

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Double-Bind of the Black Detective: A Socio-Critical and Structural Analysis of the TV series “Cross”

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ABSTRACT

The 2024 Amazon Prime Video series ‘Cross – Season 1 and Season 2’, starring Aldis Hodge, represents the most sustained and ambitious screen adaptation to date, benefiting from the expanded narrative space of episodic television to develop character relationships, casework, and backstory with greater fidelity to Patterson’s source material. Across all iterations, Alex Cross endures as a significant figure in popular literary culture - a detective whose longevity reflects the genre’s appetite for protagonists who are professionally formidable, emotionally available, and morally unambiguous in a world defined by violence and ambiguity. This article surveys Detective Alex Cross as a luminary fictional character in Amazon Prime Video series ‘Cross – Season 1 and Season 2’. It examines his translation across screen adaptations, considering the tensions and transformations that arise when a richly textured character moves between media.

Keywords: Black professional, screen adaptation, institutional racism, family dynamics

FULL RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

The figure of the 'Black' detective within American television has long served as a locus of acute socio-political anxiety. Positioned at the structural intersection of institutional state violence and systemic racial marginalization, the Black police officer embodies a permanent ideological contradiction. This particular character must enforce the laws of a carceral State that historically and continuously targets their own community (Bond, 2020). In Amazon Prime Video's series "Cross," developed by Ben Watkins and adapted from James Patterson's long-running Alex Cross literary franchise, this systemic friction is updated for the contemporary landscape of the mid-2020s too. Led by Aldis Hodge's portrayal of Dr. Alex Cross, a forensic psychologist and detective within the Metropolitan Police Department of Washington, D.C., the series uses a high-gloss, premium streaming format to interrogate the limits of Black institutional power (Chalaby, 2024).

Spread across its first two seasons with 16 episodes, 'Cross' transforms Patterson's foundational pulp formula into a multi-layered analytical digital texture. It moves away from the simple, classic procedural literary tropes where a single, brilliant, gloomy detective solves all cases in isolation. Instead, this series maps out a complex matrix of contemporary anxieties as mentioned below:

- The performative nature of corporate and municipal diversity initiatives
- The physical and psychological toll of localized gentrification
- The rise of algorithmic or hyper-curated violence in the digital age
- The deep, inescapable trauma of the Black bourgeoisie operating within inherently white supremacist legal frameworks

'Cross' (2024–2026), based on James Patterson's Alex Cross novels, reimagines the detective thriller as a study of race, power, and institutional dysfunction in contemporary Washington, D.C. Across Seasons 1 and 2, Alex Cross navigates serial violence, political corruption, and elite impunity while balancing familial and professional responsibilities. The series critiques the commodification of justice by exposing how wealth, bureaucracy, and state institutions often protect privileged offenders while marginalizing vulnerable communities. Season 1 foregrounds psychological trauma and systemic bias through the hunt for a serial killer, whereas Season 2 expands into a broader critique of corporate and governmental corruption through a vigilante narrative targeting corrupt billionaires. Sociologically, Cross

portrays crime as a product of unequal power relations rather than individual deviance alone. The research article attempts to provide a rigorous socio-critical analysis of the TV series 'Cross' - Seasons 1 and 2. It tracks how the narrative shifts from the intimate, grief-stricken claustrophobia of its debut season into the expansive, institutional rot uncovered in its second season. This critical analysis also illustrates how the series functions as a profound critique of the 'Black exceptionalism' myth within the American law enforcement agencies.

Season 1: The Haunted Panopticon and the Pathology of Erasure

The first season of 'Cross' establishes its narrative foundation by grounding its protagonist not merely as an elite interrogator, but as a deeply traumatized subject. Alex Cross is haunted by the unresolved murder of his wife, Maria, who is shot dead in broad daylight during a police operation. This tragic loss pierces the protective armor of Cross' upper-middle-class stability in Southeast D.C. With two little kids - a boy and a girl to look after, Cross is deeply affected by the irreparable loss and the additional responsibility as a parent.

The Illusion of Bourgeois Protection

This domestic trauma functions as a crucial socio-critical macro-trope. It demonstrates that neither advanced academic pedigree nor state-sanctioned authority can insulate Black citizens from structural vulnerability. Cross's sprawling, historically preserved home serves as a vital visual text in the series. It highlights the stark socioeconomic divides within D.C., contrasting sharply with the hyper-surveilled, economically starved neighborhoods that characterize the city's outer wards where the mere act of living is a dangerous experience every day.

The central antagonist of Season 1, Ed Ramsey - a wealthy, hyper-refined serial killer operating under the guise of a progressive philanthropist - acts as a direct subversion of the traditional 'urban boogeyman'. Ed Ramsey, nicknamed 'The Fanboy', is played by Ryan Eggold. He is a well-known and influential figure in Washington D.C.'s political circles, whose obsession with serial killers drives him to commit murder in a uniquely ritualistic fashion. Ramsey does not harvest bodies from the margins out of basic economic desperation or sudden, uncontrolled rage. Instead, his violence is an exercise in elite curation. He targets low-profile individuals whose disappearances are unlikely to trigger systemic state alarm, exploiting the institutional biases of the very police department Cross serves to protect the lives of such people.

The 'self' - the irreducible particularity of a human being is the first and most fundamental thing Ramsey destroys. Michel Foucault's panopticon, borrowed from

Jeremy Bentham's prison architecture, describes a structure in which the watched internalize the gaze of the watcher, regulating their own behavior under the assumption of perpetual observation. Ramsey inverts and haunts this model. His panopticon does not discipline the living into conformity — it disciplines the dead into resemblance. The surveillance here is retrospective, directed not at controlling behavior but at controlling identity itself, bending living persons into the shape of the already-dead. His victims are watched, studied, and ultimately consumed by the image of another.

The pathology of erasure operates on two levels simultaneously. For the victims, erasure is literal and physical - their appearances, their meals, their manner of dying are all overwritten by Ramsey's obsessive fidelity to his criminal heroes. For Ramsey himself, however, erasure is the very thing he fears. His entire enterprise is a war against his own anonymity. By constructing this grotesque gallery of recreated serial killers, he seeks to inscribe himself permanently into criminal history - to become not merely a murderer but a curator, an author, a god. The haunting is therefore mutual. His victims are haunted by the identities forced upon them, and the specter of being forgotten haunts Ramsey. This dynamic places *Cross Season 1* in conversation with broader cultural anxieties about visibility, legacy, and the hunger for recognition in a media-saturated age - themes that resonate unexpectedly with the concerns of *Black Mirror*, where identity is also perpetually at risk of being recorded, replayed, and ultimately replaced. Ramsey's scrapbook of kills is, in its own deranged logic, a content archive - a curated record of performances staged for a future audience he intends to haunt long after his capture. That Alex Cross, himself a man defined by his ability to inhabit other minds, is the one tasked with stopping Ramsey is thematically apt. The forensic psychologist and the Fanboy are mirror images: both penetrate the interior lives of others with obsessive precision, both are driven by a need to understand and to be understood. The difference and it is everything is that Cross restores identity while Ramsey annihilates it.

The Curated Body and Disposability

Ramsey's obsession with taxing and cataloging his victims echoes the historical mechanisms of the transatlantic slave trade and colonial exhibitions. He reduces Black and marginalized bodies to literal design objects, treating them as collector's items within an elite, subterranean economy of violence. He transforms human bodies into curated collector's items, directly demonstrating how wealthy predators exploit the racial and socioeconomic blind spots of the State. By forcing Cross into a psychological chess match, the narrative exposes a grim reality: the State's

investigative apparatus responds with genuine urgency only when a crisis threatens to expose the moral rot of its wealthy elite. Through this dynamic, showrunner Ben Watkins directly critiques the carceral panopticon's true nature. The tools of state surveillance such as facial recognition, data harvesting, and geo-tracking are ostensibly deployed to maintain public safety. However, Season 1 consistently demonstrates that these systems are used instead to police the boundaries of class and race. Cross himself is trapped within this panopticon. He is constantly scrutinized by a police leadership that views his psychological insights as a useful tool, yet labels his systemic critiques as a form of cultural disloyalty. His brilliance is tolerated only as long as it successfully protects the city's political elite. The moment his investigations threaten the stability of those power structures, the institutional walls close in, reducing him from an elite agent of the State back to a fundamentally monitored subject who should abide by the laid-down laws of the land.

Season 2: Institutional Rot and the Commodification of Justice

If the first season of 'Cross' focuses on the psychological wounds of individual trauma and localized elite violence, Season 2 expands its scope to examine institutional corruption and the corporate commodification of justice. This transition mirrors broader shifts in digital platform television, where expanded narrative spaces are used to dissect systemic socio-political frameworks rather than isolated crimes (Wyatt, 2019). In Season 2 of Cross, institutional rot is portrayed through the corruption and moral failure of law enforcement agencies, government officials, and powerful corporations. The second season reveals how systems designed to protect citizens often shield wealthy offenders and suppress justice. The commodification of justice is evident when legal and political institutions treat justice as a negotiable commodity influenced by power, money, and social status rather than fairness. Through the investigation of trafficking, corporate exploitation, and official cover-ups, the series questions whether true justice can exist within corrupted institutions. Alex Cross's struggle highlights the tension between moral responsibility and systemic failure.

The Bureaucratic Machinery of True Crime

The sophomore season follows Cross as he uncovers an intricate network of institutional complicity. This web connects municipal real estate syndicates, private security firms, and the digitized landscape of contemporary true-crime media. A core thematic pillar of Season 2 is the critique of the true-crime industrial complex. The narrative introduces a media ecosystem that actively consumes and profits from Black

trauma. The victims are no longer just targets for an isolated serial killer; they are converted into commodified digital content designed to feed streaming algorithms and true-crime podcasts. The series highlights how independent digital media platforms often replicate the very carceral biases found in traditional network television (Petruska & Woods, 2019). These platforms selectively exploit victims' lives to generate engagement, shaping public perception to favor aggressive policing and rapid real estate development under the pretense of public safety.

Gentrification as State-Sanctioned Violence

This media-driven exploitation works hand in hand with the season's critique of gentrification in Washington, D.C. The narrative charts how private developers use localized spikes in crime to justify clearing out long-term Black residents from specific neighborhoods. Through urban redevelopment, rising living costs, and the prioritization of elite economic interests, long-standing residents are displaced and excluded from their neighborhoods. The series highlights how political institutions, law enforcement, and corporate power often collaborate directly or indirectly to sustain inequality and silence community resistance.

Within this framework, the Metropolitan Police Department functions less as a protector of the community and more as an enforcement arm for corporate land acquisition. Cross's partner, John Sampson, serves as the narrative's moral anchor during this arc. Sampson remains deeply connected to the city's working-class Black neighborhoods, and his character highlights the profound betrayal felt by communities that find themselves occupied by the very officers who claim to protect them. This structural cycle forces Cross to confront his own position within the municipal hierarchy. He is no longer simply tracking down an eccentric, isolated killer; he is fighting a diffuse, corporate machinery that smoothly processes Black bodies as either raw material for true-crime media consumption or as geographic roadblocks to urban development. The second season explicitly argues that within a neoliberal capitalist framework, justice is systematically hollowed out. It is transformed into a highly curated commodity, designed to protect property values and corporate investments while actively disposing of the marginalized populations who actually built the community and, in many ways, are instrumental in running the system.

The Dialectic of the Partner: Cross, Sampson, and Cross-Class Friction

The core relationship between Alex Cross and John Sampson provides the series with its most compelling socio-critical dialogue. Rather than presenting a unified front of Black solidarity within law enforcement, Watkins structures their

partnership as a complex dialectic between two distinct segments of the Black diaspora: the academic bourgeois elite and the urban working class. In *Cross*, the partnership between Alex Cross and John Sampson embodies a dialectic of loyalty and conflict. Their differing perspectives, shaped by class experiences, professional responsibilities, and personal values, create productive tension throughout the narrative. While Cross often approaches cases through psychological analysis, Sampson emphasizes practical realities and community concerns. Their relationship highlights cross-class friction while demonstrating how mutual respect can overcome social divisions.

Dr. Alex Cross: The Myth of Institutional Reform

Cross approaches law enforcement through a clinical, highly intellectualized lens. Armed with a PhD in forensic psychology and a deep understanding of behavioral patterns, he operates on the assumption that the State apparatus can be reformed or precisely directed from within. His belief system relies heavily on the concept of Black exceptionalism: the idea that if a Black officer is sufficiently brilliant, highly educated, and legally precise, they can force a biased system to mete out true, impartial justice. Cross represents the classical integrationist philosophy. This viewpoint believes that occupying positions of authority within institutional frameworks is the most effective method to protect marginalized communities from systemic harm.

John Sampson: The Reality of Community Defense

Sampson, conversely, operates with a grounded, instinctual understanding of the true street level. He recognizes that the surrounding community views the police department as a hostile occupying force, a perspective rooted in a long history of institutional oppression (Lockett, 2021). Sampson lacks Cross's academic credentials, but possesses a deep structural awareness of how power actually operates on the ground. He is under no illusions about the history or purpose of the carceral system. His presence within the department is driven by a pragmatic desire to protect his community from both external predators and the worst impulses of the police force itself. This cross-class friction erupts into open debate throughout both seasons. Sampson repeatedly challenges Cross's psychological abstractions, reminding him that while he is busy profiling the complex minds of elite killers, working-class Black residents are still being routinely harassed by rank-and-file officers on the street under the guise of protection. This dynamic subverts the classic 'buddy cop' trope. Instead of simple banter, their dialogue serves as a continuous interrogation of Black identity

and political alignment in the shadow of State power. It forces the audience to question whether it is truly possible to reform an inherently oppressive institution from within, or if the act of participating in that system inevitably turns the Black detective into an agent of their community's displacement and containment.

Visual Style, Architecture, and Streaming Geographies

The socio-critical arguments of 'Cross' are fundamentally reinforced by its visual design, lighting architecture, and geographic framing. Moving away from the gritty, desaturated palettes common to early 2000s police procedural dramas like 'The Wire', 'CSI', 'Cold Case', 'Law and Order', 'Cross' embraces a sleek, high-definition neo-noir aesthetic. These visual choices reflect the economic realities of contemporary premium streaming platforms, which prioritize glossy production values to capture global subscriber engagement (Chalaby, 2022).

The Spatial Geography of Washington, D.C.

The series uses the distinct architecture of Washington, D.C. as a visual map of systemic power and exclusion. The camera consistently contrasts the monolithic, neoclassical marble edifices of federal and municipal power such as headquarters, courthouses, and elite private clubs with the warm, vulnerable domestic spaces of the Cross-family home. The imperial spaces are captured with wide, clinical, geometric frames. This lens design emphasizes the scale of the State machinery, making individual human figures appear small and disposable. When the narrative moves into the police interrogation rooms or corporate boardrooms of Season 2, the lighting shifts to harsh, piercing fluorescents. This cold exposure highlights the clinically detached nature of bureaucratic State power. The makers have impactfully etched the disparity using deliberate color themes in the frames.

Shadows, Light, and Psychological Fragmentation

Conversely, the domestic spaces in the series are filmed with shallow depth of field and warm, low-key amber lighting. This design establishes the Cross home as a fragile sanctuary under constant siege from the surrounding city. The heavy use of chiaroscuro lighting and the sharp contrast between deep shadow and focused light serve as a visual manifestation of Cross's internal psychological fracturing. The shadows that constantly creep into his home represent both the lingering memory of his murdered wife and the ever-present threat of state surveillance that monitors his career. The series maps out a clear socio-economic geography by contrasting different sections of the city. The camera tracks the rapid spread of modern, glass-and-steel luxury apartment complexes deep into historically working-class Black

neighborhoods. These buildings are styled with clean lines and a cold, minimalist aesthetic, visually representing the aggressive erasure of local history. Through this deliberate visual framing, 'Cross' transforms the physical landscape of D.C. into an active narrative participant in the drama. The environment itself charts the steady encroachment of corporate capital and state control over the city's remaining spaces of cultural safety.

Conclusion

Across its first two seasons, Ben Watkins' 'Cross' successfully hollows out the comforting myths of the traditional American police procedural. By refusing to reduce its narrative to a simple moral binary where good investigators easily triumph over isolated evil, the series provides a clear structural look at the internal contradictions of carceral justice. Alex Cross is not a triumphant hero who can fix a broken system through sheer intellect; he is a tragic figure trapped within an ongoing bureaucratic loop. The series forcefully argues that the concept of the Black exceptional detective is a fundamental paradox. Cross's advanced psychological training and institutional authority give him the illusion of agency. However, the narrative trajectories of both seasons demonstrate that the State continues to use his brilliance primarily to preserve its own hierarchy. Whether fighting an elite serial killer who treats marginalized bodies as private art objects, or confronting a corporate real estate apparatus that uses true-crime media to drive gentrification, Cross is consistently forced to witness the disposability of his own community under the law. In the end, 'Cross' positions its protagonist as an emblem of contemporary systemic alienation. Trapped between a community that understandably views his badge with deep suspicion and an institution that regards his race as a permanent risk factor, the Black detective is left without a true political or cultural home.

By mapping this impasse with sharp analytical precision, 'Cross' leaves its audience with a challenging, unresolved question: can an institution built on historical and systemic exclusion ever become a vehicle for genuine human justice? The series redefines the city of Washington, D.C. from a mere backdrop into an active, digital panopticon. By showing how seamlessly municipal cameras, geofencing, and forensic algorithms are turned against Black citizens, including an elite detective like Cross, the narrative argues that modern surveillance technology does not eliminate systemic bias; it simply automates and accelerates it. Watkins uses Cross's high-society status to critique the respectability politics often forced upon the Black middle class. Cross is continually pressured to act as a stabilizing buffer between a frustrated public and a defensive police department. By leaving major institutional conflicts open-ended at

the close of Season 2, the series deliberately rejects the neat, comforting closures typical of network television procedurals. This structural choice forces the audience to confront a harsh reality. In a system driven by corporate real estate capital and media monetization, "solving the case" is merely a temporary band-aid on a permanently fractured foundation.

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