TELEVISION REVIEWS

"In Gore We Trust": Horror and the Modern U.S. Crime Series

Bernice M. Murphy

Television crime in the United States has undergone a radical transformation in the past decade. Prior to the mid-1990s, most detective series, with the exception of rare stand-outs such as Cagney and Lacey and NYPD Blue, were predictable, comfortable viewing fit for all the family – which is why reruns of Diagnosis Murder, Murder She Wrote, Matlock, Quincy, MD, and Columbo are still staples in the daytime viewing schedules. The only thing about the likes of Murder She Wrote that might keep you awake at night would be wondering why no police officer ever questioned the fact that Jessica Fletcher 'just happened' to be present at the site of so many suspicious deaths.

Now, largely thanks to non-terrestrial stations such as the Dublin-only Channel 6, the UK's Channel 5, and the Living Channel (ironic, since so much of its output focuses on the dead, be it in ghostly or corpse form), Irish television schedules are overflowing with prime examples of the new breed of American TV detective. Gone are the Private Investigators, enthusiastic amateurs and sleuthing pensioners of the past (although William Petersen's Gil Grissom in CSI: Vegas is getting increasingly saggy looking). With the exception of precocious high-school student Veronica Mars, American detective shows overwhelmingly focus on government agencies and highly professional police departments staffed by beautiful people in sharp suits (or snappy casual wear made cooler by the strategic addition of Kevlar and handcuffs). They spend much of their time gazing into microscopes or at computer screens, prodding fresh corpses, performing autopsies, or profiling serial killers and deranged killers. They also occasionally find a moment to brood over unresolved personal issues and gaze meaningfully into the middle distance.

Shows such as the various incarnations of CSI, Cold Case, The Inside, Bones, Criminal Minds and Touching Evil owe much more to the conventions of horror and the gothic than they do to those of the more traditional US detective drama. The nation that was allegedly shocked by the 'accidental' exposure of Janet Jackson's left nipple during a live Superbowl broadcast seems to have no problem whatsoever with the intensely detailed, hyper-realistic depictions of violent death, decay and putrefaction which are the very raison d'Être of Bones and CSI. So long as the body is fictional, anything goes – which suggests that the viewing public is more comfortable with dismembered fake bodies than it is with naked real ones.

Today's crime shows are characterised by slick production values (whatever the quality of the writing, they always look good), expensive SFX and frequent use of CGI to illustrate the ease with which the human body can be destroyed. David O. Russell's film Three Kings had a much-lauded scene in which the path of a bullet through the human body was graphically illustrated. Nowadays, moments such as this form the very basis of CSI and Bones, which also display a geekish fascination with technology and weaponry, and a sustained valorisation of the forces of law and order. In a dynamic familiar to all X-Files fans, whilst the guys in charge often fail to understand the methods of the talented mavericks who work

for them, ultimately, the mavericks are still part of the system, and the tools and resources provided by officialdom prove invaluable.

Generally, these shows fall into two main types, although they have much in common beyond this. The first is overtly body-centric, inhabited by scientific geniuses who need only a part of the puzzle to be able to solve the whole conundrum – in this case, I mean the CSI franchise and Bones (recently shown on Sky 1 and TV 3). The obvious antecedents for this strand of programming include Patricia Cornwell's immensely popular Kay Scarpetta novels, which, with their detailed and intensively researched descriptions of the hitherto mysterious processes of crime scene analysis and the duties of a medical examiner, did much to introduce the public to the nitty-gritty of forensic investigation. Indeed, Bones is loosely based upon a similarly themed, if more recent series of novels by Kathy Reichs, a real-life forensic anthropologist.

Though much time is spent in the lab, performing baffling but cool-looking experiments to a moody sound track, the forensic detectives do tend to perform an unlikely amount of hands-on police work as well, accompanying cops on raids, performing interviews and even, as in the so-silly-its-kind-of-enjoyable Bones, taking part in shoot-outs and hand-to-hand combat with dangerous suspects. Both CSI:Vegas and Bones also display a notably goofy sense of humour, as if to offset the sheer unpleasantness of so much of their subject matter. CSI: Vegas almost always has a moment at the end of the opening teaser where chief investigator (and father figure) Gil Grissom makes a bad pun about the crime scene of the week. A prime example is the episode in which, after observing a large rodent coming out of the mouth of a corpse, he wryly notes of the victim that "she ratted herself out". The silliness of such jokes is presumably intended to remind us that what we're watching isn't actually real, and to give a little warmth to characters who might other wise be intimidating insightful. It is also unintentionally reminiscent of the similarly puerile strain of humour found in Slasher movies, which also display a fascination with the mechanics of violent death.

Another big influence is the most successful horror film of the 1990s, The Silence of the Lambs. Made with the full cooperation of the FBI, Silence did much to help rehabilitate the reputation of an agency that had hitherto had an absolutely disastrous decade, as David Schmid's fascinating book on the popularity of Serial-killer narratives, Natural Born Celebrities, notes. As well as helping to establish the 'hunt for a serial killer' as one of the most popular present day cop-show story lines, the scene in which Agent Starling and her cohorts carefully photograph the bloated corpse of a young woman murdered by 'Buffalo Bill' is key here. Prior to this point, death on mainstream television shows tended to be discrete rather than overtly realised. A corpse might have a bit of blood on its face, or a small red hole somewhere to indicate a gunshot, but that was usually all, and Quincy, the original medical examiner, could sometimes perform a whole autopsy onscreen without us ever seeing the body. But like Twin Peaks' fixation upon the corpse of Laura Palmer, and the grotesque scene early on in Seven in which the hugely obese man forced to eat himself to death is splayed out on the mortuary slab, the body-examination scene in Silence tapped into a public appetite to see the most abject of scenes graphically realised on the small screen.

The other category of show I will discuss here is rather less reliant on science and technology (although corpses are frequent), and tends to feature government agents and cops rather than scientists and

technicians. At least five American TV shows in the past decade have focused on task forces dedicated to capturing serial killers – Millennium, Profiler, Criminal Minds, The Inside and Touching Evil (again, thank you Seven and Silence of the Lambs). Millennium, Profiler, and the more recent-but-short-lived The Inside in particular, often had a mythical, semi-or-overtly supernatural element which left us in no doubt as to the fact that we were watching a fully-fledged battle between good and evil. They all feature gifted mavericks with a disturbing, semi-psychic knack for putting themselves in the killer's shoes. The ability to understand such criminals, it is consistently suggested, usually comes at the expense of some terrible personal ordeal. But even shows without any overt supernatural content can, at times, have a vaguely gothic feel: the heavily flash-back reliant Cold Case always ends with a cringe-inducing scene in which the detective in charge of solving old murders quietly smiles at the happy looking spirit of whatever victim she's helped out on that particular week, and in Without A Trace (an otherwise strictly procedural show about an FBI missing persons unit), those who have vanished that week are shown gradually fading out of the picture at the beginning of the show, like ghosts who don't know they're dead yet.

In both types of show, the trope of the young, troubled female investigator is so common as to have become something of a cliché. Like Starling, for whom the lambs were still screaming, the problem generally lies with some sort of unresolved childhood trauma. The parents of Temperance Brennan, heroine of Bones, disappeared when she was a teenager (she should have asked the guys in Without a Trace to help find them). In CSI:Vegas, we eventually discover that team member Sara Seidel is a moody loner because her mother stabbed her abusive father when she was a kid. The main character of Cold Case, a wan Philadelphia cop named Lily Rush, was neglected by her alcoholic mother and brutally assaulted when she was ten, and the fiancée of the main female character in Touching Evil shot himself (he probably sensed that he was doomed anyway). The most bizarre childhood trauma I've come across is that undergone by Rebecca Locke, main character in The Inside (briefly shown this summer on ITV 4). She was kidnapped as a little girl and spent several years in the company of an evil genius. Luckily for the FBI, as well as making her understandably sullen, the experience also gave her an uncanny ability to think like a serial killer – a talent which has obviously become downright commonplace in this kind of show.

Leaving aside the question of just how all of these troubled young women were able to pass the psychological tests necessary to become involved in law enforcement, one cannot help but again notice the extent to which the conventions established in The Silence of the Lambs have trickled down to the small screen. Just as that film was a deft combination of police procedural and gothic horror story (tropes effectively combined in the film's gripping climax), so too do Starling's small-screen successors often find their own tragedy-riddled personal histories affecting the cases they investigate. This is not to say that the men in such shows are entirely trauma free either. They have their fair share of issues too, most notably in the case of CSI: Vegas's ultra-unfortunate Nick Stokes, who has been both stalked by a madman who lived in his attic and imprisoned in a glass coffin full of poisonous ants. But it's the women who generally have the most to put up with, though no one has yet approached Dana Scully's uncanny ability to get abducted by aliens/serial killers/liver eating mutants every time Mulder's back was turned on The X-Files.

The detective shows of the past always concluded with the cunning unmasking of the culprit and a cheerful return to the status quo. Deranged maniacs were notably scarce, and motives tended to be comfortingly old-fashioned: usually jealousy, adultery or greed. Even though the murderer of the week is generally still caught at the end of the new breed of program, the effect is no where near as reassuring. What these shows overwhelmingly have to tell us is that it's a dangerous world out there, one full of demented serial killers, brutal street crime and random acts of senseless violence. And if you think that you're any safer at home, you're wrong, because you're just as likely to get bunked off by your loved ones or creepy next-door neighbour. Like the world weary, justifiably cynical cops and scientists who populate the new breed of detective dramas, we know that the following week will simply bring them another brutal murder to solve. The only comfort comes from knowing that it probably won't be our own.

BERNICE M. MURPHY

There is nothing wrong with your television set: Programming from The Outer Limits (The Original Series, Season 1 & 2, MGM DVD, 2002-2003)

There is nothing wrong with your television set. Do not attempt to adjust the picture. We are controlling transmission. If we wish to make it louder, we will bring up the volume. If we wish to make it softer, we will tune it to a whisper. We can reduce the focus to a soft blur, or sharpen it to crystal clarity. We will control the horizontal. We will control the vertical. For the next hour, sit quietly and we will control all that you see and hear. You are about to experience the awe and mystery which reaches from the inner mind to... The Outer Limits. — Opening narration – The Control Voice – 1960s

It's curious to note how many of the great science fiction TV shows of the past begin with opening narrations similar to this; narrations which ask us to come inside, settle down, open our minds and prepare for the unexpected. Another example is The Twilight Zone which tells us:

"You unlock this door with the key of imagination. Beyond it is another dimension - a dimension of sound, a dimension of sight, a dimension of mind. You're moving into a land of both shadow and substance, of things and ideas. You've just crossed over into the Twilight Zone."

And most famous of all is Captain Kirk's invitation to join the Starship Enterprise on its five year mission to "explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before". Along with providing continuity, the central tenet of these and similarly narrated intros is to provoke a sense of excitement, adventure and mystery and, most importantly, a sense of breaking boundaries, of leaving something old and entering something new and unknown. (Ironically, these narrations have become very familiar, even comforting, to fans of these shows, but that doesn't mean they've lost their excitement.)

This penchant for an introductory narrative in science fiction TV is quite clearly indebted to Old Time Radio shows of the 40s such as Dimension X and X Minus One, both of which began with weird noises and a host inviting you to travel with them through "dimensions in time and space" and listen to "adventures told in future tense". Old Time Radio horror/mystery shows such as Lights Out, The Creaking Door and Inner Sanctum also included exciting and mysterious intros, inviting their listeners into a liminal space of unknown adventures. Yet, curiously unlike their science fiction counterparts, such horror-based radio shows did not find themselves a home on TV so readily. It seems the reason for this may be a matter of perception and, in particular, of genre definitions. As Mark Jancovich so eloquently argues in his study of American horror of the 1950s, Rational Fears (1996), the genre distinctions made between the tale of horror and the tale of science fiction are complex and often contradictory. Among the numerous difficulties arising out of attempts to impose a rigid and coherent formula on genres such as horror and science fiction is the willful denial of the huge variety of classificatory methods used by different audiences. This is nowhere more evident than in the science fiction narrative of 1950s America, where stories of alien invasion and monster movies made rigid genre definitions appear not only arbitrary but futile. Amidst these definitions, we find the attributes that have been most readily associated with the science fiction genre are a tendency toward philosophical and intellectual reasoning, a predilection for social criticism and a perspective which is decidedly pro-science. In opposition to this, the genre of horror

and in particular Gothic horror is often regarded as dealing with individual psychology and emotion, all within a framework which views scientific progress as dangerous and threatening. However, even a preliminary consideration of the science fiction and horror narratives of 1950s American cinema makes these definitions highly problematic. Under such distinctions, tales of alien invasion and mad science must be classified as horror, albeit horror with a science fiction theme. All in all, what such categorization would seem to suggest is that science fiction stories become horror stories when science "goes wrong"; when, for example, aliens prove to be more violent and primitive than us or when a scientist allows personal issues to interfere with his work.

With these distinctions in mind it also becomes clear why TV programmers favored science fiction shows to horror shows. As part of its mission to establish itself as the friendly face of science within the home, the new and exciting medium of television was naturally drawn towards the futuristic pro-science of the science fiction story; and the 1950s presented its TV audience with a slew of high-action tales of adventure such as Buck Rogers (ABC 1950-51), Captain Video (Dumont 1949-54), and Flash Gordon (Syndicated 1953). By the 1960s these were replaced by more adult themed shows, which focused on philosophical and ethical issues through tales of mystery and suspense rather than action-adventure. The most notable of these are of course The Twilight Zone (CBS 1959-64) and The Outer Limits (ABC 1963-65), two of the genre's most celebrated and influential series, which as one commentator notes "frequently engaged in critical commentary on the three pillars of New Frontier ideology--space, suburbia, and the superpowers". (Jeffrey Sconce)

Hosted and for the most part scripted by Rod Serling, The Twilight Zone was an anthology series which frequently, although not exclusively, used science fiction to frame highly allegorical tales of the human condition and America's national character. Science fiction was often used to defamiliarize and question the values of post-war America, be it its suburban malaise or cold war paranoia. Serling's tales usually relied on ending with a twist and often used quite heavy doses of "I told you so" irony to enlighten their audience.

In an attempt to set up a rival series to CBS' Twilight Zone the programming heads of ABC contracted independent producer Leslie Stevens. Stevens undertook the project and employed the skills of Joseph Stefano (script writer of Hitchcock's Psycho). Between them, and the considerable talents of their production team which included directors, Gerd Oswald and Laslo Benedek and cinematographer Conrad Hall, The Outer Limits came into being. With Stevens' interest in the latest audio-visual techniques and Stefano's penchant for German Expressionism and dark tales of psychological drama, The Outer Limits combined the genres of science fiction and horror in an utterly unique and often disturbing way. Its profound awareness of itself as both a televisual product and a science fiction format was perhaps one of its most intriguing elements. The show evidenced this awareness from its very beginning. Unlike The Twilight Zone's decidedly vague references to dimensions in time and space and a land of things and ideas, The Outer Limits made a direct and immediate reference to its existence as a TV program, turning this familiarity into something strange and vaguely threatening in its claim to have interrupted programmed viewing and taken control of transmission. This claim is backed up by the program's opening visuals which begin with a small dot in the center of the screen that transforms into a pattern of broken waves. Curiously, while this brilliant use of technological reference heightens the sense of the show's

contemporary science fiction elements, it also acknowledges the darker possibilities of science itself, turning that most familiar face of household science (the television set) into a medium which can act in unpredictable ways and be used by unknown forces. Indeed, the premise of the show's very first episode, "The Galaxy Being", involves a similar theme of unexpected televisual transmission, when radio station owner and inventor, Cliff Robertson, finds his high-powered transceiver's "three-dimensional static" resolves into a pure-energy alien from the Andromeda galaxy.

Despite their preliminary likeness, The Outer Limits in fact differed quite radically from The Twilight Zone. Firstly, The Outer Limits was more firmly grounded in science fiction than The Twilight Zone, and although both were an anthology series, The Outer Limits' hour-long format lent itself to more in-depth character development and more complex plot lines. And while it too told allegorical tales about science and space it did so in a far darker tone, heavily implicating its audience and American society in the sinister scenarios it offered. Despite its other worldly format it did not shy away from earthly references, be they narratives of enemy infiltration of the American Government, (reaching all the way to the President) ("Hundred Days of the Dragon") or the political manufacture of fear in order to manipulate public opinion ("The Architects of Fear"). These earthly parallels also included the unashamedly "artsy" and intellectual referencing of "The noble Hamlet... Anna Karenina, putting on her gloves on a snowy evening... Gatsby in white flannels... Moby Dick... and Mark Twain's whole meandering Mississippi" ("The Man Who was Never Born"), as well as the legends of ancient peoples "Assyrian, Babylonian, Sumerian, Semitic" ("Demon with the Glass Hand"). This latter episode, dealing in time travel and the fate of the human race, has been quite justifiably referred to as "one of the most narratively sophisticated and willfully obtuse hours of television ever produced". (Sconce) If all of this sounds like too much hard work for the viewer, let's not neglect to mention that The Outer Limits was also a format for highly compelling drama, with a host of fascinating characters and more than a few very creepy creatures. It also boasted a galaxy of acting talent which included Donald Pleasence, Vera Miles, Robert Duvall, Ruth Roman, Martin Landau, Sydney Blackmer, Gloria Graham, Bruce Dern, William Shatner, Don Gordon, Ralph Meeker, Warren Oates, Miriam Hopkins, Lenoard Nimoy, and Cedric Hardwicke.

Like all allegorical tales, the stories The Outer Limits told contained moral lessons but these lessons remained ambiguous and decidedly liberal, with more than a hint of the value system which by the late 60s would be referred to as “hippy”. Nowhere is this more evident than in the control voice's closing words to the episode entitled "The Man Who Was Never Born":

"It is said that if you move a single pebble on the beach, you set up a different pattern, and everything in the world is changed. It can also be said that love can change the future, if it is deep enough, true enough, and selfless enough. It can prevent a war, prohibit a plague, keep the whole world... whole."

Unfortunately, the network heads of ABC did not share this vision, becoming increasingly concerned that the show was too "out there" for a mainstream audience. Unappreciative of Stevens' and Stefano's maverick style, they placed pressure on the duo to radically alter the show's orientation and tone. In short ABC wanted less plot and more action, less socio-political commentary and more monsters. Rather than submit to network pressure the pair quit the show after 32 episodes and thus ended Season One of The Outer Limits. With a new crew, composed of key members of the Perry Mason production team, Series

Two aired in September 1964. Without the creative sensibilities or the vision of the original production team, Season Two suffered from narratives which managed to be simultaneously pedestrian and convoluted, camera work which was flat and uninspired and a cast of marauding alien monsters with little to do but tear up the scenery. Coupled with these changes, a new time slot and a reduced budget sealed the fate of the show and it ended in mid-season. All this said, Season Two is not without its moments; among them the previously mentioned episode "Demon with a Glass Hand" and brilliant exchanges such as the following from the episode "Keeper of the Purple Twilight":

Ikar: "That's the second time you use that word, what does it mean?... love."
Dr. Plummer: "You don't know?"
Ikar: "It's a new word to me."
Dr. Plummer: "It's the opposite of hate!"
Ikar: "That is also a new word."
Dr. Plummer: "These are the two most profound emotions of all Mankind."
Ikar: "Emotions?"
Dr. Plummer: "Don't tell me you don't know that! What in heaven's name, what do you live for?"
Ikar: "Accomplishment!"
Dr. Plummer: "Without satisfaction?"
Ikar: "Knowledge!"
Dr. Plummer: "Without pleasure?"
Ikar: "Conquest!"
Dr. Plummer: "Without hate?"
Ikar: "Energy!"
Dr. Plummer: "For what?"
Ikar: "For control."

Throughout its brief existence The Outer Limits remained intent on exploring the nature of control, the uses and abuses of power and the role of individual responsibility in society. In the current social-political climate these explorations remain as pertinent as ever. The release of the series on DVD is long overdue, however, those with a liking for DVD extras will be sorely disappointed as there are none included. It could be argued that to want more would be pure greed and is it not true that in such passions lies the annihilation of the human race?

We now return control of your television set to you, until next week, at the same time when the Control Voice will take you to... The Outer Limits

Now available in all good DVD outlets, Season One - 8 Disc Box Set, and Season Two - 5 Disc Box Set

ELIZABETH McCARTHY

Satan's School for Girls
Christopher Leitch. American Broadcasting Company. 2000.

Satan's School for Girls, the 2000 Aaron Spelling made-for-TV remake of a 1973 Arron Spelling made-for-TV film, and which was shown on Ireland's Channel 6 in June of this year, is perhaps most notable for failing to live up to the expectations raised by its title. Contrary to the initial reactions of those to whom I have mentioned it, there are no shower scenes, no uniforms, no bondage gear, and Shannen Doherty's character Beth remains fully (indeed, modestly) clad throughout. There is, nonetheless, a lot going on in this rather snigger-inducing little exercise in generic convention. Doherty, undercover as "Kate", enrols at the university attended by her sister before she committed suicide, with the intention of unearthing the motives behind this uncharacteristic move on the part of her beloved sibling. Convinced, for some reason, that the occult is involved, she soon runs afoul of a group of under-fed Goth-girl types, who are hostile, mysterious, and hang around an abandoned building on campus where terrible deeds happened in the long ago – ample evidence of membership of a Satanic cult. We are therefore supposed to feel rather thrown when the leader of the gang is eaten by a wolf, which is controlled by a group of hooded female figures, just moments after these figures are shown having sex with shadowy Things against a vast and twisted tree. All of this comes to our attention via a nightmare of Doherty's, an economical vehicle for the revelation that she is psychic. From here, a vast conspiracy is revealed, one that reaches to the very heart of the college's leadership, who attempt to recruit our heroine into their evil, power-hungry, man-eating ways, an attempt that she foils in spectacular fashion. And all this in just over an hour and a half. That said, it was an hour and a half fairly enjoyably spent. However, one is also left with a niggling impression that, despite being only five years old, the film is strangely old-fashioned.

It is this quality that makes the film an interesting choice for Channel 6, Ireland's newest television channel, one that tells us a lot, both about what almost seems to be a strategy of deliberate anachronism on Channel 6's part, and about the fate, since the late 1990s, of low-budget small-screen productions that can only be termed "horror-lite". By this I mean that particular brand of programme that borrows heavily from the conventions and iconography of the horror genre, while most of the time turning the gore and fright factors down to a minimum. The blood is there, we just don't get to see it very often. It is in the casting that the issues of genre and release date crystallise most palpably. Shannen Doherty is a somewhat older, more sober version of Prue, her character in the series Charmed, a typical example of a late-'90s horror-extra-lite, which features a family group of three witches bravely fighting off demons, saving the world and screaming a lot, with absolutely no blood spilt whatsoever. Her coldly blond evil nemesis is Julie Benz, best known for playing Darla, the coldly blond vampire in the ever so slightly gorier Buffy the Vampire Slayer and its spin-off Angel. Spelling's film takes no risks, recasting actresses from well-known supernaturally inclined programmes in roles more or less unaltered from their earlier avatars. This choice reveals something that is equally plain from the film's plot and mise-en-scène – that it is little more than a parasitic regrouping of situations and images already familiar to its audience. More importantly, perhaps, this is how it functions within the current geography of Channel 6's programming, since, every weekday from 6 to 8, the channel is showing Buffy followed by Charmed each from the very beginning of series one.

In 2001, the year of the 9/11 attacks, and a year after Satan's School for Girls is released, Buffy dies, only to be reborn in the next series into a less sunny Sunnydale, one characterised by loss, failed communication, disintegration, ambivalent evil and general ontological uncertainty. By 2003, the show had come to an end. In an opposite move, in Charmed, Prue is killed off and replaced by Rose McGowan, who signals her new-millennial sympathies by wearing less gloomy, thoughtful, Gothy eye make-up and more bright, sensual, emotional lipstick. While one show wears its cultural malaise on its blood-stained sleeve, the other attempts to exorcise or at least bury it beneath a shiny surface where darkness finds it increasingly difficult to lurk (evidently a good plan, since there were still new episodes of Charmed being made in 2006). One way or another, the era of the television series in which demonic evil is successfully fought off by spunky-yet-complex young ladies has been forever altered. A few months ago, however, Channel 6 made the interesting decision to halt its repeats of Buffy directly after her death and return to random episodes from earlier seasons. Despite resuming in early September with a resurrected heroine, they omitted the episode in which she claws her way out of the grave. It almost feels as if her death is a scandal which needs to be hushed up. More inexplicably still, the episodes of Charmed continue to feature a hale and hearty Prue. On the one hand, Satan's School for Girls fits seamlessly into this rather odd pre-9/11 revival, returning to a time when supernatural evil could be fought off by gifted young waifs without apologising for it either by exaggerating it or toning it down. At the same time, its narrative enacts the passing out of favour of such programmes. The ending is particularly grim in this respect. A smiling Doherty, clad in a flowery print and lugging a hefty-looking baby in her arms, waves a supremely bland Stepford-type husband off to work. She serenely picks flowers (more flowers!) before depositing her bundle of joy in a play-pen and going in to answer the phone. While she's in there, a large crow (reminiscent of those that, along with the Goths, hung around the deserted building back in the university) lands on her fence and proceeds to squawk ominously, followed by another and then another, in an ultra-transparent The Birdsrip-off. Doherty, chatting away, is unconvincingly oblivious. Finally she does notice, looks shocked, the music goes "duhn-duhn duhn", and the credits roll.

Apart from the fact that this is just plain daft – unless it's trying to lead us to expect a sequel, mercy save us – it is also deeply depressing. In an odd foreshadowing of the simultaneous demise of Buffy Summers and Prue, Doherty's character has evidently been stripped of her psychic powers – or worse, has voluntarily suppressed them – at precisely the same moment that her college career comes to an abrupt end, and she happily settles down to be a wife and mother. Only the crows remain to give us some semblance of hope that she might have to give it all up and go back to being a precognisant version of Carol J. Clover's Final Girl who keeps fighting evil even after her sister, boyfriend and various acquaintances get sacrificed to Satan. But no sequel (however badly made) is forthcoming, and we are in the midst of a wave of utterly realist (if equally daft) and somehow, despite having positive female characters, overwhelmingly male programmes like 24, Lost and Nip/Tuck. That feisty girl is now to all intents and purposes dead, and is lying at the narrative centre and on the post-mortem examination tables of the new, unashamedly gory repositories for the tropes of Gothic horror – franchises such as CSI and Law & Order, and "reality" shows like the gob-smackingly prurient Forensic Detectives.

The ending of Satan's School for Girls also spookily prefigures the shift from Sex and the City (which Channel 6 is also playing from the start) to Desperate Housewives. While I would baulk at the idea of announcing that either Buffy or Sex in the City present indisputably ideal models of femininity, what is

most shocking about the return to the 1950s suburban baby factory and the rise of representations of the sex-murders of beautiful women is the ease with which they have been accepted. In a cultural climate no longer dominated by programmes like American Gothic or The X-Files, one in which Dead Like Me, Supernatural, and even all of those alien-invasion shows are doomed to relative obscurity, there are many who refer affectionately to the privileged, soap-opera world of Desperate Housewives as "dark", but like it because it really isn't, while at the same time immersing themselves in televisual universes where women are more often objectified victims than participating subjects. What Channel 6's extended foray into the world of American television before September 11th serves to remind us is that there was a time before women traded in their superhero cloaks for floral aprons, and that, while it was silly, often nonsensical, it really wasn't so bad.

DARA DOWNEY

Someone's At The Door….
American Gothic 1995-96 CBS

Twin Peaks may have garnered the critical plaudits, and The X-Files may have been the biggest hit of the decade, but to my mind the best horror-themed series of the 1990s was also one of the least seen: Sean Cassidy's short-lived, ambitious American Gothic, which has recently been released on DVD for the first time, ten years after its television debut.

As Cassidy and series producer David Eick note during their witty pilot commentary, the series was a rich, strange, and often blackly hilarious slice of southern gothic much indebted to the darker works of Truman Capote, William Faulkner, and the complex inter-familial politics of The Godfather. If that all sounds rather complicated, the concept at the heart of the show was not: essentially it is the story of a father trying to ensure that his young son follows in his footsteps. The trouble is the father in question is demonic Sheriff Lucas Buck (Gary Cole), who rules the Southern Carolina town of Trinity with a combination of devilish charm and brute force. The supernaturally-gifted little boy he tries to groom as his successor is Caleb Temple, (Lucas Black) conceived when his mother was raped by Buck, who quite rightly holds the sheriff responsible for all the misfortune that has befallen his "fambly".

Arrayed against Buck's seemingly unstoppable will are troubled medic "Dr Matt" Crower (Jake Weber), who also takes a fatherly interest in the boy, and Gail Emory (Paige Turco), Caleb's last surviving relative, who returns to Trinity to look out for her little cousin and try to figure out the truth behind the death of her own parents two decades previously.

Whilst this may sound like a fairly hackneyed scenario, what differentiated American Gothic from the standard good versus demonic evil genre piece was the quality of the acting, the morbid wit of the writing, and the shows willingness from the very outset to stretch the very limits of what could be shown on American television. The pilot begins as troubled patriarch Gage Temple goes on a drunken rampage, threatening the lives of Caleb and his catatonic 16 year-old sister Merlee (Sarah Paulson), who can only mutter the delightfully eerie words "Someone's at the door" over and over again as her father batters his way into their room. Forced to leave Merlee behind as he scrambles out of the house to seek help, Caleb runs smack into Sheriff Buck, who greets him with the heavily ironic words: "Time to stop running, son".

Meanwhile, back in the Temple shack, Gage has cornered Merlee and takes a swing at her head with a handy shovel – a scene which so vexed then Presidential candidate Bob Dole and his fellow anti-television violence campaigners that it was cut short. What really shocked unwary viewers however was the fact that the arrival of the supposed forces of law-and-order – Buck and his weak-willed deputy Ben Healy (Nick Searcy) – actually makes things worse. Buck enters the homestead, and breaks the still-conscious Merlee's neck (the sound of her spine had to be drowned out by music after the network again objected to the extreme violence on display).

However, this isn't the last we see of Merlee. In no time at all, her vengeful ghost is stirring up trouble for those who would seek to cover-up the true cause of her death. She functions as a kind of embodied conscience for Caleb, the Jiminy Cricket to his conflicted Pinocchio, although her fashion sense runs to a

tasteful white cloak rather than a garish top hat. For a few episodes it seems alarmingly likely that Merlee will only show up to deliver pious sermons about "what's raaht" to her little brother and occasionally levitate significant objects, Carrie-style. Luckily, it soon becomes delightfully obvious that despite her disembodied state, Merlee is just as flawed and prone to making mistakes as anyone else in Trinity.

In one episode, entitled "Rebirth", Merlee steals the soul of an unborn child so that she may briefly experience normal life; in another, "The Plague Sower", she turns the town's river into blood and infects anyone she deems to have capitulated to Buck with an Ebola-style virus which makes them bleed out of their eyeballs. The fact that Dr Matt and Gail are amongst her victims (she, for falling prey to Buck's irresistible charms, he, for failing to stand up to the sheriff strongly enough) leaves us in no doubt as to the cruelty of her actions. As Eick drolly observes on the commentary, this show was more "Touched by Satan" than "Touched by an Angel", although I'd pay good money to see a crossover episode in which Buck corrupts Roma Downey and the rest of her do-gooding friends.

Lucas Black, now all grown up and recently seen in Jarhead, as well as, somewhat less admirably, Tokyo Drift, is here that rarest of creatures: an accomplished child actor who actually seems like a real child. Unlike creepily composed present-day child actors such as Dakota Fanning and Cameron Bright, Black's performances are seldom less than a pleasure to watch. He conveys rough-hewn intelligence and determination in an appealingly natural manner; an accomplishment all the more notable given the fact that much of his time onscreen is spent talking to a ghost.

Particular mention should also be made of Gary Cole, whose ability to radiate immense evil and irresistible charisma as Lucas Buck carried the series. Buck may be an evil, corrupting force – perhaps even Lucifer himself, as his name suggests – but he is also an immensely likable fellow, the centre around which the business dealings, criminal activities and moral dilemmas of an entire town revolve. After all, what's not to love about a sheriff who advises his morally squeamish subordinate that "conscience is just a fear of getting caught"? Whilst Buck and Caleb both display supernatural abilities during the course of the series, most of the sheriff's devious schemes work out because he so expertly plays upon the foibles and weaknesses of his fellow townsfolk. Like the similarly satanic Lealand Gaunt in Stephen King's novel Needful Things, Buck offers his victims whatever they most desire – but at a very high (and usually bitterly ironic) cost.

Buck's moll-in-darkness is the voluptuous Selena Coombs, elementary school teacher by day and town sexpot by night. As Selena, Brenda Bakke vamps about town in a bright yellow sports car, pausing occasionally to tease whatever poor sap Lucas Buck has his claws into on a particular week. However, in a pattern repeated throughout the series, what would have in another show been a rather stereotypical role is here invested with much more depth than one would initially suspect. Like Buck's unfortunate, but never unsympathetic, sidekick Ben, Selena is soon revealed to be a complex and deeply unhappy character who longs to escape his malign influence but can never quite manage to succeed.

Had American Gothic been shown on a cable network like HBO or Showtime, its combination of supernatural menace, sex, violence and family drama may well have survived. But from the outset, it was clear that a show as uncompromising as this was doomed. Many of the episodes bear sorry evidence of

network tampering; the most obvious being the disappearance of Jake Weber (now playing Patricia Arquette's husband in Medium) halfway through the season as it was felt that his character wasn't strong enough to stand up to Buck. Needless to say, his replacement, the square-jawed, conventionally heroic Dr Billy Peel (John Mese) barely makes an impact.

During the original US run of the series, four episodes were left out of the running order entirely, and those familiar with the show will rightly wonder why the final episode is here placed seventeenth, rather than twenty first. Anyone buying the box set would therefore be well advised to look up the correct running order on the internet before starting to watch the show. Standout episodes include: the three opening instalments, "Potato Boy" (in which a genuinely bizarre and often hilarious story involving a deformed child is interwoven with some startling revelations about Selena Coombs), "Strong Arm of the Law" (in which three out-of-town extortionists learn the hard way that they should have bypassed Trinity, and a shovel once more comes in useful), "The Beast Within", "The Plague Sower" and blistering final episodes "The Buck Stops Here" and "Requiem", which are so good that you'll curse the short-sighted idiots who pulled the plug on the series just as it got into its stride. In other words, if you have any interest whatsoever in supernaturally-themed television shows, the southern gothic, weird family sagas, or undeservedly neglected TV gems, this is the show for you. Just don't make any deals with the devil to get your hands on it…
Now available in all good DVD outlets, RRP: €55.00 / £34.00: also currently showing on ITV 4.

BERNICE M. MURPHY

Dead Quiet: Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Angel

While recently researching the state of the modern vampire, I was struck by how quiet the 21st century vampire has been, particularly on television. Vampire literature has experienced something of a boom in the past decade, and yet we find the vampire has for the most part disappeared from our television screens in recent years. Why is this? And has the colossally successful phenomenon that is Buffy and its spin off series Angel contributed to this? There is no doubt that the vampire has become a source of contemporary humour and light reading; vampire novels in the style of HBO's Sex and the City have littered 'horror' shelves in chain bookstores for sometime now and it is this reigning perception of the vampire as a benevolent romantic character that has effectively castrated him. This castration may be interpreted as a transition in the vampire's duality from 'other' to both monster and self. While vampires of the past thirty years generally embody human emotions and conditions, we have now become overly saturated in the vampire's dialogue and have grown jaded of 'the vampire's point of view'. Perhaps, I daresay, we have removed the current popular perception of the vampire from the horror genre altogether? Is it the case that in recent years the pop culture vampire has become increasingly estranged from the horror genre itself?

Firstly, we should examine what the modern vampire has become. Unlike his more traditional predecessors, the modern vampire has long left the castles and crypts of lore behind and settled instead in the hotels and apartments of cosmopolitan urban centres such as New York, Los Angeles and London. This change of location cancels out the concept of the vampire as the rural/foreign 'other' and allows an inclusive cultural viewpoint. While the vampire as monster can be viewed as categorically different from the human inhabitants of the city, he is now representative of a cultural minority within the city limits rather than the physical and cultural other represented by Stoker's Dracula. Vampires live among us in the modern world and in our city space; they can be our neighbours, friends and lovers.

In the past ten years, vampires have experienced a resurgence in popular culture thanks to the critical and popular success of Joss Whedon's Buffy The Vampire Slayer. In what initially seemed like an old-fashioned representation of vampires as monsters, BTVS quickly challenged the viewers (and its heroines) initial assumption that all vampires were evil bloodsuckers by introducing the character Angel, a complex, brooding vampire (not unlike Anne Rice's Louis) with a soul who refuses to feed on humans and fights for the forces of good. The central theme in many Buffy and Angel episodes rests on the fear that Angel's soul may be lost to corruption or magic. The ingenuity of this new mythology on the figure of the vampire, as soul bearer and conscious stricken immortal, rests on our belief in his alliance to the forces of good; an alliance which the viewer is never fully assured of. When Angel lost his soul again during the classic season 2 two-part episode 'Surprise'/ 'Innocence', the bloodthirsty vampire fiend of past Hammer representations came to the fore. While Whedon's writing of the character puts modern society at ease with the rules and exceptions of the vampire condition by making vampires benevolent under certain circumstances, he also reiterates the known histories of the destructive vampire's past. This fertile narrative terrain facilitated the transition and expansion of the character's potential so much that a spin off series, Angel debuted in 1999 and ran for five years.

Angel is, without doubt, a much darker series than BTVS. The shows often risqué content was seen by the Warner Bros. network as too daring for the average Buffy viewer (some social commentators had

pinpointed core viewers and fans as young as seven years old). Unsurprisingly, this snared Angel a later timeslot on television in the US and UK and an 18s certificate from the BBFC and Irish Film Censor's Office (IFCO) on its DVD release. However, having the vampire return to a more adult premise allowed the writers to present the audience with a more wholly realised sexual viewpoint on the vampire protagonist.

While all series of Angel tended to be of a more adult nature than Buffy, the relocation of setting in the final series to the headquarters of the powerful (evil) law firm Wolfram and Hart, where Angel becomes a CEO, added a balancing comic element. Lawyers have long been metaphorically associated with vampires – viewed by some as social and financial leeches in our current culture, while the vampire becomes a demythologised being. Associating our protagonist with the culture of litigation updates the vampire to late 20th / early 21st Century life but alters his mythological outsider status. Angel, like Nick Knight before him on television's Forever Knight, begins his quest aiding the police by solving cases and crimes, just another private eye on streets. While the initial formula was only enough to deliver one series, Whedon developed a new mythology for Angel involving procreation, other worlds and prophecies. The series closed with an impending apocalypse and faded out as our heroes faced an impossible battle and certain death – the bloody conclusion (and their certain destruction) cleverly, and poignantly left to our imagination.

In comparison to this, the most recent innovation in television drama, the forensic detective template, leaves nothing to our imagination. Everything is displayed, dissected and scientifically explained. CSI and its spin offs graphically display the wounded body in grotesque detail and the victim is mostly relegated to a secondary focus to solving the case. This excessive drive to reveal every detail of horror on the body in vivid form has reduced our exploration of myths, and demands that all similar displays of horror include the same graphic exposure of flesh and blood.

The romance of the vampire is lost in this new display of revealing all; part of the romantic vampire persona is to be sexually alluring, beautiful and mysterious, whereas the modern serial killer is a monstrous human entity, ensnared by science and reason rather than myth and magic. In this new time of televisual serial killers, terrorism (24) and reality television (The Swan etc), the vampire has fallen dormant. A final breath of life was to come from the US in the form of Blade: The Television Series. However, it was poorly received and boasted no actors from the original film trilogy: the series was cancelled in a matter of weeks. Perhaps for now we should leave the TV serial killers to their work and await a new vampire mythology. I am in no doubt that when this occurs, the vampire will have much to say on this overtly violent and relentless form of invasive entertainment. But for the present it is human monsters that hold our interest, not supernatural ones.

SORCHA Ní FHLAINN