

Dark Shadows: Gothic soap opera and the fantasy of identification

My name is Victoria Winters. There are two great houses at Collinwood. One alive with the present and the other slowly decaying, filled with the dead memories of the past.

To close this chapter on hybrid American Gothic television in the 1960s, we turn now to an examination of the Gothic soap opera, *Dark Shadows*. The piece of dialogue above, taken from the opening of episode 214 of the series (broadcast on 21 April 1967), speaks of the two houses that structure the Gothic soap opera. The first, the home of the Collins family at the centre of *Dark Shadows*' soap narrative, is an ancestral home which is nevertheless filled with the everyday activities of a large, extended family (including the narrator, the family's nanny, played by Alexandra Moltke); the second, a dilapidated mansion in the grounds of the family home, is the centre of the serial's Gothic narrative, and houses Barnabas Collins (Jonathan Frid) (distant relative and vampire) and his henchman, drifter Willy Loomis (John Karlen). These two houses therefore metaphorically represent the generic hybridity of *Dark Shadows*, the unique mixture of the soap opera and the Gothic drama, and the fact that once again the commonplace and the supernatural are inextricably intertwined in this instance of Gothic television.

Dark Shadows was first broadcast a month after the cancellation of *The Addams Family* and *The Munsters*. A daily serial which ran from June 1966 to April 1971, it mingled tales of vampires, werewolves, time travel and parallel universes with the more traditional family saga of the daytime soap opera. The soap was filmed 'as live' on videotape in the studio by creator Dan Curtis' own production company, and broadcast on ABC, Monday to Friday, in the mid-afternoon. There were 1225 episodes in total, alongside two offshoot films, *House of Dark Shadows* (US, 1970) and *Night of Dark Shadows* (US, 1971), 32 paperback novels by Marion Ross, 'games, comic books, (hit) records, wrist-watches, posters, postcards, magazines, masks, models, music boxes, puzzles, Viewmasters, chewing gum, and even a *Dark Shadows* cookbook' (Benshoff, 1993: 52). Following its initial broadcast, *Dark Shadows* became the first daytime soap to go into syndication (on local TV stations and PBS) in 1975; there was a revival of the original soap opera in 1991, also titled *Dark Shadows* (Dan Curtis Productions, 1991) but running in a primetime evening slot, which lasted for just 12 episodes, and MPI Video began releasing a series of video (and later DVD) box-sets of the serial in 1989. *Dark Shadows* was also a key programme in the launch of the Sci-Fi satellite channel in 1992, which bought the exclusive rights to air it: between 1992 and 1997, the entire series was

re-broadcast twice in a weekday slot, thus recreating the series' initial context of broadcast (albeit on a specialist, narrowcast channel, rather than on ABC, one of the 'big three' US networks).⁶

The soap began as Victoria Winters arrived at the Collinwood mansion to assume her duties as governess to David Collins (David Henesy); it was therefore established as a classic female Gothic narrative from the outset (young woman, relocated from her home, arrives in a threatening house), but became more 'supernatural' as the series progressed, in response to falling ratings. As Dan Curtis remembers:

When [*Dark Shadows*] was going down the tubes, my kids said to make it scary. I said, 'Why not? I've got nothing to lose.' So I put a ghost on, and when the ghost appeared the ratings jumped, and that's when I started experimenting. . . Who knew? . . . I brought the vampire in and it suddenly became this gigantic hit. Then I thought, 'Now what am I going to do?' I couldn't kill him off, so that's when I turned him into the reluctant vampire. It really caught the imagination of the audience. (Dawidziak, 1990: 24-7)

It is important to remember, in relation to Curtis' claims that the supernatural soap 'caught the imagination' of the viewers, that *Dark Shadows*' narrative initially took place in the present day (of the late 1960s). While the appearance of ghostly and vampiric characters tied the Gothic narrative to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and there were lengthy sojourns into the past of the Collins families in 1967 (which took the narrative back to 1795 for five months), in March 1969 (going back to 1897 for nine months) and a further flashback to 1840 in 1970, the soap was pointedly given a contemporary setting at the outset, which perhaps drew closer parallels between the diegesis and the world of the viewer, only to transport them to earlier times and parallel universes later in *Dark Shadows*' five year run. In fact, we might locate the beginning of *Dark Shadows* within a broader generic cycle of horror in this period identified by Vivian Sobchak:

From the 1960s onward, family life and social life have continued to converge, partly in response to a number of institutional shifts; within this chronology, horror (as well as science fiction and fantasy) has been transformed into a generic form that includes elements of the family melodrama - a genre whose own representations are driven by an opposing realism. (1996: 146)

One might wonder how this 'dark' programme worked within the daytime schedule, and ask what accounts for the success (and enduring appeal) of a Gothic daytime soap opera. Sam Hall, one of *Dark Shadows*' key writers, noted, 'I never thought the network particularly liked the

Helen Wheatley, 2006

show. It broke too many daytime rules. They felt it was a cult show; a fad, with no staying power' (Hall, 1990: 41). Just as *The Addams Family* and *The Munsters* fused the family sitcom with Gothic horror, so *Dark Shadows* combined the narrative preoccupations and structure of the soap's 'family saga' with stock characters and situations from a heritage of supernatural Gothic horror. The programme did break 'daytime rules', both in terms of its subject matter and given the fact that it was often literally too dark (with its shadowy graveyards and gloomy rooms) to view in the haze of mid-afternoon light. However, it was conceived of as a daytime soap opera by its producers from the outset.

Despite the supernatural trappings, the show always remained a soap opera, first and foremost. The storylines always revolved around various love affairs and domestic disputes. In fact, probably the greatest dramatic tension was fuelled by Angélique's unrequited love for Barnabas, which formed a major part of the story arc for several seasons. (Dawidziak and Stevenson, 1996: 32-3)

Certainly, the open-ended soap-style narrative lends itself very well to the Gothic, as a genre of uncertainty. In *Dark Shadows*, the constant hesitation of the soap's cliff-hanger endings produces the suspense essential to the Gothic genre. For example, the appearance of a hand slipping out of a coffin and grabbing at Willy Loomis' throat at the end of a Monday afternoon episode (episode 210, 17 April 1967), which turns out to be the first glimpse of the vampire Barnabas Collins, produces an atmosphere of threat which carries over until the start of the following day's episode. Rather than producing an impression of 'unrecorded existence', identified by Christine Geraghty in relation to the British soap opera's insistence that 'day to day life has continued in our absence even though the problem we left at the end of the previous episode has yet to be resolved' (Geraghty, 1981: 10), *Dark Shadows* provides a threatening sense of suspense between episodes. Rejoining the action a few minutes before the cliff-hanger at the start of the following day's episode, the Gothic soap opera doesn't produce any sense of unrecorded existence here, but, in the context of the soap opera form, with its sense of simultaneity between the diegetic and extra-textual worlds, the hesitation on the vampire's hand at the cliff-hanger suggests an unresolved threat which extends beyond the realm of the text.

Dark Shadows fits easily into the categorisation of soap opera as produced by Gothic scholars. Richard Davenport-Hines, for example, argues that the genre is related to the Gothic in a number of ways:

Confused paternities, improbable coincidences, melodrama, sudden death, cheap ideas, trivially stereotyped characters. . . . television soap

opera provides the twentieth century equivalent of gothic novels. . . . Both genres provided their consumers with devices by which they could pretend to be passionate. Their success rests on the understanding that human beings learn to become adults by acting imitative or emulative parts; in consequence much human emotion is theatrical, and the private emotions of most human beings are sustained by inner dialogues of martyrdom, self-pity, fake heroics and gaudy, mawkish histrionics. (1998: 144)

In *Dark Shadows*, the stock situations and characters of the daytime soap are fused with the stock situations and characters of the Gothic genre, without any internal sense of irony: 'the unique style of *Dark Shadows* lay in the absurdity of a ludicrous situation performed with complete conviction by the cast' (Parker, 1990: 17). After an initial sense of hesitation experienced by both viewers of the soap opera and characters within it, there develops an absolute acceptance of the presence of the supernatural (vampires, ghosts, lycanthropy, and so on). For example, when Barnabas Collins (one of the soap's central characters) was introduced during the second year of broadcast, the other characters (and the viewers) were led to initially believe that he was a distant cousin from England; here, this hesitation over his true (supernatural) identity is produced through his insistence on his familiarity with Collinwood through inherited memory, and by the fact that his vampiric activities are initially implied but not shown on screen. As his true identity as an ancient vampire is gradually revealed, however, it quickly becomes accepted and absorbed into the everyday goings-on of the soap narrative. In relation to Todorov's delineation of the subcategories of fantasy, we might therefore understand this soap opera as belonging to the 'fantastic marvellous': 'the class of narratives that are [initially] presented as fantastic and end with an acceptance of the supernatural' (Todorov, 1975: 52). In fact, as the serial developed, it moved even further towards a purely marvellous narrative, whereby vampirism and haunting became everyday and commonplace.

As well as insisting on its position as legitimate soap opera, the producers of *Dark Shadows* were very careful to situate their programme within a heritage of Gothic literature. According to Lara Parker (who played Angélique in the serial),

People were willing to be moved, to be stirred by the classics – and I don't know if they are any more. Dan Curtis never stopped using the classics that were so beloved in *Dark Shadows*. He borrowed from *Jane Eyre*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *Frankenstein*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and *Dracula*. These plots were constantly being reinvented. No other show has ever done that. The whole idea of using the intensity, the complexity, the emotional

depth and passion of Gothic literature was unique. (Henessey-Derose and McCarty, 2003: 40)

Indeed, Curtis went on to become somewhat of a Gothic auteur for television, creating a series of made-for-TV movies of both original teleplays and classic Gothic adaptations.⁷ There is a particularly strong link between *Dark Shadows* and the genre of female Gothic literature discussed at length in the previous chapter. For example, the opening episode of the soap introduces Victoria Winters, who acts as an ongoing narrator at the beginning of each subsequent episode, arriving in Collinwood as the governess to the Collins family. As an orphan looking for a sense of personal history, Winters provides an emotional centre for the early part of the soap opera, which strongly reflects the female Gothic narrative tradition. Like Marian in *The Woman in White* (see the previous chapter), Victoria opens the ongoing soap narrative with an interior monologue (delivered in voice-over) which underscores the importance of feminine subjectivity:

My name is Victoria Winters. My journey is beginning; a journey that I hope will open the doors of life to me and link my past with my future. A journey that will bring me to a strange and dark place, to the edge of the sea high atop Widows Hill. A house called Collinwood. A world I've never known with people I've never met. People who tonight are still only shadows in my mind who will soon fill the days and nights of my tomorrows.

Here the emotional intensity and implied conspiratorial closeness between young female protagonist and viewer are writ large across this melodramatic opening scene. During this monologue, cuts are made between stock exterior shots of Victoria's journey (a train, the moon, the stately home at Collinwood) and a close-up of her face as she sits on the train, with the camera slowly zooming into her view of the window. As her speech finishes, the scene cuts to a shot of breaking waves, accompanied by a soaring, string-laden vibrato soundtrack, marking this opening as a moment of melodrama, and establishing Victoria's intense anticipation of her life to come, as well as a pervading sense of threat. The image of deep water is seen at the beginning of a number of the female Gothic adaptations discussed previously,⁸ and can be seen as a metaphor for the young woman's narrative journey and emotional state: here, the coupling of romantic images (the moonlit train, a full moon, a mansion house and the crashing sea) with shots of the young woman at the centre of the Gothic narrative reinforces the close connection between the genre, femininity, and excessive desire and anxiety. Narratively and structurally

then, *Dark Shadows* is connected in a number of ways to the female Gothic genre.

Like the programmes previously discussed in this chapter, one can argue that, to a certain extent, *Dark Shadows* explores prevalent cultural anxieties, or 'taps into' a potential sense of identification between viewer and text. Harry M. Benshoff's work on this serial 'views popular culture as an arena wherein different ideals and ideologies may circulate, coexist and even conflict' (1993: 51), and he takes on the 'fan scholar' position to explore the possibilities for subversive/transformatory readings of the text. Conversely, or perhaps in tandem with Benshoff's analysis, it will be argued in the conclusion of this chapter that textual analysis of *Dark Shadows* also provides us with an image of Gothic television 'worrying at' domestic space, domestic invasion and the threatened and/or threatening home. Benshoff's work on this series has primarily engaged with the viewing positions taken up by fans of the programme, drawing on empirical research into the fan cultures surrounding the show.⁹ He argues that his research into *Dark Shadows* opposes the 'idea of a single, static, original "text"' (1993: 52) by looking at fan fiction and productions deriving from *Dark Shadows*. Furthermore, Benshoff seeks to capture the heterogeneity of the soap opera's audience: 'Besides the expected soap opera audience of housewives (and to a lesser extent college students), *Dark Shadows* was also watched by children of all ages' (1993: 53). Post-broadcast, Benshoff also identifies an active gay and lesbian subculture organised around the programme, arguing that this viewing body confirms Henry Jenkins' notion that 'fandom is a vehicle for marginalised subcultural groups (women, the young, gays, and so on) to pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations' (Jenkins, 1991: 174). Although Benshoff's approach differs radically from the analysis offered in this exploration of Gothic television and, indeed, he believes that his audience research 'problematises[s] theories of popular culture which posit a universal subject constructed by the text' (1993: 52), his findings are nevertheless illuminating in relation to the following investigation, which seeks to define the pleasures in identification offered to the viewer by the Gothic soap opera. While Benshoff argues that this can only be done through an analysis of the fan activity that surrounded this programme after its initial broadcast, it will be argued that certain viewing positions are recorded into *Dark Shadows*, suggesting a variety of available pleasures and fears for the home viewer. If, as Benshoff has argued, '*Dark Shadows* afforded [viewers] a place of comfort and/or a fantasy of power' (1993: 53), then the analyses that follow uncover the textual strategies that promote these sensations or approaches from within the text itself.

The discussion of *Dark Shadows*' place in the daytime schedule above might suggest that the rest of daytime fiction lies firmly within the realm of the real, and that daytime would therefore be an unusual location for genres of fantasy, such as the supernatural Gothic. On one level this is true but, on another, the soap opera has always been a space of fantasy and melodrama. Here, Ien Ang's work on the US soap opera, *Dallas* (CBS, 1978-91), is particularly illuminating, in which she reads the US primetime soap opera as a genre of fantasy:

Fiction is not a mere set of images to be read referentially, but an ensemble of textual devices for engaging the viewer at the level of fantasy . . . Fantasy is an imagined scene in which the fantasising subject is the protagonist, and in which alternative scenarios for the subject's real life are evoked . . . Fictions are collective and public fantasies; they are textual elaborations, in narrative form, of fantastic scenarios which, being mass-produced, are offered ready-made to audiences. (1997: 162-3)

While Ang speaks directly of a primetime, not daytime, soap, she categorises television fiction in general here as 'collective and public fantasies' which invite viewers into a system of fantastical identification, drawing 'alternative scenarios for the subject's real life', in which they may imagine other realms and worlds beyond their own experience. In essence then, the theoretical framework that Ang provides for thinking about the viewing of soap opera goes some way to explaining the enduring popularity of *Dark Shadows*, as a work of melodramatic fantasy in which a world radically different from our own can be imagined, and therefore inhabited.

Ang's delineation of the soap narrative as melodrama is useful here, given that, as identified above, melodrama can be seen as the generic link between *Dark Shadows*' two hybrid genres, the soap opera and the Gothic drama. Firstly, Ang argues, personal life becomes the central narrative focus of the melodrama (Ang, 1997: 158). As in soap opera, the Gothic narrative rests on familial drama (confused paternities, abandoned children, dark inheritances and family curses), and intensely subjective narration serves to emphasise emotion and personal crises: a Gothic soap opera might therefore be seen as the logical conclusion of both genres. Ang also argues that convoluted plotting is another key melodramatic element of soap:

A second major melodramatic feature of soap opera is its excessive plot structure . . . To the critical outsider this may appear as a purely sensationalist tendency to cliché and exaggeration - a common objection levelled at melodrama since the late nineteenth century. It is important to

note, however, that within the fictional world of the soap opera all those extreme storylines . . . are not treated in a sensational manner, but are taken entirely seriously . . . Their role is metaphorical, and their appeal stems from the enlarged emotional impact they evoke . . . An excess of events and intensity of emotions are inextricably intertwined in the melodramatic imagination. (1997: 159)

Here Ang could just as easily be describing Gothic plotting as that of the soap opera, or what Eve Sedgwick describes as 'the difficulty the story has in getting itself told' (1986: 13). As discussed in chapter two, in relation to spectacular horror drama, the Gothic drama (in literature, theatre, film and television) has always been seen as a sensationalist, excessive genre, both narratively and aesthetically. In light of this, *Dark Shadows*' supernatural storylines are the ultimate in melodramatic cliché, combining Gothic exaggeration with that of the traditional television soap. Emotional excess is also located in performance in *Dark Shadows*, in which the actors produce a kind of hybrid performance style which combines daytime drama convention with a more theatrical heritage of Gothic performance. As Lara Parker remembers, '*Dark Shadows* was wonderfully theatrical and romantic. Many of the performers . . . were larger than life. Most of us were stage actors, not soap opera actors. We were trained to make emotions broad and powerful, rather than internalised and underplayed' (Parker, 1990: 16). This expansive, at times gestural and expressionistic performance style, was one of *Dark Shadows*' key points of stylistic differentiation within the daytime schedule, and emphasised a sense of melodrama in the show's aesthetic.

Finally, Ang argues that the unending soap opera form is inherently melodramatic: 'here a basic melodramatic idea is conveyed: the sense that life is marked by eternal contradiction, by unsolvable emotional and moral conflicts, by the ultimate impossibility, as it were, of reconciling desire and reality' (Ang, 1997: 160). In *Dark Shadows* this eternal lack of conclusion is particularly emphasised by the flexibility of time and heavy use of flashback throughout the series' five year run: the fact that many of the actors played several different characters, caught up in similar romantic and familial intrigues, in the different time frames of the soap opera (1795, 1840 and 1897, as well as the present day), suggests an eternal lack of conclusion and 'unsolvable emotional and moral conflict' which extends into a much greater 'unrecorded existence' of the past, as well as beyond the end of the soap's narrative. Given that '[melodramatic characters are] victims of forces that lie beyond their control' (Ang, 1997: 160), this eternal repetition and coincidence provides an *uncanny* narrative structure, in

from the US soap, *Dallas*, explores the questions and problems raised by female viewers identifying with such a tragic, 'melodramatic heroine':

the position from which Sue Ellen fans seem to give meaning to, and derive pleasure from, their favourite *Dallas* character seems to be a rather melancholic and sentimental structure of feeling which stresses the down-side of life rather than its happy highlights; frustration, desperation, and anger rather than euphoria and cheerfulness. (1997: 157)

Deconstructing earlier feminist accounts of the 'role/image approach' to identification, which propose that women should look to strong, independent, untroubled role models, presupposing a rather straight connection between representation and reality, Ang argues that melodramatic identification offers more complex positions and pleasures. There are, she proposes, two possible readings of melodramatic identification:

On the one hand, sentimental and melodramatic feelings of masochism and powerlessness, which are the core of the melodramatic imagination... Identification with these feelings is connected with a basic, if not articulated, awareness of the weighty pressure of reality on one's subjectivity, one's wishes, one's desire. On the other hand, identification with a melodramatic character also validates these feelings by offering women some room to indulge in them, to let go as it were, in a moment of intense, self-centred abandon. (1997: 164-5)

It is the indulgence of melodramatic identification which, I would argue, lies at the heart of *Dark Shadows*. A series of tragic characters at the centre of the narrative provide multiple points of connection (and therefore identification) for the viewer: the orphaned young woman on the verge of self-discovery (Victoria Winters), the struggling matron (Elizabeth Collins Stoddard), the confused teenager (Carolyn Collins), even the reluctant vampire (Barnabas). Each of these characters can be read as a melodramatic figure with whom we are encouraged to identify, given that they are each positioned as the narrational centre of the soap opera at key moments throughout its run, and their stories are constructed to elicit viewer sympathy and engagement.

As with other programmes discussed in this exploration of Gothic television, fear is constructed in *Dark Shadows* around a series of familiar images, most notably the image of the Gothic house, and yet, according to Len Ang's reading of the vicarious nature of the melodramatic imagination, this is fear which might also be experienced as a kind of pleasure: identification with the threatened home and family therefore becomes a wilful abandonment to domestic trauma. Given the

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which, it is suggested, characters are bound to repeat past mistakes and deeply unhappy relationships. The yearning and unrequited love that permeate *Dark Shadows*' narrative structure are a testament to such a sentiment.

This soap opera can also be defined as melodramatic in a more literal sense, in relation to the use of music, which is closely tied to emotion and feeling throughout. The melodramatic mode is utilised in the depiction of the threatened victim-heroine, for example: during an illness brought on by a vampiric attack in episode 229 (11 May, 1967), waitress Maggie Evans (Kathryn Leigh Scott) stumbles about her room silently, wracked with a mixture of desire and terror, and accompanied by the sound of music and wolves. In a scene we have come to understand as an identifying moment of the Gothic television narrative, Maggie is depicted exploring her own domestic space in dread and horror, with a tremulous 'horror' theme offering an impression of her inner turmoil. This depiction of Maggie's suffering thus raises important questions about the viewing pleasures of *Dark Shadows*, specifically 'what does the Gothic soap opera offer its viewers in terms of serial pleasure?' and 'why is it so engaging?'

Harry M. Benshoff's work has suggested that there is 'a whole constellation of factors to which the fans [of *Dark Shadows*] respond' (1993: 52); ranging from an enjoyment of the hybrid Gothic-soap form to valuing *Dark Shadows* 'for its depiction of a "pure and complete fantasy world"' (1993: 52). Benshoff's subjects thus position themselves in, and in relation to, the text in a number of ways. As with the female Gothic dramas discussed in the previous chapter, this leads us back to the question of identification; as actor Lara Parker suggests, 'the fascination for *Dark Shadows* lay in the ability of those in the audience to identify with the characters. You may ask how one can possibly identify with a witch, or a ghost, or a vampire? We have nothing in common with these appalling creatures... or do we?' (Parker, 1990: 17). Parker's formulation, a rather dramatic rhetorical question, raises an interesting point here. *Dark Shadows*' particular brand of the 'fantastic-marvellous', the blending of stock characters and narrative events from the soap opera and the Gothic genre, therefore bringing into congruence the ordinary and the supernatural, might be seen to render viewer identification somewhat mystifying. However, it also might tell us that there is no straight connection between representation and reality when it comes to the construction and reception of television fiction and fantasy.

Again, Ang's work on the soap opera is useful here. Her discussion of viewer identification with Sue-Ellen (Linda Gray), a character

restrictions of its studio production, *Dark Shadows* appears to be a chamber drama, with its action confined to a limited number of mainly interior (and mainly domestic) settings. Although this setting might, on the one hand, be seen as a marker of the paucity of the programme's production values and the economic intransigence of daytime television drama production, it also produces a certain 'domestic' aesthetic in keeping with the narrative's main themes and concerns. For example, if we look at the episodes surrounding a key moment in the soap's history, when vampire Barnabas Collins returns to his ancestral home, we see the house as both the key location of family history and traumatic memory within the Gothic narrative, and also as a site of domestic horror, built around the image of the home under threat of invasion.

Following Collins' exploration of his old house, young David Collins reports to the rest of the family that 'it seems as though he was haunting the rooms instead of just walking through them': indeed, several episodes are dominated by the vampire wandering through rooms in the house, discussing its significance within family history. When governess Victoria Winters tells him 'to me this house has always been a reminder of the enterprise of the people who settled here' (see episode 214), Barnabas delivers a long monologue which speaks of the American Gothic's identity as postcolonial narrative:

Yes, in a way you're right. The design and construction of this house represented a marriage of the elegance of Europe and the vigour and enterprise of a new world. The foundations were made from rocks left behind by glaciers thousands of years ago. The beams and supports were cut from ancient local forests. The plaster walls were made from crushed clam shells and horsehair. Bricks were imported from Holland. That dusty chandelier was brought over from France . . . That faded wallpaper was especially designed by a Belgian artist. The parquet floors were installed by an Italian craftsman, the mouldings were the effort of a Spanish craftsman.

While this dialogue is primarily designed to demonstrate the vampire's uncanny familiarity with the house's construction (the other characters still believe that he is a distant cousin from London with an expert knowledge of family history, rather than an ancient vampire), it also underscores the relationship between the 'old' and 'new' worlds that is so central to the American Gothic narrative. Here, the colonial moment is said to have produced a haunted artefact (the house), imbued with a sense of a national, as well as familial, past, and an inheritance which is not eradicated through the passing of time. When Barnabas goes on to speak of the house's significance in their particular family history,

however, we also see domestic space as a representation of the American Gothic's more quotidian, familial concerns in *Dark Shadows*.

The beautiful exterior belies the hatred and distrust that lived beneath this roof. Nothing was ever real here. The love and happiness that one would expect was never lived in the lives of those that lived here . . . This room saw much hatred. Saw families divide and devour each other. On these stairs, a father and son hurled words at each other, words that would lead to the death of the son.

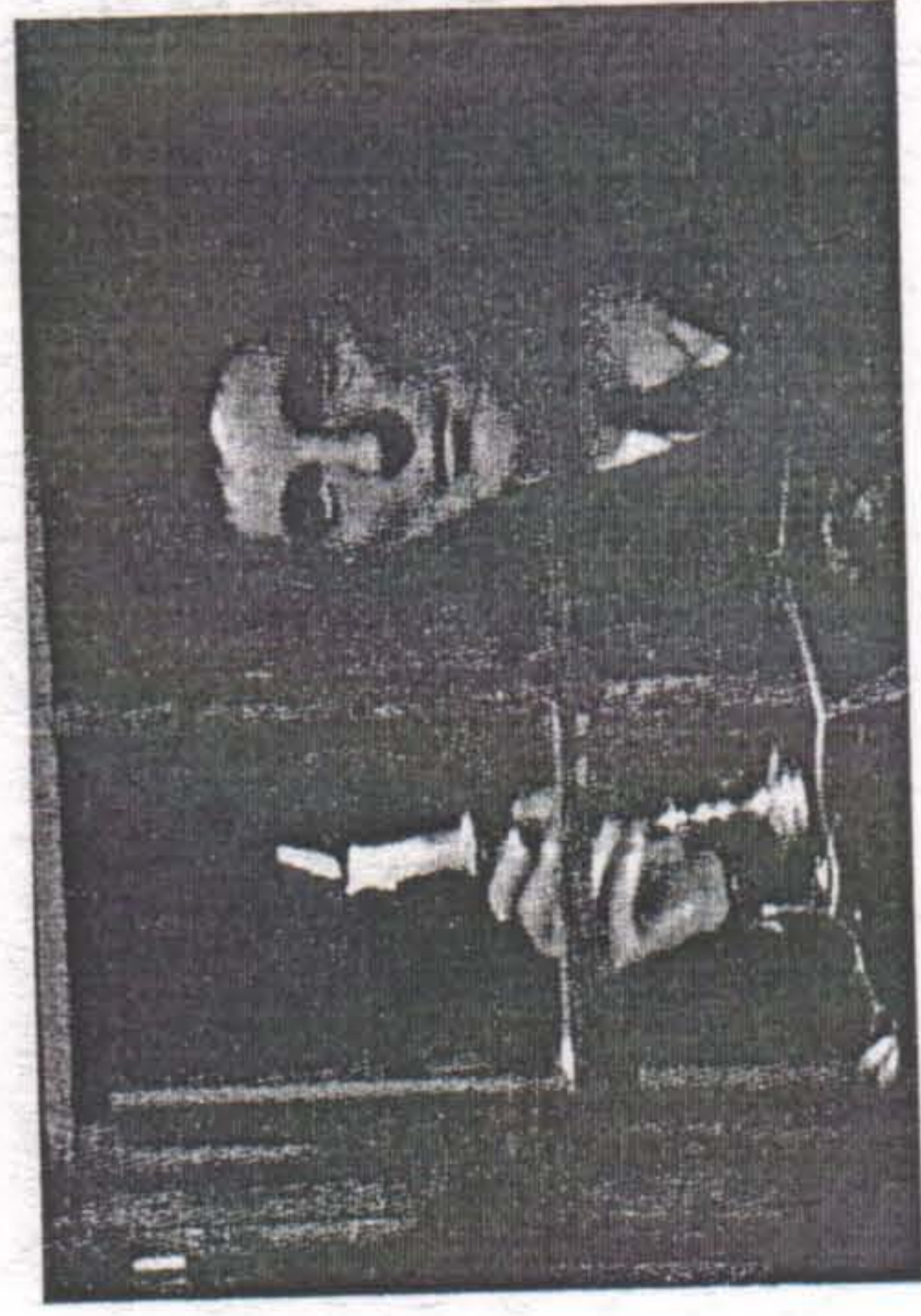
The house is thus depicted as an emotionally 'loaded' location within the Gothic soap opera

As suggested above, houses are also depicted as threatened spaces in *Dark Shadows*, most obviously through that iconic image of the vampire narrative: the open window. The vampire narrative is particularly well suited to Gothic television in this respect, given that it is a cycle within the Gothic genre which is defined more generally by the permeability of the house (the vampire's ability to enter bedrooms, to slip in and out of people's everyday lives leaving infection and death behind). In *Dark Shadows*, for example, the connection between Barnabas Collins and his second victim, waitress Maggie Evans, is represented through the trope of the permeable home. Not only is it suggested that he continually enters her bedroom at night (through the recurring image of the open patio doors next to her bed as each morning breaks), but also, after their initial meeting, Barnabas is able to watch Maggie from afar, his view rendered 'televsual' in its literal sense by the token that he possesses 'distant sight'. Here, we revisit the horror of the American neighbourhood in the 1960s, discussed above in relation to the Gothic family sitcom: Barnabas' 'night visits' and his ability to see over great distance mean that we are again shown a community in which there are no hard and fast boundaries between public and private space.

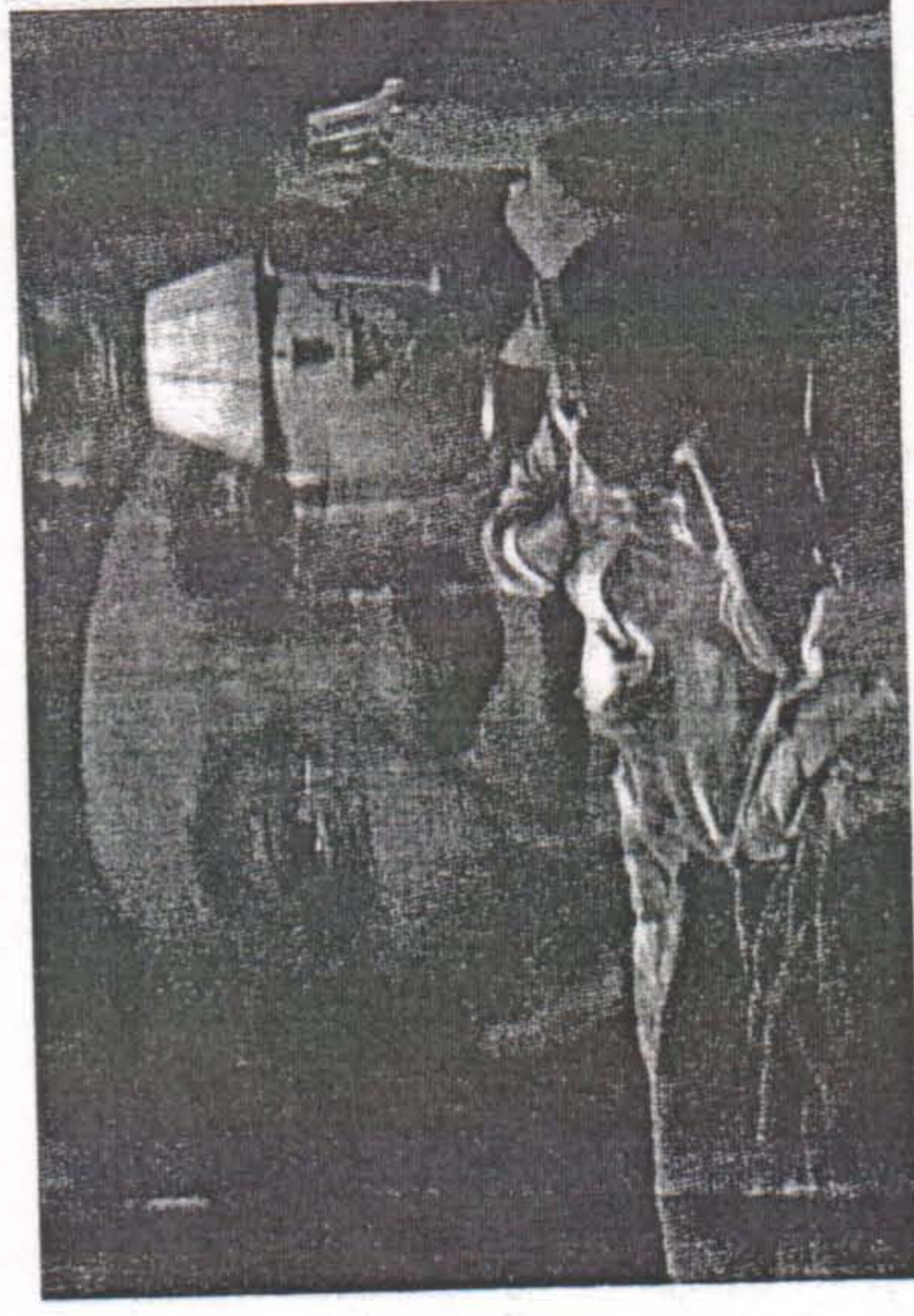
Episode 227 (9 May 1967), for example, begins with an exterior shot of Maggie's home, warmly lit from the inside, establishing the 'normality' of this domestic space. A cut is then made to close-ups dissolved together of Maggie's hands wringing her bed covers and her face wracked with turmoil, anticipating the moment of domestic horror to come. As she clutches at her throat, the camera tracks up and around to the patio doors in her bedroom, accompanied by the sound of heartbeats like timpani drums and a low wind instrument which plays a musical warning that Maggie is under threat, as the shadow of the vampire crosses over the net curtains covering her doors, again building the anticipation of an imminent attack. A slow track up the door as it opens reveals Barnabas' face, as the moment of horror is realised and he enters

her room to stand over her bed, grinning in the gloom of the evening and baring his fangs. As elsewhere in Gothic television then, the climax of horror is found in domestic invasion: we need not see his first bite (the scene cuts to the title sequence before this occurs), as the vampire's entry into the home is horror enough for a domestic (daytime) audience. Following the credit sequence, the exterior shot of the house is repeated, this time in daylight rather than dusk, and a cut is then made to the open door of the young woman's bedroom: therefore, while the attack takes place during an ellipsis created by the credit sequence, the viewer is immediately reminded that this is the site of domestic invasion. Furthermore, on two occasions during this episode, and elsewhere in the series, Barnabas' 'televsual' sight is also marked as an act of domestic invasion. In a moment which strongly resembles Nosferatu's (Max Schreck's) stalking of Ellen (Greta Schröder) in Murnau's *Nosferatu* (Germany, 1922), cuts are made between a close-up of Barnabas' leering face at the window of his own house, suggesting that he can see his victim (see figure 4.5), and Maggie's bedroom, where she in turn reacts, suggesting the uncanny sensation of being watched. Later, this closeness without proximity is intensified by the use of a slow dissolve which places the voyeur (Barnabas) and the object of his intense gaze (Maggie) in the same frame (see figure 4.6).

In both these instances, editing is utilised to create a sense of extreme anxiety around domestic invasion, and, arguably, to record into the text a potentially intense moment of identification in which the viewer fears for Maggie's safety from the comfort of their own home. Like the Collins household discussed above then, other homes in this Gothic soap opera are configured as permeable households, in which boundaries between public and domestic, inside and outside, remain worryingly blurred.



4.5 The televisual sight of the vampire: episode 227, *Dark Shadows* (Dan Curtis Productions Inc., 1967).



4.6 Bringing vampire and victim together: episode 227, *Dark Shadows* (Dan Curtis Productions Inc., 1967).

This representation of domestic space in earlier American Gothic television thus also prefigures the narrative preoccupations of the programmes discussed in the following chapter.

While all three of the programmes discussed at length in this chapter were very much 'of their time', unique explorations of the domestic Gothic from a number of different positions, it is possible to locate the legacy of these unusual instances of hybrid Gothic television from the 1960s in current programme making in the US. For example, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (20th Century Fox Television, 1997–2003) and its spin-off series, *Angel* (20th Century Fox Television, 1999–2004), perhaps the most famous and successful examples of parodic, hybrid Gothic television in recent years, have not been discussed at any great length in this book. This decision is taken partly because there already exists a wealth of critical literature on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its spin-off, with several articles discussing *Buffy's* relationship to the Gothic genre specifically (see Callander, 2000; Davis, 2000). As Robert A. Davis argues,

In one sense, the literary and cinematic ancestry of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* seems self-consciously clear. Episode by episode the program makers mischievously invoke the full catalogue of gothic horrors, knowingly parading an endless series of monstrous exhibits whose thoroughbred credentials from the archives of gothic fiction and film make them instantly recognisable to the viewing audience. (2000)

Davis and Callander both argue that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is indeed Gothic at its core, citing a range of visual and narrative references to the genre within the series to construct their arguments. *Buffy's* narrative

clearly relates to some of the central issues dealt with in this delineation of Gothic television, particularly those questions about gender and the Gothic genre raised in this book. Indeed, in a second season episode entitled 'Halloween', Buffy puts on a haunted costume (an eighteenth century ball gown) which transforms her into a vulnerable Gothic heroine! As a post-feminist text (Moseley, 2002), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* worries at many of the anxieties surrounding femininity and independence which are generic to the Gothic heroine, and, like the long-running Gothic series drama discussed in the following chapter, *Buffy* also explores the burgeoning fear of home invasion. In this series, the threatened domestic space is one of the focal centres of the serial narrative in which the young heroine struggles to look after her home and younger sister while defending it from a wealth of supernatural enemies. Other teen TV dramas, such as those discussed by Rachel Moseley (2002) (e.g. *Charmed*, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*) can also be understood as hybrid Gothic texts, fusing the narrative preoccupations of the teen drama with the stock characters and imagery of the Gothic. However, it is to the televisual Gothic serial drama that we now turn in the following chapter.

Notes

- 1 *Hallowe'en With the New Addams Family* (CBS, 1977), *The Munsters' Scary Little Christmas* (20th Century Fox Television, 1996), *The Munsters' Revenge* (NBC, 1981).
- 2 *The Munsters Today* (The Arthur Company, 1988–91), *The New Addams Family* (Fox Family Channel, 1998–99).
- 3 *The Mini-Munsters* (ABC [US], 1973), *The Addams Family* (Hanna-Barbera Productions, 1973–75), *The Addams Family* (ABC [US], 1992–93).
- 4 *The Addams Family* (US, 1991), *Addams Family Values* (US, 1993).
- 5 *The Addams Family Reunion* (US, 1998).
- 6 A very thorough production history of *Dark Shadows* is offered in Kathryn Leigh Scott's *The Dark Shadows Companion: 25th Anniversary Collection* (1990).
- 7 For example: *The Night Stalker* (ABC [US], 1972), *The Night Strangler* (ABC [US], 1973), *Frankenstein* (ABC [US], 1973), *The Turn of the Screw* (ABC [US], 1974).
- 8 E.g. *Rebecca* (Carlton, 1997), *The Turn of the Screw* (United/Martin Pope/WGBH Boston, 1999), *The Haunting of Helen Walker* (Norman Rosemont Productions, 1997).
- 9 Benshoff contacted fans through fanzines, initiating correspondence and sending out questionnaires, as well as analysing fan fiction (both literary and videographic).

Televisuality and the new American Gothic

5

In addition to its reappearance on European television, the Gothic flourished in many and diverse areas of North American culture during the 1990s. Christoph Grunenberg, curator of a major exhibition entitled *Gothic* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Massachusetts, noted that:

A predilection for the Gothic has deeply affected all areas of contemporary life – from 'high' literature to 'schlock' science fiction, mystery, and romance novels; penetrating art, architecture, design, fashion and graphic design; to be found in advertisements and on record covers; present in popular music of today as in the revival of Gregorian chants and medieval hymns; and, most pronounced, making its daily appearance in film and television, where an obsession with sex, crime and the proclivities of twisted yet clever serial killers has developed into one of the most popular categories in mainstream entertainment. (1997: 210)

Grunenberg, who explains this predilection as 'a true fin de siècle spirit of cultural pessimism and spiritual malaise' (1997: 208), is joined by other cultural commentators in unpacking the Gothic's renaissance in the US during the final decade of the twentieth century. For instance, Mark Edmundson finds the discourses of the Gothic present in 'media renderings of the O.J. Simpson case, in [America's] political discourse, in our modes of therapy, on TV news, on talk shows like *Oprah*, in our discussions of AIDS and of the environment', concluding that, 'American culture at large has become suffused with Gothic assumptions, with Gothic characters and plots' (1997: xii). I wish to examine the Gothic trend in North American television drama during the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, a trend identified as originating in the groundbreaking serial drama, *Twin Peaks* (Lynch-Frost Productions, 1990–91). This long-form serial is described by Lenora Ledwon as '[tapping] the full potential of the "Television Gothic" . . . [utilising]