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Citation: van Laer, T. (2016). Why We Love A TV Thriller Like The Missing. Huffington Post,

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THE BLOG

Why We Love A TV Thriller Like The Missing

29/11/2016 10:52

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VCHAL VIA GETTY IMAGES

As a fan of *The Missing*, I cannot wait to see the final episode of the second season. It has fascinated me for the past two years. And I'm not alone. The popular series by the BBC and Starz is the latest example of a genre of stories to which we return time and again: thrillers.

Thrillers are characterised and defined by the emotions they elicit, giving viewers heightened feelings of anxiety, suspense, and anticipation.

But why do we enjoy being anxious, on the edge of our seat, gripped episode after episode?

I am a narratologist, meaning I study the causes and effects of exposure to stories.

My colleagues and I have done research into people's need for narrative and made a 20-minute [documentary](#) out of our findings. We found five motivations for thriller consumption: (1) understanding the outer world, (2) understanding the inner world, (3) investigating the outer world, (4) forgetting the inner world, and (5) looking after a lonely and suffering self.

Understanding the outer world

Stories can provide insight into other people's lives. This is something we all need.

Vivid thrillers also help us make sense of the world. Sense making combines paying attention with mental imagination and feelings of empathy.

The Missing strongly supports these processes because the series provide key patterns of meaning from which everyone can derive broader implications. It is a means for anyone to understand child disappearances and police detective work.

Understanding the inner world

We prefer stories to which we can more easily relate. We mostly enjoy stories in which we have a personal stake.

We also use thrillers to make sense of our own experience.

The Missing is particularly useful to purposefully interpret our own experience, see if our own actions and intentions are appropriate and boost our self-worth.

Investigating the outer world

Different from needing to understand the outer world, needing to investigate it transcends our own direct experience. Stories are also journeys of discovery.

We are also interested in thrillers to learn more about the world and expand our life experience.

Here, *The Missing* is meant not only to interpret what we feel or live through but also to vicariously navigate characters' emotions and 'lives' by visiting real and fictional places (Eckhausen) you would not otherwise.

Forgetting the inner world

Another need for narrative we share is needing stories to break away from daily life. Escapism is human and inescapable. While travelling produces immediate estrangement, story-provided cultural escapism is subtler and more profound. It entails escaping from this world into a fantasy world. Thrillers are effective whenever we just don't want to think about our things anymore. We avidly consume them to avoid our problems or, at least, to forget them for a while.

Escaping to *The Missing* can be good and bad. It can show us how mundane our affairs are. However, it also suits indulgence and denial of personal problems. Escapism should not be putting your issues aside and keeping them for later, because as a result, they do not get resolved.

Looking after a lonely and suffering self

We also consume stories to improve personal resources and heal ourselves. Powerful stories have a therapeutic use.

Thrillers are more than accounts of personal suffering: they abound with moral choices and stress a social ethic. Thrillers are often built on or from myths, which are powerful meaning providers because they include historical elements, linguistic cues to a given culture, religious and ritual values, and social norms and structure. This may at least partly account for thrillers' appeal.

The Missing has various therapeutic uses: it teaches us how to cope with loneliness, it offers a fictional revenge, makes us remember various emotions, including profound sorrow, embarrassment over being in

retirement instead of solving the case, and guilt for losing a child. In some ways, Julien Baptiste is our alter ego, whose life events and emotions make us realise we are not to blame.