Historical Power, Historical Trauma and the Gothic Historical Drama

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This paper proposes that there are a number of historical television dramas which make use of the aesthetics of the Gothic in order to signal their focus on historical traumas which still have contemporary resonance. This is part of a wider use of a Gothic mode in these dramas in presenting and considering these traumas, not just as the individual experiences of specific characters, but as socially structured, as we see the individual characters placed into conflict with their social and cultural structures. These dramas use elements of anachronism as part of their signalling that these are not just historical traumas, but traumas that are still active or have active legacies today, such as racism, sexism, colonialism and capitalist imperialism. Presenting these dramas through the Gothic mode is not only a way of signalling that these productions deal with traumas and issues that are still relevant, but is also a way of appealing to different audiences from those conceived of in relation to the cosy heritage drama. This is done in part through the overt use of sex, violence, modern obscenities, as part of a subversion or distortion of the expectations of the classic heritage drama.

Using examples such as Taboo, Picnic at Hanging Rock, Black Sails and Deadwood, this paper will outline this conception of the Gothic historical television drama, exploring how its aesthetics relate to the increasing broad social and cultural awareness of these historical traumas and their continuing legacies. While historical television dramas have always contained an overtly socially conscious strand, and there are still many historical dramas that do not use the Gothic mode, the aesthetics of these Gothic historical dramas overtly signals their association with trauma. It also makes use of changes in the aesthetic possibilities of television production and distribution technologies, and uses these aesthetics to stand out from other historical productions and to potentially attract different audiences. Gothic historical dramas stand at the nexus of social change, technological change and the demands of streaming in reassessing our relationship with the past in the present.

This paper outlines core ideas in my current research into the Gothic Historical Drama. As such, it’s more of an overview, but it also means that I will be happy to take any questions or useful suggestions about ways of developing the depth and coverage of the project. That includes further questions about applying the ideas to the case studies that I discuss, or suggestions of other productions that might fit under this category or be useful to discuss in order to test, focus and develop these ideas.

At its core, this is a project about how we present historical fictions, and the importance of considering the modes in which those historical fictions are presented. This is picking up on work by, amongst others, [SLIDE] Jerome de Groot and Marnie Hughes-Warrington in examining some of the genres and modes of historical fiction. In this work, I am considering the genre to be historical drama, that is fiction with a historical setting. The importance of considering the mode of the historical drama becomes clear when considering how the same events or historical personalities can be shaped through representations in different modes, such as comedy, political thriller, action-adventure, swashbuckler, romance [SLIDE]. The mode engages certain preconceptions and expectations, and so shapes the way that the viewer approaches the text and
engages with it, based on their previous experiences of that mode, including how they have encountered it more widely as a cultural category, per Jason Mittell.

Of course, fictions usually engage with multiple different modes, but it is still often easy to determine one or two dominant modes for a particular fiction. In this case I am interested in what happens when we present historical fiction through the Gothic mode on television. So what do I mean by the Gothic mode?

For my purposes, I am building on Helen Wheatley’s definition of Gothic television, which drew on Gothic literature with regard to narrative and thematic elements, while also emphasising the particular aspects of television style which could be interpreted as ‘Gothic’.¹ These elements include [SLIDE]:

- ‘a mood of dread and / or terror inclined to evoke fear or disgust in the viewer’,
- ‘highly stereotyped characters and plots, often derived from Gothic literary fiction’,
- overt or implied representations of the supernatural,
- ‘a proclivity towards the structures and images of the uncanny’,
- ‘homes and families which are haunted, tortured or troubled in some way’,
- temporally complex narratives, often with flashbacks and similar revisitations of the narrative past,
- being ‘visually dark, with a mise-en-scène dominated by drab and dismal colours, shadows and closed-in spaces’,
- and subjective camerawork.

Wheatley also discusses a particular aspect of Gothic television which she terms the ‘feel-bad heritage’ drama [SLIDE].² This in turn builds on Andrew Higson’s concept of the ‘heritage drama’ which, no matter what the social critique presented by the narrative and characters, is so overwhelmingly visually attractive that the spectacle emphasises the past as a place of pleasure and stability.³ Wheatley’s ‘feel-bad heritage drama’, on the other hand, ‘refuses the sanitisation of nostalgia’ in order to ‘offer the viewer narratives of fear and anxiety set in a past which is not only marked by a sense of decay or dilapidation, but which is also disturbed by uncanny happenings and supernatural events’ and so ‘removes the surety of the past as a haven or site of nostalgia’.⁴

My definition of the Gothic mode in relation to the historical television drama builds on these ideas, particularly the ‘feel-bad heritage drama’, but also differs in some respects [SLIDE]. I want to place more emphasis on the Gothic aesthetic, including the drab darkness identified by Wheatley, but also stating that many of these productions have a specific palette of greys, blacks, steely blues and deep reds. This visual aesthetic is enabled by advances in television production and reception technologies, which allow easier colour adjustment and improved colour reproduction, as well as low-light shooting and reproduction of images. The Gothic aesthetic is also useful in standing out from other forms, with its dramatic imagery working both in large scale and in small, with the subtleties of detail in its shadowy images offering visual interest when seen at scale, while its highlighting important elements of the scene in patches of light within this darkness means that the imagery also works when viewed on a mobile device.

To the visual aesthetic, I would add the common use of clearly modern music, including that which may carry associations with the Gothic, such as the use of ‘Red Right Hand’ and P.J.Harvey in *Peaky Blinders*. This may be part of a tendency in these productions to emphasise elements of anachronism in presentation, music and speech, typically in a way that links the production's themes with more recent or current culture. Doing so can also be considered part of the challenging of expectations around historical dramas and the comfort offered by meeting expectations of ‘how the past should be presented’.

While I am focusing primarily on series that are not explicitly supernatural, I would argue that part of the Gothic style is making significant use of symbolic imagery, often relating to the supernatural, superstition and / or religion. For example, in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* there are visual references to Miranda as crucified, or Miranda, Irma and Marion presented as the three Graces. *Peaky Blinders* opens with Tommy Shelby on a black horse and ends with him on a white one, covering two of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse. The Gothic themes are primarily those of trauma, particularly social traumas that continue to have relevance today: imperialism, colonialism, sexism, racism, capitalism. While all historical dramas have to make their historical setting relevant to audiences in the present, the Gothic historical drama does so by focusing on the connections of trauma and how it is active in and relevant to the present.

In order to test out these ideas, I am more interested in examining what could be considered to be boundary cases, or at least cases which are not absolutely central. When we think of the Gothic mode we might think of adaptations of Gothic novels, such as *Dracula*, or of the Victorian Gothic aesthetic that we can find in many period Sherlock Holmes adaptations, for example. It is important, clearly, to think about these uses of the Gothic mode, and I do include some in my wider research. Such as Steven Knight’s adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*, but it is more interesting to me to examine the cases where the mode is applied where it would not be expected. So that means looking at uses of the Gothic mode outside of the Victorian period, and outside of narratives of the clearly supernatural.

I was drawn to think about this mode and its effects when watching the television adaptation of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. This took the sun-soaked, weird dream-turned-nightmare reality of Peter Weir’s film, and emphasised the Gothic elements in places, including in Natalie Dormer’s costumes, with the sunglasses that she dubbed her ‘Oldman glasses’ because they reminded her of the tinted glasses Oldman wore in *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. The Gothic appears in representations of entrapment and punishment, in the tower of Appleyard College, and in images of (to borrow from the Pulp Librarian Twitter account’s coverage of Gothic romances) beautiful women with great hair in flowing dresses either walking darkened corridors with lanterns, or fleeing the Gothic house of Appleyard College. Like Weir’s film, it makes use at times of imagery that illustrates how young women are objectified in society in order to demonstrate how such imagery is complicit in constructing narratives which constrain people’s opportunities.

The series presents its narrative through a number of modes which in turn relate to the way that the mystery of the disappearance of some girls and their teacher is constructed in different ways: a crime narrative, a romance, a Gothic mystery, a weird disappearance. Similarly, the modes of the series slip knowingly between classic heritage costume drama, crime drama, romance, weird, and Gothic, with the Gothic appearing not just in the aesthetics but also in the narrative focus on societal constraints and traumas that characters try to escape: sexism, classism, racism. The series emphasises how these attitudes place constraints on multiple characters in multiple ways, thereby emphasising how these are social and cultural structures which constrain and entrap, rather than simply one individual’s experience. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* thus served as a way of starting to understand how this Gothic aesthetic could encourage a focus on these themes, as well as engaging itself with the importance of the framing and construction of historical narratives.

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encourage an understanding of the construction of history in the reader, and something that many of these Gothic historical dramas do is to foreground the construction of history as a powerful act.

Two historical series from Starz similarly make this a central theme. In *Spartacus* [SLIDE] this is presented from the opening episode, where the newly-enslaved Thracian warrior is given the name ‘Spartacus’ by the owner of the gladiatorial training school he has been sold to. The name is supposed to remind the Roman audiences of historical Thracian leaders known for their skill; it is a piece of marketing, a construction of a narrative, and one that backfires once this new Spartacus eventually accepts and embraces the name and the legend and builds on it. Popularity and reputation are key here, whether in the commercial success of the ludus or in the success of the revolt that Spartacus finally leads.

Similarly, while reputation and assumed identity appear throughout *Black Sails* [SLIDE], they play a key role in the end of the series. There, a group of rebellious pirates and their associates gather to establish the legend of Long John Silver as a rallying figure in what the series presents as a war against ‘civilisation’, its rulers, its taxes and its structures. In itself, the choice of Long John Silver as the figure shows the importance of fiction and narrative to history, as Silver is a fictional character from *Treasure Island*, as are a number of the other characters in the series. However, the series is also populated not just with original characters but with characters based on historical figures, such as Blackbeard, Charles Vane, Anne Bonny. Yet these are historical characters that are often known through fiction, and who themselves made use of the power of narrative and legend to establish their fearsome reputations. They are thus known to us as a blurring of historical fact and fiction, and may be less familiar to us than fictional pirates, their names remembered in the same cultural mixing pot as Captain Flint and Long John Silver, familiar to many, yet their provenance as fictional or factual may be hazy to most.

As with the majority of the other Gothic historical dramas that I am examining, *Black Sails* presents many characters that are attempting to find a new way of being that is different from the dominant society and its sexist, racist, classist, heteronormative structures. One of the ways that they advance this reshaping of society is through stories, constructing narratives that will allow them to live new lives, try to construct different societies and structures. They typically fail, but not completely; things move, and the stories last or, in the case of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, the multiple stories and multiple possibilities remain unresolved.

As this conference is considering issues of power, one of the uncomfortable ideas that needs to be engaged with is that these are not empowering narratives of finding alternative ways to a constraining dominant society, but are instead sops to the liberal to make them feel engaged. This would be an example of what Hunter Hargraves has dubbed [SLIDE] ‘woke TV’, where ‘Woke spectatorship […] describes an affective mood that conceives of political action primarily in terms of awareness and shifts in perception’ rather than in direct real-world action. The fact that these dramas do place these traumas in the past would tend to support such a reading, as that can provide distance from the horrors of sexism, racism, classism, exploitative capitalism, etc, even as the dramas themselves signal that these are issues that continue into or shape the present. However, that could be part of the marking out of these dramas as a form of ‘quality TV’, even of ‘art’, in the same way that their tendency to depict graphic violence and sexuality can also be understood as a marker of ‘quality’ because ‘art’ is intended to shock and to challenge, within limitations.

I can’t really counter this argument. These series are not themselves calls to action, not to mention that television drama is rarely an immediate drive to change social structures, and that audience responses are, of course, out of the hands of any of the people making the programmes. But then maybe that is the counter: the place of television drama is to make people

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think and to feel, and what each person thinks and feels is personal, so the drama can lead to increased awareness, or it can lead to action, or it can lead to someone simply being entertained, or driven away by something not to their taste. And raising awareness is important, shifting perception is important, enhancing understanding is important. Those of these dramas which are about creating an alternative to dominant society tend to emphasise the need for collaboration by diverse victims of these social and cultural traumas, and their allies. For example, *Black Sails* brings together people who had suffered as a result of their gender, their race, their class and their sexuality. As in *Taboo* and *Deadwood*, this is no total overthrowing of society that is advocated, as what is being escaped to or shaped is still governed by capitalism. The only escapes seem to lie in death or disappearance, as in *Spartacus* or *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, or *Peaky Blinders*. [SLIDE]

And maybe this sense of entrapment is one of the most Gothic aspects of these historical dramas. Yet they can give a sense of the power of narrative and the way that history is written, both as a form of entrapment by dominant powers, but also as a way of claiming space and recreating the world. They emphasise trauma, and the ways that the trauma endures into the present. And that is what I consider to be interesting, and significant, about the presentation of historical fiction through the Gothic mode. And as they signal this through their aesthetics, their style, engaging existing audience understanding of different modes, that then suggests ways of starting to interrogate the various other different modes of historical drama, hopefully providing additional nuance to our understanding of genre and its variety.

Thank you.