

TELEVISION REVIEWS

America's Next Top Victim:

***Scream Queens*, Season 1**

(VH1, Oct-Dec 2008/ MTV, Jan-March 2010)

It's easy to scoff. It's equally easy to sneer, to groan with exaggerated exasperation and roll one's eyes heavenward, as if asking for deliverance from the crime against humanity's finer intellectual, aesthetic and feminist sensibilities that is being acted out on the screen of one's television (surrounded, of course, by collectors' edition DVD box sets of *Friday the 13th* and *Cube*). After watching several episode's of VH1's recent (it's only recently been shown in Ireland courtesy of the always-tasteful MTV) 'reality' show *Scream Queens*, however, I began to get the feeling that if I did that, acting coach John Homa would roll his eyes right back at me, tell me I'm not being "real," that I need to "bring it," and that he simply isn't convinced that I'm committed to the role of Scoffer #2 (the slutty one who gets disembowelled from behind near the end of the first hour).

I admit without hesitation that, over 350 minutes of total running time later, *Scream Queens* may indeed have brainwashed me into not rejecting it outright as total, irredeemable tripe. Still, despite my awareness of having been manipulated by its cliff-hanger ad breaks and cannily contrived narrativising and character identification, I remain incapable of telling whether the programme really is total, irredeemable tripe, or, in fact, a work of pure genius.

The format is a simple and a familiar one, being almost identical to that pioneered by *Big Brother* and developed (or perhaps more accurately honed by the merciless knife of TV formula-creation to its most basic and repeatable elements) through such gems as *Love Island*, *Beauty and the Geek* and, most successfully, the *America's Next Top Model* franchise. Indeed, there is little to differentiate this effort from the latter (which contains almost equal quantities of screaming and crying, both in front of the camera and in the "reality" sections). Competing, not for a modelling contract this time but for a "break-out" role in *Saw VI* (2009), ten aspiring but more or less unknown actresses move into a lavish hacienda-style dwelling somewhere in sunny California, complete with swimming pool, hot-tub and – in a development surely meant to crank up the shouting even more – no dishwasher. The aspirant scream queens compete in a series of weekly challenges of increasing formality and intensity, and at the end of each episode (which neatly corresponds to a week in their highly ordered existence) they stand in front of a panel of judges for elimination. Sure, there are some tweaks (not everyone is called for judgement every week and, well, that's it) but it is conducted by means of an all-but unaltered version of "Tyra Mail" – missives left by some unknown agent in a pre-ordained place in the house informing the contestants of new challenges and elimination meetings – while during the latter, the contestants must walk along what is to all intents and purposes a catwalk. The judges, in both cases, are a mixture of women who have previously held roles similar to those the girls weep and cat-fight over, and the men who direct, train and hire or fire them.

It's an entirely unreconstructed replication of Hollywood power structures, but in *Scream Queens*, the Gothic potential of this world of Svengali-types and wicked step-mothers is brought nearer to the surface by means of a heavy (and yes, quite hammy) emphasis on people being "axed," "cut," "given the chop" or looking forward to days in front of the camera that are going to be "hell." This may be fairly obvious and cheap, but it does manage to serve as a reasonably satisfying commentary on the melodramatics of what