

## TELEVISION REVIEWS

### *Superstition* (Syfy, 2017)

As any devotee of the history of death culture will tell you, the American Civil War transformed the funeral industry, ushering in not only modern embalming practices and contemporary death care, but also inaugurating the distinct tradition of the African-American funeral home as a vital social, cultural, and economic force within the black community.<sup>1</sup> When the war was at its bloodiest and many soldiers were buried on the battlefield, it was often their black comrades who were assigned the grim task of interring their remains.<sup>2</sup> In the decades following Emancipation, this wartime familiarity with mortality intersected with a growing anxiety about the treatment of black bodies by white undertakers.<sup>3</sup> Believing that their loved ones would be cared for with more dignity by funeral directors drawn from the black community, many African Americans chose to entrust their deceased family and friends to undertakers who would not only treat them with respect, but who would also be familiar with the post-mortem customs and traditions of the community. The funeral business therefore became one of the first industries in which newly emancipated African Americans could achieve any real measure of economic success. Consequently, the funeral home occupies a unique position in the African-American cultural imagination. At once a signifier of socio-economic advancement and a safe space in which to mark the passing of friends and family, the funeral home is a locus of community in which distinctly African-American funereal rites such as home-goings – elaborate services that include a week-long visitation to the home of the bereaved, a wake, and an extravagant funeral procession – can be celebrated and preserved.<sup>4</sup>

It is this rich tradition of the black funeral home as both a centre of community life and a repository of cultural memory that provides the foundation for *Superstition*, a new series created for the US channel Syfy by Mario Van Peebles – a veteran filmmaker and the son of renowned pioneer of black cinema Melvin Van Peebles – and Joel Anderson

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<sup>1</sup> See Tiffany Stanley, 'The Disappearance of a Distinctively Black Way to Mourn', *The Atlantic*, 26 January 2016 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/01/black-funeral-homes-mourning/426807/>> [accessed 22 May 2018].

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> See 'Researcher Explores History and Complexity of African-American Funeral-Home Business', *Virginia Tech News*, 22 January 2016 <<https://vtnews.vt.edu/articles/2016/01/012216-ncr-lyonsafricanamericanfuneralhomes.html>> [accessed 22 May 2018].

<sup>4</sup> See Jakara K. Griffin, 'Home-goings: A Black American Funeral', *Anthropological Perspectives on Death Tradition*, 23 April 2017 <<https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/gravematters/2017/04/23/home-goings-a-black-american-funeral-tradition/>> [accessed 22 May 2018].

Thompson. Set in the fictional town of La Rochelle, Georgia, the first series of *Superstition* spans twelve episodes and focuses on the complex family dynamics of the Hastings clan, an African-American family whose official livelihood is provided by their undertaking business, which is housed in a rambling, gothic-style funeral-parlour-cum-family home. This is not, however, simply a realist scenario, as we learn that the family are entrenched in a centuries-old supernatural battle between good and evil. The first episode establishes the series' ongoing preoccupation with the intricacies of familial relationships, as we are introduced to war veteran Calvin Hastings (Brad James) who, upon returning to his hometown after deployment in Afghanistan, must confront not only his often-combative relationship with his father, Isaac (Mario Van Peebles), but also the legacy of a mystically induced past trauma. This thematic preoccupation with the paranormal and its effect on family relationships immediately lends itself to comparisons with the CW's immensely popular and rather similarly titled horror series *Supernatural* (2005-present) – and, in many ways, the comparison is apt. The Hastings family, like *Supernatural*'s Winchester clan, is comprised of 'demon hunters' embroiled in an ongoing battle against various forces of otherworldly wickedness. Indeed, the parallels evoked by the series' assonant names hint at a connection between the two shows. *Superstition* is self-aware enough to acknowledge this early on in its first episode, with Calvin questioning whether his monster-fighting father has an arsenal of weapons laid out in the back of his car 'like Sam and Dean' – the brothers at the heart of *Supernatural*.

Unfortunately, the infiltration of intertextual allusion and 'meta' humour into mainstream entertainment has meant that many derivative works attempt to avoid accusations of unimaginative imitation simply by acknowledging their debt to thematically similar precursors, without ever attempting to distinguish themselves on their own merits.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, *Superstition* often succumbs to the temptation to lean on meta-references in place of originality. Unfortunately, this over-reliance on the formulas established by more popular or familiar examples of genre television inevitably becomes *Superstition*'s greatest weakness, as the show's desire to adhere to pre-established generic conventions detracts from what might otherwise have been a fascinating exploration of uniquely African-American superstitions, mythologies, and traditions. Indeed, in many ways, *Superstition* appears to function almost as a fusion of *Supernatural*'s action-orientated horror and the forensic-mystery format popularised by shows like *CSI* (2000-15), as many of its episodes invariably require the

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<sup>5</sup> The knowing references in *Bones* (2005-17) to the show's obvious similarities to *The X-Files* (1993-2002, 2016-18) is one obvious example of meta reference being used to deflect such criticisms.

Hastings family to investigate a mysterious or mystical death, with the help of sarcastic goth medical examiner Tilly (Tatiana Zappardino), before ultimately engaging in combat with the demonic entity responsible. While this combination of supernatural horror and investigative procedural is not necessarily unimagative in itself, *Superstition*'s failure to deviate from the tried-and-tested formulas of these genres ultimately renders many of its episodes tedious and predictable.

That being said, *Superstition* is not simply a hollow imitation of its more successful CW counterpart; it is grounded in a very specific cultural milieu and draws upon a unique set of social and historical concerns. While *Supernatural* is often enlivened by the ecstatic, ceaselessly dynamic momentum inherent to the expansive, Kerouac-style road trip at the core of its narrative structure, *Superstition* is firmly rooted in a very specific time and place. The show is set in the sort of slow, humid Southern town where midday heat appears to cling to the sticky streets, and Spanish moss is draped languidly across the low-hanging branches of gnarled oaks. Moreover, *Superstition* is at its strongest when it foregrounds both its historicity and the familial connections at the heart of its narrative. Van Peebles and Thompson's decision to structure the show around the activities of an African-American funeral home clearly hints at a broader preoccupation with the investigation, representation, and preservation of African-American culture. Indeed, *Superstition* is a series that, in its foregrounding of African-American mythology, fashion, and cuisine, overtly celebrates black history and community. While the Hastings' funeral home provides burial services for all citizens of La Rochelle regardless of race, the family's profound commitment to the idea of dignity in death echoes the specific ethos of deep respect for the deceased out of which the African-American funeral industry emerged as a uniquely community-centric institution.

From Isaac's expansive collection of dashikis to his wife Bea's (Robinne Lee) use of Nubian mystical rites, the series makes numerous rich allusions to traditional West-African proverbs, dress, and customs. *Superstition* therefore gathers together a variety of references to the broader experiences of the African diaspora in Europe and America. Likewise, one of the most engaging elements of the show is its emphasis on family and community dynamics, as the first season explores not only Calvin's fraught relationship with his father, but his equally complex relationship with his ex-girlfriend – the town sheriff May Westbrook (Demetria McKinney) – and estranged daughter Garvey (Morgana Van Peebles). The most effective moments within the show are those that take place around the dining-room table, on back porches, and in local diners, where the Hastings quarrel, joke, and learn about folk traditions

and superstitions from the family matriarch, Bea. In its evocation of the intricacies of African-American culture – both in the broader terms of history and folklife, and in the more intimate sense of family and community – *Superstition* is truly a unique entry in the canon of contemporary genre television.

It is unfortunate, then, that, over the course of the first season, these moments of engaging familial interaction are repeatedly undermined by often-clumsy attempts at supernatural horror. For example, the first episode of the series finds the Hastings family confronted with a cluster of mysterious deaths in a local snake-handling church, a plotline which emphasises images of religious excess and rural lore and so echoes the long tradition of Southern-gothic iconography upon which *Superstition* attempts to draw. From here, however, the series quickly devolves into a rather formulaic ‘monster-of-the-week’ drama, becoming increasingly weighed down by its own internal mythology, as subsequent episodes delve into the family’s ongoing battle against ‘infernals’. It focuses a little too heavily on the nature of these beings, the mythology surrounding them, and the means through which they can be defeated. After all, these creatures are essentially demons, and the lengthy expository scenes dedicated to describing them are unnecessary, verbose, and tedious. As the episodes progress, this convoluted mythos becomes increasingly central to the show’s narrative, largely displacing the originality of the culturally specific setting of a Southern black funeral home, while the engaging family dynamics are increasingly marginalised by a largely unimaginative TV horror narrative. While some episodes – the spectacularly over-the-top finale, for example – strive for an interesting (albeit B-movie-influenced) aesthetic, the series generally suffers from the kind of cartoonish CGI imagery that has by now become a staple of Syfy productions (see, for example, *Mega Piranha* (2010) and *Archnoquake* (2012)).

In many ways, then, *Superstition* is a frustrating show. It is apparent that the creators paid careful attention to both the cultural and historical significance of its setting. An early establishing shot of the Hastings funeral home, complete with a sign announcing ‘Hastings Funeral Home – Est. 1907. Family Owned and Operated’, signals the importance of themes such as history and family legacy. Moreover, this foregrounding of the show’s setting clearly speaks to Van Peebles’ desire to explore the complex history of the African-American community and its relationship to broader constructions of Southern identity. Indeed, the CEO of one of the show’s main production companies, Barry Gordon, explicitly spoke to its ambitious commitment to inclusivity and representation when he claimed that ‘[w]e created

*Superstition* to be the most diverse genre TV series ever created for the global market'.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the series, the viewer can glimpse intriguing allusions to its debt to black culture and folklore. Bea Hastings' warning to Calvin to '[g]et your boots off the table. As if we need more bad mojo around here' recalls the popular superstition that resting one's shoes on a table attracts misfortune. Similarly, the most powerful talisman possessed by the family patriarch, Isaac, is the 'Ring of Solomon', an artefact that alludes to King Solomon's talking ring, a magical repository of wisdom, which in hoodoo lore was presented to the biblical leader by the Ethiopian Queen of Sheba.<sup>7</sup>

These allusions to the combined folk traditions of both the rural South and the African diaspora provide a frustrating glimpse of what the show *could* have been if it had fully committed to the premise of exploring African-American myths and superstitions rather than in many ways simply imitating the tried-and-tested formulas of shows like *Supernatural*. We see this, for instance, with one of the most intriguing characters to appear on the show, the recurring character of Aunt Nancy (Jasmine Guy), who is a manifestation of the West-African spider-trickster and storyteller, Anansi. Yet her presence is limited, and the full potential of her character remains under-developed, in line with so many of the uniquely African-American mythological elements that are invariably smothered by the generic supernatural drama conventions that ultimately come to dominate the show. Similarly, the show's use of dark imagery and sultry Southern menace reminds us that Van Peebles is drawing on a tradition of both fictional and non-fictional African-American gothic writing that extends back through Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) to Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Yet the generic nature of the Hastings family's battle with the infernals, along with their eventual confrontation with the demons' black-clad, cowboy-hat-wearing leader (W. Earl Brown), ultimately adds nothing to this exploration of black culture and community. The 'cookie cutter' formula of the show's horror tropes detracts from the far more interesting exploration of the nuances of Southern black culture.

Van Peebles is clearly committed to reinvigorating the conventions of genre television by moving it away from its historical focus on the concerns of a homogenous, primarily white, America. This ambition is admirable, and his project is a necessary one. Even amongst

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<sup>6</sup> See 'As Network TV Struggles with Diversity Issues behind the Camera, *Superstition* TV Series Has Embodied Inclusion from the Start as It Prepares for Global Launch in 2018', 19 December 2017 <<https://www.marketwatch.com/press-release/as-network-tv-struggles-with-diversity-issues-behind-the-camera-superstition-tv-series-has-embodied-inclusion-from-the-start-as-it-prepares-for-global-launch-in-2018-2017-12-18>> [accessed 21 May 2018].

<sup>7</sup> See Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1935) <<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma01/grand-jean/hurston/chapters/hoodoo1.html>> [accessed 21 May 2018].

the best examples of American horror television – *Supernatural* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) spring to mind immediately – African or African-American culture is often either absent or figured as marginal and other. Whether depicted as a sinister force or an exoticised curiosity, the black presence in mainstream genre television is often depicted as a mystery to be solved, an other to be studied and understood. *Superstition* is an important addition to the canon of mainstream horror television because of the manner in which it resists such othering tendencies, presenting black culture as something intimate and familiar – a valuable, comforting, and complex part of the self rather than an exotic or threatening alien.

The show's setting in an African-American funeral home evokes a long history of black struggle and survival in an often-hostile nation, while the use of black folklore and superstition speaks of the rich cultural traditions that facilitated and enabled this process of survival. If the first season of the show is weakened by its reliance on plotlines borrowed from the popular genre staples of the past two decades, a second season (if commissioned) will hopefully be able to contribute something unique to the modern television landscape, by focusing strictly on the series' strongest features: the familial and cultural dynamics that lie at the heart of the show.

*Miranda Corcoran*