Abstract
Supernatural narratives sustain popularity partly due to the way they speak to threats, such as the idea that the appearance of the monster heralds the inevitability of large-scale human destruction or transformation. The theme of apocalypse has become an increasingly prevalent in popular culture, widely rehearsed in Anglo-American television horror since the 9/11 attack on New York City – with its concomitant sense of vulnerability amongst Western nations (Bennett 2019) and growing ethos of social and political extremity. In the third season of John Logan’s *Penny Dreadful* (Showtime/Sky, 2014–2016), Christian Camargo portrays the all-powerful vampire, Dracula, disguised as a charming museum curator, who entrances the female lead, Vanessa Ives, with his terrifying vision of an evolutionary ‘end of days’ (S3:E6). Vanessa’s struggle to resist the compulsion of Dracula’s fatalistic embrace speaks to issues of pressing immediacy in our own time, including the ambiguities of human agency in the face of a transfigured world. This paper will interrogate the theme of compulsive apocalypse and the sublime in John Logan’s *Penny Dreadful*.

Key words
Vampire, Apocalypse, *Penny Dreadful*, horror, fantasy, sublime

Word count: 6,223
Future Fear

Vampire narratives sustain popularity at least partly due to the ways that they speak to perceived fears or threats – millennial transition, disease, oppression, antipathic identities, post–humanism or global war. Perhaps most urgent among these is the idea that the vampire heralds the possibility of mass destruction or transformation on a nuclear scale, through war, environmental disaster or disease pandemic. While the vampire frequently figures in fantasy narratives as the embodiment of desire, the threat of extreme catastrophe is often invoked as a vehicle for reflecting on contemporary and future fears. This has intensified in Anglo–American television, as Bennett argues (2019), since the 9/11 attack on New York City, with its wake of social and political extremity.

The threat of extreme destruction is evoked in John Logan’s drama series Penny Dreadful (Showtime/Sky, 2014–2016), where the vampiric figure is personified in the character of an all–powerful demon–vampire, Dracula (Christian Camargo), who has dominion over all dark things. He seeks to end humankind and gain universal power. Disguised as a charming science museum curator, he entrances the female lead, Vanessa Ives (Eva Green), drawing on her supernatural abilities to drive forward his devastating vision of an evolutionary ‘end of days’ (S3:E6). This paper will explore the idea of compulsive apocalypse in Penny Dreadful as an expression of tensions between archaic and modern beliefs. By ‘compulsive’ I refer to the magnetic appeal of the monster and the associated sense of a pull towards large–scale destruction as an inevitable, transcendent or purgative force. My use of the term is partly informed by Bruno Latour’s critique of pessimistic determinism in relation to the future of humanity (1993a; 2013b). While acknowledging the centrality of historicity, Latour points out, the shape of the future is not absolutely determined by a ‘stultified compulsion’ towards humanity’s failure (1993a, 330–31). Resistance against the narrative of fatalism offers a way of refusing what Elżbieta Rybicka calls the ‘erosion of memory’ (2012, 132–133), to reclaim shared values and culture, contest the totalitarian imperatives of the past, and refuse violent reactionism, as a way of revivifying the future. Vanessa’s struggle against the compulsion of Dracula’s deathly embrace in Penny Dreadful embodies this resistance and speaks to issues of pressing immediacy in our own time, including the challenges and ambiguities of human agency, cultural knowledge and shared future survival in the face of a transfigured world.
Stacey Abbott regards the proliferation of vampire and zombie stories as ‘two sides of the undead coin’ (2016) that show social fears about the prefiguration of violent, cataclysmic change that destroys the Earth or takes us beyond our human condition. Whatever their platform or mode, supernatural threat stories show us a spectacle of mass violence and consumption, invoking our horror of a viscerally invasive power – our fear that past wars and plagues will return – while also entertaining us with phantasmagorial thrills and spills. The dramatic treatment of the apocalypse narrative can be humorous – as in the zombie film *Warm Bodies* (Levine/Mandeville 2013) or Season Two of the witch television series *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Aguirre–Sarcasa/Kreiger/Warner 2019–2020) – where the supposedly impending end of days becomes a contextual intensifier for adventure and romance. The apocalypse trope has not only haunted the horror narrative as a figure of repressed anxiety, however, but has also come to represent the impulse of intensely destructive fears in response to real, immediate and overwhelming dangers as those being witnessed in relation to climate change, violent racial discrimination and the corononavirus pandemic of 2020.

The idea of the monster apocalypse in *Penny Dreadful* alludes to the vision of an epoch in which history, the idea of the past, is abandoned. The modern world is on the brink, ceasing to be as it is known, about to become something sublime, terrifyingly ineffable, almost beyond human imagining and therefore virtually beyond our capacity to resist. As Henry Day observes, in relation to cultural and social instances of extreme violence which blur distinctions between real and virtual entertainment depictions of violence, the sublime ‘comes to signify not communion with the infinite but a sense of radical alienation, of a trauma so overwhelming it defies comprehension’ (2013, 8). More powerful than incomprehension, however, is the vortex of excitation and horror that the sublime conveys: the irresistible appeal of death as escape, sacrifice and illusory yearning for a pure resurrection. In literary terms, then, the series deliberately sets out to resonate with a post-Romantic vision of encroachment through the rapidity of destructive change in our own time, while offering the remaining possibility of recovery and survival through allegiance or community.

**Reshaping Stories**

*Penny Dreadful* is set in a reimagined London at the Victorian *fin de siècle*, filmed on location in Dublin and at Bray’s Ardmore studios in Ireland. It is built on richly referential story platform, with characters sourced from late–Victorian popular genre fiction, including Bram
Stoker’s 1897 novel *Dracula*, Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), R.L. Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), and a host of sensation novels and novelettes including American ‘dime store’ westerns. As Anita Nel Bech Albertsen argues, the characters can be conceived of as mashups that are, in a sense, contaminated by facets of monstrosity that challenge and modify the biases of their source archetypes (2017). This provides for a complex and evolving portrayal of the characters as their stories adapt and change, filtered through grotesquerie, horror and emotion. Further, the show’s references to historically popular stories, theatre, paintings, costume, etc., signals its sustained reflexivity, drawing attention to the elements of its own making as spectacular fantasy entertainment. *Penny Dreadful*’s elaborate use of recursive adaptation technique also points forward, however, to contemporary transmedia character developments, with the publication of post-production graphic fiction and a new television series set in Los Angeles, which brings new possibilities for story transformation (Logan/Aguilar/Showtime 2020).

The original three season television series flirts with the historical modernities of its late–Victorian/Edwardian London setting alluding to the popular discourses and anxieties of the age – spiritualism, sexuality, industrialisation, women’s suffrage, science and psychology – weaving its stories of battles with the ‘demimonde’ through a gothically heightened fantasy cityscape. The story follows Vanessa’s struggle to resist the mysterious demon – Dracula – and the damage his power brings to humanity through failing individual agency, irrecoverable social and environmental destruction, and the threat of a radical alterity yet to come. In this story context, the evolutionary doctrine of the ‘survival of the fittest’ is repurposed for a new kind of ‘species’ dominance, not by politicians but by supernaturally ‘evolved’ predators, with devastating implications.

The modernity of *Penny Dreadful* is reflected in its narrative thrust towards the unleashing of an accelerated human apocalypse: a threatened extinction due to change beyond our control. This theme echoes fin de siècle literary preoccupations, in particular the poetic vision of spinning disaggregation captured in W. B. Yeats’s figure of the ‘gyre’ as the moment of crisis in which the past and the future are joined (‘The Second Coming’ 1994, 158; Kermode 2000, 100). Here, however, the impending crisis is imbued with more contemporary social, environmental and narrative concerns.

Logan’s avowed aims with this series were to create a group of characters at the cusp of the nineteenth–century, centred around Vanessa Ives, living through social and psychic trauma,
dissonance and loneliness in the face of future uncertainty. In various ways, with this series, the writer sought to reflect the pressure of early twenty-first century challenges:

there’s something about the Victorian Era that reminds me of right now. They were on the cusp of a modern world. The agrarian economy has been replaced by industrial economy. They’re looking across the ocean to Germany and America. They were grappling with the very elemental question of what it is to be human, with Darwinism and evolution (Christina Radish, Collider, 18 January 2014).

Logan refers here to the uncharted waters of the future – human impacts through climate change, viral pandemics and technology on the world we know – as beyond current understanding. In Penny Dreadful, he recasts the anxiety invoked by this feeling of incomprehensibility within a supernatural world, where the boundaries between human and non–human entities are being broken, threatening the nature of existence with a seemingly unstoppable visceral and emotional transformation.

Bennett defines apocalypse as it is rehearsed in contemporary television fantasy as ‘one or more events that occur or are threatened that cause or would cause large scale destruction and/or harm to the human race’ (2019, 7). Given the scale and complexity of threats now facing humankind on Earth, the invocation of fear in this series seems particularly timely. Nevertheless, the apocalypse narrative is far from a new or original narrative. Frank Kermode discusses the recurring theme of apocalypse in literature as the expression of ‘a pattern of anxiety’ that reflects a sense of perpetual change leading to an end (2000, 96). Inherent in the notion of fin de siècle, is an artificial but commonplace impression of crisis, a ‘fiction of transition’ (Kermode 2000, 100–101) that allows us to create a fathomable story of the past. While Kermode argues that the cultural phenomenon of anticipated destruction is hardly new (2000, 95), transmedial fantasy narratives of destructive transition are certainly an intensely popular preoccupation with early twenty-first century readers and audiences. As Stephen Joyce remarks, recent popular culture is ‘unusually obsessed with the end of civilisation as a form of amusement’ (2018, 3), as exemplified by the television series The Walking Dead (AMC 2010 –) and video games such as The Last of Us (Naughty Dog 2013), among many others. Arguably, for the current inhabitants of the planet, facing the mass spectacle of deforestation, polar melting, extreme forest fires and other disruptions of climate change, the prevalence of apocalypse themes in contemporary transmedia narrative echoes fears that seem all too urgent and real.
Latour alludes to the idea of apocalypse as a mechanism for a kind of serious play that allows us to think differently, about the past, the future and, of course, about ourselves.

The fireworks of the Apocalypse are not there to prepare you for a rapturous upload to Heaven, but on the contrary, to make you ready to avoid being chased off the Earth by Earth’s own reaction to your presence. It is a harsh solution, but it seems the only way to oblige us to turn our attention around after so many years of neglecting what happened behind our back. (2013b, 111)

It is risky to use the apocalypse trope in popular discourse because the ethos of inevitability that apocalypse entails can overshadow the prospect of multi–species survival. In the gothic or horror narrative, it can be problematic, too, because it plays into the inherent undecidability of the genre, troubling definitions and aims as well as roles and identities. Importantly, in either context, however, the notion of compulsive apocalypse raises the question of ‘who decides’? Who or what has the subtlety and the power, real or supernatural, to foster the intricate survival of diverse beings in the realm of the future? Latour calls into question the idea of human agency and ‘the politics of assembling a character which is pushed to the centre but which simultaneously loses its boundary, consistence and definition because it is tied’ to that which takes us beyond ‘the human’ (2017c, 46). He cites Donna Haraway’s term – ‘response–ability’ (Latour 2017c, 38), to invoke the necessity for individuals to respond to destructive change, referring to human agency in relation to the study of Anthropology and the Anthropocene, and the need to take action in troubled times. The point is a reminder of the ontological demands of being human at the Anthropocene, the tensions that surround the idea of response–ability, resistance and/or surrender to cataclysm, or commitment to the possibility of a flourishing future of peace and coexistence among human and non-human beings.

Such ideas can inform a study of modernity and the sublime in Penny Dreadful, where a mytho–Victorian character with magical powers – who exists amid a carnivalesque milieu of adventurers, artists, performers, decadents, mediums, prostitutes, demons, vampires, witches, werewolves and other non-human beings – must confront the question of her own belief in the value of human survival. Specifically, it is the narrative magnetism of profound and destructive transformation with which the character of Vanessa Ives contends, made vulnerable by her difference, that I now explore in this discussion as a representational mechanism for present existential concerns.
Characterising Transformational Power

An ambiguous character from the outset, Vanessa’s powers are not easily defined. She seems to embody some kind of link or conduit between the modern human world and an ancient dark force. She is not simply a medium, witch, or host. Her skills have been developed through rigorous training with a long-lived witch known to rural villagers as the ‘cut wife’ Joan, as portrayed in Season 2. Vanessa can cast curses and spells using *verbis diablo* (Schubart 2017), a language of magical power, which was constructed for the series by David J. Peterson. As Marielle Wakim reported in the *Los Angeles Magazine* (30 September 2015), *verbis diablo* was made up from a pastiche from Latin, Arabic, Akkadian, Middle Egyptian, Farsi and Turkish to convey an impression of ‘the Devil’s corruption of language’ Described as a Daywalker in Season Two (E4), Vanessa is a human witch whose abilities ultimately allow her to unite with the demon and destroy what exists – to create a new order of being.

Throughout the entire series, Vanessa is physically embattled, her body torn between human empathy, medical control and supernatural destruction. She belongs outwardly to an upper-middleclass British way of life that rehearses the style and manners of late-Victorian polite society. She takes tea in her drawing room among elegant furniture, attends balls and the theatre, dressed in silk, jewels and lace. Yet, throughout Seasons One and Two she is repeatedly locked in raw struggle with an unnamed and unseen demon and its minions. It has been suggested that her spiritual/supernatural ability emerges as a psychic split due to guilt after her affair with her friend Mina’s fiancé, Captain Branson, (Schubart 2018, 254–255) which somehow causes a tear in the ethos that allows the demimonde to break through containment. Nevertheless, her ambiguous power seems to be ancient in its source and pressing in its determination. The allusions to Ancient Egyptian magic help to create this sense of an archaic force, repeatedly evoked through Season Two.

Vanessa’s actions and strange behaviours are interpreted variously by those around her as madness and possession. She is plagued by guilt, apparent lunacy, by three evil witches, the demon himself and her own desires, including her wish for acceptance. Barely an episode passes without her thin pale body being tortured, possessed or marked in some way by supernatural attack or asylum incarceration. She is repeatedly called by the demon to summon him into her dimension and although she learns spells and incantations to ward him off, he gradually breaks through. She suffers hot and cold treatments prescribed for lunatics and is locked, weeping, in a padded cell (S1: E5; S3:E3). In Seasons One and Two she withstands these incursions, with the support of her fellow contenders against supernatural devilment who
each carry their own burdens of ambiguous humanity or moral culpability. Only in the third season, after her friends leave London on new quests of their own, when a profound sense of loss weakens her resolve, does she become vulnerable to the vampiric apex predator, attracted by the promise of intimacy, the demon’s passion for her darkness and the promise of a shared purpose that can free her from lonely suffering.

We do not meet the demon vampire Dracula himself until Season Three, but his presence is implied from the very first episode in the series, when Mina is seduced by a ‘foreign’ nobleman and hidden from friends and family in strange nether realm. In the meantime, Vanessa makes friends, lovers and enemies of a host of characters from the repertoire of sensation and popular fiction including an American werewolf (Ethan Chandler – Josh Hartnett), a titled detective (Sir Malcom Murray – Timothy Dalton), a mad scientist (Dr Frankenstein – Harry Treadaway) and his irrepressible progeny, Caliban (John Clare – Rory Kinnear). The demon appears in human form in Season Three when Vanessa becomes most vulnerable to the magnetic persuasion of his overtures (S3:E6). Dracula appeals to her despair, her desire to become ‘something else,’ to cast aside her suffering, her feeling that only the full-scale annihilation of humanity can release the Earth from material limitations. This desire is so powerful that she ultimately abandons her home and joins him in his lair after a seduction in which he first appeals to her mind, and then to her longing for connection (S3:E7).

Dracula, Evolution and Fantasy

While the historical vampire is in some respects a seductive figure, characterized by a romantic ethos of seduction and surrender, themes of commerce, science and modernity have become commonplace vehicles for anxiety in vampire screen narrative. Although not the first of his kind, the vampire as a decaying aristocratic predator (Frayling 1992, 108) is epitomized in fiction by Stoker’s long-lived scion of ancient conquerors Count Dracula (1897/1997, 33), whose adaptative popularity now extends across a host of text and media platforms. In surviving the past, the rise and fall of provinces and empires, as Attila Viragh suggests, this creature of the living dead is a victim of cultural annihilation a ‘subaltern struggling against cultural loss’ (2013, 223). Yet this same vampire whose lands, cultural practices, even languages, are lost with the passing of epochs is also portrayed as a practically-minded entrepreneur who adapts to compete and survive in a changing world (Khair and Höglund 2017). Eric Kwan-Wai Yu reminds us that Stoker’s Count Dracula, is ‘not only able to...
modernize … familiarizing himself with modern-day legal and commercial transactions, but also able to move freely around England like an English gentleman without attracting public attention’ (2006, 147).

The short-lived but visually striking television series entitled *Dracula* starring Jonathan Rhys Meyers captures this ethos of adaptive adventurism, in which science and commerce offer a vehicle to contend with romantic sacrifice (Haddon/Knauff/NBC 2013). In Episode One, the Count arrives in London society in the persona of a wealthy American industrialist with scientific interests, a gentleman of means, at home amongst the money-makers of late nineteenth century London. A striving manufacturer of a future he seeks to create, at once modern and archaic, he spruiks his technological invention for a new kind of energy. This is partly a cover story for an old promise of revenge against the secret society, Order of the Dragon, which has long sought to destroy him, and as an investment in a laboratory experiment to develop a ‘solar vaccine’ to protect the vampire kind from sunlight, and thus from the risk of annihilation. This take on Dracula franchise had only a brief existence: while demonstrating the continued lushness of televisual vampiric dramatization, the show was pulled after ten episodes. The science solution narrative exists elsewhere in the vampire screen repertoire, however, often preceded, as Clasen and Abbott both point out (2010: 2016), by Matheson’s novel *I Am Legend* (1954), the story of the last human survivor after a vampire virus takes over the world.

The trope of the vampire pandemic has given writing and screen industries a vast source of metaphoric possibility for storytelling and social comment, from fear of disease and difference, to weaponized science and the building of postapocalyptic communities, among the various so-called ‘scientific’ strands that recur in the vampiric narrative space. In the television series *True Blood* (Ball/HBO 2008–2014), the production of synthetic blood is American capitalism’s answer to the threat of a vampire takeover. Earlier instances include *The Hunger* (Scott/MGM 1983) in which Susan Sarandon plays the role of Miriam, a scientist who studies aging in primates, or the blood experiments in *Daybreakers* (Spierig Brothers 2010) where a plague has turned the majority of humans into vampires. Similarly, Jim Jarmusch’s *Only Lovers Left Alive* (RPC 2014), set against the ruined spectacle of decayed factory city, Detroit, is centred around an underground trade in laboratory-grade ONeg which enables vampires to survive, since human blood has become poisoned by environmental pollution – a seemingly prescient reference since Detroit became a Covid19 epicentre in the USA during the 2020 pandemic (Sara Alvarez et al., *The Bridge*, March 25
2020). In their different ways, each of these narratives, among many others, points to the threat of human and/or vampire annihilation. It is the Dracula template, however, which perhaps best captures the ways in which screen fantasy utilizes audience anxiety about bodily incursion, scientific experimentation and an inchoate sense of apocalypse, which some of Earth’s creatures are yet able to survive.

The recounting of Dracula as progressive gentleman scientist is reprized in the third season of John Logan’s *Penny Dreadful* where the rise of the demon vampire is presaged as the evolutionary inevitability of human destruction. Christian Camargo as the vampire makes himself known in London society as a progressive Victorian intellectual, a charming museum expert in zoology and the ‘new’ theories of evolution (S3:E2), but this persona is a cloak for the demon who rules the demimonde. He beguiles Vanessa while, out of public sight, amidst the secret places of the London night, this Darwinian Dracula reveals his powers as an all-powerful demonic god. Full of frustrated fury, his aim is to entrance the object of his desire, Vanessa Ives, and to use her vast supernatural power to unleash a dark evolution – his horrific vision of the end of days (S3:E6) in which human life is extinguished and the vampire gains total dominion.

**Reshaping the Vampire Universe**

The demon breaks through Vanessa’s resistance in Season Three, during her incarceration in an insane asylum, conveyed via the classic clichés of institutionalized psychology – claustrophobic isolation, white padded cells stained with the sufferings of their inmates, and the barbaric instruments of pseudoscientific cure. The poignancy of Vanessa’s vulnerability is intensified when the demon visits her by inhabiting the body of the asylum ward guard (Rory Kinnear) whose body later serves as the lifeless vessel Victor Frankenstein uses to create his frightful Caliban, John Clare.

Guard/Demon: We live in a mighty age of science and faithlessness... But you are not a thing of the spirit, Vanessa... you're a thing of the flesh... like me. You are the wolf, you're the scorpion and all those things that slip and soar and stalk through the deep forest in the dark night. You're powerful. You feel it coiling within you... be truly who you are.

Give me your flesh... give me your blood... Be my bride and then all light will end and the world will live in darkness... The very air will be pestilence to mankind... and
then our brethren, the night creatures, will emerge... and feed... Such is our power...
Such is our kingdom... Such is my kiss...

Vanessa: yes...

Guard/Demon: One kiss and you're free of all this... In this mortal world you'll always be shunned for your uniqueness... but not with me... They will lock you away in rooms like this. They will brand you a freak and a sorceress, but I won't. I love you for who you are, Vanessa.

Vanessa: What name do I whisper to you, beloved.

Guard/Demon: I am the demon. I am the dragon. My name is Dracula.

Vanessa: I see you clearly now…

(S3:E3; 41:57–45:09)

Here, the vampire’s take on the survival of the fittest doctrine possesses devastating implications, an opportunistic force for change that seeks to destroy or transform all humanity. For Vanessa, who longs for acceptance, Dracula’s seductive embrace brings forth an overwhelming desire to sublimate her power, to realize the expulsion of loneliness.

The notion of sublime abjection is useful for understanding how fantasy fiction can represent what may be unrepresentable in our daily lives: the horror and attraction of being other, abject, all–powerful, yet apart, subject to invasion, exploitation and destruction. As defined by Julia Kristeva, the abject is that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order…the in–between, the ambiguous’ (1982, 4) – the condition of being cast down, dismembered, undead.

According to Miller and Atherton, however, the abject in Kristeva’s terms also enables a way of commenting on the catastrophic process of dehumanisation: a ‘shifting of perspectives’ (2018, 9), a closing off from others, even from personal subjectivity. In Season Three of Penny Dreadful, the demon enchants Vanessa with his doctrine of evolutionary apocalypse and the promise that she will reign with him over the night creatures, but she is never wholly transfigured. Her resistance reveals the horror of the lonely demagogue of power casting destruction over earthly dominions.

Clasen remarks that ‘speculative fiction extrapolates from ordinary, realistic anxieties and
fantasies or presents them in metaphoric guise’ to entertain us, to engage our imaginations and to give ‘symbolic form to universal human fears’ (2010, 314). We ask ‘what if’ and are comforted by the realisation that such extreme possibilities of horror are unreal. Yet, as we speak, human populations face threats that are far from universal, that are in fact highly asymmetrical and all too real for many – war, disease, environmental disaster, extreme disparities of wealth, and more. Brent Linsley argues that ‘apocalyptic and post–apocalyptic fictions of the last few decades invite us to investigate the nature of the changes taking place around us in light of a shifting perspective on the development of capitalism’ and its unsustainability (2019, 196), warning against promises of utopian solutions which further entrap humankind in a narrative of ongoing wastage. Schubart suggests a more active way to understand the fantastic as a medium for metareflective thinking, a cognitive approach, that offers a space within which to imagine the impossible, the yet–unreal (2018, 77). She argues that the fantastic can engage personal reflexivity – a way of reimagining and rewriting the self through immersive engagement. The notion of fantasy as a space of possibility is interesting here, however, in relation to the ways in which *Penny Dreadful* explores narrative imperatives and character choices that can destroy or renew but ultimately lead to survival through collective action. The project of narrative – perhaps ultimately of all culture? – is, arguably, to reassemble humanity out of the abject and to remind us of our communal lives.

**Sublime Realisation**

The scientific meaning of the term sublime is vaporisation. In our contemporary global context, this can be read as a metaphor for the rendering of human form into something so awe-ful and encompassing that it becomes ineffable in its scope. This is ultimately a kind of transcendence, but the sublime must also be understood as the expression of a cognitive engagement with a power – imagination – that compels us to record our experiences in testimony, art, music, literature or poetry – without which is to risk abjection, indeed to ‘risk a ‘forgetting’ that may lead to the annihilation of the human race’ (Miller and Atherton 2018). Rybicka writes of literature in relation to place as ‘vessel of historical memory’ (2013, 138). She argues, with reference to Berent (1974), that literature is the archive of a living ‘bios,’ which is also a form of discussion with the past, present, and future – the reflection of a dialogue of many voices which also becomes, in itself, a repository for recollection (2013, 138). As an ensemble screen narrative built on a repertoire of gothic and Romantic literary
texts, *Penny Dreadful* reflects the idea of creative expression as part of the work of memory, going beyond memorialisation to show, through Vanessa’s story, what happens when we forget who we are. It is despair at the thought that death, destruction and loneliness are inevitable, to which Vanessa succumbs, joining the demon and casting the city into a crumbling pall as Dracula has summoned his night creatures and prepares to consign humanity to dust.

This horrific vision is apprehended by the seer Kaetenay who travels with Vanessa’s friends from America to try to save her. They find London in turmoil, wreathed in the poison fumes of supernatural ill will and occupied by the creatures of the night. Vanessa herself is encased in the Demon’s dark glory, almost drained of her former human self (S3:E8 & E9). The impending destruction of humanity is at hand. The holocaust narrative is only halted when Vanessa begs her lover Ethan Chandler (Josh Hartnett) to destroy her with a bullet – ‘what’s one life for all humanity?’ – rather than let humanity and its civilisations be destroyed (S3:E9). It is hardly a happy end. Vanessa dies in Ethan’s arms – her lair filled with soft shadows and ritual candlelight. Drained of her life force, the vampire demon is conquered. The world is finally wrested from ultimate destruction through human agency, by a refusal of the vampiric grand narrative. Abruptly, London’s ordinary chaos is restored. No trace remains, in this ending, of the knowing narratological playfulness and ironic subtlety that characterized much of the series.

Critics railed against the ending, arguing that Vanessa’s submission betrayed the character and story parameters established in the first two seasons (McFarland *Vox* 30 June 2016). As a viewer I shared these reservations and the disappointment that the series did not continue to a fourth season. What I find interesting about the show’s finale, however, is the way it plays with the popular fantasies of the late Victorian era in serious discursive terms – contrasting the materialist concerns of incipient modernity with the all too human pull towards destruction, and the fragility of human agency in determining the future survival of the planet. If the Victorians were living through a time of previously inconceivable industrial change, in our time we have lived with the material threat of annihilation since the nuclear experiments of the 1940s when our governments grasped the possibility of planetary liquidation via nuclear force, and now through climate change.

The sense of horrific threat has long been a source of anticipation and excitation in screen narrative. Miller and Atherton observe that, ‘the nuclear sublime stems from this Burkean
emphasis on horror and the resulting terror that transports the audience to a place beyond description’ (2017). In the vampire universe, I suggest, the idea of apocalypse refers to a more sustained catastrophe than that of explosive holocaust. It engages a tension between an archaic desire for the lost possibilities of the past, the seeming impossibility of an ‘end of days’ for the always already undead, and the high–speed transformations of technological capitalism. This take on the Dracula story, in particular, can be seen as a mechanism for negotiating new and old forms of power, invoking the idea that the past will always be in contest with the future, a battle between the living and the dead within a world whose survival is linked, as Penny Dreadful suggests, to story as a vehicle for remembering and renegotiating the struggle between loss, stasis and change.

Biographical Note:


ORCID:

https://orcid.org/0000–0003–0718–073X

Works Cited


Rybicka, E. 2012. Place, memory, literature (from the perspective of geopoetics). *Teksty Drugie* (2) Special Issue: 126–139. rcin.org.pl


Screen References


---

1 Polidori’s languidly urbane novella *The Vampyre* was published 1819. Franz Seraph Chrismar’s short story ‘Der Vampyr’ was published in the literary journal *Wiener Zeitschrift* on December 12, 1835; the first story (we know of) that links Vlad Dracula to the vampire myth.

ii The scientific use of the term is given in a variety of dictionary sources. Merriam–Webster online dictionary defines the intransitive verb as ‘to pass directly from the solid to the vapor state’ : https://www.merriam–webster.com/dictionary/sublime#learn–more/. Biology online dictionary gives it as meaning to: ‘subject to the process of sublimation; to heat, volatilize, and condense in crystals or powder; to distill off, and condense in solid form; hence, also, to purify’ : https://wwwbiologyonline.com/dictionary/Sublime/; while Cambridge online dictionary avers its meaning as: ‘to change a solid directly into a gas without the solid first becoming a liquid’.