core as the social and economic heart of small towns. For example, in *Chronicle Mysteries: Recovered* (Bourque 2019) heroine Alex rounds a corner downtown and runs into Drew (played by Benjamin Ayres) – the editor of the local paper she’s been collaborating with on the case. They stroll slowly down the street discussing the challenges of researching a decade-old disappearance, the intricacies of reading a police case file, and their plans to revisit what they suspect was the scene of the crime. These investigative issues are softened by the cozy charm of the stores in the background, with nature-themed names that emphasize Alex’s rural surroundings: Harvest Café, Birdies’ Cottage Bakery, Grove Salon & Spa. Likewise, at the beginning of *Chocolate Chip*, when we follow Hannah on her morning jog through town we spy signs like Old Town Bakery hanging off awnings, and see the milkman unloading jugs from his truck greeting Hannah by name. The trope of the jog-through recurs in the *Chronicle Mysteries* and *Murder 101* series as well, and at different times of day to show the full range of downtown experiences to the community. In another variation, *Flower Shop Mystery: Mum’s the Word* (Walsh 2016) starts with what we can think of as a drive-through. Set downtown, the camera moves smoothly through a (clean) alleyway to emerge streetside just in time to focus on heroine Abby Knight’s (played by Brooke Shields) car as she drives along the street and pulls into a parking spot. This medium shot at street level highlights the bustling local businesses, and follows Abby as she enters hers – she’s the proprietor of Bloomers Flower Shop. This sequence firmly embeds Abby in the downtown core, not just as a community member but also a small businesses owner (like the sleuths in the *Fixer Upper Mystery*, *Garage Sale Mystery*, and *Murder She Baked* series). The main street walk-and-talk and its variations create a consistent visual language that evades a recognition of global capitalism’s impact on local and independent business, or on the exploitative labour practices minimum wage workers experience. It conveys instead an image of the small town as idyllic – as the kind of sociable, safe space worth keeping crime-free.

Happily Ever After, Eh!

“[T]he small towns and shops central to the cozy have a fantasy feel (and appeal),” and appear interchangeable from series to series – Eden Lake looks like New Chapel, which looks like Lawrenceton, which looks like Harrington (Waters and Worthington 2018, 203). Their generic non-specificity means the movies feel familiar just from the first few scenes. Moreover, these spaces look the same because often they *are* the same: most of these films, and Hallmark movies more broadly, are shot in a handful of Canadian locations in and around Victoria and Vancouver, British Columbia – even masquerading as Martha’s Vineyard, one of the only non-fictional settings found in these mystery series. As Canadian author Douglas Coupland (2002) notes: “When people dream of the American Dream, they’re often dreaming of Canadian suburban mainstays they see in films and on TV” (110). The movies’ reliance on melodrama helps maintain this familiarity and appeal, for Williams argues that the melodramatic storytelling mode is no longer marginal to pop culture but is instead a “sensory and experiential horizon of cinema (and television) [that] *constitutes* the mainstream” (2012, 529).

Hallmark movies thus seem at odds with how cultural critics tend to talk about Canadian film. Typically, it is thought of as an instance of national cinema:

films that for whatever reason ‘fit together,’ follow similar general patterns, or pursue similar themes seen as specific to that nation. . . . Accordingly, there is often an implicit assessment of ‘quality’ that accompanies discussions of national cinema. This tends to privilege films with supposed artistic quality or thematic resonance – films that purportedly reveals something about the world and, specifically, about the nation from which they emerge. (Lester 2019, 152)

Hallmark’s made-for-TV mystery movies highlight a perceived gap between national cinema and cinema produced nationally. National cinema is a serious artistic endeavour; Hallmark movies seemingly are not. Yet there’s a similar goal animating both: the creation of an imagined community. While Canadian cultural policies have turned to representations by and about Canada, Hallmark’s murder mysteries rely on the affective dimensions of the made-for-TV movie formula to generate a shared vision of happiness and the good life that transcends national borders.

“The struggle over happiness forms the political horizon of these films,” regardless of how easily Hallmark’s made-for-TV movies may seem to slip away from an appearance of cultural – or even Canadian – significance (Ahmed 2010, 59). To do so, these films invoke the

loaded frameworks of both the crime and the romance story, creating a “happy formula” that suggests criminality and victimization are best understood affectively. Set in small Canadian towns dressed up to look like Everywhere USA, the movies’ spatiality continues to promote images of generic niceness that deliberately sidestep any cultural specificity. Opting for the popular at the expense of the particular, Hallmark’s crime films are a key part of a broader shift in Canada’s cultural industries toward an industrial model that paradoxically makes mainstream melodramas the most invisibly visible Canadian films today.

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