

Chapter 6

Diagonal Truths: The Representation of Gender Violence in True Crime Podcasts. The Case of *West Cork*

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Domestic and intimate partner violence are among the most spread types of gender-based abuse suffered by women worldwide. In Ireland and other English-speaking countries, this form of violence is endemic and widespread. According to a survey carried out by Women's Aid, 1 in 4 women living in contemporary Ireland have been abused by a current or former partner (Women's Aid, 2021). Similar numbers have been registered in the United States (Smith et al., 2017: 117), in England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2019), in Australia (AIHW, 2019: vii). Femicide, which is to say, the lethal victimisation of a woman for misogynous reasons (Radford, 1992: 3), is often directly connected to the practice of domestic or intimate partner violence, as demonstrated by figures collected by the Irish Femicide Watch, according to which 1 in 2 women killed in the country is murdered by her current or ex-partner (Women's Aid, 2019: 9). Notwithstanding the worrying pervasiveness of intimate partner violence, gender-related crimes are often undervalued or deprived of their gendered connotations by the media, by the police and in a judiciary context (Dunne, 2016; O'Halloran, 2015; Women's Aid and Mazzone, 2019). This chapter discusses the podcast *West Cork* (Audible, 2018) and, by comparing it with its antecedent *Serial* (2014), it analyses its ability to expose the issue of gender violence in the Irish context, where it is set, and beyond.

Podcasts and the groundbreaking *Serial* (2014)

Podcasting, namely the process of preparing audio files and distributing them directly to listeners' devices through RSS feed (Really Simple Syndication, a feed that allows users to quickly access web updates), is a relatively recent but extremely popular practice. The history of podcasts dates back to 2000, when Dave Winer introduced a new RSS version that facilitated the circulation of audio files and allowed, in 2004, the production of the pioneering podcast series *Daily Source Code* by Adam Curry (Bottomley, 2015: 164). When in 2005 Apple launched an iTunes version that included a podcast directory, the podcast experience was made accessible to millions of users. Since then, podcasts progressively gained popularity among listeners in the English-speaking world and beyond. A survey conducted by Reuters in 2019 showed that podcast users who listened to at least one podcast per month were 43% of the interviewed in South Africa, 37% in Ireland, 35% in the U.S., 29% in Canada, 27% in Australia and 21% in the UK (Newman et al., 2019). Given their success, podcasts have attracted increasing scholarly attention (e.g. McClung and Johnson, 2010; Bottomley, 2015; Berry, 2015; Llinares, Fox and Berry, 2018; Boling and Hull, 2018). This, in turn, contributed to the definition of the podcast as an independent medium (Bottomley, 2015: 166-167; Llinares, Fox and Berry, 2018: 4-5) characterised by specific technological features and distribution methods, production tendencies and audience expectations. Among other traits, scholars highlighted podcasts' accessibility to producers and listeners (Bottomley, 2015: 166) as well as podcast listeners' ability to control the place, time and modality of consumption (McClung and Johnson, 2010: 82; Boling and Hull, 2018: 94-95) and interest in establishing an informal, intimate and genuine bond with the podcaster (Mottram, 2017: 63-64). Existing literature on podcasting highlighted the capacity of the new medium to re-shape, precisely in light of the aforementioned characteristics, the audio storytelling genre (McHugh 2016).

The brief history of podcasts was marked by a 'watershed moment' (Llinares, Fox and Berry, 2018: 9): the launch of *Serial* (2014), a journalistic investigation by Sarah Koenig into the trial for the murder of Hea Mae Lee (in Baltimore, USA, in 1999) during which her ex-boyfriend, Adnad Syed, was life-sentenced.¹ *Serial* revealed podcast listeners' interest in true crime, a genre where women are frequently portrayed as murder victims (Biressi, 2000: 191),

¹ *Serial*, produced by the weekly radio program *This American Life*, later continued with a second season centred on the story of Segeant Bowe Bergdahl, who was accused of desertion after being held for years in a Taliban quarter.

and prompted a significant proliferation of podcasts that media specialists labelled as the ‘*Serial* effect’ (Vogt, 2016: 66; Sherrill, 2020: 2).

Serial also generated a stimulating debate among scholars, journalists and activists interested in discussing the podcast’s relevance to feminist discourse. On the one hand, experts highlighted Koenig’s ground-breaking ability to employ the true crime genre and the podcast medium in order to question the epistemological claims to truth that characterise traditional journalism and nonfictional narratives. Michael Buozi (2017: 260-261), for example, argued that the podcaster used recordings of her amicable interviews with the convicted Syed as a rhetorical method to display the unsolvable ambiguities that feature the case and to complicate the dominant judiciary narrative by giving voice to the condemned. Similarly, Bethany Doane, Kaitlin McCormick and Giuliana Sorce (2017: 120) praised Koenig for her journalistic approach, which ‘intersects with a core principle of feminist methodology in challenging positivist epistemologies by emphasizing the representation of multiple perspectives’. On the other hand, feminist journalists and bloggers criticised *Serial* for overlooking intimate partner violence as a phenomenon that could be realistically linked to the case (Brocklehurst, 2015; Stone, 2016) as well as for Koenig’s representative disregard for the figure of the victim, who is not given full consideration (Ditum, 2014; Shangani, 2014).

The polarization of feminist critics around *Serial* illustrates a divergence that still dominates current discussions on the representation of gender-based violence and discrimination: the opposition between those who compliment portrayals that aim at overcoming the rhetoric of violence and those who prefer representations that surmount the violence of rhetoric, to use the terminology introduced by Teresa de Lauretis (1987: 31-50). To say that in other words, feminist scholarship and activism is often divided in two main threads. On one side, poststructuralist sympathisers who believe that sexist discrimination should be challenged through a symbolic destitution of dichotomous thinking or narratives of truth (the same from which gender binarisms and hierarchies originate). On the other, realism advocates who call for accurate descriptions and denunciations of social violent dynamics.

This chapter examines gender violence in podcasts and proposes a close reading of the podcast *West Cork*, by Jennifer Forde and Sam Bungey, which will be analysed in direct comparison with *Serial*. Adopting a methodology that blends narratology and sound studies within the framework of feminist theories on the representation of violence, the chapter discusses how oblique and diagonal narrative techniques (Genette, 1980; Nelles, 2002; Zwart, 2017) can be fruitfully used to talk about sexist abuse in true crime podcasts with women as murder victims. It contends that oblique narratives enable the portrayal of the reality of gender-

based violence and its possible connections to unsolved cases of women killing without failing to engage in the (inherently feminist) critique of linear narratives and judicial truth. Moreover, oblique and diagonal rhetorical strategies permit podcasters to provide an ethical and non-stereotyped representation of the woman victim.

True crime podcasting and the ethics of obliquity

Distributed in 2018 by the Amazon-affiliated company specialised in audio digital products Audible, *West Cork* is a journalistic investigation into the murder of the French television producer Sophie Toscan du Plantier (née Buniol), which occurred in Toormore (Ireland) on the 23rd of December 1996. After the discovery of the woman's body outside her Irish holiday home, a controversial police investigation started searching for the murderer in the nearby village of Schull, one of Ireland's most popular destinations for creatives and outcasts from all around the world (the so-called 'blow-ins') at the time. The investigation soon focussed on the figure of Ian Bailey, a British journalist and poet resident of Schull who became the prime suspect. Bailey, who has always maintained his innocence, was arrested on two occasions but no evidence could be found to keep him in custody or bring him to trial in Ireland. Notwithstanding the absence of definitive proof, Bailey was sentenced in absentia to 25 years in prison in a trial held in France in 2019. Ireland later refused to extradite Bailey, thus leaving the puzzling case irresolute and the suspect free.²

West Cork's authors, British journalist Sam Bungey and BBC documentarist Jennifer Forde, rode the wave of true crime podcast success that emanated from *Serial* and from the parallel celebrity of the genre in Anglophone television shows like *Making a Murderer* (2015) and *The Jinx* (2015) (Boling, 2019: 162). The podcast became popular among Irish listeners (Cashin, 2018; Nolan, 2020) and gained international recognition (Dockterman, 2018). This is not surprising given that *West Cork*'s main features adhere to those identified by scholars as crucial for audience retention in the case of true crime narratives and, more specifically, podcasts. Among these, the recreation of a sense of place that allows listeners to imagine the locality where the crime occurred (Punnet, 2018: 97-98; Pâquet, 2020: 6). In *West Cork* it is made possible by the podcasters' frequent descriptions of the countryside and coastline

² The Sophie Toscan du Plantier case produced a vast range of intermedial re-narrations. These include the books *Death in December* (2002), by Michael Sheridan, *A Dream of Death* (2020), by Ralph Riegel and the Sky and Netflix docuseries *Murder at the Cottage* (2021), by Jim Sheridan and *Sophie. A Murder in West Cork* (2021), by Jim Dower. The significant production of post-2018 mainstream narratives on the case might be related to the *West Cork* podcast's success.

surrounding Schull, which includes narrative mappings of the location as well as recordings with sounds (e.g. seagulls' crying and howling wind) that reproduce the atmosphere of the place, thus contributing to the listeners' immersion in the story. Moreover, *West Cork* invites its listeners to establish an informal bond with the podcasters and, in so doing, satisfies that search for stories told by friendly and genuinely authentic figures that researchers have listed among podcast audiences' implicit requests (Mottram, 2017: 63-64; Tiffe and Hoffman, 2016: 117; Buoziš, 2016: 261). Bungey and Forde achieve this by presenting their investigation as the outcome of a trip to Ireland during which the boundaries between private and professional life blur. For example, they explicitly talk about their friendly relationship with Bailey and they mention Forde being pregnant during the recordings. Last but not least, *West Cork* confirms true crime narrative's tendency to attract and retain audiences on the basis of the crime's unsolvability (Pâquet, 2020: 7; Bruzzi, 2016: 278). In fact, the podcasters do not provide their listeners with a clear-cut solution to the Sophie Toscan du Plantier murder; on the contrary, they rely on a fluctuating narrative style that reinforces existing doubts about Bailey's supposed involvement in the events, witnesses' reliability and ambiguous behaviour of An Garda Síochána or the Gardai (the Irish police).³

The decision to provide readers with an open narrative that digs into the reality of the killing by posing questions as opposed to answering them prevents the podcasters from framing the murderous event as a case of femicide. In other words, Bungey and Forde's rejection of a definite closure on the perpetrator(s) and motives of the crime precludes the possibility of explicitly linking the murder to gender-based abuse and, consequently, inhibits the public denunciation of a social phenomenon that is responsible for the majority of intentional homicides with women as victims on a global scale (UNODC, 2018: 13).

In light of these provisional considerations, *West Cork* aligns with cultural products like *Serial* that display a feminist ethos at a discursive level, by means of a general effort to challenge the very principle of rigid and univocal truth that regulates the creation and reproduction of crystallised narratives. The idea of openness and uncertainty as guiding ethical

³ The representation of An Garda Síochána as corrupted and disorganised is a constant thread in the podcast. Given the British origin of the podcasters and the biased common portrayal of Irish people as foolish, clumsy and incompetent proposed by British popular discourse (Ullah, 1985) this representation might be considered problematic or even informed by a racist attitude. However, this type of portrayal is a constant in narratives on the Sophie Toscan du Plantier's case, including re-narrations by Irish authors. The same representation is substantiated by the numerous mistakes carried by the An Garda Síochána during the investigation and by witnesses' declarations on the corrupting attitude demonstrated by some of its members. The scope and the limited space of this chapter do not allow an in-depth analysis on this matter and further analysis should be conducted to investigate this.

traits is confirmed by the podcasters' during an interview released for Audible's vice president Jesse Baker and included in the podcast as a bonus episode. Here, Bungey replies to Baker's question on whether he thought that Baily is guilty or not by saying: 'We spent three years trying to avoid asking ourselves that question because it felt like that was the only way to report the story fairly' (Bungey and Forde, 2018, 'West Cork Aftershow': 1:41-48).

Even more than *Serial*, where Koenig does not provide a resolution but takes the eventuality of Syed's innocence so seriously that she positions him as a 'coinvestigator' (Buozis, 2017: 260), *West Cork* relies heavily on epistemological uncertainty and employs it as a discursive feature that regulates the narrative flow. The podcast presents the events related to the murder, investigation and following trial in a chronological manner. However, this linear sequencing criteria is often coupled with a non-plot-based ordering that the narratologist Brian Richardson (Richardson, 2005: 169) defined as 'rhetorical sequencing'. It is 'an intentional arrangement set forth as advantageously as possible to produce a particular effect: to bring the mind of the reader into closer conformity with the beliefs of the author' (169). In the specific case of *West Cork*, rhetorical sequencing is used to confirm the aforementioned rhetoric of doubt that guides the podcasters' ethos. Examples can be found in almost all episodes of the series, where events are introduced to the listeners as part of a continuous oscillation between two or more possible scenarios. In episode 5, 'A Good Suspect', the decision of the Gardai to concentrate their investigations on Bailey is presented as the controversial outcome of an investigation focussing on clues including some scratches that the man had on his hands the day after the murder. Bungey and Forde report the quarrel about the scratches using a swinging narrative mode: first, they include a recording in which Bailey awkwardly justifies himself saying that the cuts came from his attempt to kill a turkey and cut a tree for Christmas; later, the listener's suspicion about Bailey's naïve apology is unexpectedly confirmed by Forde, who admits that Bailey did kill a turkey and cut a tree that day; after this, other witnesses state that the kind of scratches the suspect had could not be linked to those activities, according to their own experiences as countryside workers; finally, the podcasters point at the absence of pictures that could document the cuts, casting skepticism on the Gardai operation, thus leaving the ambiguities unsolved.

The following episodes display the same rhetoric of doubt, which is often reinforced by allusions to vocal witnessing and hearsay (all products of audio-related communication). In episode 9, 'The Moonshine Effect', the authors give an account of the atmosphere of hostility that surrounds Bailey and his partner Jools Thomas in Schull. They do so by making implicit reference to the practice of orality and oral storytelling about supernatural phenomena that

characterise Irish modern folklore (Cronin, Crosson and Eastlake, 2009). At first, they denounce the locals' use of stories where Bailey is portrayed as a dangerous occultist who howls at the moon and possesses a mysterious 'moonstick' that disappeared after the murder, which clearly contributed to the symbolic construction of the suspect as guilty and evil. However, the podcasters later identify in Bailey himself the source of these stories: he obsessively talked about the moon, he noticed during a police interrogation that the killing happened on a full moon night, he repeatedly described himself as affected by moon phases and he is recorded saying that drinking spirits on a full moon had a different effect on him. Here, Bungey and Forde feed the listener's suspicion of Bailey by pointing at his eccentric behaviour and by disproving Bailey's own declarations regarding the Gardai's responsibility for circulating these stories. Later, the perspective switches again and again, the rhetorical swing being fed by antithetical vocal statements released by different people who comment on explicitly unprovable events that see Bailey as a disturbing protagonist and reinforce the idea of his culpability. In this sense, aural communication, which in Western contemporary culture is linked to the idea of evocativeness and allusion as opposed to proof and manifestation (Greer, 2018: 4-5), is employed to sustain *West Cork's* rhetoric of doubt.

True crime, obliquity and gender-based violence

Despite being laudable for its ability to question established narratives and for showcasing the inner ambiguity of events that—as is the case with gender categories in the context of patriarchal narratives—are presented as unequivocal truths, the rhetoric of doubt is not enough when it comes to the representation of a murderous event where the presence of a woman victim legitimises presumptions about a gender-related crime. As those who criticized *Serial* argued, a descriptive effort that takes into account the reality of misogynous victimisation of women in our societies is necessary to assign credibility to a portrayal that fully matches with the feminist ethos. This is because failing to acknowledge the history of patriarchal violence is, in itself, a violent act that obscures women's genuine experience of abuse (de Lauretis, 1987: 34-42).

But how is this possible when the representation is ingrained within a genre that, for its own conventions, does not support clear and definite conclusions about the motives of the murders it investigates? And how is it possible to talk about gender violence—a phenomenon whose acknowledgement requires a certain degree of reliance on the principles of reality and truth—in a narrative that depends so heavily on the deconstruction of consolidated truths?

West Cork, in fact, does manage to discuss gender-based violence explicitly and it achieves that by means of an oblique approach that circumvents, but does not clash with, the rules of true crime openness. According to the philosopher Hub Zwart, oblique perspective is an epistemological strategy that can be used when the object of a certain inquiry happens to be unattainable or unreachable. In these cases, indirect and diagonal lines of inquiry allow those who investigate to abandon the main research path, which ‘blinds us to other possible answers concerning the question’ (Zwart, 2017: 8). Zwart employs the idea of oblique perspective to talk about science and philosophy of science with the aim of diverting scholarly attention from major direct questions such as ‘What is nature?’, which became unanswerable since the end of positivistic thought. He suggests approaching these questions with a diagonal method that adopts a reflexive attitude and studies the subjects (the scientists) who work with these guiding questions in mind. This detour from the object-pole to the subject-pole, will result in a failure to solve the unsolvable issue of what nature is, but it will allow that and similar ‘issues to emerge in the context of critical dialogue, a living oblique laboratory, a mutual learning exercise’ (Zwart, 2017: 15).

Like the philosopher described by Zwart, Bungey and Forde are not interested in providing an indisputable answer on Ian Bailey’s involvement in the Toscan du Plantier murder. However, they discuss the object by means of a report on the behaviours of the subjects who directly or indirectly participated in the investigation. This not only produces insights on the killing, but also allows to talk about connected social issues. Among these, gender-based violence.

References to the phenomenon of gender violence are included in episode 7, *The Arrest*, where the podcasters report on the first attempt by the Gardai at detaining Bailey. Bungey and Forde question the strength of the suspect’s alibi, which was connected to his partner’s statement that they spent the night of the murder together. Given that the continuation of the arrest was highly dependent on the testimony of Jules Thomas – Bailey’s partner, the relationship between the two needed to be considered. In this context, the podcast introduces its listeners to past incidents of domestic violence during which Bailey physically assaulted Thomas, who decided to continue the marriage nonetheless. But it is in episode 10, *Shanghaied*, that the same facts are discussed in detail. Here, as in episode 7, the events are narrated on the basis of a need for contextualisation, namely the explanation of the reasons of institutional and media scepticism on Bailey’s figure. Narratologists defined this type of oblique storytelling mode as explanatory narrative embedding (Genette, 1980: 232-233) and noticed how the practice of telling a story within a story often contributes to the production of a deeper realistic

effect in fictional texts (Nelles, 2002: 349). In the case of our non-fictional work, narrative embedding conserves its realistic function as it permits the podcasters to speak about the social reality of sexist abuse, thus allowing listeners to consider the possibility of a connection between gender violence and the West Cork murder.

The two parts where domestic violence is covered display no major difference from the rest of the podcast in terms of structure: in the embedded narratives, as elsewhere, the podcasters' voice is juxtaposed to that of oral testimonies released by members of An Garda Síochána, by the suspect and by locals who participated in the narrated events directly or indirectly. However, if compared to other parts of the inquiry, these sections are distinguishable on the basis of two characteristics. The voice of the survivor victim (Jules Thomas) is heard, as opposed to that of the deceased Sophie Toscan du Plantier, who is only evoked through references to her journal entries. Moreover, the oscillatory mode is temporarily paused, which determines a crucial shift from the aforementioned rhetoric of doubt to a more definite and linear approach to the events. As the following paragraphs will corroborate, the latter strategy contributes to present gender-based violence as a real social issue that deserves attention and an unambiguous representation.

In episode 7, intimate partner violence is introduced by Bungey, who mentions photographic evidence that the Gardai collected from the suspect's house during the investigation. The presence of pictures that showed 'the damage Ian had done to Jules' (Bungey and Forde, 2018, 'The Arrest': 21:18-20) discovered in a book found in the property confirmed what the Gardai already knew: Bailey assaulted Thomas at least twice before the murder, which resulted in the woman seeking hospital treatment. In this passage, references to the realm of the visual and to the photographic medium in particular are employed to give an account of facts that are not contestable or dubious. As opposed to the previously mentioned evocativeness and uncertainty that characterise audio witnessing, direct allusions to pictures serve as rhetorical tools that validate factual reporting. This is connected to the ontologically indexical function that our culture assigns to the medium of photography (Osborne, 2010) and, at a more general level, to the tendency of modern Western societies to rely on a 'scopic regime that equates seeing with knowledge' (Rose, 2016: 3).

Similarly, a representation that clearly commits to the use of an ocular perspective characterises a crucial passage in episode 10, where Pete, one of the couple's neighbours, provides a vocal testimony of what he saw when, on the night of the second domestic violence incident, he was called by a doctor and by Thomas' daughter to bring the woman to the hospital. Pete's explicit depiction operates as ocular evidence of Bailey's violence and Thomas'

survival. After describing being introduced to the scene by aberrant noises of pain, the man portrays Thomas while rocking in the bed, with her arms, hands, face and lips damaged and one of the eyes ‘in a terrible state’ (Bungey and Forde, 2018, ‘Shanghaied’: 18:19-24). This image-based witnessing contains an implicit intra-textual reference to analogous scenes that Bungey and Forde had included in the podcast: the testimonies of the Gardai who first saw Sophie Toscan du Plantier’s dead body. In episode 2 ‘The Back of Beyond’, the rhetorical device of inserting the testimony of those who directly saw the corpse activates a visually-driven realistic relationship with the murderous event. It is not by coincidence that Eugene Gilligan, from the Garda Technical Bureau, introduces his description of the approximation to the woman’s body by saying that the image is still vivid in his mind, ‘it’s like a picture’ (‘Bungey and Forde, 2018, ‘The Back of Beyond’: 22:24-25). The cross-denunciation of brutalities conveyed by references to the realm of the visual is replicated by the mention, in episode 7, of Thomas’ indignation towards the Gardai who, during the interrogation for Bailey’s alibi, allegedly tried to show her photographic images related to the Toscan du Plantier’s murder. This indirect association has the obvious function of illustrating the possibility of Bailey’s involvement in the murder. However, if seen through the perspective of sexist violence representation, it also introduces the listeners to the social phenomenon of women’s continuous and gender-based victimisation that Liz Kelly defined ‘continuum of sexual violence’ (1987; see also Introduction to this volume).

The actual link between the two cases of violence cannot be proved, only suggested. But despite this uncertainty, the truth of domestic violence, both as a specific event that marks the suspect’s life and as a broader social issue, is never denied or evaded. Frequent references to journal entries that Bailey wrote after perpetrating violence towards his partner are presented to further confirm the entity and the certainty of the suspect’s engagement with the practice of gendered abuse. Bungey goes so far as to read out loud one of the entries that, as opposed to the volatile spoken word, serves as evidence, even during the trial:

I attacked and severely beat Jules to such an extent that she sought hospital treatment [...] At present, two nights on, she is badly hurt and walking wounded with bruises on her face, lips and body. How I could have perpetrated such injuries on someone I both love and owe so much to? I cannot properly explain (Bungey and Forde, 2018, ‘Shanghaied’: 16:22-42).

Bailey’s voice and justifications are also incorporated in *West Cork*. In the live recording, he does not deny being physically violent towards Thomas but he systematically

downplays the gravity of his own behaviour. In the following passage, the man describes his actions as the result of romance and love:

We've been together for nearly 25 years, which is obviously longer than what a lot of marriages sustain. I mean, I don't offer it as a defence for my own behaviour, but it is a reality that it isn't uncommon. So, I mean, if you look at Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor there were similar things going on with them, they would be very much in love and then they drink and fight and then they finish up making love again (Bungey and Forde, 2018, 'The Arrest': 22:02-32).

Scholars who analysed portrayals of violence against women have considered the common tendency to frame intimate partner abuse as a consequence of romantic love a rhetorical technique used to justify perpetrators (Gius and Lalli, 2014; Lelaurain et al., 2018). The same indirect apology is frequently hidden by the propensity to define as fights or domestic conflictuality acts of violence that have a specific perpetrator and a clear victim (Berns, 2001). Both these discursive strategies are employed by Bailey, but he is promptly contradicted by Bungey, who recognises his justificatory attitude and states: 'He says he's not trying to minimise it, but that's exactly what he's doing' (Bungey and Forde, 2018, 'The Arrest': 22:53-57).

Bailey is not the only one to adopt a condoning rhetoric. The same is done by Jules Thomas, who admits that the man had been violent towards her but defends her husband by excusing him: she presents him as a man who loses control only when he drinks (Bungey and Forde, 2018, 'The Arrest': 23:45-56), who acted out of impulse and did not premeditate the assaults (Bungey and Forde, 2018, 'Shanghaeid': 31:29-33), who is subjected to 'dark moods' that, despite the abusiveness, stimulate artistic creation (Bungey and Forde, 2018, 'Shanghaeid': 23:05-32:42). She also relies on the trope of romantic love to explain the cyclical episodes of violence that characterised her relationship with Bailey (Bungey and Forde, 2018, 'Shanghaeid': 35:07-35:41). Given her position as a survivor of gender violence, the podcasters cannot easily and directly deconstruct Thomas' statements. Her perspective cannot but be a crucial component in a representation that, following the feminist ethos, is interested in not confirming the objectifying practices and the dismissiveness with which women are treated in patriarchal societies. Her voice needs to be taken seriously into account, even when it sounds questionable. In this sense, Thomas' declarations are not juxtaposed to a direct judgement or verdict like the one that Bungey uses to respond to Bailey's self-acquittals. In order to assign space and dignity to Thomas' voice without abandoning the embedded narrative's tendency to

provide a linear and non-condoning representation of gender violence, the podcasters resort to another oblique rhetorical technique and indirectly confront the woman's controversial comments. They introduce the listeners to the scepticism with which Thomas' decision to back Bailey and to continue the relationship⁴ after his assaults had been received in the town of Schull. After reporting the hearsay that circulated on Thomas in West Cork, which resulted in widespread victim-blaming to the point of triggering conspiracies on the woman's participation in the murder, Forde states:

This kind of thinking is exactly in line with common assumptions about women who choose to stay in abusive relationships. The question 'why don't you leave?' is frequently asked to them. It seems so simple from the outside. We spoke to several experts who explained not just how difficult and often dangerous it can be to leave, but also how many women love their partners and don't want to leave, they just want the abuse to stop. They explained that when women chose to stay, society so often loses its sympathy with them and even ends up blaming them for the violence, concluding that they must invite it or enjoy it at some level. It seems like the murder allows people to take these tropes up and hutch. Jules wasn't just complicit, even the instigator of the violence against her, she was capable of extreme violence herself, capable of murder. (Bungey and Forde, 2018, 'Shangaied': 27:58-28:47).

Here, the indirect intervention of experts on the topic of domestic abuse is presented as the consequence of the community's judgement, not as the result of the podcasters' need to criticise Thomas for her declarations. Yet, the experts' explanation displays the victim's acceptance of the violent relationship as a common alarming issue that needs to be addressed without blaming the woman and contributes to contextualise Thomas' experience in the broader social problem of sexist abuse.⁵ By means of this diagonal strategy, the authors manage to conserve the non-

⁴ In 2021, Thomas eventually decided to interrupt her relationship with Bailey. Even after the end of their relationship, she never negated her previous statements on Bailey's innocence in relation to the Toscan du Plantier case.

⁵ The podcasters do not fail to make references to the Irish context and to the emerging role that women started to play during the second half of the Nineties, when a divorce bill that allowed a member of the couple to escape abusive relationships (June 1996) was approved. This mention is used to corroborate the idea of Thomas' agency and decision to continue her marriage with Bailey. Notwithstanding this legal achievement, Irish women continued to suffer and still suffer the consequences of intimate partner violence. The contextualisation of Thomas' experience of victimization would have benefitted from the inclusion of a more explicit mention of the issue of gender-based violence, maybe supported by the invitation of a feminist scholar or activist who could have established an even clearer connection between the general and the particular situation.

oscillatory discursive mode that characterises the section, thus avoiding any risk to minimise the incidence and gravity of gender violence.

The regard that Bungey and Forde show for the survivor's opinion is not diminished by the use of this oblique technique. On the contrary, the mention of specialists' theories on the reasons why women in abusive relationships often fail to denounce and decide to stay contributes to re-assign agency to a category, that of victims of intimate partner violence, that might be re-objectified by representations that insist on their victimisation. An intimate process of decision-making during which domestic violence survivors assess the risks connected to their choice of continuing the rapport is indicated by Forde as one of the components that the experts highlight. Sociological studies on the matter confirm the sensitive nature of this personal decision, which is not always transparent and easy to perceive from the outside. Researchers have identified a number of 'micro and macro barriers' that women consider when they contemplate the idea of leaving an abusive relationship (Kim and Gray, 2008: 1466). These can be 'structural constraints' or 'psychological factors' (Anderson and Saunders, 2003: 165): emotional commitment and previous investment in the tie (Strube and Barbour, 1983; 1984; Truman-Schram et al. 2000); the woman's employment status and financial dependency (Lesser, 1990; Rusbult and Martz, 1995; Kim and Gray, 2008: 1478); the perception that the criminal justice system will not be supportive or protective enough (Ballentine, 2005); the realistic fear that violence will escalate to femicide when leaving (Browne and Bassuck, 1997; Fleury, Sullivan and Bybee, 2000, Kim and Gray, 2008: 1478-79). Forde notices that women who continue violent liaisons are not masochistic characters, as the victim-blaming towards Thomas seems to suggest, in a similar vein to early Freudian theories that considered battered women as subjects governed by a 'conscious or unconscious need for pain and punishment' (Anderson and Saunders 2003: 164). Contrarily, the choice to stay or leave is the result of a careful evaluation where internal and external factors are considered.

The aforementioned passage is followed by a brief conversation that Thomas had with Jennifer Forde. The woman podcaster carefully introduces the chat with a description of the studio where Thomas carries out her work as a painter. This draws an imaginary line between the sonic space that the authors assign to the woman's voice and the actual, physical space that, from Virginia Woolf onwards (2012), is considered crucial for the development of female subjectivity. The presence of another intra-textual reference further contributes to the representation of the victim's dignity and self. Similar scenes in which interiors are described can be found in episode 3 'Sophie Buniol' (22:17-22:52) and 13 'An Intimate Conviction' (1:20-3:14), where the podcasters illustrate Sophie Toscan du Plantier's property in Toormore

by meticulously listing the signs of her presence in the house. In episode 3, the description clearly has the function of demonstrating Toscan du Plantier's solitary attitude, thus disproving the gossip that, in another example of victim-blaming, circulated the figure of the woman and her supposedly libertine sexual life. More generally, these descriptive interludes testify to Bungey and Forde's awareness on the issues that regard the representation of violence against women in patriarchal societies and demonstrate the podcasters' interest in offering a portrayal that liberates women from the objectification to which they were condemned by the abuse and by discourses that construct them either as guilty or passive. Therefore, it is clear the recognition of gender as a crucial component in the domestic violence incidents that affected Thomas and as a hypothetical factor in the Toscan du Plantier's murder. In light of this, avoidance of simplistic depictions of victims/survivors fruitfully complements, as opposed to clashing, with the podcast's evident recognition of gender violence as a phenomenon that leaves not much space for rhetorical oscillations.

Conclusions

This analysis of *West Cork* reveals the obstacles and possible solutions that true crime podcasting poses to the representation of gendered violence against women. A previously produced podcast, the acclaimed *Serial*, relied on the true crime genre's tendency towards openness and epistemological uncertainty, thus avoiding substantial and explicit mentions of the issue of gender-based abuse. This triggered feminist critiques of the podcast's failure to portray women victims of violence respectfully and to take seriously the social phenomenon of sexist abuse and femicide. *West Cork*, a journalistic investigation into the unsolved killing of Sophie Toscan du Plantier, successfully escapes *Serial*'s tendency to obscure gender violence by obliquely approaching the issue notwithstanding the persistence of a clear general propensity to feed the listeners' doubt and to avert a definite closure on the murder. This is made possible by the insertion of an embedded narrative in which the podcasters give an account of the incidents of domestic violence that involved the case's prime suspect and his wife. The embedded narrative, which is characterised by a different narrative sequencing and clearly prioritises a linear, clear-cut representation of the events, provides the podcast's authors with the possibility of addressing the issue of women's victimization in patriarchal societies and considering, though never validating, the probability of gender-related motives in the murder case. An indirect, diagonal, rhetorical approach is also employed to facilitate the inclusion and discussion on the victim's controversial but crucial perspective on the violence.

The oblique perspective adopted in *West Cork* has been employed by other true crime podcasts recently produced in the Anglophone world. Among these, *The Teacher's Pet* (2018), an investigation on the disappearance of Lynette Dowson (1982) hosted by the journalist Hadley Thomas and published by *The Australian*. Here, the podcaster is not able to provide definitive solutions on the vanishing and, consequently, he cannot establish if it was a case of intimate partner femicide. However, the issue of gender violence emerges as a fact and as a possible motive for Lynette's disappearance when the podcast reports on the cases of sexual harassment and exploitations towards female students that the woman's husband, a teacher, perpetrated. Similarly, *Root of Evil* (2019), hosted by Yvette Gentile together with Rasha Pecoraro and produced by Cadence13 and TNT, focusses on the famous Black Dahlia case pointing at the controversial figure of George Hodel as its prime suspect. Hodel's previous involvement with sexual violence and women's objectification, which is confirmed by the testimony of one of his victims, is what allows the authors to discuss gender violence and its probable relevance in the murder case. Despite the differences that necessarily distinguish Ireland, the United States, Australia, their society and culture, the podcasts' common English language testifies to a wide and transnational circulation of the paradigm of diagonal storytelling. Given the productivity of the oblique perspective technique, further studies on the employment of diagonal approaches to gender violence in true crime podcasts should be encouraged in order to give full recognition to a medium that, because of its growing popularity, can play a part in the symbolic contrast to patriarchal abuse.

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