Returning to *Kolchak*:
Polymediated Narrative, Discourse, and Supernatural Drama

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Scholars are paying a great deal of attention to the complexity of the stories being created for print, film, television, and the Web. In this essay, we expand on the concept of polymediated narrative complexity in contemporary storyworlds to explore how external discourses influence their legacies and interpretations. Our exploration of the relationship between complex narratives and the discourses in which they participate focuses on one television genre and starts with one television program: *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*. We argue that *Kolchak* remains an important and ever-evolving discursive fragment within the supernatural drama genre.

Keywords: narrative, storyworld, television, polymediation, discourse, supernatural drama, transmedia, rhetoric, Kolchak, Buffy, X-Files, Twin Peaks

One of the important developments in media over the past 50 years has been the journey toward intricate narratives. According to Ryan and Thon (2014), examinations of storyworlds have evolved to the point where "thinking of storyworlds as representations that transcend media" allows narrative scholars to expand the potentials of traditional narrative scholarship (p. 2). However, we do not think that stories "transcend" the media through which they are told. We believe the medium and the content are woven together in ways that challenge the past and provide new avenues for the future. The tools for storytelling that were revolutionary in 1977's *Star Wars: A New Hope* now seem rudimentary compared with the epic scope in 2016's *Rogue One*. However, through the many *Star Wars* stories, people have been introduced to a narrative universe with endless boundaries and the potential to push and expand the possibilities of media.

Approaches to the study of mediated storytelling often begin with either the medium or the stories rather than seeing the two as inseparable from each other. We contend that McLuhan (2011) was correct in writing that "the latest approach to media study considers not only the 'content' but the medium and the cultural matrix within which the particular medium operates" (p. 23). While the impact of

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such an approach has ripples throughout the study of media, for this essay we examine one dimension of contemporary storytelling that is often overlooked: how the story exists outside the medium used to distribute it.

Our examination of the journey to narrative looks beyond the tenets of a storyworld to examine how it is connected to others by both content and discourse (Herrmann & Herbig, 2015, 2016). We argue that stories, discourse, and media have become so interwoven that they have forever reshaped people's understandings of narrative and that evolving narratives reshape the stories themselves. Narrative must now account for the ways that content and distribution are intertwined. It is a recursive relationship in which the medium functions as a narrative tool and narratives push the boundaries of what is possible via the medium.

For example, television is a medium where the ever-expanding influence of larger narratives can be seen. In his work on television storytelling, Mittell (2015) documents how these narratives changed over the last generation. The movement away from episodic programming not linked to a larger narrative arc can be seen in programming from dramas to situation comedies. The go-to joke is, "Why would anyone continue to live in Cabot Cove, Maine, after all the murders on *Murder, She Wrote*?" However, with the shift away from episodic programming, little research has documented the discourses around these narrative shifts.

In this essay, we examine the evolution of a storyworld from the past: *Kolchak*. The hard-nosed reporter Carl Kolchak lived in a world created by two made-for-television movies and one season of an episodic television drama. However, the storytelling in *Kolchak* and its influence on the supernatural dramas of today make it an ideal storyworld for examining how internal narrative structures have evolved as well as the discursive influence that *Kolchak* has on the genre to this day. Many readers will have never seen the films or series in Carl Kolchak's storyworld, but this article describes its role in our understandings of content, discourse, and media in a polymediated age. By applying polymediated narrative as an approach to this phenomenon, we explain how changes in people's relationships to media also change how people relate to stories.

Examining Polymediated Narrative

As an approach to storyworlds, polymediated narrative asks critics to account for two important dimensions of modern storytelling: the internal stories that build these storyworlds and the external circulation of those worlds through discourse (Herbig, Herrmann, & Tyma, 2015). If we believe McLuhan (2011) and Ong (2001), evolutions in media do more than just change how content is delivered. When Ong (2001) examined the evolution from orality to literacy, he was careful to note that the changes resulting from that shift did not happen immediately and that not only did information and knowledge themselves change—such as the development of philosophy—but people did as well. Changes in media allow us to see and think differently. Building on Ong's (2001) secondary orality and Jenkins' (2006) convergence culture, polymediation focuses on the shifts from the relationship *between* media and content to incorporate how modern media allow access to public discourse and connection (Herbig et al., 2015).

For about 150 years, critics have been building a language to grapple with how people's orientation to knowledge is shifting in shifting media climates. For instance, Ong (2001) distinguished primary orality, "a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print," from secondary orality, "present-day high-technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print" (p. 11). Nevertheless, these two definitions contradict each other in meaningful and important ways. If orality is based in a lack of knowledge of print, then the modern era must be something distinct from orality. Maintaining the notion of orality is insufficient to deal with how modern media have made people sensitive to visuals or have heightened awareness to the ways music can change the content of a moment. This is not simply a second era of orality.

So we turn to Jenkins' (2006) explication of convergence and transmedia as well as Jenkins, Ford, and Green's (2013) work on spreadability. According to Jenkins:

> By convergence, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want. (p. 2)

Building on convergence, Jenkins outlined the concept of transmedia storytelling to account for how content within a story can be translated across media. According to Jenkins, what makes transmedia storytelling unique is that it "places new demands on consumers and depends on the active participation of knowledge communities" (p. 21). However, not all people act as the hunters and gatherers of content that Jenkins describes (Simons, 2014). What we have is a storytelling context where producers must manage the many different kinds of engagement people can have with stories (Mittell, 2015). With spreadability, Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) attempt to reshape circulation into something that can account for popular participation. As they noted, "If it doesn't spread, it's dead" (p. 1). We agree with the sentiment; however, the focus is still on the flow of content as opposed to the content itself. One of the ways to make it spread is to understand the limits and potentials of content creation within a given medium and how that content has transformed over time.

We have proposed *polymediation* as an overarching term for a discourse to account for how media is changing as well as how it is changing people (Herbig et al., 2015). Fundamentally, we acknowledge that people have always made connections with, by, and through media, but advancements in technology are making people more aware of the limits and potentials of those connections. Connection is, ultimately, central to understanding modern media. However, connection is not limited to relations between people or simply internal to narratives. Connections are central to how we understand content as well (Herbig et al., 2015). One begins to wonder, what happens when a news story on the six o'clock news becomes an article online, then a Facebook post, and then a topic of a comments section. On the news, this is a story among others in a "block" and part of a local broadcast. As an article, it becomes something to be read as well as seen, and then it can also be redistributed. The reposting on Facebook allows for both limited (by one's privacy settings) and wide (depending how dispersed and disparate one's friends and family are) distribution. This story can have multiple lives, with multiple interpretations, and

participate in multiple discourses. Much like this hypothetical news story, the storyworlds of film and television past are reshaped and changed by their distribution through modern media.

Therefore, instead of approaching content as fixed or static, we examine the stories, images, ideas, and sounds within mediated environments as dynamic fragments that are constantly being interpreted and reinterpreted based on how they are understood through narrative lenses as well as how they circulate through discourse. According to Herbig (2015), fragments are contingent, constitutive, connective, dialectical, and contextual. They are contingent because how they are interpreted is often based on how they are constructed within a narrative or argument. This means they are also constitutive and impact the interpretation of other fragments, stories, characterizations, or ideas through which they are discussed. They are connective in that they invoke ideas and discourses that exist outside a particular articulation, therefore connecting them together. Those connections also make them dialectical, placing them inside a discourse with an infinite number of voices and interpretations. For that reason, fragments are also contextual, seen as a product of both individual articulation and dialectical circulation simultaneously (Herrmann, 2016a). What polymediated narrative attempts to do is account for the polyvalent ways in which a fragment—be it a story, a picture, or even an entire television series—evolves, remains static, or changes entirely through the discourses to which it is connected. Therefore, polymediated narrative is not an approach to transmedia environments. Rather, it is an approach that allows us to examine and explore how mediated environments are changing and shifting people's associations with story, discourse, and media.

This shift means taking account of connections both across and through media. While transmedia and convergence demonstrate the power of modern media as a storytelling context, we have yet to fully examine how it allows us to re-create and reexamine discourses and storyworlds of the past. Scolari's (2014) work on *Don Quixote* explains that the circulation of a story through multiple media is not necessarily new. However, what happens when the old becomes new again? Or when new information comes along and changes our relationship to an old story? For example, recent revelations about *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* creator Joss Whedon's infidelities have caused some to rethink his place as feminist storyteller (Browning, 2017). Reactions to the song "Blurred Lines" transformed it from a catchy pop hit to an anthem of rape culture (Romano, 2013). Ultimately, these moments of the intersection of content and discourse are shaped by polyvalent uses of words, images, and sounds connecting with already existing ideas and discourses, thereby changing and evolving the fragments themselves. These connections require an approach that looks both internally into the content and externally into how it connects to the discourses that impact how it is interpreted.

Herbig and Herrmann (2016) examined the television series *Supernatural* through a polymediated narrative lens, focusing on the complexity and recursivity of the episode "Fan Fiction." As they note:

> It is more than a simple text; it is the intermingling of multiple textual threads, media, stories, and grammars. The episode is the result of, and shows the impact of, recursivity between producers and consumers via polymediation, while simultaneously incorporating fragments from previous episodes, genre conventions, grammars, and so forth. Yet,

> even with all of these influences and changes and variables, the episode "hangs together," and for those familiar with the series, the story is narratively fidelitous. (p. 761)

This examination of "Fan Fiction" stands as an exemplar of a polymediated narrative approach as it applies to one television episode.

This essay pushes the boundary of polymediated narrative, concentrating not on one television series or episode but on one television genre. To exemplify this approach, we explore how two made-for-television movies and a short-lived television program became an important moment in the evolution of supernatural storytelling. We take *Kolchak* as our starting point because what the series means today is the product of multiple discourses, both from within television itself and larger societal discourses from without, combined in a cauldron to create something new. Remarkably, that "something new" has continued to evolve nearly 40 years after *Kolchak* wrapped production. *Kolchak*, despite its problems and dilemmas, became an important point of departure for what was to come. It provided "the materials for new stories to be built and expanded through many authors and crafted with various and often competing tools" (Herbig & Herrmann, 2016, p. 753). Ultimately, a polymediated narrative approach to *Kolchak* allows us to unpack the stories, discourse, and media that influence how it lives on to this day. Likewise, *Kolchak* provides the opportunity to interrogate how a short-lived storyworld from the 1970s is integral to storyworlds and the discourses about those storyworlds today.

Kolchak: One Monster at a Time

An ancient mummy attempts to devour a man's soul. A creature drains victims' blood. A ghost is killing the innocent. A guess that these situations are from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), *Angel* (1999–2004), *Supernatural* (2005–present), *The X-Files* (1993–2002, 2016–present), or *Twin Peaks* (1990–1991, 2017) is only half wrong. Before Agent Cooper visited the red room, before Scully and Mulder met "The Smoking Man," before the brothers Winchester worked the "family business," and before Buffy and the Scoobies discovered the Hellmouth, hard-nosed reporter Carl Kolchak was on the case. Each scenario described above was the plot of either one of the two made-for-TV movies about Kolchak or an episode of *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* (1974–1975). As a series, *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* spent little time on the airwaves (Muir, 2008; Subramanian, 2013), but, as a fragment of a larger discourse, it would come to have an outsize impact.

It is well known that most television programs are formulaic, but the content of those formulas is evolving. Calling this evolution "complex TV," Mittell (2015) argues that "narrative complexity redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration—not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance" (p. 18). In this vein, *Kolchak* represents a point where the balance begins to shift. From the internal discourses of the people involved with the storyworld to the reactions it produced, the world of *Kolchak* provides both a place to examine the changing narratives in supernatural dramas as well as a context for examining the evolution of *Kolchak* into an inspiration for storyworlds beyond its borders.

The stories in the world of *Kolchak* represent a point of disjunction where traditional episodic television comes into conflict with serial narrative. According to Todorov (1975), stories begin in a position of equilibrium that is disrupted by events, with the final resolution creating a return to a state of equilibrium. This taken-for-granted structure converts disharmony into order, reinscribes societal norms, and punishes transgressors, reinforcing conservative ideologies. However, in modern television narratives, while order may be restored in the end, it is certainly not identically re-created. As Wood (2003) asks: "Does the possibility not exist of narrative moving toward the establishment of a different order, or, quite simply, toward irreparable and irreversible breakdown (which would leave the reader/viewer the options of despair or the task of imagining alternatives)?" (p. 220). Overlooked in traditional narrative restoration theories is that the order in serial narratives often cannot be restored. The worlds and characters are fundamentally, qualitatively different because of the events of the story.

In serial supernatural dramas, it is particularly necessary for narrative continuity that characters perceive the world differently following their encounters with the weird. As Xander Harris laments in the second episode of *Buffy*, "This is just too much. I mean yesterday my life's like 'uh oh, pop quiz.' Today it's 'rain of toads'" (Whedon, 1997, 11:48). In terms of the serial narrative, the question is: If a person were forced to battle werewolves and vampires, would not his or her paradigmatic perception of *normal* change? Unlike its predecessors such as *The Outer Limits* (1963–1965), *The Twilight Zone* (1959–1964), or *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955–1965), *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* followed a single character through the world of the unknown based in the verisimilitude of the known wherein week to week he was confronted with reality that deviated from the norm.

For those who are not familiar with *Kolchak*, a quick recap. The original made-for-TV movie *The Night Stalker* (1972) was intended to be a one-off based on the unpublished *The Kolchak Papers* by Jeff Rice, adapted for television by Richard Matheson (Thompson, 2009). Dan Curtis, who created the gothic soap opera *Dark Shadows* (1966–1971), was brought in to produce (Meehan, 2010; Muir, 2008). According to the *Night Stalker* DVD commentary (2005), Curtis specifically asked Darren McGavin to play the role of Kolchak. As Kolchak, McGavin would play a down-to-earth, ear-to-the-ground newspaper reporter for the Independent News Service whose career stalled due to his inability to play well with others.

Importantly, Kolchak was *not* the night stalker. Kolchak stalked the things that stalked the night. The night stalker in *The Night Stalker* was a vampire. *The Night Stalker* received the highest ratings for any television movie at that time (http://:www.imdb.com/title/#0067490. The follow-up made-for-TV movie, *The Night Strangler* (1973), took Kolchak to Seattle, where he confronted Richard Anderson's mad scientist. Finally, Kolchak ended up in Chicago in the television series *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*, a commercial failure.

The show had a lot going for it. By all accounts, McGavin was an excellent lead. The writers and directors would become famous later and included Bob Gale (*Back to the Future*), David Chase (*The Sopranos*), Robert Sheerer (*Star Trek: The Next Generation*), and Robert Zemeckis (*Forest Gump*) (Thompson, 2009). Hammer horror alum Jimmy Sangster and Steve Fisher, who wrote the noir movies

Dead Reckoning (1947) and *Lady in the Lake* (1947), also wrote for series. The guest cast included well-known actors such as Cathy Lee Crosby, Dick van Patton, Tom Skerritt, and Larry Linville.

It is fair to say that the assembled talent put this series in a position to succeed. However, to completely understand *Kolchak*, it is necessary to frame it within its historical and contextual discourses; not just the societal context of the United States in the early 1970s but also within the context of popular culture. As mentioned earlier, Kolchak's television forerunners included *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, *The Twilight Zone*, and *The Outer Limits*, anthology series all. These shows were framed as otherworldly, in separate zones, fantastical places, not necessarily connected to the here and now or having characters that would continue in their roles each subsequent week. As Rod Serling told *The Twilight Zone* audience, "You're traveling through another dimension," *The Outer Limits* intoned, "You are about to experience the awe and mystery which reaches from the inner mind to . . . *The Outer Limits*." Even *Star Trek* (1966–1969), which borrowed from *The Outer Limits*, was in an otherworldly future (Schow & Frentzen, 1986). As James Tiberius Kirk reminded viewers, the *Enterprise* was "to boldly go where no man has gone before." These stories were not part and parcel of American everyday reality. Similarly, these outsider qualities played for comedy on programs such as *The Munsters* (1964–1966), but mostly the supernatural was presented as otherworldly or not part of a character's everyday life (Muir, 2008). The events that would transpire were "out of this world." *Kolchak* changed this.

Carl Kolchak is unique. First, he is a throwback to the cynical, hard-boiled noir detective. Going back to *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940), newspaper reporters as neophyte gumshoes are archetypal noir characters, and speaking truth to power is another noir fundamental (Meehan, 2010). Like noir detectives, Kolchak narrates his own stories and holds his own ethical standards close and uncompromisingly (Meyer & McDonnell, 2007). When witches and Satan worshippers tempt him with power and treasure, Kolchak refuses to compromise. His dedication to the truth is more important than either. The final noir influence is the idea of corruption in high places—big business, government, and rich families (Marling, 1995).

Unlike the tough, hard-boiled detectives, Kolchak is the epitome of the everyman. He is Cary Grant's characters without the suave. He is the stuttering Jimmy Stewart and the fumbling Fred MacMurray, updated for the 1970s. He is not exceptional. He is a working man. "He's a coward even, not brave," Muir (2008) commented. "He's human. He's scared. He does what we would all do when confronted with monsters: scream and run like hell" (p. 15). As the everyman, Kolchak is the surrogate for the audience, a character they can identify with. Kolchak humanizes the victims: showgirls, thugs, prostitutes, and gangsters. He provides their names, ages, occupations, physical specs, dates, and the mundane things they were doing when they died.

Each week, Kolchak—the smart-mouthed, fast-talking, not-entirely-honest, pain-in-the-ass reporter—is handed an apparently typical case. A murder here. A murder there. Except Kolchak's assignments end up being strange; he is chasing a vampire or mad scientist. Kolchak encounters zombies, werewolves, killer robots, headless motorcyclists, and more. Kolchak is fighting Wells's (2000) macrocosmic invading enemies as well as confronting personal horrors and tragedies.

Kolchak, however, fights on two fronts. He battles uncanny entities as well as skeptical colleagues and incredulous superiors. The crusading reporter bumping heads with a hard-headed editor is a narrative staple—for example, Superman's Perry White or Spiderman's J. Jonah Jameson (Meehan, 2010). Likewise, Kolchak deals with the antagonism of the police and public officials attempting to stop him from finding or reporting the truth. Sometimes the monsters are at work, in city hall and, by extension, in the conspiracy-riddled 1970s White House. Ingebretsen (2001) noted:

> Monsters are less *agents* of social collapse than *announcers* that the collapse has already occurred. He or she dramatizes the collapse of social boundaries, while hiding from view the particular linguistic and social usages by which those boundaries are fabricated. (p. 203, emphasis in original)

Here is where *Kolchak*, in all its formats, does its true work. However, no matter how many monsters Carl Kolchak faced, after each episode the world seemed to reassert its narrative restoration in both character and plot.

Wood's (2003) suggestion about the lack of restoration in certain types of narrative is important when considering the storytelling in *Kolchak*. On the surface, *Kolchak* fits the conservative equilibrium model. Kolchak vanquished the monster of the week each week. Yes, the public is kept in the dark and everything seems to return to normal. However, there is a structural narrative alteration to *Kolchak* that destabilizes his return to normality. The key to this destabilization is Kolchak's narrations. In his introductions, he presents the facts of the case, as outlandish as they might seem. Beginning "The Werewolf," Kolchak narrates:

> Admittedly, the story you are about to read is bizarre, incredible. Those of you who wish to avoid being unsettled, who wish to avoid *thinking*, will label it insane. And though you, the reader, would find these facts almost impossible to substantiate, that does not change their nature. Facts they are, I know. I saw them happen. (Rice, Chase, & Playdon, 1974, 0:03)

Kolchak's concluding narration provides a similar destabilization. Ending "The Sentry," he says,

> As far as the authorities are concerned, the events of April 20 and 21 will never have occurred. They're gonna tell me that if I ever breathe a word of this they're gonna break me like a straw man . . . if you're ever in a subway or pedestrian tunnel underneath a ballpark and you think you hear something moving in the walls, it may not be your imagination. Take my advice, don't walk—*run*—to the nearest exit. (Rice, Neale, & Huff, 1975, 49:14)

According to Todorovian analysis, everything should have returned to normalcy, but Kolchak is a witness to a changing world. The facts of the case have not changed. They are outlandish and bizarre. Viewers are safe because Kolchak intervened and saved the day. However, there's an underlying difference in *him*.

Kolchak can take on supernatural monsters, but he cannot vanquish censorship (both governmental and editorial) or the suppression of the facts. The all-too-real notion of cover-ups is as much a monster as the creatures. At the end of *The Night Stalker*, city officials closed ranks. Vampires are not good for Las Vegas tourism. They paid off or ran off everyone involved in the case, including Kolchak's girlfriend. Kolchak is presented with a warrant for murder—a warrant that will be executed if he tells the truth. With no real evidence to back his story, Kolchak is run out of town. According to Todorov (1975), everything is back to narrative equilibrium. That worked for the made-for-television movies.

However, a supernatural television series requires a perspective, as described by Wood (2003), where the narrative changes and things are not always restored to how they were. When analyzing the stories of *Kolchak*, it is necessary to remember Todorov's (1975) narrative verisimilitude typologies. Todorov differentiated between *generic* and *cultural* verisimilitude. Cultural verisimilitude refers to texts that aim to be realistic portrayals of everyday life. Generic verisimilitude refers to how the narrative is true to genre conventions. *Kolchak* easily fits into the standard conventions of the science fiction horror genre. The show also has cultural verisimilitude. Oil monsters and vampires do not exist, but if they did exist, it seems reasonable they would exist as presented. As Herbig and Herrmann (2016) note, "The believability of the bizarre and freakish is supported by the overall narrative action, reinforcing that these things can happen and are happening" (p. 755). Likewise, it is culturally versimilitudinous that respective authorities would attempt to keep them secret. However, the characters in these stories must simultaneously become aware of the changes to the world in which they are living. They cannot forget that, just last week, it was "rain of toads."

The movies and series performed destabilization on a number of narrative and discursive levels: challenging and problematizing the verisimilitude of standard cultural narratives; rebuffing the trustworthiness of public servants and the gatekeepers of the fourth estate; combining the everyman with aspects of the noir hero; and providing a simultaneous factualness regarding the supernatural and an ambiguity about public institutions, persons, and the media. So why did a well-acted, promising series based on two well-received television movies fail after one season? One reason could be the decision to make the series' stories episodic rather than with a season-long or series-long narrative arc.

The negative impact of the decision to make the series episodic was that this format relegated the supporting cast into one-dimensional characters. Tony Vincenzo, Kolchak's frustrated editor, never developed past the point of disbelief and never remembered anything from the previous episodes. None of the supporting characters showed development. Kolchak did not have a Scully to go with his Mulder, or a Willow to go with his Buffy. He did not have Dean Winchester's Sam. Also, there was ultimately nothing or no one for Kolchak to confront. There was no overarching reason or rationale for the strange. The monster-of-the-week format quickly wore thin (Thompson, 2009). With no narrative arc, *Kolchak* lacked what would later be termed "mythology" (Herrmann & Herbig, 2016) or a storyworld (Ryan & Thon, 2014). There was no continuity or momentum from week to week. Eventually, even McGavin derided the format, stating:

> I hope they cancel this show as quickly as they can and get it out of their corporate, pinheaded minds. It's not the bosses. It's the system. It's group decisions. It's the

structure. That, and a certain amount of contempt for the audience. (quoted in
Dawidziak, 1998, p. 98)

Though McGavin was made executive producer, he wanted out, and when the ratings fell, he was allowed
to walk away.

Although broadcast for only one season, according to Muir (2008):

Kolchak, the series and namesake, however, left a lasting impression. In a time when
elected leaders gave people the right to be cynical of their government, and the
"hippies" gave parents the right to suspect their children were up to no good, Kolchak
was a battle cry. (p. 29)

In *Kolchak*, three themes emerged that would impact television going forward: the detective trope, the
supernatural trope, and the conspiracy trope. With these three concepts in place, *Kolchak* starts what
would eventually become the supernatural drama. However, there is one missing piece. It would be David
Lynch and David Frost who would meticulously weave into supernatural stories the fourth necessary
aspect: serialized narrative.

From *Kolchak* to *Twin Peaks*

Fast-forward 15 years. Lynch and Frost bring their strange filmic surrealism to television in *Twin
Peaks*. They supplied one of the most tantalizing pop culture questions of the 1990s: "Who killed Laura
Palmer?" While there are hints that aliens and monsters exist, they are only hints. Gone are the
macroscopic invasions of the science fiction genre. *Twin Peaks*, with its dream giant, the red room's "man
from another place," and the lady who talks with her log, was something new. Gone is the city. As in
Lynch's 1986 *Blue Velvet*, wickedness is covered in the veneer of small-town normalcy (Wilcox, 1995).
Gone, too, is the Kolchak everyman, replaced by the black coffee–loving, highly trained FBI Special Agent
Dale Cooper (Lavery, 1995). "Coop" finds himself in the midst of an investigation involving the
paranormal, the supernatural, and existential questions about personal identity and the reality of evil. Also
missing from *Twin Peaks* was the government conspiracy angle. Sheriff Harry Truman and Coop, though
quirky, are good-guy protagonists. As result, *Twin Peaks* and its intricately woven story structure started
as ABC's highest rated show in almost four years (Lavery, 1995).

While *Twin Peaks* retained some of the *Kolchak* noir, it also added something new. It was the first
substantial supernatural prime-time television show to create a season-long narrative arc (Lavery, 1995;
Ledwon, 1993). Part detective mystery and part soap opera, *Twin Peaks* solidified the idea of the long
narrative arc, proving that prime-time audiences wanted more than episodic television for their evenings
(Charney, 1991). As with all things Lynch, the narrative was not straightforward:

The standard narrative arc went out of the window, and in its place came idiosyncratic
character studies, an elliptical plot, dialogue that brought the bizarre and the banal

> together in a captivating verbal marriage, and imagery quite unlike anything seen on the
> small screen. (Anthony, 2010, para. 2)

Twin Peaks deals with the bizarre and Wells's (2000) microscopic fears. The conspiracies lie within the "good" people of the town. The monsters in *Twin Peaks* are internal, psychological, pathological, emotional, and spiritual. The population of Twin Peaks has secrets, doppelgängers, and demons. Did Audrey, Leo, Shelly, or Leland kill Laura? Was it someone else? Viewers do not know. Viewers no longer need zombies, witches, or vampires. The townspeople now embody the surrealistic terror and horror.

As Zizek (2002) noted, "The division friend/enemy is never just a recognition of factual difference. The enemy is by definition always (up to a point) invisible: it cannot be directly recognized because it looks like one of us" (p. 5). The *Twin Peaks* viewer is left in a space of existential suspended animation, unable to identity what the truth is. The horrible, the grotesque, and the uncanny are now in our midst. As Ingebretsen (2001) noted:

> Those who are nominated as monsters may be coded as foreign or outlandish, but rarely
> are they alien . . . the simple fact is that we know the monster intimately. Perhaps
> worse, the monster is us: bone of our bone, wish of our wish, or even ourselves, slightly
> out of focus—or maybe frighteningly focused. (p. 203)

Or, as the man from another place said about Laura Palmer's doppelgänger, "She's filled with secrets" (Frost & Lynch, 1990, 44:48). In the small town of Twin Peaks, viewers confront the blurred lines of holy/evil, right/wrong, good/bad, all contained within the blurry psyches of the townsfolk. *Twin Peaks*, with it intractably and interconnected absurdist narrative text(s), is considered the first postmodernist television series (Lavery, 1995).

After two seasons, *Twin Peaks* was canceled. First, the series was put up against the popular NBC comedy *Cheers* (1982–1993); then it bounced across different nights and times. Internally there were problems. Kyle McLaughlin's girlfriend and costar, Lara Flynn Boyle, nixed the natural pairing within the show's narrative: the romance between Audrey and Coop. Finally, the 24-hour broadcast of the Gulf War preempted the show for six out of eight weeks. The show lost its audience and its momentum. Furthermore, ABC executives pressured Lynch and Frost to reveal Laura's killer in the middle of the second season. Without that MacGuffin, the series lost its narrative impetus. As Nickerson (1994) argued, "*Twin Peaks* becomes increasingly removed from the . . . structure of a detective novel and closer to a purely forward-moving serial narrative" (p. 274). Though it lasted only two seasons, the prime-time, serial supernatural drama had arrived.

Building on *Kolchak*, *Twin Peaks* introduced an extensive storyworld with a deep mythology, wrapped in a long-term narrative arc (Herrmann & Herbig, 2016; Ryan & Thon, 2014). On top of this, the Lynch-Frost collaboration had two other important impacts. First, it allowed for the first tie-in "*diegetic extension*, where an object from the storyworld gets released in the real world" (Mittell, 2014, p. 259) in the form of *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer*. And, second, as Kruse (1997) noted,

> *Twin Peaks* made the point that postmodern games with the American dream and media culture could be reconciled with mainstream television consumerism. It demonstrated that hyperawareness about the media matched well with a stylishly hyper mode of narrative and a point of view which suggested that a sense of weirdness might be the proper reaction to contemporary America. (p. 114)

Kolchak and *Twin Peaks* influenced two shows that would carry on the tradition of the supremely weird on television. *The X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* would not only have long narrative arcs but deep and complex storyworlds.

Mulder, Buffy, and the Mythological Storyworld

Most people forgot about *Kolchak*, but not everyone did. That popular culture fragment became hugely influential for two important television series creators. *The X-Files* creator, Chris Carter, noted,

> I was inspired by the show *Kolchak, The Night Stalker*. It had really scared me as a kid and I wanted to do something as dark and mysterious as I remembered it to be. So, I was able to say to Fox when they hired me to an exclusive deal, "this is what I want to do." (quoted in Maccarillo, 1994, p. 74)

Soon after *The X-Files* began, Warner Brothers Television Network (The WB) chair Jamie Kellner said, "What we need is the next *Kolchak*" ("Kellner interview," 2000, p. xi). The WB purchased *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* the following week. Susanne Daniels, former president of WB entertainment noted, "One reason we bought *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was that we had been talking about *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* and how it was scary and funny at the same time, and we wanted to recapture that" (as quoted in Friend, 1999, para. 25).

Two years after *Twin Peaks*, the supernatural drama came into its own. Take underpinnings of *Kolchak*, extend the narrative arc, add two FBI agents who externally represent the internal conflicts of Agent Cooper, and you have the basis of *The X-Files*. Agent Fox Mulder is different than Coop and Kolchak. He is a combination of Kolchak's "hysterical outsider" and Cooper's FBI insider. Mulder is the consummate outsider-within (Orbe, 1998). He is simultaneously a member of the FBI, and therefore an insider, yet he believes in conspiracies, government cover-ups, monsters—especially aliens—which makes him an outsider. It is this positionality that prompts the agency to assign Scully to keep tabs on "Spooky" Mulder. Scully, however, is a hard-nosed, by-the-book insider. As a doctor and a scientist, she is bound and dedicated to rules and finding facts. Her skepticism of Mulder's theories and suspicions provide the audience with an opportunity to explore the verisimilitude presented in *The X-Files* from the position of both believer and skeptic. Mulder and Scully's complementary relationship drives the conflict and complexity that heightened the stakes and drama of their stories.

Given the development of the genre, it does not take a giant leap to see the discursive and narrative connections between *Kolchak* and *Buffy* (Fox, 2014). In his horror history, Dawidziak (2015) noted, "Without *The X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, you don't get *The Walking Dead* and

Supernatural. Without *The Night Stalker*, you don't get *The X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" (para. 8). Like *The X-Files*, *Buffy* deviated from the *Kolchak* model and developed a deep mythology. Whedon noted, "It's fascinating to me, the shows that I've always loved the best, *Hill Street Blues*, *Wiseguy*, *Twin Peaks*, have always been shows that did have accumulative knowledge" (as quoted in "TV critic David Bianculli," 2000, 7:42). Both *Buffy* and *The X-Files* provide an exemplary illustration of the continued back-and-forth between episodic and serial storytelling. According to Sconce (2004), viewers could tune into *The X-Files* any week and catch an episode dedicated to the long-term mythological narrative about the government cover-up regarding the existence of aliens. Or viewers could find themselves watching an interesting but singularly episodic monster-of-the-week with no connection to the larger storyline. Similarly, in *Buffy*, one could watch a stand-alone episode or get caught up in the mythologically based storyworld. While both shows' first seasons were primarily monster-of-the-week episodes, seeds of the mythological narratives were planted wherein both the heroes and villains began to have storylines.

There is not space here to examine the full-blown mythologies of *The X-Files* or *Buffy*. However, it is important to remember the sociohistoric placement of both shows. It had been about two years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and *The X-Files* was the first post–Cold War science fiction–horror television show (Lavery, Hague, & Cartwright, 1996). *Buffy* would premiere a few years later. Within this historical placement comes a new discursive and narrative liberty. Mulder and Scully, as well as Buffy, were allowed to go where *Kolchak* could only scratch the surface. No longer were viewers *primarily* concerned with alien invaders and monsters. From moles in the FBI, to the Syndicate in *The X-Files*, to the Watcher's Council and the Initiative in *Buffy*, now dangerous enemies include the government and big organizations. As the taglines for *The X-Files* read: *I Want to Believe. Trust No One. The Truth Is Out There.*

Unlike Kolchak, who in the original *The Night Stalker* movie eventually *comes to believe* in the supernatural through his encounter with the vampire, Mulder and Buffy *already believe*. Mulder believes in the paranormal and the large government conspiracy to cover it up. In fact, Chris Carter wanted Darren McGavin to reprise the role of Kolchak in *The X-Files* (Dyess-Nugent, 2014). McGavin refused, although he appeared as Arthur Dales, father of the X-Files. As for Buffy, she was born into the preternatural, with the potential to become the Slayer. She may question her purpose and why she was picked as the Slayer, but by the time of the television series, she also believes. Like Kolchak, Buffy the television character has a history from a film that predates the program. The fact that she burned down the gym at her previous school is not lost on the administrators of Sunnydale High School.

It is the storyworlds with their complex mythologies that maintained the shows and brought them to a wider audience. It is the conspiracies, double-dealings, government cover-ups, and anticipation of seeing the "The Smoking Man" that sustained *The X-Files*. No longer is the local government simply getting in the way of the truth, as it was in *Kolchak*. Now a large shadow government is taking an active role in re-creating, retelling, and simultaneously hiding the truth. In *Buffy*, she is the Chosen One, the one to do battle with the "Big Bads" of the world, which includes two organizations supposedly designed to protect people (Herrmann, 2013). It is a shift that seems natural given the subject matter and lives being led within these stories, but it is also part of a storytelling trend that has continued to subordinate the episodic plots into larger narrative arcs that give us complex storyworlds.

***Kolchak* and the Changing Nature of Our Narratives**

In the recent reboot of *The X-Files* (2016), Chris Carter paid homage to *Kolchak* by creating a character dressed in signature Carl Kolchak fashion and stated that the series was a "huge influence" on what *The X-Files* became (quoted in Hegedus, 2016, para. 4). Writer Eric Hegedus (2016) noted, "If #Kolchak inexplicably trends on Twitter Monday night, blame 'The X-Files'" (para. 1). And once again, Kolchak was back. Not the character or a new movie, a Kolchak-like fragment, an "Easter egg" (or hidden message), and like other Easter eggs, it connects one storyworld to another (Herrmann, 2016b). One of the important dimensions of polymediated narrative as an approach is that it allows audiences to account for the ways in which the internal and external dimensions of storyworlds are influenced by the outside storyworlds and discourses to which they are connected. Contemporary media are making it possible to redistribute, recirculate, revive, and relive stories past. For that reason, Kolchak can exist on television as both a character from a short-lived television series streaming on Amazon or as an Easter egg in *The X-Files*. Media are making it possible for viewers to make as well as see the connections between stories in ways that become integral to understandings of them.

It would be easy to dismiss this essay as a quaint recap of the legacy of *Kolchak*. However, that reaction overlooks the discursive importance of what *Kolchak* represents. Both producers and interpreters draw upon numerous texts, genres, narratives, and discourses, and change them. This not only means changing, adopting, or helping to evolve the texts themselves (or, internal to the genre itself, if you will). It also means the incorporation of external social narratives and discourses, including everything from political discourses and economic discourses to the desires (as well as anger) from fandom discourses. This emphasis shows fragments, discourses, and narratives in action. Creators reinterpreted, adopted, changed, and transformed *Kolchak* from a commercial failure into a living part of our contemporary understanding of supernatural dramas.

If Ong (2001) was right and media do influence our relationships to knowledge and understanding, it would seem as if the interconnectedness of contemporary media has focused viewers on the interconnectedness of the stories within their narrative worlds. It is evident all around. The *Star Wars* universe can continue as if it was never finished (at least twice now). Marvel has created stories that link through the Web, television, one-shots on DVD, and film into one grand narrative. Each of the stories in these worlds contributes to an increasingly complex narrative.

In highlighting the internal connectedness of these narratives, we cannot neglect their external connectedness as well. *Kolchak* was not a storyworld built to be "spreadable," but there it is on television, phones, and computers. Given the prevalence of past storyworlds in modern media streaming, it is no longer enough to examine how the contemporary storyworld transcends a particular medium. Nor is it necessarily enough to look at the recursivity between series' producers and their audiences. Rather, we must examine the dynamic interplay of various polymediated fragments and discourses, and how that interplay changes social and contextual narrative understandings in fundamental ways.

This essay focuses on the constitutive, connective, and contextual dimensions of Kolchak as a

fragment in the supernatural drama genre. Despite the fact that we are discussing a character, a series, two movies, and a storyworld, conceptualizing Kolchak as a fragment allows us to account for the many ways in which all these things have continued influence. And yet we cannot ignore how storyworlds can be dialectical as well. They contribute to an increasingly complex discourse that is given space through media. Just as new stories can reopen the *Star Wars* and Marvel universes, it is also important to examine when fans, in response to *The Force Awakens*, clamor about the sexism in marketing in response to the lack of Rey toys (O'Connor, 2016). Storyworlds are also contingent. The telling of the stories themselves can be endangered, as when Dark Horse Entertainment sees its characterizations challenged when White actors are cast in roles originally written as people of color (Rosen, 2017). The discourses in which these stories participate and the roles they play within those discourses need unpacking.

The fact is, shifts in storytelling necessitate shifts in our understandings of stories. For instance, given the evolving focus on narrative arcs in fictional stories, what if some contemporary news coverage suffers from a lack of context? What if, by presenting news only as who, what, when, and where, the larger discourses and narratives that give stories meaning are neglected (Eisenberg, 2016)? Certainly, the zeitgeist moments of *Serial* (2014) and *Making of a Murderer* (2015) are examples of narrative storytelling bringing together news with issues that resonate beyond a simple retelling of what occurred to create an influential moment of cultural discourse.

In retrospect, the made-for-television movies and television series that introduced audiences to Carl Kolchak—that obnoxious, pain-in-the-neck reporter—seem quaint and outdated. However, the continued contemporary influence of *Kolchak* points to an important shift in our understandings of not only the diegetic supernatural genre narratives but of larger cultural narratives as well. One could not avoid the influence of all the challenges a reporter must face when he cannot even get his editor to acknowledge what was going on. However, *Kolchak* not only gave us monsters. It gave us conspiracies, and thus became part of everyday discourses about authority and power. *Kolchak* was much more influential than two made-for-television movies and one season could have signified in generations past. Ironically, this article extends that influence and those discourses. Forty years later, Carl Kolchak still speaks to us. And if we listen, we can still hear him.

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