

## TELEVISION REVIEWS

### **“We’re Coming to Get You”: Charlie Brooker’s *Dead Set*** (e4, 27th October – 1st November 2008)

“Whose house do you think you’re standing in, you stupid speck of shit.” So states (without inflection, and hence without a question or exclamation mark) obnoxious boss Patrick, a producer who effectively elects himself *Big Brother* in Charlie Brooker’s recent “zombies-in-the-*Big-Brother*-house” mini-series, *Dead Set*. Even without the fascinating commentary on power and the individual which the inclusion of the character of Patrick brings to the programme, this would be pretty fine stuff. With it, the entire production becomes something that I certainly hope will endure as one of the more memorable and thought-provoking televisual horror offerings of recent years. Brooker, the show’s creator, is a *Guardian* journalist and television critic famous for diatribes against the cult of celebrity, mass culture and pretty much everything else, and whose recent collection of TV writing, *Dawn of the Dumb* (2007) carries the Romero reference in the title through to a cover featuring a gun-toting Brooker poised to take on legions of the undead. It is unsurprising therefore that *Dead Set*, despite participating in this culture, equally functions as a trenchant, even damning critique of the vapid self-promotion and desperation for fame with which modern society appears to be consumed. Nevertheless, e4 itself, despite being the sister channel of Channel 4, which (at least occasionally) offers viewers innovative and challenging material, both fictional and non-fictional, is dominated by the twin institutions of the *Big Brother* behemoth and *Hollyoaks*, a sensationalist, over-produced paean to the reality-TV generation. As such, then, Brooker’s blood-spattered, allusion-heavy production, in which Davina McCall herself goes from groomed über-host to growling flesh-eater in the space of a single episode, sits rather strangely in the middle of the very cultural vehicle which it so unrelentingly derides.

The series (which ran to five episodes of varying length on either side of Halloween 2008 – a reminder that the Halloween season runs right through until Guy Fawkes Day in the UK) is based on an elegantly simple premise. While the population of Britain (it is somewhat unclear if the rest of the world, or indeed Ireland, has been affected – perhaps this is seen as immaterial) is systematically transformed into a vast and unstoppable horde of seemingly mindless, flesh-guzzling zombie, the usual miss-matched collection of self-promoting wannabes, and a few members of the staff who film and control their lives, find themselves occupying a smaller and smaller enclave of safety within the *Big Brother* house and its environs. Our Final Girl, significantly, is not in fact a “housemate,” but a lowly runner on the production team. Kelly (played convincingly by Jamie Winstone), rather than being the one who doesn’t have sex (the usual characteristic which distinguishes the Final Girl and which somehow keeps her safe from the ravaging monsters), is therefore set apart from almost all of the other female characters by dint of the fact that she is behind, rather than in front of the cameras (and somewhat more modest sartorially). In an interesting take on the usual device (employed in *I Am Legend* in particular) of having the main character physiologically immune from whatever virus has caused the zombie epidemic, Kelly’s job quite literally places her outside of the attention-grabbing hysteria which, initially at least, is the thing which unites the housemates, and indeed some of the other characters.

This marked tendency both to work within and subtly to alter the concerns and motifs of the genre is carried through to other elements of the film. The overwhelmingly claustrophobic mood is intensified rather than broken by the subplot, in which Kelly’s boyfriend Riq (they had a fight immediately before disaster struck) tries to reach her, teaming up with another survivor named Alex. After holing up in a

country house, where he can access the live *Big Brother* online feed, which allows him to see that Kelly is still alive, he convinces Alex to go and try to find her, and they leave by boat. Cue some lovely atmospheric and deeply creepy scenes as they drift along a calm river surrounded by dense fog, which could (and, as it transpires, does) hide some pretty nasty things. When Riq finally does get to the film studios, we are treated to an almost compulsory Romero reference; Marky, a housemate who has been picking zombies off from the roof with a very large gun, very nearly kills Kelly's beau by mistake, creating a moment of audience trepidation which is allayed in the next episode.

However, this temporary relief (which leads us to think that, unlike Romero's Ben from *Night of the Living Dead*, Riq might just save the day) serves only to lull us into a false sense of security, by exploiting the intertextual knowledge of a genre-savvy audience. Thus, while the opening of Episode 5 seems to imply that *Dead Set* is alluding to but not engaging in the bleak, post-apocalyptic despair of that most seminal of zombie movies, the ending, which finally convinced me that I was watching something really very good, is about as bleak as they come. In the final few minutes, it is revealed that every character has been zombieified, including the resourceful Kelly, in spite of her desperate last stand against the heaving, shambling masses which ultimately break into the compound. Moreover, the final frames of the programme radically undermine the positioning of Kelly as a Final Girl, a survivor who never succumbs to the temptations which doom those around her – in this case, celebrity culture and the cult of the image-simulacrum. Instead, we are left with a shot of her staring vacantly into a camera which continues to roll as the human world collapses around it, and beaming her image to countless television sets all over Britain which were never switched off – a spectacle watched, it would seem, by millions of other zombies. More chilling still, not only has she joined them in their remorseless desire to consume human flesh, but neither she nor Riq are even filmed as leaving the *Big-Brother* house. The world of superficial stardom and “ten seconds of fame” has won out; she too has been seduced, and there will be no escape.

E4's website for the show (<http://www.e4.com/deadset/>) cleverly extends the critique of celebrity culture and mass media representational strategies at the same time as utilising, feeding into and perpetuating it. The site includes mocked-up tabloid articles on each housemate, Kelly's emails from the morning of the outbreak, Riq's Facebook page and a David-Brent-gone-evil interview with the vile Patrick. There's also a picture gallery, of which the set of “teaser” pictures released before the series began is a personal favourite, focusing mainly on blood-stained light switches and prostrate female legs clad in high heels. The close-up of dead flies on a white, industrial surface is a particularly nice touch, extending the programmes' highly effectively conjuring up of the sense of realism and of a situation vaster than could ever fully be portrayed.

Even more interesting is the discussion of power which comes into play when Patrick first makes contact with the beleaguered housemates. When he utters the line with which I began this review, he is standing in the control room of the house, setting the industrial shutters to plunge the house's interior into darkness and turning on a blaring siren until Kelly begs him to desist. This initial play of authority – and his self-positioning as Big Brother, the owner and ruler of the house in which the others have become trapped – is far from short-lived, but becomes even more vital in Episode 4. Convinced that escape is the only option, he hatches a reasonably well thought-out plan to distract the zombies with body parts from a dead housemate, Grayson, the by-now obligatory housemate of ambivalent gender (a rather perfunctory engagement with issues of sexuality and indeed race is perhaps the one major failing here). What follows is surprisingly gory, even in a mini-series about flesh-eating zombies – Patrick doesn't just dismember Grayson; he seems to find it necessary to disembowel him as well, yanking out bloody entrails and becoming himself more blood-spattered than Johnny Depp in *Sleepy Hollow* (only much less prettily).

The tyrant who descends to appalling atrocities in order to push home his point that his way is the best way, like Macbeth (only much less nobly), his own terrible deeds are revisited upon him, as the zombies inevitably fall on him in the final episode, in their turn dragging out and devouring his livid intestines.

While his character seems to be a pretty straightforward *homage* to Captain Rhodes in Romero's *Day of the Dead*, who is also a reprehensible authority figure who receives his just deserts at the hands (and teeth) of the undead, he also serves to add yet another dimension to the show's central critique. Trapped in the labyrinthine corridors around the house proper, Patrick and vacuous evictee Pippa must be rescued by Kelly and the surviving housemates (not least because this is the only way to stop him from persecuting them with the apparatus of the house itself). In an effort to stop his whining, Kelly yells "We're coming to get you!" ominously echoing the words uttered by Davina when Pippa is evicted, a mass-media event which almost seems to trigger the zombie outbreak – and, of course, the famous "They're coming to get you, Barbara!" from Romero's original. The alteration in pronouns here seems significant, blurring the boundaries even before the final scenes (this occurs in Episode 4) between housemates and zombies; and between Davina's eviction-night extravaganza and the liberation of trapped human beings from a space infested with the dead. In a world where everyone and anyone can be gripped by the bug of celebrity, as it were, it's hard to tell who's in charge and who's at their mercy; who's benign and who's malevolent; who's living, and who's dead.

There is a new world order, even in the house, where we are being told; piffling rules and men barking orders have no place in a zombified Britain, and neither do those who seek to opt out and live independent, private lives. Now, it would seem the sole and supreme ruler is the television screen itself – or perhaps the camera, which keeps running, long after its human operators have ceased to be able to use it in any kind of creative way. Instead, they (or what is left of them) can only stare blankly at one another – and, by extension, at us staring blankly back at them – probably forever.

***DARA DOWNEY***

***The Simpsons: Treehouse of Horror***  
(20th Century 1990-present)

*The Simpsons* may have made their full-length television debut with a Christmas episode ('Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire'), but in the nineteen years since they've made Halloween their signature holiday with the annual "Treehouse of Horror" episode. First introduced in October 1990 in the show's second season, the "Treehouse of Horror" series now amounts to fifty-seven individual segments over nineteen episodes to date (plus extras, in the form of opening and closing credits sequences and their associated trappings, such as the alternate scary names for cast and crew that get more elaborate by the year – Dan Blackulaneta, for example). Over the years, *The Simpsons* has parodied and paid homage to all kinds of supernatural and extra-terrestrial beasties culled from popular culture, and taken pot-shots at television censors, politicians, and the television programmers that now regularly schedule the show to appear in November. At its best, the Halloween special has re-enacted classic horror movies ('King Homer'; 'The Shinning'; 'Nightmare on Evergreen Terrace') and television shows (*The Twilight Zone*-inspired 'Clown Without Pity'; 'Terror at 5½ Feet' and 'Homer3', among others, proving especially memorable) and squeezed many a gem into the introductory segments that anticipate the main attractions (Marge's warnings; Bart and Homer's *Outer Limits*-styled takeover of the airwaves; Homer's stint as Alfred Hitchcock). In recent years, though, it has faltered somewhat, displaying the same kind of patchiness that has been evident in latter-day *Simpsons* as a whole, and showing signs of the law of diminishing returns to which horror franchises are so fatally prone.

It started on a real high with the trio of 'Bad Dream House' (a spin on *The Amityville Horror*); 'Hungry are the Damned' (based on a *Twilight Zone* episode 'To Serve Man', itself based on a short story of the same name) and the real highlight, 'The Raven'. The latter, read by James Earl Jones, is plainly conceived and brilliantly executed, casting Homer as the poem's main character, Marge as the lost Lenore and Bart as the raven (just one of a series of appearances by Edgar Allan Poe which reached its zenith in Season 9's episode 'Lisa the Simpson', which featured Bart and Homer whooping to the fall of the House of Usher on a fictional Fox special, *When Buildings Collapse*). Indeed, the first nine instalments of the "Treehouse of Horror" produced moment after moment of perfectly-honed horror pastiche, from 'The Devil and Homer Simpson' (in which Homer sells his soul for a donut and faces a trial by the jury of the damned, including Benedict Arnold, Lizzie Borden and the then-still-very-much-alive Richard Nixon) to 'The Thing and I', where Bart's discovery that he was born with a conjoined brother (Hugo) who now lives in the attic leads to the revelation that it is Bart himself who is the evil twin. As the show really hit its stride, its experiments became more elaborate (most obviously in the Tron-inflected 3-D animation of 'Homer3') – but also with more and more playful narratives in which advertisements come to life and terrorise Springfield ('Attack of the 50-Foot Eyesores') or Itchy and Scratchy break down the fourth wall of the Simpsons' world ('The Terror of Tiny Toon'). Throughout its run as a whole, the show has also maintained a healthy propensity towards punning in their tradition of scary names, and for segment titles – the best from the show's heyday probably being 'The HΩmega Man' and 'Clown Without Pity'. In recent years in particular, these titles have veered more and more towards the tortured (and I must confess I'm very fond of a tortured pun, as is probably evident from the film section...), giving us such classics as 'You Gotta Know When to Golem' and (my favourite) 'I've Grown a Costume on Your Face'...

Equally, though it has sometimes seemed that more attention has been paid to lexical histrionics than the subject matter itself in some of the more recent episodes. Overall, the quality has certainly dipped, and

has gone hand in hand with the downturn in quality in a lot of contemporary horror cinema – parodies of the likes of *I Know What You Did Last Summer* ('I Know What You Diddily-Iddily-Did') just don't quite cut it (although, in Homer's advice as to where each member of the family should take shelter from their pursuer, it does provide one of the show's funniest Halloween gags: "Marge, you hide in the abandoned amusement park. Lisa, the pet cemetery. Bart, spooky roller disco. And I'll go skinny dipping in that lake where the sexy teens were killed one hundred years ago tonight"). Too often of late, the show has tended to feature at least one segment per episode that merely retreads a recent release in a manner that is just a bit too straightforward – 'The Island of Dr Hibbert' (The Island of Dr Moreau), for example, or this year's 'Untitled Robot Parody' (Transformers). Indeed, 2008's offering proved notoriously weak, not even fulfilling the Halloween brief. One of the segments – 'Mr and Mrs Simpson' – is an uninspired take on Mr & Mrs Smith, while 'E.T., Go Home' recasts recurring favourite Kodos as a less-than-cuddly extra-terrestrial in a tiresome alien invasion story that had been done better in earlier, superior Halloween specials. This was particularly true in the 1996 election special 'Citizen Kang', a personal favourite, in which Homer uncovers an alien plot to replace then presidential candidates Bill Clinton and Bob Dole with Kang and Kodos, which leads to some quite blunt (but equally funny) satire along the lines of:

*Kent Brockman*: Senator Dole, why should people vote for you instead of President Clinton?

*Kang*: It makes no difference which one of us you vote for. Either way, your planet is doomed. DOOMED!

*Kent*: Well, a refreshingly frank response there from Senator Bob Dole.

And, when they are unmasked as the "hideous space reptiles" that they really are:

*Kodos*: It's true, we are aliens. But what are you going to do about it? It's a two-party system; you have to vote for one of us.

*Man 1*: He's right, this is a two-party system.

*Man 2*: Well, I believe I'll vote for a third-party candidate.

*Kang*: Go ahead, throw your vote away.

This impulse for political subversion still endures in the Halloween specials, though, and election time still seems to bring out the best in the *Simpsons* writers. The most recent "Treehouse of Horror" was first broadcast in the US a few days before Election Day, and boasted an introductory segment in which Homer's efforts at voting for Barack Obama are thwarted at every turn by a "haunted" voting machine that registers each vote for Obama as a vote for John McCain, before turning violent...

The rest of the episode that followed (tired *Transformers* parody aside) marked something of a return to form, certainly improving on the previous year's effort. This was particularly true of the final segment ('It's the Grand Pumpkin, Milhouse'), which paid good-natured homage to another festive animated favourite, the *Peanuts* specials. This was a literal reanimation, then, which recreated *Peanuts*' signature animation style for Springfield and recast Springfield's inhabitants as characters from Charles Schultz's cartoons. This kind of playfulness is also evident in what is probably the best gothic sequence to have made a *Simpsons* appearance in recent years. This was not included in a Halloween special at all, but in a Season 18 episode ('Yokel Chords') in which Bart's story of the so-called "Dark Stanley murders" at school is animated in the style of macabre artist Edward Gorey (whose work has influenced the likes of Tim Burton, for one). This inventive and beautifully animated sequence managed to inject new life into the show's long-standing tradition of paying tribute to the gothic where that year's Halloween special had fallen flat, an upward spiral that continued into the most recent "Treehouse of Horror" itself. It looks like

things might be on the up for *The Simpsons* horror oeuvre, then, and it may well continue on the trajectory envisioned by Kodos in ‘Citizen Kang’, moving “forward, not backward; upward, not forward; and always twirling, twirling, twirling towards freedom!”

**JENNY McDONNELL**

**Weird Science: *Fringe***  
(Sky, October 2008 - Present)

Coming as it does from the creative team responsible for the hugely successful (and famously convoluted) *Lost*, *Fringe* arrived freighted with more expectations than most paranormal themed television shows, although in fairness, given that the likes of *Medium*, *Supernatural* and *Ghost Whisperer* had been the most prominent representatives of the sub genre in recent years, the bar hasn't been set all that high of late. The basic premise – a team working for the FBI investigates “unusual” cases which defy conventional law enforcement methods – is of course almost identical to that of *The X-Files*, and indeed, many of the mysteries dealt with here would also have suited the deductive talents of Mulder and Scully. The main difference plot wise is that whilst it was the mysterious abduction of Mulder's sister and the alien-conspiracy takeover plot which resulted which provided the all important (and tedious) arc for that series, here, it is the so called “Pattern” – a series of mysterious and generally gory incidents said to result from the actions of rogue scientists operating on the “Fringes” of ethically responsible science – which drives the narrative (and provides the title).

Whilst fans of *Lost* are no doubt scouring the series for interconnections with that series, and there are undoubted similarities (such as the predilection for last minute twists and the fact that the soundtrack pays frequent homage to the famous *Lost* “wooshing” sound which closes scenes), it is another, earlier J.J. Abrams show which has most in common with *Fringe: Alias*. Though initially marketed as an action adventure/espionage show, the most compelling, and ultimately maddening thing about *Alias* was the ever present “Rambaldi” subplot, which concerned the inventions of a Leonardo Da Vinci-style Sixteenth Century inventor named Milo Rambaldi whose mysteriously advanced inventions, the McGuffin at the heart of many of the shows finest episodes, frequently edged *Alias* into the realm of Science Fiction. Similarly, *Fringe* also hinges upon the consequences of unchecked Scientific ambition, and the race to decide who controls the discoveries which result. The series also shares with *Lost* and *Alias* another of Abrams favourite conceits: a troubled heroine with major Daddy issues surrounded by men and by organisations which may not be entirely trustworthy.

Olivia Dunham (Olivia Torv) is an FBI field agent reluctantly drawn into the world of weird science when the passengers and crew of an airliner all die within moments of each other in the gory scene with which pilot episode opens. Together with her partner/secret boyfriend, John Scott, Dunham probes the reasons behind the crash and soon discovers evidence that the loss of lives was the result of a sinister conspiracy (is there any other kind?) instigated by rogue scientists conducting seemingly random experiments on the population at large as part of what is known as the “Pattern”. When Scott is infected by a deliberately engineered virus during the course of their investigations, Dunham must spring mad scientist Walter Bishop (John Noble) from the nuthouse and enlist the aid of his cynical son Peter (Joshua Jackson) to help find a cure. The pilot also introduces us to the Machiavellian high-ranking executive Nina Sharp, an employee of the vast multinational conglomerate “Massive Dynamic”, which was founded by Bishops former business partner. The most interesting thing about Nina Sharp so far – apart from the fact that her company seems to have a mysterious connection almost every case investigated by the *Fringe* trio – is that she has a metal arm. It's something which cannot help but evoke *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*, whose second season, showing at the moment, also features a sinister, red-headed female executive with metallic body parts and a secret agenda. It must be noted however that Blair Brown's performance in *Fringe* is much better than that of the remarkably stilted Shirley Manson in *T: TSCC*, who seems to have studied Arnold Schwarzenegger's turn in the original films and decided that the secret to

playing an effective Terminator is to speak with as little expression as possible whilst trying not to blink too much.

*Fringe* is also notable for being yet another recent American SF/Horror show in which the lead characters work for the increasingly ubiquitous department of Homeland Security, seen also in the likes of *Threshold* and *The 4400*. It is perhaps no coincidence then the plane load of dead passengers with which the show opens ends up landing at Boston's Logan airport, point of departure for many of the 9/11 hijackers, nor that as the series progresses we are told of the existence rogue "cells" of scientists determined to further technological and scientific inquiry at the cost of human life. Here, at least so far, unseen scientists have become the ruthless fanatics, secular jihadists determined to further human knowledge at all. What's more, as in any good conspiracy, the secrets go right to the top, and it is strongly suggested that both the Federal Government and Massive Dynamic are playing an important part in such secret machinations. In a familiar scenario therefore, Olivia, Peter and Walter (like Sydney Bristow in *Alias*) may just be pawns unwittingly aiding the very powers they're trying to bring down.

This is clearly a show that has had a great deal of money spent on it from the outset: there's a glossy, movie-of-the-week look to it which suggests that the studio have a lot riding on its success. One of the most visually striking elements is the fact that both the opening titles and the location and key scenes are dramatised as giant 3-D letters floating over the landscape (this innovation surely be cribbed from the opening titles of David Fincher's *The Panic Room*): a great deal more attention grabbing than *The X-File*'s relatively discrete use of courier font.

Yet the success (or failure) of any show lies not in the opening titles, but in the attractiveness of the dynamic between its leads, and in this crucial respect *Fringe* gets it only two-thirds right. The best thing about the programme so far is Australian actor John Noble's performance as Walter Bishop, an insightful but unstable genius whose seventeen-year sojourn in an asylum has sorely depleted his already rudimentary social skills. Noble's small but unforgettable turn in *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* as the insane Denothor (who decided to cremate his son even though he wasn't quite dead yet) was the basis for some of the most disturbing scenes in the entire trilogy. Similarly, he seems to be in his element here, providing a much needed strain of comedy to a sometimes rather po-faced show, yet at the same time managing to evoke poignancy in his portrayal of a man whose immense intellect has probably done more harm than good. His performance in episode eight, "The Equation" – in which Walter must return to the asylum in order to interrogate a fellow inmate – is particularly moving. More surprising perhaps is the fact that *Dawson's Creek* alumni Joshua Jackson manages to achieve actual likability as Peter Bishop, the gifted but rootless cynic who serves as his father's assistant. The tentative father son relationship at the heart of the show is one of its most compelling elements, and crucially, helps differentiate the show from the many other similarly themed programmes out there.

Unfortunately, the part played by Torv fails to be half as interesting. Olivia Dunham has been assembled from the same tediously predictable template as practically every other female law enforcement officer on US television. Impractically long and shiny hair? Check. A dedication to the job which comes at the expense of a personal life? Check. Penchant for starting into the middle distance? Check. Troubled childhood? Check. Irritating tendency to state the obvious so that the slower members of the audience can keep up? Check. A boss who initially doubts her abilities but later doles out grudging respect? Check. Yup, it's all there, including a propensity for saying unintentionally hilarious things like "I know I'm emotional, but that's what makes me so damn good at my job" (she's a woman in a man's world, see). Torv herself isn't all that bad, despite her often flat delivery of lines and rather limited palate of facial



expressions (expression one: squint to denote deep thought, expression two; nod significantly to signal understanding of technobabble heavy explanation of the week). It's the script which really hobbles the character, and the fault may well lie with Abrams himself. Dunham has much in common with his similarly humourless and predictably troubled heroines on *Lost* (particularly Kate Austen, who like Dunham has also violently dispatched an abusive stepfather) or even Sydney Bristow on *Alias*, who grew increasingly dull as that series progressed. One can only hope that *Fringe*'s writers have noted the characters sheer blandness and have resolved to make her rather more interesting than she is as present, before viewer irritation hardens to downright dislike.

So what of the episodes themselves? Well, the pilot was fairly intriguing and established the premise in a crisp, efficient manner. It's still early days yet, but, the episodes seem to be proceeding in a fairly predictable fashion: something strange happens in the pre-credits sequence (a lift plummets to the ground, a woman makes people's heads explode in a diner, etc) whilst our trio of investigators attempt to figure out what went wrong. So far, the level of coincidence here seems worryingly high: most of the cases seem to have some sort of connection with Massive Dynamics and/or Walter Bishop's earlier research interests, and the "Freak of the Week" structure may well, as in *Smallville*, soon prove tiresome. And yet, for all that, *Fringe* remains an entertaining, if as yet unexceptional hour, particularly for those nostalgic for the days when Mulder and Scully roamed the gravel pits and forests of Vancouver looking for weird cases to solve. If already somewhat formulaic, the show is well produced, features excellent special effects and some mildly intriguing mysteries. Perhaps the stand out episode so far is "The Arrival", which we are introduced to a character known as "The Observer" who may well prove as crucial to *Fringe* mythology as the Cigarette Smoking Man was to *The X-Files*. Crucially, the episode's initial weird-happening of the week here provides an opportunity for the writers to set up and even more intriguing mystery regarding the Bishop family connection to "The Pattern". It may well be that as more and more clues regarding the overall arc are provided the show will truly come into its own. Or, as in *Lost*, the establishment of a detailed mythology will result in a convoluted and essentially unsatisfying confection which can never satisfactorily resolved (see also *The X-Files* and *Alias*). At the moment therefore, the show remains promising but flawed: as with the "Pattern" itself, its true nature has still to fully emerge but is still worth keeping an eye on, just in case.

**BERNICE M. MURPHY**

***Death Traffickers:  
The Rise of the Irish Road-Safety Advert***

Who would have thought it? Ireland has finally produced a successful horror movie, a terrifying piece of film in which an air of portentous doom is shockingly realised in a scene of appalling carnage. This film is a Gothic tale in the strictest sense, revolving around (in Richard Davenport-Hines' terms) "a tyrant who ruins the lives of the young but whose dominion is broken by the uncontrolled excesses of his own passions," and a heroine who sees too much and is emotionally and physically mutilated by her experiences. This film has gained recognition and praise from international audiences, and yet is deemed so disturbing and graphic that it is only shown on television after 9pm, and, in the cinema, before films with certificates of 15s or higher.

The film in question, "Mess" (or, to give it its ungrammatically awkward full title, "The Faster the Speed, the Bigger the Mess,"), created by Lyle Bailie International Limited, is not strictly a horror movie as such. At any rate, this was not the intention behind its production as part of an impressively well funded cross-border campaign to reduce road deaths in Ireland. Nevertheless, it works within the genre's conventions, and it is as a horror film (albeit a brief one, at a mere – yet unbearably interminable – sixty seconds long) that it has effectively been received by unsuspecting viewers who find themselves watching it during the ad break for something innocuous like *The Late Late Show*.

Precisely because of the significant overlap with exploitative slasher flicks, but also because of the expectations created in previous road-safety commercials, the message which "Mess" is seeking to convey becomes somewhat garbled. A considerable proportion of such advertisements are aimed at those who are most likely to be hurt or killed on the roads. For example, a pair of ads in which Fats Domino's "I Wanna Walk you Home" plays loudly over the action portrays inattention while crossing the road as having terrible consequences for a young Lothario, and for a mother and young son. Somewhat more ambiguous, however, is the "No Seatbelt, No Excuse" campaign, in which a single unbelted passenger causes the death of three of his friends, including his girlfriend, and is left severely brain-damaged himself.

This second ad is far closer to the "innocent victim dies, evil perpetrator is unhurt" variety of road-safety commercials which are most prevalent on our television screens at present. These ads explicitly play up the underlying gender dynamic of the "No Seatbelt, No Excuse," message, invariably coding victims as female (or, less often, as young children) and murderously irresponsible drivers, who invariably walk away physically unscathed, as young, sexually predatory males. Thus, "Slow Down Boys" (slick young buck survives, pretty girl in skimpy white dress is crushed against a tree) targets boy racers who attempt to use cars as indicators and extensions of their sexual prowess; while the even less subtle "He Drives, She Dies" (based, it is insisted, on sound and overwhelming statistical evidence and shown primarily in cinemas, for some reason) spells the message out in no uncertain terms.

Whatever the figures might say, however, in this latter campaign (which Noel Brett, Chief Executive of the Road Safety Authority referred to as encouraging "girl power") matters become somewhat confused. By placing the onus on young women to refuse lifts with joy-riding studs, advertisements of this nature (presumably inadvertently) imply that victims are in fact responsible for the injuries or loss of life that comes about as the result of someone else's bad driving, a somewhat skewed perspective which aligns them even more closely with the slasher films, those modern-day manifestations of Gothic unease.

Famously, slasher movies are now often seen as modern-day versions of Perrault's fairy stories – morality tales intended primarily to curb the sexual impulses of an impetuous youth. As we are told explicitly in Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996) – which draws upon such classics as John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) and its sequels, as well as the *Friday the 13th* and *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchises – having sex is a sure-fire way of winding up dead in just about every horror-film scenario (a motif turned humorously on its head in *Cherry Falls* (2000)). However evil or depraved the villain might be, on a fundamental level we are being told that the victim (most usually a teenage girl) has no-one to blame but herself.

The “sex is dangerous” angle is also present in “Mess” – if not quite to the same degree as in some other road-safety commercials. One of the most intriguing things about the ad is the fact that it has become a massive hit on YouTube: one particular posting – and there are several – has clocked up 388,153 hits and counting, a figure which, considering the content of the commercial, more than suggests a prurient fascination with, almost a fetishisation of traffic accidents which strongly recalls David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996), a text which seems to lurk queasily behind the advertisement's rather garbled moral message. Beyond this, both within and outside of YouTube, the ad has sparked off a surprising number of threads on online discussion forums. As one contributor has commented, what he's learnt from the ad is that kissing your girlfriend at the side of the road is a *really* bad idea, and he won't be doing that again. This may be somewhat glib, but the way in which the narrative is organised, and its implicit association of sexual encounters with the horrific consequences of the accident, certainly makes this a legitimate reading. It begins with a couple kissing; she is sitting on the wall of a bridge, with her legs wrapped around him. The events leading up to the crash, for which the driver of the car is evidently to blame, are interspersed with shots of the young lovers, and later with a courtroom scene, a scene in an ambulance, a morgue and finally a funeral, but are given rather less weight, and considerably less attention than the harrowing scenes of the boy being pinned against the girl, while her legs are crushed against the wall. Brief as they may be, her screams and the shots of both young people writhing in agony are the things which stay most firmly in the mind of the (often unwary) viewer. However dark and apocalyptically doom-laden the court-case scene might be, it is not fear of the law, fear of the consequences of our actions as drivers, or even fear of the idiotic man who swerves to avoid a dog which runs into the middle of the road that this ad evokes.

Instead, because at least some of the images contained within it are almost too distressing to watch, causing (as many people have pointed out, on the internet, in the newspapers and on radio and television) a significant proportion of viewers to change channels the moment they hear the accompanying music, it is the pain and mutilation undergone by these young people, the site of their blood and terror, that frightens us. Moreover, for those who have lost loved ones or themselves been involved in a traffic accident, every ad break is potentially an emotional minefield (a serious problem with the campaign overall which various government websites callously dismiss). It is no wonder, then, that so many of us choose, in the face of something that is more upsetting than instructive, to look away.

Indeed, this very fact is embedded in the song (written specially for the ad) entitled “I Can't Take My Eyes Off You,” as well as through the way in which ads like this (and indeed horror more generally) function, inviting a sick, Cronenbergian fascination coupled with a desire – but often an inability – to avert our gaze. Indeed, this conflicted reaction is cleverly referenced in “Mess” itself, when we see a mother hastily, but far too belatedly, put her hands across the eyes of a small child who has inadvertently ended up watching the carnage. In a sense, we, as the viewers, are that little girl, visually assaulted not once but (potentially) several times in one evening, and only turning over when we've already seen more than we would like. One its most simple level, however, the song also blurs the boundaries between

perpetrator and victim – the couple's infatuation with each other being intimately associated with the driver's fatal moment of inattention.

What I would *not* like to suggest here is that road safety ads are ill-conceived, a futile exercise or a waste of money. Consciousness-raising is always a vital first step in any campaign, and if the plethora of online activity and media controversy which these advertising campaigns have spawned are anything to go by, they are undeniably making young people across the English-speaking world and beyond think more carefully about what exactly is involved when they get behind the wheel of a car. The problem is that cause and effect become somewhat slippery things in the realm of horrific images, however carefully a narrative economy may

strive to distinguish them and to direct our dread accordingly. On the one hand, we ought to identify with the perpetrator, and adjust our behaviour accordingly for fear of what might happen if we fail to do so. However, it would seem that this identification can slide all too easily into a Gothic villain's gloating delight at the pain inflicted, drawing some viewers to return again and again to this spectacle which should repel rather than attract. On the other hand, when, along with the heroine, our eyes widen in horror as we comprehend exactly what is bearing down inexorably upon us, fumbling – too late – for the remote control, it seems that instead, we have become the victim.

***DARA DOWNEY***

***True Blood***  
(HBO, September 2008 – Present)

Given the rise of vampire romance novels in the last few years, and the number of vampire-related detective television series such as the CBS show *Moonlight* and the Canadian *Blood Ties* (both cancelled early by their networks to the disappointment of many fans), the popularity of HBO's *True Blood* is hardly surprising. Part romance, part mystery, *True Blood* stands out from its counterparts because of its network's allowance of explicit sex, gory violence and bad language, but also by its quirky humour and the steamy atmosphere which pervades the show.

In Alan Ball's adaptation of Charlaine Harris's Southern Vampire Mystery novels, the world has become aware of the existence of vampires due to the fabrication of 'Tru Blood' – a Japanese-made synthetic blood which fulfils all of a vampire's nutritional needs without requiring them to kill anyone. The small town of Bon Temps, Louisiana, hasn't seen a real-life (or rather a real-undead) vampire since their race 'came out of the coffin' two years beforehand, until Bill Compton (Stephen Moyer) walks into Merlotte's Bar and Grill one night and orders a bottle. Bill, and others like him, can come out at night and go about his business as a regular American citizen. There are many, of course, who oppose the idea of vampire rights, and Bill is met with suspicion and hostility by all but pretty blonde telepathic waitress Sookie Stackhouse (Anna Paquin), whose name, pronounced in the characters' Louisiana accent becomes the hilariously appropriate 'Sucky.'

Sookie, often branded as freakish or crazy by the other inhabitants of Bon Temps because of her telepathic abilities, is inexorably drawn to Bill as another outsider, and as the only person whose thoughts she can not hear (which offers blessed silence from the sex, violence and unhappy marriages on the mind of the sadly oftentimes stereotyped Southerners). The love story between Bill and Sookie is full of slow-motion walking, lingering shots and soft music, and the scene in which they first kiss is like something taken directly from a bodice-ripper romance novel, with a white-frilly-dress-clad virginal Sookie running in slow motion through a graveyard to Bill's plantation house where he takes her in his arms and smells her hair. The series seems to gently poke fun at the romance genre while still appreciating it. A lot of the appeal of Sookie's otherwise slightly whiny character is her ability to put tall, dead, brooding Bill back in his place. As he glowers at her when they first meet, she laughs at his name – 'Vampire *Bill*?! I thought it might be Antoine, or Basil, or like Langford, maybe.' – and when he attempts to 'glamour' her (a sort of vampiric hypnosis) she pretends it's working before once again laughing in his face ('You don't like not being able to control people, do you? That's not a very attractive trait, Bill.').

Sookie spends half her time being awesome (beginning the series by saving Bill's life rather than the other way around, warning the vampire to speak to her 'like the lady that I am,' cursing at the entire town at her grandmother's funeral, and being the one to stop the Bon Temps killer in the season finale) and the other half moping or snapping at her friends for no discernable reason. Luckily, for the whining half we have a plethora of quirky characters to concentrate on instead, like Sookie's best friend Tara (Rutina Wesley), whose feistiness and smart mouth are a welcome balance to Sookie's mixture of childlike innocence and supernatural world-weariness; shapeshifter Sam (Sam Trammell), Sookie's boss and one-third of her love triangle; black, camp, foulmouthed short order cook slash drug dealer Lafayette; and Sookie's older brother Jason (Ryan Kwanten), who at first threatened to remain simply a gag character whose only function initially seemed to be getting into trouble and getting naked, but who became far more

interesting after meeting psychopath hippie chick Amy (Lizzy Caplan). If Sookie's character occasionally gets lost among the other characters' subplots it only helps to enliven the supporting cast. Bill also seems to exist only for brooding, but then again this is a staple of the vampire romance genre (think Angel in *Buffy* – before *Angel* the series fleshed out his character – and Edward Cullen in *Twilight*).

Nods to the romance genre aside, Ball, creator of deliciously dark drama series *Six Feet Under*, takes on Charlaine Harris's good-natured psychic detective/ vampire romances and turns them into *True Blood*, a gothic explosion of sex and gore which still somehow manages to retain a lot of Harris' quirky humour. The beautifully realised opening sequence, set to Jace Everett's *Bad Things*, lets the viewer know in no uncertain terms what the show is all about. Images of road kill, the Ku Klux Klan, Southern baptisms, Venus fly traps, gospel choirs, strippers and pole dancers come together with the bars, bayous and houses of Louisiana in flickering sepia, reminding us at the beginning of every episode that this series is about death, sex, race and religion and we would do well to remember it.

Ball's generous use of allegory is hardly subtle. While the show successfully portrays a lot of the preoccupations of modern American consciousness – underlying the campy vampire story, the romance and the sex is the reality of post-Katrina Louisiana and the US in general after the Iraq war – he is often heavy-handed. With its repeated epithet of 'God Hates Fangs' and the political backstory involving vampire rights legislation, the show tries to make parallels between homosexuality and vampires, and race and vampires, without quite knowing which metaphor to stick to. These metaphors become quite problematic when one considers the discrepancies between human minority groups and vampires, who all – 'mainstreamers' and rebels alike – practice a rather laissez-faire attitude towards their own anti-killing laws.

Some of the specifics of the vampire world Harris created aren't too clear in the series, and the mystery of the Bon Temps killer, which supposedly leads the plot of the first season, tends to get lost in the romance and the rest of the action. This aside, the world of *True Blood* is interesting if not entirely original, and is imbued with a heady, steamy atmosphere that is right at home in the Louisiana bayous. The characters are offbeat and engaging, if sometimes annoying, and the main cast are generally satisfyingly good-looking. If this is, as Alan Ball himself has claimed, 'popcorn television for smart people,' smart or not, please pass the popcorn.

**MOIRA FOWLEY**