TELEVISION REVIEWS

Dexter

Showtime: FX, 2007

Given the immense popularity of forensic detective shows such as the *CSI* franchise and *Bones,* and the frequency with which serial killers provide the basis for the case-of-the-week in each, it was perhaps only a matter of time before someone had the bright idea of combining the serial killer and the forensic detective into one character. The result of this inevitable generic crossover is Dexter Morgan, blood spatter specialist for the ever-busy Miami Police Department by day, vigilante serial murderer by night, hero – or rather, anti-hero – of the new series *Dexter*, which has just finished its first season on the FX channel.

Loosely based on the novels by Jeff Lindsay, the show is an entertaining, blackly humorous and, at times, notably gruesome viewing experience which threatens to veer into sentimentality rather more often than the gleefully misanthropic source texts. Much of the humour in the opening episodes comes from the inevitable conflict between Dexter's murderous proclivities and the cheerful 'normal' exterior he has erected to try and hide his true nature from those around him.

Having been found at a bloody crime scene many years before by his adoptive father, a cop named Harry who soon realised that his son was, at heart a killer, Dexter has been counselled since childhood to disguise his true, emotionless nature at all costs. To that end, his apparently charming, helpful character is nothing but a smokescreen for the emotional vacuum beneath; although as the series progresses it becomes clear to the viewer that Dexter experiences a great deal more emotion than he is willing to allow himself to admit.

Given that he is portrayed by Michael C. Hall, who also played conflicted gay undertaker David Fisher in the series *Six Feet Under*, the fact that Dexter is a closeted serial killer becomes all the more ironic, particularly given that many of his scenes early on in the show concern his relationship with his emotionally damaged girlfriend Rita (former *Angel* regular Julie Benz), whose desire to keep their relationship strictly platonic fills him with immense relief. The parallels between this and Hall's last major role are obvious; and with his *almost*-handsome-but-also-kind-of-creepy bland good looks and ability to adopt a suspiciously nonchalant expression at the drop of the hat, he was a fitting choice for the role.

Like Hannibal Lecter, who in Thomas Harris's later, weaker, novels preferred to eat the rude and those who had committed terrible crimes themselves, Dexter is a poacher turned gamekeeper who uses his contacts within the police department to track down human predators much less discerning than himself. Those he catches –who include child murderers and people traffickers – are drugged, wrapped in cling film, and carefully dismembered before being dumped in the ocean. Dexter is nothing if not neat. Presumably, given that our sympathies and perspective on events always lie with Dexter, we are meant to think that murder is sort of ok, once it's bad people who suffer. *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer* this is not.

Apart from his relationship with Rita and her two young children, Dexter's most significant point of human contact is with his foul-mouthed sister Deborah (the excellent Jennifer Carpenter, best known as the demon-afflicted college student in *The Possession of Emily Rose*), an ambitious, goofily enthusiastic homicide detective within the same department who, more often than not, insists that her big brother help her solve whatever case is at hand. Like Rita, she too has no inkling of Dexter's true feelings (or lack of them) perhaps because his occasionally stiff, vaguely inappropriate responses to the world around him aren't all that different from that of the average non-serial killing male. The only one who suspects him at all is the hyper-aggressive Sergeant Doakes, who generally yells, "What the fuck are *you* looking at, Morgan?" in a hugely entertaining fashion at least once per episode, and, unlike everyone else, finds Dexter's penchant for hanging blown-up pictures of blood spatter over his desk rather suspicious.

The main story arc of the first season concerns the police department's attempts to snare the 'Ice-Truck Killer', so called because he freezes his street-walking victims before cutting them up into neat little parcels which are then left for the police to find. The moment he comes upon the first such crime scene, Dexter realises that he has finally met his match, and a steadily escalating war of wits between the two killers commences as it becomes clear that the Ice Truck Killer knows a great deal more about Dexter's troubled past and unacceptable urges than Dexter himself does. To cap it all off, he's actually even neater than Dexter, and that really bugs him.

Storyline aside, the look of the show is fantastic, with the always sunny scenery and buzzing atmosphere of America's most Latin city providing a startling backdrop to all kinds of gruesome misdeeds. Almost all the men – including Dexter – wear garish, brightly coloured shirts, and, like Crockett in *Miami Vice*, Dexter also has a boat of his own, though sadly, no alligator, although this would surely save some time when it came to disposing of his victims. The opening titles are worth watching in themselves, as glossily sinister and slightly nauseating close-up is employed to make the simplest of actions – grinding coffee beans, cutting into bacon – seem somehow violent and murderous.

Whilst the show tends to lose some of its momentum when dealing with non-ice truck killer cases, or with the troubled personal lives of some of Dexter's colleagues – a soap opera touch notably absent from the source text – it still differentiates itself from the ordinary pack of detective shows by dint of the comedy derived from the bluntly witty, expletive-laden dialogue (it is undoubtedly significant that alone of his police department colleagues, Dexter hardly ever swears). Another point of interest lies in Dexter's attempts to blend in with everyone else, as well as by the manner in which his upbringing and relationship with Harry, his adoptive father, is continually referenced by regular flashbacks to his youthful indoctrination (complete with bad wigs and dodgy fashions). Indeed, one of the most interesting things about the show is the gradual insinuation that Harry, who has, after all, encouraged a very disturbed child to vent his violent urges on criminals, rather than send him for psychiatric help, may well have been as much of a monster as his troubled charge. It's a realisation that Dexter himself comes to in the closing episodes of the season. However, some viewers may be annoyed by the shows rather pat contention that severe childhood trauma automatically creates a future serial killer (so *that's* how it's done!).

The conclusion of the Ice Truck killer arc, and the manner in which the Morgan siblings become entangled in the killer's cunning plan is compelling, if somewhat predictable (indeed, anyone with an ounce of deductive reasoning will have figured out who the Ice Truck Killer is long before those onscreen limp to the same realisation). Still, the odd weak instalment aside, the interesting premise, witty dialogue,

and unusual character interaction make *Dexter* well worth watching for those who like their humour black and their blood spatter bright red. For the next generic crossover, may I suggest that TV executives consider creating a show about a maverick pathologist who also works as a top chef? Or a vampire turned district attorney? The possibilities are endless…

BERNICE M. MURPHY

***Twin Peaks* (1990-1991)**
ABC/Universal Home Entertainment (Season One)/Paramount Home Entertainment (Season Two)

In April 1990, the plastic-wrapped corpse of Laura Palmer floated onto our television screens, buoyed up by a quirky supporting cast of eccentrics. Propelled by the increasingly offbeat investigation of this absorbing murder-mystery, the first season of *Twin Peaks* (the brainchild of Mark Frost and David Lynch) was an undisputed phenomenon. But when the second season began in September 1990, the show's initial appeal seemed rapidly to diminish. Frustrated by the lengthy and increasingly obscure nature of the investigation into Laura Palmer's death, viewing figures began to decline; and after the unveiling of her killer (under pressure from alarmed studio executives), only the most ardent of fans braved scheduling reshuffles to find out how *Twin Peaks* would survive the resolution of its headline-grabbing McGuffin. After just two seasons (comprising a pilot and twenty-nine episodes in total), Twin Peaks ended in June 1991 with the bleakest of cliff-hangers, leaving those members of the audience that had faithfully seen it through to the bitter end gagging for a third season, a craving that the much-maligned feature-length prequel, *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (1992) failed to satisfy. Now, after prolonged distribution problems (which have meant that the second season has still not seen a release in the UK and Ireland), *Twin Peaks* is finally available in its entirety on Region 1 and a selection of mainland European releases on Region 2 DVD. And so it's time at last to brew some damn good coffee, sample another slice of cherry pie and relive the show that gave backwards-speaking dwarves their day in the sun.

Twin Peaks started life as a basic whodunit. In the idyllic small town of Twin Peaks ("where a yellow light still means slow down, not speed up") the body of high-school student Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee) is discovered, wrapped in plastic; another girl, Ronette Pulaski (Phoebe Augustine), is missing. When she turns up across state lines, bloodied and apparently in a dissociative state, Special Agent Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) is dispatched to lead the investigation, working with Sherriff Harry S. Truman (Michael Ontkean) and his team of local law enforcement officers. Guided by Tibetan philosophy and the interpretation of his dreams and visions, Cooper goes about the process of gathering clues to Laura's murder (most infamously those offered by the figure of The Man From Another Place (Michael J. Anderson), the oft-parodied backwards-talking dwarf, who would later star in *Carnivàle*). This was eventually to lead to the unfolding of a larger mystery: that of the Black Lodge, a metaphysical manifestation of what Truman identifies as "the evil in these old woods" which surround the town (a gothic trope which has haunted American culture as far back as Hawthorne). But such prosaic summaries simply can't do justice to the impact *Twin Peaks* had in its hey-day; and in particular, the pall cast by the characterisation of BOB, an evil spirit housed within the Black Lodge.

BOB is the stuff of nightmares, a primal force of evil, and a shadowy figure that recurs in Laura Palmer's secret diaries as an abusive figure that has tormented her from a young age. His appearances are often sudden and fleeting, and invariably range in effect from deeply unsettling to absolutely terrifying, especially when he invades seemingly benign domestic spaces. In one of the most memorable examples, Maddy Ferguson (Laura's cousin, also played by Sheryl Lee) has a vision of him in the Palmer living room, crawling over couches and tables directly towards her, and directly into the camera. It's a moment that signifies better than any *Twin Peaks*' effectiveness in bringing murder into the home (where Alfred Hitchcock, embarking on his own televisual exploits in 1955, once claimed it belonged). It also provides as clear an indication as any that the real horrors of Twin Peaks lurk in apparently the most mundane places. The site of Maddy's vision was later to become the place in which *Twin Peaks* yielded its secret,

when BOB strikes a second time in one of the most disturbing and sadistic scenes ever to have been screened on a commercial network (and the relatively conservative ABC at that). **[SPOILER BEGINS]** As Leland Palmer (Ray Wise) stands in his living room, looking in the mirror, his reflection is revealed to be that of BOB; in a devastating twist, then, we realise that BOB's human host is Laura's own father, previously presumed to be a run-of-the-mill eccentric who deals with his daughter's death by singing show-tunes and dancing like a manic Gene Kelly. These attributes are put to unsettling and surreal effect as we witness Leland/BOB chasing his latest victim around the room (after delivering a couple of bone-crunching blows to her face) and taunting her, before sweeping her into a tight embrace and twirling her about the living room, and brutally murdering her. In the space of a few minutes, then, the nightmarish BOB is unmasked and granted a more human – and infinitely more disturbing – face. **[SPOILER ENDS]**

If *Twin Peaks* had dealt exclusively in the dark and nightmarish realms which BOB occupied (and which its feature-length prequel *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* showcased, many would say to its detriment), there's a good chance it would never have gotten past the pilot stage. Indeed, a feature-length version was hastily put together for the European market, which remains something of a curio in Peaks lore. It revealed a mortal BOB to be the killer, before he was dispatched by 'Mike' (Al Strobel), the one-armed man who would prove to be an integral feature of the mythology of the Black Lodge eventually developed over the course of two seasons. (This remained undeveloped in the European pilot, but some related footage from its coda – in which Agent Cooper encounters Laura Palmer and The Man From Another Place in the Red Room – would subsequently feature in *Twin Peaks* itself, in the form of Cooper's dream.) The darkest aspects of the series – the murders and domestic secrets that shook Twin Peaks – were inextricably linked with this elaborate mythology, but were counter-balanced by the eclectic supporting characters and black humour that also characterised the show. At heart, it remained an elaborate soap opera (mirrored in the first season by its show-within-a-show, the fictional *Invitation to Love*), and *Twin Peaks* gleefully parodied soap-land excesses: for example, early in the second season, Cooper was filled in on what had happened since he was shot in the cliff-hanger to Season One:

Truman: Lucy, you'd better bring Agent Cooper up to date.

Lucy: Leo Johnson was shot, Jacques Renault was strangled, the mill burned, Shelley and Pete got smoke inhalation, Catherine and Josie are missing, Nadine is in a coma from taking sleeping pills.

Cooper: How long have I been out?

Truman: Six hours.

Throughout its run, *Twin Peaks* played with the conventional soap opera format and themes, regularly featuring such melodramatic excesses as the reintroduction of characters presumed dead; recurring story-lines involving love triangles and questionable patrimony; and soap-land's favourite affliction, amnesia – from Benjamin Horne's (Richard Beymer) re-enactment of the Civil War to Nadine Hurley's (Wendy Robie) regression to her teenage years and acquisition of superhuman strength, apparently leaving her husband Big Ed (Everett McGill) free to pursue a relationship with his own teenage sweetheart Norma Jennings (Peggy Lipton). Some of the more unconventional characters, like the infamous Log Lady (Catherine Coulson) and Major Garland Briggs (Don Davis) would also prove to be key players in the Black Lodge mythology; others, such as odd-ball Pete Martell (played by Lynch regular

Jack Nance) and FBI agent Gordon Cole (David Lynch himself) would turn strange quirks and character traits into much-needed (and well-loved) comic relief.

It was these supporting players that came to the fore in the second series after the revelation of Laura's killer, but with very mixed results. A number of guest directors were brought in while Lynch busied himself with the Palme d'Or-winning *Wild at Heart*, while the screenwriters struggled to keep the narrative on-track as it attempted to establish the wider mythology to which BOB belonged. Some of the new storylines seemed to meander a little too much (worst of the bunch was a noirish subplot involving Laura's biker boyfriend James Hurley (James Marshall) and a *femme fatale*, which briefly left the town of Twin Peaks behind); others have taken on a cultish appeal of their own, most famously David Duchovny's dragged-up pre-*X-Files* turn as DEA Agent Denise/Dennis Bryson. And others still represented the best of *Twin Peaks*' off-beat sense of humour, as when the chronically-deaf Gordon Cole falls for waitress Shelley Johnson (Mädchen Amick) – "the kind of girl that makes you wish you spoke a little French" – only to discover that he can hear every word she says, a memorable light touch amidst the gathering gloom of the show's final episodes. Ultimately, all roads would lead back to the Black Lodge after Cooper's former partner at the FBI Windom Earle (Kenneth Welsh) turned up in Twin Peaks, intent on using its secrets as a means to take his revenge on Cooper. Once the show found its way back on track, the stage was set for its devastating finale, with Lynch back at the helm for the final episode in which Cooper must face the mysteries of the Black Lodge in an extended sequence which remains a visceral *tour de force* of televisual surrealism. By now, though, the series had been axed and with no third season to redeem the fate of Cooper, *Twin Peaks* ended finally on the most dismal of notes.

Ultimately, *Twin Peaks* could never have maintained its initial success. The effectiveness of its immediate selling-point (the murder of Laura Palmer) would eventually prove its downfall, and once the identity of Laura's killer was revealed, the show struggled to regain its focus until it was all too apparent that the plug would be pulled. Despite this apparently ignominious ending, though, and seventeen years after it made its provocative debut, Twin Peaks remains an inescapable touchstone for gothic and supernatural programming. Its influence in paving the way for the likes of The X-Files (to which many members of the cast and crew graduated), *American Gothic* and *Carnivàle*, for example, is obvious; the success of the format of The X-Files in particular is unthinkable without the pioneering force of *Twin Peaks*. Its legacy can also be traced to just about any show that dramatises the nightmares that lurk beneath the veneers of suburban and small-town America, most memorably perhaps *Six Feet Und*er, and most recently, the inexplicably popular Desperate Housewives (another ABC show). It displayed its Peaks-isms long before Kyle MacLachlan was added to the cast, by using as the focus for its first season the mysteries behind the unexpected suicide in the first episode of Mary Alice Young (a role originally intended for Laura Palmer herself, Sheryl Lee, but eventually played by Brenda Strong – who also had a minor role in Twin Peaks). But no television show has proven up to the task of fully capturing the darkly humorous and nightmarish spirit of *Twin Peaks*, or replicating the initial shockwaves that it generated when it premiered. Its reappearance now on DVD provides a welcome opportunity to revisit the show that has remained such a pervasive influence on our television screens; what emerges finally may be a flawed work, certainly, but one which remains compulsive viewing.

JENNY McDONNELL

Torchwood
(BBC Three, 2006)

A controversial spin-off of the science fiction cult classic *Doctor Who*, *Torchwood* (the name itself is an anagram of *Doctor Who*) has its origins firmly within the mythology of the 'Who-niverse', a fondly held collection of traditions deriving from its cult parent programme. However *Torchwood* has a level of adult content - violence, profanity and scenes of a sexual nature - that have never be seen on *Doctor Who*. While *Doctor Who* is a drama, it also is firmly aware of its family and child-friendly audience. *Torchwood*, with its mixture of adult comedy and violence, is in many respects more comparable to American science fiction television shows such as *The X-Files* and *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*.

The plot of *Torchwood* revolves around a team that work "Outside the government, beyond the police" protecting modern day Wales and the world at large from the dangers of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial. The series is based in Cardiff where the show, like Russell T. Davies' re-vamped *Doctor Who*, is filmed. The explanation for the high level of paranormal activity is neatly resolved as the city stands on a rift in time and space. The team is led by the charismatic Captain Jack Harkness (John Barrowman). Little about his past is given away to the audience or the other team members in the series but from his stint on *Doctor Who* we know that he is a Time Agent from the 51st Century who was a conman until he reformed his ways as the Doctor's companion, during the first instalments of the re-imagined series. He is the leader of Torchwood 3, the third branch of the Torchwood Institute, instigated by Queen Victoria to defend Britain from supernatural forces after she met with the Doctor in the Scottish highlands in the *Doctor Who* episode "Tooth and Claw". The team is made up of five operatives: Jack Harkness (Barrowman), Gwen Cooper (Eve Myles), Dr Owen Harper (Burn Gorman), Toshiko Sato (Naoko Mori) and Ianto Jones (Gareth David-Lloyd). A character by the name of Susie Costello, played by Indira Varma, featured prominently in the advertising as part of the team but was sensationally killed off at the end of the first episode. This device of killing off a "lead" character early in the narrative was also used in the pilot episode of the television series *CSI* as well as, most famously, in Alfred Hitchcock's film *Psycho*. By killing off an apparent lead at the beginning, the audience's preconceptions are altered and left unsettled leading them to believe that their other preconceptions about the show could also be proven wrong in the subsequent episodes. Torchwood is therefore presumably supposed to be anything but predictable

Cardiff Policewoman Gwen Cooper (Myles) is introduced to the team in the first episode and provides a point-of-view for the audience. Her corruption and eventual transformation into a character similar to Susie (Varma) is an evolving thematic arc of considerable importance to the overall plot. When Gwen joins the team she is a no-nonsense every-woman whose honesty and earnest determination to uncover the truth is noted by Captain Jack Harkness. She shows genuine guilt at having to keep the secret of her new profession from her boyfriend. By the end of the series, she has told lies and acted unscrupulously to the detriment of others in the team in order to get her own way, just as Susie had done. Her new position, immersed in the paranormal alters her completely, and infringes on her personal life as she embarks on an affair with her co-worker Owen Harper (Gorman).

Many of the episodes in the first series show an awareness of common horror tropes, with the appearance of ghosts, monsters, vengeful fairy spirits (in the episode "Small Worlds"), cannibals (in the episode "Countrycide") and unknown forces doing harm. Characters include a ghost (in the episode "Random

Shoes"), a half-woman/half machine (in the episode "Cyberwoman") and a seductive, sex crazed alien (in the episode "Greeks Bearing Gifts"). There is an existential bent to the programme as well, with the theme of the meaning of life and the afterlife being a common thread through the first series. It could be argued then that in many respects *Torchwood* provides a more gothic, pessimistic contrast to the happily optimistic *Doctor Who*. The character of Captain Jack Harkness is shown to be immortal in the pilot episode but throughout the series he frequently faces near-death situations with a manic energy. The characters also frequently display symptoms of depression, Jack's suicidal inclinations being just one example. *Torchwood*'s *mise-en-scene* is also much darker and it grimier than that of its parent show. However it retains a strong sense of black humour and parodic self-awareness throughout.

Torchwood's post-watershed time slot allows the show a far more adult content, than the more family orientated *Doctor Who*. This important difference has attracted criticisms from some of those attached to the mythology and feel of the original show. *Torchwood*'s differences from its parent programme are many but its emphasis on the sexuality of its characters have brought it the most controversy. By dint of its perennial status as tea-time family viewing, sexuality in *Doctor Who* is generally only alluded to via tongue-in-cheek jokes or wry insinuation. Sexuality in *Torchwood* is, however, a main theme, with at least one character engaging in sexual activity during each episode. Each character is represented as bi-sexual at some point and same-sex encounters as well as liaisons with supernatural beings happen in almost every episode. Much has been made in the media of the fact that the hero of the show, Captain Jack Harkness, is played by the openly gay actor John Barrowman (series creator Russell T. Davis is also gay). Their involvement in the show, as well as the frequent bi-sexual themes of *Torchwood*, have garnered it a large and dedicated fan base among the gay and lesbian community, as well as criticism from more conservative quarters.

Torchwood mines the traditions of horror and gothic literature and film in inventive ways. Typical horror tropes are utilised with great enthusiasm, if with varying success. Its reception has been mixed. Touted as an adult *Doctor Who*, some have been disappointed by the constant emphasizing of specific themes such as sexuality over those of the story. There has also been much praise for the series, and it has garnered enough viewers for a second series, which is now underway. However, in terms of entertainment, the show has been unable to recreate the essential chemistry between the characters in the same way as *Doctor Who* has done between the Doctor and his successive companions, Rose Tyler and Martha Jones. The show also suffers from its attempts to distance itself from *Doctor Who*, often pushing the storylines and characters in ways which seem forced and overdone. With the addition of the character of Martha Jones from *Doctor Who* to the second series of *Torchwood* there is hope that the creators will be able to redefine the storyline to be more coherent and focused. Until then, with its willingness to tackle dark sexual themes and to include gothic influences, *Torchwood* remains a unique experience in the history of British science fiction television, if not an entirely successful one.

RUTH PATTEN

Maybe Tomorrow: *Supernatural*'s Restless Men and (Un)predicable Girls
(Seasons 1 & 2, UTV)

I've been itching to review *Supernatural* for quite some time now – not, I hasten to add, because I believe it to be the epitome of the dizzy heights and impenetrable depths which small-screen Gothic and horror can attain – very much to the contrary. My nagging desire to subject *Supernatural* to the scrutiny of a review springs from my vivid sense that it shouldn't be allowed to get away with what it's currently getting away with.

Every Friday night, armed with a determination to nobly sacrifice myself to the cause of Gothic studies, I doggedly sit through yet another episode of what usually turns out to be dull, pedestrian drivel. Much of my recurring irritation springs from *Supernatural*'s unflagging commitment to the violent death (usually, somewhat arbitrarily, by spontaneous combustion) of blond, scantily-clad ladies of a narrowly defined body shape and age group. Of course, this, I hear you cry, is what horror is and always has been all about! To my mind, however, much of the pleasure and excitement in watching a TV show that utilises Gothic tropes, plot lines and iconographies frequently arises from its willingness to subvert, challenge or mock this central narrative component. *Supernatural*, for all its massive budget and sporadic well-informed knowingness, doesn't even try to do any of these things, and the result is repetitious and often just plain boring. Indeed, the very predictability of the fate of any unfortunate blonde who wanders into the camera frame serves to turn the programme into something resembling a self-parody, condemned to repeat eternally the empty gestures by which it defines itself. "Look look!" it seems to cry at every available opportunity, "I am a horror show, I am, I am!"

Above and beyond this flagrant insecurity, there is another problem. Perhaps if they were offered up for their own sake, the various yellow-haired conflagrations might be visually arresting and even mildly disturbing. Instead, however, the gynocides are invariably hurried over at the start of an episode and employed, in retrospect, in the service of prompting bland, unconvincingly rough-edged men (Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles as Sam and Dean Winchester, respectively) who, incidentally, pack some serious – and possibly compensatory – weaponry) to avenge the deaths of their womenfolk. Most of the time, they do this by killing as many "bad guys" as they possibly can, bad guys whose status as "demons" or occasionally gifted psychics leaves one with the uncomfortable feeling that a profound xenophobia and mistrust of difference (whether gender or otherwise) underlies the programme's basic premise.

This premise, briefly, is that two brothers, improbably surnamed Winchester (the fire-arm related irony is not lost on me – if it's intended, it is undoubtedly one of the few genuinely frightening aspects of the show) become demon hunters when the younger brother's girlfriend dies in the previously mentioned incendiary manner. It transpires that their father became a demon hunter after their mother also died in similar fiery circumstances, which nearly caused the death of same young brother, who has long hair, some ham-fisted sensitivity and, we find out, psychic powers. Having worked with their über-macho dad in their youth, the younger brother rebels and goes off to college, only to be convinced by the aforementioned death of his girlfriend to take up the cause again. This involves lots of manly arguing and ego-clashes until, following a car crash, Daddy makes a pact with a demon to save the life of the older brother (who has a cheeky twinkle in his eye and some patchy stubble), sacrificing his own life in the process. Orphaned and now mightily pissed off, the two boys, speeding from one crummy small-town

Southern motel to the next, go it alone in the dangerous world of killing demons with guns and exorcising ghosts with, er, guns.

One particularly fine example of their modus operandi is provided (in a Season 2 episode entitled "Simon Says") by a conversation during which the brothers discuss someone who needs to be "taken out" because of his dangerous psychic abilities. It goes more or less like this:

Hairy Psychic Brother: But how is he any different to me?

Cheeky Stubbly Brother: Because he's killed people.

Hairy Psychic Brother: So have I.

Cheeky Stubbly Brother: That was different. Those people were evil.

[Silence]

It almost doesn't matter that I only hallucinated Stubbly Brother adding, "They deserved to die" – the point is that pretty much anything other than wholesome, gung-ho, gun-toting, *white* Southern manliness is fair game in *Supernatural*, and nowhere is this attitude more in evidence than in the show's portrayal of the real enemy – women. In general, *Supernatural* suffers from the blind spot regarding the fair sex which afflicts so much of the male "buddy" genre in TV and film. Apparently taking Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men* as a how-to guide rather than a damning critique of such attitudes, the programme only introduces the female of the species if it requires someone to be saved, shagged, or killed. This attitude manifests itself most frequently, indeed with wearying regularity, in a plot line which involves the pouting little madam that they've shown up to rescue turning out to be the very source of evil they're duty-bound to eliminate.

In one episode (Season 2, "Hunted"), for example, Sam (Hairy Psychic Brother) meets a nice girl who seems to have the same powers as he does, and who he tries to protect from some monstrous force killing other preternaturally gifted young folks. While he and his bro' are off investigating the latest body, however, they forget about her briefly, and when they show up belatedly at her house, her fiancé's been eviscerated, and no-one loses any time in realising (or should that be "assuming"?) that she's the one behind it all, cruelly tricking poor little innocent demon hunters into thinking that she was just another helpless victim. In almost exactly the same way, in the very first episode of Season 2, "In My Time of Dying," while Dean (Cheeky Stubbly Brother) is in a coma following the previously mentioned car crash, he has an out-of-body experience which effectively turns him into a ghost, wandering around the halls of the hospital, bemused that no-one can see or hear him, and meets yet another sweet young thing, who seems to be in the same predicament. While sensitive Sammy, convinced that Dean is trying to communicate with him, tries to save him from being sucked unceremoniously into the next life, it is suddenly revealed that this young lady is in fact a "Reaper", just breathless at the thought of harvesting Dean's well-muscled soul. Conveniently, unlike the largely silent girls who obediently burst into flame on a regular basis, all of these more independent types are almost consistently dark of follicle. Well, we couldn't have ambiguity, now could we?

Apart from this worrying tendency to code everything and anything as Other, *Supernatural* simply fails to unsettle its audience in any kind of lasting way. If you're looking for a profoundly unnerving small-screen avatar of pure evil, you could do worse than look to Gary Cole as the Sheriff in Sam Raimi's *American Gothic*, or William B. Davis, the Cigarette-Smoking Man in *The X-Files*. In comparison, grim sepia lighting, flickering credit sequences, and novelty contact lenses just don't really cut it: we've seen it all before, and in far more memorable circumstances. At the very least, it's difficult to be scared of something that we know can be reduced to a cowering heap by some salt, a handful of ashes and a holy-water hand-grenade (I kid you not – tongue very far away from cheek, the Monty Python crew nowhere in sight).

More importantly, perhaps, the reason why *Supernatural* is so spectacularly flaccid in this all-important region for a horror show is because the main characters themselves are so rarely afraid, so infrequently in real danger, and almost never inscribed within the narrative of fear presented by an individual episode. If nothing else, we know that they can always fall back on an impressive arsenal (both projectile and occult) hidden in the booth of their boy-racer fantasy of a beat-up car (a 1967 Chevy Impala apparently – I'm wondering if there's some sort of vampire joke in there somewhere), a welter of secret codes and conspiratorial glances, and an encyclopaedic knowledge of all things demonic. They are, in other words, safely isolated from the evil which permeates their environment, and they want to keep it that way, as evidenced by the fact that they never renounce their ability to just drive away from demon-infested locations, malevolent beauties and potential ball-and-chains alike, their own psychological issues handily worked through in the process of performing their violent exorcism.

Before dismissing the series entirely, I'm quite willing to admit that episodes like "Route 666", "Home," and "Hell House," from Season 1, and Season's 2's "No Exit," do contain some memorable images and are not wholly ineffective as horror offerings. These episodes are replete with haunted houses, murderous phantom trucks and undead serial killers, satisfying a clued-in audience that the makers of the show (Eric Kripke *et al*) have at least done their homework. Marshalled here is an impressive array of references to Stephen King, Robert Bloch, Richard Matheson and *The X-Files*, to name but a few. Kripke himself names Neil Gaiman, *An American Werewolf in London* and the theories of anthropologist Joseph Campbell among his influences. A few good episodes and some canny use of its uncanny predecessors do not, however, save Supernatural from coming across as *The Littlest Hobo* with the lights turned off. Confirmed bachelors, the Winchesters, it seems, have no desire to be settled. Unfortunately, as they roar off in a cloud of dust at the end of each episode, they invariably leave unconsummated, or even dead, our own perfectly reasonable desire to be unsettled.

DARA DOWNEY

Jekyll
Hartswood Films/BBC/Stagescreen Productions (2007)

"We'd like you to review *Jekyll*," the Coven said. *Jekyll* ..? Ah, yes, *Jekyll*. BBC. Updated version. James Nesbitt ... "It's with James Nesbitt," I said, thinking that would settle the matter. "Yes," they said. "No, no, you don't understand. I saw the trailers, it's with *James Nesbitt*." "Yes," they said, "We know." "But don't you see, in order to review it, I'd have to watch it!" How much clearer could I make it? But they were remorseless, as is the way with covens. "Yes," they said, then added, "We understand it won't be easy." Which was kind of them, I suppose, but ... Jesus creeping shit, I've got to get out of this! "Look," I nearly shouted, pointing at Witch No. 1, "you yourself said you despise James Nesbitt and all that he represents!" "That's true," she conceded, but said no more. Then, I'm ashamed to admit, sheer panic took over. "But *it's James Nesbitt*! You know, the one from up North who's always doing that I'm-just-one-of-the-guys act when you know what he's really thinking is, I AM IT! I am God's fucking gift to women and don't they just love me! Yeah, baby, YEAH! I'd rather sandpaper my scrotum for three hours than watch James Nesbitt for one!" But, as you'll have gathered, it was all to no avail. Remorseless, that's the only word for it.

Still, I thought later, how bad could it be? Well, bad enough, obviously, but Stevenson's story is short, so the adaptation couldn't be any longer than an hour, could it? An hour-and-a-half, at the most, like that recent, godawful version of *Dracula* the BBC did ... Then the DVD arrived in the post. *Jekyll*. Season One. Running time: 330 mins. approx. *Season One*! *330 minutes*! *Three hundred and thirty minutes*! God's balls, what sort of bad karma was I reaping here? I grabbed the calculator. Five and-a-half hours. Five and-a-half hours ... of *James Nesbitt*! Right, you've asked for it, you've *really* asked for it! One fair and impartial review coming up...

Tom Jackman (played by guess who) has been feeling not quite himself lately. And when he's not quite himself, Tom does bad things. Very bad things. Like smoking. And drinking. And having sex with women. He may even eat take-away pizzas while watching football on the telly, though we're not actually shown that. As Tom is a happily-married New Man and a dab hand at changing nappies, such Neanderthal tendencies naturally upset him, so he does the only thing possible under the circumstances. He leaves his family, rents a dingy flat, and straps himself into a chair whenever he feels he might do anything Bad. When we first meet him, Tom is interviewing a girl named Katherine Reimer (Michelle Ryan), who claims to be a psychiatric nurse but dresses like Lara Croft. Katherine gets the job of monitoring Tom's mood swings and warning him when they're due. Good Tom communicates with Bad Tom by Dictaphone, so they can keep abreast of things. Important things, like where did you park the car before you wigged out and ended up in bed with that prostitute?

Tom, who used to work as a scientist for a firm called Klein & Utterson, becomes aware that he is being followed by a black van – you know, the sort with tinted windows that sinister people like to drive. He also visits his family from time to time, though he feels unable to tell his wife, Claire (the pulchritudinous Gina Bellman), why he has left home. One night, during one of his Bad moods, Tom is approached by the occupants of the van, who are indeed sinister (they must be, they wear suits), and are led by an American called Benjamin Lennox (Paterson Joseph), who is polite in a sinister kind of way. The sinister people

seem to want something, but Bad Tom is not in the mood so he throws one of them through a window before shinning up a nearby building like a monkey.

Eventually, Bad Tom gets to learn about Claire and the kiddies and goes to pay them a visit, introducing himself as Cousin Billy. When Good Tom learns about this, he leaves angry messages for Bad Tom, warning him to stay away from his family. He also discovers that Claire has hired a pair of lesbian private investigators to follow him, and from them he learns that there really was a Doctor Jekyll in Edinburgh in 1886, who allowed a certain well-known author to write his story as a fiction. But any connection with the original Jekyll seems to hit a dead end when it is revealed that he had no descendants. So Tom must look elsewhere to find the answers before Hyde takes over completely...

Needless to say, at 330 minutes, there is a lot more plot than this. An awful lot more plot, which jumps back and forth in time while becoming progressively more and more silly. Any initial curiosity as to how the programme-makers were going to handle a new version of Stevenson's tale quickly evaporates after the first episode, as it becomes clear that what they are really doing, apart from exhausting the viewers' patience with one improbability after another, is using Stevenson as a springboard for a sort of ghastly, politically correct morality play.

Not only do the bad people wear suits, they also work for an all-powerful corporation (possessed of "more money than God"), and it should come as no surprise to learn that most of them are men, including Tom's friend, Peter Syme (Denis Lawson), who of course turns out to be a bad egg. Tom's allies all just happen to be women – and what a prejudice-free cross-section of modern, contemporary Blairite Britain they are. There's Claire, of course, the devoted mother, and Katherine, the perfect Girl Friday (but successful and independent too, no doubt), and the lesbian gumshoes, one of whom is Asian and one of whom is pregnant, and the Muslim amputee tap-dancer who'll only perform in a burka... Okay, okay, I made the last one up, but really! Do scriptwriters feel obliged to work in these ethnic-gender "role models" before they submit their work to the BBC, or does some wretched casting committee twist their arms by saying, "Well, we think we can green-light this, yah? But we were just wondering if it mightn't be more ... you know, if the private investigator couldn't in fact be a woman? Two women, actually. In a relationship, why not? And maybe one of them is, like, Asian, or something ..." Jesus wept, it's enough to make one go out and buy the Collected Works of Bernard Manning.

Given such characters, it goes without saying that the performances are pretty woeful as well, though Bellman deserves some credit for managing to deliver her inane dialogue with a straight face. Michelle Ryan's character, though given a big build-up in the first episode, soon disappears into irrelevance, perhaps because the PC Squad realised she was both white *and* heterosexual. And then there's James Nesbitt. Ah, yes, James Nesbitt – how could I forget? Obviously, one's opinion of Nesbitt's efforts rather depends on one's view of Nesbitt himself because, make no mistake, this series is all about him. If you happen to consider him a smarmy, ingratiating blight in the first place , then *Jekyll* isn't going to change your mind; or, to put it another way, if you find Nesbitt's screen persona creepy, then watching him turn it up several notches to super-creepy isn't as much of a surprise as it might be for those who think he's either (and I take these examples from the script) "A world-class hottie" or "Mr. Sexy Pants". Oh, yes, I kid you not.

Nesbitt's interpretation of Hyde is certainly different but, along with the script, suffers from jarring shifts in tone, from the occasionally disturbing to the frequently ridiculous. Playing Hyde like some demented jack-in-the-box, Nesbitt leers and gurns at every available opportunity, while the character himself often seems to be an amalgam of Hannibal Lecter (identifying people's habits by smell), Dr. Bruce Banner ("Don't annoy me. That's not a good way to go."), and Mike Tyson ("When yuo [sic] sleep I will eat your children"). And it's really neither clever nor funny to have Hyde peer back through time at the original Dr. Jekyll (also played by guess who) and say, "Doesn't look a bit like Spencer Tracy."

Robert Louis Stevenson didn't write *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as a vehicle for lame gags, but then, as with the wretched *Dracula*, the makers of Jekyll seem more interested in hijacking a well-known name and using it to flog their disagreeably prudish post-feminist agenda than with doing justice to anything so outmoded as the author's original intentions. And make no mistake, there is something distinctly retrograde in the conceit that the original Dr. Jekyll is turned into Hyde by nothing other than good, old-fashioned lust (even allowing for the fact that Gina Bellman could bring out the beast in any man still in possession of a pulse), as indeed there is in the depiction of the three principal characters. Good Tom, as we have seen, is good because he is New Man, caring, unthreatening, and dull. Claire is good because she is a mother, a status which, being natural to her womanhood, must therefore be exalted and beyond reproach. But Bad Tom is bad, not only because he smokes (obviously!), but because he does ... what exactly? That which is natural to man, but which state, church, and women do their best to curb, control and suppress...

All of which is to give more than enough attention to a series that, in addition to being an insult to Robert Louis Stevenson, is also an insult to the viewers' intelligence. That the BBC actually intends to commission another series is deeply depressing, and I hereby give warning that if anybody comes to the Good John suggesting he review Series II, they'll have to deal with the Bad John first.

JOHN EXSHAW