

## **Dreams, Nightmares and Haunted Houses: Televisual Horror as Domestic Imaginary**

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### *Abstract*

It has been widely proclaimed that U.S. Television is currently experiencing a Golden Age with horror at its vanguard, in part enabled by technological innovations that have seen audiences engage with TV in ever more diverse ways, enabled by the advent of Smart T.V. Meanwhile, television has historically positioned itself as a humble and domesticated medium and yet its increasingly sophisticated channels penetrate into the very heart of the contemporary home.

With this in mind, I view Suburban Gothic TV series such as *American Horror Story* (2011) and *Hemlock Grove* (2013) through the lens of psychoanalytic concepts such as The Uncanny, considering the extent to which such dramas invoke the dark side of the domestic imaginary which haunts that most cherished of spaces, the home. Why does Gothic Horror continue to engage the imaginations of the contemporary home's technologically orientated inhabitants? And how has technology helped to drive the resurgence of a genre so firmly rooted in a historical-literary form? These are just some of the questions that this article explores.

domestic imaginary|suburban gothic|television horror|the uncanny

*“In the first place a great deal that is not uncanny in fiction would be so if it happened in real life; and in the second place that there are many more means of creating uncanny effects in fiction than there are in real life”.* (Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, 1919)

We are, it has been widely proclaimed, currently experiencing “a ‘Golden Age of Television’, but specifically of horror television”, (McGrath: 2014) and this article sets out to consider this phenomenon via the lens of the social, specifically the domestic, imaginary. I will initially consider the increasingly powerful status of the ostensibly humble technological medium within the domestic context, thus enabling Television Horror to penetrate into the very hearts and minds of the home's inhabitants. I will then go on to explore the ways in which televisual horror also reflects the social, domestic imaginary of its inhabitants, the haunted house narrative exploring the deepest fears that stalk the domestic sphere: what happens if the home is no longer the safe haven that we imagine? What then?

Viewing Televisual Horror series such as *American Horror Story* (2011) and *Hemlock Grove* (2013) through the lens of the Suburban Gothic, this article conceptualises both content and spectator via psychoanalytic concepts such as the uncanny and the monstrous feminine, with what I term the domestic imaginary as its organising principle. With reference to “New Wave Horror Television” series (McGrath: 2014) I will consider the extent to which such narratives might be said to re-imagine the dark underbelly of domesticity, the nightmares of confinement and conformity that haunt that most cherished, and protected of spaces, the home. How, and why, does this most ancient, arguably even hackneyed, of genres continue to engage the imaginations of the home's increasingly technologically orientated inhabitants?

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Before focusing on horror television specifically, though, it seems worthwhile to briefly consider whether we are indeed living through a new “Golden Age of Television”? And, if so, what significance might this have for televisual horror? The claim relates at least in part to the increasing popularity of the so-called T.V. box set (its name deriving from its origins in DVD based series), namely quality dramas boosted by high production values and filmic aesthetics, often featuring film actors and directors and funded by cable T.V. companies like HBO and more recently, on-demand digital streaming providers such as Netflix and Amazon. Series such as Mafia crime drama *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) are typically cited as marking the emergence of this phenomenon, with drug-crime drama *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) as a recent example. Combined with recent technological innovations such as Internet streaming and Smart T.V. enabling high-level consumption<sup>2</sup>, the “Golden Age” of T.V. drama series appears a reasonable label, then, although it is outside of the scope of this article to offer a more detailed critique here.

What might the implications of this surge in popularity be specifically for horror television, then? Certainly, viewing figures suggest that horror television represents a sizable chunk of this resurgence.<sup>3</sup> At first glance these statistics seem surprising, since the horror narrative’s reliance on spectacular sensation might appear to be eminently more suited to the immersive cinema experience, whose overwhelming visual and aural possibilities may be unfavourably contrasted with even the most sophisticated domestic small screen. As Helen Wheatley suggests, “it is the feeling that television is too literal a medium, too obvious, too blatantly visual, which has challenged programme makers and troubled reviewers”. (in Armit, 2014: 153) Why, then, has televisual horror drama not only survived but also flourished, despite the technological restrictions of the medium?

In response, it seems reasonable to argue that televisual horror offers a more intimate, perhaps even subjective experience, playing to the strengths of a genre which frequently emphasises, even capitalises upon, its spectator’s homely domestic setting and associated imaginary fears. The cinema’s reliance on overwhelming spectacle, on the other hand, is perhaps less effective at conveying small-scale domestic drama. For similar reasons, horror has adapted successfully to new domestically orientated media forms such as Gothic inspired videogames, as Catherine Spooner indicates. (2014: 188) Drawing on the concept of Freud’s uncanny discussed later, T.V. horror can be seen to channel the genre right into the heart of the home, just as fireside horror literature did before it, by playing on the fears, dreams and nightmares that haunt those that inhabit the domestic sphere. After all, one may well retreat to the bedroom to sleep, perhaps to dream, after viewing televisual horror, as opposed to being rudely awakened from one’s horror reverie by the post-cinematic external world. Moreover, as Jean Baudrillard points out, there is something intrinsically enigmatic, even unsettling, about the medium itself: “There is nothing more mysterious than a TV set left on in an empty room. It is even stranger than a man talking to himself or a woman standing dreaming at her stove. It is as if another planet is communicating with you”. (1988: 50)

The Japanese film *Ringu* (1998) is a case in point. Viewed alone in a dark house, Sadako’s emergence from the diegetic T.V. becomes all the more powerful when itself viewed in a domestic context. Because while the viewer knows on the conscious level that Sadako is not *actually* emerging from the T.V. set, viewed from another perspective, she is: that image is being channelled straight into the viewer’s own living space, and so is brought one chilling step closer to home. And, crucially for a genre that relies on such affects, Sadako preys on the mind, taking up residence by becoming part of one’s mental furniture, a spectre whose white face, distended eyes,

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<sup>2</sup> BBC online (2013) reported that 10.3 million viewers tuned in to US cable channel AMC to view the season finale of *Breaking Bad* (2013).

<sup>3</sup> *The Hollywood Reporter* (2014) put viewing figures for *The Walking Dead*’s (2010) season finale at 15.7 million viewers, for instance.

black curtain of hair, haunt our imaginations: once seen, never forgotten, I would suggest. To twist Vincent Deary's contention slightly, we live in rooms haunted by our imaginations. (2015: 60)

But how is this "haunting" achieved? How does horror fiction manage to invade our mental space in this way? The spectator's imaginative apparatus plays a crucial role here, of course. While it has become a truism to view the horror genre in terms of cultural and historical context, such texts can also be seen to "form part of the symbolic structures which we use to make sense of and ascribe meaning to our existence". (Grixti, 2015: xii) With this in mind, I wish to propose that horror as a highly imaginative genre may also be mined for its derivation from, and contribution to, the social imaginary. But how might we go about defining the social imaginary? And what does "domestically orientated horror" have to contribute to this concept?

For the purposes of this article, John Jervis's explanation of the cultural imaginary seems an apt one:

To 'inhabit culture' is also to belong to one or several cultures, however defined, and the cultural imaginary can be said to pose the questions and possibilities of what is involved in this, how to navigate these worlds. It maps the structure of relations between actual, virtual and possible that open up and frame the contours of experience, experience as it is lived and reflected on. In the modern world, the cultural imaginary draws on the full resources of the media-inflected narrative and imagery through which such experience is reflexively appropriated as discourse and figuration, embedded in cultural forms (specific media and art forms) and cultural practices. (2015: 13)

Translated explicitly into the domestic realm, meanwhile, we can begin to think explicitly in terms of what I term the *domestic* imaginary, in other words, those image-conceptualities that shape how we think of the domestic sphere and which in turn help to inform what constitutes the elements of the domestic imaginary in the first place (as literature did before it). And domestically orientated horror narratives have much to tell us on that score. What form do these constituents of the domestic imaginary take, though? In other words, what images spring to mind when we think about the home, which help to govern our everyday experience of, and practices within, the domestic environment?

My own domestic imaginary is populated by images of home as a familiar place of safety, a refuge, a safe haven from the potential threats presented by the external world. This undoubtedly idealised imagery connotes the cosy homestead as much as it does the English country cottage. I imagine shutting the front door and retreating to my own space where I relax away from the eyes, judgements and expectations of the world outside the home. I venture forth but always need somewhere to return in order to be myself as part of the domestic arena that is, for me, part and parcel of a harmonious existence. As Jervis affirms, "The 'homely' has a simultaneously spatial and affective sense... Home is a place where the self spreads itself, unguarded; it is not unbounded, but its boundaries diffuse outwards". (2015: 33)

More than an idealised set of images provoking homely feelings, though, the domestic imaginary has doubtless shaped aspects of my identity, behaviour and everyday experiences too. For instance, that I am lucky enough to have a shared home of my own (and attendant mortgage, cornerstone of the British version domestic imaginary) drives the need to work for, maintain, retain, one's cherished home, with all the physical and psychological comforts it confers upon its inhabitants. The domestic imaginary is also, no doubt, partially responsible for my emotional reactions when reading or viewing fictional narratives evoking the concept of home, and has certainly influenced my choice of topic for this article.

That said I am all too aware of the domestic imaginary's dark alter ego, home as place of stultifying conformity, entrapment, fears that Gothic horror so effectively magnifies into nightmare scenarios. Not everyone has a safe place to call "home" or has experienced its positive connotations, either as an imaginary or actual "place". It may resemble a nightmare more than it does an idealised dream (as the haunted house so effectively connotes). Furthermore some may feel most "at home", most authentically themselves, in the company of

external others in public spaces. Likewise, the imaginary or actual home may be a place to flee from rather than to, occupying a resistant place in the imagination.<sup>4</sup> Be that as it may, the concept of home is so omnipresent that it indubitably playing an important role in the wider, social imaginary.

That said, what happens when an external threat invades the home or even lies within it, a central theme of the domestic horror and indeed, fairy-tale, as illustrated by Charles Perrault's *Little Red Riding Hood?* (1697) "The wolf lifted the latch, the door sprang open, and without saying a word he went straight to the grandmother's bed, and devoured her. Then he put on her clothes, dressed himself in her cap, laid himself in bed and drew the curtains". More threatening still is the enemy within, and it is here that horror bespeaks the dark side of the domestic imaginary. Little Red Riding Hood, for example, "was surprised to find the cottage-door standing open, and when she went into the room, she had such a strange feeling that she said to herself: 'Oh dear! how uneasy I feel today, and at other times I like being with grandmother so much'". Here, home reveals its dark underbelly, becoming unfamiliar, *unhomely* or as Sigmund Freud describes it, *unheimlich*:<sup>5</sup> "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar". (1919: 1-2) What could be more uncanny than an *unhomely* home which shelters a threat within its very own walls? That the wolf inhabits Grandmother's bed and closes the bedroom curtains seems to me to be more uncanny than the fact that he dons Grandmother's clothes and assumes her persona. Is this because beds and accompanying curtain closing connote the cosy familiarity ideally experienced since childhood? We close out the external world and snuggle under the bedclothes, suggestive of Red Riding Hood's (and our) imagined "right" to that security and privacy which lies at the heart of the domestic imaginary. The wolf's occupation of this designated safe space violates that right, and in doing so contaminates those imaginary spaces that are, "something long known to us, once very familiar". (1919: 1-2)

As Jervis points out, though, *affect* is a crucial aspect of uncanny-ness associated with the domestic imaginary, sentimentality and even nostalgia providing the key to unlock this particular door:

If the uncanny finds the unhomely in the homely, the sentimental will always find the homely in the unhomely... This is what can be both fascinating and disturbing about it. And just as the self can waver uncertainly in its status here, so can the objects it confronts in the world; the uncanny de-materialisation of the subject goes hand in hand with an uncanny fetishism of the object, linked, in the domestic context, to a simultaneous sentimentalism. (2015: 39)

The concept of home is certainly an idealised and sentimental one, which has the potential to generate a range of imaginative and emotional responses, as my own subjective observations demonstrated all too well. This may well hold true even for those who have only experienced negative versions of "home": it is perfectly possible to *imagine* the perfect "home" after all. One need only switch on the T.V. to experience the full power of the domestic imaginary, even if, perhaps especially if, it remains just that: a dream.

Before considering the domestic imaginary specifically in relation to horror narratives, I would first like to turn briefly to *Breaking Bad* (2011) in order to reveal the potentially uncanny dimensions of the domestic imaginary outside of the confines of the horror genre.<sup>6</sup> While the

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<sup>4</sup> Though as many teenagers will testify, fleeing the family nest may well turn out to be bittersweet, not the wholly positive experience they had hoped for. Such is the power of the domestic imaginary!

<sup>5</sup> Freud's essay *The Uncanny* (1919) explores the aesthetics of feeling interwoven with literary sources, drawing inspiration from psychologist Ernst Jentsch's 1906 essay, *On the Psychology of the Uncanny*.

<sup>6</sup> *Breaking Bad* occasionally incorporates melodramatic horror tropes, for example, the "Exploding Tortoise" scene (2009) which features a severed Mexican head fused onto a booby-trapped tortoise, but further discussion lies outside of the scope of this article.

spectre that stalks the White's cosy family home is undoubtedly cancer, the domestic imaginary and its dark side can surface in the most unlikely of contexts, in this case a dinner at menacing businessman Gus's home in honour of his employee Jessie Pinkman. For example, when Gus utters the words, "I have invited you into my home, prepared food, so we could sit and talk, discuss what's going on in this business, *our* business, like men" we know that a pleasant evening is not on the cards. And yet the words are rendered all the more menacing by the fact that taken at face value they connote the positive dimensions of the domestic imaginary: "breaking bread" as it is conventionally termed, offering hospitality to an employee in what is presented as a very comfortable and luxurious home, replete with as much "uncanny fetishism of the object", especially kitchen objects, as Jervis could wish for. (2015: 39) Viewed in this way, Gus's dinner violates some of the most cherished images of the domestic imaginary by insinuating darkness *into the very heart of Gus's own home*. And it is here that its power lies. A man who can violate his own home in this way, we correctly imagine, is capable of just about anything.

With this in mind, we turn now to consideration of what has been identified by Bernice Murphy (2009) as "The Suburban Gothic".<sup>7</sup> I wish to argue that this sub-genre is important for our purposes in at least two ways. The first is that Suburban Gothic reveals the continuing evolution and success of a genre with firmly historical-literary roots. For Murphy, Suburban Gothic originated in an increasingly suburban post-War America whose inhabitants "live in suburbs and have positive experiences of the milieu, and yet it is frequently depicted in popular culture as a repressive, soulless and dehumanising hellscape (sometimes literally)". (2013: 9). Rather than being just too good to be true, the quiet neighbourhood might even harbour the potential to unravel into a place of horror as the suburban evocations of *Hemlock Grove* (2013-) so brutally demonstrate.

At the same time, the horror genre's highly successful small-screen incarnation testifies to the power of technology to influence both the content and transmission of the horror genre as a whole with its uncanny-ness intact, perhaps even enhanced. The fact that the T.V. set in *Ringu* (1998) is able to spontaneously switch itself on, the inanimate object becoming animate, is just as uncanny, if not more so, than the emergence of Sadako discussed previously: "the later innovations of microchip and digital computer technology have endowed technology with the appearance of sentience [reintroducing] into the machine age that type of fear that Freud associated with uncertainty over 'whether a lifeless object might in fact be animate'". (Armitt, 2014: 152) The animated T.V. set resonates so powerfully because we can easily imagine the mundane everyday object that is our own set suddenly switching itself on in the corner of the room, indeed it isn't beyond the realms of possibility that an electrical fault could enable this, whereas the materialisation of Sadako somewhat stretches the credulity and thus can be placed firmly in the box marked "fantasy".

The second is that Suburban Gothic draws much of its power *from*-and so is well placed to support our investigation *into*-the domestic imaginary, depending as it does upon threats to idealised suburban domestic bliss, typically represented by a home of one's own, picket fences and a safe neighbourhood, in stark contrast to the grim depictions of inner city life which beset much American popular culture.<sup>8</sup> After all, horror which threatens the comfortable inhabitants of suburbia is much more effective than a corresponding threat to an urban social housing ghetto, not least because the domestic imaginary associates the former with safety and security, while the latter becomes a potential threat to suburban wellbeing, effectively a no-go area for suburbanites.

Put another way, Suburban Gothic depends upon the domestic imaginary so as to question and ultimately destroy its appeal, thereby revealing its essentially illusory nature and adding fuel to the flames of our nightmares. Preservation of the homestead is, as horror narratives remind us, a constant battle, which we cannot afford to lose. In doing so, the genre plays upon our subliminal

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<sup>7</sup> The genre has since been officially recognised by the film world: horror comedy *Suburban Gothic* was released in 2014.

<sup>8</sup> One need look no further than TV series *The Wire* (2002-2008).

impulse to destroy the illusory order of domestic life, offering the promise of wish fulfilment for those willing to confront their darkest imaginings without the risk of venturing forth and potentially experiencing their realisation. For what could be more inviting to the voyeur (and all spectators are voyeurs are they not?) than imagining dark happenings behind suburban neighbourhood doors? Surely there must be more to the suburbs than barbeques and lawn mowing?<sup>9</sup> (Or so we secretly wish...)

It is perhaps to be hoped that one's darkest imaginings might not extend quite as far as the horrors awaiting those who venture over the threshold of the so-called *Murder House* (2011), however. The trope of the Haunted House has long roots, of course, being a mainstay of the horror narrative. At the same time, it can be seen as a concrete representation of Freud's concept of The Uncanny. Indeed, as Freud himself explains: "many languages in use today can only render the German expression 'an *unheimliches* house' by a *haunted* house". (1919: 13) Moreover,

We may not believe in ghosts, but we remain frightened by them. Precisely because we all live in houses that become dark at night and begin to creak, that have shadowy corners, cupboards and rooms with closed doors...we may well fear, especially when alone, that an antagonist (living if not dead) could be waiting for us. (Armitt, 2014: 174)

Be that as it may, it is certainly the case that both *The Murder House* and its inhabitants prove to be fertile territory for the domestic imaginary, coagulating as they do into an unsettling palimpsest of past and present incarnations of the house co-existing alongside past inhabitants haunting the living. At the same time, the living seem to inhabit rooms that are haunted by their own psychic issues as we will go on to discover. (Deary, 2015: 60) Altogether, this unholy brew calls forth Freud's "return of the repressed", a reminder of our repressed psychic past, which he deems to be a necessary condition for the uncanny, though not sufficient in and of itself. As Freud warns, however:

The uncanny as it is depicted in *literature*, in stories and imaginative productions...is a much more fertile province than the uncanny in real life... The distinction between what has been repressed and what has been surmounted cannot be transposed onto the uncanny in fiction without profound modification; for the realm of phantasy depends for its very existence on the fact that its content is not submitted to the reality-testing faculty. (1919: 18)

With these points in mind, we turn to the pilot episode of *American Horror Story*, (2011) which opens with a scene which firmly places a crumbling Gothic house centre stage, replete with bare trees and gothic paraphernalia. We have been transported back to 1978 and watch a little girl watching the house whose windows, the camera suggests, creepily appear to return her (and accordingly the spectator's) gaze, thus echoing the Gothic family home in *Psycho*. (1960) Suddenly, the girl's reverie is ruptured by splintering glass signalling the appearance of identical twin boys,<sup>10</sup> armed with baseball bats. "Hey Freak!" they shout, but the little (Downs) girl is undeterred: "Excuse me, you're going to die in there!" she warns as they approach the threshold. "Shut your mouth!" they return while continuing to their fate, while her warning echoes eerily around the desolate garden: "You're gonna regret it!" and it is thus that the house reveals both its ruined interior and its accursed status. And thus the stage is set for a Suburban Gothic narrative, which will proceed to puncture yet another set of cherished dreams of domestic bliss, as we shall see.

In what appears to be an unlikely parallel, the scene immediately shifts to reveal Vivian Harmon at her gynaecologist's office, situated within the context of medical instruments and medicalization (a recurring theme). Vivian, we learn, has suffered a miscarriage. The focus on bodily excess ("all

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<sup>9</sup> See TV series *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012), for instance.

<sup>10</sup> Twins have significance in terms of Freud's conceptualization of the uncanny, as I explain shortly.

that blood!”) invokes Barbara Creed’s (1993: 52) concept of the monstrous feminine, the fear and disgust provoked by female bodily processes within a patriarchal frame of reference. Characteristics of the monstrous feminine include repulsive representations of the overwhelming “fleshiness” of the female body and body parts, in particular reproductive organs, the loss/lack of control and bodily boundaries initiated by, for instance, female puberty and childbirth, symbolised in horror films by spontaneous and uncontrollable bodily fluids, most notably blood and other viscous fluids<sup>11</sup>. This recurring theme is also invoked by the sinister activities of the original owner of the house, the mad Frankensteinian figure Dr Montgomery<sup>12</sup> who becomes addicted to ether and is driven to perform illegal abortions once his celebrity status wanes. In doing so he displays an approach to the female body itself suggestive of Aristotle’s clinical observation that “Woman is literally a monster: a failed and botched male”. (in Ussher, 2012: 1)

Indeed, Vivian’s pregnancy manages to be both uncanny and monstrous, since she is pregnant with twins by two different fathers.<sup>13</sup> One twin is fathered by a raping ghost (and therefore destined to be the Antichrist) the other is her husband’s. The subsequent birthing process, overseen by the ghost of Dr Montgomery, proves to be fatal for both mother and “normal” twin. That Vivian gives birth to twins is significant here, since twins evoke Freud’s notion of the uncanny nature of the double,<sup>14</sup> which, he argues, derives from a very early mental stage but culturally “has become a vision of terror”. (1919: 10) One need look no further than *The Shining* (1980) for a vivid example here, featuring as it does the uncanny materialisation of identical twins at the end of the deserted corridors of The Overlook Hotel. Formerly go-karting son Danny is stopped dead in his tracks by their uncanny invitation to “come and play with us, Danny, for ever and ever and ever...”

The monstrous feminine is itself an extension of Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject, a reworking of Freud’s concept of the uncanny, which highlights the fear of ambiguity generated by loss of clear physical and psychological boundaries: “Abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it-on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger”. (1982: 9) Dr Montgomery’s Frankensteinian attempts to resurrect his son<sup>15</sup> via a combination of baby and animal parts, the monstrous creature revitalised by the heart of one of his abortion patients, provides a striking illustration of the abject’s blurred borderline between life and death, humanity and the monstrous. In a similar vein, next door neighbour Constance’s monstrously deformed son Beau is an in/human figure who is chained like an animal to the floor of the house’s attic and is eventually euthanized by her lover Larry in 1994.

Viewed in terms of the abject/monstrous feminine, then, Vivian’s dehumanising experience at the hands of the gynaecologist acquires greater significance. The doctor’s attitude is notably unsympathetic and clinical, comparing the human body (actually, his patient’s body) to a house: if the foundations are faulty then it is a waste of time to restore the rest of the house, he opines while probing her supine body. He goes on to offer a cocktail of synthetic hormones in order to control Vivian’s own internalised fears of the monstrous feminine, of the out-of-control female body (as well as, more predictably, those of husband Ben who, she tellingly points out “hates blood”).

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<sup>11</sup> *Carrie* (1976) is an oft-cited example of this phenomenon wherein a shower scene erupts into an unmanageable torrent of menstrual blood.

<sup>12</sup> Introduced somewhat euphemistically by the estate agent as “the doctor to the stars”, he later performs illegal abortions upon desperate Hollywood starlets who become his victims via rape, torture and/or murder.

<sup>13</sup> This is an extremely rare medical phenomenon whereby two eggs are released and fertilised at separate times.

<sup>14</sup> Freud also describes “suddenly and unexpectedly meeting one’s own image... a vestigial trace of that older reaction which feels the double to be something uncanny”, (1919: 17) which he attributes to Otto Rank’s figure of *der doppelgänger*, “the ghastly harbinger of death”. (1919: 9)

<sup>15</sup> Dr Montgomery’s son was dismembered and stuffed into jars by the boyfriend of one of his secret abortion patients.

Despite their unequal power dynamic, however, Vivian remains assertive: “I don’t need hormones, doctor. I just want to get control of my body again after what happened”. The doctor evades the emotional source of Vivian’s plea, though (she has, after all, suffered a traumatic miscarriage), suggesting that medicating the body is the solution: “I’m offering you something to help get that [control] back”. He goes on to insist that the side effects will make her feel ten years younger (the ultimate wish fulfilment for a middle-aged woman?) to which she responds, “Doctor, I’m not a house!” “Vivian, what are you so afraid of?” asks the gynaecologist before handing her the prescription anyway.

Vivian is next seen in the context of the present family home whose cosy and affluent domesticity evokes all the idealised hallmarks of the domestic imaginary. We are shown into a luxurious kitchen apparently uncontaminated by human contact, gleaming as it is with white cabinets and blinds, an effect enhanced by the falling snow. This domestic idyll proves to be as imaginary as its source, though, as Vivian suspiciously eyes the medications then whirls round and grabs her phone, startled as she is by a noise and fearing an intruder. After making the phone call and armed with (what else?) a gleaming kitchen knife, she moves silently through the darkening house, up the stairs, along the corridors...only to find her psychiatrist husband Ben in the bathroom. Shocking him (and us), she lashes out, cutting his arm.

Vivian’s troubling behaviour triggers another familiar Gothic trope: the domesticated woman driven to psychological distraction by a controlling husband who blames her loss of control upon feminine “hysteria” (a connection made particularly explicit in this case by Vivian’s gynaecological problems) thereby drawing attention away from his own nefarious activities. Indeed, Ben ultimately commits his wife to a contemporary version of a lunatic asylum,<sup>16</sup> despite the fact that he himself has “psychological issues” aplenty which prompted his decision to become a psychiatrist in the first place. Coupled with the haunted house, the hysterical incarcerated woman has a longstanding pedigree as evidenced by Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), which documents a respectable Victorian wife’s descent into madness initiated by postpartum related “temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency”. Her doctor husband prescribes a rest cure, advising that she is “absolutely forbidden to ‘work’” until she is well again. (2013: 1) And so they temporarily rent a suspiciously cheap yet grand house (which she fantasises is haunted) whose nursery wallpaper “colour is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow”. (2013: 3) She is confined within the walls of the nursery day after day, eventually hallucinating that there are women trapped in the pattern. Finally driven to insanity, she seeks to liberate the women by tearing the wallpaper off the walls, believing she too is trapped there. When her husband finally unlocks the door, he finds his wife circling the room and touching the walls with her hands, whispering: “I finally got out of here!” before creeping over his now fainted body again and again. Her state of mind is clearly exacerbated by her husband’s paternalistic treatment (he calls her his goose, his little girl, while her actual name is never revealed by the first-person narrative): “John is a physician and *perhaps*...that is one reason why I do not get well faster” (2013: 1) as she chillingly confides to her diary, later explaining, “He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction”. (2013: 2)

Significantly, the story is also referenced in *American Horror Story* (2011) whereby the housekeeper who “comes with the house” describes the story to Vivien to explain how men “make you think you’re crazy so they can have their fun”. Indeed, women’s distrust of men, particularly medical men, is also highlighted here as it is elsewhere in Gothic Horror: “Doctors are charlatans!” the housekeeper avers, and later, “Since the beginning of time, men find excuses to lock women away. They invent diseases like hysteria... Men are still inventing ways to drive women over the edge”.

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<sup>16</sup> That psychological themes are key to *American Horror Story* is made even more explicit by the location of the second series: a 1960s Catholic lunatic asylum.



Literary precedents aside, this disturbing scene between Vivian and her husband is just a hint of horrors to come, as augured by the echoing words of the little girl, “You’re gonna regret it!”

The setting of *American Horror Story* (2011) clearly belongs to “that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar”. (1919: 1-2) It also invites us to consider what it means to be a spectator of televisual horror, a voyeur enjoying the sensations generated by the panoply of technological effects afforded by modern televisual technology. Why do we relish suffering, unspeakable horrors and visceral violence in our viewing, themes from which we would recoil in everyday life?<sup>17</sup> There are no simple answers here, as I suggest in the conclusion, but Lilie Chouliaraki has this to say on the subject:

Technology interposes itself, converts authentic presence into spectacle, and leaves us trapped in the intimate space of reception. Like art, it reduces the distance between truth and fiction and risks reducing its audience to admiration for it—or annoyance with it—and indifference to its content... ‘If looking through the screen immerses spectators in suffering...looking at the screen reminds them of the reality of the medium that disseminates suffering as spectacle and fiction. (in Jervis, 2015: 195)

Be that as it may, we are next introduced to the entire Harmon family in a way which situates the series firmly in the Suburban Gothic, fleeing as they are across country from their old life, in Boston (The East) to Los Angeles (The West), “the optimistic white settler who leaves the corrupt, diseased hierarchical ‘Old’ World behind in order to settle in a promising ‘New’ one which inevitably has problems of its own”. (Murphy, 2013: 5) For Vivian in the full grip of the domestic imaginary, LA is a place of dreams where “the light is softer.” “It’s called smog!” daughter Violet shoots from the backseat, but this isn’t enough to dent parental enthusiasm for the time being. The family are optimistic, zooming down the “freeway”, en route to a viewing of the family home of their dreams which will, they hope, enable them to put the past behind them (the aftermath of the miscarriage, Ben’s ill-advised affair with a student), to start afresh in the best tradition of American popular culture. In a chilling augur of things to come, however, Vivian rejects Ben’s proffered hand, signifying that this is merely an imaginary vision of their future possibilities.

At the same time, the house of their dreams/nightmares has apparently undergone something of a transformation since its former decrepit 1978 incarnation, though its looming appearance, despite sunlight, manages to be no less Gothic. “I love it, hun, don’t you just love it?!” enthuses Ben as he rings the doorbell, though Vivian looks less than convinced, “Yes, it’s interesting”. Violet proves to be the most intuitive, however: “Great, it’s where the Addams family live!” An overly voluble promotion of its charms by a somewhat neurotic estate agent: “Welcome! It’s a classic LA Victorian, built around 1920... It’s just fabulous, these are real Tiffany fixtures!” implies that the house’s glowing appearance might be more cosmetic than transformational (its foundations, echoing the gynaecologist’s words, somewhat less than sound). This evolution is later paralleled by the Harmons’ own doomed attempts to effect a wholesale transformation into the perfect family beloved of the domestic imaginary, one which might similarly be described as “papering over the cracks”.

Any excessive enthusiasm is dented somewhat when the estate agent goes on to disclose that the previous owners both died in the house in what she describes as “murder-suicide. I sold them the house too. They were just the sweetest couple. You can never tell, I guess”. On learning that the basement was the location of these events (having already investigated its subterranean charms, prompted by the family dog) Violet is unexpectedly enthusiastic: “We’ll take it!” The family agree to the purchase, ultimately seduced by a key cornerstone of the domestic imaginary: ownership of a huge, even better, bargain price mansion in a desirable Californian neighbourhood.

Violet’s enthusiasm for the basement foreshadows its narrative importance, since it was Dr Montgomery’s laboratory and operating theatre, the results of which are ghoulishly displayed in

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<sup>17</sup> Considerations of the un/reality debate lie outside of the scope of this article, which concerns imagination and fiction.

specimen jars discovered by the twins' destructive exploration of the 1978 house, ominously invoking the psychic structure of the family home in *Psycho* (1960) as re-imagined by Slavoj Žižek in *The Pervert's Guide To Cinema* (2006): "Events took place on three levels, first floor, ground floor, basement. It's as if they reproduce the three levels of human subjectivity. Ground floor is ego...upstairs it's the super-ego... and down in the cellar, it's the id, reservoir of the illicit drives". The basement is also a literal manifestation of Armit's contention that "nothing is more horrifying to us than those unseen mysteries, terrors and wonders that lurk in the anatomical 'locked room' to which only the medical profession holds the key". (Armitt, 2014: 177)

Taken at face value, the literary adaptation *Hemlock Grove* (2013) exemplifies horror of a very different order from that on offer in *American Horror Story* (2011) although it just as graphically demonstrates that "in the active pursuit of what most frightens us, we continually reshape our Gothic monsters to fit society's changing fears. (Armitt, 2014: 150) Just as "All supposedly educated people have ceased to believe officially that the dead can become visible as spirits" (Freud, 1919: 14) so do we regard monsters, werewolves, zombies, vampires and the like, although their cultural omnipresence suggests that such creatures still populate the popular imagination much as they always have. In terms of the Suburban Gothic, meanwhile, such creatures continue to represent the fears that lie at the heart of the domestic imaginary: what if the security it offers is purely illusory, can be destroyed by external threats from The Other, strangers, intruders, inhabitants from outside the suburbs who don't live by "our" values?<sup>18</sup> Even worse, as the haunted house trope suggests, what if the threat lies within the home, how to escape then?

Viewed from a distance, fictional Pennsylvania town Hemlock Grove typifies small town life: aerial shots swoop over picket fenced and grid-aligned homes, Stars and Stripes hoisted aloft, surrounded by vivid autumnal woodland, apparently as idealised a vision of the domestic imaginary as one might wish for. "Family Fun Run" banners flap in the breeze, surely a safe and secure neighbourhood to raise a family, as the domestic imaginary suggests? Roads into the town might almost feature a sign inscribed with the legend: "Hemlock Grove: Nothing Ever Happens Here... Thankfully!" to hammer the point home.

Needless to say, far from being yet another insignificant, anonymous small Pennsylvania town where people live out their days in suburban quietude, however, things actually *do* happen here. All kinds of things, being an unsettling hybrid of typical small town happenings and what might best be described as uncanny occurrences. For example, a local schoolgirl gets pregnant by father unknown, she identifies him as an angel; high-school children bully the school misfit who turns out to emit a blue light as well as having a bionic eye; attractive teenage girls are being killed, the rumour mill identifies the murderer as a werewolf.

At the same time, ground level views reveal a dilapidated and somewhat paranoid place, the deadening, even deadly, potential of small-town life reminiscent of *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991). Our first introduction to town life consists of a slow-motion montage, its nightmarish qualities underscored by an unsettling jangling violin soundtrack. We see in turn a scowling and pallid young man holding aloft a somewhat phallic ice-cream cone in a shabby drugstore, and a sultry young woman staring at him meaningfully through the glass door before turning to walk away. The young man follows her down the small street to a parked car wherein they proceed to have sex. She obligingly pants and writhes while he, apparently distracted, reaches for a knife, pricking his thumb and smearing her arm with his blood. Noticing, she breathily responds, "Ah, you're so weird, Roman, but I like it". This is no conventional scene of small town teenage lust, however: "Shh..." he returns, "...You don't know my name" "Oh! Sorry!" she whispers. Afterwards, adjusting her clothing, she gazes questioningly at Roman. "You didn't like that?" he demands. "Oh no, baby, it's très kinky" she returns. He licks his thumb and reaches for his wallet, handing over a roll of dollar bills. "This is too much!" she objects. "You know my name?" he returns. "You're the kid in

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<sup>18</sup> One need look no further than the gated communities of the wealthy for evidence that the fear of The Other exists, and that such fears are at the same time rational and irrational.

the candy store” she replies. He chuckles humourlessly, adding: “This is the part where you leave”. She pauses before getting out of the car and strutting off, watched through the window by Roman who sucks his wound ruminatively while the soundtrack cuts to the next scene which features another convention of small town America: a cheer-leading session, though this turns out to be yet another opportunity for Roman to observe a young woman, this time the troupe’s trainer. A high-school science lesson follows, though this also undercuts convention by depicting a nascent lesbian affair between teacher and student rather than the more usual male-female scenario. The affair is stopped dead by the student’s brutal murder by would appear to be a wild animal (or werewolf). Her refuge from the marauding beast? Significantly, a child’s model house, though far from a refuge, this proves to be a distinctly *unheimliches* place as her mauled body testifies.

While a distillation of all things small-town, then, Hemlock Grove (2013) also manages to be simultaneously Gothic, “a scene, terrain, geography, for something terrible” (Michasiw in Martin & Savoy, 1998: 237) overshadowed as it is by an abandoned wreck of a steel mill on the outskirts of town. Moreover, far from being a natural haven, the autumnal woods are marginal and contaminated by encroaching “civilisation”, cloaking all manner of horrors: the werewolves, inexplicable murders, which threaten to engulf the town. Meanwhile, the mysterious towers of “Godfrey Institute for Biomedical Technologies” loom, its sinister medical experiments echoing the role played by medicine in *American Horror Story*, (2011) its psychiatric strand embodied by yet another troubled physician figure, Dr Norman Godfrey. Inquisitive aspiring author Christina Wendall, meanwhile, represents female mental disturbance.<sup>19</sup> Traumatized by her discovery of a mutilated female corpse in the wood (and initial belief that it was a prank), Christina is ultimately incarcerated in a mental institution.<sup>20</sup>

Ironically, the paranoia characteristic of small town life is not as misplaced as might first appear. Exotic newcomer Peter Rumancek is a secret werewolf (though not the murderer), but is designated chief suspect because he is guilty of something almost as threatening. He is a Roma or as he describes it, “strictly speaking, a half-breed,” living in woods suggestive of a Rural Gothic-style wilderness whose “dark and mysterious landscapes” are stereotypically inhabited by dark-skinned outsiders who threaten ‘the safety of the white settler’’. (2013: 7) Compounding his otherness, Mother and son simply drive through the woods and seemingly stumble across their home: “Is it a house”? (Linda) “I think it’s half a house... It’s home sweet home.” (Peter) “Let’s get, uh, cosy, ok.” (Linda) And in sharp contrast with the suburbanised formalised viewing and purchasing processes of *The Murder House* it really is as simple as that: they have a new home which turns out to be a broken-down caravan, complete with assorted wreckage including an outdoor refrigerator and assorted discarded beer cans. Linda instructs Peter to hang a garland of “herbs” on the front door, and the caravan becomes “home” once Linda has wrought a magical transformation indoors, that is.<sup>21</sup> As she modestly puts it: “Oh, I cleaned!” “Looks pretty nice”. (Peter) We know that they are only paying lip service to the domestic imaginary, however. This is only an illusory homestead. When the time is ripe they will move on, taking their cardboard boxes and unconventional concept of “home” with them.

This casual and unstructured approach to both home and material possessions, highlighted by Peter’s “trailer trash” style home, which turns out to be his alcoholic uncle’s, symbolises his threatening difference from the suburban settlers, apparently underscored by an unsettling affinity with nature as he casually dozes and dreams in a hammock under the trees. Peter rejects such idyllic notions of this particular woodland habitat, however, by negligently tossing his beer bottle

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<sup>19</sup> Christina’s hair gradually turns white, a vivid outward manifestation of her inner torment.

<sup>20</sup> Vivian’s teenage daughter Violet also suffers from mental illness in *American Horror Story* (2011), resulting in her eventual suicide.

<sup>21</sup> Such domestic magic is typical of American popular culture whereby a woman armed with a mop and duster is able to transform a shack into a cosy home in a matter of hours. A clean and tidy home is, of course, another constituent of the domestic imaginary’s version of home.

into the bushes. "Civilisation" is too close and has polluted the river, he explains to Christina, and so he prefers to swim in her uncle's adjoining house pond instead. Here we have the Rural Gothic backwoods, which threaten to encroach upon the ordered routines of suburban life, provoking the paranoid suspicions of other-ness that can be attributed to: "the long-standing historical sense that those who dwell in backwoods are prone to savagery and degeneration" (Murphy, 2013: 8) an attitude summarised by Roman's wealthy mother Olivia's description of the newcomers as "Filth!"

As a result of such attitudes, the caravan proves to be the police's first port of call for a murder suspect though such criminal connotations aren't entirely refuted by the narrative. We learn, for instance, that Peter's apparently urgent trip to town turns out to be a mercy mission of sorts on behalf of his mother: "You're mummy's little thief!" she exclaims lovingly as he produces a purloined pearl necklace which she proceeds to kiss and bless, at the same time as making conventional maternal noises about having cooked (presumably now spoiled) pork chops. "Never mind" she concludes, before proposing a toast: "To our new home!" followed by some foreign words whose other-ness would no doubt arouse suspicion in the bosoms of the townsfolk.

The previously encountered Roman Godfrey is also implicated in the girl's murder and viewed with suspicion, though for very different reasons. His outsider status initially stems from his kinship with the excessively wealthy Godfrey family, the former owners of the now defunct steel mill who are accordingly held responsible for the town's widespread unemployment and poverty. The family's ostentatious lifestyle does nothing to allay such attitudes, as Roman points out to his vampiric mother:<sup>22</sup> "Isn't Uncle Norman saying that in this economy we need to be backing off on the conspicuous consumption front? It makes us unsympathetic". "And I suppose if Uncle Norman lent you the Communist manifesto I'd have to find recipes for borscht!" she scornfully responds. Roman's outsider status is finally rubber-stamped by his ostensibly unlikely alliance with Peter, which ushers in yet another literary Gothic Horror convention: a werewolf transformation scene. The verisimilitude of this particular iteration brings Freud's observation to life, however: "an uncanny effect is often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality, such as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality". (1919: 15)

Of course the imaginative power of the literary depictions would have once far transcended the clunky special effects achieved by their filmic counterparts.<sup>23</sup> Nowadays, however, technology really does make it seem as if "the imaginary appears before us in reality", (1919: 15) further evidence for my contention that the resurgent popularity of Televisual Horror owes much to technological innovation.<sup>24</sup> Gothic Horror's enduring appeal also, I have argued, stems from its imaginative power, its ability to engage our deepest fears and insecurities. Even when "some aspects of the Gothic that rely on things 'unknown and unknowable' start to disappear...with that shift others appear". (Armitt, 2014: 152) Hence its affinity with psychoanalytic methodologies, tracing as it does a direct line from the madwoman in the attic trope beloved of the gothic novel<sup>25</sup> through the incarceration endured by the Victorian domesticated female explored so vividly in *The Yellow Wallpaper* to the advanced psychiatric interventions presented by *American Horror Story*. (2011) Combined with the nightmare quality characteristic of all Gothic Horror, irrespective of whether actual spectres or mythical creatures manifest themselves, we are brought full circle to the starting point for our investigation into the psycho-analytical co-ordinates of Suburban Gothic Horror and its roots in the dark side of the domestic imaginary.

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<sup>22</sup> Significantly, Olivia has "no people" as her husband fearfully points out. The suggestion that she is a vampire is supported by Peter's identification of Roman as an "upir" or vampire (amongst other clues). Eventually both Olivia and Roman are revealed as vampires in the final climactic episode of Season One.

<sup>23</sup> Lon Chaney's transformation into *The Wolf Man* (1941) is a case in point here.

<sup>24</sup> That said, horror purists may still insist upon the superiority of the imaginative capacities generated by the literary form.

<sup>25</sup> See Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817) as a parodic yet effective example of this convention.

This article has proposed then, that Suburban Gothic draws at least some of its power from the images, thoughts and feelings generated by elements of the domestic imaginary, at the same time plumbing the murky depths of the unconscious mind. Less certain is the connection between spectatorship, embodiment and sensation. Put simply what does it really mean to be a spectator of televisual horror, a voyeur enjoying the sensations generated by the panoply of technological effects afforded by modern televisual technology? What is it about human nature which invites, indeed relishes, the spectatorship of vicarious suffering, unspeakable horrors and visceral violence? Less certain yet is the extent to which Horror Television and its ilk helps to create or reinforce our imaginings, channelled as it is into the most intimate of domestic spaces, the living room (and perhaps even the bedroom). To what extent, if any, are our dreams and nightmares, our psyches and unconscious imaginings, affected by what we view on that flickering box in the corner which has for many supplanted the flickering fire in the hearth around which the original gothic stories were told? Such puzzling and perhaps ultimately unanswerable questions would provide sufficient material for another article.

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