

Riverdale, Season Two (CW, 2018)

This year saw the finale of the second season of *Riverdale*, the surprisingly popular, dark and sexy reimagining of one American pop culture's most twee and wholesome exports. Picking up where Season One's cliff-hanger left off, Archie Andrews (K. J. Apa), the updated version of the eponymous hero of the long-running Archie Comics, and his friends find themselves in Season Two hunting and being hunted by a sin-obsessed serial killer called the Black Hood. Meanwhile, Veronica Lodge's (Camila Mendes) mysterious and implicitly sinister father, Hiram Lodge (Mark Consuelos), arrives in town. In between all the riots, murders, stabbings and political intrigue, our main characters somehow find time to fall in and out of love – and learn that friendship, in a surprising twist, cannot actually do much in the face of severe and repeated moral compromise.

Said moral compromise may just be part of the rather nihilistic streak that seems to be running through a lot of modern pop culture these days (a trait which still feels like a reaction to or an attempt to capitalise on how well received Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005) was), but it feels noticeably pronounced in *Riverdale* – even more so in this sophomore season. This show is not set in a world where difficult situations are resolved while our heroes maintain a moral superiority or clean conscience – far from it. For example, in this season we observe Archie stand by while someone gets shot, and cheerfully raising a private jock army to act as a vigilante force. Meanwhile, we witness the traditionally squeaky-clean Betty Cooper (Lili Reinhart) deliberately lure the serial killer to murderously dispose of a man who she perceives as a potential threat, not to mention helping her mother hide a body earlier in the season. As for fan-favourite Jughead Jones (Cole Sprouse), he (in one of the show's more shockingly glossed-over moments) horribly mutilates a woman by removing her tattoo with a knife in order to scare her out of town. These are not the 'good guys' of the conventional teen drama; they are more akin to the characters in the first act of a horror film like *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997), who transgress and (usually) spend the rest of narrative being punished for their deeds and haunted (often literally) by their actions. What little comeuppance there is in *Riverdale*, though, is short lived, light on long-term consequence, and designed solely for immediate melodramatic effect.

Season Two, it seems, is trying hard to be categorised as horror, or at least to invoke several of its aesthetics and tropes. From the lazily obvious episode titles – such as 'The Hills Have Eyes' or 'The Town That Dreaded Sundown' (which themselves occasionally find their way inorganically into spoken narration) – to plot points involving a *Carrie* (1976) musical or

the delivery of mysterious crates from the Miskatonic University via a certain Mr Lovecraft, the decidedly transparent references to gothic and horror staples abound. Yet the main tension of *Riverdale*'s horror elements lies in the fact that it is by no means clear who exactly they are aimed at – strangely, these references seem to be intended for a different demographic than those to which the show predominantly appeals. The show's primary target audience (mainly teens tuning in more for the mainstream teen drama than necessarily for the 'horror' elements) may not care about or even recognise the majority of the intertextual references.¹ (This is to say nothing of just how much this audience knows of the source comics or even *if* they know of the source comics at all. If *Riverdale* is an original property in their eyes, the subversion at the show's core is potentially lost on them).

The only reason to pay direct homage to the iconic shot of BOB from *Twin Peaks* (1990-91) mounting the couch and crawling toward the camera during Betty's nightmare, or for Veronica to have cushions in her lake house printed with the instantly recognisable design of the carpet from *The Shining* (1980), is to entice detail-driven horror fans to watch this show. Arguably, however, such nods to horror classics are too unsubtle to reward many such fans. The fact that the writers felt the need in scenes such as this to explicitly announce and explain the parallels with the horror 'greats' reveals a lack of confidence in their own audience; when Betty and Jughead dispose of a car in a swamp, for example, Jughead directly spells out the parallels with a scene in *Psycho* (1960), and references Norman Bates by name. Why include these explanations if aficionados will quickly recognise the references? And similarly, if the majority of audience members will *not* recognise these references, why even include them at all? These allusions therefore seem to be little more than an aesthetic choice, bolted inelegantly onto the otherwise (admittedly quite enjoyably) silly, overwrought teen drama and mystery plots revolving around small-town politics or family secrets.

Where the show succeeds more consistently is often in the sequences that occur directly after one of the endless, tension-free horror set pieces, in which the protagonists gather with their family units to unwind, only for some additional dark secret to emerge. Beyond these scenes, a number of the few truly tense moments this season emerge from Betty's home life, as her murderous long-lost brother stalks around her house, using her bathroom and staring at her menacingly while holding her infant niece, effectively holding Betty hostage in her own home. Such sequences are still a far cry from anything resembling

¹ See Alison Herman, 'Teens Don't Watch TV – So Why Do They Love *Riverdale*?', *The Ringer*, 18 October 2017 <<https://www.theringer.com/tv/2017/10/18/16492324/riverdale-season-2-teen-phenomenon>> [accessed 23 August 2018].

subtle drama, but the claustrophobic confines of both the house itself and the family dynamics – her mother refusing to hear a bad word against him, for example – prevent Betty from easily resolving either the situation or dramatic tension.

Here, *Riverdale* is playing in the more traditional spaces that drama and horror deal in. From *Gaslight* (1944) to *The Thing* (1982), gothic cinema repeatedly emphasises the inescapability of the confines of the domestic abode, a situation intensified by the characters' distrust of one another and themselves. While quite standard for all intents and purposes, this type of drama stands out in *Riverdale* owing to the fact that – on top of being more tense and dramatically engaging than much of the rest of the show – these moments are decidedly in the minority. The show's usual modus operandi is notably louder, less subtle, and frequently more bluntly violent; it features not only various murders, but also full-on riots in the streets and arm carvings, to say nothing of the absurd image of Cheryl (Madelaine Petsch) emerging in full superhero-ified Red Riding Hood regalia, complete with a bow and arrow, to confront the main serial-killer antagonist, in a moment that appeared to have escaped from one of the CW's many comic-book shows.

These moments aside, stylistically, the show is somewhat at odds with itself. For all the narrative investment in the dark underbellies of the town, in dirty dealings, family secrets, and corrupted morals, the show's actual aesthetic is astoundingly glossy and clean. So, while the cinematography, production design, and lighting and so on are undeniably as easy on the eye as the selectively assembled cast, there is a noticeable disconnect between plot and visuals. The underlying 'message' of *Riverdale* is the same as that of *Twin Peaks* (just one of many aspects this show cribbs from David Lynch's surreal drama) – that below the Norman-Rockwell sheen of the American small town lies moral filth, ethical darkness, and societal decay. In *Riverdale*, however, this moral and societal white-picket-fence-and-milkshakes sheen is simply covering another kind of sheen, a neon-lit sheen with dramatic shadows and perfectly photographed blood. There is no true dirt or grit in *Riverdale*, just overly stylised darkness and carefully lit leather jackets. The show has no interest in actually exploring darkness or horror, and this extends to its efforts to maintain a pristine aesthetic, even when it should be diving into the narrative and visual grime.

And this is *Riverdale* at its core. It is a show happy to invoke the rich tapestry of American gothic and horror cinema – and to a lesser extent, literature – as a mere additional flavour to add to its tonally mismatched genre ingredients of serious drama and comedy, with little narrative or character enrichment. While a show like *Hannibal* (2013-15) utilises its

horror elements to evoke a sense of the confusion and terror that can come with battling a mental illness, *Riverdale* merely uses horror as makeup, which is liberally and inconsistently applied to hide the face of an uneven and confusingly targeted melodrama.

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