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"Amped About Hell": Representations of the Suburban Gothic in Serial Television

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Abstract

Derived from the work of Bernice M. Murphy, "Suburban Gothic" is a subgenre in popular culture providing continuous commentary on American society. Though she writes extensively about depictions of Suburban Gothic throughout the last several decades, Murphy's research has shown little interest in television. The advent of complex narrative in serial television, particularly over the last twenty-five years, is crucial to homing in on the format. Viewing the Suburban Gothic as a "genre television," we can see it evolving into a higher art form. Using essays in aesthetics and film theory to enhance the understanding of Suburban Gothic, three shows are using a combination of these theories. *Twin Peaks*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *American Horror Story* mark the genre's evolution from dialectical to playful, ultimately revealing to audiences that they have become frenzied over the impending collapse of society.

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LAKE FOREST COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

"Amped About Hell": Representations of the Suburban Gothic in Serial Television

by

Simone Marjorie Perry

April 28, 2014

The report of the investigation undertaken as a
Senior Thesis, to carry two courses of credit in
the Independent Scholars Program.

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Abstract

Derived from the work of Bernice M. Murphy, "Suburban Gothic" is a subgenre in popular culture providing continuous commentary on American society. Though she writes extensively about depictions of Suburban Gothic throughout the last several decades, Murphy's research has shown little interest in television. The advent of complex narrative in serial television, particularly over the last twenty-five years, is crucial to homing in on the format. Viewing the Suburban Gothic as a "genre television," we can see it evolving into a higher art form. Using essays in aesthetics and film theory to enhance the understanding of Suburban Gothic, three shows are using a combination of these theories. *Twin Peaks*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *American Horror Story* mark the genre's evolution from dialectical to playful, ultimately revealing to audiences that they have become frenzied over the impending collapse of society.

*This thesis is dedicated to my nieces and nephew--
pretty little lights peaking through
darkness.*

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introduction

Considering the period which *Twin Peaks*¹ was born unto, I think it is entirely fair that I only discovered the show late into my adolescence. I did watch television when I was younger, but not much of it; and when I did, I never saw anything profoundly beautiful about it. So as I was graduating high school, I dealt with the end of a thirteen-year imprisonment by holing myself away with the Mark Frost and David Lynch drama series. That summer, I found a new passion for avant-garde television series.

There was so much that I loved about *Twin Peaks* in the first forty-five seconds, let alone the first episode. The title sequence, with its panoramic shots of the Pacific-Northwest landscapes. The twang of bluesy, sad, rockabilly guitars humming soft and slow over Korg sounds. The ominous typeface—all maroon and lined in a nuclear green—crediting each actor, producer, composer, and the creators. There is something so enticing about the title sequence, that at times I often wondered if I continued watching the series just to experience it all over again.

However, the episodes proved to be just as delicious and seductive as the opening. I was addicted to the melodrama of this small town and every entangled, interwoven relationship. I loved Sarah Palmer's wail, banshee-like and tormented by the untimely loss of her only daughter; Pete Martell's voice as it quivered over the phone ("She's dead. Wrapped in plastic."); I especially loved, in the height of his despair, Leland Palmer flinging himself on top of the coffin that contained his late daughter as she was being laid to rest. I loved when Shelly Johnson mocked him with Double R Diner customers a mere scene later. There was camp; so much camp that the show almost seemed to be making

¹ For the purposes of differentiating between (1) the show *Twin Peaks* from the town of the same name and (2) the show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* of and the character of the same name, the show titles will be italicized while the settings and characters will be in a normal typeface.

fun of itself, in a very self-aware manner (i.e., every scene where *Invitation to Love* mirrored the series of events in the town of Twin Peaks). The show was bizarre, so very strange, and yet so enjoyable. It was weird in such a good way.

For all of the "funny" weirdness in *Twin Peaks*, there was also plenty of "eerie" weirdness; uncanny and unsettling moments. The show is very Freudian, indeed, which is likely to be the reason I became truly invested in the show. The plot is largely inspired by the idea of the subconscious, well beyond the dreams Special Agent Dale Cooper often refers to during his investigation. There are specters, making themselves known throughout the series—the dancing dwarf, the giant, BOB; there are places in a parallel universe—the White and Black Lodges. Frost and Lynch have placed many other aspects of the subconscious throughout the show. *Invitation to Love* being one of the more obvious elements. Then there are the morbid reflections of the Log Lady's trusted companion. Sarah Palmer's and Maddy Ferguson's moments of clairvoyance. All of these little elements enhanced the plot and character development.

There is only so much I can say about *Twin Peaks* before going into a ceaseless diatribe about why I think it is one of the single greatest (and shortest lived) television series in the last twenty-five years, but then I would be indulging too much into grandiose statements and circular arguments. There is something to be said about the show, however. It was a trendsetter for many television series that would follow it. After *Twin Peaks*, shows were becoming unafraid to be sort of...weird and strange, and yet we can relate to the small-town mentality or the personal dramas within the grander narrative. *X-Files*, for example, was completely mind-boggling at times and really sort of scary. *Twin Peaks*, however, and particular shows that followed it lack particular qualities of a particular genre that I believe the show to fall under: the Suburban Gothic.

Twin Peaks, the early 90's television series created by Lynch and his collaborator, Mark Frost, was the start of something new in television. While it drew heavily from soap operas (and even some from situation comedies), the series created a trend in television dramas to have strong overtones of weird, uncanny, unusual, supernatural, and so on. In a prior essay of mine, I attempted to identify this trend as a television genre known as the Suburban Gothic. There has been little said of the genre, although one writer had her own take on it. In her book, *The Suburban Gothic In American Popular Culture*, Bernice M. Murphy identifies many exemplars of a genre that critiques suburban America, but did little (in my opinion), to define how this genre functions in the realm of television.

This is what I hope to explore more in my research. I want to begin by identifying both the gothic literary genre and the Suburban mentality in their separate contexts, and move on to how these two meet in the Suburban Gothic genre. I have selected Twin Peaks and David Lynch as my main exemplars because, prior to Twin Peaks, no show had such an interesting take on the Suburbs—exposing the darkness that exists within the community, the entangled relationships, the debauchery, the strange and supernatural, all through the narrative of a local tragedy and an FBI agent working to solve the crime. Following Twin Peaks, many shows took a similar approach, but few used the Suburban household (or neighborhood) as the consistent setting. This is where *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* comes in; a show that exposes the dark side to suburban living (especially high school and college) by giving the Suburbs a literal underbelly and a manifestation of hell on Earth in the form of "vampires, demons, and the forces of darkness." The other series that inspires my work takes a far subtler metaphor when dealing with these issues. My last point of reference, the *American Horror Story* anthology series, uses various settings tied to these suburban lives. The first, a haunted house on the outskirts of Los Angeles; a

New England Asylum, harboring the insane as well as the innocent; and soon, a boarding school for girls that stem from the bloodline of Salem witches. These four programs—*Twin Peaks*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *American Horror Story*—are the ideal examples of Suburban Gothic as a television genre. They take place in the homes, communities, and families of Suburban America; they use sweeping metaphors to describe the very horrors that begin and end with people and the facade of their well-manicured homes and lawns; they acknowledge how blemished and imperfect life truly is behind the facade of the "American Dream."

Cavell and "The Fact of Television"

Television sets are something of an icon when contemplating the ideal household in America. They are just as much of a piece of furniture as, say, a sofa or a table lamp. Television has become ubiquitous in our homes, and the way we acquire information. We will come to find that internet serves a similar purpose today, but growing up in the late twentieth century we relied on television as a primary source of entertainment and news. Discussing the television genre of the Suburban Gothic first requires an understanding of the television format. Murphy, through much of her book, finds that the genre is occupied mostly with literature, and especially film. It would stand to reason, then, to point out qualities of television that enhance the Suburban Gothic. What does the genre gain from being on television, and what does it lose when its stories are not told in feature length? Having read Stanley Cavell's essay, "The Fact of Television," I have derived some of his thoughts about television and folded them into my own. For Cavell, his primary concern is the format of television; it is from the format that television acquires its aesthetic.² I am

² "To say that the primary object of aesthetic interest in television is not the individual piece, but the format, is to say that the format is its primary individual of aesthetic interest." Cavell, page 79.

inclined to agree with him. In one hand, the Suburban Gothic being depicted in television loses a sense of conclusiveness due to the serial format. The show ends, and the Suburban Gothic audience is left wondering what is to come in the following weeks. However, the upside here is that the continuous nature of the serial format allows for the narrative to continue beyond the time allotted to each episode. This is pertinent, we will see, when it come to the public perception and individual reviews of individual episodes. It will also become clearer, later, when considering how the serial aids in the more disturbing aspects of the Suburban Gothic genre, and what effect the on-going quality has on its audiences.

Throughout my research—both textual and empirical—I hope to hone my definition of "Suburban Gothic," why it has the tendency to evolve these television shows into analytical case studies, high art forms, and the way it elevates popular culture. I wish to share why the public is so taken with these sorts of television shows, how they satiate the viewer's appetite for darkness and Freudianism, and how they popularize *avant-garde* television. Most importantly, I want to explain why *Twin Peaks* and David Lynch has been and will likely remain the television series and auteur to bring significance to this genre and the viewers' desire for bizarre happenings. Before examining all of these things under a microscope, it would help to begin with a basic dissection of "Suburban Gothic": what the words mean in separate contexts and what they become when conjoined, what they mean for the purpose of this thesis.

The Suburban

Allow me to begin with the Suburbs—a land invented by the "American Dream." A place of perfectly manicured lawns, white fences and gardens, with hard-working husbands and obedient wives and all of their little Johnny's and Susies running around and playing Cowboys versus "Injuns" with the neighbors little Johnny's and Susies.

Honestly, there isn't much that can be said about the Suburbs that I haven't already experienced for myself. It's a niche so engrained into our society that there really is no need for some elaborate literary reference to it. However, for semantics' sake, pinning down an origin is necessary in order to move forward. A textbook definition of a suburb would be, "a residential area on the outskirts of a city or town" (*Webster's Student Dictionary*, 462). These populations of people moving toward the peripheries of these major American cities was a response to the economic expansion that followed World War II. With that expansion, cities began to fall apart and became homes to race riots, encouraging white America to migrate to these more isolated sections outside of the poverty and danger of the major cities (Beauregard 2-3); in exchange, suburbanized towns gave Americans all of the functionality of a city within a "safe haven," so to speak. With the suburbs came things like supermarkets, strip malls, mini-vans, extreme couponing, and other senseless drivel that made life convenient for "average American families." It seemed as though the dog days were over.

There really isn't much else that can be said of the suburbs that a citizen of this country has not already experienced. I, for one, spent my childhood in two very different suburbs. One being a very white, well manicured place with good schools and high taxes. The other being the product of white, suburban America fearing the "other" infiltrating their Eden. The taxes were low, the schools were not supported and students did worse, "for sale" or "for rent" signs in the lawns of every other home. No one wanted to stay. It may be important to indicate these differences because, like the television programs that fall under this "Suburban Gothic" genre, each Suburban setting is very different depending on the geography but the general concept of Suburbia still permeates these places. They are meant to be safe, local police officers respond within a minute of a

phone call regarding a noise complaint, and everyone turns a blind eye to the things that are not their or their families' business...unless they are gossiping about it later, of course. However, for the purposes of this thesis, it would be wise to think of the suburbs, not as a setting (though it does act as a quaint metaphor in the television shows) but as a mentality.

A "Suburban mentality" is one which suggests that the best things life has to offer exist within the confines of the home or the community. It is a mentality of settling for what one already has, rather than creating a new adventure. From the perspective of someone who grew up in the suburbs, a suburban mentality can be seen in those people who attended the same schools but not leaving the place they grew up in. No setting or state of mind—no matter how perfect—is without its own issues. I aim to suggest that a Suburban mentality is dangerous to everyone, and it stunts a person's ability to thrive outside of a suburban setting. The frightening "Stepford" complex is one which is where the Gothic style becomes important in allowing more frightening narratives of Suburban life.

The Gothic

Gothic romance or fiction, being one of the older and more popular literary genres in the last three centuries or so, is a world where romance meets horror. The word "gothic" is born from the combination of the Roman Empire and Germanic tribes that invaded it, but has been used to describe that which was "medieval," and not classical. This makes sense considering that the gothic style does not abide by any sort of cookie-cutter tradition. Many famous works are affiliated with the genre, such as Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*; Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher"; and more recently Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to

Find," among all of her other Southern Gothic stories. A long list of literature and poetry falls under the "gothic" category; and while it is popularized in books, the genre has transcended into other arts: music, architecture, fashion, and even film and television. For example, prior to *Twin Peaks*, one show that was intrinsically "gothic" was *Dark Shadows*, a soap opera that pulled in elements of the supernatural as the series progressed, yet was always quite morbid and thrilling in its content. It is important to note that while *Dark Shadows* is a gothic story, it does not necessarily fall under "Suburban Gothic" for a few reasons—such as the time period, the story revolving mostly around the Collinwood Mansion and not the entire town of Collinsport, or the socioeconomic status of several of the characters in *Dark Shadows*—which, compared to the average American living in the suburbs, is a bit grandiose. But our concern right now has to do with the gothic, a topic that writer Elizabeth MacAndrew covers extensively in her book *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction*.

MacAndrew outlines her book into two parts: "The Shape of Ideas" and "The Continuing Tradition." The former discusses the essential pieces of a Gothic story the characterization (of which there are two types, the Reflected Self and the Split Personality), the setting, and the narrative structure. The latter half of the book discusses the sort of amendments made to the Gothic tradition over the years. Among the alterations are the perception of heroes and heroines in the stories, the differences between terror and horror ("...the first expands and the second shrinks the soul...point[ing] to the difference between devices in the Gothic that draw the reader into a sympathetic understanding of the evil exhibited..." (156)³), among several others. Rather than turning this discourse into an analysis of what makes something "Gothic,"

³ An expansion on the ideas of Ann Radcliffe, who inspired MacAndrew's work

however, I will simply point out a few important views MacAndrews expresses in her book.

- **Writers told their stories in the Gothic tradition as a way of viewing psychological evil; the evil that manifests itself within the mind, rather than the exterior.** This point is crucial to understanding Gothic in context of the Suburbs, as we will see that the darkness of such stories begins within.
- **Gothic stories intentionally use monsters to frighten audiences because these creatures already exist in our imaginations.** Another important point, especially considering the number of these Suburban Gothics that use monsters and demons as a metaphor for the horrors of the natural world.
- **Despite the "fallen" status of humankind, people are still capable of committing good.** The number of characters in these stories that commit some heinous act, be it murder or adultery, tend to have some flicker of humanity left in them. One of the more disturbing qualities to Suburban Gothics is their ability to have the most despicable character in the program to play on the sympathies of the audience. The viewer wants to believe that some good may come of them, even though it is not likely to pan out before that character's final appearance.

With these features of the Gothic tale in mind, I will move into the Fantastic-Uncanny—the final facet that holds the Suburban Gothic together.

The Fantastic-Uncanny

Tzvetan Todorov, knowing that defining the fantastic was no easy feat, wrote an entire book on the subject; it proves very useful for this discussion. Early on in his theoretical book, *The Fantastic*, he writes: "[e]ither the devil is an illusion, an imaginary

being or else he really exists, precisely like other living beings—with this reservation, that we encounter him infrequently" (25). The natural world leaves us with two options, according to Todorov. The first option is that we are either a victim of an illusion, or that the event has actually taken place. Essentially what Todorov is referring to is the moments where we need to be pinched; the things that do not feel real but may very well be reality. This is a quality that only enhances the viewing experience of a Suburban Gothic, as the audience must determine if the events in the story have happened at all. The fact that some characters in these programs contemplate the reality of these occurrences only enhances our curiosity as a spectator. Inspired greatly by Sigmund Freud and his concept of "the Uncanny," Todorov insists that the fantastic (as a literary genre) requires the existence of an uncanny event that "provokes hesitation" in both the reader and the protagonist, emphasizing that part of that hesitation is the need to reject any allegorical or "poetic" interpretations of the tale; naturalistic explanations of the things occurring are disappointing to the audience.

As another influence of Freud's "The Uncanny," Todorov uses a diagram to display varying levels of the fantastic. There is the uncanny, the fantastic-uncanny, the fantastic-marvelous, and the marvelous. Because the marvelous rationalizes these strange moments, I will no longer refer to it. What matters here is the Uncanny, and the Uncanny working in tandem with the Fantastic. Todorov calls attention to the notion that The Uncanny "realizes...one condition of the Fantastic: the description of certain reactions, especially fear" (47). Fear is important here because we know the Uncanny to "belong" to fear and horror, despite the varying sensitivity to it; Todorov's notion of the Fantastic does not require fear. It is necessary, then, that the two compliment each other. The fantastic-uncanny moment is crucial to making the Suburban Gothic just that. The

combination of place (Suburbs), style (Gothic Romance), and happening (Fantastic) are the trifecta that glues the genre together.

Horror and Humor

While the three main components of the Suburban Gothic fall on the setting, Gothic Romance, and the Fantastic, it is particularly important to note that the subgenre also comes with a sense of humor. In television, Suburban Gothic spawned from the traditions of both horror and comedic genres in television, something that interests the philosopher Noël Carroll. He writes in his essay, *Horror and Humor*, on the thin line that separates characters of the horror genre from becoming caricatures of their very being. Carroll argues in this essay that amusement and fear, among other emotions, are intentional, mental states. The horror and humor are engrained in our minds, but audiences must be able to discern whether the characters they are observing are characters of either the horror or the comedy. Carroll writes at the end of his essay: “The boundary line between horror and incongruity humor is drawn in terms of fear. Two visually indiscernible creatures [...] can be alternately horrifying or laughable depending upon whether the narrative context invests them with fearsomeness or not” (157). While I agree with Carroll in this regard, I have to disagree with his claim that horror and humor do not drift into one another.⁴ However, characterization and development of the players in these stories allow for audiences to connect a deeper meaning to their viewing experience.

⁴ For the claim about intersections of horror and humor, see page 157, “Horror and Humor” by Noël Carroll

The Westerner

The "man without a country" concept is another necessary facet to Suburban Gothic. Robert Warshow's essay "The Westerner" describes the protagonist character of the film genre as a melancholic character who not only sees life as inevitably serious, but also an authority who does not fancy himself as such. "Even when he wears the badge of a marshal," Warshow writes. "Or, more rarely, owns a ranch, he appears to be unemployed" (455). Warshow continues to describe this sort of character as lonely, not by condition, but by choice; they care about maintaining a positive image of themselves within the community; and, of course, they live outside of the limitations of society.

Suburban Gothics, interestingly, develop the protagonist around a similar model. Eventually, we will see how this is the case in the television shows selected. Prior, it is important to realize the parallels between Western and Suburban settings. Firstly, we can understand both as worlds between worlds: "the West," as we understand it, is a space that exists between civilization and the wild (hence calling it "The Wild West" over the years). Suburbs, by that same token, are communities that exist between urban and rural settings. A protagonist with Warshow's model for the Western hero, then, would fit neatly well into the fold.

The character—like the setting—is between worlds. They reside or visit communities that were not intended for them, thus they never become rooted or attached to the place for reasons other than the obligation to uphold justice. They live outside of the community standards, which are deeply troubled but also stabilized by the people who place value in those standards. Their commitment to resolving the problems of the community means having the fortitude to endure every horrible occurrence that takes place there. At last, we have a proper formula for the Suburban Gothic.

The Suburban Gothic

The marriage of "the Westerner" to these three qualities—the gothic, the suburban, and the fantastic—are quintessential qualities of the Suburban Gothic; where they intersect is where the genre comes to life. For fans of etymology, the prefix and the root of the word "suburb" loosely translates it to mean "under the city," which is interesting when considering the common tropes of the Suburban Gothic as a genre. The idea of the Suburban Gothic is that it reveals to the audience what hides beneath the facade; the secrets, the things the neighbors see but choose to ignore, all of those entangled relationships. It is only the facade that veils these realities from the people who desire such lives or already live them. With the uncanny or fantastic moments occurring in the story—the subconscious visions; the strange, inexplicable deaths; the mysterious strangers appearing in the homes—these fantastic moments create the winding metaphors in Suburban Gothic television shows for the true rot and decay that goes on within the neighborhoods. Without setting, the dark use of storytelling in the genre would be pointless. It's just another Gothic tale.

Bernice Murphy, in her book *The Suburban Gothic in American Pop Culture*, calls attention to the backbone of this notion of Suburbs being a breeding ground for this dark behavior: the contrast between the Suburban Dream and the Suburban Nightmare. There is the Suburban Dream, a world of utopia, where everyone has their own home and they are protected from the dangers of the external world; it is a place to start anew. The Suburban Nightmare—a dystopia, where families are riddled debt and financial struggles. A place where the greatest threats are within, a community where the newest members are haunted by the past of their new home. As Murphy so beautifully put it, "[t]he suburbs is, after all, an in-between space by definition: located beyond the heart of a town or a city, yet still existing within its urban orbit" (4). The Suburban Gothic is the limbo

between the "dream" and the "nightmare," as Murphy suggests. Murphy's interest in literature and film, however, do little to defend television's place in the Suburban Gothic. What Murphy's work lacks is the point when television of the early 1990s (up to the new millennium) become significant, especially *Twin Peaks*, the match that drew the spark.

The first chapter will focus on David Lynch and Mark Frost's *Twin Peaks*, and how the series brought a greater amount of attention to the Suburban Gothic as a television genre. I will explore the series and other works in the oeuvre of David Lynch, and how his interest in the seedy side of suburban America gave influence to his own television program, as well as others. I will give a few examples as to what those shows are, and identify them as either Suburban Gothic or *not* Suburban Gothic, and give my reasons as to why. To continue discussion on the sub-genre, I will write my second chapter on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and how the series carried the legacy of *Twin Peaks* with it through seven consecutive seasons—all while using supernatural as the main metaphor of "High School is Hell," and all of the darkness that comes within this and other sects of Suburban life. As there are substantially more episodes of *Buffy* than the other programs I am interested in (a whopping 144, to be exact), I will narrow down my exemplars to a few of the more crucial episodes in the series that support its place within the subgenre. The third and final series that serves as inspiration for this paper will be discussed in the penultimate chapter. In it I will approach the continuing tradition of the Suburban Gothic in *American Horror Story*, and how it spans across periods and exists in many different settings. There is not much that other critics and writers have said about *American Horror Story* from an analytical perspective, especially as each season revolves around a new setting and characters. However, my own spectatorship will lend to much of the conclusions I draw about the show being a "Suburban Gothic"—as not many

television theorists have written about the series yet—and I will acknowledge the elements of the show that tie it to the aforementioned series mentioned in this report.

The Complex Narrative and Genre Evolution

A few final theories to consider when writing about the Suburban Gothic (or really any television genre) are put forth by Jason Mittell and Thomas Schatz. These ideas are not only useful in periodizing the Suburban Gothic, but they allow for an understanding of how, over the last twenty-four years, the genre has developed. In his essay, "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television," Mittell writes mostly on the trend coming out of the early 1990s for audiences to watch "programming that demands an active and attentive process of comprehension" (32). Mittell's work, much like this one, believes in the relevance of both *Twin Peaks* and *Buffy* in this context. Relevant to the genre as a whole, however, is the claim that audiences have begun "[r]ejecting the need for plot closure within every episode that typifies conventional episodic form" (32). One of the qualities in Suburban Gothic television that proves most effective in garnering audiences on a weekly basis is the cliffhanger at the end of each episode. *Twin Peaks* and *American Horror Story* are especially gratuitous with ambiguous endings to each episode. Mittell also notes that complex narratives can span across genres. If Schatz were weighing in on this, he would likely argue that this is only the case with *dynamic* genres.

Schatz's book, *Hollywood Genres*, contains a section on genres as a system. Early on, Schatz points out that there are several factors that contribute to changes within genres. In the same chapter on "Film Genre and the Genre Film," Schatz details what he describes as a "generic evolution" of genres. His own ideas derived from the art historian Henri Focillon's interests; Schatz describes the evolution as such:

[A] form passes through an *experimental* stage, during which its conventions are isolated and established, a *classic* stage, in which the conventions reach their "equilibrium" and are mutually understood by the artist and audience, an age of *refinement* during which certain formal and stylistic details embellish the form, and finally a *baroque* (or "mannerist" or "self-reflexive") stage, when the form and its embellishments are accented to the point where they themselves become the "substance or "content" of the work. (Schatz, 37-8)

Schatz goes on to assert that moving from an experimental genre to one that is more embellished leads to a particular opacity, wherein the form itself is appreciated, rather than just mere the story. Schatz's evolution thus supports Mittell's ideas of narrative complexity, as both acknowledge these changes in storytelling as a response to the changing attitudes of the audiences. Furthermore, Schatz's writings support an even greater theory of what it is the Suburban Gothic is meant to accomplish.

It is too soon to discuss the deeper achievements of the Suburban Gothic, though. We must start by reviewing the shows that have best served the genre. First, there is *Twin Peaks*, the cult David Lynch show which examines Suburban Gothic through a dialectical lens. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, for the purposes of this essay, meets both the classical and refined stages of Suburban Gothic, in part due to its long run on cable television. Finally, there is *American Horror Story*, the anthological series which falls into the baroque phase of the television genre. With each series comes watershed episodes, and they will all be acknowledged throughout this body of work. After combing through each television program for depictions of Suburban Gothic, I will discuss its particular place in the evolution of the genre. Ultimately, this evolution will reveal itself as an indicator for what exactly the changing attitudes of the audience truly are.

In this thesis, I will argue that the Suburban Gothic is a genre that pulls young audiences into a discourse about their fears of complacency. It is a fear that we will never see the rest of the world nor gain any experience, a fear of not being prepared for the "real" world—a world of non-suburban dangers—when we must confront it. I will

explain that it is due to the current character of television (the episodic nature, the familiarity of the medium, the recent interactions between television and the internet, etc.) that the genre's primary audience consists of Millennials. Finally, because the Suburban Gothic narrative is on-going in the televised format, we can see how it has evolved from a mere expression of our fears of complacency into a gross, hysterical exaggeration of those fears.

"Through the Darkness of Future Past": Twin Peaks, American Nightmares, and the Revelation of the Suburban Gothic

She was found dead, wrapped in plastic along the shores of a Pacific Northwestern town. That's how it began, and that was the fissure in the surface of a bucolic town known as Twin Peaks. Not even the near-constant grey skies could blemish the loveliness of the place. The geography was enough to make any Walden-toting collegiate turn into butter. Rolling hills. Steep falls. Those fantastic trees; big, majestic. What were they? "Douglas firs." With all of the natural pleasures, however, the town was not so remote and even commercially successful. It was the ideal illustration of an American Dream.

Twin Peaks is, for all intents and purposes, a true suburb, though we are never given a direct reference to its satellite city (presumably Portland or Seattle). Once, someone tried to argue with me on the suburban nature of the fictional town, but could not provide any evidence of this other than the absence of knowing which metropolitan area it fell within. So, what is so "suburban" about Twin Peaks? Let's go back to this "American Dream" cliché for a moment. To start, the town is hardly rural, and though the houses may seem miles apart—the audience never does see two houses in uncomfortably close lots—there is no sprawl. There are no pastures that we know of, only the lumber mill. The lumber mill, which is major industry for the town. Then there is the Great Northern Lodge, which houses many tourists. Many tourists who make Benjamin Horne a wealthy, wealthy man (though he probably makes a lot of money in his *other* ventures as well). There is a hospital, though the doctors there are willing to admit it is a humble one. There is a local diner with cherry pie. *Cherry. Pie.* The very pastry that is symbolic of the Suburban Dream, the original American Pie. There is a Meals-on-Wheels program that

the high school students volunteer with. There *is* a high school; a stereotypical high school equipped with jocks and outcasts and young girls changing into their high heels and lipstick and smoking in the lavatories when they feel they are at a reasonable distance from authority figures. There is a homecoming queen. At least, there *was* a homecoming queen. She was found dead, wrapped in plastic on the morning of February 23rd, 1989; and with her casket sealed, Twin Peaks' closet of skeletons is burst wide open, as though that haphazardly wrapped plastic was concealing dynamite—and with each episode new and shocking secrets are revealed.

It is the drama the audience craves in their own lives that plays out in *Twin Peaks*. Infidelities, love triangles, people we think we know being someone entirely different. Murder. Even though the events that take place within the show are entirely melodramatic, they somehow manage to offer a critique on the silence of our own suburbs. It is, after all, an interesting quality of the Suburban Gothic to see something so horrific or inhumane and find it intriguing rather than shocking. But even in the show, everyone has their own agenda—no one quite seems to be taking actions for the good of the whole community, save for Special Agent Dale Cooper and his Bookhouse Boys (who come off a bit more human than their FBI-sent companion). Even James and Donna embark on their own investigation of Laura Palmer's death only to use their detective work as a thinly veiled defense for their own romance to blossom. It is toward the end of the season that they lose sight of the reason why they started looking for the answers of Laura's secret life, but also lose sight of who they are—particularly Donna as she tries to transform herself into a persona like that of Laura's. However, these entangled relationships are merely a trivial facet of the derailment that follows such a story. There are greater things at work in the world of *Twin Peaks*.

Bernice Murphy, in her own research of the genre, finds that the Suburban Gothic "is concerned with exploiting a closely interrelated set of contradictory attitudes," such as: nice neighbors versus neighbors with secrets, a place in which to make a fresh start versus a place of entrapment and unhappiness, and (most importantly) a place protected by outer dangers versus a place where the most dangerous threats come from within (3). These, again, are her "Suburban Dreams" and "Suburban Nightmares." The contradictions between these two subconscious make up the whole of Murphy's theories, but they do not fully realize the complexity created by *Twin Peaks* as much as they describe the horror film and thrillers she primarily writes about in her book.

The fact of the matter is that *Twin Peaks* represents a pivotal shift in the perspective of the Suburbs. Many shows that preceded the series made suburban living seem formulaic and saccharin. *Twin Peaks* stripped the suburbs of all of its sweetness, creating a darker perspective for storytelling within such a setting. I claim *Twin Peaks* to be one of the first examples in television of a Suburban Gothic because following its short run on ABC, other television shows tried to follow a similar criteria. The theories provided by Todorov, Freud, Murphy, and even Kant give a very basic insight into how to read the Suburban Gothic as a genre. Empirically, however, *Twin Peaks* offers up the template for the typical Suburban Gothic Plot.

The exposition of a Suburban Gothic is marked with death. For viewers of Suburban Gothic serials, the fact that the Pilot episode begins with some sort of death is always dramatic irony. Network promotional ads for *Twin Peaks*, for example, always seemed to contain the famous Pete Martell line in the Pilot episode. This is beneficial for the audience in that it makes them no stranger to death, or any other natural horrors, not that they would be denied of this exposure for very long. Laura Palmer's corpse is exposed to

the audience within the first eight minutes of the pilot. Meanwhile, her mother panics at the sight of an empty bedroom, uncertain of where her daughter could be. Beyond the inaugural episode, however, the entire plot of the series (at least the first season and the first few episodes of the second season) revolves around Laura Palmer's untimely death.

Throughout these episodes the audience catches its first glimpse of things in a provincial town not being quite what they seem, as the Homecoming queen turns out to be—as Christy Desmet points out in her essay, "The Canonization of Laura Palmer,"—promiscuous, drug addled, and psychologically disturbed (93). She is an omnipresent character, which, despite her demise, serves as an allegory for the community that lives in Twin Peaks. "Saint Laura," as Desmet affectionately calls her, is both a martyr and a catalyst whose death thrust forward the secrets of the townspeople who, because of the abrupt end to the series, are never absolved.

The people sacrifice their intuition and ability to sense danger for the Suburban Aesthetic. We do not notice this right away when watching *Twin Peaks*, especially given that the premise is a murder. Dale Cooper says to Albert Rosenfield in the third episode: "Murder is not a faceless event here, it is not a statistic to be tallied up at the end of the day. Laura Palmer's death has affected every man, woman, and child in Twin Peaks because life has meaning here." Yet, Laura's life, as depraved as it was when she was not volunteering with Meals-on-Wheels, could not be spared. And just as Laura sacrificed her own life to reveal the sins of the people to themselves and each other, the people sacrificed their sight so that they could apply an abject meaning to their lives. Alice Kuzniar makes sense of this with her interest in double talk in *Twin Peaks*. "[It] isolates what is heard from what is seen," Kuzniar writes. "*Twin Peaks* adheres to the law of isolation and replacement of body parts...calling attention to the loss at the same time as it

aims to compensate for it" (121). She goes on to point out more obvious cases of this, such as Nadine's missing eye representing her ignorance to the failure of her marriage; the brothel "One-Eyed Jack's" being a euphemism for a penis; Gordon Cole's "blinding" attraction to Shelley Johnson temporarily restoring his hearing, among others.

"Quaintness" is "Eeriness" and Absurdity is Normalcy, at least in the case of the settings of Suburban Gothic tales. After all, the town of Twin Peaks had not appeared disturbed until Laura's death. The town is literally too good to be true, so much so that the unsavory activities, the extramarital affairs, incestuous relationships between father and daughter, the drug culture, and the corrupt business ventures are entirely ignored; even when people claim to have known that not all was well, as Bobby Briggs points out at Laura's funeral, they choose to ignore it to keep up the illusionary image of the town, and of their lives. There are nuances to the town, however, that appear as normal to the people of the town, but new participants in the audience would find peculiar.

The Log Lady, for example, uses her precious object to project a particular voice that would not exist without it. Her log, in a sense, is the eye of the town; the eye that the citizens of Twin Peaks plucked right out in order to live quiet lives amidst the Douglas firs. The only person in Twin Peaks who seems to take this omniscient log (and its lady) very seriously is Special Agent Dale Cooper. The citizens have learned to accept—and ignore—the lady with the log, something audiences adjust to when they interact with the program. There are several other cases of this acceptance of people into Twin Peaks' community. The societal "Other" is widely embraced in the show. "Others" who, in the literal context of our society, are often oppressed or marginalized are elevated to positions of authority or power in *Twin Peaks*. The pilot alone introduced audiences to not one, but two black women of authority (the Vice-Principal at the local high school, the head practitioner at the hospital). We are later introduced to a transwoman Federal

Bureau Agent, an idea far ahead of its time when one considers that *Twin Peaks* was written to take place in 1989 and no one turned the other cheek in regard to Special Agent Denise (look up last name)'s transition; it is a subject that people still shirk in the year 2014.

This template for Suburban Gothic television—expository deaths, substitution of perception for Suburban aesthetic, and the embrace of things that most would deem unusual—are all crucial to the genre. They tease out the juxtaposition between American Dreams and Nightmares, but they serve as the bait which lures the viewers to the hook. Week after week audiences would return, wanting to learn more and wanting to try their hand at solving the mystery of Laura Palmer's death. What's more, the audience of the Suburban Gothic appeal to these shows to give them sight. When returning to the programs at the same time on a given day of the week, ritually, they sacrifice an hour or more of their time to be shown that even idyllic places, places as comfortable as home, are not devoid of their individual horrors. With this narrative template explained, it would be wise to highlight where the Suburban Gothic aesthetic turns up throughout *Twin Peaks*. The series, although short-lived, contained many delicious scenes in a number of episodes: "Pilot: Northwest Passage" (for the purpose of introducing characters), "Episode Two: Zen, or The Skill to Catch a Killer," "Episode Three: Rest in Pain," "Episode Five: Cooper's Dreams," "Episode Eight: May the Giant Be With You," and (much further down the line) "Episode 29: Beyond Life and Death."

As with all pilot episodes, we are introduced to the cast of characters that will take audiences on a journey through the series. We do not meet our protagonist (or in the case of Suburban Gothic tales, the Westerner) until much later in the episode. Special Agent Dale Cooper enters the town of Twin Peaks *in medias res*, with the shock of Laura Palmer's death still lingering throughout the town. He immediately reveals to the

audience that he is an outsider, recalling details of his trip to the Pacific Northwest into his tape recorder; the name of the diner he ate at driving in, his intent to find cheap but comfortable lodgings, and even making a note to ask someone the genus of trees that line the highway.

Dale Cooper does not own much; in fact, he has no real home other than his room at the Great Northern Lodge. He usually wears the same outfit throughout the series. Apart from the obvious "man without a country" trope that Dale Cooper wears throughout the series, he also holds a new authority—he immediately informs the officers at the Twin Peaks sheriff's department that the investigation of Laura Palmer's death is his primary obligation. Though, he does not boast this influence unless he feels an individual is being uncooperative. Of all of the programs concerned with the Suburban Gothic, Dale Cooper may be the closest character to Warshow's Westerner. Other characters in the series serve a great purpose, but no other is as significant to the Suburban Gothic as Special Agent Dale Cooper.

There are several cast members who do enhance the plot of *Twin Peaks*, namely Laura Palmer whose death is cataclysmic to the quiet nature of the town. Though she is gone, her presence is still felt and seen throughout the series. Laura's parents, Sarah and Leland, deal with their grief in unusual ways. Mrs. Palmer has many premonitions in the series, while Leland falls into a deep depression that often renders him hysterical. Then there is Harry S. Truman, the sheriff of Twin Peaks. He appears skeptical to Agent Cooper's methodology with the investigation. Truman eventually does come to understand Cooper's (and others') way of perceiving the events that take place in and around the town. There are several other members of the ensemble worth mentioning—particularly the "Log Lady," Margaret Lanterman, with her prophetic hunk of wood. In

order to continue a discourse about the show, I will mention them as they appear relevant to each episode.

As mentioned earlier, Sheriff Truman often finds himself in disbelief of Agent Cooper's approach to the investigation. This is in part due to Cooper only bringing up details of what exactly it is the FBI sent him to Twin Peaks in search of; but mostly it is due to Cooper's bizarre reliance on chance and intuition. This is especially evident in "Episode Two: Zen, or the Skill to Catch a Killer," when Agent Cooper takes the officers into the wood to teach them his "Tibetan Method," in which he tosses rocks at a glass bottle after a name (and the relationship of that person) is called out. He describes it as mind-body coordination working with "the deepest level of intuition." After several throws, Sheriff Truman finally asks whether the idea for this method really did come from a dream. Cooper answers, rather simply, "Yes. Yes it did!" Though this is the mildest instance of unusual occurrences, it is one of the earliest moments in the series where we realize that Special Agent Dale Cooper believes in a greater power than just human nature. The audience themselves would almost want to believe in it following another striking scene in the episode.

Viewers are later shown Laura's father, Leland, in the Palmer home. He turns on a jazz record, picks up Laura's portrait, and begins dancing with it. His weeping becomes audible, triggering Sarah to enter the room. She tries to pry the photograph from his hands, in an attempt to bring him back to reality, but the struggle ends in the glass frame breaking. Leland cuts his hands on it, and begins to smear his blood all over his daughter's picture. It is interesting that this scene would precede the next, particularly because by the end of the episode, Cooper places a call to Sheriff Truman exclaiming that he knows who Laura's murderer is—and eventually the audience does learn that Leland is (in part) responsible for his daughter's death.

The scene begins with a cut to Cooper in his bed at the Great Northern. He has begun to dream of a place with red curtains and a black and white tiled floor. He envisions himself older in his dream. After the One-Armed Man (known as MIKE) recites a poem, Cooper sees himself, again, sitting in an armchair across from a man with dwarfism (known as only as "The Man From Another Place") and none other than Laura Palmer. After saying a few cryptic lines to Cooper, the dream begins to end. Laura kisses Cooper, and whispers something in his ear. We assume this to be the name of her killer, as it startles the Special Agent awake and into calling his colleague. Though this is merely one of Cooper's dreams, it would be difficult to say that this is not one of the uncanny moments that Freud speaks of. This is especially true because, as an intuitive person, Cooper often relies on his dreams and his feelings to get the answers he seeks. This dream depicted to the audience is but one of those dreams that helped satisfy Cooper's desire to close the investigation, even if he woke up not remembering what Laura told him in his dream.

"Episode Three: Rest in Pain" continues to reveal Suburban Gothic qualities, from subtler things like young Audrey Horne vying for Agent Cooper's attention—revealing a desire of a young girl to be perceived as an adult—to something as telling as Laura Palmer's autopsy, wherein it is revealed that at the time of her death Laura was not only bound, but had cocaine in her system. The audience is shown two girls who approach the desire for another life in drastically different ways. Laura, who felt so weathered that she *wanted* to die (at least according to her boyfriend, Bobby Briggs, in a later episode). Audrey, on the other hand, attempts to prove her maturity by taking up her own investigation of Laura's death. Another character attempts to do the very same thing, but proves to be a distraction for everyone else due to the similarity between herself and the late Laura.

Madeline Ferguson is the spitting image of her late cousin, and her arrival in *Twin Peaks* distracts a few of the men that were close to Laura in her life, namely Leland and James Hurley, Laura's secret boyfriend. The similarity between Maddy and Laura, one might say, is *uncanny*, and of all the doubling that occurs in *Twin Peaks* (between the "Bobs" and "Mikes" in the show, along with coded language in things like "One-Eyed Jack's") Madeline is the greatest embodiment of this. Her arrival is so important that it is mentioned in Cooper's dream. This may be due to the fact that she eventually meets the same fate as her dear cousin, despite being purer at heart than Laura.

Maddy was not meant to stay longer than a few days after her cousin's funeral, which was unsurprisingly a disaster. Not only did both of Laura's boyfriends attempt to fight one another, only to be pried apart, but the tension comes to a head when Leland has an episode. When the young boys are broken apart, Leland begins to sob, and flings himself onto his daughter's casket. His weight on top of the casket causes the lowering device to malfunction, leaving the pair to bob up and down in the grave for several awkward moments—a rather humorous situation despite the unsettling things that happened in the first few chapters of the *Twin Peaks* series. The series revolves around similar moments of bleakness abruptly changing into comical moments, as it would happen in "Episode Five."

The Log Lady, from her introduction in the pilot, is cleverly disguised as a comic character. She often provides humorous moments throughout the series—like when she describes Norma Jennings's pie as a miracle or spits her gum out and sticks it to the wall, only to finish her coffee and begin to chew a new piece of gum. Some could argue that she is humorous purely for the fact that she claims to have an omnipotent log. Though, the audience (as well as the characters of *Twin Peaks*) learn to take the Log Lady seriously in some regard. After his dream about meeting Laura in the Black Lodge,

Cooper consults with The Log Lady, who believes Cooper can now find the answers he seeks. He asks the log what it saw the night Laura died and, speaking on behalf of her log, Mrs. Lanterman tells Cooper: "The owls were flying. Many things were blocked. Laughing. Two men, two girls. Flashlights pass by in the woods over the ridge. The owls were near. The dark was pressing in on her. Quiet then. Later, footsteps. One man passed by. Screams far away. Terrible, terrible. One voice." The message is cryptic, surely, but using that bit of information and connecting it to the things he experienced in his dream, the Special Agent is able to discover hard evidence, such as the discovery of Laura being bound at the time of her death, and the two men who were involved the night that she died (presumably BOB and his vessel, Leland Palmer). Dreams become more prominent as the series goes on, with more characters have premonition-like dreams regarding Laura Palmer's Death. It is in dreams that the characters hold a dialect with their own subconscious, much like *Twin Peaks* is in a dialectic stage with the Suburban Gothic.

Twin Peaks, as it is concerned with the Suburban Gothic, takes on an important, preliminary role as the genre begins to manifest itself. The series must, first, be read as the experimental or dialectical period in the Suburban Gothic. The David Lynch show only ran for two consecutive seasons before the premature reveal of Laura Palmer's killer tanked the ratings and ended the series. However, it was an appropriate beginning to the genre. Its cliffhanger-style endings with each episode both satisfied audiences and left them wanting more, and other shows have come to follow this aesthetic. Furthermore, *Twin Peaks* was unlike a lot of its contemporaries, particularly the day-time soap operas which served as inspiration for Lynch as he worked on the series with Mark Frost. *Twin Peaks* was far more self-aware than the soaps were, and it used the humorous elements in a way that seemed to make fun of itself.

Unfortunately, these quirks were not enough to keep the show in serial. Six years pass before television would see a series that depicted the Suburbs in a similar, self-reflective way, with both comedic elements and perilous moments. Comparing the next series to its predecessor, no one would have suspected that a story told through the perspective of a teenage girl would flourish more than the cerebral *Twin Peaks*. And yet, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* somehow managed to.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Wherein a Supernatural Melodrama Carries the Lynchian Torch

The 1990s were terrific years to present fantasy as allegory in television. With Joss Whedon's series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (which began in 1997), high school is actually perceived as hell and not just an appropriate comparison. Apart from course work, the struggle to fit in among peers, and trying to make parents proud, the adolescents in *Buffy* have to live through a variety of demonic activity in their town. Sunnydale is a town where most adults do not pay much attention to the struggle of being a teenager, with the exception of the few that can actually see the town for what it is. By appealing to the season one episodes "Welcome to the Hellmouth" and "Prophecy Girl," season two's "Surprise" and "Innocence," the season three finale "Graduation Day (Parts 1 & 2)," as well as the episodes "The Body" and "The Gift" from season five, we can see how a show about adolescence, surprisingly, turns the Suburban Gothic into a more sophisticated genre.

When we meet Buffy Summers in the pilot episode, she seems very ordinary. A teenage girl growing up in California, her mother uproots her from Los Angeles to the small, suburban Sunnydale after an expulsion from her previous school. It seems completely normal until a meeting with the principal reveals that Buffy's expulsion was due to her burning down the gym there. We quickly learn that this was due to a vampire attack, and that Buffy Summers is actually not an ordinary girl, though she desperately tries to be. She is chosen, as fate would have it, to be a "Slayer," a girl with a hidden ability to fight "vampires, demons, and the forces of darkness."⁵ While Buffy grapples with this destiny, it is particularly difficult for her to accept in the initial episodes. She

⁵ The prologue for each episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* recites the following: "Into each generation there is a chosen one. She alone will stand against vampires, demons, and the forces of darkness; she is the slayer."

tries (and fails) to deny her abilities; an allegory of a girl trying desperately to cling to her youth. However, even moving to a new town could not prevent Buffy Summers from her duty to the world and, consequently, she is forced to grow up far too soon.

It may be hard to view Buffy Summers as a Westerner, especially considering she is a teenage girl—she has a home, (for the most part) a social life, and a family. She has a colorful wardrobe, a clear violation of the Westerner's code. Though, Buffy is a character who must treat her life as a high school student as second nature; it is a persona she must take on when she's not actively preventing the apocalypse. Even when she's in school, she spends her free hours training. She even allows the few friends she makes at Sunnydale High School to join her in her constant battle. Xander Harris and Willow Rosenberg are forced to accept their town's perilous reality almost as abruptly as Buffy does. However, (beginning) with no special abilities, they do not have as smooth of a transition into accepting this reality as their extraordinary friend does. They have not matured as quickly. They fall into a routine, eventually, and as a unit they work to protect the people of Sunnydale so that they can carry on living with their lives, despite the surrounding dangers.

Contributing more to the "Westernly" quality of Buffy and her companions, these teenagers have families that do not necessarily understand them. For example, Buffy's mother is unaware of her gifts for much of the series; when she does come to understand that Buffy is the Slayer, she asks her daughter to just stop, as if it were so simple. Xander, a mere mortal appears to come from a family who hardly acknowledges him, though we only hear such things in passing. His penchant for dating immortal women serves as a metaphor for the human attraction to our fears and outside threats. Willow, on the other hand, has parents with impossibly high expectations. This has made her into an incredibly bright and studious girl, qualities that eventually make her an outstanding witch. She is

also a closeted lesbian for the first half of the series, a revelation that her parents needed getting used to.

While very few adults seem to take the time to get know and accept these characters, there is one who supports Buffy and her friends throughout the series. Rupert Giles, Buffy's watcher, is the most nurturing and supportive adult in the show. We come to love Joyce as much as the rest of the Scoobies (as they have cleverly dubbed themselves), but the attachment both characters and members of the audience have to Giles is unmatched. Working under a council, he is sent to Buffy to train her and guide her as she maintains peace on Earth. It is very rare that he tells any of the Scoobies that they cannot do something, so long as it does not kill them. Even with the possibility of death, he is more likely to give a word of caution than to deny their abilities. Even in the pilot, when Buffy stubbornly refuses to do her duty as a Slayer, he waits patiently for her to accept her inescapable destiny, which she does come the second episode. It is with his help, and the help of Xander and Willow, that she challenges her first nemesis, The Master, and vanquishes his minions. By doing purge the town of these vampires, she is protecting the innocents; they are thankless saviors allowing everyone to go on living.

Living, as it would appear, is a luxury that Buffy cannot afford; at least, she cannot live a normal life. Thus, we see another struggle of Buffy as the Westerner. The season finale reveals a prophecy about Buffy wherein she dies at the hands of the Master. Despite knowing this, she still comes to challenge her adversary; she refuses to let death stop her from carrying out her task. She even dies, briefly, of asphyxiation—not only fulfilling the prophecy of her death, but allowing herself to be *reborn* into a grown, more disillusioned version of herself. By accepting death and her role as the Slayer, she is able to conquer the Master and come into her given role. The entire series serves as a coming

of age tale, but season one especially presents itself as dealing with accepting these threats and outside forces, having to grow up knowing they exist.

As with all seasons of *Buffy*, the second season introduces us to new villains. The vampires Spike and Drusilla are lovers who find romance in bringing chaos unto the earth. As old as the couple is, it should have come as no surprise when it is discovered that Buffy's vampire boyfriend, Angel, was once a member of their vampire coven. He left after his soul was restored to his vessel by way of a gypsy curse. He would only lose it again if he experienced a moment of pure happiness; Angel lives in an infinite purgatory on Earth. However, with Buffy as his lover, the day when they consummated their relationship was bound to come. No one expected, however, that doing so would mean his descent into evil.

The episodes "Surprise" and "Innocence" chronicle Angel's history with Spike, Drusilla, and Darla, Angel's former lover. These episodes are also pivotal for Buffy's character, as she elects to lose her virginity to him on her seventeenth birthday. Both forfeit a form of innocence: Buffy in her maidenhead, and Angel literally losing his soul to a moment of true joy with the woman he loves. After Angel rejoins Spike and Drusilla, revealing to the Scoobies that he is evil once more, Buffy finds herself in the painful position of having to fall out of love with someone she gave herself to. She succeeds just enough to vanquish him (at the exact moment Willow manages to restore his soul) but it is ultimately futile, for it is clear that Angel is Buffy's soul mate. This story arc is crucial to the chronology of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as it teaches the audience that even the ones we love and trust the most are susceptible, not only to getting in the way of danger but actually *being* the danger itself.

Threats can come from all sides, even the systems we believe can protect us. Season three of *Buffy* introduces us to the Mayor of Sunnydale, Richard Wilkins. Though

he seems good-natured and kind, he turns out to be a sorcerer on a mission to transform into a demon in exchange for immortality. The two-part season finale, "Graduation Day," shows Buffy's entire graduating class working as a united front to vanquish the Mayor as his fantasy of becoming a giant demon reptile comes to fruition. While there are several casualties in the episode, it was a beautiful sight to see all of those students standing together to fight the administration. They actually got through high school, or died trying. There is a moment at the end of the episode where Willow's boyfriend, Oz, speaks with Buffy about surviving. After acknowledging what an intense battle they just faced, Oz replies by saying, "Not the battle, high school." These words resonate with anyone who struggled to get through high school, acknowledging how difficult adolescence can often be. As these are the last of the "teenage" troubles, the content in Buffy got substantially darker after season three. Particularly in season five, Buffy faces such a potent evil that she must accept facing without the help of any of her family or friends.

Glorificus, otherwise known as Glory, is a hell demon who seeks a "key" which will open a portal to the dimension she was banished from. All of season five, all she desires is to go home. However, the monks that have banished her created an entirely new person to conceal the key, and sent it to Buffy to protect it. The key, as the monks would have it, was given to Buffy in the form of a sister, the girl we come to know as Dawn. From the first episode of season five, the characters treat Dawn as if she had always been there, though it is clear to audiences that something is amiss. When Glory discovers that her precious key is the kin of the Slayer, she antagonizes the Scoobies and everyone they hold dear in the hope that they will forfeit Dawn. Not only would doing so mean Buffy loses her sister, but (yet again) Hell would open up on Earth.

The suffering Glory causes Buffy and her friends falls, coincidentally, with the discovery that Buffy's mother has a brain tumor. In the sixteenth episode, Buffy's mother

dies. It is suspected that Glory is responsible for Joyce's death, but it is discovered to be a complication from the surgery Joyce underwent to remove her tumor. This death rattles the entire group, not just because such an integral figure in their lives had passed but because the death was purely of non-magical circumstance—something they were not used to experiencing despite being surrounded by death constantly. Through her mother's death, Buffy comes to accept that she must shed herself of the things she holds dear in order to finish Glory by herself. With this knowledge, as well as advice she had taken earlier from a spirit guide, Buffy comes to accept that "death is [her] gift." The loss of Joyce further emphasizes this truth, one that Buffy had to accept earlier than most; even sooner than the audiences that would indulge in these episodes on a weekly basis. Buffy eventually has to act upon this truth in "The Gift," the season finale wherein she sacrifices herself by throwing herself into the portal Glory opened up. In her death, she not only saved her sister, but she also saved the world.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer is a much beloved show for its unabashed depiction of Suburban life as a proverbial Hell on Earth. In the same way Buffy and the Scoobies protect the people of Sunnydale in order to protect them from realizing the danger posed by living in their town, the viewing experience of *Buffy* allows audiences of the Suburban Gothic to immerse themselves into a fantasy show in order to feel as though their lives are normal. With its seven-year run, *Buffy* was given enough time to pass through both a classic and refined age of the Suburban Gothic. It shows, not only a teenage girl maturing into the woman she needed to be in order to protect the world, but the way the narrative developed over the course of those seven years showed true promise for the Suburban Gothic to a point where the episodes were artfully crafted, "embellished," as Schatz would describe. *Buffy* marks a point in the Suburban Gothic where both the artist and the audience can begin to see just what the genre is trying to accomplish.

In the same years that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was in serial, more and more people began gaining access to the Internet. Though it did not reach the lengths we will see *American Horror Story* does in the next chapter, it should be noted that *Buffy* garnered a huge following, and has since become a widely discussed topic in popular culture, from both a critical and academic perspective. It is through *Buffy* that we can see the Suburban Gothic move past the point of a mere experiment into a fully-fledged genre. The show is an obvious indication of the genre becoming more mature, and more self-aware. Rather than toying with the possibilities of what *Buffy* can do narratively and for its audience, Whedon created a series which, in a confrontational way, addresses the issues that matter most to the people watching the show. It has transcended *Twin Peaks* in its self-awareness, as seen in its use of camp and use of gaudy costumes and computer graphics. In the same way that Buffy inherits the responsibility of protecting humankind, the audience has begun to inherit the Suburban Gothic, turning it from an idea into a genre worth analyzing. As that audience matured from adolescents into adults, the Suburban Gothic matured through the broadcast of *Buffy*. It is not until the year 2010, about seven years after the series finale of *Buffy*, that the genre was ready for yet another dramatic shift in its portrayal, and another stride toward revealing that which audiences have come to fear the most.

American Horror Story: Re-Envisioning Storytelling in the Suburban Gothic

In the twenty-first century, television has taken greater strides toward reeling audiences in. Shock value seems to be the most effective in increasing ratings, and no show has had as much press for their shocking antics as Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk's *American Horror Story* franchise. The series, taking on a new theme with each season, is known for its extreme violence, sexual content, and horrific situations. To make the situation feel closer to home, the settings are all suburban areas of major cities that Americans are familiar with; cities such as Los Angeles, Boston, and, most recently, New Orleans. In the evolutionary timeline of the Suburban Gothic, *American Horror Story* would certainly fall into the *baroque* phase. As with the previous two shows, we must see an episodic trajectory. For *American Horror Story*, I have selected mostly from the *Murder House* series: "Pilot," "Piggy Piggy," and the two part finale, "Birth/Afterbirth"; from *Asylum*, the arresting "Welcome to Briarcliff" and, finally, "The Origins of Monstrosity."

The pilot episode of a series is usually the only introduction an audience needs of the ensemble cast. *American Horror Story* is unique in this way, as each season is a new set of characters. For this chapter, all of the Westerners will be identified prior to delving into the more poignant scenes from the series. For *Murder House*, the Harmon family—Vivien, Ben, and their sixteen-year-old daughter, Violet—are the primary Westerners. Having moved from the east coast all the way to California as a means of keeping their family together, they discover, all too late, that they are in a home that does not belong to them, but rather the ghosts that are condemned to the place. Even further away from being Westerners than Buffy was in her show, the core of their characterization comes

from the fact that they try to maintain a sense of control over the place, though they have none at all.

Their neighbor, Constance Langdon, is secondary to the Harmons in terms of "Westernly" quality. She and her children once lived in the house where the Harmons reside through this first season, but a series of unfortunate events cast her out of the place, and she tries (and fails) to return to the place she holds so dear. However, the audience comes to realize that this desire to return to the house does not have as much to do with it as it does for the fact that the ghosts of her dead children are among those damned there. Her former lover, Larry Harvey, is yet another character who lived in the house—first with his wife and children (before she discovered he was cheating on her with Constance, and set herself ablaze in the bedroom with her sleeping daughters) and then again with Constance and her sons and daughter. His desperate attempts to return to the house are only motivated by his love of Constance, whose sole motivation is not love, but returning to her children. A final Westerner can be seen in Hayden McClaine, Ben Harmon's mistress. Constantly forcing herself upon the Harmons in life and death, Hayden cannot reconcile herself with the fact that Ben has chosen to repair his family. After becoming pregnant with his baby, she insists that they can start anew; yet another person trying to infiltrate a home where they do not belong.

As for the community that *Murder House* revolves around, there are a large number of ghosts whose souls still dwell in the home. There is Moira, a maid with a ghostly eye and a tendency to bring out a dangerous lust in men; Tate, Constance's son and Violet Harmon's love interest; and of course, Chad and Patrick, the bickering gay couple that lived—and died—in the house just before the Harmons moved in. There are many more ghosts that reside in the house, but these four contribute the most to the *Murder House* story.

Asylum has many Westerners, as well, since a number of people are wrongfully committed into the Asylum. Particularly Kit Walker, who is mistaken for the east coast serial killer, Bloody Face; Lana Winters, an undercover journalist who is committed for being a lesbian; and finally, Sister Jude/Judy Martin, who is committed after attempting to expose one of her colleagues as a former Nazi. *Coven* does not have a clear Westerner, as it would appear each character belongs to or once belonged to a tribe of their own. There are a few episodes from the latter seasons that are relevant to the discourse; however, as the *Murder House* plot deals with tensions within the nuclear family, the episodes from this series will provide the most breadth for its place in the Suburban Gothic.

Jumping ahead to the third episode in *Murder House*, "Piggy Piggy" opens in 1994, at Westfield High School. Five students are working the library when gunfire goes off. The shooter, after making his way into the library, shoots them all, one after the other. It is but a moment later that the viewer discovered Tate Langdon is the shooter. Only one lived after the shooting—the librarian whom Violet consults after she discovers through a bit of internet research that her boyfriend is actually dead. Unable to process how it could be possible for her boyfriend to not only be dead, but capable of murder, Violet becomes unstable, attempting to take her own life toward the end of the episode. Tate, however, tries to keep her alive, forcing Violet to vomit until she has purged herself of all the sleeping pills she ingested. This is unsuccessful, however, as the audience will learn later. What is most shocking about this desperate act and the deep depression Violet found herself in was that it went virtually unnoticed by her parents, one of whom is a psychiatrist.

Meanwhile, Vivien, pregnant with twins (one of which is the baby of a ghost dwelling in the house) is being catered to by both Constance and Moira. The two of them

prepare sweetbreads for her, insisting it is the most nutrient-dense food for an expecting mother. After ingesting a raw brain, Vivien begins to worry that something is not right with her pregnancy. The viewer later becomes aware that Vivien is carrying Ben's mortal baby, as well as the demon spawn of Tate Langdon, who raped Vivien disguised as Ben in a gimp suit. We also discover that this is his second attempt at acquiring a child for Nora, a ghost in the house whose baby died years ago. His first was by way of Chad and Patrick, who he murdered when they did not adopt a baby in a timely manner. These events are only the beginning of a frenzied style of story telling, which fits as much shock and awe into forty-five minutes as possible. This is without even mentioning some of the other strange events that unravel at the Harmon's new home. The finale of *Murder House* however is one of the most gruesome finales in recent memory.

The finale of the *Murder House* cycle revolves around Vivien's early labor. In the same episode Ben realizes Violet's suicide attempt is successful, but he does not believe her immediately. The events that have taken place in the Harmon's new home all come to a head, when the ghosts start revealing themselves to Ben and Vivien as she prepares to deliver her twins. That is until Dr. Montgomery, one of the first ghosts to reside in the house, uses dated methods to remove the babies from her womb. The first twin, Ben's son, is still born; Tate's son, the strongest of the two, lives but is taken from Vivien almost immediately. Between the intensity of the labor and the conditions in which Vivien was forced to deliver, she loses her life in the process. Ben, at the end of "Birth," is left alone in the living room with the lifeless body of his wife, and no children to attend to. The culmination of sins against his family finally turned him into a lonely man with nothing left. Almost appropriately, it is just before Ben's death does he come to terms with his faults, his accountability in the deaths of his family, and makes an effort to repent. He considers suicide, but the specters of Violet and Vivien present themselves to

him, insisting he carry on living for the sake of Vivien's son. They convince him to flee, but he does not get far before the ghosts of Hayden attack him, and hang him from the chandelier above the staircase. The Harmons, now ghosts themselves, live among the others. They try to carry on as best as they can as a happy family, but it is unknown how long their ease will last with an array of bitter spirits haunting the home. Violet, in her death, realizes all of the horrible things that Tate has done, including raping her mother. She tells Tate she never wants to see him again, and through old magic he is unable to see her unless she chooses to present herself. He is last seen staring at her, pining from afar, just as Hayden is left to do with Ben. This is the last we see of the Harmons, as *American Horror Story* moves into a new plot, revolving around an insane asylum in Massachusetts.

American Horror Story: Asylum begins with the story of Kit Walker, a white man living in a suburb of Boston in the 1960s. Being married to a black woman by the name of Alma, Kit and his wife are often targeted by locals who disagree with their marriage. One night, believing he is being attacked by a group of locals he ran into at the gas station that night, Kit and his wife are abducted by aliens after making love. The scene cuts to a congregation of people outside of the Catholic asylum known as Briarcliff, waiting to see the man accused of being a serial killer, known to the public as Bloody Face, who is known for preying upon young woman. The man who exits the vehicle is Kit, though it is suspicious that he is accused because his wife is never found. Lana Winters, an area journalist, is hard-pressed on investigating this story, but her persistence only irritates the nun in charge of the institution. Sister Jude, not wanting Winters to meddle in the goings on at Briarcliff, particularly the case of Kit Walker, goes to great lengths at making sure nothing that happens within Briarcliff gets out. When Lana breaks into the asylum, she is eventually committed; it is discovered that she is a lesbian, and

Sister Jude had her committed under the guise of needing aversion therapy. This is not the only time we see Sister Jude's harsh attitudes; she takes to caning patients, and even putting them through electro-shock therapy for bad behavior. The episode introduced Dr. Arden, as well; Arden fancies himself a scientist, and often experiments on patients he feels are expendable. The entire season premier of *Asylum* serves as a critique of, not just mental health care, but also abuses in the Catholic Church.

The cycle is not just concerned with ideas of the care (or lack there of) in mental institutions, despite taking place in one. The series focuses a great deal on what creates evil in human beings. The episode, "The Origins of Monstrosity" tries to detail this throughout the entire episode, starting with the subplot of a young girl named Jenny, who's mother brings her in suspecting she may have killed her friend while playing one day. Jenny's mother asks Sister Jude what could have happened to make Jenny psychotic. This is never answered, though the episode ends with Jenny having killed her mother and sister. Meanwhile, one of the psychiatrists at Briarcliff, Oliver Thredsen, is revealed to be the killer known as Bloody Face, after he captures Lana Winters with the intent of making her his next victim. He confides in Lana, however, detailing for her his abandonment as baby, his desire for a mother figure, his longing for closeness. He tells Lana that the women he felt were unfit to play the role of his mother were the women he ended up killing and skinning. He finds that Lana's compassion makes her a suitable "parent," and keeps her locked in the cell of his basement until she is able to find the will to escape. This episode also deals, in part, with Dr. Arden's origin story. Having been exposed to the audience as a former Nazi Officer, his story details how it is he came to Briarcliff, and how he worked with the Monsignor of the institution to find a cure for tuberculosis. The Monsignor, however, finds Dr. Arden's experiments to be horrifying and inhumane. He attempts to stop them from continuing, but Dr. Arden cons him into

letting him stay, telling the Monsignor that he, too, is accountable for the conditions of the patients Arden has worked with, and if word should get out, the Monsignor would forfeit a chance at getting into the papacy.

American Horror Story is, without a doubt, the most melodramatic series in the Suburban Gothic genre. It resorts to the greatest shock value with each episode, and is unrelenting in violence and horror. It feels real only because the settings are familiar and the history it takes place in is one that the American people have experienced. It blurs the lines between fantastic and familiar horrors, with both serial killers and aliens, infidelity and ghosts weaving into the same plot. We can identify this as the baroque period in the genre, because it is so frenzied, and the horror is unrelenting. The humor in the series is far more self-aware, constantly poking fun at bigoted comments and even the very technologies that bolster its audience in size and discussion. Considering the fact that each season is a different storyline, it feels even more frantic, and difficult to follow, harder to discern whether or not this is purely fantasy, or if it is an American satire under the guise of a horror show.

Beyond the horror elements, however, *American Horror Story* reaches the audience in a way that the other two series have not achieved. The fervent interest in viewing and discussing this anthology would be nothing without the advent of the Internet. *American Horror Story* has shown a strong reliance on social media as the key to its marketing success and large audience. Even greater than those successes is the way that its use of the Internet engages audiences into rich conversations about the show. Like the frenzied nature of *American Horror Story*'s content, the eagerness to talk about and interpret it is met with the same hysterics that the show provides.

What can be found in this manic consumption of the *American Horror Story* anthology? Each series has gained a higher sense of self-consciousness than the last. We

watched as *Twin Peaks* set the stage for the genre, and we grew up with *Buffy* as the heroine confronted the every-day issues our society faces—death, grief, debt, romance, and so on. It stands to reason that what makes *American Horror Story* so horrific is not just the visuals, but how much more aware of itself it is than its predecessors. Unlike *Twin Peaks* and *Buffy*, it has discovered the common thread between itself and the former, the fears that they all seek to address. It is in *American Horror Story*, and the discourse that surrounds it, that we find our greatest fear is born of the Suburban mentality, a frame of mind that is synonymous with complacency. That is society's greatest fear, and *American Horror Story* has decorated it to match our worst nightmares.

conclusion

"Tragedy was preparing me for something greater. Every loss that came before was a lesson."⁶ While Constance Langdon explains this to her hair stylist at the conclusion of *American Horror Story: Murder House*, it resonates. At the heart of all of these television shows, audiences will find that the Suburban Gothic is more a reflection of the Suburban Reality than it is a *just* a genre. The programs reveal to us that the "underbelly" of the community consists of our collective fears. Fears, which Freud believed to reveal subconscious desires:

- Fear of rejection
- Fear or wish of privacy/private space being invaded
- Fear of betrayal
- Fear or wish of reversion into adolescence (important because it was a passionate period prior to repressions of adulthood—where passion is often loss)
- Fear or wish for integration into pluralistic communities, and consequent loss of identity.

Most importantly, the Suburban Gothic warns younger audiences of the danger of our complacency and how the Suburban mentality inhibits our ability to thrive in non-suburban environments. It is from the stories in the Suburban Gothic that we can see how grave situations rattle entire unsuspecting communities. We can see this from the beginning, with *Twin Peaks*.

The town of Twin Peaks struggles to feel a sense of normalcy after the death of Laura Palmer, yet the people who live there never leave. Audiences can see that all of the scandalous activity is isolated to the people that insist on staying (save for James Hurley,

⁶ From Constance Langdon's closing monologue in "Afterbirth," from *American Horror Story*.

who briefly abandons the town for something new). The complacency of the townspeople may be best represented in their romantic affairs. The audience can see how complacent attitudes have bred these incestuous relationships in the town. From Bobby Brigg's feelings of entitlement to his late girlfriend, Laura Palmer, despite his affair with Shelly Johnson to Shelly's inability to leave her abusive husband, Leo; we can also see complacency in Norma Jennings's and Ed Hurley's on-going romance amidst their unhappy marriages, as well as Ben Horne's affairs with several women in Twin Peaks (notably, Catherine Martell, Eileen Hayward, and Laura Palmer).

Complacency in *Twin Peaks* can also be seen in the case of One-Eyed Jacks, the brothel just north of the United States and Canadian border. The clandestine business venture of Ben Horne exists— literally— outside of Twin Peaks, and potentially the problems of those who live there. However, the involvement of the townspeople in the dealings at the casino and brothel creates an adoption of the conflicts that take place there (most evident in the covert trip the Bookhouse Boys take in search of Jacque Renault). The eager Audrey Horne, for example, found herself so eager to help Special Agent Dale Cooper in his investigation that she put *herself* in the perilous situation that both Laura Palmer and Ronette Pulaski found themselves in at the hands of Blackie, the head mistress at One Eyed Jacks. Fortunately, she was spared the fate of her peers with the help of the Bookhouse boys. One Eyed Jacks is one of the town's poorly kept secrets, and yet the people of Twin Peaks who are on the other side of the law enforcement do little to end the dubious activity that takes place there—including their employment of high school girls.

Fears of complacency can be seen in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* Sunnydale, as well; an entire town of people continue to live in this volatile place, knowing there is a constant threat on their lives (though they do not quite expect demonic activity). Buffy's

presences allows them to carry on with their ways, though she does this inadvertently considering her main objective is to protect *all* of humankind—not just the ones living in the Hellmouth. Other illustrations of complacency in the Suburban Gothic are found in *American Horror Story*, particularly the *Murder House* series. Ben Harmon, for example, has such a strong fear of complacency that is to blame—not only for his desires and acts of infidelity—but for his family's uprooting into the very house which marks their death. The entire family, even, shows signs of complacency by disregarding the paranormal activity that occurs in their home. In *Asylum*, complacency is what allows Briarcliff to function as an institution for so long; the truth about the establishment is concealed from the people, thereby allowing antiquated and inhumane practices to be performed on the patients. Complacency is what put innocent people, like Kit Walker and Lana Winters, into the institution without proper evidence of their insanity. So long as it shields the people in the community, it is an acceptable solution.

The successes of this genre, though having plenty to do with the compelling narratives, can also be interpreted as an effect of the Millennial audience. It is because of my generation's own fears of complacency that these shows are consumed with such ravenousness. As they evolve within the Suburban Gothic genre, the programs become increasingly hysterical; there is an excessive amount of sex and violence that is unprecedented in these shows. However, the popularity of the Suburban Gothic can also be attributed to the generation's familiarity with television as a medium. For many years, the television set has been ubiquitous with American households. People, especially those who grew up in the 1990s, constantly talk about the things they saw on television that night or the night prior—particularly primetime programming. These conversations are often had at work, or school, or even over dinner. The venue for these conversations,

much like the programming that revolves around them, is evolving in a similar way to these shows.

The nature of such discourse is so frequent because the programs are still in serial; they are being written as our conversations are happening. These interactions have become magnified in context of the internet, as well. Social media—blogs, YouTube, Twitter, et al—is an advent that is inherently a part of the Millennial experience. In the same way that the television programs have become frenzied, the Internet has done the same to the dialogue that surrounds these, and other, shows. Television shows are no longer capable of being "cult" with the homogeneity of internet culture. Even *Twin Peaks*—once considered a cult show for its small and devoted fan base—has an expanded audience over twenty years later, reaching a younger audience. I find that I and my thesis serve as direct evidence of the impact the internet has had on both audiences and television; if *Twin Peaks* had not been so readily available on streaming websites or DVDs, my interest would not exist. As audiences grow and become more outspoken with help from the Internet and social media, the number of voices speaking about these television shows also grows, and they're all talking at the same time. With these conversations, our fears are out in the open. The audience is talking about them but they are talking over each other, creating an air of hysteria; a hysteria of millions of voices expressing their thoughts about the narratives they enjoy.

To reiterate an earlier point, this maniacal dialogue about television, especially in Suburban Gothic programs, is not reserved merely for our conversations, but the content of these shows. It has evolved from the moments that we saw Laura Palmer's body wrapped in plastic, or the possessed Dale Cooper bashing his head against the mirror of his bathroom, revealing the perversion of his soul to the audience. Even *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which had acts of violence and black magic in nearly every episode, has

not pushed the envelope as far as *American Horror Story* has in the last three years of its broadcast. The graphic nature of the program is a reflection of just how violent and vulgar twenty-first century television programming has become. *American Horror Story* is the result of how much television producers can get away with before the program becomes too extreme to broadcast. This is also telling of how comfortable the audiences have become with such content. In fact, it is the audiences' expectation for all programming to exceed the perimeters that each previous episode has established.

Another reason why *American Horror Story* is significant to the timeline of the Suburban Gothic is because of its place in the continuous conversation about television, about the things audiences have seen, and the expectations they have of the following episodes and seasons. This is another reason why *American Horror Story* is so significant to the timeline of the Suburban Gothic is because of its place in the continuous conversation about television; about the things audiences have seen in the latest episodes and seasons, and their expectations for everything that will follow.

American Horror Story, beyond the dark narrative, is notorious for its viral marketing strategy. Many shows today are only going as far as releasing television promos to play during commercials, or producing advertisements for publications and billboards. While *American Horror Story* has turned to these conventions, their web presence has not only increased the numbers of their audience, but they have also encouraged web-based discussions of the show. Never mind the fact that Ryan Murphy's team has curated an renowned ensemble cast. The show's constant interaction with the audience feeds their discussion and continued consumption of the program. Using cryptic clips to appeal to the audience before each new season, the public relations team has created a powerful bait for their audience. Then, as the show is in circulation, they initiate a conversation with the audience by way of hash tags that pertain to certain characters,

events, or simply using the title of the show. The last season, *Coven*, used the hash tags "#AHS Coven" and the popular "#onwednesdayswewearblack." The latter referenced the day of the week new episodes aired, and the character of Fiona Goode insisting members of the Coven donned black garments while in training. It also served as a space for fans of the show to post their *Coven* inspired outfits. All of this activity, unsurprisingly, appeals to younger audiences, particularly the Millennials, who make up a large sum of the people who use websites such as Facebook or Twitter. It is safe to assume that with such technology at the disposal of television audiences, these trends will be recurring as time goes on. This is because the lasting nature of the serial television format.

Between the prominence of internet in on-going conversations about television shows and the increasingly explicit content that comes up in regular programming, the Suburban Gothic has found a niche in television that it could not quite carve out for itself in cinema and literature. The format of television is such that in complex narratives—like the ones we see in *Twin Peaks*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and the *American Horror Story* anthology—end their episodes leaving the audience in suspense. It is a tactic that is alluring to audiences: they keep watching the shows, and the continue to talk about them when they are over. These open endings also add to the eeriness of these shows. This eeriness is, in a way, emphasized by a few points that Sigmund Freud has made in *The Uncanny*.

First, he claims that "the frightening element is something that has been repressed and now returns" (147). This is the way of the television series; to end in one place and return again the following week. This is especially effective in the Suburban Gothic, where the episode (more often than not) picks up in the very place it left off. The second point worth noting in *The Uncanny* is where Freud writes that "fiction affords possibilities for a sense of the uncanny that would not be available in real life" (157).

This is not only relevant in relation to the fantastical and supernatural qualities of the genre, but in the way television pauses for breaks and then returns after a period of time to the program. This is an occurrence we find happening at points of heightened tension within the show before cutting to advertisements, or the episode ending on a cliffhanger. It is a strange feeling to be left in a point of suspension and then having to sit through several minutes of colorful advertising, or wait for days (sometimes weeks) until the next episode airs. As the content of these shows becomes eerier or more explicitly sexual and violent, the tensions audiences experience just before it comes to a halt only become greater.

Over the recent history of the Suburban Gothic, we have witnessed an evolution of not just the shows in the genre, but an evolution of the way they illustrate the fears that arise from the Suburban mentality. With the frenzied discourse regarding the programs taking place over the internet, and the content becoming more and more graphic, we have become increasingly aware of ourselves; their phobic attitudes toward the things that society has long perceived as abnormal, and especially our fears of complacency. *Twin Peaks*, in softer tones, began the conversation. Meanwhile, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* allowed audiences to speak more freely about fears in relation to the Suburbs and Suburban ways of thinking. In the age of *American Horror Story*, our fears have reached a point of exaggeration. The show has aligned the highest point of our fears, thus making the content much darker and grim. This embellishment in the sinister is the baroque period that Schatz is concerned about, as I have noted, in his book. The genre is no longer an expression, but a manic response to our evolution.

Complacency is a more realistic fear in our current climate. With the internet giving everyone a voice and creative platform, we seem to be at more of a risk to uniformity. This is evident, not only in the shows we watch, but the way that we have

come to watch them, with the internet as an aid for conversation and interpretation. Audiences look to these shows as an escape from their greater fears, though they only seem to be perpetuating them, living them out. They sit inside the house, consuming the programs in a ritualistic manner, spending precious time with them rather than experiencing the world outside. The very thing that is meant to keep us aware of our fears only allows them to live on. Perhaps this is what we want. After all, Freud believed that our fears were truly wishes; we are actually quite complacent with complacency.

As the years pass and shows become more extreme in their material, audiences are reminded of their own evolving conditions. Our society digs a deeper hole in our already problematic situation, thus the programming—and the audience—becomes more sophisticated.

Twin Peaks served as one of the earliest moments in the Suburban Gothic. While it could have proven itself to be the greatest show in the genre, it did not last long enough to evolve into the most cryptic series in the genre⁷. *Twin Peaks* certainly ends on a note that would feel as if it is deserving of that title, with the fate of so many characters unclear. It is easily the episode that leaves the audience suspended in wonder of what was meant to happen next. However, it has set the stage for a number of other stories in serial television for years to come, including *Buffy*.

With a seven year run, *Buffy* had plenty of time to evolve as a show. Meeting both classical and refined stages in its growth, it is unsurprising that *Buffy* is—to date—the most successful among the three shows. It was able to move from a campy story about a bubbly teenage girl forced to live a life of violence, into a beloved tale about a girl becoming a courageous woman and warrior, putting the greater good before her own needs and desires; fighting through her personal pain in order for the world to be a better

⁷ Schatz, in describing the generic evolution of genres, mentions

place. The fact that it had such a successful run allowed for it to accomplish what *Twin Peaks* could not—bring the Suburban Gothic to a wider audience. Though it took some time for another show to step up to the plate, *American Horror Story* finally came, and pushed the Suburban Gothic Genre even further. The series, despite its excessive violence and mayhem, leads the Suburban Gothic into a baroque period, creating a universe that blurs the lines between our own world and fiction. *American Horror Story*, as both Todorov and Freud would imply, is uncanny because it is so close to what is familiar.

Knowing that the genre has only evolved as years have passed, and that with elapse of time the audience is more sophisticated, more keenly aware of the narrative and the plot in each of these stories, it should be considered that the programming and the audience have both evolved in such ways because viewers are beginning to feel that, supernatural occurrences aside, the unusual and abysmal nature of these shows is actually one we see in our own lives. It is likely that the intensity of the violence and sexual content, the increasing number of fears and desires cropping up with these shows, parallels the growing hysteria we feel with the reality of our world ending. Although we become *less* ignorant of the world around us—rather than more so—thanks to the traumas of Suburban Gothic characters, the question we will always ask ourselves at the end of forty-five minutes is, "Where do we go from here?" Will we have figured out how to resolve our issue or will we continue to produce more aggressive art? Will we become resourceful enough to survive or will we just accept, as many of the Suburban Westerners have, that our fate is sealed? *American Horror Story* is still in serial, and other shows—like *Supernatural* or *The Walking Dead*—are still working to help their fans come to their own conclusions about their future; and though it looks bleak, these programs want us to find pleasure out of "the end," and out of life while we still can.

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