

**Real Ghosts:
Trauma, True Crime, and Temporality
in *Sharp Objects***

Charlotte Devon Scurlock

*The following text accompanies the videographic essay of the same title in this issue, viewable [here](#).

Beginning in the late 2010s, streaming platforms have increasingly produced and distributed an increasing number of limited series and anthology horror programs. This trend can be observed on Netflix,¹ Amazon Prime Video,² and Hulu,³ among others. These series are based in traditions of the televisual serialized family melodrama, and center elements of horror in aesthetics and narrative. They are presented either as individual episodes or season-length arcs. In their explorations of trauma and family dynamics, they embody what Jason Mittell (2015) identifies as schemas of “complex TV,” featuring formal elements of serialization, melodrama, authorship, and deep character interiority and psychologization. In these regards, they are somewhat distinct from earlier televisual horror which frequently use an episodic structure. Like much of horror media, the threats in these series reflect Robin Wood’s (1978) notion that horror’s “return of the repressed,” or the manifestations of unresolved trauma, center in the family. *Sharp Objects* (HBO 2018) fits within this schema of televisual horror, with the fall of a family empire playing out alongside visions of ghosts. In this video essay, I explore how *Sharp Objects* relies on fragmentation to mimic the impact of trauma and critique the gendered structures of true crime media. I use what Chiara Grizzafi (2020) would describe as a poetic (rather than explanatory) mode of videographic criticism.

Sharp Objects follows Camille Preaker, a crime reporter for a Saint Louis newspaper who copes with a slew of childhood traumas through alcohol abuse

¹ *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018), *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020), *Midnight Mass* (2021), *The Midnight Club* (2022), *Archive 81* (2022)

² *Them* (2021), *Lore* (2018)

³ *Monsterland* (2020), *American Horror Stories* (2022)

and self-injurious behaviors. When she hesitantly returns to her fictional hometown of Wind Gap, Missouri, to report on the grisly murders of two young girls, she is confronted by memories, including those of her physically and emotionally abusive mother, her deceased sister, and intense gendered violence experienced in high school. Her past is revealed through brief sequences intercut throughout the series. This montage effect allows the mystery to unfold over the course of eight episodes. In order to connect the events of the past and present, and to solve the complex crimes driving the narrative, viewers must deploy what Mittell describes as the forensic gaze. This necessitates close diegetic engagement and rewards discussion and repeated viewings, encouraging audiences “to organize and uncover a wealth of narrative data” (Mittell 2007, n.p.).

As noted by Lorna Jowett and Stacey Abbott in their 2012 book on the subject, televisual horror has always been diffuse and hybrid, with elements of the uncanny seeping into non-horror genres. The graphic murders at the center of the series drive the narrative arc, centering discussions of true crime media consumption. Writing about women readers of popular true crime books, Laura Browder (2006) notes a readerly focus less on narrative than on forensic scrutiny, the books structured to “encourag[e] the reader to participate in a voyeuristic dissection of the victim’s mistakes, her failure to read obvious clues” (931). In *Sharp Objects*, the resolution promised by true crime media—the pleasure derived from solving the case and seeking justice—is shattered by an abrupt twist ending. A fourteen second mid-credit sequence reveals that Amma enlisted her friends to carry out the murders, luring the girls into the woods wearing long white gowns. While this ending offers tidy diegetic resolution, it dissolves the satisfaction that normally accompanies a true crime text as it further alienates Camille from her family. This ending also reveals how dominant cultural narratives of true crime (stranger danger, men as perpetrators of violence, etc.) diverts attention from the true killers in *Sharp Objects*.

The history of Wind Gap is saturated in gendered and racialized violence. Camille’s mother is heiress to a large hog farm, employing much of the town, including a number of migrant workers. The frequent shots from car windows reveal the stark race and class divides at work in the city. The setting of Wind Gap places the series within the Southern gothic genre, with the constant hum of bugs and fans indicating the summer heat. Lisa Hinrichsen, Gina Caison, and Stephanie Rountree (2017) describe the televisual South as “an intensely visual place” (3). This emphasis on landscape allows for examination of class. The town of Wind Gap serves a prominent character function throughout the series, signifying the oft-explored notion of the idyllic American town with a seedy

underbelly. Frequent shots from Camille's perspective as she drives through town reveals the racial and socioeconomic segregation throughout the town, with homes ranging from large suburban mansions to decrepit homes and trailer parks.

I use video essay form to exemplify repeated patterns and capture the essence of watching the series. It would be difficult to understand the unique function of intercutting in *Sharp Objects* through text only. Additionally, I hope that I was able to capture the affective experience of watching the show through manipulation of sound. The poetic mode of this piece allows for implicit and explicit connections with the text.

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