Horrible Histories? Vampire Television, Period Drama and Spectacle

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ABSTRACT

Vampires are essentially immortal and thus, while contemporary vampire television series are generally set in the present, the epic scale of a vampire's existence affords vast potential for period drama via flashback. This paper examines the different ways vampire TV has accessed the spectacle of period drama, presenting an alternative version of its usual televisual self, and playing with a different set of genre conventions. Period flashbacks are designed to provide novelty and spectacle, and also afford the pleasure of seeing a different version of a well-known character appearing in a new context. Yet, this article argues that contemporary vampire television series, exemplified by *Angel*, *The Vampire Diaries*, *True Blood* and *Being Human*, tie this new perspective to recurring characters and ongoing thematic preoccupations, balancing novelty and the epic sweep of historical period with the familiarity and repetition characteristic of serial drama on television. Thus, vampire TV shows integrate elements and conventions of period drama but use them, sometimes subverting and disrupting them, to feed ongoing development of narrative, characters, themes and aesthetics common to many vampire representations. This article identifies and examines similarities between vampire television and period drama, and the ways in which the combination of two sets of televisual conventions both mesh harmoniously and produce interesting tensions in the former.

KEYWORDS

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gender

period drama

spectacle

television

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In contrast with earlier eras of horror production in television, cinema and other media, contemporary vampire TV is generally set resolutely in the present. There are some notable exceptions, such as Dracula adaptations (which have a long lineage as Gothic or period drama) particularly the short-lived UK/US co-produced series *Dracula* (2013-2014), or *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016). Notably both *Dracula* and *Penny Dreadful* are less authentically-rendered 'period' and more visually rich re-imaginings that mobilise fantasies of period as part of their distinctiveness and attractions. Yet, since vampires are essentially immortal, the epic scale of a vampire's existence affords nearly unlimited potential for historical period visited via flashback, even in series with contemporary settings. As Stacey Abbott notes of *Angel* (1998-2004) the prevalence of vampire characters means that flashbacks can become 'an integral strand to the fabric of the series' (2009: 21-2). Vampire TV, like other television drama, uses flashback to extend the temporal range of the narrative. But

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including vampires makes that temporal range truly epic. Vampire TV can move back not just a few years, but to the 1970s, the 1860s, or to prehistory. Even a show as realist in its style as the United Kingdom's *Being Human* (2008-2013) has flirted with period flashback, albeit in restricted ways. Contemporary vampire television shows, as exemplified here by *Angel*, *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017), *True Blood* (2008-2014) and *Being Human*, tie this new perspective to recurring characters and ongoing thematic preoccupations, balancing novelty and epic scale with the familiarity and repetition characteristic of serial drama on television. Thus, while Linda V. Troost describes 'heritage space' as 'a space for the display of heritage properties rather than for the enactment of dramas' (2007: 81) vampire TV shows integrate heritage, period and costume drama with action informing current character arcs and plot lines.

The ongoing development of television, both technological and in terms of the market, has led to an emphasis on visual style and spectacle, particularly in 'quality' TV drama. HD, large screen television sets, and the appeal of niche channels to tele-literate audiences willing to invest in long-running series all contribute to this trend. Writing about HBO's series *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-2014), Janet McCabe observes that the viewer's 'attention is trained on the most inconsequential detail, as if only *now* the form can deliver something new, something not possible before: namely a visceral engagement with the historic past' (2013: 193, original emphasis). Delivering period drama on TV is not new, but the ongoing success of 'quality' television productions and their careful attention to visual style and distinctive aesthetics means that the textures and details of period drama on TV are, more than ever, subject to scrutiny and admiration.

While there are obvious reasons why contemporary vampire TV might incorporate period flashbacks and their elements of costume drama, at first sight these two subgenres seem incompatible. This article seeks to identify and examine the similarities between vampire television and period drama, and the ways in which the combination of two sets of televisual conventions both mesh harmoniously and produce interesting tensions.

Costume as Fantasy

Historical accuracy and interpretation is always an issue for period drama to negotiate, especially in a story based on historical events. Part of the value placed on some versions of period drama is about the authenticity of their reproduction—accurate period detail and the research entailed in producing costumes, for example, receives much press. This does not mean, of course, that period drama *is* historically accurate nor, despite its attention to material details, is it necessarily realist. In anything from *Roots* (1977) to *Pride and Prejudice*, what viewers receive is, as Glen Creeber notes, 'A version of the past that is implicitly aimed at and constructed for a contemporary, frequently nationally based, mass audience' (2004: 21). Likewise, Julianne Pidduck, discussing costume films, argues that costume drama's pasts 'offer fantasy zones for the exploration of national identity, gender and sexuality' (2004: 8). It is these 'fantasy zones' that lend themselves to fantasy television, and vampire TV tends to unashamedly offer versions of period rather than accurate historical rendering.

Many of the period flashbacks enjoyed by audiences of vampire TV drama visit iconic and therefore instantly recognisable versions of the more recent past, like the 1920s, 1950s or 1960s, World War II and the American Civil War. This is practical for

programme makers: a sight of the costumes and a few seconds of music can position the audience exactly in a given time period (see Halfyard for more on music in such series). 'Costume frequently remains subservient to the demands of character, setting and plot,' notes Sarah Gilligan, 'functioning primarily to signal time period, or delineate characters rather than draw attention to itself in its own right' (2010: 154). Yet she goes on to place this in the context of contemporary television and its emphasis on visual style as a key attraction for audiences: 'As TV drama (like popular cinema) becomes ever increasingly preoccupied with spectacle, the visual pleasures of costume and its intersection with the body are self-consciously offered up to the spectator' (154). The series Gilligan mentions here range across genres from comedy-drama like *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) or period drama and quality TV such as *Mad Men* (2007-2015)—both noted for their emphasis on costume or fashion—but she goes on to apply similar frames of reference to British science fiction series *Torchwood* (2006-2011) just as I apply them here to vampire series.

It is no coincidence that the immediately recognisable twentieth century eras favoured for flashbacks in vampire TV are not only visually distinctive but are also times of change or conflict where liminal, disruptive vampire figures are entirely at home. Costume drama in the conventional sense may seem to be all about decorum, convention, tradition and repression—think of the more fantasy zones of history that are recognisable not in the specific but in the general. Something might look vaguely Victorian with the unspoken message 'they're wearing old stuff and they're all buttoned up, it must be a period flashback'. Thus vampire TV gets to have it both ways. It delivers visual pleasure through the texture and drape of 'period' fabrics, through details of dress and hairstyling (often subject to ridicule, see Shaunna

Murphy's online article 'The 17 Best Flashback Wigs on TV' which warns 'there are a lot of vampires on this list', 2014) and gives a sense of propriety and decorum. Viewers might readily anticipate the breaking of surface social conventions or repression because they know the vampire characters who will provide it.

In the *True Blood* episode 'Authority Always Wins' (5.3) glimpses are offered of San Francisco in 1905 when Pam—prior to becoming a vampire—is running a brothel. One night vampire Eric saves her from an attacker, telling her afterward, 'the streets can be dangerous at this hour. A lady should really be more careful'—to which Pam wryly replies, 'If I meet a lady, I'll let her know.' Despite Pam's rejection of the description 'lady' and all it implies about socially acceptable behaviour, she is beautifully and expensively dressed. The scene even draws attention to this when Eric apologises for ruining her 'lovely dress' by splashing it with blood, giving her money to 'cover' its loss. Regular viewers have seen both vampire characters bare and bloody many times *before* seeing them buttoned up in high collars, and seeing Eric in particular so fastidiously attired is a change to his usual positioning as 'eye candy' both for other characters and for the audience.

Pidduck suggests that the term *costume drama* 'suggests the pleasure and possibilities of masquerade—the construction, constraint and display of the body through clothes' (2004: 4). Like other period drama series, but characteristically in more excessive ways, vampire TV tends to play with and on the notions of constraint and display. A second season episode of *The Vampire Diaries*, 'Memory Lane' (2.4) has a flashback showing Stefan and vampire Katherine at a society party. They dance with other couples, and this physical intimacy is mitigated by the gloves all the dancers wear and the rule about 'no touching' but simultaneously enhanced by the fact

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that Katherine is displaying ample bare skin and cleavage in an off-the-shoulder dress. Taking a slightly different approach the episode '1912' (3.16)'s flashbacks to Mystic Falls use sepia colour tones to denote the time shift and initially shows the Salvatore brothers wearing suits, with bad boy Damon even sporting a bowler hat. Later in the episode when Damon attends a (possibly illicit) boxing match featuring at least one female fighter, his hat is gone and his hair is tousled, suggesting a relaxing of decorum. Vampire Sage casually watches some bouts with him as they scout the audience for potential victims, and the camera picks out various women who are watching the boxing with enjoyment. However, Sage advises Damon, 'You want the ones who button themselves up,' indicating that those who are most repressed are most likely to desire release. That this repression, coded here as physical and sexual, is signified by clothing makes use of 'shorthand' or generally accepted tropes of costume drama and historical period. The notions of constraint and display have been mined by *The Vampire Diaries* from its earliest flashbacks, with 'Children of the Damned' (1.13) showing the human Salvatore brothers in more informal, unbuttoned dress (open necked shirts without jackets) while engaged in physical sports and activities, and leading up to flashbacks of seductive vampire Katherine engaged in active sex with an apparently naked Damon while she remains partially dressed.

The 'possibilities of masquerade' mentioned by Pidduck are intensified in vampire TV flashbacks. It is not that vampire characters are necessarily masquerading as historical figures: their long existence is taken as a given, and there is usually no reason to suppose that they were not in early twentieth century San Francisco, colonial China or Civil War North America as the flashbacks indicate. But vampires are always performing, passing or masquerading, sometimes able to glamour and

deceive, sometimes revealing themselves as vampires. They play at period, choosing to dress appropriately 'in character' to fool their victims, sometimes to the point of cliché ('What's with the Catholic schoolgirl look?' Angel asks Darla in 'Angel' *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* 1.7, 'Last time I saw you it was kimonos'), and they outlive successive eras of history, fashion and morals. The use of costume and period flashbacks, as Gilligan drawing on Jane Gaines comments, supports 'our understanding of character traits, emotions and motivations through a dress plot of changing garments and appearances' (2010: 154). In other words, a long-running vampire TV series can unfold the 'dress plot of changing garments and appearances' over a run of several years, offering a deeper understanding of vampire characters' inhuman span of existence.

Given that period flashbacks on vampire TV are character-driven viewers may be inclined to forgive them for not being very 'authentic', or even very well-realised in terms of epic scale and period detail, especially compared with 'real' costume drama. Heritage drama has been criticised for affording a 'heritage simulacrum' which 'often produces mythological and conservative representations of national and European pasts' (Pidduck 2004: 89) and certainly period flashbacks in vampire TV can be clichéd. Budget limitations as well as the brevity of most of the flashbacks means that these forays into the past use visual and aural cues as shorthand to convey maximum information about when and where the flashback is in the shortest possible time (what Deborah Nadoolman Landis calls 'telegraphing' information 2003: 8), before going on to delineate something about the characters involved at more length. In this sense, any flashback is likely to tap into 'mythological' representations as more recognisable for audiences.

Yet, as Helen Wheatley has argued about Gothic television, the combination of a Gothic narrative with period detail and setting can make heritage anti-nostalgic (2006: 99). The prevalence of wartime eras in vampire flashbacks suggests a darker version of history than the nostalgic tints imply. For example, when vampire Bill Compton is invited to speak to the Descendants of the Glorious Dead society of Bon Temps in an early episode of *True Blood* ('Sparks Fly Out' 1.5) his eye-witness stories not only bring the period to life for his listeners (and they are visually presented to the TV viewer), but also include details that run counter to notions of patriotism and glory.

Claire Monk's research with audiences of period film offers some frames for analysing responses to such period flashbacks. Her study involved two audiences, one more traditional (members of British conservation organisation The National Trust) and the other more invested in contemporary values (readers of London-based magazine *Time Out*). The latter, she outlines, 'placed a very high value on *visual pleasure* in period films—as opposed to visual *accuracy*—often using language that expressed this pleasure in sensuous terms: "sumptuous style", "visually rich", "visual ravishment" ' (2011: 442, original emphasis). It is easy to see how such descriptors are already associated with vampire TV, if at times in a more graphic and bloody fashion: the horror genre and the vampire itself are generally characterized as excessive and visually alluring. As I have suggested above in relation to audiences of contemporary television drama, Monk found that this group valued 'quality of script, dialogue and acting' and 'were. . . far more likely to understand and value literary adaptation and historical production design as *creative processes*' (2011: 442, original emphasis).

This awareness of production design as process and valuing of story and acting, and, by implication, characterisation (heightened in a long-form narrative like TV drama rather than a self-contained film production), also allows viewers of vampire TV flashbacks to discount some of their less 'accurate' or 'authentic' aspects. Since vampires are generally restricted from moving around by daylight flashback scenes are generally dark and dimly lit, masking possible deficiencies in historical production design. *The Vampire Diaries* incorporates plot devices that allow vampire characters to move around freely during the day yet its flashbacks are still often interior or 'night.' (Even when series are restricted to night scenes, these are often accomplished by day-for-night shooting, presumably for budgetary reasons). Moreover, many episodes that include flashbacks use material objects as catalysts provoking the flashback narratively and allowing the past to inhabit the present. *The Vampire Diaries* is especially significant in this regard with Stefan and Damon's 'daylight rings', a Gilbert family pocket watch able to detect vampires, and an amber crystal attached to the Bennett talisman, just a few of the many items that become recurring devices. This dovetails with the setting of most of the action in the town of Mystic Falls, where the material past is already apparent in the period or antique style of family houses, and the heirlooms, photos, books, and so on that are found in them.

Yet part of the production design for vampire TV flashbacks has to account for elements not generally present in other forms of period drama, cinematic or televisual. Flashbacks inevitably focus on vampire characters, or human characters who become vampires, and thus while some attention may be paid to costume and sketching of period, these scenes foreground vampire action, from full-blown fight scenes to blood sucking. The costume designer for the *True Blood* episode 'Authority Always Wins,'

Audrey Fisher, discusses the sourcing and alterations to Pam's dresses, and the way the fabrics used for all the characters serve to denote the period (a 'gorgeous purple and yellow floral silk that has an early 1900s pattern and feel'). However, she also draws attention to the extra demands of vampire flashbacks, noting 'we had to make sure the sleeves would accommodate the blood tubes' (in Mel 2012) and explaining that three versions of the costume were necessary for repeat filming of a blood-letting scene.

Intimacy and Distance

By situating these horrible histories as part of a fantasy narrative including vampires, vampire TV series also allow the viewer to read them at a distance. Unlike a regular costume drama, audiences are not immersed in the period consistently. The nature of flashback means that there is switching between past and present, or a frame narrative that leads into the past and the vampire history and then brings the story back to the present. Abbott has extensively discussed the ways *Angel*'s 'Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?' (2.2) intertwines two time periods, alternating a dense visual rendering of the 1950s with present-day action and unfolding one single story taking nearly half a century to run its course (2009: 86). The obvious elements of genre fantasy in such narratives encourage viewers to see the period as a subjective, experienced version of the past rather than factual history. This is, effectively, back story and while the scale of a vampire's life may be epic compared with that of a human, flashbacks offer a personal history not a political or social one.

Indeed, as already mentioned, one of the effects of period flashback in vampire TV is to highlight the supernatural immortality or longevity of the vampire. Yet this works

alongside the flashback's function as character development, where the whole historical production design either 'fits' or subverts what viewers already know. If in regular screen drama 'the costume designer is responsible for the "who" (Who is this character? What can the audience expect from this person?),' as Nadoolman Landis argues (2003: 8-9), then this function is heightened in vampire serial television. Vampire characters have a long, acknowledged but untold history that can be developed incrementally according to the structures of long-form storytelling, satisfying competing demands for familiarity and novelty.

The early flashbacks in *The Vampire Diaries* start to subvert the familiar dynamic the opening episodes set up: Damon is the bad brother, Stefan the good vampire, Elena is the female protagonist involved with both of them—structures familiar from the popular *Twilight* series of books and films, among others. As the first season unfolds, flashbacks reveal that Elena is a double (or doppelganger, as the series puts it) of Katherine, the vampire who turned both Salvatore brothers into vampires during the 1860s. This reinforces the nature of the romance plot by suggesting that the relationship between Stefan and Elena is 'eternal' or 'fated,' yet also introduces a more sinister aspect as Stefan is revealed to be trying to repeat a previous, demonstrably failed, relationship with Elena. In 'Children of the Damned' the 1864 scene showing Damon and Katherine in bed together is cross cut with a parallel present-day scene of Elena and Stefan, indicating that all the characters are joined by blood or by sexual/ romantic ties that cannot be easily severed. The doppelganger trope enables various plot points, but also showcases actor Nina Dobrev's ability to play two different characters: one human, one vampire. This offers pleasurable variety for the audience in seeing her accomplish it via costume and

period as well as via scripting and performance, especially when she plays against type as the ruthless Katherine (much as David Boreanaz did as Angel and Angelus in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*). It also further complicates the good/bad dynamic established with Stefan and Damon: the backstory revealed in the flashbacks disrupts the presentation of Stefan as good and Damon as bad by showing Stefan embracing vampirism and Damon rejecting it, with Damon motivated by his love for Katherine and tension with his overbearing father. Costume renders Katherine morally ambiguous (in bed with Damon she wears a dark bodice trimmed with white lace) and Stefan is if anything more rebellious than Damon (both brothers' collars and ties contrast their flowing hair, but Stefan's tie is very loosely knotted suggesting a disregard for convention).

'Authority Always Wins' operationalises similar strategies for fan-favourite *True Blood* vampire Pam. In present day Louisiana, Pam tends to wear 'ladylike' coordinated ensembles when off-duty and overstated 'vampiric' or Gothic outfits when working at the vampire club Fangtasia. In light of the flashback from 'Authority Always Wins' both extremes seem to fit her character's story. Paintings by John Singer Sargent are mentioned by costume designer Fisher as inspirations for Pam's 1905 clothes, suggesting period authenticity. Fisher also stresses that in all the flashback scenes the production team aimed to 'make Pam look incredible, wearing the brassiest and most alluring fashion as a Madame in that era would have' (in Mel 2012) and thus providing pleasurable spectacle in terms of the 'allure' of the period dresses, as well as the novelty of seeing a 'new' version of the familiar character. The characterisation function of costume is another important factor, though, and Fisher recounts how these clothes not only signal Pam's role as the manager of a brothel but

also suggest 'a tinge of sadness and vulnerability, so that although she's a savvy Madame, she has that edge of desperation that drives her to beg to be turned by Eric' (in Mel 2012). In such cases the viewer is both inside and outside the period: invited in to admire the costumes, pick up on the details, read the clues about how familiar characters fit into this period setting; but simultaneously distanced in that familiar characters are presented in an unfamiliar environment that is additional or supplementary to the drama's usual setting.

A *True Blood* promotional poster presented Bill's origins in the Civil War era, emphasising the unnaturalness of a vampire's undead existence. Whether this is an actual Civil War photograph with actor Stephen Moyer photo-shopped into it or a complete fabrication is beside the point: the sepia tones, slightly bleached out faces and the recognisable poses of early photography present the image as a tangible, material artefact demonstrating Bill's history (a heritage simulacrum). Moreover, the tagline 'Life Goes On' highlights vampire experience as vastly different to that of an average human—if Bill were alive during the American Civil War, he should not be experiencing the twenty-first century.

The use of iconic periods increases attention to surface detail and spectacle, and the sense of masquerade or performance is foregrounded in more self-conscious series. A glorious brief glimpse of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*-verse vampires Spike and Drusilla in 1950s Italy in 'The Girl in Question' (*Angel* 5.20) exaggerates its own unreality, shifting from colour to black and white, and playing on iconic signifiers like the beret, sunglasses, cigarettes and poses to provide a parodic cliché of Beat style and Italian cinema of the era. Similarly, Abbott explains that 'Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?' is not just *Angel*'s rendering of the 1950s but of

1950s' film, noting elements that pay homage to *Rebel Without a Cause* (Ray, 1955), such as the deliberate inclusion of the Griffith's Observatory and a red jacket similar to the one James Dean wears in the film, among others.

While *Being Human* uses flashback more restrainedly (perhaps because of its reimagining of British social realist aesthetics and tone), a season five episode featuring Lady Mary, the ghost of one of vampire Hal's victims, engages with and parodies televisual period drama in a more extended way than the flashback from 'The Girl in Question.' During the episode Hal tries to protect Lady Mary from the present and maintain a façade of the genteel past (not unlike entering a period drama or preserved heritage site), wearing 'period' dress or costume when meeting with her (Figure 1) **[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]**. Mary is eventually revealed as a willing voyeur of twenty-first century social niceties, deflating Hal's efforts but also demonstrating how vampires, in the past or in the present, are always performing. The episode is called 'Pie and Prejudice' (5.3), in acknowledgement of the lasting impression left by the BBC production of *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) starring Colin Firth as Mr Darcy.

Thus when Pidduck describes how 'play of surfaces and depth, witty remove and deep feeling provide some of the [costume drama] genre's greatest pleasures' (2004: 14), this is even more applicable to vampire TV. Viewers can play spot-the-historical-reference at the same time as enjoying a new, hitherto unrevealed, story about a favourite vampire character. Bill's talk to the Civil War historical society in *True Blood* ('Sparks Fly Out') emphasises deep feeling and intimacy, as Bill shares his recollection of a dying comrade-in-arms with the man's descendants. Yet it also demonstrates the witty remove, or historical distance such stories can provoke when

the view shifts to human character Jason's drugged-up view of the rapt audience in the church. This change of perspective punctures the apparent seriousness of the moment related by Bill, relieving the emotional tension through a tonal shift, and bringing us back to the present, and another character's story. While Gilligan notes that period drama can allow its audience to experience emotion because 'the past is a safe place for feelings to reside' (2010: 158), this episode of *True Blood*, and many others, uses a flashback to bring those feelings into the present. Bill is not only thanked by relatives of the people he once knew for sharing his personal memories (however edited for politeness), but he also strikes an emotional chord with combat veteran Terry Bellefleur, who suffers from PTSD after serving in Iraq and relates to Bill's story directly as shared trauma.

Thomas Higson describes the 'intimate epics' conveyed by costume drama, their strategy for folding together the personal, subjective and intimate with the epic, historical and distanced. In such dramas, he states, 'the self-conscious visual perfectionism of these films and their fetishisation of period details create[s] a fascinating but self-enclosed world. They render history as spectacle, as *separate* from the viewer in the present, as something over and done with, completed, achieved' (1993: 95, original emphasis). Of course, with vampire TV, the flashback usually involves a vampire character who exists in both the past and the present, so to speak, with the result that history is far from 'over and done with'. Yet the feeling of separateness from the history depicted remains: what such flashbacks allow is an intimate glimpse into the past of a character whose long existence is almost unimaginable in human terms. When *True Blood* reveals the story of Bill's turning by Lorena following his talk to the citizens of Bon Temps, the narrative and visual

presentation emphasise how Bill is distanced from his own human life and from human history. He may be able to see his family on the porch of their home but as a vampire he can no longer be part of their lives. He is divorced from his own life, able only to view it as spectacle from afar, rather than actively entering into its continuing flow.

Gender

This emphasis on both spectacle and intimacy suggests another common element in costume drama and in vampire TV: they are often perceived as women's genres. Media tie-ins on period detail and dress are designed for a female audience, as Wheatley notes of Gothic television (2006: 97), and coincide with an explosion of lifestyle and makeover programming (98). One company advertising itself as 'your complete source for historical undergarments' takes *True Blood*'s 'Sparks Fly Out' as the subject of a blog post, specifying not only the model of corset worn by Lorena when she seduces and then turns Bill, but also the fabric and colour. 'This demure female vampire is wearing our Alice corset in cream Brocade Coutil' (Period Corsets 2009). In a reminder of the practical concerns of the costume designer discussing Pam's dresses in 'Authority Always Wins', the company also notes that 'The wardrobe department needed two just in case they needed to reshoot the scene. Spilled vampire blood is not so easy to remove from costumes in a hurry' (2009). It is hardly surprising that costume drama has historically been denigrated like other female forms such as soap opera for dealing in such apparently trivial details. Pidduck describes how epics such as *Cleopatra* (Mankiewicz, 1963) or *Ben Hur* (Wyler, 1959) were 'scorned by film critics for… emphasis on spectacle, costume and the body rather than identifiable historical events' (2004: 5), while Troost observes that costume

drama is notable for its 'foregrounding of relationships and women's issues' (2007: 75). However, as noted above, using period costume in *The Vampire Diaries* is also a means of directing actor Nina Dobrev's performance, in terms of helping her play both Elena and Katherine: for vampire TV series engaging in period flashbacks costume works for the actors and creators as well as for the audience.

Costume drama on television and in cinema is often literary adaptation, and much of the material was written by women (Jane Austen being one), so it follows that it focuses on female experience, relationships and concerns. It is perhaps stating the obvious to note that at least two successful contemporary vampire TV shows are adaptations of novel series written by women: Charlaine Harris' Southern Vampire Mysteries and L. J. Smith's The Vampire Diaries. *True Blood* and *The Vampire Diaries* can also be categorised as part of the paranormal romance boom, another subgenre generally targeted at women and often denigrated (see Jowett 2013). Both costume drama and vampire TV can be seen as female or feminised then, in terms of narrative focus or thematic concerns as well as in the ways they develop distinctive visual styles.

While costume drama has elements in common with the epic, and several vampire feature films have presented themselves as period drama on an epic scale (such as *Byzantium* Jordan, 2012) both costume drama and period flashback in vampire TV tend to match their intimate tone with an intimate scale and setting. Francis Ford Coppola's film *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Coppola, 1992) provides action, epic drama, lavish period detail, and vampire romance and undoubtedly the combination of the vampire story and period drama allows for blockbuster spectacle. Yet television versions, of costume drama or of vampires, must be more restrained.

Even in a premium cable production like *True Blood*, flashbacks rarely offer wide-screen spectacle and the opportunity to relish the epic scale of heritage spaces (though heritage interiors like Bill's house or Russell's mansion do feature). This is not necessarily a drawback. Pidduck suggests that costume drama offers a space 'where the past is depicted on a smaller canvas through the prisms of romance, desire and the body' and that it demonstrates 'narrative economy of detail often associated with femininity' (2004: 6).

This certainly applies to vampire TV. When *Being Human* indulges in an atypical flashback episode ('The Looking Glass' 2.5) showing vampires Mitchell and Herrick and human Josie in the 1960s this is contained both in terms of its setting (within one building and mostly in Josie's flat), and by its framing in terms of the present day narrative that parallels Mitchell's developing relationship with Lucy and his past relationship with Josie. The episode slips between the two time frames and establishes the period of the flashback largely through set dressing, costume and music (which includes The Velvet Underground's 'Venus in Furs' and Jefferson Airplane's 'White Rabbit,' both released in 1967). Herrick's speeches about liberation relate the 60s setting to Mitchell's ongoing dilemma of how to live clean as a vampire, though very little historical or social context is provided, or needed. The story is Mitchell's story and it is viewed, 'through the prisms of romance, desire and the body', albeit a vampire body and desire that includes blood as well as sex.

The episode also demonstrates another tendency that enhances the intimacy of period flashback and the smaller scale of period on vampire TV. Facial close up replaces the track and pan of usual heritage drama, notes Wheatley of Gothic television, fostering subjectivity and identification (2006: 116). Epic spectacle is thus

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replaced by the spectacle of intimacy through direction and shot selection. Abbott has analysed how the flashback where Lorena turns Bill into a vampire in *True Blood*'s 'Sparks Fly Out' is shot 'largely in extreme close-up' (2012: 32) to establish this intimacy. However, she argues that the 'intimacy on display in these scenes is not the intimacy of character development but the monstrous eroticism of vampirism that is central to the series' (2012: 32). This is one place where the conventions of period drama clash with the conventions of vampire TV, offering dual pleasures for the viewer. The closeness of the camera works against the distance of the flashback; viewers relish not, or not only, surface material detail but intimate, visceral, flesh and blood.

Both types of intimacy chime with Monk's findings from her research with two types of audience for cinematic costume drama. The less traditional respondents 'expected narrative and emotional engagement from the period films they enjoyed— and, in some cases, also to be socio-politically or erotically engaged' by plots and characters (2011: 442). She goes on to elaborate:

> In a corresponding contrast with the *politics* of NT [National Trust member] responses, TOs [*Time Out* readers] showed a particular enthusiasm for strong female protagonists, and valued their preferred 'heritage films' for their *progressive* gender and sexual politics and as critical explorations of class and wider social constraints, all of which they celebrated as key strengths (Monk 2011: 442, original emphasis)

Thus some viewers value such films not for period authenticity but for a reimagining of history from a twenty-first century point of view. I would argue that vampire TV

series, with their incorporation of period flashbacks alongside present day scenes, and their coupling of contemporary female protagonists with male vampires who have long histories, take this a step further.

It is obvious from the examples used already that vampire flashbacks on TV tend to focus on male vampire characters and this can be seen as yet more proof of the 'feminisation' of the genre. This tendency might even be dated from the 1995 BBC *Pride and Prejudice* miniseries, where Colin Firth's Darcy was foregrounded in accord with the characteristics of costume drama already identified: body, desire, and romance. In an attempt to make his character more sympathetic and therefore a suitable match for Elizabeth in the eyes of a modern audience, the Darcy character became more central and intimate glimpses of him bathing, or exerting himself during a fencing lesson were offered. The camera lingers on Darcy and he is certainly 'now the object of the gaze,' as Troost points out (2007: 84), setting a precedent that the contemporary BBC *Poldark* series (2015-) also adopts, certainly in relation to its leading man, Aidan Turner, who previously played vampire Mitchell in *Being Human*. Starting, perhaps, with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, vampire TV has adopted similar tactics and promotional images frequently play on the visual appeal of smouldering male protagonists. Male vampires offer all kinds of revisions to standard masculinity and vampire men are fantasy men, even more so than the male protagonists featured in costume drama.

This appeal is not muted in vampire TV series by moving from the contemporary to the historical, since the shift can enhance how 'masculine dress (in particular) . . . is characterized by a sartorial style that enables the spectator to revel in the visual pleasure of the objectified male and also in the "bliss" of the textile,' as

Gilligan notes of science fiction series *Torchwood* (2010: 153). A very similar sartorial style is present in vampire TV, whether it depicts the past or the present: the aesthetics of such series encompass spectacle, the body and desire in terms of male vampire characters. In any vampire narrative clothes take on what Moya Luckett describes as 'a certain narrative and iconographic importance.' Luckett is discussing British gangster films here but it is fair to say that vampire film and TV also ascribe such importance to clothing, and that their audiences 'will also take pleasure from looking at men's clothes' (2000, 320). However, the male vampire is more directly presented via a female or queer gaze. Vampires are often coded as dandies, partly because, as Vicki Karaminas points out, the dandy is popularly perceived as at once bohemian and elite, resisting categorisation and blurring boundaries. Moreover, 'Dandy-like in their glamorous rebellion, vampires refuse to conform to societal conventions' (Karaminas 2013: 370).

Presenting the male vampire as dandy also subverts, or perhaps simply makes visible, some conventions of period drama. Period clothing generally signifies repression, Luckett notes, but she argues that a film like Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (Kubrick, 1975) 'sexualises its clothes—particularly male attire' (2000: 319). The costume in vampire period flashbacks on TV also aligns with Luckett's observations about period clothing asserting rather than minimising traditional masculinity: 'in a masculine period . . . decoration highlights the male body's supreme ability to resist feminisation' (2000: 317). In this sense, as Janice Miller argues about men wearing makeup (2013: 347), the dandification of male vampires, particularly via period clothing, may appear transgressive but is not necessarily feminising.

I have already suggested that in vampire TV the physical restrictions of period clothing offer new pleasures of tactility and spectacle, as well as the anticipation of almost-certain disruption to social niceties via vampirism. In period settings, men as well as women are repressed and reluctant to express what they feel or desire. The vampire, existing outside of society by virtue of its extended undead existence, is free to say or do forbidden things. Thus, while a character like Darcy in the BBC *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) 'struggles against the expectations of generic character' and this 'is represented directly as he determines to escape conventional codes of behaviour, traditional modes of representation, and even his clothes,' according to Sarah Cardwell (2000: 242), male vampires do not have to struggle in this way, they simply enjoy freedom from conventions that they will outlive.

As noted above, period flashbacks in vampire TV deliver back story, primarily, and thus often reveal the emotions, longing and suffering that have shaped the characters over decades or even over centuries. When Pidduck discusses costume films like *The Age of Innocence* (Scorsese, 1992), she notes that 'male protagonists are increasingly placed within (melo)dramatic situations where deep longing and suffering produce a more sensitive and deep-feeling masculinity' (2004: 16). This is only magnified when applied to male vampire protagonists. In *True Blood*'s third season, Eric is shown a crown from vampire King of Mississippi, Russell Edgington's collection, amassed over centuries by Edington's consort Talbot ('Trouble' 3.5).

Eric: And this?

Talbot: Some random tribal crown. He must have a hundred of them. This one's Scythian, I think.

Eric: Viking.

A close-up of the crown (Figure 2) **[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]** prompts a flashback showing Eric Northman, the human Viking. Eric is berated by his father, the Viking leader wearing the crown, for an irresponsible attitude. Eric's situation here may be unfamiliar to regular viewers accustomed to Eric the ruthless vampire and powerful Sheriff of Area 5, but his low-key verbal and facial response (detailed below) is reminiscent of the Eric we know, satisfying continuity of character.

Period setting here is rudimentary since the scene is almost entirely interior, and as such it reflects the domestic interiors that stifle conventional female protagonists in costume drama. Eric is thereby positioned in a similar fashion, oppressed by the weight of parental expectation and desperate to find a space of his own within the family dwelling (he sneaks off for an amorous liaison). The raid on the Viking community by Edgington's werewolves introduces action and drama to the scene but is primarily designed to suggest Eric's feelings on again encountering the vampire who brutally killed his human family centuries ago (Figure 3) **[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]**. These feelings are not articulated, however. As the scene returns to the present, in keeping with the intimate scope and attention to detail of costume drama, Eric's feelings are implied by his steady gaze at the crown, again shot in close-up. The dialogue from before the flashback continues seamlessly as Eric simply says, 'It's beautiful.' Talbot responds, 'Quite,' and another scene begins. Like many others, this brief flashback and its careful siting within a present-day narrative engages both witty remove and deep feeling. The audience glimpse who Eric was, already knowing who he is, and are thus made aware of how the transition from on to the other has taken place and what it has cost.

Conclusion

The temporal and critical distance afforded by period flashback thus allows vampire TV to mobilize it in many ways: as iconic imagery, as parody and intertextuality, as backstory and emotional resonance rounding out the popular trope of the sympathetic or suffering vampire. The sheer prevalence of flashbacks in these series indicates its value: *The Vampire Diaries* may use flashback the most (on average five episodes contain flashbacks in its first five seasons, rising to as many as ten in seasons six and seven) and its spin-off series *The Originals* (2013-) follows suit, yet as the preceding examination demonstrates, period flashbacks are ubiquitous in a range of vampire TV series. *True Blood*'s opening title sequence notably signals its investment in both the present and the past with its combination of new and archive imagery.

Forays into vampire 'history' may be sketchy at times, since they serve to enhance, develop and flesh out the backstory of vampire characters and their spectacular histories. They never really masquerade as historical fact but rather are presented as subjective viewpoints that might verge on cliché and pastiche, and may—at a later date—be overwritten by a new versions of the story from the perspective of other characters. 'The details,' Niklaus says to Stefan, 'are what make it legend' ('The End of the Affair,' *The Vampire Diaries* 3.3), and for viewers of vampire TV these details may be bloody corsets and risible wigs as much as to-die-for dresses or heart-breaking emotional insights. Monk's research outlines differences within audiences of period film: vampire television, like the *Horrible Histories* series of children's books, offers its viewers all the best and goriest bits—the horrible history. After all, to paraphrase

Lady Mary from *Being Human*'s 'Pie and Prejudice', 'All that thee and thou bollocks can really get on your tits'.

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