What Is Dead May Never Die: A Word from the Media Review Editor

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The media review section in this issue of *The Incredible Nineteenth-Century: Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Fairy Tale* includes Stacey Hoffer's reflections on a trio of "cozy puzzle" video games whose play mechanics, storylines, and visuals offer gamers lessons in how gender ideology shaped nineteenth-century botany discourse and intensified the unresolved tension between occult and scientific epistemic habits that dually informed Victorian knowledge of plants. Meanwhile, Safiyya Hosein takes readers beyond the familiar Euro-medieval geography of Westeros to visit the "mysterious" city of Pentos in HBO's series *House of the Dragon* (2022-) that is set in the fantasy universe of George R. R. Martin. Hosein notes how so much of Pentos—its spices, architectural forms, harems, and bloodthirsty warriors—faithfully reproduces orientalist tropes that exoticize non-western bodies and settings that might as well have been cribbed from Richard Burton's illustrated 1885-88 edition of *The Arabian Nights*. In an age when Anglo-American cultural discourse is shaped by a suspiciously Victorian "separate spheres" worldview as propagated by manosphere and tradwife influencers nostalgic for white Christian nationalism, both Hoffer and Hosein add to our understanding of how zombie forms of nineteenth-century thought and representation are both (un)alive and (un)well in the culture industry of twenty-first-century entertainment media.

The seafaring people of Martin's Iron Islands, whose civilization is itself inspired by the same Viking culture adored by anti-Semites like Richard Wagner and his Nazi acolytes, have an absurd but instructive national motto for our sick times: "What is dead may never die." First uttered on television in Martin's incredibly popular HBO series, *Game of Thrones* (2011-19), for which *Dragons* is a prequel, the Iron Islanders' refusal to let what is dead stay dead unintentionally speaks

in the voice of the media ecosystem that birthed it—one flooded by endless iterations of recycled IP, whether mapped inside Martin's Westeros, the Marvel Extended Universe, or Disney's *Star Wars* Galaxy. Perhaps even more appealing to media execs overseeing a monopolized industry whose corporate wars and territorial mergers are the real-life counterparts of those imperial conflicts and conquests chronicled in their increasingly uninteresting shows, are those beloved nineteenth-century characters and narratives whose authors are gloriously just dead enough to demand no royalty checks. These include everything from the many Brontë and Austen adaptations or Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* (2019), to the Stoker-inflected vampire tales and Shelley-bound monster tales taken up, respectively, in the acclaimed films of Hollywood auteurs like Robert Eggers's *Nosferatu* (2024), Ryan Coogler's *Sinners* (2025), Yorgos Lanthimos's *Poor Things* (2023), or Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein* (2025). Yes, what is dead may never die, but here at *I19*, we are especially interested in asking a question related to this Iron-born maxim from the specific vantage point of literary and cultural studies scholars trained in the first wave of transatlantic gothic fiction: "Why does the nineteenth century insist on haunting our own?"

Certainly, the twenty-first century media ecosystem we inhabit looks much different than that of writers like the Brontës, Austen, Shelley, Alcott, and Stoker, as this review section surveys a world of cinema, streaming services, and video games that constitute the main diet of eager post-literate consumers. *I19* will continue to publish reviews that demonstrate the afterlife of that previous world as it bears on our own, but in the issues to follow this one, as the editor of our Media Review section, I will also offer a series of short essays on certain nineteenth-century narrative materials whose residual remains continue to structure the production of contemporary cultural forms. In particular, I will focus on a trend most evident in a popular genre that itself has been pronounced dead many times, only to see itself resurrected before our eyes on a variety of

media platforms: the situation comedy. In the past decade shows like BBC One's *Ghosts* (2019-23), later repurposed with the same title for American audiences on NBC (2021-), has joined with others like Amazon Prime's *Upload* (2020-25) and NBC's *The Good Place* (2016-20) to participate in a Victorian tradition of spiritualist fiction where the dead and the living communicate with one another to seek the latter's emotional closure in this world and the former's in a world beyond. Bringing new narrative perspective from the point of view of the colonized, FX's *Reservation Dogs* (2021-23) and its Indigenous production team led by Seminole showrunner Sterlin Harjo have created a contemporary portrait of Native American life in Oklahoma that prominently features a spirit guide to several characters who died fighting Custer's army at the Battle of Little Big Horn. And finally, FX's other towering contribution to the sitcom tradition, *What We Do in the Shadows* (2019-24), as overseen by its showrunner, the Jewish- and Maori-identifying cocreator of *Reservation Dogs,* Taika Waititi, marshals a whole bestiary of nineteenth-century monsters—vampires, reanimated creatures, and rapping spirits, to name a few—to tell what is at its core a story of immigrants to America from the Middle East, Europe, and Mexico as they attempt to resist assimilation into a dominant culture exemplified by their blindingly white "emotional vampire" housemate named Colin Robinson. One of the leads, a medieval Ottoman general-turned-vampire named Nandor the Relentless (played by Persian-English comedian Kayvan Novak) offers one of the more fully rounded depictions of a Middle Eastern character ever to appear on American television. And *Shadows*' setting of Staten Island, forever positioned as the "other" NYC borough, is depicted like a real place in a way that *Dragons*' Pentos is most certainly not.

Sianne Ngai has argued convincingly that the sitcom form as codified by *I Love Lucy* (1951-57) and its domestic housewife with frustrated dreams, constitutes the supreme narrative

expression of the post-WWII "American Century" and effectively served that hegemonic cultural role that the realist novel played in the age of British imperial hegemony. And from *I Love Lucy* forward the sitcom has primarily centered on a realist domestic setting, whether the living room presided over by patriarchs like Archie Bunker in *All in the Family* (1971-79) and Cliff Huxtable in *The Cosby Show* (1984-92) or the decentered apartment spaces favored by the aimless protagonists of *Friends* (1994-2004) and *Seinfeld* (1989-98). Occasionally a *Munsters* (1964-66) or an *I Dream of Genie* (1965-70) might add some gothic or magic twist on the formula, but even these narratives were largely focused on middle-class family units. What characterizes the afterlife sitcom as I understand it, however, is that it centers alternate forms of sociality to the bourgeois family unit in the manner of *Seinfeld* and *Friends* while eschewing the ideal of heterosexual marriage or romance as the only proper end of a person's life. These are sitcoms with forging a new collective identity on their minds: the transhistorical assembly of ghosts representing different yet simultaneously existing eras of British or American history in *Ghosts*; a multicultural and global cohort of the recently dead working towards enlightenment in *The Good Place*; the group of childhood friends who identify as "rez dogs" and seek both their own place in the world where they can live as Native Americans with roots in western modernity as well as their ancestral past as kept alive by the nineteenth-century spirit of William Knifeman; and the polyamorous polycule of Old World vampires and their Mexican-American familiar, Guillermo de la Cruz, who eschew mainstream American culture for the queer comforts of Staten Island home life in *What We Do in the Shadows*.

If the classic sitcom form told a story of conventional middle-class family life whose health and happiness ensured the health and happiness of a newly supreme USA, the afterlife sitcom produced in the twilight of the American Century is one that turns away from realism and toward

a gothic form of storytelling better suited to tell stories about the world once ruled over by Huxtables, Bunkers, and Bings that has already passed into the history books. Please stay tuned in the coming issues, where alongside future reviews of films like *Sinners* and *Frankenstein*, these pages will focus on some aspects of the contemporary afterlife sitcom and its relation to nineteenth-century narrative traditions. Collectively, this critic hopes these readings can help in performing a much-needed cultural autopsy of the present.