TELEVISION AND PODCAST REVIEWS

(Please note that reviews may contain spoilers)

***Lore*: Season 1** (www.lorepodcast.com, 2015-present)

Since it began broadcasting in early 2015, *Lore*, which is still in its first season, has rapidly become a successful podcast, based on gripping and eerie tales of folklore. In each episode, writer and producer Aaron Mahnke recounts myths and urban legends, in addition to tragic true stories. Episodes come out every other Monday and are available wherever podcasts are released. Usually, each episode is an intermingling of first-hand accounts of suspicious and mysterious events with hard facts that have been researched by Mahnke. The result is a constant questioning of what is and is not real, leaving the listener with a creeping sense that poltergeists and changelings might very well exist.

Each episode of *Lore* begins with a different piece of instrumental music that runs throughout the majority of that particular episode. This invariably eerie yet beautiful music sets the mood for the podcast from the outset. This, in addition to Aaron Mahnke's calm and comforting voice, creates the perfect setting for a scary story. This is essentially what the podcast is — a scary story — but it is also so much more than this, as elements of history, mystery, and horror flow through each episode.

The structure of the podcasts, for the most part, is consistent. Each week, we begin with a preliminary story, taken either from recent history or from folklore, which introduces the theme of the episode. These stories range from mystical tales of spirits and strange creatures, to horrific true stories about unsolved murders and the evils of mankind. This use of introductory narrative is highly effective in setting the scene and enticing the listener to excitedly await the intriguing — and often terrifying — details to come. The varying topics make for a diverse and pleasantly sinister experience, ensuring that the show's structure never feels repetitive.

Considering the title of the podcast, it is no surprise that folklore is the main focus. From internationally recognised tales to obscure local myths, Mahnke has researched and produced episodes on disturbing and engaging lore. Some of these tales are inspired by true events that have since been shaped into fantasy. Often the events that have happened were terrible murders or historical events solidified by evidence, while others are pure fantasy

passed down through generations. In Episode 19, which may be one of the most frightening, Mahnke describes the brutal actions of a poltergeist in Edinburgh, a spectre which is said to terrorise the living to this day. A staggering number of witnesses have provided first-hand accounts in which they report the various injuries inflicted by the ghost: it has, allegedly, left bite marks, scratches, and burns on its victims. While the arousal of fear is the podcast's central aim, the tales of older folklore are, by turns, entertaining, creepy, and sometimes even whimsical. Mahnke revisits the classic vampire, witches, and poltergeists but keeps the stories fresh by incorporating historical accounts that claim to provide proof of human contact with these creatures.

In Episode 24, Mahnke begins the podcast with the folktale on the Pied Piper of Hamelin. However, after the well-known tale has been explained, the story takes a dark turn. As the Pied Piper is scorned by the people of Hamelin, the man lures the town's children away to never return. The story is familiar; however, *Lore* assures us, this cautionary tale, that is used to warn against trusting strangers, is really inspired by even more disturbing true events that happened in Germany around the late thirteenth century. As the German Empire at this time needed people to populate new lands, 'locators' would visit towns looking for prospective inhabitants. Townspeople would often sell their children to these locators in order to solve their financial problems. The people of Hamelin were quick to repackage this grim reality as fantasy, Mahnke tells us, and soon the story of the Pied Piper was passed down to cover their actions.

Many of the episodes that leave a lasting impression are the stories that are entirely true. Episode 11, the story of an Irish family in the late nineteenth century, is a disturbing one and shows how dangerous folklore can be when combined with fear and irrationality. Mahnke opens the episode with a short description of Irish fairy culture. Some believed that if a child was born disfigured, this meant that a fairy had taken the child and replaced it with a sort of supernatural place holder, who wasn't fully human. Additionally, if someone became sick and never fully recovered, their loved ones would often believe that the same thing had occurred. The belief can therefore be seen as a kind of coping mechanism, used to explain unwelcome events. However, the opposite could also happen; the episode continues with the story of a man who goes mad, and eventually kills his own wife for the fear that she had been replaced by the fairies.

A similar effect is produced by Episode 27, which centres on the Gruber family and the Hinterkaifeck murders, a series of infamous and terrifying unsolved murders in modern history, filtered here through Mahnke's narrative talents, which only enhance the sense of

horror. It is episodes like these that leave the reader especially disturbed, to a far greater extent than is the case with those that are more clearly mythological in origin. The show suggests, again and again, that while 'home is where the heart is', the place where, traditionally, we feel most safe, we are not, in fact, always safe there at all. This destabilising idea remains with the listener long after the episode in question has ended.

While these are the most effective episodes, *Lore* has something for everyone; it is satisfyingly frightening while also appealing to history buffs and life-long learners, as it touches on historical events and mysterious tales from the past (whether these are true or untrue is left to the listeners to decide). The relaxing tone and eerie stories are a welcome addition to any horror fan's arsenal of entertainment, while also presenting thoughtful analyses of the societal functions of folklore and myth.

Anne Carey

Flowers (Channel 4, 2016)

The opening scene of *Flowers* details a failed suicide attempt by Maurice Flowers (Julian Barratt), the father of the titular family. After a gloomy montage in which Maurice sets up a rope to hang himself from a tree branch, the branch buckles under his weight, sending him sprawling to the ground, where his frustrated expletives diffuse the tension of the situation. In other words, Channel 4's six-part drama *Flowers* begins exactly as it means to go on: as the purest form of gallows humour possible. Indeed, *Flowers* demonstrates wonderfully how humour and depression are inexorably linked, with one being a response to the other rather than its opposite. It's difficult to watch, and often deeply affecting, but more than worth viewer investment, not least because of the cathartic release that the show delivers.

Flowers has a classic gothic feel, largely due to the Flowers' huge family house with its low-hanging ceilings and oddly angled rooms, located in a corner of the English countryside called Heathen's Wood. The show's palette of earthen reds, browns, and greens reflects their country living. The family is also very much influenced by English mythology, with the stories and local myths that the family tell about goblins and pagans intersecting with their own. Maurice is an author of children's books that centre on a goblin-like family called the Grubbs, written in a style reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's poem 'The Jabberwocky' from *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). Maurice's voiceover, in which he reads his own work aloud as he writes and rewrites the stories of the Grubbs, is one of the show's running

motifs, and one which adds to the gothic atmosphere. His gloomy poetry frequently addresses the anguish and despair of his own life. One memorable example runs,

> As Nana Grubb gasped her terminal breath,
> Mr Grubb paled at the cause of her death.
> He gathered her bones and felt his heart wilt,
> Too weak to endure the sheer weight of his guilt.

Such offerings certainly make the audience wonder exactly how he became a children's author in the first place. Maurice's daughter Amy (Sophia Di Martino) similarly uses her own creativity to deal with her frustrations by exploring the story of a fabled local pagan, who was burned as a witch for the crime of falling in love with a disabled boy. Her final act of defiance was to run away from her village by escaping over a nearby bridge to spend a night with her beloved. This bridge features heavily in Amy's own experience of coming to terms with her sexuality. The eerie atmosphere established by these various plot devices is heightened by both the soundtrack of violins and piano composed by Arthur Sharpe, and by the unfashionable tweed that the family wear, a detail which suggests that the Flowers may be somewhat out of step with their contemporary surroundings. Indeed, the family seems to exist in a pastoral wilderness and only make contact with the rest of the world when required. Driving and even phone calls are oddities in their lives, reserved for emergencies (of which there are several throughout the six episodes). This sense of isolation effectively dislocates the family in both space and time, allowing the viewers to appreciate the detached nature of the Flowers family, even as they desperately try to cling on.

More generally, dealing as it does with modern issues in post-crash England, *Flowers* is also an updating of the gothic family drama. Although revolving around broadly applicable themes relating to creativity and expression, family ties and resentments, *Flowers* explores these issues specifically in regard to twentieth-century life. For instance, there is an oppressive (though never outwardly acknowledged) sense that artistic expression is continually being threatened by the demands of modern consumerism. Maurice's contract with his publishing company, Carols (perhaps so named in a nod to Lewis Carroll, much in the same way the Grubbs are reminiscent of Carroll's work), is in jeopardy, and the pressure to provide for his family in such difficult times exacerbates Maurice's depression. Adding to the financial worries are his grown-up twins, Donald (Daniel Rigby) and Amy, who are in their mid-twenties and still live at home. In post-crash Britain, their creative aspirations (to be an inventor and a musician respectively) may never be realised.

Maurice's profession and person disaffection has also bled over into his marriage. His wife, musician Deborah (Olivia Coleman), is desperate to reconnect with him, as he has chosen to sleep out in his studio rather than with her. Deborah's isolation seems to be exacerbated by her lack of contact with the outside; in a world increasingly reliant on electronic communication, she counts the postman among her closest friends. Although British TV is, arguably, somewhat over-saturated by Coleman at the moment, it is clear from her turn here that she more than deserves all the accolades she gets for her portrayal of a desperately unhappy woman, determined to maintain a brave face for her family. Their children, too, find it difficult to deal with their isolation. Amy struggles with her sexuality, and particularly with the prospect of coming out to her family, when she falls in love with her neighbour Abigail (Georgina Campbell). Finally, much of Donald's frustration at his inability to find what he terms a 'strong wife', and his constant sense of competition with his sister, stems from his lack of direction as a young man without any prospects. *Flowers* therefore functions as a post-recession family gothic in which the typical trials and tribulations of gothic family life are reflected in a modern context.

Indeed, if *Flowers* is to be admired solely for one achievement, it is how it addresses the issue of the inability to speak openly about one's fears — fears of inadequacy, loneliness, or depression— and the negative effects this can have. This inability manifests itself differently in each character, with Deborah desperately trying to establish a sexual relationship with other men against her better judgement, simply to get Maurice's attention; Maurice distancing himself from his family to shield them from the truth regarding his suicidal tendencies; Donald framing his life as a competition with his sister in order to ignore his own lack of ambition; and Amy rejecting her mother out of fear that she will judge or condemn her sexuality. *Flowers* explores how detrimental the unsaid can become and how difficult it is to weather one's personal storm alone.

All this drama is supported effectively by an excellent ensemble cast, comprising the Flowers family, their friends, and relatives. Julian Barratt, whose occasional appearance in British Indie productions (such as *Nathan Barley* (2005) and *The Mighty Boosh* (2004-2007)) is always a joy, shows once again that he is more than capable of being the emotional core of a drama whilst simultaneously acknowledging its absurdities. When a fan of his book series observes '[y]ou're taller than I imagined', Maurice's response is '[y]es, I am'. It's the kind of line that only Barratt could deliver with the mixture of nonchalance and confusion that we see here. Meanwhile, Angus Wright plays a neighbour who works as a plastic surgeon, and clearly relishes some of his more outrageous lines, such as when he announces that '[g]rief is

a very sexual emotion'. The most amusing character is arguably Shun (Will Sharpe), who is also the series' writer and director. Shun is Maurice's resident book illustrator and confidant, whose main interest is gay erotic manga: his favourite manga character is Mr Gay, a superhero whose one weakness is his constant erection. While he delivers some of the most entertaining moments in the show, it seems Sharpe himself recognised that his character is somewhat out of place within the tone of this family drama, as Shun conveniently bows out before the emotional climax of the show. However, even he has his moment of pathos, coming to terms with his own homesickness for his family in Japan.

Flowers is also, ultimately, surprisingly uplifting, following the characters as it does from the nadir of their despair through to the possibility of better days. Family, the series dares to hint, could in fact pave the way for healing and greater understanding. A problem shared might just be a problem halved, as the sixth episode leaves the characters on the edge of a tentative reunion, each character realising that they have been strengthened by trusting in others. Although nothing is certain, they are starting to connect once again, and the world is starting to look a little bit more manageable. It's refreshing to see an original series prepared to address issues of mental health and everyday struggles in such an engaging and heartfelt way, using both humour and drama to explore how they can affect us. Chances are *Flowers* will resonate with its audience for a long time to come.

Sarah Cullen

***Stranger Things*, Season 1** (Netflix, 2016-present)

On 15 July 2016, Netflix released all eight episodes of *Stranger Things*, the latest in the online-streaming site's in-house productions. Written and directed by the Duffer Brothers, Matt and Ross, touted as something of a comeback for Winona Ryder, and a nostalgia-fest for people of a certain vintage, the series would establish a cult following with remarkable speed, as the hashtag #StrangerThings trended on Twitter for most of the weekend following its release. Although originally teased by Netflix as being about the disappearance of a young boy, Will Byers, from the small town of Hawkins, Indiana, the eight episodes expand to encompass childhood friendships, teen angst and peer pressure, stolen children, shady scientific experiments, government conspiracies, alternate universes (known here as the 'Upside Down'), scary monsters, frightening forests, and one girl's real, undying love for Eggos.

The opening eight minutes of the first episode are a contender for the most striking of any television series this year, beginning with the attack on a scientist by an unseen creature at a US Department of Energy lab in Hawkins. At the same time, across town, four friends, Dustin, Mike, Will, and Lucas — the youngest, and ultimately most central, group of characters in the show — conclude a ten-hour game of Dungeons & Dragons. The action follows Will on his way home and details his tense encounter with the monster from the lab, which snatches him away to the Upside Down and goes on to terrorise the small town. Playing directly to the power of the viewer's imagination, there is no direct sighting of what stalks Will, with the camera instead focusing on his fear as he attempts to run, and then hide. Indeed, the monster is only gradually revealed as the series progresses. Beginning with brief glimpses in the shadows, or blurry images caught on characters' cameras, each episode provides a more substantial visual picture of the monster, leading to the last episode's dramatic final encounter in a brightly lit classroom.

There are three distinct groupings within the narrative — the adults, the teenagers, and the kids. Winona Ryder makes a welcome return to a screen of any description, playing the permanently frazzled Joyce, mother of the missing Will, to perfection. The cast of adult characters also includes Matthew Modine as Dr Brenner. Although he has little in the way of dialogue or screen-time, Modine convincingly conveys Brenner's sinister nature as the scientist in charge of operations at the lab where El, a mysterious girl with paranormal abilities, is held and experimented on, and where the monster is unleashed after the accident that begins the whole series. David Harbour stands out as Jim Hopper, the world-weary alcoholic sheriff with a heart of gold and a troubled past. The notable teenage characters include Charlie Heaton as Will's older brother Jonathan, and Natalia Dyer as Nancy, Mike's older sister, who team up as unlikely monster hunters after Nancy's best friend, Barb (who became an unexpected fan favourite), is also taken by the creature.

But it is the younger actors who really shine in this cast. The four main child characters — Mike (Finn Wolfhard), Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo), Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin), and El (Millie Bobby Brown) — are remarkable for the strength of their performances, with Brown in particular earning well-deserved critical praise for her ability to create such a compelling character without the assistance of much dialogue. It is gradually revealed that El, known as Eleven at the lab, was taken from her mother when she was a baby and raised as a lab-rat by Dr Brenner. Possessed of extraordinary psychic powers and the ability to slip into the Upside Down, she has had no contact with other children, no socialisation beyond her interactions with those in the lab, and calls Dr Brenner 'Papa'. Her vocabulary is limited and

her knowledge of the outside world is non-existent, something that would be a challenge for the most experienced of actors to play and yet Brown manages it with ease.

The three actors playing the boys who shelter her when she escapes are similarly noteworthy in their performances. These kids are proud geeks, revelling in their board games and science experiments, using all their game-playing skills to try and outwit their own real-life Demogorgon. The use of the name 'Demogorgon' is an interesting device here, given that it is also the name of one the best (or worst) demons in Dungeons & Dragons. Naming the monster, and associating it with the board-game they have forged their friendship over, enables the kids to process their fear of the monster without compromising their desire to outwit and defeat it. It is a dehumanising tactic — if it is possible to dehumanise a monster from another dimension. There is real heart at the core of the kids' narrative as they try to find their missing friend, keep El hidden while also trying to use her powers to their advantage, and deal with the emotional rollercoaster of losing Will but gaining El, and then having essentially to swap them both again at the end.

Beyond this, part of the charm of *Stranger Things* is the very blatant homage to all things 1980s in which it indulges, although this can also be a failing, depending on your point of view, as one person's homage becomes another's rip off. From the visual cues to Spielberg movies, including the boys' bikes that anyone who has seen *E. T.* will constantly expect to take flight, to the nods to *Twin Peaks*, among countless others, it could seem like an exercise in seeing how many cultural references can be crammed into a single episode. But all of this is handled with a deftness of touch and an obvious love for the pop culture of the era, leaving me feeling all warm and aglow when I found myself remarking aloud that 'we have that same jug!' during the final dinner scene at the Byers house. The soundtrack, and use of music throughout the series, is pitch perfect and generally follows the music of the period the series is set in. A notable exception to this is Peter Gabriel's cover of Bowie's 'Heroes' that scores one of the more emotional moments of the series, as Will's 'body' is recovered from the quarry at the end of Episode 3. It is one of those powerful instances where visual and aural registers beautifully combine to heighten the emotional impact of a scene.

This is not to say that the series is without its flaws. There is nothing particularly innovative about the story when it is broken down into its constituent parts, and it ticks many of the standard boxes for constructing a scary story, including creepy forests and lost children. The character pairings are also decidedly heteronormative, even though there are attempts at some quirks. Nancy, initially the annoying older sister, transforms into some kind of warrior princess, yet she still ends up with the jock boyfriend instead of the more sensitive,

lonely outsider Jonathan. There has also been some criticism of the scene where El is dressed up in a wig and dress by the boys in order to disguise her, with its obvious reference to a similar scene in *E. T.* Physically androgynous in the beginning, El's knowledge of and investment in the concept of 'pretty', despite her limited vocabulary and having been essentially a lab rat for her entire life, is somewhat jarring.

And yet in spite of this, *Stranger Things* is still one of the television events of the year, primarily because it knows how to tell a story well. Netflix have also recently confirmed a second season, thereby ensuring that they won't keep what Dustin calls 'the curiosity door' closed for long.

Jennifer Daly

Making a Murderer (Netflix, 2015)

A dead young woman, false imprisonment, heroes and villains, a murder mystery, salacious details, and a public viewing gallery: *Making a Murderer* has all the elements of an excellent gothic novel. Yet this is a true story, presented via a Netflix original documentary that covers twenty-two years. The series follows Steven Avery, a resident of Manitowoc County, Wisconsin, and his various trials and tribulations with the law. Firstly, it shows how Avery was wrongly convicted of sexual assault in 1985 and consequently imprisoned for eighteen years. It then focuses on how, following his release, his attempts to press a civil lawsuit against Manitowoc County were interrupted when he was accused and found guilty — alongside his nephew Brendan Dassey — of the rape and murder of a woman named Teresa Halbech. The series documents the case against Avery and the efforts made by his defence lawyers, Dean Strang and Jerry Buting, to show how the police failed to handle the evidence correctly and planted incriminating evidence in order to indict Avery. In its structure and style, the series draws on several elements of the gothic tradition, producing what is essentially a gothic murder mystery for the twenty-first century.

Making a Murderer exemplifies how the gothic is continually changing medium, and particularly one that reflects changing technologies. While television is not a new phenomenon, the *way* in which we can now consume television programmes has altered radically in the past few years. Netflix, for example, allows subscribers to 'binge watch', meaning that you can view every episode of a series both consecutively and immediately. The appeal of such a viewing model relies on the fact that the programmes themselves are marketed as addictive, therein ensuring a loyal audience. Series become phenomenon, as for

example *Breaking Bad* (2008-13) and *Stranger Things* (2016), with thousands of viewers avidly watching before moving on to the next craze. In some ways, this mirrors the reading habits of readers of the early gothic — perfectly parodied in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (published 1817; begun in the mid-1790s) — as they would move voraciously from one salacious novel to the next. This method of consumption, however, becomes problematic when the subject is nonfiction, when it involves real-life cases and people who are still affected by the events depicted. In *Making a Murderer*, the cooperation of Avery and his family with the documentary's production is motivated by a hope that this coverage will force a re-trial. Though it did result in a petition and caused widespread furore, there is the risk that with the confirmation of *Making a Murderer* Season Two, viewers will be appeased by the show's release — and not by Avery's — feeding the demand for further episodes.

The cruellest twist in watching *Making a Murderer*, however, is the viewer's growing awareness, as the storyline unfolds, that its narrators, the filmmakers Laura Ricciardi and Moira Demos, are ultimately unreliable. Whilst their access to those involved in the case was unavoidably limited by a number of factors (for example, many simply did not want to be interviewed), articles quickly arose after the series' release that accused *Making a Murderer* of drawing the viewers' attention only to evidence that was overlooked or misrepresented. For example, while the presence of Avery's blood in the victim's car was presented as planted, the filmmakers did not acknowledge other DNA evidence such as hair and sweat. The series was also accused of focusing solely on the defence, without allowing the prosecution to make an alternate case. It is difficult, if not impossible, to comment on the filmmakers' intentions — one can only speculate.

However, in offering a medium through which to discuss the unreliability of the series' creators, the internet becomes a useful metatext and draws attention to the engagement between the gothic text and the viewer/reader. Forums and discussions boards, as well as social media, became spaces to discuss and share theories about *Making a Murderer.* These concerns were picked up in mainstream media, with *The New York Times* releasing an article entitled 'Questioning the Evidence in the "Making a Murderer" Case' (29 January 2016). In particular, the programme's generic positioning as a documentary and its construction of the narrative were questioned in terms of its veracity. For many, the idea of a documentary suggests objectivity and truth; this can lead to people watching such shows without any critical engagement with the text. While we may be familiar with other gothic texts having unreliable narrators, such as the unnamed protagonist is Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) or the killer in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart' (1843), documentaries often

try to hide of the fact that they feature a narrator at all. The filmmaker disappears behind the camera, negating the sense of a first-person narrative, and hence obscuring the possibility that the narrative voice or perspective might be unreliable. In *Making a Murderer*, the viewer does not even hear the filmmakers posing questions, concealing the fact that a story is being told and a narrative created.

More generally, the series draws on elements of sensationalism, the gothic, and detective fiction in order to draw in the viewer. By concentrating primarily on one victim of the failures in police procedures, *Making a Murderer* effectively creates a narrative around the man who becomes our protagonist — Avery himself — with whom the viewer readily identifies. Rather than considering a wide number of cases to show endemic failure in the American legal system, the programme concentrates on eliciting an emotional response from viewers in its depiction of Avery, his family, and his friends; the affective quality of the series draws on sensationalism. The story itself is also sensational; it is a murder mystery, one which provides a terrifying insight into the corruption of the legal system. In line with this disturbing material, the opening credits evoke a sense of the gothic through the use of sepia tones and shots of rural America complete with dark birds flying across a grey sky. The music is cinematic and plaintive strings evoke a heightened sense of drama. Thus the credits establish links to other gothic fictional television series such as the Nordic detective series *Jordskott* (2015), which also uses string music and dark birds in its opening credits, and the French 'zombie' series *The Returned* (2012-present), which features similar shots of a rural, isolated community.

Further underlining the show's quasi-fictionality, each episode relies on a 'cliff hanger' to keep the viewer watching. This means that the information and facts of the case are regulated and re-ordered to create a credible narrative structure. Consequently, the documentary format is forced to fit within the structures of gothic sensationalism — each 'reveal' encourages the viewer's desire to find out the 'truth'. In a similar way, the sensation novels of the nineteenth century, such as Wilkie Collins *The Woman in White* (1859), drew on gothic and detective elements to create suspense. Readers wanted to reach a satisfactory explanation for the mystery which unravelled before them.

Peopling this narrative is a cast that is split into 'good' and 'evil' characters. Throughout the programme, the lawyers defending Avery against the murder charge are positioned as the documentary's heroes. In many ways, these lawyers fulfil the role of the Crew of Light in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897): they are shown to be decent, honourable, and hard-working, fighting tirelessly for the good of the victimised. The idea that Dean

Strang and Jerry Buting, rather than Avery himself, should be viewed as the heroes has been confirmed by the viewing public — indeed, the online news and entertainment site *Buzzfeed* portrayed them as heart throbs. This was partially in response to further information about Avery's past coming to light. It was quickly noted by online viewers that the account of Avery killing a cat was dealt with very briefly by the filmmakers during the course of the series. The image of Avery as a cat-killer compromised his apparently absolute innocence — and, of course, the internet loves cats. Strang and Buting, by contrast, come across as intelligent and moral, and the internet was quickly flooded with memes featuring the pair of lawyers surrounded by love hearts.

The desire to find 'good guys' to counteract special prosecutor Ken Kratz's strangely convincing role as the 'bad guy' indicts the viewer and the filmmakers as much as the jury. Overall, the series creates a claustrophobic sense of the injustice and corruption that runs through the legal system in America. The inequity of the power of the police in regards to the Averys is reminiscent of the representation of the Roman Catholic Church in early gothic novels. There is a sense that those who work for Mantiwoc County have become corrupted by their power. There are parallels here with the Schendoni, the villainous priest from Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797), and Ambrosio, the evil monk from Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796), both of whom defend their actions because they are representatives of the Church. Similarly, Kratz and the police of Mantiwoc County are presented as feeling justified in their behaviour because they are representatives of the law.

Yet, just as *Making a Murderer* highlights the fact that jurors want to believe that the police are above reproach, and would rather imprison the wrong man than no-one for murder, the viewers are at risk of making a comparable mistake. We want the police and prosecution to be cruel and tyrannical, and Strang and Buting to be our romantic heroes. Thus, Avery's more ambivalent qualities are left underexplored, in favour of the presentation of Avery as a family man and, more compellingly, as a victim — both of the police and of social prejudice. Avery is also repeatedly depicted as childlike: the cover image for the series is Avery's face show on one side as an adult and on the other as a child. The inference is that his innocence had been lost through the behaviour of the legal system. In regards to Dassey, Avery's nephew, his victimhood is also framed as childlike innocence. Both men are presented as vulnerable and this creates a desire in many viewers to protect them. When this image of Avery was challenged online outside the documentary itself, particularly in regards to his killing a cat, the allegiance of the viewers shifted to the defence lawyers as less complicated 'heroes'. Moreover, the vehemence of opinions regarding the Averys' guilt or innocence, and

the number of alternate theories, highlights the desire for a clean ending to this narrative. In the murky obscurity of this gothic narrative, the viewers strove for clarity, taking on the mantel of the detective themselves. Although readers of gothic narratives are often (though by no means always) presented with happy endings and a clear sense of what is 'good' and 'evil', the viewers of *Making a Murderer* must make their own 'good guys' and 'bad guys'.

In concentrating on the gothic elements of this series this review has, like the series itself, neglected Teresa Halbech, the woman whose rape and murder were attributed to Steven Avery and Brendan Dassey. *Making a Murderer* and the discussions that followed its release have tended to concentrate on the accused as the victim and not Halbech. Ultimately, in the real world, a young woman was murdered, and it is not clear at all if the murderer/s have been apprehended. Viewers have used the internet to pick at Halbech's bones, but have often wholly disregarded her personhood. Instead, to the viewers, she is represented only by her image; throughout the documentary, her identity is replaced with a picture of Halbech with her camera. Her image, like the narrative of *Making a Murderer*, becomes something to be consumed. In particular, Dassey's disturbing description of what happened to Halbech, which he later denied, mirrors the most prurient elements of murder mysteries. The obsession with the perpetrator and not the victim of the crime is reminiscent of the presentation of Jack the Ripper as an anti-hero. At the London Dungeons, the room dedicated to Jack the Ripper comes immediately after the one for Sweeney Todd, with no acknowledgement that one was real-life killer and the other a figment of the imagination. Moreover, the tourism which has sprung up around Jack the Ripper shows the potential danger in allowing the victim(s) of killers to become voiceless. The lives of Jack the Ripper's victims are ignored and his crimes are treated merely in terms of an enjoyable gothic tale.

In many ways, the treatment of Halbech as just another element of a sensational storyline is what makes *Making a Murderer* truly gothic. Though Ricciardi and Demos deride the manner in which Halbech's death was sensationalised for the jurors, the series allows the viewer to be similarly prurient. The series draws parallels between Dassey's description of Halbech's murder and James Patterson's novel *Kiss the Girls* (1995), which he was reading at the time. This detail suggests that there is an overlap between the world of fictional serial killers and the real world, one which Dassey fails to acknowledge. This is not to suggest that fiction causes people to behave like serial killers, but rather that it may be easier to frame real life within fictional constructs. In doing so, the threshold between popular accounts and verifiable narratives is blurred. The irony is that *Making a Murderer* itself often threatens to

cross this line. By drawing on gothic tropes to construct Avery's life, viewers are able to enjoy it as gothic fiction rather than gothic fact.

Kaja Franck

Scream Queens (Fox, 2015-present)

Wickedly funny, irreverent, and at times patently offensive, Ryan Murphy's darkly comic horror series, *Scream Queens* (2015-present) has a dramatically different tone from his other well-known creations. It is neither as saccharine nor as immediately accessible as *Glee* (2009-2015), the most recognisably mainstream of Murphy's works, while managing for the most part to sustain a structural coherence and critical focus that is otherwise lacking in *American Horror Story* (2011-present), an exhausting anthology of hyperbole and horror pastiche. Along with regular collaborators, co-writers, and co-executive producers Brad Falchuk and Ian Brennan, Murphy eschews the excesses of *American Horror Story* and transposes (with reasonable success) the conventions of the cinematic horror-comedy into the miniseries format. *Scream Queens* offers up a caustically witted, overdressed slasher mystery that apes most major classics of the horror genre (*Psycho* (1960), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Carrie* (1976), *The Shining* (1980), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), and even the recent true-crime podcast, *Serial* (2015-present)).

The show's title is a conscious allusion to the ways in which female characters (and indeed the actresses who play them) are traditionally victimised in slasher horror — usually by phallic-symbol-wielding male assailants. *Scream Queens* is overtly aware of its status as meta-horror, and builds on the successes of its predecessors, most notably the *Scream* series (1996-2011). While *Scream Queens* certainly celebrates its heritage and revels in postmodern self-reference, the series' self-awareness is rarely overplayed, and it avoids the pointed, self-indulgent meta-horror of *Scream 4* (2011), for example, which utilises the horror-narrative-within-a-horror-narrative trope to an infuriating degree within its first ten minutes alone. (The film opens with a series of filmic *mise-en-abymes* that leaves the viewer unsure of whether the scenes they are watching are part of the film's diegetic narrative or of a narrative ruse designed to unsettle audiences' expectations of what they are watching). Nonetheless, in one episode of Murphy's series, the original scream queen, *Halloween*'s ingénue Jamie Lee Curtis, recreates shot for shot the famous shower scene from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, which starred her real-life mother, Janet Leigh. The show therefore teases but ultimately

rewards fans of the horror genre, and Murphy and the writers play with certain recognisable, classic tropes in a way that is readily understood by the initiated viewer.

The series follows the sisters and new pledges of a fictional college sorority house, Kappa Kappa Tau, who are being stalked by a serial killer dressed in a red devil costume (known simply as the 'Red Devil'), determined to wreak vengeance on the sorority for events that happened twenty years previously. The sisters are presided over by Chanel Oberlin (Emma Roberts), the spoilt, entitled, and fiercely vitriolic head of the sorority. Swaddled in haute couture, she is an unholy amalgam of Heather Chandler from *Heathers* (1988) and *Mean Girls*' (2004) Regina George, all the while addressing her friends as 'minions', 'dumb sluts', and 'idiot hookers'. The sisters of Kappa Kappa Tau must contend with a new decree by the college's Dean Munsch (Curtis), which allows *any* incoming female student to become a pledge — a decision that the wealth- and fashion-obsessed clique of young women (who the show appears, at first glance, to lambast) consider to be a travesty of what they believe a sorority should be, making a mockery of their beloved elitism. Munsch certainly serves as a counterpoint to the unchecked capitalist hedonism of the sorority girls, and she is very much Murphy's mouthpiece for the show's satiric derision of contemporary female youth culture, and its tendency to inculcate passive-aggressive and manipulative behaviour, and unbridled competitiveness, within young girls' relationships. As self-interested, fashion-conscious, high-consumerist products of twenty-first century reality television, saturated in the vainglory of social media, the 'Chanels' (the collective term for Chanel and her minions) 'represent everything that is wrong with young girls nowadays'.[1] They represent a damning indictment of the superficial, jaded millennial culture against which Murphy and the show seemingly rail.

Scream Queens' aesthetic blends horror with a darkly derisive critique of these millennials, and the show's humour is problematically and frequently linked to images of imperilled young women in particular. For example, in a casting coup for Murphy, American music starlet Ariana Grande plays Chanel Number Two, one of the sorority sisters, who is stabbed by the Red Devil in the show's pilot. With her dying breath, the character uploads a status update about her own murder to an unnamed social-media website highly reminiscent of Facebook. The scene is parodic in nature, emphasising the overreliance of youth culture on social media to document seemingly everything that happens. Yet the threat to the female body (a consistent trope in horror, especially slasher horror) remains ever-present: from the

[1] 'Pilot', *Scream Queens*, Fox, 26 October 2015.

very first episode, the show encourages us to laugh at and mock both stupidity and female beauty, and the horror of this scene — in which Grande's character is repeatedly stabbed/penetrated — is couched in darkly humorous terms. In this way, *Scream Queens* is painfully unoriginal, as the show does very little to update the trope of the victimised and objectified young woman in horror.

In spite of the show's very subtle, sometimes very clever satire, Murphy seems to sanction for his (probably young) audience a spurious belief that the Chanels' wildly exaggerated, inappropriate, juvenile, and aggressive behaviour is justifiable — precisely because, it is largely implied, those whose economic and social livelihoods are imperilled by the Red Devil are attractive, wealthy, upper-class, young, and, for the most part, white women. The appalling behaviour of most of the young female characters is seemingly endorsed by the show precisely because these women are rich and pretty — certainly a questionable moral ethos. Indeed, Roberts' character, in particular, is so one-note in her function as satirical cypher that she becomes a veritable simulacra, both the vehicle through which the show critiques the horrors of capitalist youth culture and the un-ironic mouthpiece of that very culture. So hyperbolic is her portrayal of Chanel, and so outrageous is the character's behaviour, that the audience hardly fails to recognise her for what she is — an overblown indictment of fashion-conscious, cut-and-thrust, over-privileged millennial culture.

However, given that it ultimately falls to the audience to understand Chanel's significance as a satirical figure, the show runs the decided risk that many of its viewers will be unable or unwilling to discern its subtext. Murphy's evident fascination with college sororities seems to function as a rather shallow pretext for examining issues of class and female identity politics within American society (two issues that are firmly entwined within *Scream Queens*). It becomes apparent that, for everything the show wryly observes about the prescriptive authoritarianism and militant rigour of some strands of contemporary feminism, and the ways in which girls and young women are encouraged to behave, to dress, and to treat one another, Murphy nonetheless glories in the competitive backbiting, the duplicity, and the high-stake fashion wars of his characters, and in the superficialities of his own creation. As such, the satirical power of *Scream Queens* is lost in the show's more superficial interests.

More generally, the series is not really *about* who the killer is; the identity of the Red Devil is the show's MacGuffin. *Scream Queens* is about the perils of female relationships, and the ways in which those friendships presented in the show are frighteningly comparable

to the paranoia experienced within traditional horror narratives, where the characters never quite know who to trust (a common feature of the *Scream* series (2015-present), for example). Indeed, when one of the sisters of Kappa Kappa Tau rams a stiletto heel into her own eye in order to incriminate her supposed friend and sorority sister, Murphy underlines the duplicitous extremes to which young women can go in order to compete for one another's friendship. Here, the high heel is used as a tool by which the character mutilates herself: the phallic symbol and a symbol of both female sexuality and oppression are conflated to the point where they *literally* damage the character's own view of herself, linking the horror of this act to the series' implied wider social and cultural fears — namely, female paranoia about self-presentation and social status, and the simultaneous fear of/desire for penetration.

For all this, the show's use of horror is purely functional: by putting these women in mortal peril, and all but ensuring that none of the less stereotypically attractive or less obviously entertaining characters meet their end at the hands of the killer, the show's 'final girls' (pretty rich white women) are those who, for the large part, endorse an extremely problematic set of politics. The show's ostensible moral message (that sororal bonds are good) is all but glossed over, as Murphy's evident obsession with the Chanels suggests that what is ultimately more important for a woman is the ability to undercut someone with a tart and efficient one-liner, all the while wearing a drop-dead-gorgeous dress — an impulse that clearly runs contrary to some of the series' more genuinely enlightened insights into sororal relationships. There are, after all, only so many times that the writers can have Chanel stomp around looking fabulous without the audience, too, glorying in the excess of her world.

While the show's writing is tremendously sharp in places, the writers make little attempt to conceal a troubling inclination towards (among other things) casual racism, homophobia, misogyny, classism, and the ill-treatment of those with mental-health problems. In one of many such scenes, Chanel forces the older, overweight sorority housekeeper, Mrs Bean (Jan Hoag) — whom she calls an 'obese specimen of human filth' and 'white mammy' — to ape Hattie McDaniel's line from the 1939 film, *Gone With the Wind* (1939), about 'birthin' babies'.[2] Hattie McDaniel, of course, played the African-American house slave in that film, which makes this a particularly uncomfortable comparison not least because of the writers' irresponsible disregard for issues of class and race in American history, but also because of the downright nasty relish with which Mrs Bean's physical appearance is insulted.

[2] 'Pilot', *Scream Queens*, Fox, 26 October 2015.

As the series progresses, there is a disturbing trend towards body shaming women, which amounts to the veritable ridicule of Chanel Number Five's body shape for no other purpose than malicious entertainment. (Abigail Breslin, who plays Chanel Number Five, was the only regular cast member who was still a teenager at the time of filming, and whose body is in fact the most realistically proportioned of these women.) Admittedly, all of these scenes are pointedly exaggerative and in line with the excessive, provocative nature of the show's aesthetic. However, it would be a mistake on the part of viewers to imagine that, just because the show delights in its status as a black comedy, the wilfully inappropriate attitudes displayed towards African Americans, homosexuals, poor people, and curvaceous women merit no objection. Indeed, it may be argued that the true horror of *Scream Queens* is not so much the traditional elements of the slasher thriller, but the horror of the cultural attitudes and ideologies defining contemporary North America that are represented in the show.

In particular, *Scream Queens* is painfully aware of the destructive psychological effects that ritual bullying and humiliation have on young women — indeed, this forms part of the show's central message. It acknowledges these effects and goes to great lengths to drive home to the viewer (albeit parodically) its other central theme: the absence of parental figures and the psychological effects that a misplaced sense of loving approval can have on the young (a well-known horror trope, illustrated, for example, in *The Orphan* (2009)). Ultimately, the show's awareness of itself neither prevents nor excuses the writing from being unqualifiedly hateful. In Chanel, *Scream Queens* presents a version of 'femininity' that is problematically indistinguishable from satire. Chanel is both a critique and a vindication of certain tendencies within female youth culture towards bitchiness, capriciousness, and self-centredness. We want to hate her because she is despicable, but we love to watch her because she says despicable things that, arguably, few people in real life could get away with saying — and she is consistently glamorised while doing so. Most troublingly, this reviewer fails to see how the young women who might watch this show can distinguish with confidence between subtle satire and the glamorised, underweight characters/actresses who peddle the series' smothered moral message amidst its horror.

In spite of how unrelentingly offensive the show can be, the fact that *Scream Queens* has garnered a major cult following says a great deal about contemporary American sensibilities and anxieties surrounding political correctness. The series is entertaining and hilarious for all the wrong reasons — a troubling contradiction that perhaps speaks to popular culture's unquestioning blindness as to the damaging effects of language, and the comfortable bigotry which remains a consistent feature of post-reality broadcast media. The show is

certainly worth viewing, if only to allow one to recoil at the sheer deluge of bad taste, for there is certainly a limit to how effective its satire is. *Scream Queens*' content, as suggested above, adds very little in the way of original material or tropes to the horror genre, and while its presentation of contemporary female youth culture is the most noteworthy element of the show, it is also the most worrying. The horrors of real-world female peril, which include both the social pressures of female competition and the threat of unwanted penetration by masked men, are mitigated somewhat by the narrative's hyperbolic comedy, which ultimately transforms the show from relevant social satire into something considerably less palatable.

Although far from the best example of new-wave horror television (represented by shows such as *Hannibal* (2013-2015), *Jordskott* (2015), and *Penny Dreadful* (2014-present)), *Scream Queens* certainly does advance further possibilities for serial horror television — particularly in regard to those shows that delight in paying homage to the greats of the genre, but without allowing their own inter-referentiality to become stifling and distract from the main narrative (such as *American Horror Story*). However, much like *Scream: The TV Series*, the second season of which is currently airing on Netflix, *Scream Queens* will need to rely more on scenes of innovative and original horror for its upcoming season, and much less on its ailing satirical qualities, if it is going to sustain itself. Horror has entered a new phase — becoming serialised, episodic, and prolonged — but if this new format is going to survive, writers of horror television are going to have to devise new and believable ways of sustaining these narratives without descending so indulgently into self-parody.

Ian Kinane

***Penny Dreadful*: Season Two** (Showtime, 2015)

John Logan's Showtime series *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016) returned for its second season in May 2015 with ten thrilling episodes that (re)introduce spectators to this gothic costume drama set in late-Victorian London (and Season Three aired in 2016 while this review was being written). The protagonists of the show are the major characters of nineteenth-century gothic and adventure literature (such as Dr Frankenstein, vampires, and Allan Quatermain), united in what Jeff Jensen defines as 'a league of extraordinarily screwed-up demon hunters'.[1]

[1] Jeff Jensen, '*Penny Dreadful*: EW Review', 30 April 2015 <www.ew.com> [accessed 13 April 2016].

Season One (reviewed by Bernice Murphy in Issue #13 of the *IJGHS* (2014)) presents the intertwined stories of Miss Vanessa Ives (Eva Green), Mr Ethan Chandler (Josh Hartnett), and Dr Victor Frankenstein (Harry Treadaway). The raven-haired Miss Ives is a rigid, though elegant woman who continually fights against Satan's possession of her body and soul; Mr Chandler is an American sharpshooter who transforms into a werewolf at full moon; and Dr Frankenstein is a young scientist who is forced to obey the requests of his malevolent Creature (played by Rory Kinnear). This group is headed by Sir Malcolm Murray (Timothy Dalton) — a Quatermain-like explorer and gentleman — and its mission is to search for Sir Malcolm's lost daughter Mina (partly based on the character of Mina from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897)), who has been kidnapped by a group of vampires infesting London. Simultaneous with the central action are the narratives of the epicurean Dorian Gray (Reeve Carney), who attempts to seduce Miss Ives, and of the Irish prostitute Brona Croft (Billie Piper), who falls in love with Mr Chandler, but dies of tuberculosis at the end of the first season. Season One's finale depicts the group's failed attempt to save Mina, who is converted to evil completely, and Sir Malcolm's acceptance of Miss Ives as a substitute daughter. The parallel narratives also involve Mr Chandler's massacre of the Mariner's Inn's customers, Frankenstein's initial work on the corpse of Brona, and the Creature's eager anticipation for its re-animation.

Season Two picks up precisely at the end of Season One. It opens with the massacre perpetrated by Mr Chandler, and his subsequent anguish and regret, as well as his fear of being discovered because of the testimony of a vengeful survivor. Just as the wild werewolf into which he transforms hunts its prey, Mr Chandler is himself hunted throughout the ten episodes by a new character, Scotland Yard's inspector Bartholomew Rusk (Douglas Hodge), who attempts persistently (though with the most polite and gentlemanly of manners) to convince Mr Chandler to confess his crime and thus redeem his soul. From the first episode of the season, Mr Chandler entertains a closer protective relationship with Miss Ives than in Season One. These two characters represent the physical and psychological torment caused by the dark forces raging inside them, as they must each continually fight the temptation to succumb to fits of murderous wrath. Mr Chandler struggles against the werewolf inside of him, and Miss Ives against the Devil's possession: Chandler defines his dark forces as 'monsters', whereas Ives describes hers as 'demons'.

Outside of Chandler and Ives own psyches, in contrast to the unnamed vampires who were the villains of Season One, Season Two's new adversaries are introduced almost immediately and assume the shape of a family-coven of shape-shifting witches headed by

Mrs Poole (a superb Helen McCrory, who appeared in Season One as the medium Madame Kali). Mrs Poole is a servant of Satan, to whom she intends to consign Miss Ives, who is part of a greater design involving the battle between 'good' and primordial 'evil'. After numerous enchantments and several attempts to kidnap Miss Ives, Mrs Poole attempts to command Miss Ives from a distance by creating in her subterranean 'sanctuary' a puppet that works as a sort of voodoo doll and reproduces Miss Ives' features with uncanny precision. An intriguing narrative element is added through the implementation — by Miss Ives and the witches — of the *Verbis Diablo*: the alleged dead language of the Devil, a form of mythological communication, similar to Tolkien's Black Speech of Mordor in *The Lord of the Rings* series (1954-1955), which lends weight to the scenes involving witchcraft. Together with the graphic portrayal of murders and the nightmarish visions induced by black magic, the use of the *Verbis Diablo*, and the good characters' progressive translation of it through a series of ancient artefacts recounting the Devil's memoirs, is one of the most fascinating aspects of the second season of *Penny Dreadful*. Christianity, together with many of its symbols, is juxtaposed continually with a revised version of the story of the fallen angel dramatised in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667): according to the series' narrative, there are two fallen angels, one of whom roams the earth in the form of a vampire and feeds on human blood, while the other is confined to hell and preys on human souls.

Though this is, arguably, an age of widespread desensitisation, to the extent that there are few scenes in *Penny Dreadful* that are genuinely frightening, the series nonetheless belongs under the heading of gothic television.[2] Indeed, the thematic focus on horrific themes and motifs, such as infanticide, paranoia, the grotesque body, and the invasion of the home by hostile forces, as well as the use of a series of morbid paraphernalia such as skulls, gargoyles, and trickling blood, renders the aesthetic of the show firmly gothic. Moreover, as is the case with many horror films and other gothic TV series such as *Twin Peaks* (1989-91) and *The X-Files* (1993-2002, 2016-present), the visual tone of *Penny Dreadful* is consistently dominated by drab and dismal colours, by closed-in environments and a stark use of lighting, which privileges exaggerated shadows and dark settings. The mise-en-scène is also characterised by the use of many low angles and out-of-focus frames, which emphasise the gory details and provide a disturbing perspective.

Although Season Two of *Penny Dreadful* is, as was the case with Season One, still impaired by its slow pace and what Murphy has called its many 'lengthy conversation[s]

[2] Helen Wheatley, *Gothic Television* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 2006.

between […] very messed-up people', its sentimental and intriguing subplots do provide some compensation.[3] These are, however, more interesting than the suspenseful scenes belonging strictly to the horror genre and to the main characters. Indeed, the sequences depicting morphine-addicted Victor Frankenstein's love and subsequent raving jealousy for his new creature — the re-animated Brona Croft (Piper), now re-baptised through the experiment's rite of water and electricity as Lily Frankenstein — become all the more intriguing and compelling as the series progresses. This is also the case with the amorous adventures of the hedonistic Dorian Gray with the transgender woman Angelique (Jonny Beauchamp), a relationship which finally leads to the much-awaited unveiling of the immortal young man's picture. As was the case with Season One, an effective device here is the way in which many plots are structured so as to run parallel to each other in every episode: an illustrative example is provided by the juxtaposition of the sequences depicting the simultaneous love/sex scenes of many characters near the finale of the fifth episode of Season Two, 'Above the Vaulted Sky'.

The most captivating subplot is the story of Frankenstein's Creature (Kinnear), who now tellingly calls himself John Clare, and whose naïve smile and erroneous trust in human kindness and good-heartedness likely stimulates every viewer's compassion. The Creature's narrative, which is filled with poetic language, demonstrates — in accordance with Mary Shelley's original masterpiece (1818) — the immorality, brutality, and monstrosity of the human race when confronted with anyone 'different' or Other. The development of the character of Lily Frankenstein, who was created as a bride for the Creature, well surpasses the speechless roles interpreted by Elsa Lanchester in James Whale's *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) and by Helena Bonham Carter in Kenneth Branagh's *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994). Here, Lily evolves from a shy and weak woman dependent on the men around her to a conscious female being with ambitions of power and dominion. Mr Lyle (Simon Russell Beale) is also a more significant presence than he had been in the previous season. In Season One, Mr Lyle was introduced as an Egyptologist who entertained his guests with spiritualistic séances. In Season Two, he has an active role in the battle against evil: after hesitating between the two sides, he becomes a helpful advisor to the series' team of men who fight tirelessly against the diabolical and ruthless witches (and who strongly recall the 'Crew of Light' in Stoker's *Dracula*). With his bushy eyebrows, perspiring forehead, and

[3] Bernice M. Murphy, '*Penny Dreadful*: Season 1', *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, 13 (Summer 2014), 142-46.

thick fingers, Lyle seems also to be an excellent imitation of the cheiromantist Mr Podgers from Oscar Wilde's short story 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime' (1887).[4]

The slowest parts of the story are those that concern the flashbacks of Miss Ives' initiation as a witch and her subsequent temporary retirement to an isolated cottage in the middle of the Western moors. These sequences do not have the charm of the urban settings portrayed throughout the rest of the season, in the realistic streets of fin-de-siècle London (evocatively defined by Frankenstein's Creature as a 'steel-hearted city'), the interiors of the character's homes (such as Mrs Poole's gothic mansion), and the storage rooms of the British Museum. More successful is the portrayal (through the character of the Cut-Wife (Patti LuPone), an old woman who tutors Miss Ives on the use of magic in the third episode, 'The Nightcomers') of white magic and the cruel persecution of alleged witches throughout history, a reminder of the unjust hatred towards people and phenomena that humans struggle to understand.

More generally, together with the precision in the depiction of the settings, costumes, language, and manners of the Victorian era, one of the greatest merits of *Penny Dreadful* derives from the actors' performances. The cast are all exceptionally good in their roles, especially Eva Green as Miss Ives and the magnificent Timothy Dalton as the guilt-ridden Sir Malcolm. Green and Dalton portray every nuance of their characters and their moods with convincing realism. Noteworthy, too, is the soundtrack, composed by Abel Korzeniowski, which contributes significantly to the series' ambience. Its use of choral and fast-paced orchestral tracks is highly effective, whilst its crescendos perfectly accompany the use of magic in episodes such as 'Verbis Diablo'.

The season's finale resolves the central narrative arc in the first half an hour, with the emotionally intense confrontation between Miss Ives and her nemesis, the Devil himself (who physically possesses Miss Ives' doll), which occurs through a supernatural duel. Once this has been resolved, this final episode ('And They Were Enemies') leaves viewers with a series of poignant epilogues that separate the main characters — three of them are last seen aboard different ships. These epilogues, which effectively exemplify the characters' loneliness, are certainly distressing, but they simultaneously invite viewers to return for the series' continuation. For those who were not fully enchanted by Season One, Season Two will surely induce viewers' affection and loyalty. Season Three of the show has been aired since this review was written and it includes such infamous gothic characters as Dr Jekyll,

[4] Oscar Wilde, 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime', in *Late Victorian Gothic Tales*, ed. by Roger Luckhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 27-56.

Count Dracula, and Dr Seward, while it had been rumoured that Dr Moreau could become the villain of the fourth season, thus completing the show's series of mad scientists; however, we now know that Season 3 marks the end of *Penny Dreadful* — for now, at any rate. We will therefore never know whether H. G. Wells' Invisible Man, Charles Maturin's Melmoth the Wanderer, Richard Marsh's Beetle, and Arthur Machen's Great God Pan could successfully have joined the cast of characters, or if Lucifer himself would have fully manifested and staged a final confrontation.

Antonio Sanna

The Black Tapes (www.theplacktapespodcast.com, 2015-present)

In the past eighteen months, the world of podcasts has been expanding at an astonishing rate. No longer the preserve of political commentaries and football analyses, the podcast is becoming an artistic medium in its own right. Reaching beyond the downloadable 'catch-up' of the consistently popular Radio 4 *Drama of the Week* and *The Archers* (1950-present), the podcast has become a common form for both fictional and non-fictional serialised storytelling, with historical surveys such as Dan Carlin's *Hardcore History* (2012-present) and sci-fi cult offerings like *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012-present) both receiving loyal followings. One podcast belonging to this new explorative generation is *The Black Tapes* (2015-present), a bi-weekly investigative gothic drama that has so effectively exploited the podcast medium's conventionally realist limits, with its commitment to imitating its journalistic counterparts, that confusion initially arose as to whether it was indeed fictional.

Few people could have missed the recent phenomenon that was *Serial* (2014-present), as millions of commuters were transformed into detectives while listening to the show on their way to and from the office. Since then, a permanent fixture on the iTunes home page has been a conveyor belt of the best true-crime podcasts, covering everything from brutal nineteenth-century murders to evidence tampering and urban legends, all of which raises the question: what is it about this medium that attracts such dark subject matter? Consistently throughout these shows, questions of truth, fiction and doubt are raised, and in many respects, these aspects also play significant roles in the realm of the gothic, for it is a genre that depends on the evocation of fearful possibility. The same may be said of the podcast form: it tells the listener what they ought to picture, rather than explicitly showing them. In some ways this is the difference between horror (the explicit) and terror (the possible), two components which shape the gothic. In her genre-defining 'On the Supernatural in Poetry'

(1826), Ann Radcliffe lays out the differences between horror and terror, asserting that the former 'annihilates' the senses in its use of shock and gore, while the obscurity of the latter stimulates them.[1] Following this logic, it may be argued that the podcast, with its singular and somewhat restrictive route into the imagination via the auditory, is the perfect vehicle for manipulating the listener into a state of terror of their own making. The podcast as a form piques the creative impulses, forcing the listener to pay attention to the surface text, while simultaneously reinterpreting the imaginative possibilities behind the words; the listener is essentially locked in a dark cupboard and asked to decide what is really happening behind the door. In a society so visually fixated (ideally situated for the shock of horror), this technique in *The Black Tapes* places the consciousness on shaky ground before even taking into account the fictional realism at play in how content is presented.

Essentially, *The Black Tapes* is *Serial* meets *The X-Files* (1993-2002). Opening under the guise of a documentary series looking at 'people with interesting jobs', gung-ho journalist Alex Reagan finds herself lured into the world of the notorious super-sceptic, Richard Strand, whose research institute is offering a million dollars to anyone who can legitimately prove the existence of the supernatural. Enter the titular black tapes, an assortment of video and audio recordings on a shelf in Strand's office, detailing paranormal phenomena dating back decades that he can't quite explain … yet.

It has to be said, Alex is suspiciously like the journalist behind *Serial*, Sarah Koenig, in both terms of presenting style and personality. Much like Koenig (whose dedication to the Adnan Syed murder case extended to mapping defunct cell-phone towers and timing car journeys around Baltimore personally), Alex is consistently curious and open minded, going above and beyond the call of duty in her search for the highly abstracted but ever present idea of 'The Truth' — the holy grail for all investigative journalists. Indeed, perhaps the most telling nod to Koenig lies in the fact that both she and her fictional counterpart, Alex, frequently share their ethical concerns, personal anxieties, and innermost reactions to developments in their investigations, showing that it is not just the answers to questions, but the process of finding them, that profoundly affects the individual. Given the supernatural nature of *The Black Tapes*, it is perhaps unsurprising that for Alex these humanistic concerns will come to be manifest in imagery linked to demons and elements of possession (especially in Season 2).

[1] Ann Radcliffe, 'On the Supernatural in Poetry', *The New Monthly and Literary Journal*, 6:1 (1826), 145-152 <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/gothic/radcliffe1.html> [accessed 9 September 2016].

Without giving too much away, Season 1 introduces us to the Torres family, who have been haunted for generations by a creepy black figure in their family photographs. Cue debates surrounding photo tampering, Babylonian demons, conventional horror tropes of imaginary friends gone rogue, and the commonly repeated term 'apophenia' — supernatural confirmation bias, the idea that once the idea of the paranormal is placed in someone's head, they will subsequently seek out positive proof wherever possible. This dispute between science and the supernatural could get monotonous, and being very blunt, the dialogue in some parts does not do much to resuscitate such a well-worn trope. This can be forgiven, however, as the weightiness of the words is often due to over-zealous attempts to convey an encyclopaedic level of knowledge about the occult. In Season 1 alone, the Zozo demon board, the Tower of Marduke, sacred geometry, and bi-location are all treated with astonishing levels of precision. This does hamper the plot's pace in parts, and in some respects you do have to work to find the fear factor. That said, with its convincingly naturalist production style, the risk of potentially farcical scary-monster voices is limited, and the emphasis falls instead on more menacing realist tricks like distorted riddles left on hacked mobile phones.

It is impossible to discuss *The Black Tapes* without dwelling on the show's form and production, for it is without a doubt thanks to its commitment to realism that it has gained so much traction on social media. After listening to the first episode, I found myself googling 'is *The Black Tapes* real?' and I was not alone in my confusion. The somewhat anonymous team behind *The Black Tapes* have really outdone themselves in creating social-media accounts for their characters and fictional production team (complete with up-to-date interactions), as well as websites for The Strand Institute and the show's host station, Pacific North West Stories. Needless to say, the novelty of this set-up can only be sustained for so long, and it is now common knowledge that the show is the summer project of Canadian English teacher, Paul Bae and his film-maker friend, Terry Miles. Amazingly, however, the identities of the voices behind the characters are still highly contested on fan forums such as Reddit, and it seems unlikely that Bae and Miles will be leaking the names any time soon. They have opted instead to expand the fictional PNWS network's remit with a sci-fi sister series, *Tanis* (2015-present), featuring character crossovers, as well as episode sponsorship from well-known podcast supporters, and the inclusion of 'bonus' episodes and online features through subscription schemes.

Many elements of *The Black Tapes* phenomenon can be seen to echo the 90s cult classic *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), which relied on early social-media hype before its

festival launch and played heavily on the 'found footage' format and total improvisation on the part of its actors, who for some time were actually listed as deceased on IMDb. However, perhaps where the two pieces differ is in the type of effects they hope their realist techniques will achieve. Whereas *The Blair Witch Project*, with its shaky cameras, blurry night-time footage, and traditionally gothic setting of a forest allows the viewer to experience the documentary makers' 'real' terror as the film progresses, *The Black Tapes* relies more on 'informed fear', styling itself as an investigative-journalism podcast, and counting more on somewhat academic content regarding the occult than on form to create its ambience. In this respect, it is not a particularly immersive form of horror; there is very little in terms of the gratification of a good jump scare, and genuinely terrifying plot points can be missed in seconds if the listener accidentally tunes out of interviews with 'experts' or the subjects of each tape. So how is it still scary? The terror of *The Black Tapes* is one that lingers and makes itself known when it is least expected. Information about cults, possession, exorcisms and demons is presented in a totally matter-of-fact, academic manner and it's only later that the mind fully processes what was actually said, and more importantly, why it's so unnerving. There is no resolution in the black-tapes cases, no satisfying Scooby-Doo villain to put the blame on, no demon vanquished, allowing the suburban family to resume their everyday routines. Indeed, *The Black Tapes*, with its sceptic vs potential-believer dynamic, deliberately exploits this lack of closure, underlining the unique, individualised nature of doubt and belief. Anything is possible and that amount of free imaginative rein, combined with the supernatural information provided, allows the mind of the individual listener to go to all sorts of strange and frightening places at any time.

This is not to say that *The Black Tapes* is all about the writing and less about the production. *The Black Tapes* may not have an explicitly 'scary' form, but its commitment to realism does facilitate the aforementioned elements of debate surrounding doubt and belief. The show copies the format of the popular mystery and true-crime podcasts currently dominating the charts, making a point of integrating the simulated production process into the podcast itself, with Alex and her producer Nick Silver discussing the ethics of including particular interviews in the programme. Beyond this, the show is comprised mainly of narrative from Alex, coupled with telephone conversations and on-location interviews. There are some eerie found-footage elements (think baby monitors with ghastly voices), but for the most part the show uses these sorts of terror tricks sparingly, and they are still very much situated within the framework of doubt vs possibility, as Strand and Alex puzzle out what exactly is going on. Indeed, the show's overall vibe is epitomised in its cautionary theme

tune, 'The Kingdom of the Universe' (2003), by Vancouver indie band Ashley Park: listening to the series, we are ill at ease and hyper-aware that something is not quite it seems regardless of whether this is a human conspiracy or something otherworldly. This sentiment is in keeping with the song's depictions of the otherwordly — allusions to the devil, spirits, and belief are interwoven in such a way that the demonic/supernatural is humanised: the question is not whether these things exist, but whether we wish to doubt or to believe in them. With its repeated instruction to 'fly away', 'The Kingdom of the Universe' echoes this conflict by suggesting that we may quite literally fly into the realm of the unknown, or metaphorically flee into the world of scepticism.

It is hard to predict what will happen next with *The Black Tapes*. Season 2 has seen a bit more character development in regards to Alex and Strand, and although this does impede on the show's initial structural impact as a 'documentary', listening to the audio-diaries of seemingly ordinary people coming to doubt their own systems of belief is perhaps more terrifying than any fuzzy found footage. In these diaries, we listen as painfully human themes of madness, faith, and science take hold, to the point where we ourselves begin to question what we believe. Studies of the gothic have always nodded to the concept of the 'uncanny' — feelings of familiarity tainted and gone awry. Through its familiar show formatting, insistence on 'accurate' journalism, and rigorous debates between the eternally doubting Alex and the absolutist Strand, the listener could be in more or less any of this year's popular wave of true-crime investigative-documentary series (recommendations include HBO's *The Jinx* (2015) and of course, Netflix's critically acclaimed *Making A Murderer* (2015)). The only difference is that, from the very first episode, we are dealing in questions of truth and fiction in an entirely fictional setting, and this is where the uncanniness very much begins.

The Black Tapes throws the listener into a house of mirrors with the suggestion of lurking monsters, and demands instead to know what the listener sees in his or her own distorted reflection. In many respects, what stares back in this artificial setting is entirely real human anxieties: the endless search for something to believe in and the pressure always to be accurate and factually correct in a society that often scorns those who believe too readily. *The Black Tapes*, with its reserved, probing tone, fascinating insights into the supernatural, and intelligent marketing, epitomises perhaps the greatest fear of the twenty-first-century sceptic: the open acknowledgement that, in a cynical world of fact, nothing is as certain as it appears and that there may just be the tiniest bit of room for doubt.

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