

**No vampires, please, we're British:  
Realism, Science and Professionalism in *Ultraviolet***

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In the 1970s, horror cinema shifted from period settings and Gothic/ supernatural tropes to the contemporary and "real" horror. Films like *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Last House on the Left* (1972), *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1976) or *Halloween* (1978) are responses to the relaxing of film censorship, but also to the tradition of period horror, as seen in Roger Corman/ AIP adaptations of Edgar Allen Poe stories or Hammer horror productions.<sup>1</sup> This strategy reframes Gothic horror in a realist fashion that uses the mundane to heighten the contrast between the fantastic and the everyday. Horror, as Peter Hutchings observes, often "conjur[es] up. . . strange realms within or in relation to a world of normality" (2004, 105). While post-1970 horror movies tend to eliminate supernatural elements, television seems to rewrite them via realism.

The British tradition of 'kitchen sink' drama may seem incompatible with fantasy horror and especially with Gothic icons like the vampire, yet British fantasy has often used a realist aesthetic to inflect its horrors, from the ordinary bystanders and recognizable locations of *Quatermass* (1953) to the apparently 'real' haunting of pseudo-documentary *Ghostwatch* (1992). The recent success of *Being Human* and *Misfits* is partly predicated on their disdain for glossy American production style and the way they embed fantasy in distinctively British social realism, offering an often absurd mixture of the fantastic and the mundane. Social realism is still a discernable characteristic and a critically privileged mode in British media. From documentary to soap opera, British TV is seen to be most British when it presents the ordinary lives of ordinary people. Jonathan Coe points out that period Hammer films appear to be traditional high Gothic but even they "insist that extremes of violence and extremes of cosiness can and must coexist" (in Leach, 170). Notably, when Hammer moved into TV, the plots and settings of *Hammer House of Horror* (1980) installments tended to be contemporary and mundane ["typical settings and narrative concerns of domestic, quotidian horror" (Wheatley 2006, 78)]. This paper examines *Ultraviolet* (Channel 4, 1998), exploring how its style and hybridity push the use of realism in horror to an extreme rarely seen, even on TV.



When writer/ director of 6-part series *Ultraviolet*, Joe Ahearne, talks about the difficulty of doing a British vampire show he alludes to specific national traditions: "If it's social realism, if it's comedy and if it's period then that's what Britain does but anything else, America seems to get hold of" (Ahearne interview). He is slightly disingenuous, perhaps, in claiming that "*Ultraviolet* came about when I was trying to come up with an idea for a TV series which wasn't cops or docs or lawyers," since he updates the vampire myth partly by using conventions of TV crime drama and the thriller. The show includes investigation, suspense, action, and conflicts between work and personal lives, aspects television production companies and British TV

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<sup>1</sup> The shift to a more realist horror aesthetic had already been apparent in horror fiction, with writers like Richard Matheson and Shirley Jackson influencing major names like Stephen King with their reworking of the Gothic.

channels might find attractive. *Ultraviolet* also adapts the national tradition of social realism, thus providing, as Stacey Abbott has noted, "not only a distinct vision of a familiar tale but also one that is uniquely British" (2010 UV, 307). While a recent US version of *Being Human* has been made, the US remake of *Ultraviolet* never went ahead, perhaps because at the time (prior to the success of shows like *The Wire*) it was seen to be too "understated" (Abbott, 313).

Richard Dyer notes that usually in vampire fictions, "The mesmerisingly excessive vampire is met by his/her normal, dull but decent antagonists" (1997, 222). Other vampire media from the same time also returned to the vampire hunter, yet unlike these *Ultraviolet* ignores vampire characters almost completely. Shifting from vampire as protagonist to "dull but decent" vampire hunters plays down the romanticized allure of the vampire. The scientific approach taken by the show adds to this, presenting vampires as a disease rather than as charismatic individuals. Both factors allow for more realism, if less conventional horror, in the treatment of vampirism. Moreover, the developing trope of the reluctant vampire (highly visible in popular culture since the 1970s) is countered, replaced by the reluctant vampire hunter. This trope is also present, as Abbott observes, in the contemporaneous *Blade* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* where "unlike their iconic predecessor Van Helsing, the investigators are plagued with uncertainties about the righteousness of their vocation" (2010 UV, 309). Taking a rather different angle, David McWilliam argues that "the viciousness of the vampires [in *Ultraviolet*] is an effort to match the remorselessness of the human programme of extermination. . . both sides exhibit a capacity for inhuman cruelty and a willingness to contemplate genocide" (forthcoming). My analysis today draws on and develops ideas from Abbott and McWilliam's work, arguing that if the reluctant vampire trope allows us to see humanity in the monster, the reluctant slayer, especially as presented via social realism in *Ultraviolet*, allows us to see the monster in humanity.

Ahearne employs an aesthetic that promotes realism and had been working on documentaries prior to *Ultraviolet* (Ahearne). Many scenes take place in daylight, partly owing to the economic limitations on TV drama in Britain ("you couldn't schedule something that was all shot at night," Ahearne admits), but also working to dispel conventional Gothic gloom. Add to this episodes that feature fertility treatment ("Sub Judice" 3) or paedophilia ("Mea Culpa" 4), and vampires who may be dabbling in "VAT on imports" ("Sub Judice") as part of their income generation, and this world is both highly contemporary and utterly mundane. Although *Ultraviolet* is set in London, the location of classic Gothic tales such as *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* [albeit transposed from Edinburgh] and parts of *Dracula*, this London is not a dark labyrinth of terror. Rather, recognizable locations are both traditional (Westminster Bridge) and modern (a white modern building similar to but not SIS building at Vauxhall Cross), and the occasional Gothic architecture of a church or school is matched with ordinary suburbs, inner city high rises and housing estates, pubs, car parks and playgrounds. In other British fantasy, such as *Doctor Who's* "Father's Day" (1.8) directed but not written by Ahearne, mundane locations are the setting for fantastic or horrific interruptions.



Time travel or monsters "conjur[e] up. . . strange realms within or in relation to a world of normality" as Hutchings describes.

In *Ultraviolet*, the mundane settings may be sometimes frequented by vampires, but the contrast between the everyday and the fantastic is downplayed by a strictly realist aesthetic.



The lens of science also provides a more “realistic” version of the vampire. “Suppose it were possible to strip away all the tongue in cheek which had overlain the myth through endless repetition?” Ahearne asks, “What if they really did exist? How would we fight them? Science would be the weapon, not superstition” (intro). Thus the language of science/ medicine contemporises the familiar myth, a tactic not without its own tradition in British TV drama (as *Quatermass* (1953) and *Dr Who* demonstrate), and also apparent in the evolution of the forensic crime subgenre. When police detective Michael Colefield gets mixed up in mysterious events following the disappearance of his best friend Jack the night before Jack’s wedding, he expresses skepticism. “I know what you think you’re dealing with,” he rudely retorts to the operatives who question him about Jack’s disappearance. Even in the fourth episode (“Mea Culpa”), having joined the team, Mike points out that meningitis would produce the sensitivity to sunlight, and violent mood swings that seem to indicate a group of schoolboys have become vampires. On the whole, such skepticism is derailed by the way the team of Dr Angela Marsh, Vaughan Rice and Father Pearse J. Harman discuss their investigations. The word vampire is never heard, “leeches” functions as a slang term (most often used by ex-soldier Vaughan) and “Code 5” is standard, presumably taken from the Roman numeral V. Code 5 is an interesting choice, as it refers to the “infection” not to individuals, situating the vampire threat as a disease, a social crisis, not a personalised menace. The vampire story is readily interpreted as a disease narrative and vampirism itself can be seen as a kind of STD but Ahearne takes this further in *Ultraviolet*, removing the intimacy that often generates horror in vampire fictions of all kinds and presenting instead a kind of social horror.

The inclusion of a doctor on the team justifies some of this scientific or medical language, though Angela is by no means the only character to discuss the vampires in this fashion.



“I think you’ll find,” Pearse tells Mike, on debating whether to medically examine a captive vampire, “ ‘autopsy’ is the correct term for dissecting dead tissue” (“Terra Incognita” 5). This language is part of a realist aesthetic that also encompasses performance. Susannah Harker, who plays Angie, explains that her character “is exciting to play as everything is internalised and the challenge is to hint at the depth of her motivation and the emotion that she is holding back” (<http://www.world-productions.com/wp/content/shows/other/uv/angie.htm>). Such restrained performances are typical in *Ultraviolet*, underpinning the move away from more excessive, melodramatically Gothic versions of the vampire story. Ahearne argues that *Ultraviolet’s* audience “bought it because of the actors, because they didn’t camp it up and they played it as for real” (interview).

The final episode ("Persona Non Grata" 6) shows a vampire regenerating from a pile of dust, in a helix-like swirl of particles that recalls DNA modeling, offering a neat combination of the supernatural and the scientific. Similarly, the resolutely scientific language used to discuss Code 5 stands in contrast to the Latin episode titles, just as priest Pearse and scientist Angie work together to achieve the same goal. The emphasis on science also offers an alternative type of spectacle for a vampire show, and the ultraviolet of the title is echoed in the cool blue lighting of the team's facilities. In contrast to the opening of the first *Blade* film, which combines blue and white clinical lighting with scenes of blood and violence right from its opening scene,



lurid and excessive use of Gothic colouring, and especially blood, is avoided here.



more CSI than Hammer horror

Moreover, technology provides uncanny spectacle, since everyday technical equipment continually fails to record "leeches" who are invisible not just in mirrors, but also on video, CCTV, ultrasound ("Sub Judice") or security scans ("Terra Incognita"). Operatives require special cameras fixed to their weapons in order to distinguish humans from vampires, emphasising for the audience that, as Abbott observes, "vampires exist outside of our natural world" (2010 UV, 312), while still maintaining scientific rationality and a realist aesthetic.<sup>2</sup>

Vampirism via science is a threat to the whole human population and operates rather like a global conspiracy. "Parasites don't kill their prey," we are told in the opening episode ("Habeus Corpus" 1), while in "Terra Incognita" (5) the team discover evidence that vampires are working to produce synthetic blood (i.e. to survive without human food). McWilliam argues that "by emphasising the parasitical nature of the vampire's feeding habits the term offers a competing narrative to the portrayal of vampires as possessing seductive charm." During "Sub Judice" Vaughan clarifies that vampires do not engage in procreative sex—"females don't menstruate," he explains bluntly after Mike jokes about necrophilia—and comments like these from the show's characters, figuring reproduction as biology, also work to dispel notions of vampire romance or seduction. "The sperm envelope is human but the genetic information is Code 5," Angie reveals of a possible vampire pregnancy, "What they're after is compatibility with the human ovum" ("Sub Judice"). The treatment of

<sup>2</sup> However, as always using technology is not fool-proof, as demonstrated in "Mea Culpa" when Vaughan and Mike find a location where child pornography has been filmed.

CLIP 4 "Mea Culpa" 36.00-37.27 (c. 1.27)

As the view switches here from the TV screen to the video to Mike's point of view, neither the audience nor Mike are sure what we are actually seeing any more, and even when he realises that the child, not the paedophile is the vampire, Mike chooses not to shoot, despite Vaughan's urging.

pregnancy itself is unusual in film or TV versions of the vampire: sex may be an integral part of the vampire's allure and a long-running serial drama like *Angel* has negotiated the vampire as parent, but reproductive sex, perhaps because of "least objectionable programming" strategies, is generally sidelined. Here, the way Angie's examination of a possibly pregnant woman, Marion, is spliced together with Mike overseeing the exhumation of Marion's deceased husband effects a visual folding together of sex and death that far exceeds anything in vampire iconography because of its direct correlation between sex and (mundane, human) reproduction.

3 "Sub Judice" c.30 seconds @ 15.23

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFLF2J9KO8c&playnext=1&list=PL9CE6C8821F0AD033&has\\_verified=1](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFLF2J9KO8c&playnext=1&list=PL9CE6C8821F0AD033&has_verified=1)

The hunting down of Code 5 (in the womb or in the grave) renders medical science sinister, cold, and invasive, removing any notion of healing or nurturing. This scenario is repeated in "Persona Non Grata" (6), when Angie is shown experimenting on a captive vampire, leaving the audience uncertain where their sympathies should lie.

*Ultraviolet* reimagines the vampire myth in light of contemporary science but it also uses vampirism to heighten its focus on the professional and personal concerns of middle class protagonist, Mike. Robert C. Allen notes that the kind of social and political realism traditional in British drama has morphed into a "paradigmatic complexity (how particular events effect the complex network of character relationships)" (in Creeber 2004, 4 CHECK). *Ultraviolet* superficially seems to be another 1990s genre show that foregrounds character and relationships, shifting social realism from the ordinary working class to middle class professionals. The story maps Mike's response to finding out about Code 5, quitting his police job, and finding his feet in the team, alongside having to deal with the fall-out from best friend Jack going AWOL on his wedding day (Mike was to be best man) and, later, his feelings for his best friend's girl. Robert J. Thompson observes that a drama like *thirtysomething* "validated the quotidian aspects of" its protagonists' lives but "it also confronted them with a sometimes dark and existential treatment of those lives" (in Creeber 2004, 115). Presenting a mundane version of the vampire hunter story, *Ultraviolet* finds darkness in humanity rather than in the Gothic vampire. Taking on a new job, Mike finds that he is isolating himself: "What, none of you have got any friends?" he asks Vaughan when he first comes on board ("In Nomine Patris"). This functions on a genre level as the typical lot of a hard-working law enforcement officer and when Mike is warned off close contacts, his ex-girlfriend Frances argues that even as a policeman he was accustomed to being "Careful" about associations ("In Nomine Patris"). "The vampires have renounced their humanity, but Michael really questions what the Squad are asked to sacrifice in pursuit of the enemy," says actor Jack Davenport of his character, "he just isn't prepared to give up his personal life" (<http://www.world-productions.com/wp/content/shows/other/uv/michael.htm>). Thus *Ultraviolet* also suggests that vampire hunting will test both the characters' and the viewer's ability to define what human is. "In the investigations our heroes undertake, there's the risk they may lose their own humanity without ever becoming vampires," as Ahearne notes. Given that most members of the team have lost people close to them, this alienation seems a necessary requirement for the job.

This is the aspect McWilliam elaborates in his reading of the show as a foreshadowing of debates about national security and individual rights post-9/11. In a reversal of what Allen describes above, *Ultraviolet* is constructed to move from the personal to the political. Mike's (often rather tedious) personal "issues" are negligible

alongside the larger social issues the show raises, especially about institutions, power, regulation, and secrecy. Mike's boss in the police force accedes to the mysterious team's interference, admitting, "Whoever they are, they've got clout," ("Habeus Corpus") and both vampires and vampire hunters deal in real world power founded on money and influence. Angie threatens a doctor with being struck off if she does not reveal information about a patient in "Sub Judice" and in "Mea Culpa" Vaughan brutalizes a suspect, kicking his dog and telling the owner, "We're not cops... We do exactly what we like." One of the first things Mike asks on seeing the facilities available to the team is, "Who pays?" This is never clarified, but there are hints about government funding ("You're paying, we're all paying... It's a public health issue, a defense issue," Pearse says to Mike) as well as possible backing from the Catholic church ("Habeus Corpus"). The fact that these vampire hunters are civil servants not only positions them in mundane working life but also raises questions about the society they nominally serve.

The rhetoric of purity and protection that runs throughout *Ultraviolet* is common in what Judith Halberstam calls postmodern Gothic, which, she argues, "warns us to be suspicious of monster hunters, monster makers, and above all, discourses invested in purity and innocence" (1995 27). Arguably *Ultraviolet* makes a virtue out of budgetary limitations and trends in TV drama in its reworking of the vampire story. It is undeniable, however, that its aesthetic choices, the lens of realism, sharpens its focus on the seduction of such rhetoric, and the complexity of the morality surrounding it.

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