

Reviews (Films / Documentaries / TV Shows)

All Is True [film].

Directed by Kenneth Branagh. 2018.

Sony Pictures Classics. 101 minutes.

What word would you use to describe the death of your son? I would use the word “tragedy,” and I think that, when William Shakespeare’s son died, he would have employed the same term. While we know Shakespeare for the tragedies he penned, we often overlook the tragedies of his actual life. They are not broadcast the same way as his actual plays, but moments like these – the artist’s struggles – are the focus of the 2018 film *All Is True*. Director Kenneth Branagh, also the star of the film (as William Shakespeare), depicts the later years of Shakespeare’s life by setting the film in 1613, three years before Shakespeare’s death. While still showing deference to the prolific playwright/poet, *All Is True* highlights the struggles and mistakes of Shakespeare’s life, such as being an absent father, coping with the death of his son, and his failures as a husband. The film courageously depicts Shakespeare the man, not Shakespeare the Bard.

All Is True begins in 1613 with Shakespeare’s return from London to Stratford-upon-Avon, where he immediately wanders into the fields of tall brush in front of his sumptuous estate. There, he is reading from aged pages of handwritten poetry, purportedly written by his son, when a young boy appears and talks to him but then abruptly vanishes. This enigmatic beginning is clarified when the viewer finds out that Shakespeare is seeing a specter of his son, Hamnet, who had died at age eleven. Shakespeare struggles to cope with his son’s death, much to his family’s dismay. Having already mourned Hamnet’s death back in 1596 when he had actually died, the family feels little sympathy for the father’s belated mourning. Shakespeare had not been present when Hamnet died, nor had he attended his funeral. Rather, as Shakespeare’s wife Anne (Judi Dench) reminds him, at that time he was in London, writing *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

The Shakespeare family is fraught with tension that William struggles to assuage. His relationship with his youngest daughter Judith (Kathryn Wilder), Hamnet’s twin, is especially volatile. Judith resents William’s mourning of Hamnet with fervent consternation, and she berates her father for clinging so desperately to the poems that Hamnet wrote as a child. She accuses Shakespeare of only caring about his son and having a lesser opinion of his daughters simply because they are women. She even goes so far as to say that the wrong twin died and that Shakespeare would have been happier if it had been her and not Hamnet. This tension comes to a climax in a dimly lit scene when Shakespeare screams about his regret of being absent for Hamnet’s death. He bellows about the boy’s brilliance as a poet which provokes Judith to yell, “Oh, Hamnet wasn’t brilliant! He was beautiful, but he wasn’t brilliant!” 00:53:02). Then, Shakespeare’s reality is shattered when, in a rage, Judith reveals that she, not Hamnet, had created the

poems. Hamnet had only written them down because Judith had never been taught to read or write. She then burns most of the pages, leaving only a few scraps for Shakespeare to cling to.

The film plays with fiction and history in the triangle of Hamnet, Judith, and William Shakespeare. There is much speculation about how Hamnet died, a salient theory being that he was killed by the Plague. Branagh uses this theory as a means to another end. In the film, Shakespeare believes that the Plague took his son, yet, when he consults the death registry to see his son's name, he finds only been six deaths that month. Such a low number would have been inconsistent with the Plague which would have taken dozens, if not hundreds, of lives. Shakespeare confronts Anne and Judith about Hamnet's actual death and finds out that his son committed suicide. Eleven-year-old Judith had told her twin brother that she was going confess to their father that the poetry was hers, not Hamnet's. Unable to bear disappointing his father, Hamnet then went to the local pond and drowned himself with the poems floating ominously around him on the water.

His failures as a father aren't the only focus, however. On his first evening home, Shakespeare is walking to bed with his wife when she abruptly stops him at the bedroom door. Anne tells William that he has spent so much time away from his family that he is a guest in his own home, and guests, she says, sleep in the guest bedroom (00:04:11). The couple struggles to rekindle any sort of love, especially because Anne holds a deep resentment against Shakespeare for his sonnets, even though these had been published illegally without the author's consent. The sonnets, centering on a man who loves both the Handsome Youth (male) and the Dark Lady (female), caused a deal of controversy for the Shakespeares. Bisexuality was not socially acceptable during Shakespeare's time, and Anne's reputation was slandered when these poems were published. She voices her anger, asking Shakespeare, "All these years, Will, worried about your reputation, have you even once considered mine?" (00:37:42).

The sonnets are another example of history meeting fiction in *All Is True*. The debate about the addressee of Shakespeare's sonnets is rife with controversy. Dedicated to the ambiguous Mr. W. H., the sonnets carry with them the mystery of who these initials represent. Branagh chooses to portray the sonnets as intended for the Earl of Southampton, Henry Wriothesley (Ian McKellen). Shakespeare and Wriothesley share an intimate dinner by candlelight where Shakespeare admits that the sonnets are, indeed, for Wriothesley. Shakespeare recites sonnet 29, a poem about an insecure man who finds security in the thought of his lover. Branagh leads the audience to believe that this sonnet was written for Wriothesley. The Earl thanks Shakespeare for his deference, but he makes it clear that Shakespeare cannot love him, ever. The tense scene ends with Wriothesley reciting the poem back to Shakespeare, obfuscating his previous denial of their love, and then proceeds to exit. The last we see of the Earl is him galloping away on his horse at full speed.

Shakespeare does his best to mend his relationships with his family. After much struggle to reacquaint himself with them, Shakespeare finally comes to terms with his family and “becomes a Shakespeare” rather than a guest. His relationship with Judith and the deceased Hamnet comes to a resolution when Shakespeare gives Judith a penknife so that she can begin to write the poetry she so long ago was only able to speak to her brother. Shakespeare had carried this specific penknife every day since Hamnet’s death because it was intended as a gift for the boy who—Shakespeare thought—was a poet. Releasing this penknife, a symbol for Shakespeare’s regret about his son, to Judith represents Shakespeare relinquishing his guilt while also setting a new foundation for his relationship with his daughter. The tension between Anne and Shakespeare is resolved in this same scene. Thirty-one years earlier, Anne, unable to read or write, had signed their marriage license with a simple X instead of her name; fast-forward to the film’s setting in 1613, she surprises William by presenting the marriage certificate to him and signing her own name.

What separates *All Is True* from many other films about Shakespeare or his plays is that Branagh does not valorize or romanticize Shakespeare. He shows Shakespeare as human, as prone to error. This is much different than, for example, *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) by John Madden, which romanticizes Shakespeare and his love affair with the fictional character Viola (an allusion to Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*). Shakespeare is young and virile in *Shakespeare in Love*, a much different representation than the older Shakespeare figure in *All Is True*. *A Waste of Shame* (2005) by John Mckay takes a quite different approach to the sonnets by dramatizing the story of the Dark Lady and the Handsome Youth and their relationship to Shakespeare. While *All Is True* does include a serious scene about the sonnets, how the sonnets came to be is not romanticized here, nor does it make up the plot of the film. Also, *All Is True* does not depict one of Shakespeare’s plays, something Branagh has previously done, for example, in his adaptation of *Hamlet* (1996). No, this film focuses on the aftermath of Shakespeare’s time as the Bard in London and presents him as fully human, fully fallible, and yet, still the genius that produced some of the most revered texts in history.

I truly enjoyed this film and its complex development of Shakespeare and all his mistakes. History and films typically romanticize Shakespeare—not as “a” bard, but as “the” Bard, the epitome of playwrights and poets. Branagh chooses to swim against the current of mainstream Shakespeare representations and depicts him as a human capable of error, while still highlighting his talent and genius. There is a fair amount of ambiguity between history and fiction, but that adds some irony to the title of *All Is True*. The film stands as a historical account of how gender roles affect family values, family relationships, and relationships with the outside world. The film gives a unique account of the connection between literacy and gender through Shakespeare’s volatile relationship with his daughter. So, if you are looking for a romanticized bard who charms all with his wit and poetry, then this is not the film for you. However, if you are looking for a complex

characterization of a brilliant mind that astonished the world while facing real-life issues such as losing a son and being estranged from his family, then grab your popcorn and enjoy.

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The Assassination of Gianni Versace: American Crime Story [TV series]. Season 2. Directed by Ryan Murphy, Nelson Cragg, Gwyneth Horder-Payton, Daniel Minahan, and Matt Bomer. 2018.

Ryan Murphy Productions; Color Force; Scott & Larry Productions; Brad Falchuk Teley-Vision; FX Productions; etc. 9 episodes (41-66 minutes).

There are very few names in the world that most people will recognize, and not many of these are associated with extravagance and wealth. Gianni Versace (1946-1997), an Italian fashion designer, may be one such name, for even if you are not a fashionista you have most likely heard the name. The name Versace has infiltrated mainstream media so deeply that popular musical artists mention the brand in their lyrics to emphasize their lavish lifestyles. Yet, despite the great fame of his name, many may not be aware of the tragic end to Versace's life, as he was assassinated in 1997 by a serial killer, Andrew Cunanan, right outside his Miami Beach home. Perhaps sensing this lack of awareness, the television channel FX decided to include this case in its "American Crime Story" series.

The Assassination of Gianni Versace: American Crime Story is FX's attempt to bring the story of Versace's murder to light and to present the history and mindset of the killer, Andrew Cunanan. It is directed by several notable individuals: Ryan Murphy, a six-time Primetime Emmy Award winner, who is best known for creating and producing popular television series such as *Glee* (2009-2015) and *American Horror Story* (2011-present); Nelson Cragg who worked on the first installment of the "American Crime Story" series, *The People vs. O. J. Simpson* (2016), and *American Horror Story* (2011-present); Gwyneth Horder-Payton who has directed notable shows such as *Fringe* (2008-2013), *The Walking Dead* (2010-present), and many more; Daniel Minahan who directed several episodes of *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) and *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-present); and Matt Bomer, an American actor with a recurring role in *Chuck* (2007-2012) and winner of a Golden Globe Award for his role in *The Normal Heart* (2014), who made his directorial debut with *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*. The show is based on Maureen Orth's book *Vulgar Favors: Andrew Cunanan, Gianni Versace, and the Largest Failed Manhunt in U.S. History* (1999), which claims to relate all the known details of Andrew Cunanan and his killing spree.

While much of the show is based on Orth's book, each episode ends with the statement, "This series is inspired by true events and investigative reports. Some events are combined or imagined for dramatic and interpretive purposes. Dialogue is imagined to be consistent with these events." The Versace family has

distanced itself from the show, claiming that it is merely a work of fiction, but Ryan Murphy has responded to these statements by stating that the show is based on Orth's book which is a work of non-fiction and that the show merely adds some docudrama elements. Since both Versace and Cunanan are dead, as are the other victims involved, there is no way to ascertain the whole truth. The show consists of nine episodes, each ranging from 41 to 66 minutes in length, and is rated "Mature" due to language, smoking/drugs, suicide, violence, and hints of sexual abuse. I would not recommend *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* to those with weak stomachs as Cunanan's murders are shown in graphic detail, usually accompanied by eerie music that seeks to unsettle the viewer. The series also has a running theme of showing the struggles of the LGBTQ+ community, showcasing both Versace and Cunanan as gay men during the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s.

Episode 1, "The Man Who Would Be Vogue," begins with a juxtaposition of Versace's and Cunanan's mornings on the day of the murder: Versace enjoys a comfortable start in his beautiful home and has a hearty breakfast by the poolside, while Cunanan spends his morning walking into the ocean where he screams his lungs out and then throws up in a dirty public toilet where he reads homophobic slurs written on the walls of the stall. This juxtaposition eventually leads to a climax as Cunanan sees Versace at the front door of his home and thus takes the opportunity to assassinate him. The show then jumps back to the year 1990 when Cunanan and Versace supposedly met. This incident has been the subject of considerable debate as the Versace family vehemently denies that the two ever met, and there are only confirming stories by those who heard about the meeting from Cunanan. This first episode also uses the opportunity to highlight some of the police incompetence that characterized the manhunt for Andrew Cunanan. The theme of homophobia is introduced when the police questions Versace's long-time partner, Antonio D'Amico, and is seemingly uncomfortable with the manner of their relationship. Then we are introduced to Donatella Versace, Gianni's sister, who was known to be very close with her brother. The episode ends with Cunanan seemingly reveling in all the news reporting of his murder of Versace.

Episode 2, "Manhunt," suggests that Versace was struggling with HIV, yet the Versace family has denied that Gianni ever had the disease and claimed that, although he was sick, he was suffering from cancer. The viewer is transported back to May 1997, and we get glimpses of Cunanan's charming personality and his penchant for tall tales as he tells his neighbor Ronnie Holston that Versace had proposed to him but that Cunanan had rejected him. The remainder of the episode deals with Cunanan stalking Versace and trying to discover a way to get to him, while also evading the police, and ends with him at a club telling another patron, "You know, I'm the person least likely to be forgotten," (51:16) suggesting that Cunanan was suffering from an inferiority complex, a theory that has been considered as the real Cunanan's motive for killing Versace as he may have felt that Versace was the epitome of everything he wanted to be and felt he deserved.

Episode 3, "A Random Killing," goes back a couple of months in time to focus on Cunanan's third victim, Lee Miglin, a property developer in Chicago. Although never proven, Orth believes that Miglin was a closeted gay or bisexual man who had a relationship with Cunanan, which ended with his murder. We also witness the murder of Cunanan's fourth victim, William Reese, who is shown to be shot by Cunanan in order to steal his truck. *Episode 4, "House by the Lake,"* jumps to April 1997 and focuses on Cunanan's first and second murder victims, Jeffrey Trail and David Madson. The reason for Trail's murder, according to this series, is that Cunanan believed that Madson was his one true love, and therefore he would do anything to be with him and considered Trail as a threat. It is interesting to note that, at the time of Trail's actual murder, the police believed that Madson was involved, but Madson's name was cleared, which is why he is portrayed here as an uncooperating victim of Cunanan who eventually gets killed himself.

Episode 5, "Don't Ask Don't Tell," portrays the injustices suffered by the LGBTQ+ community during the 1990s. The episode focuses on Jeff Trail when he was a Navy Lieutenant. "Don't Ask Don't Tell" was a policy established in 1993, which essentially allowed gay Americans to serve in the military, but they could neither be asked about their orientation nor talk about it. In the episode, Trail eventually ends up at a gay bar where he meets and befriends Cunanan. The episode cuts back right before Trail's murder, when Cunanan is staying at his apartment, and they have an argument with Trail claiming that he wishes he had never walked into the bar where he met Cunanan. Cunanan then leaves for Madson's apartment, and from there he calls Trail to tell him that he has his gun, which then leads to the events depicted in the previous episode.

Episode 6, "Descent," cuts back to 1996, the year before Cunanan's killing spree. Here we witness Cunanan's lavish lifestyle thanks to the wealth of an older man, Norman Blachford, who appears to have some sort of sexual arrangement with Cunanan. Throughout the episode, we are reminded of Cunanan's vanity and compulsive lying as he tries to juggle his friends and clients all in one place. We also see instances of Cunanan using cocaine. During this episode, Madson tells Cunanan that he is not "the one" for him, which causes Cunanan to break down and use methamphetamine. Once he hits rock bottom, Cunanan returns to his mother, Mary Ann. We now start to see some of Cunanan's dysfunctional family. Cunanan eventually leaves and the eerie music that is usually associated with his murders is played as he drives away, signifying his "descent."

Episode 7, "Ascent," covers Gianni Versace trying to push his sister Donatella to come into her own as Gianni is unhealthy at this point in the flashback and believes he will have to leave his entire fashion business to her. Meanwhile, Cunanan is shown working unhappily at his part-time job. He tries to join an escort agency but is rejected and exclaims that he will sell himself. This eventually leads to his pursuit of Norman Blachford, his client in the previous episode. When packing up to move in with Norman, Cunanan tells his mother that, despite his earlier promises that he would take her wherever he would go, she cannot come

with him. When she gets slightly hysterical, he pushes her away, which leads to her fracturing her shoulder blade.

In *Episode 8, "Creator/Destroyer,"* we get another juxtaposition of Versace's and Cunanan's respective upbringing. Versace was raised with the notion that success only comes with hard work and practice, and that it is never easy, which is why it is special. Cunanan, on the other hand, was spoiled and his father's favorite to the point that he was given the master bedroom to remind him that he was special and that "when you feel special, success will follow." (7:43) Modesto Cunanan, the father, is shown to be a cruel husband, telling his wife she has a weak mind for being depressed and physically abusing her. Modesto is also shown to have a penchant for lying, and the show implies that Cunanan's father sexually abused him, although there seems to be no evidence that this occurred in reality. The episode ends with Modesto falling from grace and fleeing the U.S. to go to the Philippines. Cunanan chases after him, believing that his father has a plan even though his mother tells him otherwise. What he finds is that his father has been lying all along, which makes Cunanan feel that he is also a lie. The episode ends with Cunanan applying for a part-time job.

In *Episode 9, "Alone,"* Cunanan is evading the police while reveling in all the news coverage he is getting for Versace's murder, but his attitude quickly changes when he realizes that he is boxed in and losing his chances to escape. Here we get the show's most explicit statement concerning the injustices suffered by homosexuals as Ronnie Holston rants that nobody had cared to seriously try to catch Cunanan when he was killing "nobody gays," that Cunanan was only taken seriously once he had killed a celebrity, and that gays were complacent by hiding in the shadows while Cunanan was vain, not hiding, and actually "trying to be seen." (17:16) That Cunanan's motive was to strike back against homosexual injustice seems like a stretch as he, throughout the series, personally does not seem to suffer any injustice and seems more fixated on his delusions of grandeur. Once Cunanan realizes that there is no escape he opts for suicide. As he pulls the trigger, he recalls his encounter with Versace, and we get the continuation of their conversation with Versace rejecting Cunanan, thus apparently breaking Cunanan and his dreams. The episode ends with a final juxtaposition as Versace's cremated remains have their own private space on his estate while Cunanan's remains are left interred in a public mausoleum, seemingly lost among the other dead.

Overall, the series is fast paced, and to discover that many of the details of the murders, as well as some details of Cunanan's background, are historically quite accurate is refreshing. The series does feature a fair amount of conjecture, though. There is no evidence that Lee Miglin had a relationship with Cunanan; Trail and Madson are implied to be in a relationship in the series, but there is no evidence of this; and it is by no means certain that Cunanan and Versace ever met prior to the latter's assassination. In addition, Cunanan's autopsy revealed that he did not have HIV, and the details of Versace's illness remain unknown. Nonetheless, the actual murder events and Cunanan's history seem to be accurate. It is also rather

forward-thinking of FX to include the struggles of the LGBTQ+ community in this installment of “American Crime Story.”

If you like thrillers or have a morbid curiosity with regard to the psychology of serial killers or are just looking for a decent television show to watch, *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* may be for you. If you like this show, I would suggest you also watch the first series of “American Crime Story,” namely *The People vs. O. J. Simpson* (2016), which is also based on a book, *The Run of His Life: The People v. O. J. Simpson* by Jeffrey Toobin (1996), as well as the next installment of the series titled *Impeachment*, based on another one of Toobin’s books, *A Vast Conspiracy: The Real Story of the Sex Scandal That Nearly Brought Down a President* (1999). There are also a number of historical documentaries or docu-series that investigate serial killers, such as *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* (2019) or *Evil Genius* (2018) which follows the story of bank robber Marjorie Diehl-Armstrong. Whether you choose *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* or any of these others, you are “in” for great television.

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Belly of the Beast [documentary film].

Directed by Erika Cohn. 2020.

Idle Wild Films Inc; Independent Television Service. 82 minutes.

Although the human-rights violation of forced sterilization explored in Erika Cohn’s *Belly of the Beast* (2020) may appear as contemporary, the fight for reproductive justice in America has a long history. The sexual autonomy of women of color has been violated by the United States government from the very beginning, with those at the intersection of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, disabled, mentally ill, LGBTQI, and immigrant identities facing the greatest violence. In the middle of the nineteenth century, enslaved Black women were subject to involuntary experimentation, without any administration of anesthesia, by notable American physicians, including Dr. J. Marion Sims who remains renowned as the father of modern gynecology. After slavery’s abolition, initiatives to control reproduction in the Black community were far from halted and perhaps more pronounced than ever before. All forms of birth control, including sterilization and asexualization procedures, were viewed as the most cost-efficient means of curbing welfare costs in America, leading to a decrease in the birth rate of poor Black and non-Black children of color. With the passage of legislation, such as the Snyder Act of 1921 and the Indian Health Care Improvement Act of 1976, Indigenous women and underage girls as young as eleven were forcibly sterilized under the care of the Indian Health Service, a division of the United States Department of Health and Human Services. In the United States territory of Puerto Rico, Latinx women were not only used as test subjects for contraceptives but

experienced the highest rate of sterilization in the world: nearly a third of their total childbearing population was sterilized.

American culture and state-sanctioned unethical human experimentation have played a significant role, and the general public has been conditioned to overlook the intentional genocide of marginalized populations through forced sterilization. The Eugenics movement emerged in England in the late nineteenth century, spearheaded by scientist Sir Francis Galton. However, the Eugenics movement in America did not gain traction until the first half of the twentieth century, during World War II, and simply preyed on the existing racially biased attitudes of the American people. The movement produced propaganda which reiterated the biological inferiority of different marginalized populations on the basis of alleged, predisposed “degenerate” or “unfit” traits. It primarily rallied around the goal of segregating and institutionalizing “feeble minded” populations during their prime reproductive years until the realization took hold that reproductive surgeries would be comparatively less costly and entirely eliminate the respective women’s ability to reproduce. The Eugenics movement in America garnered support in more ways than one from government officials, medical professionals, intellectuals of various racial backgrounds, and mainstream White feminist movement figures, including Margaret Sanger, the co-founder of the birth control movement. Although Indiana adopted the nation’s first sterilization law in 1907 and the 1924 Immigration Act encouraged sterilization as a solution to preserve the United States’ racial makeup, it was the 1927 decision in the U.S. Supreme Court case *Buck v. Bell* (274 U.S. 200) that undoubtedly opened the door to legislation at a national level which enabled the mass compulsory sterilization of marginalized groups, especially those who were both female and incarcerated.

There are misconceptions that America replicated segregationist ideology and Eugenics procedures of Nazi Germany when, in fact, Germany actually followed California’s example. California was running the largest sterilization regime in all of the states, legally performing over 20,000 tubal ligation and hysterectomy surgeries in hospitals, mental institutions, prisons, and other systems of confinement between 1909 and 1979. While California’s sterilization law was repealed in 1979, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) continued to forcibly perform tubal ligations and hysterectomies on incarcerated individuals without consent up until 2013.

“When they say the CDCR is the Belly of the Beast, it is literal.” (01:15:03) *Belly of the Beast* is a 2020 documentary film which uncovers modern-day Eugenics and medical negligence in California women’s state prison facilities. It centers on the story of Kelli Dillon and her historical case against the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. Dillon had undergone a hysterectomy unknowingly while incarcerated at the age of twenty-four. The film begins with footage of California’s Central Valley with a voiceover by Kelli Dillon. She recalls her initial impression of the grasslands, decades earlier, when she entered the Central California Women’s Facility after shooting and killing her husband in self-

defense. The screen shifts between blurred images of the Central California Women's Facility and Kelli Dillon's 2008 deposition video for her case against the CDCR. Dillon had initially visited the infirmary because of abdominal pain. Her time with the prison doctor quickly turned a mere initial examination into a series of biopsies, ending with her coercion into a surgical procedure. Dillon describes the process of filling out consent forms just minutes before the surgery, demonstrating that it is impossible for any incarcerated person to decipher and comprehend such paperwork and make an informed decision. After her surgery, Dillon experienced the classic symptoms of early menopause and made the decision to contact Cynthia Chandler of *Justice Now, Inc.*, an organization which provides legal advocacy and resources for community organizing to formerly and currently incarcerated women. Upon Chandler's visit to the Central California Women's Facility, it became clear that a hysterectomy had been performed on Dillon by the prison surgeon, confirming suspicions of potential malpractice. Dillon then turned to direct community action inside the prison, relaying legal resources to other women who had similarly experienced reproductive injustice and connecting them to *Justice Now*.

Though Dillon did not win her case against the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, her fight for justice eventually resulted in the 2014 passage of SB-1153 in California and brought national media attention to the long-standing institutional phenomenon of forced sterilization abuses within systems of confinement. *Belly of the Beast* incorporates testimony from women who were formerly or are currently incarcerated, some with nearly identical stories to that of Kelli Dillon, from investigative journalists, and from former CDCR nurses. The film maintains impartiality through layers of objective evidence and the inclusion of counter perspectives, including those of the CDCR, the California Prison Health Care Services Federal Receiver, and more. It not only includes footage of several hearings but also individual interviews and written statements.

Belly of the Beast also explores Dillon's process of community reentry after her release from prison, as she is trying to come to terms with the fact that fifteen years of her life have been spent incarcerated, away from her now adult children and elderly mother. Dillon discusses the process of reclaiming her body, navigating self-worth, reconnecting with her sons, and serving as an advocate against domestic and community violence. Chandler also tells her story in the film and addresses the time, resources, and emotional intensity of longtime community organization involvement whilst balancing single motherhood. Even considering the success of SB-1153, Dillon and Chandler both acknowledge that the fight for reproductive justice is nowhere near over. The film ends with a preliminary 2019 hearing for AB-1764, a combined effort by Dillon, Chandler, and others who are demanding reparations for all of California's forced sterilization survivors, as the outro of Mary J. Blige's "See What You've Done" fades into the background. At the very end, the film discloses in white text on a black screen that, despite the fact that there is a federal ban against forced sterilization surgeries, systems of

confinement across the United States continue to sterilize incarcerated individuals without their consent for the purpose of birth control.

Belly of the Beast is more than an exposé of the United States' extensive history of forced sterilization and of human-rights violations in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. It prompts reflection about the nation's punitive approach toward incarceration and perception of incarcerated individuals' humanity or, more transparently, lack thereof. It also provides powerful insight into topics like trauma, motherhood, domestic violence, and community organizing. Though the content may be unsettling or potentially triggering for younger audiences and those directly impacted by the criminal justice system, it is a must-see for all. The film could have delved further into America's history of Eugenics with regard to other marginalized populations through government sanctioned programs, however, it rightfully opts out of doing so to avoid decentralizing the experiences of incarcerated individuals.

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the film made its debut internationally on the first night of the 2020 Human Rights Watch Film Festival New York Digital Edition and was released commercially months later in United States theaters on October 16, 2020. It was first broadcast on PBS's Independent Lens series on November 23, 2020. *Belly of the Beast* is directed by Erika Cohn, a director and producer best known for her Emmy-nominated documentary *In Football We Trust* (2018) and her Peabody-Award-winning documentary *The Judge* (2017). *Belly of the Beast* was produced by Cohn's Idle Wild Films, Inc., with coproduction from the Independent Television Service.

If reproductive injustice, medicine, and law are topics of interest to you, the documentary film *No Más Bebés* and "The State of Eugenics" episode of the television series *Reel South* are other pieces of media especially recommended. *No Más Bebés* (2015) focuses on the lived experiences of Mexican immigrant women who were forcibly coerced into sterilization procedures at Los Angeles County's USC Medical Center during the 1960s and 1970s, whilst following their federal class action lawsuit of *Madrigal v. Quilligan* (decided 1978). "The State of Eugenics" (2016) addresses the stories of disabled men and women who are survivors of either sterilization or asexualization procedures in North Carolina's distinct Eugenics regime. North Carolina journalists and legislators provide additional testimonies as the documentary follows the push for accountability by providing reparations for survivors.

Belly of the Beast forces viewers to dwell upon how prejudice, perhaps even their own prejudice, is weaponized to justify human-rights violations against vulnerable populations, including those documented in the film.

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Cable Girls/Las chicas del cable [TV series]. Seasons 1-5.

Directed by Carlos Sedes, David Pinillos, Antonio Hernández, Roger Gual, and Manuel Gómez Pereira. 2017-2020.

Netflix; Bambú Producciones. 42 episodes (35-63 minutes each).

In the “roaring twenties,” Madrid became a prominent center of technology, culture, and innovation. With millions of people flooding into urban areas, women sought employment and other opportunities unavailable to them in rural regions or past centuries. This newfound independence in Madrid is expressed through four young women who make their start as associates. To combat the toxic masculinity and oppression rampant in 1920s Europe, these young professional women develop an irreversible bond of sisterhood. This is where the characters find themselves in this Spanish Netflix original television series, *Las chicas del cable*.

Originally airing on April 27, 2017, the series concluded with its fifth and final season on July 3, 2020. The executive producers, Ramón Campos and Gema R. Neira, previously worked on other popular productions in Spain, like the series *Gran Hotel* (2011-2013) and the film *Fariña* or *Cocaine Coast* (2018), with Campos also being the founder and head of Bambú Producciones since 2007. *Las chicas del cable* is rated TV-14 in the United States for violence, gore, profanity, and drug use, which one would expect from any good period drama.

I would describe this series as a high-budget soap opera, set in a fictional world, but based on possible experiences of the time. The intended audience is clearly modern and progressive, especially with the emphasis on female empowerment. The women in this series are able to get out of nearly any situation they find themselves in. Each of the main four characters, the ones on the cover posters, have negative encounters with the Spanish patriarchy. The first, Lidia Aguilar, is a *femme fatale* black-haired ex-criminal who was falsely accused of murder at the beginning of the series; yet, rather than being sent to prison, the corrupt police chief requires her to steal the vault contents of the National Telephone Company. This leads her to go to the newly built company and join as a cable girl. While there, to gain more information, she befriends fellow female co-workers. To her surprise, she slowly learns about their lives and they eventually become real friends. Marga Suarez is a quirky shy girl with high morals who has a crush on the accountant, Pablo, who later cheats on his fiancée with her. Carlota Senillosa is the daughter of a decorated general who refuses her to have a job or enjoy the Madrid nightlife. However, she not only becomes a cable girl but develops a three-way relationship with her boyfriend Miguel and her boss Sara (later revealed as Óscar). Ángeles Vidal is a sweetheart with a daughter named Sofia and a husband named Mario, who is not only abusive but insists she stop working at the telephone company because he has been cheating on her with many of the employees there. The four women conquer the city, and express themselves freely as no woman had truly been able to do up until that point. They not only explore the vibrant town, live in communal apartments, and partake in club and

bar life, but also stand up for themselves against their bosses to gradually assert their rights as humans, as they become an integral player in communication throughout Spain. As *Season 1* closes, Lidia romances the son of the owner, Carlos Cifuentes, to gain access to the vault, which quickly turns into an actual romance. Yet, the owner's son-in-law, Francisco Gómez, was Lidia's lover back when she was known as Alba and they escaped to Madrid as teenagers, thus endangering her newfound identity. She succeeds, but at a cost to her cable-girl life.

The company and building itself is based on the Compañía Telefónica Nacional de España which was established in 1924, now simply known as Telefónica. It was the only telephone operator in Spain until 1997, and its building (as seen in the series) was Madrid's first skyscraper. To this day, it stands strong, now serving a different purpose as it houses a museum with cable-girl-era relics. Even before the days of the internet, this series proves how rapid gossip can travel through an urban area. They are able to plot, scheme, and talk freely about whoever they want in the shadows, because they are the means of communication and the only ones who would otherwise be listening in on calls. Throughout the series, we see the ladies making personal phone calls, or even listening in on private conversations for extortion, either helping the police or lining their own pockets. Without communication, at a time when people could easily be unfindable, the city is blind. Whoever controls the National Telephone Company controls the manner in which the people of Madrid can communicate and organize. This aspect of telephone-operator life is presented in *Season 2* when they monitor the police lines after killing Mario in self-defense. Avoiding the police is that season's story arc, but it is shadowed by a love triangle between Carlos, Francisco, and Lidia who gets pregnant with Carlos's baby while competing for designing the new telephone booth system. The Madrid bar across the street was not only a hub of meetings for everyday citizens but also a place for the cable girls to unite and plan a strike against the new owner's increased security restrictions. Their ease of gathering in the city leads to a weakening of the regulations. Lidia is nearly forced to have an abortion by Carmen Cifuentes, Carlos' mother, but Carlos saves her just in time.

A fire breaks out at the beginning of *Season 3*. During the wedding of Lidia and Carlos, his jealous mother Carmen steals their baby from the smoldering church. The church, which typically brings the families together and serves as the urban center and the place of worship and community, is quickly destroyed. The rest of the season bounces between relationship issues, staunch political activism, and Lidia trying to find her daughter Eva. It is during this season that the *Caballeros del Orden* arrive at Carlos's new radio station to halt the charged feminist broadcast of Carlota whose radio name is Athena. These knights who are "against anything that attacks tradition or the natural order of things"—in other words, the organization against woman's suffrage—are later violently attacked by Carlota's suffragette friends who are able to muster support through secret meetings at work, bars, or abandoned movie theaters. These suffragettes doom the company building by filling it with bombs and armed women during King Alfonso XIII's

visit. Our main characters are able to sneak the police in through the sewers but, unfortunately, the radicals are able to hit the bomb timers before being arrested.

When the building explodes during the *Season 3* finale, a shift takes place, making this series less about the life of 1920s cable girls than the drama it has already been. While the building is reconstructed by the next episode – thanks to the powers of movie magic, the common women’s stories no longer center around the actual cable girls. Entering a new decade, the characters are new, too. The “girls” have moved up in the world, and the challenges they face no longer reflect those of ordinary women who have to deal with objectification from men while slowly carving a way for themselves in their working environment. The ladies, once cable girls, have become part of the bourgeois establishment – an establishment that no longer represents a cultural history overlooked by most. Rather, the series now explores the lives of LGBTQ people – which has some historical precedent, considering the rise in openly gay expression in the late 1920s and the first transgender surgery taking place in 1917 – or the love affairs of people with power, money, and devilishly attractive looks. Those who find love triangles and overdone drama amusing will find this a truly worthy Netflix series to binge.

Carlota begins *Season 4* as a valiant activist who is running for mayor of Madrid in 1931, the year women win the right to vote in Spain. However, she becomes entangled in her opponent blackmailing her and is blamed for his subsequent murder. The entire season turns into a murder mystery, and the women become involved in the discovery of the true murderer. While intercepting police cars, sneaking into hospitals, and finding witnesses before they get “suicided” (i.e., murdered but made to look like suicide victims), Lidia tries to help Francisco out of a coma and to prevent Carmen from stealing her baby again. The 1930s detective and prison agencies are placed into the foreground; the last episode has our characters break Óscar (formerly Sara) – who had pleaded guilty so his lover could be free – out of prison by pretending to be a performing troupe and starting a riot. Unfortunately, Ángeles is killed during this break and her last words plead to protect her daughter Sofia. Lidia then takes Francisco, Ava, and Sofia to live in the safety of New York City. With the end of the fourth season comes a less looked-upon historical moment for urban Spain, the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).

In *Season 5*, we witness an authentic recreation of Madrid and its personal afflictions during the Spanish Civil War. Bombs fly after Lidia’s arrival. There are craters all over the streets. Madrid is crumbling or on fire. The elaborate art-deco buildings are reduced to blocks of stone. How the city continues to function while under siege is exemplarily presented in this television series. It is already nearly three years into the siege of Madrid – 1939, with Francisco Franco’s fascist forces gaining on the capital city, yet the citizens keep their morale high. Even in the face of soaring bombers, government lockdown, and troops in the streets, we witness our main characters on their quest to save Sofia, who has run away to fight for her homeland, while maintaining their businesses and going to bars to lighten their mood. Marga, while talking with Lidia about how they can survive this new

Madrid, argues that they do not have a choice: they can either go insane, or they can give names to the bombers overhead and sleep with their clothes on in case they have to run to a bomb shelter. One bomber, they call *El Churrero* (the Churro vendor) because “it always comes early in the morning.” A wartime city always piques the interest of historians, especially this one, for the daily dynamics differ drastically from casual civilian living. The Republican forces establish illegal temporary military prisons and torture facilities to gain information on the encroaching Nationalist forces. From the perspective of *Las chicas del cable*, the Nationalists or fascist faction are a push-back against the excessive progressive movements of the late 1920s and early 1930s, which is expressed by the soldiers’ interactions with the main characters. As Lidia finds a way to locate Sofia, she comes across Carlos, whom she had abandoned to live in freedom in New York, as a Colonel in the Republican Army. He begrudgingly agrees to help get her back from the front lines, after he is blackmailed for being a traitor. Madrid eventually falls to the Nationalists, and the series steers toward its final episodes which are not summarized here to provide a little bit of a cliffhanger.

Behind every backstab, every meeting, and every romance, the main character driving the plot is the city of Madrid. Without migration from the countryside, many of these women would have been destined to raise children on a farm or serve as maids in bourgeois households. The labor demands of the modern industrialized city brought change to the social fabric of Europe, which we can, thankfully, experience vicariously in *Las chicas del cable*.

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Chernobyl [TV miniseries].

Directed by Johan Renck. 2019.

HBO. 5 episodes (59-72 minutes each).

“Where I once would fear the cost of truth, now I only ask: What is the cost of lies?” HBO’s miniseries *Chernobyl* dramatizes the events of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Created and written by Craig Mazin and released in 2019, it represents one of the few high-budget dramatizations of the disaster ever created. Mazin is mostly known for his work on comedy films of questionable quality such as *Scary Movie 3* (2003), *Scary Movie 4* (2006), and *The Hangover, Part II* and *Part III* (2011 and 2013). *Chernobyl* marks Mazin’s first foray into historical drama and it is, simply put, a masterful entry point. The series is comprised of five episodes, titled “1:23:45,” “Please Remain Calm,” “Open Wide, O Earth,” “The Happiness of All Mankind,” and “Vichnaya Pamyat.”

Episode 1, “1:23:45,” begins with the same haunting tone that characterizes the entire series and portrays Valery Legasov’s suicide. Legasov was the Soviet

inorganic chemist who acted as the chief of the commission that investigated the Chernobyl disaster. The whirring of a tape recorder precedes Legasov's tired, rasped voice musing about events and crimes yet to be seen by the audience. After recording his final account of the disaster's corrupt handling and delivering the tapes to what is assumed to be a drop-off point, Legasov hangs himself on April 26, 1988, exactly two years after the original nuclear accident. At this point, the audience realizes that the language in which this historical drama will be delivered is English, not Russian. We are then taken to one minute before the 1986 explosion of Reactor 4, to the inside of the home of Vasily Ignatenko, a Pripyat fireman. As Vasily's wife, Lyudmilla, walks past her high-rise window at exactly 1:23:45 a.m., the camera view holds on the sliver of night-time Pripyat that can be seen, and in the distance a facility ignites in a brilliant, massive explosion. The blast rocks the apartment and surrounding buildings, waking Vasily and prompting him to observe the complex from afar with his wife. A beautiful blue ray of ionization pierces the Russian night sky. Vasily and Lyudmilla are both completely unaware of what has just happened. The Chernobyl disaster has begun.

In the world of nuclear physics, the organic manifestation of severe radiation poisoning rears its head in the form of a metallic taste in one's mouth. Among the confusion and nervous dialogue between the operators of Chernobyl's Reactor 4, following the mysterious explosion in their complex, senior engineer Leonid Toptunov whispers to night shift supervisor Aleksandr Akimov, "Do you taste metal?" Deputy chief engineer Anatoly Dyatlov, a character named and condemned in Legasov's final recordings, leaves the control room moments later to gaze upon the lower roof of Reactor 4 to see the result of what he had only minutes earlier asserted as impossible: glowing, burning graphite. Dyatlov had earlier discounted the frantic testimony of a reactor operator that the mysterious explosion was that of Reactor 4's core. Dyatlov now sees the result of his alleged "impossibility" with his own eyes, namely the graphite used in the reactor's cooling rods burning on the roof. While Dyatlov contacts his superiors for guidance, the reprimanded reactor operators scramble in an ultimately futile effort to mitigate the invisible devastation taking place.

With operators being compromised at the molecular level by an amount of radiation twice that of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, seeing at least two operators severely burned by the radiation and asserting that the core has exploded, and witnessing the explosion's logical aftermath with his own eyes, Dyatlov orders the day-shift staff and the fire brigade to check into the complex and leaves for the administration building. The fire brigade, with Vasily among them, arrives to a massive fire and billowing smoke, resembling a scene directly from a war film. Vasily's comrade in the fire brigade picks up a strangely shaped black mineral which within moments begins to dissolve his hand. Despite this, Vasily presses on into the complex to complete his ordered duty. In the administration building, after a meeting between Dyatlov, plant manager Viktor Bryukhanov, chief engineer Nikolai Fomin and other high-ranking officials from

the Energy Committee, Anatoly Sitnikov is forcibly sent to the reactor roof, the figurative “eye of the storm,” to confirm rejected testimony that he, too, had seen expelled graphite. Sitnikov, Dyatlov, Vasily, the Reactor 4 operators, and dozens more suffer from and exhibit symptoms of acute radiation disease by the end of the episode. Legasov, meanwhile, is summoned to a meeting in Moscow to aid in handling the disaster. The episode ends with life continuing as usual in Pripyat, all completely unaware of the invisible poison saturating the air they breathe.

Episode 2, “Please Remain Calm,” ushers in the larger cycle of the disaster’s mishandling. It begins seven hours after the original explosion with the recording of a poem by Soviet author Konstantin Simonov. During the recording, we are introduced to a mural of two men grasping and harnessing what seems to be the atom and nuclear energy itself. Once the recording is cut short, we are introduced to Ulana Khomyuk working at the Byelorussian Institute for Nuclear Energy in Minsk. After analyzing a sudden, bizarrely high radiation alert, Ulana’s begins her own investigation into the mysterious events that are taking place.

After a brief, but haunting visit to Pripyat’s hospital where the first Chernobyl victims are being treated – Vasily, Akimov, and Toptunov among them – we are transported to Moscow where Legasov now patiently waits to join the Soviet council meeting handling the disaster. During his wait, Legasov receives a field report from Pripyat that suddenly, with one single detail, escalates the gravity of the situation by a crushing degree: the discovery of a smooth black mineral. The meeting reflects the entire mishandling of the accident: misinformation, minimization, and unwarranted calmness. When Mikhail Gorbachev, general secretary of the Communist Party and leader of the Soviet Union at the time, swiftly adjourns the meeting after receiving minimized misinformation from the vice chairman of the Council of Ministers, Boris Scherbina, Legasov intervenes. Legasov asserts that the smooth, black mineral found on the ground is graphite, and graphite is found in only one place in the entire complex, namely, the reactor’s core. Legasov and Scherbina are then tasked with ascertaining the threat level on site, as well as devising a plan to control the damage.

Earlier in the series, Brukhyanov, Fomin, and Dyatlov had reported that dosimeters were gauging radiation levels at Chernobyl at 3.6 Roentgen per hour, the radiation equivalent of about 400 X-rays. Fully in line with all the deceptive misinformation, the dosimeters they used maxed out at 3.6 Roentgen per hour. Once on site, Legasov and Scherbina learn that the true level of radiation at the Chernobyl complex is 15,000 Roentgen per hour, twice the level of radiation expelled by the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945 per hour. Once the level of severity is finally accounted for and understood, mitigating the disaster and its consequences begins and the show’s pace accelerates.

The episode continues by portraying two measures of damage control: dousing the fission fire within the reactor with about 5000 tons of boron and sand, and the evacuation of Pripyat. During this time, Khomyuk learns of a complication with regard to Legasov’s dousing plan that prompts her to immediately travel to

Chernobyl. A reservoir of about 7000 cubic meters of water lies beneath the reactor core and directly in the path of descending, freshly melted boron and sand. Khomyuk, after confronting Legasov and Scherbina with this information, explains to a council of Soviet officials and Gorbachev that the contact between the radioactive lava and water would instantly superheat the water and cause a thermo-nuclear blast of about two to four megatons. Such a blast would eject enough radioactive material into the air to render entire nearby countries uninhabitable and skyrocket cancer rates throughout the Eastern hemisphere. In light of this information, a dangerous mission to drain the water and expose three plant workers to lethal doses of radiation takes place, ending the episode.

The success of the draining operation introduces *Episode 3*, "Open Wide, O Earth." In one of the show's few moments of celebration, Legasov and Scherbina look upon the three volunteers surrounded by applauding comrades. Alcohol is dispersed, fists are thrown into the air, and smiles are traded only to be followed by the grim reality that Scherbina and Legasov are all but certain of: they are looking at dead men walking. The theme of success, safety, and happiness, followed by crushing reality, carries through the entirety of *Episode 3*. The efforts to douse the fire in Reactor 4 and drain the reservoir are ultimately successful, however, the temperature inside the core continues to rise, beginning the process of the meltdown. Whereas the contact between the reservoir water and the lava inside the core would have created a massive explosion, the contact between the lava and the groundwater beneath the entire complex would poison the water supply for nearly 50 million people. In addition to this new complication, Legasov lays out to Gorbachev the profound decontamination efforts which will require 750,000 men, two years of labor, and inevitable deaths due to exposure. Although frustrating enough in itself, the figurative logistical marathon required to mitigate the disaster's pervasive consequences pales in comparison to the physical consequences of the Chernobyl disaster portrayed in this episode.

Although Legasov, Scherbina, and Khomyuk are moving forward with controlling the situation, there is a clear underlying desire to understand the circumstances that had led to the original explosion. Confiding in Khomyuk, Legasov sends her to Moscow's Hospital 6 to which many of the reactor operators, as well as Vasily, have been transported. It is in this hospital, during Khomyuk's mission, that the full horror of Chernobyl can be witnessed: Toptunov, Akimov, and Vasily are seen in what can be described as a living hell. Their skin has begun to melt, and open sores riddle their bodies; they are decomposing alive.

After gathering testimony from Toptunov and Akimov and being arrested by the KGB for threatening to disseminate information about misconduct by the Hospital 6 staff, Khomyuk shares pivotal information about the night of the original explosion with Legasov. Khomyuk describes that a failsafe measure, normally reserved to completely neutralize the awesome energy of a nuclear reactor, inversely caused the explosion. Perplexed, Legasov and Khomyuk agree to pursue the possibility of what had previously considered to be impossible.

“Open Wide, O Earth” ends with Vasily’s funeral. Set into a wooden casket and encased within a metal coffin, Vasily is lowered into a mass grave. Lyudmilla, who has just lost her husband and the father of her unborn child, looks on as cement further entombs her beloved.

The decontamination and further evacuation processes take up most of *Episode 4, “The Happiness of All Mankind.”* Gears are shifted to the perspectives of decontamination laborers Bacho, Mikhail, and Pavel. The duties of these men in particular are simple: kill and destroy irradiated animals within the exclusion zone. In what proves to be one of the most difficult episodes to watch, the most innocent pay the ultimate price of the disaster. Back at the Chernobyl reactor, Legasov and Scherbina orchestrate a plan to remove the irradiated lead from the complex roof in order to safely entomb the entire building with protective shielding. Beginning with a failed attempt to use an unmanned police robot, the plan ultimately demands the risk and sacrifice of human lives we are, by now, accustomed to seeing in this show. Crews are sent onto the “hot” roof to pick up and toss the lead, which had practically melted a man’s hand earlier in the series, into the open reactor for no more than 90 seconds. Decontamination efforts, as well as the efforts of enlisted miners to create a heat exchanger between the groundwater and melting core, make substantial progress over the course of months to the point that celebrations begin. While Chernobyl’s immediate and short-term danger has been resolved, the audience is now left with the question that must be answered: How did Reactor 4 explode?

At the end of this penultimate episode, Scherbina, Khomyuk, and Legasov meet in a remote building in abandoned Pripyat in an effort to avoid the monitoring KGB operatives. During this meeting, an upcoming trial in Vienna and Legasov’s contribution to the prosecution is discussed, as is the cause of Reactor 4’s explosion. In the course of her research, Khomyuk has come across a heavily redacted paper published to ascertain risks in RBMK reactors (the reactor type of Chernobyl’s reactors as well as sixteen other nuclear energy complexes). Once Khomyuk reveals this paper to Legasov, his expression projects a profound emotion of guilt and, far worse, familiarity.

An RBMK reactor uses boron-cooling rods to stabilize reactivity and control heat within its core. This seems straightforward, especially since boron was one of the main elements dropped into the core to douse the fission fire. However, Legasov reveals a fundamental flaw with regard to these cooling rods that had originally been suppressed by Russian government officials: the tips of the rods are made of graphite, the element used to increase reactivity. If a reactor core has enough cooling rods pulled all the way out and reinserted, this creates superheated steam and sudden reactivity: an explosion. The RBMK reactor failsafe, AZ-5, the same failsafe triggered by Akimov on the night of the accident, is designed to insert all cooling rods into a reactor at once. Khomyuk urges Legasov to reveal this fatal flaw in Vienna, the public trial that the world would witness, in order to force the Soviet Union’s hand in retrofitting the remaining

flawed reactors. Scherbina ultimately convinces Legasov to seek a deal with the KBG that would repair the reactors in exchange for his silence on the fatal flaw to protect himself and his loved ones from the state.

Episode 5, "Vichnaya Pamyat," (Eternal Memory) finds Legasov at odds with his morality and his natural desire to survive, but begins twelve hours before the disaster in Pripyat. In this memory, the show's main characters are seen going about their daily lives with an undeniably discomfoting sense of normalcy. Lyudmilla and Vasily are out with their neighbors, Sitnikov smokes a cigarette with his wife in a promenade, and Reactor 4 operators play with their children. Among the players, we see Dyatlov, Bryukhanov, and Fomin lay the foundation for the horror to come. We learn that, after three failed tests over three years, Dyatlov, Bryukhanov, and Fomin selfishly sought to improve their status in the Party by planning to run an unapproved, dangerous, low-power contingency test. Later that night, the events of April 26, 1986 begin. Legasov is shown purchasing a newspaper and cigarettes in Germany when he is summoned to speak with Charkov, the head of the KGB, about his compliance with their suppressive wishes. At the Vienna trial, Legasov had asserted that "operator error" had caused the disaster, but the Russian trial is where Legasov takes his stand, and we discover the truth of Chernobyl's circumstances.

After Khomyuk's and Scherbina's testimony in the Russian prosecution of Dyatlov, Bryukhanov, and Fomin, Legasov vividly details the process of nuclear power, as well as the process of its mishandling. Step by step, and in some cases second by second, Legasov delivers a concise and damning timeline of events on the night of the accident—with dramatized scenes accompanying his narrative. The low-power contingency test, executed under poor circumstances, dropped the nuclear core's power to a critically low level. Then, after attempts to reactivate the core had spiked the energy levels, Akimov initiated the AZ-5 failsafe function. In what is perhaps the most powerful moments in the show, Legasov asserts that the insertion of the cooling rods took Reactor 4 to over 33,000 megajoules. It was designed to operate at 3200 megajoules. After his testimony and condemnation of the Soviet mishandling of RBMK reactors, Legasov is confronted by Charkov, who then strips him of his position, confines him to solitary life, and erases his contribution to the disaster's mitigation from Soviet records. The series ends with Legasov being driven out of the courthouse, seeing Khomyuk and Schrebina for the last time. Legasov then asserts once more: "Where I once would fear the cost of truth, now I only ask: What is the cost of lies?"

Chernobyl offers a cautionary tale of natural and moral proportions. The disaster's human toll is concisely portrayed throughout the series, but what chills us to the core is the simple fact that mismanagement caused much of it all. Human interests—individuals seeking more power in their positions or an entire nation protecting its own image—are juxtaposed with the price of greed.

Like many Hollywood dramatizations, *Chernobyl* takes certain liberties, however, overall it seems to be on the more "conservative" side of it all. Imagining

dialogue between actors, assessing contributions, and understanding the true progression of a tragedy that has deliberately been obscured can be difficult. Ulana Khomyuk, the scientist aiding Valery Legasov in his investigation in this HBO series, is a fictional character, created to portray the real-life group of scientists who played pivotal roles in investigating and mitigating the accident. Although the atmosphere, character portrayals, and statistical information are consistent, there are several aspects of the show's portrayal that have been challenged by Russian historians and those who witnessed and participated in the events of the Chernobyl disaster. The overbearing "Russian stereotypes," including an unrealistic portrayal of KGB influence and Russian ruthlessness, have caused some negative reception as well.

Ultimately, Craig Mazin's *Chernobyl* is as haunting as its message is relevant to general morality. Bolstered by stellar acting, beautiful set pieces, and solid pacing, the series offers fantastic historical drama. With regard to factual accuracy, many of the challenged aspects of the show do not detract from the overall impact of what it gets right. There are few works that can be compared to *Chernobyl*, and most of them are documentaries. Chad Garcia's *The Russian Woodpecker* (2015) and Pol Crutchen's *Voices from Chernobyl* (2016) offer a somewhat similar experience to *Chernobyl*, however, they do not match *Chernobyl*'s budget and popular appeal. I recommend *Chernobyl* for both general viewing and historical analysis. General audiences will be captivated by the hard-hitting dialogue, political drama, and heart-wrenching human experience, while academics can appreciate many of the historical details that *Chernobyl* executes well and, perhaps, immerse themselves in the drama of it all.

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Dark Waters [film].

Directed by Todd Haynes. 2019.

Participant Productions; Willi Hill; Killer Content. 126 minutes.

"Stop the world and let me off, I'm tired of going 'round and round." This line from the beloved folk country track "Stop the world (and let me off)" by Waylon Jennings echoes feelings of defeat and monotony. These feelings are prevalent in *Dark Waters*, a film directed by Todd Haynes, produced by and starring Mark Ruffalo. *Dark Waters* is classified as a legal thriller and details the story of Robert Bilott, a corporate defense lawyer working for the firm of Taft Stettinius & Hollister. Bilott is approached by some farmers who claim to know his grandmother and ask him to assist them in their lawsuit against DuPont, a chemical corporation that is allegedly poisoning their cattle and, by extension, the people of Parkersburg, West Virginia. The film is based on the 2016 *New York Times* article, "The Lawyer Who Became DuPont's Worst Nightmare" by Nathaniel Rich.

Mark Ruffalo is no stranger to the realm of environmental justice and law. In 2008, he found that gas companies were eyeing his family's land in Callicoon, New York. He did his own investigation on the issue, and it was comprehensive enough for the *New York Times* to consider him "anti-fracking's first famous face." Ruffalo has also shown public support for the Standing Rock Indian Reservation and their opposition to the Dakota pipeline. In addition, he has narrated several audiobooks on the subject of clean environmental solutions, such as *Dear President Obama: The Clean Energy Revolution Is Now* (2016).

Dark Waters is comparable to *Erin Brockovich* (2000), directed by Steven Soderbergh and starring Julia Roberts. In that film, there is a similar scenario – an attorney discovering a cover-up involving contaminated water in the vicinity of the local communities, causing illness and death among the residents. In both films, the protagonists work in the legal profession and discover the nefarious deeds of big corporations, and the crimes in question are environmental in nature and based on true events.

Dark Waters starts in 1975 with a group of young adults driving their car to the local Parkersburg lake with beers in hand and "Stop the world (and let me off)" by Waylon Jennings playing on the radio. After they jump the fence and get into the water, they are told to leave the premises by what we can assume are DuPont employees who are using water to spray away some residue in the water. The film then makes a substantial jump in time to 1998 in Cincinnati, Ohio. This is where we are introduced to Robert Bilott, a new face at the board room table, who has spent the last eight years burying himself in superfund law, suggesting that Bilott is dedicated and one to traverse the mundane to get the job done. In an incident that is every new board member's nightmare, someone interrupts the meeting, asking for Bilott. Bilott meets Wilbur Tennant, a boisterous, thick-accented farmer from Parkersburg, who claims to know Bilott's grandmother. Tennant claims that he has gone to every lawyer in Parkersburg, and none of them wants to take his case because they are too "yellow" or, in other words, cowardly. Tennant then pushes some homemade evidence tapes onto Mr. Bilott to help him build a case. Bilott initially turns down the request and returns to his meeting. He then travels to Parkersburg to see his grandmother, and it is apparent that he is comfortable in this location. He realizes that Wilbur Tennant owns the farm that is next door to the farm where he spent a lot of time on as a child. With that memory restored, Bilott determines that this is a cause worth investigating.

Bilott arrives at the Tennant farm where Wilbur is appreciative of his arrival but understandably high-strung about the situation at hand. Bilott meets Mrs. Tennant in passing but encounters a reaction that one might give to a foreigner, a form of "othering" that is just one of the many examples of the disparity between white-collar and blue-collar characters in this film. Wilbur Tennant shows Bilott his physical evidence of DuPont's chemical contamination, namely, the bloated organs of his cattle. He also shows Bilott a cow's jaw with teeth as "black as night." Tennant then takes Bilott out to the local creek where his

cows drink and relax. Here we see that the stones in the creek are white from chemical bleaching. When Bilott asks Tennant how many cows he has lost, his skepticism dissipates abruptly, for Tennant takes him to a harrowing sight, a sixty-square-foot graveyard filled with the mounds of dead cows. Tennant admits that, when there was no more room to bury them, he just burned the corpses. Finally, Tennant ties a number to this sight: 190 cows. Bilott asks about any reports written about the plant itself. Tennant claims that the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) did come by, but he was never given the report. Bilott then returns home to his family, where we get to meet his wife (Anne Hathaway) and his baby boy.

The next scene takes place at a business function for attorneys. According to the expository dialogue, DuPont Industries is not just an American chemical giant but also one of the few companies not represented by the firm that Bilott works for, namely, Taft Stettinius & Hollister. Thus, for Bilott this is a high-stakes case. Bilott then receives an EPA report after requesting it from Phil Donnelly, the head of DuPont. He attempts to appease Tennant with the evaluation but is interrupted by a cow gone mad. The cow does several manic spins, and the viewer is visually transported into the cow's perspective which is covered with several kaleidoscope filters meant to represent chemical-induced madness. Immediately after Tennant has been forced to put down this cow in self-defense, the family dog in the background can be seen doing similar manic spins. This has dangerous implications for who all may be affected by the chemical contamination.

All this prompts Bilott to finally review the tapes that Tennant had given to him at the beginning of the film, and it is in these tapes that he finds video evidence of the effects that DuPont's chemical contamination has on cattle. A stealth cut occurs to indicate that Bilott is, in fact, showing these tapes to his boss to get his permission to initiate a lawsuit for discovery, obviously a dangerous move to pull on a potential client. The boss allows this but cautions Bilott to be "surgical." Bilott receives a log that shows all the things dumped at this chemical site, and after close evaluation, he finds the listing of "PFOA" which is not listed in any chemical manual available to him. He then concludes that PFOA is an uncontrolled substance, which is to say that it is not regulated by the EPA. When Bilott presses for the answers to these questions, he is called a "hick" by Phil Donnelly and sent an exorbitant number of files and data, enough to fill his office and make any regular person claustrophobic. While this is done to dissuade Bilott from continuing his case, it only convinces him to pursue it further.

We then cut to Mrs. Bilott waking up abruptly to the sound of her husband tearing up the carpet and rummaging around the house. She wants to know what is going on, and it is revealed that DuPont has been knowingly poisoning not just the people of Parkersburg, but everyone who has ever used Teflon, which is the colloquial name for PFOA (perfluorooctanoic acid) or PFOA-C8. Some will remember that Teflon used to be advertised as the active ingredient in non-stick pans. It was initially used to waterproof tanks during World War II. To add to the corporate corruption, DuPont had been deliberately testing it on factory workers

who ended up with the “Teflon Flu.” Studies further prove that animals as well as people got cancer from this and children would suffer from birth defects. The toxic runoff produced from the creation of Teflon was dumped in Wilbur Tennant’s creek, killing his cows and, by extension, him and the people of Parkersburg.

Meanwhile, Wilbur Tennant is being harassed by the locals who claim that it is his fault that there is a lawsuit against the town’s biggest employer. Bilott returns and proposes a settlement, but Tennant has no interest in the settlement and looks toward justice. Both Mr. and Mrs. Tennant have now tested positive for cancer. The man from the beginning of the film, boisterous and talking with a thick accent, is reduced to a silent, gasping man in a wheelchair. This character’s arc convincingly represents the effect of careless corporations on the lives of the everyman. Bilott then sends the evidence collected to the EPA, which results in a fine for DuPont of around sixteen million dollars. This suit also prompts the DuPont corporation to send letters to the Parkersburg residents, assuring them that, while PFOA is present in the water, it is not enough to be harmful. This leaves Bilott flabbergasted, and he now works to sue DuPont to convince the world that DuPont has committed an injustice against the American people.

Bilott seeks to do this by proving that DuPont’s internal documents note the lethal amount of PFOA and that DuPont in its operations currently exceeds that rate. The files indicate that any PFOA level over one part per billion is enough to cause issues in people. The court date of the class action lawsuit arrives, and DuPont makes a daring move. They bring in one of their scientists and claim that they have conducted new tests that conclude that the acceptable amount of PFOA is now 150 parts per billion. Bilott pushes for medical monitoring, which would mandate that DuPont would be responsible for the healthcare of all Parkersburg residents but only if there is irrefutable proof that DuPont’s PFOA exposure had caused the problems in the first place. To incentivize the collection of data for this study, the firm pays each resident who takes the test 400 dollars. This results in the collection of nearly 70,000 blood samples.

Seven years go by. These years include a multitude of phone calls, the public harassment and threat of anybody involved in the lawsuit, and, sadly, the deaths of many factory workers who do not live to see the justice they had fought for to be won. Meanwhile, this case and the pay cuts that have resulted from it have gravely affected Robert Bilott. He has experienced financial, occupational, and marital strain. This affects him to the point of having a minor stroke due to stress. Bilott then receives a phone call from the board appointed to research the resident’s blood samples to inform him that his research results have been reviewed and have proven conclusively that PFOAs do, in fact, cause cancer and similar effects that have been seen in the victims of DuPont’s negligence. DuPont now reneges the agreement, essentially backing out of what they had signed. Bilott now fears the worst, namely, that justice will never be served, especially after the death of Wilbur Tennant, the man who had come to him for help. At this point, Bilott does the only thing that makes sense to him. He takes each case of those

harmed by DuPont's negligence, one at a time. Over time, he eventually settles each case and wins the class action lawsuit for 671 million dollars.

Dark Waters by Todd Haynes and Mark Ruffalo is a legal thriller which, at the surface, details the story of a corporate defense lawyer and his quest to fight for the everyman against the corporate negligence of the chemical company DuPont and their distribution and commercial use of Teflon. Underneath this story, however, are several gripping themes that prove to be even more relevant in today's political climate. These themes include the tensions and divides between blue-collar and white-collar employees, the geo-social prejudices that rear their ugly head when people from places like Cincinnati, Ohio, interact with people from Parkersburg, West Virginia. Another theme that is prevalent in this story is the American white-collar world and how women fit into it. The performances of Mark Ruffalo and Anne Hathaway absolutely steal the show, and this film is no slouch in the visual department either; the color grading and framing of each scene does well to create the atmosphere of the dreary and bleak reality that is white-collar America. I highly recommend this film to anyone who has any appreciation for stories with these aforementioned conflicts and is in the mood to learn about another reason to despair about the realities of white-collar America.

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The King [film].

Directed by David Michôd. 2019.

Netflix; Plan B Entertainment; Porchlight Films; Blue-Tongue Films; etc. 140 minutes.

It is the early fifteenth century. Glancing at the sunset, a poor Scottish soldier crawls with what is left of his might among the dead bodies of his fellow soldiers. Approached by a man in full plate armor, bearing the colors of yellow and red, he is mercilessly slaughtered while feeling the Scottish breeze for the last time. Who is this ominous warrior? It could be our protagonist, showing us his disdain, or a foe. As it turns out, it is Henry "Hotspur" Percy, the son of the earl of Northumberland and soon to be the antagonist of the English king, Henry IV. The 2019 film *The King* was directed by David Michôd, a University of Melbourne graduate best known for the Academy-Award-nominated crime drama *Animal Kingdom* (2010), for the dystopian drama *The Rover* (2014), and for the satirical *War Machine* (2017). It is a Netflix film, made in collaboration with the American production company *Plan B* and the Australian film collective *Blue-Tongue Films*, and rated "R" for lewd language and graphic violence (including a decapitation).

The film's second scene shows the same ominous warrior, Hotspur Percy, in disagreement with the king about Scottish prisoners and about Edmund Mortimer's unpaid ransom. King Henry IV is convinced, though, that his cousin Mortimer is a traitor. I have to admit that the dialogue is slow and confusing if you

do not know the details of English conflicts in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Henry IV threatens young Hotspur who angrily takes to his nickname and storms out. The king laments that Hotspur is at least passionate, unlike his own son. The scene changes to show us that very son, a passed-out young Henry – Hal – the future King Henry V of England. Hal, our protagonist, apparently does not want to be king. He is awakened by his older friend, John Falstaff, who needs help mending a cut. After a quick cauterization, they walk between gloomy grey buildings to party at the Boar's Head Inn. After being awoken the next morning, Hal is sent to talk to his father. King Henry IV scolds young Hal and asserts that Hal's younger brother Thomas will put down the ongoing rebellion and eventually become king. There is a constant feud between Hal and his brother, Thomas of Lancaster, who is more eager for the throne than Hal. The latter continually states that he does not want the crown, but he nevertheless helps his brother in battle by achieving a personal victory in a brawl with Hotspur Percy. I must add how exquisite this battle scene turns out. They fight alone, with the army surrounding them, for the victor will decide the outcome of the 1403 Battle of Shrewsbury. Their swords clash against each other's steel plate armor, but to no avail. Thus, they end up brawling on the floor until Hal jabs a knife in between Hotspur's armor. Thomas, rather than being grateful, becomes jealous. Later in the film, we find out from the king's advisor William that Thomas has died while fighting the Welsh. With their father now deadly ill, Prince Henry – Hal – of Monmouth will soon become King Henry V of England.

Halfway through the film, we discover our second antagonist, namely the French Dauphin (i.e., the prince next in line to succeed to the throne of France) who sends Henry V the sarcastic gift of a ball, alluding to the latter's childishness and inadequacy to rule. A captured assassin raises suspicions at the English court about French involvement in the attempt on the king's life. Henry then discovers the treachery of his former friends, the rebellious nobles Cambridge and Lord Grey. Finding himself forced to have them decapitated, Henry seeks his last loyal friend and veteran, John Falstaff, and sets sail for Normandy, geared up for conquest but nonetheless reluctant. Arriving on the beaches near Harfleur Castle, the English launch a siege, with fireballs lighting up the dark night sky and causing the slow crumbling of the stone fortifications. After the castle's surrender, we witness for the first time the Dauphin who wishes conference with the English warrior king. Instead of negotiating peace or surrender, the Dauphin insults Henry's army and manhood. Henry leaves for the friendly port of Calais to return to England, but the French army beats them there and now stands in their way. The only way for the English to survive is to stand and fight near the little village of Agincourt, the site of the legendary 1415 battle that is soon to unfold.

The King is put together well, but the title is too generic and thus confusing. Its plot is based on several of Shakespeare's plays, namely *Henry IV: Part I*, *Henry IV: Part II*, and most importantly *Henry V*, yet while Shakespeare's King Henry V of England has depth, humor, and cunning, Timothée Chalamet's portrayal in *The*

King falls short. Chalamet is, of course, a good actor who feels comfortable as Henry, and I enjoyed watching him; however, apart from the beginning, when Henry is still partying and whoring around, we see little emotional range or character development. We do, however, see a good portrayal of a young stoic prince who bickers with his father and is hesitant about taking the crown or reclaim his birthright lands in France.

The film's cinematography offers a nice contrast between wide-angle shots that give the audience a grand view of the landscape and battlefields, and well-done close-ups whenever characters need to ponder their next move. During the siege of Harfleur Castle (1415), we see an epic trebuchet scene during which John Falstaff, played by Joel Edgerton, enlightens the curious archbishop that most of a siege is waiting and that one does not simply avoid a fortified position while conquering the land around it. Eventually, the first French castle surrenders. I doubt they would shoot fireballs at a castle, but it makes for a good piece of cinematographic art. *The King* is wonderfully crafted, but I take issue with the constant clash of greys. Apart from people in red robes, the film's only color hues are beiges, browns, and blacks. No one would want to look at entire cities or throngs of people in those colors today, nor would they have wanted to do so six hundred years ago. The filmmakers could have perhaps utilized simple colors for peasants and extras to draw attention to the king and his knights, but at least the nobles should be clad in bright greens and blues while walking through the decrepit stone buildings of medieval London.

Perhaps the story could have benefited from being a little more cartoonish or direct, considering its historically inaccurate and expanded narrative. The exposition makes me antsy and could have been shortened. The acting and script feel like a Shakespeare play, just with more modern English. It is calm enough when the story does not feel neck-breaking, but one can still feel lost in the plot.

The fight between Hal and Hotspur during the Battle of Shrewsbury (1403) early on in the film is well choreographed and even more enjoyable than the final battle. Plate armor fights often ended in brawls, particularly if the combatants knew few techniques. The only way to kill warriors in 1400s plate armor was to stab them where the individual plates were joined together or concuss them with war hammers and maces. The film's fight scenes are good, but I feel that the director does not give enough screen time to either of the antagonists. Take Robert Pattinson's Dauphin: we see him only for a few minutes, namely, once after Harfleur, another time before Agincourt, and finally toward the end during his defeat. When he speaks, his French accent feels forced, even though I still enjoyed his portrayal. There are a few times when one can detect his native British accent. Ironically, Timothée Chalamet seems more comfortable with French, however, this would not be too far out of the ballpark, considering that Henry V was the first English king in four hundred years to speak more English than French, but it makes the Dauphin appear clumsy. Pattinson in general plays an awkward French prince. One scene in particular exemplifies the cumbersome portrayal. He

challenges Henry to a duel but as the Dauphin gets off his horse, with his armor on, he slips and falls into the mud. Then Henry's men jump on him and stab him to death. This ineptitude of the Dauphin undoubtedly adds some dark humor to the scene, but it seems unnecessary and exaggerated. With the Battle of Agincourt decisively won, Henry marches on to Paris to receive his new bride and a promise that he will, one day, inherit the French throne (alas, he died seven years later).

The film's little touches add to its world and breathe life into it. The toy wind-up bird that can walk seemingly by itself and comes from the "edge of Christendom" or the camels brought to Henry's garden where he is walking with his sister are just two examples. It not only gives the audience a sense that the world is moving on in places off screen, it also reminds viewers that many amazing things come from outside Europe at this time.

The film is injected with clearly modern sensibilities, particularly the overtly feminist conversations pertaining to the arranged marriage between Henry V and Catherine of Valois. It appears someone period-inappropriate for her to demand the respect of her new husband, a ruthless conqueror. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the historical Catherine would have said something as quirky as "all monarchies are illegitimate," when Henry's new bride questions him on his true intentions regarding his invasion. Was the assassination plot actually real or was it functionalized as an excuse to conquer lands the English believed to be theirs? The film reveals the true mastermind to be Henry's advisor, Chief Justice William Gascoigne, who invented the assassination plot to personally gain lands in France. King Henry suddenly and decisively stabs William in the back of his head. It is an aggressive and bold move yet reveals Henry, once again, as a manipulated boy rather than a man who had plans to conquer France before he becomes king.

The King does not pretend to be historically accurate; rather, it is based off Shakespearean theater. It straddles the creative line between *300* (2007) and *Outlaw King* (2018). It almost would have been better if the filmmakers had delved fully into the realm of comic books or adopted a *Braveheart* (1995) type of narrative, for the characters in *The King* are as bland as their armor. After all the dialogue and slow progression, I had trouble remembering even a handful of the characters' names and desires. I had to watch it a second time before I was fully able to grasp the characters. At one point during the inaccurately depicted Battle of Agincourt (1415), the knights swarm into each other, and even before they are covered in mud it is impossible to keep track of them. Sir John Falstaff has to remove his helmet so we can recognize him and root for him. Would it have been so difficult to add a period-appropriate tunic, pourpoint, or a jupon over their steel armor, like they would have worn during the real battle, so one could gain a sense of who is dominating the field? If reenactment groups had been hired for these scenes it would have improved the battle's immersive effect immensely. On the other hand, at least they are actually wearing armor instead of kilts or leather speedos. But if a production company is going to drop a significant amount of money on appropriate attire, maybe they could simply spend a little more to give the

audience the full and especially the colorful experience of the medieval period. I also came to the film anticipating an accurate depiction of the importance of the English longbowmen, but there are only two or three volleys of arrows.

Despite these flaws, I had a good time watching King Henry V's tribulations, the epic choreography, and the breathtaking cinematography. Most viewers will find the buildup during the film's first half too slow, but the payoff is worth it. I recommend *The King* for the "mature" viewer. Just be sure to lift your historical visor beforehand.

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The Last Czars [TV docudrama].

Directed by Adrian McDowall and Gareth Tunley. 2019.

Nutopia; Netflix. 6 episodes (42-50 minutes each).

When watching a great film or TV series, the story and the characters linger for days and weeks afterwards. Viewers find themselves creating links between the world they see and the world they have watched. Unfortunately for Netflix's *The Last Czars*, a six-episode docudrama about the reign and fall of Czar Nicholas II of Russia, the narrative lacks interest, the characters are lackluster, and viewers walk away with little to remember.

Episode 1 ("Chosen One") begins in July 1918 with an unnamed narrator commenting on the insubstantiality of the past, walking in the woods in what we later learn is outside Ekaterinburg where the Romanovs have recently been executed. The story then shifts abruptly to a framing device that appears at the beginning and end of each subsequent episode, a young woman in a hospital in Berlin in 1925, claiming to be Anastasia, the youngest daughter of Nicholas II, allegedly the sole survivor of her family's execution. The previously unnamed narrator moves this framing device along by speaking directly to the audience and through live action sequences. The audience learns he was an actual historical person, introduced as Pierre Gilliard, the royal children's former French tutor, who meets with this "Anastasia" to test her claim. After a few minutes, the story switches once again, this time to Russia in 1894 and the death of Czar Alexander III, which left his twenty-six-year-old son Nicholas II, soon to be wed to a German princess, Alexandra, as the heir of the 300-year-old autocratic dynasty. The tone of the series is set by Nicholas's coronation ball, when outside in Khodynka field nearly 1,400 people are killed in a mass stampede while the new czar and czarina are dancing. Throughout the series, the couple's disconnection with reality and their people is illuminated time and again.

The scripted drama is interrupted periodically by college professors, considered experts in Romanov history, such as Dr. Pablo de Orellano of King's

College London, who provide information about the politics and social unrest in Russia at the time. This constant switch between historical pseudo-mystery (the identity of the body of Anastasia was proven in 1991), period dramatization, and documentary style commentary could have been a clever device to retain the viewers' interest, but most will find the interruptions distracting at best. At worst, they are instances in which the commentators describe an event and the dramatization then immediately picks up to show that event, as though viewers needed both an explanation and a visualization to comprehend.

The following three episodes continue with the Anastasia framework at the beginning and end of each episode and include a frankly astonishing number of historical events, such as the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, the destruction of Russia's Baltic Fleet by a non-European power, Bloody Sunday in January 1905 (soldiers firing on peaceful protestors), the 1905 Revolution which was ruthlessly suppressed by Nicholas and resulted in 15,000 casualties, and the same year's October Manifesto. All these events corrode the Russian public's faith and confidence in their czar and lead to a semi-democratically elected legislative body, called the *Duma*. Throughout these events, Nicholas is portrayed as impressionable and suffering, and he seems to heed the advice of whoever he speaks with last, regardless of the counsel of his actual appointed advisors. When his erratic decisions inevitably end in disaster, Nicholas is melodramatically portrayed as smoking a cigarette, his blue eyes staring beseechingly off screen. Actor Robert Jack does a wonderful job portraying a ruler who feels betrayed by his people's hostility, but the sheer amount of sad staring eventually just draws out the episodes rather than endearing the character to the audience.

In the personal lives of these royals who continue to ignore the reality of social injustice and the abject poverty of the populace, Czarina Alexandra (after four daughters) finally gives birth to a much-prayed-for son, Alexei, who has the genetic disease of hemophilia which can cause sufferers to bleed extensively from simple cuts and bruises because the blood is unable to clot. The worry over their son's survival foreshadows the royal couple's dependence on the Siberian mystic Grigori Rasputin who shows up at the palace near the end of *Episode 2* ("The Boy") and who, at the beginning of *Episode 3* ("Anarchy"), is seen calming both Alexei and his mother. Rasputin is, for all intents and purposes, a villain in this story, though the series does a commendable job in emphasizing the terrible decisions made by the Romanovs themselves, holding them accountable for their eventual downfall. Yet, what the series fails to achieve with this character is dimensionality: this Rasputin is a drunk and a womanizer but lacks the charm and charisma the historical figure must have had to gain such power and influence in Russian high society. Viewers will find his presence creepy and ludicrous but rarely villainous.

By *Episode 4* ("War") Russia has become embroiled in World War I on the Eastern Front. Ignoring sound advice once again, Nicholas II joins his generals at the front, leaving the czarina and Rasputin to run the government. The pair alternately appoint and fire inept administrators to the growing frustration of

the aristocracy, one of whom, Prince Felix Yusupov, makes plans to assassinate Rasputin. After poisoning the food and drink he plans to offer Rasputin, Yusupov and the mystic meet, and when the poison fails to do its job Yusupov shoots Rasputin twice. The loss of Rasputin as an advisor and healer affects the czarina far more personally, and she ignores protesters gathering at the very gates of the palace in order to pray at Rasputin's grave. By *Episode 5* ("Revolution"), when Lenin and the Bolsheviks arrive, the autocracy has all but collapsed. Troops sent to guard the royal family from riots in Petrograd eventually mutiny, and in an effort to save his family, Nicholas II renounces his throne in 1917, ending the last true autocracy in Europe. The new head of the provisional government, Alexander Kerensky, smuggles the Romanovs out of the capital to the Ural Mountains.

Episode 6 shows the Romanovs arriving at "The House of Special Purpose" (also the horrifically disturbing title of this episode) in Ekaterinburg. Most of the episode is a slow tease to the execution of the family, which is a two-minute event immediately followed by the timeline moving forward to 1925 when it is proven that the young woman in Berlin is not Anastasia but a certain Anna Anderson, a missing Polish factory worker. As a complete break in storytelling, the series then shifts into a true (though brief) documentary about the discovery of the bodies of the royal family in 1979, their exhumation in 1991, and DNA testing which finally proves the claims of "Anastasia" (Anderson) as lies.

One saving grace of the series is the coverage of Nicholas II's reign: no similar work for film or television handles the same extensive timeline (coronation to death), nor the comprehensive impact of the czar's decisions on his family, his reign, and his empire. The earliest film (*Coronation of Nicholas II*, 1896, directed by Camille Cerf) only covered the coronation and then only from the viewpoint of the attendant guests. Subsequent films covered Nicholas's abdication (*The Fall of the Romanovs*, 1917, directed by Herbert Brenon) and the czarina's close relationship with Rasputin (*Rasputin and the Empress*, 1932, directed by Richard Boleslawski), but not the breadth of events found in *The Last Czars*. In fact, most films about the Romanovs are about the possible survival of the youngest Romanov daughter, Anastasia, beginning in 1928 with *Clothes Make the Woman* (directed by Tom Terriss) about Anna Anderson posing as Anastasia, to the 1956 film with Ingrid Bergman and Yul Brenner that was remade into the animated film *Anastasia* in 1997. Various documentaries used photos, paintings, or media images and prints to tell the story, and they too fell short in both timeline and impact.

That said, the series still suffers from three main problems: lack of cohesion, lack of consistency, and lack of empathic depth. The first is already evident during the first fifteen minutes of *Episode 1* with its three shifts in timeline (1918, 1925, 1894) and three shifts in framework—Gilliard as narrator and the investigation of Anna Anderson's claim; the scripted period drama of Alexander III's death and Nicholas II's marriage and coronation; and the shift to documentary with commentators. Had all three frameworks been used to describe the same sequence of events—i.e., Gilliard narrating, with scripted acting for visual effect, and

commentators for historical perspective – not only would the story have had better flow and cohesion, but viewers would obtain a more solid historical background for the drama to come. As it is, those not familiar with Russian history or even modern European history, spend the first episode decidedly lost and the next five without a firm grasp of the timeline or of the historical significance of what they are watching.

The series falls short in terms of consistency in storytelling. The anachronistic inconsistencies include Gilliard and many of Nicholas's advisors speaking with truly terrible Russian accents, while the royal family speaks with a strong British accent and uses slang. The inconsistencies in storytelling are the real setbacks, especially in a historical docudrama. As for the Anastasia framework, Gilliard attempts to identify her on the basis of a bayonet wound received during the execution of her family, but in the dramatization all of the royals are killed with handguns, and none of the soldiers are even holding a gun with a bayonet. Historical footage showing soldiers firing into crowds is used to emphasize the calamity of Bloody Sunday in 1905 (*Episode 2*), but it is obviously the same footage used during the scenes of the 1917 Revolution (*Episode 5*).

The final tragedy of the series is the lack of empathy that it stirs in its viewers for any of the characters portrayed. Nicholas II is inept and easily bullied into decisions by his wife. The czarina begins as a woman in love and devoted to her husband but becomes a drug addict dependent on a madman. The children barely make an appearance, regardless of the overarching framework of Anastasia's alleged survival. Rasputin is suitably creepy but without the charm, charisma, or even religious mystique he must have possessed to gain such power. Revolutionaries like Lenin and Stalin are mentioned only briefly, while the Romanovs' executioner, Yakov Yurovsky, appears in half of the episodes, but his motivations are never explored beyond "angry at the rich and entitled aristocracy." By the end of the series, the audience identifies with none of these characters and can offer them no empathy. And that truly is a tragedy: all the history the Romanov dynasty represents, their connections to European royalty, the sheer number of historical events that happened between 1894 and 1918, and the execution of five children and their parents should be a visual experience that viewers think about for days afterwards.

The series is not recommended for younger viewers, as there is some serious violence and gratuitous nudity. As a series, *The Last Czars* will annoy Russian historians with its plodding dramatizations and leave non-historians with an incomplete picture of just how tragic the fall of the czar really was.

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Rise of Empires: Ottoman [TV docudrama].
Directed by Emre Şahin. 2020.

Karga Seven Pictures; STX Television; Netflix. 6 episodes (45 minutes each).

Few events have impacted history as much as the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 and the subsequent disintegration of the withering Roman Empire. This event not only rang the death knell for the Romans; it allowed the Ottomans to enter the West and emphasized the waning power of the Crusades. Among the many historical documentaries with unexciting imagery and monotone narration, Emre Sahin's 2020 *Rise of Empires: Ottoman* is a much-needed change of pace for those who wish to learn more about the rise of the Ottoman Empire under Fatih Sultan Mehmet (Sultan Mehmet II or Mehmet the Conqueror). Based on actual events and shot in various parts of Turkey, the first season of the series follows the early life of Mehmet II as he becomes sultan for the second time at the age of nineteen and conquers Constantinople at the age of twenty-one. The series was released on January 24, 2020 and is available for viewing on Netflix.

Episode 1 catapults the viewer into the midst of battle as Mehmet II carves a path through several faceless, presumably Roman, soldiers. It becomes apparent that this is a dream sequence as he faces his late father, Murad II, before the Roman emperor, Constantine XI, strikes the latter down. Mehmet is jolted awake, collects himself, and leaves his tent to enter the smoke and fire-filled scene that is the siege of Constantinople. In this episode, a panel of scholars shows the full geographic extent of the Ottoman Empire at its peak, explains the predominantly figurative significance that Constantinople played in securing territories west of Turkey, and briefly provides information on the reigning Roman Emperor Constantine XI during the siege. The rest of the episode follows the nineteen-year-old Mehmet as he receives news of his father's death, ascends the throne, puts his court in order, and sends a clear message to the Romans that he is preparing for war. He then recruits personnel, such as a Hungarian cannon maker capable of producing the largest cannon the world has seen to date, and further prepares for his campaign. During this time, the Romans recruit a company of Genoese mercenaries led by Giovanni Giustiniani, an expert in siege defense. Increased depth to the story comes in the form of Mehmet's elder advisor, Candarli Halil Pasha, who is meeting in secret with an advisor to Constantine XI, Lukas Notaras, to discuss ways how the city's conquest might be avoided for the sake of business interests. *Episode 1* ends with the arrival of the Ottoman army outside Constantinople on Easter 1453 to the astonishment and dismay of the Roman defenders. The display of a massive Islamic army arriving on the holiest day of the Christian faith provides the viewer with a sense that this is the beginning of something ominous.

After the fast-paced and attention-grabbing first episode, *Episode 2* provides the much-needed context for the ascension of Sultan Mehmet II. There are flashbacks to various talks with his father, and we see Murad II's own attempt to conquer Constantinople in 1443; Mehmet being taken from his mother of

unknown origin; his elevation to the sultanate at the age of thirteen; his ousting by his own father in the face of the Crusade of Varna; him being raised by his stepmother, Mara Brankovic; and his harsh treatment at the hands of Halil Pasha. The viewer is then brought back to the present siege as Giustiniani launches a counter attack. This daring move is both effective in dealing a morale blow to the Ottomans and presenting a challenge to Mehmet as a military leader. The young and unproven sultan feels compelled to launch a direct assault on a gap in the Theodosian Walls caused by his cannons. Emre Sahin does very well here and throughout the series in showing that the conquest of the city was anything but inevitable, as Giustiniani repels the attack with relative ease.

Following this repelling of the Ottomans, *Episode 3* displays one of Mehmet's alternative attempts to get into Constantinople, namely, via the sapping of its walls. The men recruited and charged with this task were Serbian miners. In explaining their origin, Sahin effectively alludes to the complex diplomatic situation between Serbia and the Ottomans and shows that the army was not strictly composed of Islamic forces. However, the attempt is thwarted by John Grant, a Scottish soldier, who has the unique skill of finding sapping tunnels by watching water ripple in a bucket. Grant finds the tunnel, has his men shovel until it is revealed, and proceeds to fire-bomb the attackers, thus collapsing their network of tunnels. Mehmet's military failures are further accented when a fleet of four Italian ships, three of which are military vessels escorting one with supplies, make it to the Golden Harbor despite Turkish efforts to the contrary. The clandestine activities between the opposing advisors continue as Notaras and Halil Pasha draw up terms of Roman surrender without forfeiture of the city.

But all is not lost as Mehmet shows his genius and divulges a plan to get his fleet into the Roman harbor. Showing the coercion of the Genoese governor of a colony opposite the Golden Harbor, the clearing trees to make a path, and the use of exorbitant amounts of animal fat, *Episode 4* provides a front-row seat to Mehmet II's feat of genius as he moves his fleet over land and into the Roman port. This act both surprises and reveals the betrayal of the Romans by the Genoese governor who is killed later in the series for his transgressions. At this time, Sahin provides yet another example that the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople was anything but inevitable, as the episode briefly shows the negotiations between the Serbian and Hungarian kings, revealing their intentions to attack Mehmet's weakening army. Further acts of subterfuge are shown as an agent of Notaras, a slave of Constantine XI named Ana, informs Mehmet of an imminent Roman attack on his fleet; this was in hopes that when Mehmet would take the city, he would be merciful to its inhabitants. In a subtle but appreciated instance, Mehmet speaks Greek to the agent and states, "Yes, the Devil himself speaks Greek." He also demonstrates knowledge of the Bible as he cites a verse, saying that "Rich and Poor have this in common, the Lord is the maker of them all." These two incidents display Mehmet's education and civility that stand in contrast to his portrayal by the Christians. With this intelligence, the Ottomans successfully set up cannons

along the ridge facing the harbor, rain projectiles down on the Roman fleet as the latter is attacking, and annihilate it.

Episode 5 conveys a sense of desperation and clinging to faith on both sides. Due to war weariness, both sides are becoming increasingly violent toward each other. To end things, Mehmet rides up to the city's walls, calls out Giustiniani, and enters into negotiations with him to leave Constantinople for a position of power and property after the conquest of the city. The Genoese captain refuses and continues to resist the Ottoman onslaught. This is a point in the series that takes artistic license as there is no official account of an attempt to bribe Giustianni. Moreover, the ongoing love affair between Giustiniani and Constantine XI's daughter shown throughout the series is unnecessary for the sake of the plot. Constantine XI later receives word that an Italian armada has sailed to aid Constantinople. However, it is weeks away from the Greek mainland, casting doubts on whether it will arrive in time. News of this last development drives Mehmet to despair, as he berates his pashas for the shortcomings of the siege. Things seem grim, and it almost looks as if the siege is going to be lifted, rendering Mehmet a failed sultan who would likely be overthrown and killed. Amidst this anguish, his stepmother sends word to meet with him, and she informs him that astrological readings and the appearance of a lunar eclipse predict an Ottoman victory. Emboldened by these omens, the Ottoman army is once again assembled for a final assault on Constantinople.

After the multiple attempts to directly assault the Theodosian Walls, the efforts to undermine them with sappers, and the ingenious overland movement of an entire fleet, the notion that Constantinople will yet be conquered seems anything but inevitable. In fact, the idea of a direct final assault seems ridiculous to the viewer. Regardless, Mehmet II sees the lunar eclipse, an omen that spells death for the Romans, and is emboldened by his stepmother's astrological readings. Moreover, a spectacle of sheer terror for the Romans appears, as a blue fog emanates from the church of Hagia Sofia, suggesting that the Holy Spirit is leaving the city. To the modern viewer, this all seems dubious. But as the panel of scholars explains, these ideas and beliefs were very real to contemporaries. In a last-ditch effort, Mehmet sends his army in waves. He first sends the untrained volunteers to tire the defending forces. His professional army follows, shadowed by his special forces, the Janissaries. It comes down to his elite cohort, but the city is taken in a bloody night. Refusing to flee the city, Emperor Constantine XI plunges himself and his bodyguard into the fray, never to be seen again. Giustiniani is hit by an arrow and attempts to flee on a ship where he eventually dies from his wounds. On the morning of May 29, 1453, a victorious Mehmet II rides into Constantinople with his army, makes his way to Hagia Sofia, and ascends the throne. Halil Pasha and Notaras are executed for their clandestine actions, Mehmet renames Constantinople into Istanbul, makes it the capital of his empire, receives the title of Fatih (Conqueror), and ushers in a new era for the Ottoman Turks.

Throughout the series, the viewer is accompanied by the aforementioned panel of scholars and authors who reference primary sources pertaining to the siege of Constantinople and all the major figures who participated. In *Episode 1*, Michael Talbot, a senior lecturer at the University of Greenwich, recites a *hadith* (an Islamic prophecy) by the prophet Muhammad that foresees the conquest of the city. Other scholars featured in this series include Marios Philippides of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst; Emrah Safa Gurkan of Istanbul 29 Mayıs University; and Celal Sengor of the Istanbul Technical University. They are joined by authors like Roger Crowley of *1453* which covers the siege itself; Lars Brownworth of *Lost to the West: The Forgotten Byzantine Empire That Rescued Western Civilization* which provides insights into key Roman figures; and Jason Goodwin of *Lords of the Horizon* which focuses on Ottoman conquests. In this respect, the series is not unlike the docudrama *The Last Czars* where historians consistently provide vital context and nuance to the rise of the Bolsheviks and fall of the Romanovs.

Rise of Empires: Ottoman provides a way for people to learn about the 1453 conquest of Constantinople in a way that is relatively objective. Although it often favors and focuses on Mehmet and the Ottomans – to the point that one feels like one should be rooting for the conquest of the city, it does well to show that history rarely has a “correct” or “good” side. Moreover, in every episode, the series successfully shows that the city’s conquest was not an inevitable or easy endeavor. With impressive shots of a crumbling city under siege, a love affair between a mercenary and an emperor’s daughter, political subterfuge, and thrilling battle scenes, the viewer will stay entertained and learn a lot from this mostly historical retelling of the dawn of the Ottoman Empire.

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Vienna Blood [TV series]. Season 1.
Directed by Robert Dornhelm and Umut Dag. 2019.

Endor Productions; MR Film. 3 episodes (90 minutes each).

What happens when the turn of the twentieth century brings deadly apparitions, anti-Semitic organizations obsessed with blood purity and ethnic cleansing, murderous military cults, and Satanic sacrifices to the city of Vienna, the capital of the then Austro-Hungarian Empire? The answer to this question can be found in the TV series *Vienna Blood*, in which two unlikely partners, a Jewish doctor in the newly emerging field of psychology and an embittered police detective, solve several disturbing, gruesome, and rather ingenious crimes.

Based on *The Liebermann Papers*, a book series written by Frank Tallis, the TV series initially aired in three episodes of 90 minutes each. Shot on location in Vienna, Austria, the series aims to represent historical accuracy in its settings through the use of historic buildings and sites as set pieces and through the use of era-appropriate attire for its main cast. The Vienna State Opera House, the

Riesenrad in the Prater, the Palais Pallavicini, and the Vienna University Archives are all utilized as locations.

Episode 1 ("The Last Séance") sets the scene and gives viewers an appealing taste of what the series has to offer. It is 1906 in Vienna, and a young English-Jewish doctor named Max Liebermann (played by Matthew Beard) is studying psychology under Dr. Sigmund Freud. Having just moved to the city, Max and his family are doing their best to adjust to the new culture that is surrounding them. Mendel (Conleth Hill), Max's father and a friend of the city's police commissioner, is able to arrange it so that Max is allowed to assist with police cases in order to better understand the psychology of the criminal mind. Max quickly befriends Oskar Reinhardt (Jurgen Maurer), a police detective, who is baffled by a recent murder seemingly related to Spiritualism and the occult. A woman has been found dead in her apartment, shot in the heart, with a suicide note which states, "I have tasted the forbidden fruit" and "the devil has come to punish us." To add to the mystery, there is no murder weapon at the scene, and the entire apartment, windows and doors included, is found locked from the inside. An autopsy further complicates matters when it reveals that there is no bullet inside the body, nor any sort of exit wound.

Before any meaningful detective work is conducted, we are introduced to the other major characters in Max's life, his overbearing sister Leah (Charlene McKenna) and Max's longtime girlfriend Clara (Luise von Finckh), whom his family desperately wants him to marry. Through interactions at the family dinner table, it is revealed that even Max's own family views the new field of psychology as "disreputable." Max then takes Clara to a new art exhibit, in which a woman spirals into a maddening panic attack and begins screaming at nearby guests. Max has the woman taken to a mental hospital, and it is here that we, as the audience, witness the darker aspects of psychology's emergence as a field of study, namely, scenes of electro-shock therapy. Max's father Mendel is then seen at a large party hosted by Bruckmuller, a wealthy Vienna politician. At first, it appears as though all is merry, as Mendel is in the presence of those who make the economy of the city move, that is until Bruckmuller reveals the true tone of the city's elite, "As the mayor is fond of saying, we decide who is a Jew and who is not."

Meanwhile, the story of the woman found dead in her own apartment rapidly spreads throughout the papers, infuriating the police commissioner in the process. Max and Oskar begin creating a psychological profile of the killer. The victim was a medium who hosted séances, and it is revealed through props and tools in her séance table that she was a cunning con-artist. Max notices the quality of her clothes and is able to deduce which store they came from, but he also discovers that she was pregnant, and that her killer likely committed the heinous crime in order to prevent a scandal. Max has his own internal struggle when Amelia (Jessica De Gouw), the woman who had panicked at the art exhibit, reveals to him that the psychology he holds so dear is being used to justify torture and mutilations in the name of scientific progress.

Ultimately the woman's killer is discovered, and Oskar and Max are praised for their unlikely success. The rest of the season follows two more seemingly complicated and gruesome cases, those involving the murder of several prostitutes based on the scenes of an opera which traumatized a young child as he witnessed his mother being raped while he heard it being performed (Mozart's *Magic Flute*), and the death of young military cadet at a prestigious Austrian academy for soldiers. The investigation into the academy reveals a secret society of murderous teenagers, dating back decades and involving the children (and in some cases) adults of Vienna's most illustrious military families.

While these crimes are being discovered and solved, several subplots develop and find their own conclusions, such as Max finally asking for Clara's hand in marriage, and a potential love triangle involving Amelia. One of the more profound subplots is the growing anti-Semitism and rise of fascism in Austria during this period. Mendel's new business partner, Gustav von Triebenbach, urges him to only hire pure-blooded Austrians, rather than Czechs or Hungarians, and hands him a pamphlet about an organization dedicated to blood purity. Triebenbach insists that nationalism is the way of the future. The audience is left to discover how Mendel, a Jew, will handle this new development.

The level of depravity and darkness of these murder cases in *Vienna Blood* are both the show's greatest strength and weakness. For fans of murder mysteries, crime fiction, and psychological thrillers, the show will be a welcome addition to these genres. For those who are squeamish or only interested in the criminal investigations, the episodes may feel too dark or as though they are being dragged out. Luckily, any of these concerns are counterbalanced by the strengths of the show's protagonists. Both Max and Oskar play off one another, with their relationship growing at a realistic pace throughout the season; tensions and tempers flare, as do moments of peace and understanding between the two of them. The main cast feels cohesive, especially the Lieberman family and Clara.

The most impressive aspect of the show is the fact that the city of Vienna itself feels alive as a character all of its own. It delivers a sense of foreboding and dread when Max and Oskar find themselves in its seedier districts, and a sense of progress and unity in downtown area, shopping districts, and thriving markets. There is an air of mystery and uncertainty behind every corner that accurately reflects the history of Vienna during this period. There are sections of the city which have clearly existed for decades, if not centuries, which have become part of its citizens' identities. Newer buildings share the skyline with older ones—a blending of past and present.

Vienna found itself as the capital of a dying empire, one in which the dominant ethnic group, the Austrians, comprised a small minority of the empire's citizenry. Ethnic tensions were running high, with the outbreak World War I less than decade from the year in which the show begins. Technology and science were advancing faster than ever before, and the lines between what was ethical in terms of experimentation were still very much blurred. The supernatural still held sway

over many people's imagination with this period also being the height of the Spiritualist movement. The show expertly weaves these themes, along with growing anti-Semitism and ideas of racial and ethnic purity, into a thrilling series which has captured the imaginations of its viewers. A second season of twists and turns with our favorite psychologist and police detectives may not be too far away.

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