

## Monstrous *M\*A\*S\*H* – Khaki Gothic and Comedy

### I - *M\*A\*S\*H* as Gothic

A veiled woman in a sparkling white wedding gown, surrounded by an intense white light, walks into an open field toward a large, ornate bed. A dark-haired man in a tuxedo appears, and they embrace. Marching soldiers approach, and her would-be groom joins them robotically as they march away. The bed now holds a dying soldier lying next to her; as she stands up, the wounded man multiplies into four dead soldiers. The bloodied bed is suddenly empty; she looks down to realise that her hands, like the entire front of her wedding dress, are drenched in blood.

A man sits up, having fallen asleep during the middle of an exam. His professor asks him how to re-attach a limb. In punishment for not knowing the answer, he is instructed to take off his own left arm. As he pops the arm out of his jacket, it transforms into a mannequin arm. The professor tosses the arm aside, ordering another student to remove the man's remaining arm; it also transforms into a mannequin arm and is cast aside. Suddenly the armless man finds himself alone in a boat, floating in a dark river of teeming with mannequin body parts. A small, injured child stands on the side of the river, stretching her blood-stained arms imploringly. Unable to help her, the man hangs his head and the boat passes her by. He then finds himself in an open field with a wounded soldier on medical gurney. Helicopters approach as the camera pulls to a very wide shot and zooms out as. The now armless man screams up to the sky, awakened from his sleep by the sound of real choppers bringing more bloodied bodies to operate on. No longer armless, he prepares to go back into the war that had followed him into his dreams. The dream has ended: his nightmare continues.

These scenes contain readily identifiable markers of Gothic. Aesthetically, the veiled, wandering woman in a blood-soaked gown is not unlike the Bleeding Nun in *The Monk* (1796).<sup>1</sup> For the man surrounded by limbs, *Frankenstein* (1818) is also evoked – but rather than the emphasis on an uncanny construction of fetid body parts, this scene emphasises a deconstruction of

---

<sup>1</sup> See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'The Character in the Veil: Imagery of the Surface in the Gothic Novel', *PMLA* 96, (1981) 255-270 on the Bleeding Nun and the use of blood and surface.

the body with inanimate body parts. Each scene employs not just Gothic aesthetic themes like bodies drenched in blood, but specific techniques such as claustrophobia or agoraphobia to create a recognisable ‘Gothic’ atmosphere. Robert Mighall argues that,

'The Gothic is a process, not an essence; a rhetoric rather than a store of universal symbols; an attitude to the past and the present, not a free-floating fantasy world. Epochs, institutions, places, and people are Gothicized [*sic*], have the Gothic thrust upon them. That which is Gothicized [*sic*] depends on history and the stories it needs to tell itself.'<sup>2</sup>

Thus, specific images have crystallised to form accepted ‘Gothic’ tropes: through repeated use, these tropes have become Gothicised. The scenes described above are highly effective as ‘Gothic’, not just because they are inherently unsettling, but also because they recall images that have previously been employed, repeated through time, and subsequently identified as Gothic.

The scenes described above are not, in fact, from anything that has previously been recognised as Gothic, but from one of the longest-running American comedy television programmes, *M\*A\*S\*H* (1972-1983). The episode ‘Dreams’ encapsulates well the sort of Gothic that *M\*A\*S\*H* engages with – not just for this episode, but also consistently throughout the eleven-year run. Within these representations of combat, war is treated as a place not of hell, but of purgatory: for those members of the camp who have been exiled from their homelands and subjected to harrowing external threats, traditional Gothic tropes are employed to emphasise horror. Governments are cast as the Gothic patriarch, typically shown as absentee jailors both monstrously tyrannical and criminally incompetent. When the piles of dead bodies reduce, past traumas resurface, and looming insanity heightens the sense of claustrophobia.

Stylistically excessive, the colour-scheme of the programme *M\*A\*S\*H* emphasises the khaki green and tan of military uniforms and tents, simultaneously creating an oppressive atmosphere whilst simultaneously camouflaging the use of the Gothic. In ‘The Interview’, Hawkeye complains that the biggest adjustment in arriving to a war-torn Korea was, in fact, the aesthetics: ‘everything is painted green. The clothes are green, the food is green – except the vegetables, of course. The only

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. xxv.

thing that's not green is the blood – the blood is red... that's what you get the most of here'.<sup>3</sup> In 'Peace On Us', Hawkeye explains the reason why green offends him so much: '[y]ou know why they dress us this way, don't you? So we'll blend into the background. Nobody matters 'cos we all look alike'.<sup>4</sup> Khaki is a specific shade of green is consistently linked with the military, carrying connotations of conformity, violence and death.

Moreover, specific production values are utilised within the programme that only serve to heighten and control this atmosphere: most American sitcoms of the 1970s, such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977), use videotape and multi-camera production, but the *M\*A\*S\*H* television programme uses film and single-camera like feature film. In fact, the sets used for the television programme were the same sets from Robert Altman's 1970 *MASH* feature film. Larry Gelbart, the executive producer of the television version, explains that by utilising 'a look that had feature film production values (lighting, set dimensions, and details), providing the series with an atmosphere of permanence and reality, a visual grounding that was to add to *M\*A\*S\*H*'s durability'.<sup>5</sup> That 'atmosphere of permanence and reality' is visually contradicted by the transient nature of the canvas tents suggest even less stability and more peril than the crumbling castles that pepper classic Gothic narratives. Further, Gelbart goes on to explain,

Stage 9 at Twentieth Century-Fox is a wonderful place to visit if you ever need a crash course in claustrophobia. [...] a miserable place to have to report for work for more than a decade, therefore the perfect environment for the *M\*A\*S\*H* cast to convey, through their characters, just how miserable they actually felt.<sup>6</sup>

That claustrophobia – whether explicitly declared by the characters, or implicitly conveyed by the real discomfort of the actors – only lends further 'realism' to the film-style programme. This conflation of reality and fantasy only heightens the Gothic: Spooner and McEvoy suggest that one of the many definitions of 'Gothic' includes 'emphasis on the returning past', 'dual interest in transgression and decay', 'commitment to exploring the aesthetics of fear', 'and its cross-

---

<sup>3</sup> 'The Interview', *M\*A\*S\*H*, CBS, 24 Feb 1976.

<sup>4</sup> 'Peace On Us', *M\*A\*S\*H*, CBS, 25 Sep 1978.

<sup>5</sup> Larry Gelbart, *Laughing Matters, on writing M\*A\*S\*H, Tootsie, Oh, God! and a few other funny things* (New York: Random House: 1998), p. 60.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

contamination of reality and fantasy'.<sup>7</sup> *M\*A\*S\*H* not only visually represents the returning past, but, placed just behind the front lines of a war, transgression, decay, and the 'aesthetics of fear' and suffering are never more palpable.

Despite the employments of Gothic tropes through aesthetics, the inherent Gothic of *M\*A\*S\*H* has gone unrecognised. Arguably, this is due to the mislabelling of the programme as a 'sitcom', aligning it with other wartime comedies like *McHale's Navy* (1962-1966) or *Hogan's Heroes* (1965-1971). Yvonne Tasker points out, however,

Although there were other wartime comedies, *M\*A\*S\*H's* humour was distinctive in its bleakness, each episode's comedy typically interleaved with more serious/dramatic themes and storylines. Indeed it was the weaving together of distinct narrative elements, each quite different in tone that was the series team's central informal innovation.<sup>8</sup>

Despite this inherent 'bleakness' of the programme – what I, in fact, call 'Gothic' – critics consistently view *M\*A\*S\*H* as a comedy with dramatic elements. The forced laugh track for American audiences from the CBS network did a better job of camouflaging the horrors of war than intended. But *M\*A\*S\*H's* true innovation was not just how hard it works to evoke the Gothic, but that it works equally as hard to subvert that Gothic through the use of irreverent comedy. This is what I refer to as 'Khaki Gothic': it is not just an intentional, explicit employment of the rhetoric and tropes that have come to be identified as 'Gothic' to depict horror, but the employment of these very same qualities to simultaneously subvert that horror, temporarily giving the *appearance* of humour in war narratives. Because the humour is ultimately the result of a proximity to death, the Gothic maintains a permanent foothold and is never lost; through a careful application of humour, the horror evoked seems to fleetingly shift into the periphery.

This article will first explore the relationship between a specific type of humour known as 'gallows humour' and the Gothic in relation to both the historical and fictional representations of war and combat. Once establishing my term 'Khaki Gothic' further, using *M\*A\*S\*H* as a prime

---

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Spooner, Emma McEvoy, 'Introduction' in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, ed. Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy, (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Yvonne Tasker, 'Comic Situations/Endless War: *M\*A\*S\*H* and War as Entertainment,' in *War Isn't Hell, It's Entertainment: essays on visual media and the representation of conflict*, ed. Rikke Schubart et al (North Carolina: McFarland & Co., Inc, 2009), pp. 133-134.

example, I will explore not only how humour can appear to camouflage and displace horrors of war temporarily, but also how it does, in fact, heighten and intensify Gothic.

## II - Components of Khaki Gothic *Gothic and War*

The relationship between Gothic and war – specifically the fictional representation of war – has not been explored in great detail. In *Urban Gothic of the Second World War*, Wasson argues that, ‘[t]he Gothic mode enabled commentary on the darker realities of industry during and directly after the war, depleting working spaces as fraught with gendered violence both physical and psychological’.<sup>9</sup> Wasson explores some of the literature developed in response to inherent similarities between Gothic and war, as well how an urban space could be transformed, as a result of war, into a Gothicised space.

In the Introduction to *The Gothic World*, Dale Townshend explores how fictional wars could be used with a Gothic effect in texts like H.G. Wells’ *War of the Worlds* (1898), and *World War Z* (2003). Like Wasson, Townshend also emphasises how representation of war – fictional or factual – can employ Gothic techniques within wartime settings.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, Gothic techniques can be effectively used to translate the horrors experienced through war, and provide a parlance for the horrors and trauma of war.

Through this translation from ‘war’ to ‘Gothic’, however, the techniques can become politicised, particularly within fictional representations. Angela Wright’s work in *Britain, France and the Gothic, 1764-1820: The Import of Terror* re-examines the roots of Gothic Romance and the connections between war, addressing ‘[t]he appearance of the first Gothic story [Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764)] in the immediate aftermath of [The Seven Years War] [...]’.<sup>11</sup> Wright argues that, in employing ‘A Gothic Story’ as a subtitle for his second preface, ‘Walpole constitutes

---

<sup>9</sup> Sara Wasson, *Urban Gothic of the Second World War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> Dale Townshend, ‘Introduction’ in *The Gothic World*, ed. Glennis Byron, Dale Townshend (New York: Routledge, 2013), xxiv-xlvi.

<sup>11</sup> Angela Wright, *Britain, France and the Gothic, 1764-1820: The Import of Terror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 12.

the Gothic as a patriotic defence of England's cultural traditions. However, such patriotism on the part of Walpole will always appear to be belated, apologetic and compromised by ambivalence'.<sup>12</sup>

Wright recognises a link between Gothic romance and war, as well as how that link is politically contextualised. E.J. Clery acknowledges this as well in the introduction to Oxford's edition of Walpole's text, stating:

[...] Walpole's fanciful tale takes on the appearance of a nationalist enterprise; and breaking the rules of literary decorum by including a few phantoms, or mixing comedy and tragedy, becomes almost a patriotic duty. Although *The Castle of Otranto* was published in the year following the conclusion of the Seven Years War against France, it is clear that hostilities on the aesthetic front had not ceased.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the argument could be made that in what is often considered the first Gothic novel, many of the tropes that have come to be recognised as 'Gothic' were strongly influenced – even politicised – through the context of war.

Despite Wright, Wasson, Townshend emphasising the intrinsic links between war and Gothic, however, research on war and Gothic remains limited. Whilst this relationship certainly warrants further exploration, my primary interest here is not just the use of Gothic discourse within war (historical or fictional), but the addition of humour to these situations, what I refer to here as 'Khaki Gothic'. Khaki Gothic is not just the amalgam of Gothic, comedy and war trauma, but it is a very intentional application of a specific type of humour and Gothic within the context of war.

Claustrophobia and incoming disfigured, bloodied bodies to stitch together, dead bodies piling up in the corner, starvation, disease, exploitation – all of the horrors of war: this is tragic enough. But the ability to laugh and joke at these horrors in the midst of the bombs and blood: this is Gothic.

It is ironic that something as horrific as war should be so adaptable as entertainment.

Employing what Baudrillard refers to as 'War Porn', representations of combat often glorify – even

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> E.J. Clery, 'Introduction,' in *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story (Oxford World Classic edition)*, by Horace Walpole, ed. W.S. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) (1764), pp. vvi-xxxiii (pp. xiv-xv).

fetishise – not just examples of ‘heroism’, but also the devastation and destruction surrounding that heroism.<sup>14</sup> In *War isn’t Hell, it’s Entertainment*, Rikke Schubart states,

Today war is both a cruel and lethal theatre of death and something else: an exciting, dramatic, heroic or tragic narrative to be turned into films, television shows, computer games, news stories, reenactment [*sic*] plays, and banal militainment, and to be used for national, political, and commercial purposes as propaganda, as sites of resistance and opposition, and as “pure” entertainment providing spectacles of sublime beauty, intense joy, and larger-than-life heroes.<sup>15</sup>

Schubart’s phrase to describe war as a ‘theatre of death’ suggests a level of performativity and theatricality; that the line between a factual war and a fictional one (or a fictional representation of a factual one) is, perhaps, not as clearly defined as one might believe. Within this ‘theatre of death’, those who are not directly involved with the realities of war are spectators dependent on the representation and interpretations of war – primarily fictional.<sup>16</sup>

Whilst it could be argued that Gothic readings of historical war are possible (and, by association, the Khaki Gothic of the gallows humour resulting from historical war), as an interpretative concept Khaki Gothic is most useful in relation to *representations* of war; representations are created with specific intentions, and are therefore politicised. Walpole may have employed Gothic as a ‘patriotic defence’ – ambivalent or otherwise – but Khaki Gothic tends to employ humour against the Gothic as an attempt to question patriotism and duty within an unjust war, often to the point of anti-militarism or anti-patriotism. Despite the horrors of war within fiction evoked, primarily, for entertainment, Schubart suggests that the distinct line between ‘historical’ and ‘fictional’ are blurred through representation:

[w]hat is war becomes entertainment when soldiers record their actions, edit the material, and upload a video on the internet. What is entertainment becomes part of war when the same simulation programs [*sic*] are used for military training purposes. Or entertainment may be indistinguishable from war when war reenactors [*sic*] take photographs of themselves, so realistic-looking that they end up on eBay sold as authentic war photographs.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “Pornographie de la guerre,” in *Liberation* (May 19, 2004), reprinted as “War Porn” in *The Conspiracy of Art, Manifestos, Texts, Interviews* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 205-212.

<sup>15</sup> Rikke Schubart, ‘Introduction’, in *War Isn’t Hell, It’s Entertainment: essays on visual media and the representation of conflict*, ed. Rikke Schubart et al (North Carolina: McFarland & Co., Inc: North Carolina, 2009) (pp. 1-10) p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> See Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulacra and Simulation* (trs. Sheila Faria Glaser) (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1994) (1981). Baudrillard discusses representation and history specifically, even commenting specifically on the Khaki Gothic film *Apocalypse Now* (pp. 59-60) and the representation of the Vietnam War in America.

<sup>17</sup> Schubart, p. 4.

Schubert discusses visual artefacts – photographs and videos in particular – that can either be used as evidence for ‘real’ war or transformed into a replica in order to simulate war. But these artefacts, even when treated as documentary evidence, are based on visual surface: a photo or video, no matter how genuine, can never fully recreate the horrors presented. When watching footage – whether real or invented – the audience cannot smell the blood of the victims or taste the spent gunpowder in the air after a weapon is fired. Perhaps this is why it is so easy for a fraudulent photo to be taken as genuine: if the uniform, visual backdrop, and quality of the photograph are reproduced with enough care, it can be, as Schubart suggests, indistinguishable. The *representation* of war, whether genuine or fabricated, is, like Gothic, entirely surface.

### *Gothic and Comedy*

As with the relationship between Gothic and war, the relationship between Gothic and comedy is still an area of research under-explored. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik’s *Gothic and the Comic Turn* examines this topic within literature, but I am particularly interested in how their theories can be adapted for cinematic and tele-visual Gothic representations. Horner and Zlosnik state,

[...] the comic within the Gothic foregrounds a self-reflexivity and dialectical impulse intrinsic to the modern subject. Rather than setting up a binary between ‘serious’ and ‘comic’ Gothic texts, it is perhaps best to think of Gothic writing as a spectrum that, at one end, produces horror-writing containing moments of comic hysteria or relief and, at the other, works in which there are clear signals that nothing is to be taken seriously.<sup>18</sup>

With Horner and Zlosnik having established that the comic is, in fact, intrinsic within the Gothic, I argue that it is necessary to then distinguish the various types of humour (or the combinations thereof) utilised. In doing so, this will not only further the understanding of Gothic and of comedy in general, but also the relationship between the two.

---

<sup>18</sup> Avril Horner, Sue Zlosnik, *Gothic and the Comic Turn*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2005, p. 17.



For all the varieties of humour that have been acknowledged, ‘gallows’ humour, also known as ‘black’ and ‘morbid’ humour might be the darkest, for it focuses primarily on loss, death and trauma. And yet, despite being so close to death, there is often an ironic lightness that maintains it. It is one of the best enhancements to the Gothic, for, like the Gothic, it maintains a liminal fluidity between ‘serious’ and ‘light’; refusing to allow each to become binaries working against each other. Often this constant flux within the Gothic is based on the era and culture interpreting it. And, as the representation of the Gothic shifts, depending on context, so, too, does humour. Antonin J. Obrdlik explores in, “‘Gallows Humor [*sic*]’ – A Sociological Phenomenon’,

Humor [*sic*] in general, and gallows ... specifically, is a social phenomenon the importance of which, under certain circumstances, may be tremendous. It originates in the process of social interaction and bears marks of the particular group by which it was created and accepted. Its social character is revealed by the fact that it changes its contents – and sometimes also the form in which it is presented – in accordance with the character of the group and the social events to which it reacts.<sup>19</sup>

A prime example of gallows humour developed through very specific temporal and cultural situations is in concentration camps during World War II. Obrdlik recalls a gallows-style joke:

To find a Czech who is truly loyal to the Germans is no easy task. According to Czech gallows humor [*sic*] the Gestapo found one such specimen at long last. He was an old man walking up and down the street and speaking seriously to himself aloud: “Adolf Hitler is the greatest leader. The Germans are a noble nation. I would rather work for ten Germans than for one Czech.” When the Gestapo agent asked what was his occupation, this Czech admirer of naziiism reluctantly confessed that he was a gravedigger.<sup>20</sup>

Gallows humour highlights a grim, nihilistic attitude, with satirical and ironic tones, occasionally employing farcical elements (but never absolute farce), and very often with an absurdist, deadpan or even a mordant, biting delivery. The crucial key, however, in understanding gallows humour, is the way it develops:

People who live in absolute uncertainty as to their lives and property find a refuge in inventing, repeating, and spreading through the channels of whispering counterpropaganda, anecdotes and jokes about their oppressors. This is gallows humor [*sic*] at its best because it originates and functions among people who literally face death at any moment. Some of them even dare to collect the jokes as philatelists collect stamps. [...] These people simply have to persuade themselves as well as others that their present suffering is only temporary,

---

<sup>19</sup> Antonin K. Obrdlik, "Gallows Humor [*sic*] " A Sociological Phenomenon, *American Journal of Sociology*, 47, 5, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Mar., 1942), pp. 709-716.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 714.

that it will soon be all over, that once again they will live as they used to live before they were crushed.<sup>21</sup>

Gallows humour is not just found within an historical context, but is readily adaptable to fiction that maintains a proximity to death. Additionally, as seen with war and Gothic, as well as comedy and Gothic, that historical context is infused with the socio-political attitudes of the time. A prime example for this humour within literature is Joseph Heller's absurdist 1961 novel *Catch-22*.

Embracing gallows humour in the middle of World War II, Heller focuses specifically on the ironies of war:

There was only one catch, and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to.<sup>22</sup>

The doublespeak of the military – the exaggerated use of logic to the point of the illogical – underpins the dark humour so crucial to Khaki Gothic: only a crazy man is sane enough to want to live. When this humour is combined with Gothic representations of the horrors of war, the result is Khaki Gothic.

### III – Applications of Khaki Gothic

*What Khaki Gothic is not:*

Wartime comedy is not necessarily inherently Khaki Gothic. On the surface, programmes like *McHale's Navy*, *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.* (1964-1969), and *It Ain't Half Hot, Mum* (1974-1981) engage in humour resulting from combat. Aesthetically, war comedies – Khaki Gothic or not – are often visually indistinguishable: military encampments tend to follow a similar colour scheme of muted greens, tans and browns, contextualised within specific eras, but also retaining a temporal displacement that allows an ambiguity as to when and where it is actually set. Scenarios revolving around pranks and interpersonal relationships, attempting to acquire a specific object, occasional

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 712.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Heller, *Catch-22: 50th Anniversary Edition*, (London: Vintage Publishing/Random House, 2011), (1955), p. 52.

interactions with civilians, and navigating the minefield of military incompetence and bureaucratic double-speak are common. Each displays men in Hawaiian shirts and khaki trousers binge-drinking, nurse-chasing, and gambling in a military setting.

For Khaki Gothic programmes, the bureaucratic incompetent clowns are not to be laughed at, but are considered criminally dangerous, as they are the men in charge. Activities like binge drinking, nurse chasing and gambling are not for entertainment, but to distract participants from the horrors of war. Here, war is presented as a character within every episode: ever-present, horrific, cruel and terrifying, able and willing to destroy everyone, whether the names of the actors are in the main credits or not. Just as ‘Walpole’s purpose is to overwhelm the reader with an excess of stimuli, rather than to tantalise,’ the excessive barrage of horrific images and ideas displayed in *M\*A\*S\*H* are employed not to tease but to overwhelm.<sup>23</sup> These images – indeed, the excessive amounts of Gothic images – are entirely absent in sitcoms like *McHale’s Navy* or *Gomer [...]*, which are dependent on anodyne humour in spite of wartime.

Rather than highlighting the horrors of war, the humour on programmes like *Gomer [...]* works to erase the acknowledgement of those horrors entirely. Primarily situational and physical slapstick, any real representations of life at war are glorified. A 12-year old (played by actor Ron Howard) runs away to join the military in an episode of *Gomer [...]* because the letters sent home by his friend show that ‘war’ is a fun place to be, full of freedom, patriotism, camaraderie and heroism.<sup>24</sup> ‘War’ is a place where a boy becomes a man, and, as he is a patriotic hard working young American, he cannot possibly be injured or killed. Curiously, Howard, who played the underage run-away in *Gomer [...]* played an underage run-away soldier several years later on *M\*A\*S\*H* in ‘Sometimes You Hear the Bullet’.<sup>25</sup> Howard’s character is praised for bravery and patriotism in *Gomer [...]*, but in *M\*A\*S\*H*, he is angrily lectured on the violence and horrific realities of war before placed under arrest to be sent back to the States.

---

<sup>23</sup> Clery, p. xx.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Opie Joins the Marines’ in *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.*, 2.26, CBS, 18 March 1966.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Sometimes You Hear the Bullet’, *M\*A\*S\*H*, CBS, 28 January 1973.

This is the distinction between programmes like *Gomer [...]*: war is anodyne, even comforting. The humour of conventional war comedies is not dependent on the dark situations arising from combat or military-related culture, but in spite of it. Lacking an irreverent humour that both utilises and subverts Gothic tropes, humour is used within these programmes not to camouflage the trauma of war, but to deny it entirely, forcing combat and war to become a backdrop to the light comedy itself. These shows declare ‘War is Hell’, but ‘Hell’ is portrayed more as place of occasional annoyance and minor inconvenience rather than horrific and macabre. Khaki Gothic does not ignore horror, it displays it completely: it is irreverent, offensive, abrasive, provocative, and cruel. Khaki Gothic is often an anaesthetic to temporarily dull a bullet wound, but shows like *Gomer [...]* anaesthetise nothing because they refuse to acknowledge the mere existence of trauma.

#### *How Khaki Gothic Works:*

I previously acknowledged Heller’s novel *Catch-22* as a prime example of gallows humour.

In fact, *Catch-22* is also a prime example of the Khaki Gothic. Howard Jacobson observes,

Never a light novel, or what we these days call an easy read, *Catch-22* catches out with comedy, making play with what is never playful, [...] [it is] Kafka popularized [*sic*] right enough, Kafka made available to those who would never go near Kafka, but by no means Kafka alleviated. [...] The clubbed and helmeted military police coming to arrest Aarfy for rape and murder are in fact coming to arrest Yossarian for the more serious crime of being in Rome without a pass. Funny still, yes, but it’s getting harder to breathe. And while there remains work for Abbot and Costello in scenes [...] in truth the comedy has become black as hell.<sup>26</sup>

Abbott and Costello meets Kafka is, in fact, is one of the finer descriptions for *Catch-22* (and indeed, the feature film *MASH* and subsequent television programme), because it highlights both an absurd, irreverent humour and a surreal, horrific intensity. Similar in tone to *Catch-22* and the *M\*A\*S\*H* adaptations are Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979) (especially in the 2006 uncut *Redux*) and Barry Levinson’s 1987 *Good Morning Vietnam*, each set in the Vietnam War.

---

<sup>26</sup> Howard Jacobson, ‘Howard Jacobson on *Catch-22*’ in *Catch-22: 50th Anniversary Edition* by Joseph Heller, (London: Vintage Publishing Random House, 2011) (1955), (pp. 521-530) pp. 526-527.

With so many of the best examples for American Khaki Gothic either produced or set during the Vietnam War era, it could be questioned whether it is a phenomenon belonging specifically to Vietnam-era America. There are, however, several fine examples of British uses of Khaki Gothic, such as *Dad's Army* (1968-1977) and *Blackadder Goes Forth* (1989). Internationally-produced *No Man's Land* (2001), set during the Bosnian War (1992-1995), infused by a black-humour plot out of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and the irreverent humour of *Catch-22* is one of the finer examples of recent times.

*M\*A\*S\*H* remains, nevertheless, one of the most interesting examples of Khaki Gothic. With two hundred and fifty-one episodes spanning eleven years, there is ample material available for analysis. *M\*A\*S\*H* had the time to experiment with and perfect the use of Khaki Gothic – time lacking for two-hour feature films like *Apocalypse Now* or the six episodes of *Blackadder Goes Forth*. Additionally, the writers of *M\*A\*S\*H* appeared to have a working understanding of classic Gothic tropes: the programme often makes direct reference to Gothic (or Gothicised) literature or figures. From *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, to *Dracula*, the evocation of the Gothic goes beyond off-hand references, employed not to frighten, but as a release to hide from the real horrors. Next to the monstrous world they inhabit, vampires and mummies are a welcome distraction.

Most importantly, *M\*A\*S\*H* was developed during a time of war, fuelled by the apoplectic zeitgeist of the times and tapping into the irreverent, politicised attitudes of the American public.<sup>27</sup> *M\*A\*S\*H* is a television programme with a complex history: in 1970, Altman refashioned Richard Hooker's 1968 novel, *MASH: A Novel About Three Army Doctors*, as an allegory of the Vietnam War (1956-1975, with direct US involvement from 1962-1972). Altman's film (*MASH*) adaptation may have used Hooker's characters and the Korean War, but it had far more in common with

---

<sup>27</sup> James H Wittebols, *Watching M\*A\*S\*H, Watching America: A Social History of the 1972-1983 Television Series* (London: McFarland & Co. Inc, 1998). Wittebols provides an in-depth analysis of how *M\*A\*S\*H* was influenced by (and influenced) contemporary society, as well as politically contextualizing liberal and conservative politics within the programme.

Heller's *Catch-22* in terms of politics and overall anti-establishment attitude. Heller provided a foundation infused with an absurdist, mordant mood lacking in Hooker's original novel.

Altman's tone proved crucial for the television programme developed in 1972 by Gelbart as a foundation for liberal, anti-war politics. Gelbart went to great lengths not just to inject more historical accuracy into the programme, but also actively reflect the more visceral attitudes of the contemporary audience.<sup>28</sup> Michael Mandelbaum states that '[t]he Vietnam War was the first to be televised. In their living rooms watching the evening news, Americans regularly saw film of airplanes [*sic*] flying, often dropping bombs, and troops on patrol, sometimes in combat'.<sup>29</sup> The images painstakingly recreated to represent the Korean War of the 1950s are not strikingly dissimilar to the images of the Vietnam War appearing on the news for the contemporary *M\*A\*S\*H* viewer of the 1970s.

In fact, Mandelbaum argues, 'it is widely believed [...] that the United States lost the war *because* it was televised. [...] Regular exposure to the ugly realities of battle is thought to have turned the public against the war, forcing the withdrawal of American troops'.<sup>30</sup> Letters to television *M\*A\*S\*H* actor Alan Alda ('Hawkeye') seem to agree with this sentiment: in his book *The Last Days of MASH* [*sic*], he reveals several sample letters he received from viewers of the programme. One letter states, '[...] *M\*A\*S\*H* [*sic*] plugged me into the dreariest, most depressing of events – Reality'.<sup>31</sup> Another commented that the realities of the programme 'punctured my inner-brain and lodged firmly by its emotional core, compelling and discomfiting my mind throughout the night. So thank you for the lost and tossed sleep. You should be very proud'.<sup>32</sup>

Letters such as these suggest that not only did many of the viewers recognise *M\*A\*S\*H*'s engagement with horror and the contemporary socio-political atmosphere of the day, but welcomed

---

<sup>28</sup> Gelbart, p.47. Gelbart openly discusses his anti-war political leanings and how *M\*A\*S\*H* was used to encourage further anti-US military involvement in the Vietnam War, as well as research that was involved for *M\*A\*S\*H*'s historical accuracy, including going to Korea to interview former medical staff. See pp. 25-61 for more.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Mandelbaum, 'Vietnam: The Television War', in *Daedalus*, 111, 4, *Print Culture and Video Culture* (Fall 1982) (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), p. 157.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>31</sup> Alan Alda, Arlene Alda, [§Telegrams & Letters] in *The Last Days of MASH* [*sic*] (New Jersey: Unicorn Publishing House: 1983) §Telegrams & Letters [96].

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, [101].

it. With literal, factual war horrors being transmitted into the homes of American audiences every night, *M\*A\*S\*H* had to both reflect and subvert these realities: through Gothic, it utilised the anti-war *zeitgeist* in the contemporary culture. In evoking the comic, especially the gallows and mordant humour so prominent within the programme, it provided a voice, as recognised within Alda's many sample letters, for anti-war America, but also a distraction from the actual horrors the audience was witnessing on the news. As *M\*A\*S\*H* haunted the contemporary viewer with the Korean War of the past, so, too, did the Vietnam War of the future haunt *M\*A\*S\*H*.

Khaki Gothic is not necessarily intrinsic to all representations of war: it is not found, for example, in every adaptation of *M\*A\*S\*H*. The kernels of Khaki Gothic may be found within the Hooker novel, but it is never inherently Gothic. Although the Altman film worked to explore this tone, it was the television show that fully engaged with Khaki Gothic. Gelbart said the primary concern in getting the series on-air was one question:

“How the hell is anybody going to take that subject – people at war – and make it at all funny?” [...] I knew it was going to have to be a whole lot more than funny. Funny was easy. How not to trivialise human suffering by trying to be comic about it, that was the challenge.<sup>33</sup>

Even if this balance between war and humour was considered from the beginning, it wasn't fully achieved until the seventeenth episode of the first series, 'Sometimes You Hear The Bullet', when a friend of Hawkeye's dies on the operating table. *M\*A\*S\*H* Actor Larry Linville states, '[...] it was the most beautiful balance we ever hit – the best, by far. [...] This show contained the comedy, which is obviously the staple of the show, but it also contained an element of horror. And that, to me, is the finest thing we could do [...]'.<sup>34</sup> Alda also cites this episode as a turning point, stating '[...] We were beginning to mix the dark with the light. The network said, “What is this? A comedy or a tragedy?”’<sup>35</sup>

Alda's comment is reminiscent of one from E.J. Clery in the introduction to Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*: 'The nature of the plot maybe uncontroversial, but this has not prevented

---

<sup>33</sup> Gelbart, p. 31.

<sup>34</sup> Suzy Kalter, *The Complete Book of M\*A\*S\*H* (London: Columbus Books, 1987) (1984), p. 115.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

disagreement over the response it is intended to produce: terror, pity, or even laughter?’<sup>36</sup>. Walpole himself acknowledges in the preface to the second edition that this an intentional choice, stating ‘[s]urely if a comedy may be *toute serieuse*, tragedy may now and then, soberly, be indulged in a smile.’<sup>37</sup> As previously suggested, the roots of the crucial elements for Khaki Gothic – humour, horror, and influence from war – are already embedded in the first Gothic novel. In combining the tragic with humour, Walpole also recognises the importance of humour of Shakespeare’s grave-diggers in Hamlet in his own preface for *Otranto*.<sup>38</sup> In *Watching M\*A\*S\*H, Watching America*, James J. Wittebols acknowledges, ‘Shakespeare, in focusing on human complexities and contradictions, also used comedy to critique hypocrisy and pretentiousness’.<sup>39</sup> Like Shakespeare and Walpole, *M\*A\*S\*H* uses comedy, intertwined with terror as a commentary (and occasionally a politicised weapon) on current social standards.

‘Sometimes ... Bullet’ marks *M\*A\*S\*H*’s first successful experiment into the Khaki Gothic; it served as something of a second pilot, rebranding the show from the hi-jinx-at-the-front screwball humour to Khaki Gothic. The hi-jinx continued, but from this point the show maintained not just flashes of light and dark, but also this specific amalgam of the two at all times. Alda argues,

*M\*A\*S\*H* [*sic*] isn’t really a sitcom. We’d do a show without anything funny in it. We’d mix the heavy and the light. We’d be incredibly silly. The brutality of the war combined with the desire to heal – no other comedy on TV has had such a powerful basis. [...] When you can do that, it’s the best kind of drama because it’s what life is.<sup>40</sup>

Whilst I would argue several of the episodes prior to ‘Sometimes [...] Bullet’ may have contained the necessary components to be considered Khaki Gothic, this episode does mark the first time where the combination was used so effectively. As Hawkeye’s childhood friend dies on the operating table, he and Hawkeye trade jokes between them. Khaki Gothic is not just the ability to tell a joke during war, but also the ability to deliver a death-bed comedy routine; to laugh and die at

---

<sup>36</sup> Clery, p. xx.

<sup>37</sup> Horace Walpole, ‘Preface to the Second Edition’ in *Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story (Oxford World Classic edition)*, ed. W.S. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) (1764), p. 12.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Wittebols, p. 8.

<sup>40</sup> Kalter, p. 63.



the same time – or even laugh and watch a loved one die. Hawkeye laughs at his friend's jokes not because they are funny, but because there is simply nothing else for him to do.

#### *IV - Khaki Gothic in Action*

Through gallows humour, Khaki Gothic can be utilised effectively to disguise, diffuse, and ultimately, intensify the horrors of war. *M\*A\*S\*H* is, as a whole, fairly consistent in the application of Khaki Gothic, but not always consistent in how it is used: for example, 'Sometimes [...] Bullet' uses humour to intensify horror, but do little to disguise or diffuse it. Other episodes, like 'Yankee Doodle Doctor' excel in disguising horror, but do not engage strongly with intensification. I have chosen to focus primarily on 'Follies of the Living, Concerns of the Dead' not just because it centres on a highly Gothic plot, but because, through incorporating gallows humour, it effectively balances how Khaki Gothic can used to effectively disguise, diffuse and intensify trauma.

Focusing on a medical unit on the front lines of the Korean War, *M\*A\*S\*H* primarily concerns itself with the patients struggling to live and the medical staff who strived to save them. As with any war, not everyone will be saved: where there are dead bodies, surely ghosts will follow. 'Follies [...]' focuses specifically on a soldier, Weston, as he dies, leaves his body, and, completely unobserved by the main staff, save one soldier, Weston works to accept his own death and prepare for what comes next.

#### *Camouflaged Gothic – Disguise*

*M\*A\*S\*H* is particularly adept at camouflaging horror through comedy. Whether Hawkeye is tromping through the recovery room dressed as Groucho Marx, or camp clown Max Klinger is parading around in drag, the programme usually relies on physical humour to conceal the darkness of the plot. The comic momentum of 'Follies [...]' is dependent on the petty bickering between the main characters – especially between Hawkeye and Charles Winchester. As Weston slowly

discovers he is dead, he attempts to make contact with them both, telling them, ‘really, I don’t feel dead. There’s just gotta be a mistake’.<sup>41</sup>

Trying to get the attention of anyone who will listen, Weston observes the escalating fight between the two highly intelligent, educated medical doctors over who gets to use which nail to hang up their shirts as they step into surgery. The quarrel is, of course, utterly absurd: the punch-up has nothing to do with the nail on the wall; it responds to the constant deluge of bodies and trauma they face on a daily basis. The focus on this altercation distracts Hawkeye and Charles from the pending long hours in surgery: for a brief moment, the worst problem they both face is who deserves to use a nail on the wall. The horrors surrounding them never desist, but for a short time, they are placed in the periphery.

Underlying this humour, however, is the Khaki Gothic: the superficial ‘follies of the living’ as the title of the episode reminds, distracts from the rather dark ‘concerns of the dead.’ Weston struggles to comprehend not only how to let go of the life he is leaving behind, but also the fear for what is to come – literally, life and death – but the argument he observes is so vehement that Weston himself gets distracted from his own plight. The camera focus moves from the punch-up to the confused Weston: his attempts to get their attention have consistently failed and his pleas to be heard dissolve into a half-hearted ‘...hey, fellas...?’ before trailing off again and giving up entirely. Unable to haunt the living, the ghost Weston is shown, in turn, to be haunted by them in turn.

The only person in the camp who can see Weston is Klinger, who has a deathly high fever. Klinger is close enough to death he is beyond the living, able to see what others cannot. Weston, though dead, is close enough to life he is able to respond and react. At several points Klinger, crazed from fever, provides comic relief: he talks to a lamppost, trips and falls into a stretcher when ordered back to bed, and responds with non-sequitur dialogue such as ‘a mouse has four paws [...] but he doesn’t wear a belt’. This humour does, as intended, lighten the atmosphere as the priest gives last rites to Weston’s corpse and the other medical staff examines the incoming wounded. As

---

<sup>41</sup> ‘Follies of the Living, Concerns of the Dead’, *M\*A\*S\*H*, CBS, 4 Jan 1982.

before, it is a gallows humour – Klinger is talking to lampposts and having conversations with ghosts because he is dying.

Whether shown through off-hand jokes or through personality clashes, the comic cannot disable the horrors of war; it can only camouflage it. Like the Army Combat disruptive patterns integrating several colours worn by soldiers to effectively disguise them to their surroundings, comedy and horror can be splintered together to camouflage the full effect of trauma. The Gothic inherent in the text – from both the surrounding horrors of war and the ghostly interactions acknowledged only by a dying man – are never eradicated, but for a short time they are ignored. Humour – whether it is an absurd argument over the use of a nail or the fever-induced ramblings of the camp clown, does effectively distract the tragic horror from immediate sight. But as the comedy is thriving on the trauma it attempts to subvert, all it can do is distract, momentarily, from the brutalities exposed. Khaki Gothic encourages you to laugh at a joke when you hear it, only to later realise that the joke was horrific.

### *Camouflaging Gothic - Intensification*

One of the most unusual aspects to *M\*A\*S\*H* is not just the power to alleviate war trauma through humour, but to amplify and intensify it. As important as the dialogue and physical comedy might be to the momentum of a scene, the production values themselves have a strong impact on how much of the comedy is camouflaged. The placement of the performers, as well as the movement of the camera, has a great impact on the tone of a scene: critics such as Millerson and Zettl have explored the two-dimensional nature of television, and how, through set design, lighting and performance blocking, the suggestion of a third dimension, depth, is created.<sup>42</sup> For a Khaki Gothic programme like *M\*A\*S\*H*, the framing of a scene is imperative: it is the aesthetics of a scene that often determine how much power the comedic dialogue or action might have over the more dramatic elements.

---

<sup>42</sup> Gerald Millerson, *Lighting for TV and Film*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed (London: Routledge, 1999) p. 21; Herbert Zettl, *Television Production Handbook*, 12<sup>th</sup> ed (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 2014) pp. 150-158.

In order to understand why the *M\*A\*S\*H* production values might hold such importance for humour within Khaki Gothic, it is first crucial to understand how the aesthetics can be utilised within the programme itself. In ‘Television Production Techniques as Communication’, David Barker compares the production values of the situation-comedy *All In the Family* (*AITF*) (1971-1979) and *M\*A\*S\*H*. Barker suggests that unlike multi-camera comedies like *AITF*, or previous single-camera situation comedies, *M\*A\*S\*H*'s use of camera, space and lighting is more ‘aggressive’ because it visually reinforces the narrative of the programme.<sup>43</sup> Much of Barker’s argument draws upon Zettl’s seminal deconstruction of the television film set and the performer space within the frame of the camera into three separate axes: horizontal (x-axis), height (y-axis) and depth (z-axis).<sup>44</sup> Standard sitcoms, particularly multi-camera programmes such as *AITF*, primarily rely on the x-axis, very occasionally, the y-axis, but tend to use the z-axis only very occasionally: the effect is a visually horizontally long but shallow camera frame. As Hawkeye and Winchester argue over the right to use a nail, for example, the performance blocking, as well as the camera movements, are more traditional to the standard blocking of sit-coms like *AITF*: that is to say, they are placed along the x-axis, with the camera frame shallow and long, paying minimal attention to the y or z-axes. In utilising expected framing for comedic scenes for this particular comedic scene, the production values are positioning the coded expectations of a comedic scene. In short, due to the repeated associations of the horizontal x-axis as humorous, scenes shot prioritising the horizontal x-axis ‘look’ more humorous than scenes prioritising the depth of the z-axis, associated more with dramas and cinema.

For a Khaki Gothic programme like *M\*A\*S\*H* which consistently maintains an amalgam of comedy and Gothic drama, camera movements and visual set design can hold direct control over how much ‘humour’ might be perceived within a scene. Previously, I mentioned that Stage 9, repurposed from Altman’s film set, was utilised by the television programme, created what Gelbart

---

<sup>43</sup> David Barker, ‘Television Production Techniques as Communication’ in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 2.3, (Sep 1985) 234-246, p. 236.

<sup>44</sup> Zettl, p. 150.

referred to as ‘a crash course in claustrophobia’, citing the construction of the stage itself as one of the reasons for discomfort: ‘[t]iny and cramped, it was built when the movies were young, actors much smaller, and people apparently didn’t breathe as much as they do now.’<sup>45</sup> As Barker notes, however, one of the reasons *M\*A\*S\*H* is particularly aesthetically striking compared to other comedy programmes is due to the primary use not of the horizontal space, but of depth: Altman’s *MASH*, as a film, prioritised the z-axis. Blocking along the x-axis is highly unusual for *M\*A\*S\*H*: the priority of the programme tends toward the layering of depth, more common to dramas and cinematic blocking. The effect is a visually narrow (and often claustrophobic) horizontal space, but visually deep image with multiple layers of action and movement.<sup>46</sup>

This proves highly valuable: the Gothic can be employed aesthetically, and that claustrophobia that so disturbed Gelbart and the *M\*A\*S\*H* cast can be visually displaced into the scene itself.<sup>47</sup> As such, a more dramatic or even Gothic scene can be perceived as more ‘comedic’ when the x-axis is prioritised, and the comic momentum of a scene can be aesthetically discordant when filmed within the z-axis. As such, the *mis-en-scene* can have direct control over whether the comedy within a scene is displaced or displayed within the Gothic. In ‘Follies [...]’, for example, a scene in which Weston’s best friend Hicks and Potter discuss a letter to Weston’s family. The dialogue is, at least on the surface, upbeat: and yet, the lighting, performance blocking and camera movements all embrace darker feel to the scene, contradicting the light-hearted tone of the dialogue. Under the camera blocking of a sitcom like *AITF*, the comic elements within the scene might not be only disguised; with the camera blocking of *M\*A\*S\*H*, however, the comedy only serves to heighten the more Gothic elements of the scene.

A standard opening shot of the scene might have opened the scene on a clear long shot of the recovery ward, facing the x-axis before cutting to standard one-shot close-ups of the characters. But the scene is destabilised from the opening shot: a hand-held camera opens not facing the x-axis, but

---

<sup>45</sup> Gelbart, p. 60.

<sup>46</sup> Barker, p. 238.

<sup>47</sup> Gelbart, p. 60.

moving along side it at a parallel level. The camera sways around boxes in the foreground, pivoting to move along the z-axis. Swaying through the metal bed frames within the x-axis, the camera then pulls up before resting on an awkwardly angled two-shot of Potter and Hicks in another bed. The shot is deep enough to reveal nurses tending to an unconscious Klinger in a bed further back. Hovering between the beds, hidden in the shadows with his back to the camera (highly unusual for sit-coms), stands Father Mulchahy.

The placement of each of these characters within this scene, (as well as additional props) is carefully constructed to create several layers within not just the x-axis, as standard sitcoms would, but within z-axis, with secondary attention paid to the x and y-axes, creating a crowded and visually active scene to contradict the physically static positions of the characters: the camera moves whilst the characters do not. As Barker suggests, effective control and manipulation of screen space is one of the most crucial elements of television aesthetics – and in prioritising the z-axis, *M\*A\*S\*H* maintains control over how every scene is presented.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, as Barker notes, the programme utilises chiaroscuro lighting, clearly marking whether scenes are set during the day or night with lighting and shadow.<sup>49</sup> As this scene is set at night, minimal light is focused upon the middle of the frame, encircled by dark shadow on all sides. The camera work and set design position the scene as unsteady, slow, solemn and visually dark. The dialogue is quietly spoken – and somewhat contradictory to the aesthetics of the scene. Potter reads the composed letter to Hicks for approval.

As the letter is being read, the camera very slowly moves past Hicks and Potter, passing over Klinger and the nurses, into the shadows along the wall. The camera unsteadily discovers an overhead lamp throwing relief onto Weston, who stands in the shadows against the wall of the recovery room. Barker notes that, due to the ensemble-nature of the programme, *M\*A\*S\*H* tends to avoid reaction shots.<sup>50</sup> When the programme does utilise reaction shots, it is all the more striking: in fact, the camera seems generally unconcerned with the action taking place between Hicks and

---

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>49</sup> Barker, p. 241.

<sup>50</sup> Barker, p. 238.

Potter, prioritising not just Weston in the shadows who watches on the event, but on his reactions to the dialogue as Potter reads the letter back to Hicks. The effect is simple yet aesthetically striking: a claustrophobic and melancholy atmosphere to contradict the up-beat nature of the dialogue.

It is this contradiction – the tension between the dark and light – that maintains the Khaki Gothic within the scene. With the comedic dialogue, however, the comedy can only intensify the inherent Gothic of the scene. The letter recalls Weston's sense of humour as a combatant against fear and horror:

he used to read the comic page to me and make up funny voices for the characters. After a while it would have us both in stitches. [...] we'd be on patrol and he'd see I was getting scared, he'd start talking in one of those voices and it would really lift our spirits.<sup>51</sup>

On the surface, this evokes laughter and innocent fun; indeed, Hicks is concerned the letter might be too light-hearted. However, certain language and camera work are employed to ensure that it is a bittersweet exchange. When Hicks says the funny voices would 'have us both in stitches', the language evokes laughter but also medical stitches: Bennett, Royle, Horner and Zlosnik have all noted on the connection between death and laughter, recalling the phrases 'I nearly died laughing' or 'dead funny'.<sup>52</sup> The phrase 'in stitches' has a similar connection between death and laughter; perhaps, in this specific context, it is even more reflexive, being that Hicks is recovering from surgery in a rather dour recovery room, literally in stitches when using this metaphor. Weston's ability for humour is recalled as a combatant against fear and danger. In this context, however, as a tangible letter, the humour takes on a more nuanced role: rather than serve as consolation for loss, it can only ever serve as a reminder – rather than evoke a fond laughter, it only highlights that Weston's death means an absence of that laughter.

Colonel's Potter's sombre tone as he reads it to a grieving Hicks is contradicted by the light words in the letter and Weston's own happy expression at the recollection. Indeed – 'lift our spirits' has a particularly harrowing phrase: the camera stays on Weston's spirit — the only one who is

---

<sup>51</sup> 'Follies [...]' *M\*A\*S\*H*.

<sup>52</sup> Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory: Key Critical Concepts* (London and New York: Prentice-Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995) pp. 73-74; Horner and Zlosnik, p. 14.

'lifted' and comforted by this letter. Had the scene mainly comprised of gloomy aesthetics and cinematic camera work, with equally serious dialogue and tone, the scene would have merely been dramatic. Similarly, had blocking traditionally associated with comedy been utilised, the comic momentum of the scene might have maintained a lighter tone. However, just as the sets themselves are carefully designed to create layers of depth visually, so, too, is the comedy carefully designed to create similar layers of interpretation. On the surface, there is no dialogue within the scene that should be considered 'dark': the letter reflects friendship, laughter and affection. The Gothic within the scene cannot be disguised through comedy, here: the aesthetics of the scene, coupled with the tone of dialogue itself, can only highlight the comedy into irony.

The contradictions – both of the tones created by the camera and solemn delivery of dialogue – against the light-hearted content of the letter, serve not to erase the Gothic within the scene, but to intensify it. It is the humour that proves most damaging: in visually focusing almost entirely on Weston's reactions to the words his friend wrote to commemorate Weston's life can only serve as an epitaph. The fact that only the ghost is smiling in a situation where others ought to be makes the humour uncannily hollow – and it is the visual construction of the scene that ensures that the humour, meant to lighten the trauma, serves only to evoke pain and sadness, what Jean Paul Richter refers to as 'the inverse sublime'.<sup>53</sup> Comedy, whilst appearing to provide a safe distance from the trauma, can actually make you more aware of how close to the trauma you really are.

### *Disrupted Gothic - Diffusion*

Klinger's fever-induced hallucinations and the petty argument between Hawkeye and Charles serve to camouflage horror: the ghost is literally denied through distraction. The trauma is as pervasive as ever, but its presence is simply disregarded. Disguise emphasises humour whilst attempting to suppress the tragic darkness, forcing the horror to either be camouflaged within the comedy or pushed to the background, still maintaining a presence, but controlled through the

---

<sup>53</sup> Jean Paul Richter, Course VII, §31, 'On Humorous Poetry', *Horn of Oberon Jean Paul Richter's School for Aesthetics* trans. Margaret R. Hale (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973), p. 888.



humour. With diffusion, however, neither the horror nor the humour are camouflaged, but instead, buckle together to become almost indistinguishable from the other. Savagery is not only acknowledged, it is accepted and met with an ironic affection.

To round out a full day of bickering, Hawkeye, B.J. and Charles all find themselves in their tent drinking themselves to the point of unconsciousness. The camera primarily focuses on either a close up of one of the doctors or stays in an intimate three-shot of the three. Occasionally, the camera flashes back to the floor where Weston sits in the shadows, watching the doctors. In a fit of drunken whimsy, B.J. happily proclaims a toast, 'To dirt!' to which Hawkeye adds, 'And to the Army that lets us eat it, drink it, breathe it, and salute it'.<sup>54</sup> They drink to rats with 'cute little buck-toothed grins', fleas, plague, 'war: the fountain of all loveliness', 'to the blood that drips into our boots'... 'and stains our socks with gay magenta polka dots', 'to butchery', 'mayhem', and 'bestiality of every shape and kind.' When Charles passes out over Hawkeye after all of these toasts to horrific aspects of war, Hawkeye and B.J. toast to Charles.

Through gallows farce, horrors of their environment are momentarily transformed into mock-celebration. This not only disguises the horrors that surround them, but, if only briefly, allows those horrors to have an ironic loss of power: what was intolerable is now gleefully commemorated. The addition of their bunkmate Charles to the list of horrors in this toast, rather than making Charles seem as horrific as the plague, instead makes their situation seem less problematic, even trivial. The harrowing surroundings are not camouflaged, but are momentarily re-written. Fleeting, the splatters of blood staining their clothes can be transformed: once they are sober, however, those 'gay magenta polka dots' revert back to crimson blood splatter.

Within Khaki Gothic, diffusion allows the appearance of a transformation of the horrific into mock celebration. However, as this transformation is achieved by utilising recognisable Gothic tropes and techniques for comic effect, the comic is one of irony. As seen with the disguise of terror through humour, diffusion cannot completely destroy what was horrific; it can, however, for a time,

---

<sup>54</sup> 'Follies [...] *M\*A\*S\*H*.

shift the emphasis from grisly survival to morbid amusement. And, as with the attempt to disguise, diffusion is only temporary: as BJ, Hawkeye and Charles drink themselves into a stupor, the camera shifts focus once again from the living to the dead: surrounded by shadows, Weston's last words are falling on ears that cannot hear him: 'I can hardly hear you now. You're all fading...' As they continue to celebrate the horrors of life at war in the background, Weston's second death – the death of the denied ghost – goes unrecognised.

#### V – *Conclusions*

When a main character was killed off in a helicopter crash on *M\*A\*S\*H*, hundreds of letters from viewers protested the death. Gelbart writes,

Many of them accused us of hurting their feelings needlessly. These were people who thought of the series as simply a comedy, and as such, no place to be asked to face the subject of [mortality] [...] [Gene Reynolds, producer and I] reminded our correspondents that the same week "Abyssinia, Henry" was shown, a planeload of Vietnamese children perished in a horrible plane crash while taking off in Saigon. These children were being evacuated to the United States in advance of the imminent Viet Cong takeover of South Vietnam. I remarked in my letters, without irony, that I hoped as many people wrote protesting the deaths of these innocents as took the time to write protesting the death of Henry Blake.<sup>55</sup>

Reynolds and Gelbart were protesting not just the fact that not every soldier returned home alive during the 'forgotten' Korean War, but that only twenty years later, those horrors were resurfacing in the Vietnam War. That the scripted death of a fictional character in a tele-visual representation of a past war could be so much more 'real' to audiences than the factual deaths of human children in a factual war is even more ironic. Gothic and war are uneasy bedfellows: the 'real' horrors of war have, understandably, made critics uneasy about relating it to a genre associated with the supernatural, fakery and sensational entertainment. Even for a programme like *M\*A\*S\*H*, which attempts to make a clear distinction between a factual war and a fictional, Gothic representation of one, this distinction becomes uncomfortably blurred.

---

<sup>55</sup> Gelbart, pp. 53-54.

As Gothic and war share so many recognisable tropes (claustrophobia, isolation, imminent danger, etc), the artificial Gothic can serve as a method of expressing the literal horrors of war. Those studies which have started to appear, such as Wasson's, have primarily been focused on Gothic literature produced Gothic as a result of war, with secondary attention of how war can be expressed through recognisable Gothic tropes. However, this is only part of the relationship between representations of war and horror: so easy to overlook in both Gothic discourse and war studies is the role of humour, for it is comedy that has the most impact on how Gothic and war can function together.

In what I call the Khaki Gothic, gallows humour becomes the tool to camouflage, diffuse and intensify horror, creating a range of characteristically Gothic effects. Indeed – the letters Gelbart received protesting the death of Henry Blake appears not to be as offended by the death of the character, but that he was killed off on a comedy. It is the *comedy* – not the horror of the death – that they protested. For the majority of that episode, light-hearted jokes keep the episode from feeling overwhelmingly Gothic: the episode consists primarily of jokes about Henry's return to family life in the States and heart-felt good-bye celebrations. The humour does such a good job disguising the horrors and realities of war, that when these horrors are finally exposed, they are far more powerful.

By exploring Khaki Gothic, we can come to a greater understanding of the way war is coded and represented in popular culture, and, by extension, its political significance within that culture. Similarly, we can expand our understanding of the uses of the Gothic in contemporary culture and its complex relationship with comedy. War is not intrinsically Gothic but at certain points in history it becomes Gothicised. The highly protested Vietnam War, for instance, was particular amenable to Khaki Gothic modes of representation, perhaps because of the forced conscription to send young men to defend a foreign country. In *Last Days of MASH* [*sic*] one of the letters Alda publishes states,

As a Vietnam Veteran, I have been able to 'feel' your shows as well as enjoy them. Korea or Vietnam... what's the difference? During these past ten years when our Country [*sic*] was

silent about the Vietnam War, your show gave me comfort. Somebody understood. Somebody was expressing what war ‘really is’.<sup>56</sup>

Several letters contain similar sentiments, but this particular note suggests several reasons why America might have responded to the Khaki Gothic representations of war during the 1970s. The writer recognises, as a soldier, an emotional connection to the representation of war, as well as an apparent frustration with the social and political state of the country at that time. The writer also acknowledges a realistic approach to war – for showing ‘what war “really is”.’ Many of the letters within Alda’s book profess to use the show as therapy for their own war experiences: ‘a pressure relief valve for [...] emotions of hurt and pain from the horror of war’.<sup>57</sup> Through the same fakery that allows Gothic to be taken lightly, Gothic can provide the horrors of a real war a safety valve in which to be recreated and analysed – even released.

Additionally, the writer’s commentary in Alda’s book acknowledges the displacement between the Korean War and the Vietnam War. In *The Literature of Terror*, David Punter argues that Gothic has a ‘very intense, if displaced, engagement with political and social problems’.<sup>58</sup> The traumas of past wars are allowed to be re-examined and questioned by the contemporary audience – at the same time questioning the traumas of a current war. The writer asks, ‘Korea or Vietnam... what’s the difference?’ and when it comes to Khaki Gothic, there is none.<sup>59</sup> It is not just the Vietnam War that is being protested in Khaki Gothic programme like *M\*A\*S\*H*: as Gelbart argues, ‘it was about all wars’.<sup>60</sup> It is not just representations of trauma that is crucial for Khaki Gothic; it is the redistribution of it. Through this displacement, Vietnam is not the only unjust, horrific war – it is just the newest one in a regretfully long line of unjust wars. The horrors of war combined with the irreverent comedy prove that, for the Khaki Gothic, every war is unjust, and every war is Vietnam.

---

<sup>56</sup> Alda and Alda, [p. 94]. Quotations original.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., [p. 94-95].

<sup>58</sup> David Punter, *Literature of Terror: History of Gothic Fiction from 1765 to the Present Day* (London: Longman, 1980), p. 62.

<sup>59</sup> Alda and Alda, [p. 94].

<sup>60</sup> [Interview: Larry Gelbart] in *M\*A\*S\*H 30th Reunion*, Documentary, 17 May, 2002, FOX, USA.

## Bibliography

- Alda, Alan and Arlene Alda, *The Last Days of MASH [sic]*, New Jersey: Unicorn Publishing House: 1983.
- Apel, Otto F. Jr., MD., and Pat Apel, *MASH: An Army Surgeon In Korea*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998.
- Baudrillard, Jean, "Pornographie de la guerre," *Liberation* (May 19, 2004), reprinted as "War Porn" in *The Conspiracy of Art, Manifestos, Texts, Interviews*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2005, 205-212.
- Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulacra and Simulation* (trans. Sheila Faria Glaser) Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1994 (1981).
- Bennett, Andrew and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory: Key Critical Concepts*, London and New York: Prentice-Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995.
- Botting, Fred, *Gothic: The New Critical Idiom*, London, Routledge, 1996.
- Byron, Glennis and Dale Townshend, *The Gothic World*, New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Clery, E.J., 'Introduction,' in *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story (Oxford World Classic edition)*, by Horace Walpole, ed. W.S. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) (1764), pp. vvi-xxxiii.
- Gelbart, Larry, *Laughing Matters: on writing M\*A\*S\*H, Tootsie, Oh, God!*, and a few other funny things, New York: Random House, 1998.
- Heller, Joseph, *Catch-22: 50th Anniversary Edition* by Joseph Heller, London: Vintage Publishing/Random House 2011 (1955).
- Horner, Avril and Sue Zlosnik, *Gothic and the Comic Turn*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2005.
- Jacobson, Howard, 'Howard Jacobson on *Catch-22*' in *Catch-22: 50th Anniversary Edition* by Joseph Heller, (London: Vintage Publishing/Random House, 2011) (1955), pp. 521-530.
- Kalter, Suzy, *The Complete Book of M\*A\*S\*H*, Columbus Books: London, (1984) 1987.
- Maddocks, Melvin, 'Comedy and War' in *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 112, No. 1 (Winter, 2004), 22-34
- Mandelbaum, Michael, 'Vietnam: The Television War', in *Daedalus*, Vol. 111, No. 4, Print Culture and Video Culture (Fall 1982), MIT Press, 157- 169. Mighall, Robert, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Millerson, Gerald, *Lighting for TV and Film*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed (London: Routledge, 1999).
- Obrdlik, Antonin K., 'Gallows Humor ' A Sociological Phenomenon, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 47, No. 5, The University of Chicago Press, Mar., 1942, 709-716.

Punter, David, *Literature of Terror: History of Gothic Fiction from 1765 to the Present Day*, (London: Longman, 1980).

Richter, Jean Paul, Course VII. 'On Humorous Poetry' in *Horn of Oberon Jean Paul Richter's School for Aesthetics* (trans. Margaret R. Hale), Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973.

Schubart, Rikke, 'Introduction', in *War Isn't Hell, It's Entertainment: essays on visual media and the representation of conflict*, ed. Rikke Schubart, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2009.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, 'The Character in the Veil: Imagery of the Surface in the Gothic Novel', in *PMLA* 96, 1981, 250-270.

Spooner, Catherine, Emma McEvoy, 'Introduction' in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, ed. Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy, (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 1-4.

Tasker, Yvonne, 'Comic Situations/Endless War: *M\*A\*S\*H* and War as Entertainment' in *War Isn't Hell, It's Entertainment: essays on visual media and the representation of conflict*, ed. Rikke Schubart, (North Carolina: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2009), pp.132-149.

Walpole, Horace, *Castle of Otranto*, Oxford Edition, ed. W.S. Lewis, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1764), 2002.

Wasson, Sara, *Urban Gothic of the Second World War*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Wasson, Sara, 'Gothic Cities and Suburbs, 1880-Present', in *The Gothic World*, ed. Glennis Byron, Dale Townshend (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 132- 142.

Wittebols, James H., *Watching M\*A\*S\*H, Watching America: A Social History of the 1972-1983 Television Series*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co. Inc, 1998.

Wright, Angela, *Britain, France and the Gothic, 1764-1820: The Import of Terror*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Zettl, Herbert, *Television Production Handbook*, 12<sup>TH</sup> ed (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 2014).

#### Television Programmes Cited:

'Opie Joins the Marines' in *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.*, CBS, 18 March 1966.

'Sometimes You Hear the Bullet', *M\*A\*S\*H*, CBS, 28 January 1973.

'The Interview' *M\*A\*S\*H*, CBS, 24 Feb 1976.

'Peace On Us', *M\*A\*S\*H*, CBS, 25 Sep 1978.

'Follies of the Living, Concerns of the Dead', *M\*A\*S\*H*, CBS, 4 Jan. 1982.

*M\*A\*S\*H 30th Reunion*, FOX, 17 May, 2002