

NETFLIX, WEBSLEUTHS AND THE CONTEMPORARY URBAN LEGEND

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Keywords: urban legend, true crime, websleuthing, television, documentary, audiences

Introduction

Via evocatively titled docuseries such as *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* (2021), Netflix is involved in the appropriation, reconstruction, and dissemination of contemporary legend as an entertainment vehicle. *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*, produced and directed by Joe Berlinger, explores the disappearance and accidental death of Canadian student Elisa Lam at the Cecil Hotel in downtown Los Angeles. Using the troubled history of the hotel as a 'nightmarish' backdrop, the series brings together notions of the contemporary urban legend, true crime, mental illness, and viral social media to reconstruct the sensation that surrounded Lam's death.

At the heart of this reconstruction lies the social media phenomenon of websleuthing. Defined by Yardley et al as the use of online resources by private citizens to conduct amateur crime investigations, websleuthing enjoys a diverse footprint across the social media ecosystem and is realised via a 'wide range of motives, manifestations, activities, networked spaces and cases' (Yardley, Lynes, Wilson et al 2018: 1). At its best, websleuthing concerns 'the circulation of information and [the fostering of] group discussions over shared interests' (Myles, Benoit-Barné & Millerand 2020: 318) or the aiding of police investigation (Havard, Strathie, Pike et al 2021). At its most problematic, it becomes a form of digital vigilantism, where 'suspects' are subjected to doxing and harassment (Trottier 2017, Douglas 2020).

As (re)constructed by Netflix in *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*, representations of websleuthing are used to establish, reconfigure, disseminate and debunk modern legend in a specific and detailed fashion. Furthermore, the foregrounding of the processes and practices of social media within the text depict pseudo personal connections between the sources of the legend and the investigators. This, in turn, serves to explore the tensions between truth, post-truth and speculation. Indeed, it is in this exploration of the dynamic between truth and post-truth that *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* diverges from the 'norm' of the contemporary legend. The series deals with an actual and documented instance of the loss of life. The outcome of the narrative depicted in the series is factually correct and has been deemed resolved by the relevant criminal justice system.

As such, rather than present this story in a traditional factual format, series producer/director Joe Berlinger chose to appropriate the aesthetics of the modern legend to not only increase the entertainment value of the tragedy depicted but also challenge the audience. By using the notion of the uncanny, muddled via the inclusion of unreliable narration, Berlinger hooks the consumer into the narrative. In doing so, he gives 'the viewer the experience that the web sleuths had while the story was unfolding and [explains] the various things they believed in and why, in order to test the viewers' own susceptibility to believing these things [that were] circumstantially fascinating but inaccurate' (Berlinger in Kilkenny 2021).

The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel is not, however, the only Netflix docuseries that features websleuthing. The 2019 series *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* shares many of the aesthetic considerations of *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*. Commonalities, such as a focus on amateur investigation by a community of private citizens, the widespread use of social media as a networked space for that investigation, wrongful accusations, doxing and harassment are present in both texts.

There are, however, several marked differences between the narrative functions of *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* and *Don't F**k with Cats*. These differences are found in

how the respective narratives have been constructed and disseminated. *Don't F**k with Cats*, written and directed by Mark Lewis, explores an online manhunt conducted by amateur investigators. The series follows a group of websleuths as they search for, and ultimately locate, an anonymous individual who posts animal cruelty content to social media.

In *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*, while the websleuths are depicted as developing parasocial connections with Elisa Lam via her social media presence, the notion of a modern legend is constructed around her without her active participation. The nature of that emerging legend is also one that extends beyond the truth of the circumstances surrounding the disappearance to speculate and propose criminality that has not occurred. Ultimately, the contemporary urban legend configured by the websleuths of *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* is revealed within the narrative to be erroneous in nature.

This is not the case with *Don't F**k with Cats*, which focuses (for the most part) on the investigation of actual criminal activity via a true crime lens rather than the construction of speculative legend. Furthermore, *Don't F**k with Cats* depicts the perpetrator as being directly involved in (manipulating) the construction of the narrative surrounding his activities. By providing materials specifically designed for the websleuths investigating him, the urban legend here is co-created rather than an organic emergence of a legend via third parties. In the end, where the websleuths of *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* are circumstantially fascinating but inaccurate, the websleuths of *Don't F**k with Cats* are revealed to be tragically accurate.

This article focuses its analysis on *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*, exploring how Netflix has appropriated the apparatus of the modern urban legend in its deployment of the aesthetics of websleuthing (and its associated social media ecosystem) to reconfigure the unusual circumstances surrounding the disappearance of Elisa Lam into a recreation of participatory infotainment. The central question of this exploration seeks to understand how Berlinger's recreation uses the urban legends of the Cecil Hotel and the disappearance of

Elisa Lam to first attract and entertain, and then later challenge the audiences' susceptibility to the formation of such ideas.

The article contends, therefore, that this mode of consumption functions as a form of honey trap which, while passive, allows the viewer to become embedded in the narrative. The resultant experience allows the viewer to explore vicariously 'the desire to participate in achieving the type of ending more commonly seen in fictionalised representations of crime; the prospect of discovering a new lead; the naming and shaming of a suspect; and justice or "closure"' (Yardley, Lynes, Wilson et al 2018: 104) only to be corrected at the end (Kilkenny 2021).

Before analysing the specifics of *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* it is necessary to firstly set out a brief theoretical framework around the phenomenon of websleuthing and, secondly, detail the facts surrounding the death of Elisa Lam.

Websleuthing

Strategic use of the internet as a form of online sleuthing is nothing new (Vibert 2001). Since its inception, the internet has by design been used to sleuth through copious amounts of information to gain or clarify knowledge and or make informed decisions. Latterly, however, the advances in digital technology have transformed our ability to create, store and share data like never before (Trottier, Gabdulhakov & Huang 2020). This has led to the arrival of a networked digital age where our virtual selves have become an extension of our actuality (McMahon 2021). In the professional sphere, websleuthing has evolved into a new and upstart form of investigative journalism that exists outside the mainstream. Here the 'digital sleuths who practice it are singular in their ability to find, combine and extract probative value from the digital breadcrumbs strewn across the internet by every individual, organisation or device connected to it' (McMahon 2021: 57).

The ease of access to social media, as well as the ever-increasing utility of tools such as online maps or video and image sharing platforms (Trottier 2017), has transformed speculative websleuthing into a para-journalistic (Myles, Benoit-Barné & Millerand 2020) leisure activity for citizen investigators (Havard, Strathie, Pike et al 2021) interested in digital vigilantism (Trottier, Gabdulhakov & Huang 2020). Websleuths can work alone, in small communities or, in some cases, large online communities numbering in the tens of thousands of members (Myles, Benoit-Barné & Millerand 2020). Irrespective of the scope of community, common activities conducted by websleuths tend to include, but are not limited to, investigating criminal cases, searching for missing persons, hunting paedophiles, hacktivism and enhanced neighbourhood watches (Dekker & Meijer 2020)

The motivations for websleuthing often revolve around online social information seeking behaviour and are activated by ‘threat or control and distrust or suspicion [or] uncertainty reduction; relationship maintenance or acquiring social capital; reconnection; curiosity; care or concern; and establishing a sense of social justice, identifying mis-steps, or exacting punishment’ (Frampton & Fox 2020: 16). Websleuthing constitutes, therefore, a form of vigilant audience, who ‘consume footage of ... events, but also take a collective role in scrutinising and seeking retribution against targets’ (Trottier, Gabdulhakov & Huang 2020: 1).

This active mode of consumption and (re)dissemination brings about an uneasy relationship between websleuths and responsible authorities, where often a mutually ambivalent rapport exists between those authorities and the social information seekers (Myles, Benoit-Barné & Millerand 2020). Yet this relationship is not always negative (Yardley, Lynes, Wilson et al 2018) and websleuths are often courted by professional investigators for the assistance they can offer (in a similar fashion to the processes of citizen science). This allows the phenomenon to exist within a series of ambiguous ‘boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable forms of online engagement’ (Dekker & Meijer 2020: 298).

The Death of Elisa Lam

In 2013, Canadian student and blogger Elisa Lam went travelling alone in the United States. On 26 January 2013, Elisa arrived in Los Angeles and checked in to the Cecil Hotel on 28 January 2013 (Hsu 2015). Throughout her travels, Elisa kept in daily contact with her parents until 31 January 2013. After failing to hear from Elisa, her parents reported her as missing to the Los Angeles Police Department on 1 February 2013 (Duke 2013). With the initial police investigation unable to locate Elisa, on 6 February 2013, the Los Angeles Police Department appealed to the legacy and online media for information on her whereabouts (Community Alert Los Angeles Police Department 2013). On 15 February 2013 the Los Angeles Police Department, still failing to make headway in the investigation, released security camera footage of the last known sighting of Elisa. The footage, also known as the 'elevator video', featured Elisa undertaking a range of unusual behaviours (County of Los Angeles Department of Coroner 2013). The elevator video went viral internationally and led to online speculation that Elisa had been attempting to evade pursuit by an unknown third party or entity. This, coupled with the fact that there was no evidence that Elisa had ever left the Cecil Hotel, inspired multiple instances of websleuthing to emerge around her disappearance (Baggs 2021). Tragically, after reports of issues with water quality and pressure in the Cecil Hotel, the body of Elisa Lam was recovered from a water tower on the roof of the hotel on 19 February 2013. On 19 June 2013, the Los Angeles Coroner's Department found that Eliza Lam had died as a result of accidental drowning, with her bipolar disorder playing a significant factor in her death (County of Los Angeles Department of Coroner 2013).

Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel

Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel is a docuseries that moves beyond the true crime genre in revisiting the death of Elisa Lam. In discussing the genesis of the series, producer/director Joe Berlinger stated:

When that elevator footage [of Lam at the Cecil Hotel] went viral in 2013, I was fascinated by it but never really thought that I could add anything to the dialogue because it was a well-known story. The whole meditation on this story [was] that people know what the outcome is and yet people want to believe in circumstantial evidence without any corroboration. I've been thinking a lot about the era that we live in and the death of truth, and how can I express that? When that ... came along, I thought, 'This is an interesting way to potentially express this idea' ... The other goal was really being respectful to the victim in this case. All the other tellings of this story have really leaned heavily into the paranormal, into the spookiness, trying to make it seem like the Cecil is truly a haunted place. And to me, to diminish the Elisa Lam story and to write it off as a spooky, haunted-house tale, it's disrespectful to the victim (Berlinger in Kilkenney 2021).

Conceived in this way, Berlinger connects with the notion that 'the legend producing folk is not somewhere else but right here, in our midst, and we may be part of it' (Dégh 1991: 12). Moreover, given the centrality of the contemporary technological phenomenon of websleuthing to the construction of legend within narrative, Berlinger is also exploring the idea that

[technological] advancement does not change the basic fragility of human life and does not dispel the mental and physical need to respond to social crises, conflict, anxieties, the sensation of daydreams and nightmares, the excitement of joy over luck, success and adventure and grief over tragedy in the form of narrating (Dégh 1991: 13).

Rather, in the case of *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*, technological advancement is shown to amplify the processes through which legend can be created, where ‘the new technological vehicles of communication help ... folklore to travel faster and farther, accommodating and creatively transforming story plots, motifs and episodes for new audiences, for diverse reformulations by the receiving folk’ (Dégh 1991: 13).

Such transformation of story plots forms the creative backbone of *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*. The series narrative is woven together via a series of interconnected and competing story strands: the history of the Cecil Hotel, the police investigation, the broadcast media coverage, the lived experiences of the hotel staff and guests, local historians, the websleuths, and the voice of Elisa Lam. Together, these narratives first appropriate, reconstruct and transmit the contemporary urban legend surrounding the disappearance of Elia Lam. Then, via the slow intrusion of the truth into the narrative, disrupt that reconstruction to debunk the very legend that has just been recreated.

Turning to the first of those strands, while Berlinger mentions that he wanted to dispel the idea that the Cecil Hotel is a haunted space to be more respectful of the tragedy that befell Elisa Lam, the series nonetheless often prioritises the motif of the nightmarish hotel in the narrative at the expense of Elisa Lam. Lam is not even mentioned in the title. Indeed, much attention is paid within the narrative to the function the Cecil Hotel plays and has played within the socio-cultural history of Los Angeles. This establishes the site as crucial to the legend. Here, Berlinger can be seen to draw upon and exploit the notion that contemporary ‘urban/industrial society has created more subcultures and folklore-bearing social groups than ever before, and has developed more and more specific forms of expression’ (Dégh 1991: 13).

In order to dispel the legend of the disappearance of Elisa Lam, it seems that, first the legend of the Cecil Hotel must be constructed, given that, as articulated in the first episode, there is no story of Elisa Lam without the Cecil Hotel.

The Urban Legend and the Cecil Hotel

'Urban legends ... arise or are spread in contexts where meaning is made through storytelling, where bits and chunks of life are interpreted in an entertaining way' (DiFonzo & Bordia 2007: 29). 'Bits and chunks' of the story of the Cecil Hotel, rather than its complete history, dominate the narrative of *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*. Throughout every episode, the story of the hotel is told in part, returned to, revised and expanded upon. It is the anchor point of the series. It functions not only as a location, but as the locator for all the individuals and incidents featured in the series. In effect, the Cecil Hotel is the mechanism through which all other stories in the series flow.

If, therefore, 'the context for urban legends is the general need for meaning (which leads to making meaning through urban legend storytelling)' (DiFonzo & Bordia 2007: 29), then this is the context of the Cecil Hotel. It is the vessel through which meaning is given to the disappearance of Elisa Lam. Moreover, if the urban, modern or contemporary legend deals with 'stories of unusual, humorous or horrible events that contain themes related to the modern world, [and] are told as something that did or may have happened ... and contain moral implications' (DiFonzo & Bordia 2007: 23) then the legend Berlinger constructs around the Cecil Hotel very much fits the profile and is urban in the truest of senses.

The location of the Cecil Hotel is fetishized throughout the series and is central to the constellation of narratives. Frequent and sweeping drone shots of the exterior of the building clearly situate its place amongst the grey sprawl of downtown Los Angeles. The socio-cultural contexts of the surrounding Skid Row are written large in the dark tales that are wound around the hotel façade. This allows the building to appropriate narratives of danger, decay and attempted regeneration. In the series, the urban story of Skid Row is not told via the life of those on the streets, but rather via how such lives have interacted with the Cecil Hotel.

Against this context, the history of the hotel is divided into three strands; the good times, the bad times and the time of Elisa Lam. A disproportionately large share of the series

run time is spent on exploring the first two of these strands which, in the end, have no bearing on the actuality of the disappearance of Elisa Lam. In telling the tales of the murders, suicides, rapes and drug abuse that have taken place within the hotel, as well as diverting into provocative asides about the infamous serial killer denizens of the Cecil, Berlinger draws heavily on the aesthetics of the urban legend to 'not only convey ... the moral lesson to avoid dangerous situations but express ... the theme of helplessness and fear outside the security of the home, especially for young women' (DiFonzo & Bordia 2007: 29). Similarly, by exploring the fleeting days of grandeur that the hotel experienced early in its life, then documenting its gradual decay, Berlinger uses the Cecil to provide a stark allegory for Elisa Lam's tragic descent from family life in Canada to lonely death in Los Angeles.

The focus on the good and the bad of the history of the hotel imbues a layer of legend onto the third strand. The function of this legend 'is not to impart information to the [viewer] or alleviate [viewer] anxiety about the topic but to entertain or keep the [viewers'] attention, thereby enhancing social relationships' (Guerin & Miyazaki 2006: 23). In the case of *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*, this manifests in the audiences' continued engagement with the series and (at least temporarily) legitimises the conjecture of the websleuths investigating the matter. Indeed, so powerful is the continued engagement with the legend around the hotel, that even though the truth of Lam's accidental death is revealed at the end of the series, the series and hotel are still the topic of much ostension in the viewing community (see, for example *What Netflix DIDN'T Tell You | Crime Scene the Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel, 2021* or *Body Language Analyst REACTS to the Cecil Hotel Manager's MORBID Nonverbal Communication Pt. 1, 2021*).

Friends of Friends and the Parasocial Relationship

Another modality of enhanced engagement lies in the extensive use of first-hand testimony within the narrative. This operates as an extension of the attributing/authenticating friend of a friend function of the contemporary legend. 'Typically, urban legends are attributed to a friend-of-a-friend, and often their narrative structure sets up some kind of puzzling situation that is resolved by a sudden plot twist, at which point the story abruptly ends' (Brunvand 2001: xxviii).

Throughout *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*, the viewer is introduced to, and becomes familiar with, a range of individuals who have interacted with, or operated around, Elisa Lam or the Cecil Hotel. Through their first-hand testimony, told in direct address to the camera, they become authenticating agents of the legend for the audience. Be they hotel employees, guests who stayed/lived at the hotel, police officers who investigated Elisa Lam's disappearance, local historians or websleuths who partook in uninhibited speculation, Berlinger structures each testimony as an unravelling puzzle:

[U]rban legend plots *conceal* functions, and for much the same reason that mystery plots and indeed most other literary plots do: it is a necessary requirement of the genre that this be the case. In both urban legends and detective stories, what is to be dis-covered (un-covered) is the 'real plot', as opposed to the 'apparent plot' (Barnes 1996: 4).

It is the slow discovery of the true happenings of the disappearance of Elisa Lam that structures the testimony in the series. These first-hand accounts initially function to build legend, drawing upon the exegesis of lived experience to at best legitimise, and at worst exaggerate, the strange circumstances surrounding Elisa Lam's disappearance. Ultimately, however, these narratives cannot (for the most part) hold as,

at the end of the day, [when] we realize that all of those things were circumstantially fascinating but inaccurate. How do you tell that story without making the viewer feel cheated because you're leading them down a certain path that you correct at the end? (Berlinger in Kilkenny 2021).

Berlinger addresses this concern by deploying a growing and overwhelming intrusion of reality into the discussion of the events, which serves to disrupt the processes of legend building.

Another function of the first-hand testimony in *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* is to bring Elisa Lam to life. By having the discourse of her social media posts not only shown on screen in a textual form, but also embodied via the performance of voice acting, Berlinger amplifies and mirrors the development of the strong parasocial relationships with Elisa Lam that are revealed in the testimonies of the websleuths. The development of such parasocial relationships connects with one of the common motivations for engaging in websleuthing activity; a feeling or sense of proximity to the case or individual (Yardley, Lynes, Wilson et al 2018).

In *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* it is the performance of the voice actor portraying Elisa Lam that intensifies that sense of proximity. This provides a level of engagement for the audience that goes beyond what the websleuths experienced. Hearing this voice facilitates a deep proxy connection for the audience with Elisa Lam. Given that “websleuthing more commonly takes place when prominent criminal cases remain unsolved” (Loveluck 2020: 225), this proxy personal connection enables the audience to better understand (or experience themselves) why the websleuths might care so much about Elisa Lam. This in turn elucidates the most common, and perhaps noble, motivation for engaging in websleuthing activity, to achieve justice or closure (Yardley, Lynes, Wilson et al 2018) for Elisa Lam.

Websleuthing as Participatory Infotainment

Irrespective of the motivations that are articulated in, or can be inferred from, the series, the websleuthing activities featured in *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* are positioned as participatory extensions of infotainment. Much is made in the series of the fact that it was the

actions of the Los Angeles Police Department that transformed the disappearance of Elisa Lam from a missing person investigation to a site of intense websleuthing activity. By the inclusion of frequent clips from the broadcast media coverage of the investigation, the viewer is reminded over and over that by releasing the footage of the 'elevator video' to the media, the Los Angeles Police Department underestimated the

role played by the media in spreading representations of crime, feeding curiosity for solving crimes as 'infotainment' and encouraging discussion and speculation on the cases at hand, as well as the more recent 'participatory culture' trope associated with the affordances of networked media (Loveluck 2020: 224).

The websleuth activity featured in the series is frequently framed as a response to broadcast media coverage of the investigation. Rather than being passive consumers, the websleuths are shown to be active prosumers of the media content surrounding the disappearance of Elisa Lam. This 'leads to a blurring of the lines between producers and consumers, writers and readers, actors and audiences' (Yardley, Wilson & Kennedy 2015: 469), where 'digital technologies increase the agency and ownership of these media productions by providing options for websleuths to expand the "universe" of the narrative' (Stratton 2019: 189).

In *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*, this expansion takes place on the level of the urban legend. The expansion is illustrated through the direct featuring of the speculative YouTube videos, blog posts, social media postings and first-hand testimony of the websleuths within the narrative of the series. The inclusion of these elements within the narrative 'reflects the expanding "multi-dimensionality" of infotainment offered by true crime which has become increasingly embedded and defined within the norms of digital culture' (Stratton 2019: 187). Furthermore, as websleuthing is 'enabled through the opportunities offered by online technology which limit the obstacles of access and distance in undertaking investigations related to crime and justice' (Stratton 2019: 187), then *The Vanishing at the*

Cecil Hotel represents the ultimate limiting of that distance, by bringing the websleuths into the same space as those who had in-person experiences of the investigation.

In closing that distance, *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* does not, however, diminish representations of ambivalent rapport that websleuths often maintain with the police (Myles, Benoit-Barné & Millerand 2020). In fact, as the series progresses, this ambivalence turns to representations of hostility, where the websleuths turn their speculation toward Los Angeles Police Department involvement with the disappearance. In doing so, Berlinger shows that ‘websleuthing focuses not only on the crime but also on the criminal justice and legal systems’ response to the crime’ (Stratton 2019: 187). When this is coupled with the competing testimony of the investigators, the disruption of the websleuth narrative as convincing is instigated within the narrative.

It is via the evolution of this ambivalent-come-hostile rapport that *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* eventually depicts the websleuths as engaging in frivolous infotainment practices that demonstrate

[w]hilst criminal justice systems are increasingly encompassing online spaces in their appeals for Information, this does not appear to be associated with better relationships with websleuths. Whilst criminal justice may draw upon information that websleuths provide, it seems that they often label websleuths as problematic: doing more harm than good; opening rather than closing cases; lacking understanding of procedural constraints; harming the criminal justice process; and having the potential to negatively affect suspects, victims and others affected by cases (Yardley, Lynes, Wilson et al 2018: 105).

Legend Tripping and Authentication

This connection of frivolity with the practices of the websleuths is further explored via the phenomenon of legend tripping. In the later episodes of the series, footage of websleuths visiting the Cecil Hotel is contrasted with testimony from the hotel employees discussing the

difficulties these visits presented. In the absence of specific details from the police investigation, many of the websleuth narratives moved toward potential supernatural explanations for the disappearance.

Supernatural legends are complex narratives that encourage ostensive reenactment of their content and inspire investigations of their veracity. Ostensive reenactments specifically motivated by the desire to test a legend's truth are known to folklorists as legend-trips—ritual performances in which participants seek to presence the very experiences chronicled in the legend (Kinsella 2011: x).

The trips undertaken by the websleuths in the series mostly concerned visiting spaces directly connected with the disappearance of Elisa Lam, such as the elevator, her room and the roof. Such in-person legend tripping is presented in *Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* as representing an escalation from online legend tripping, whereby the site was visited by digital means. This further reduces issues of access and distance to the crime scene. By visiting the site of the legend, the websleuths take the 'opportunity to rebel against the rules and laws implied by normality and engage in activities that play with notions of reality. In these instances, the legends often pertain to issues such as morality, death, sex, grief, and identity' (Ironsides 2018: 97).

In the series, legend trippers are often seen engaging in elicited filming, evading hotel security and exploring forbidden locations. Key to these trips is the performativity of the visitor. The legend trips, commonly presented as YouTube videos designed for consumption by the wider websleuth community interested in the case, bring the websleuth to the front of the narrative. The recording of these activities situates such re-enactments as ostensive, manifesting in behaviours that signal the intention to communicate with others, as well as experience on a personal level. Such websleuths seem not to be content with investigating the case from afar, but rather are motivated to appropriate the case for means of the promotion and indulgence of themselves.

Legend tripping, like any other form of folklore, wouldn't persist as a traditional activity if it weren't serving some implicit or explicit purpose for the people who do it ... one of the most common explicit functions of legend trips is to have fun! (McNeill 2018: 210).

In this way, Berlinger shows that 'websleuths explore, create, and recount new content that complement the content' already existent in the public sphere in order to 'shift the nature of audience engagement with content, explore ... alternative narratives, and share and redistribute information to create a digital public in response to crime and justice issues' (Stratton 2019: 198-190). Yet, in the series, that content is often framed as self-serving and parasitical, where the

potential for a supernatural encounter carries with it exciting and frightening possibilities, much like watching a scary movie or going to a haunted house around the time of Halloween. Moreover, legend-tripping offers participants the ability to temporarily escape the mundane and re-enchant the everyday world through the exploration of such legends (Ironsides 2018: 97-98).

In *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*, the legend tripping featured is not presented as seeking justice or closure for Elisa Lam, but as an appropriative activity aimed at driving attention toward the legend tripper's YouTube content. This further diminishes the credibility of the websleuth narratives.

The Wrong Man and the Resolution

The websleuth narrative is most markedly disrupted in the last episode, where their actions are conceptualised as 'a form of weaponised visibility, whereby retaliation for perceived wrongdoing takes the form of exposure to public scrutiny and has real, embodied consequences' (Yardley et al., 2018: 84). Moving far beyond the available evidence in the case, the information-seeking behaviour showcased in the episode morphs into an

antagonist mode of retributive vigilantism (Myles, Benoit-Barné & Millerand 2020), manifesting in presumption, where the websleuths not only consume content, but produce content. Here the intersection of broadcast media coverage and (the lack of) information sharing by the police construct a context of fervour. In that context, 'digital technologies enable prosumption, and activities such as websleuthing, [where] the mystery narratives ... leave audiences open to explore how ... injustice could be rectified' (Stratton 2019: 197). In doing so, the websleuths transcend the denouncing or investigation of 'criminal and moral offences' to, as discussed earlier, take 'a collective role in scrutinising and seeking retribution against targets' (Trottier, Gabdulhakov & Huang 2020: 1).

The target in *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* was a hotel guest who happened to be a black-metal performer with a controversial social media presence (unnamed in this article to avoid perpetuating the misidentification of innocent individuals), whose stay at the hotel did not overlap with that of Elisa Lam. Nonetheless, drawing on the personal and professional aesthetics of the guest in question, Berlinger highlights how the investigative activities of the websleuths 'gave way to rampant speculation, including the mislabelling of innocent actions as suspicious activities and the misidentification of innocent individuals as legitimate suspects' (Dekker & Meijer 2020: 291). This mode of unreliable narration reframed the websleuths not as amateur investigators but as digital vigilantes whose 'digital vigilantism is an increasingly accessible means of converting outrage, security concerns or assumptions of injustice into effective action online' (Loveluck 2020: 236).

That 'effective action' was shown to be derived from incomplete and incorrect circumstantial evidence, and took the form of targeted social media hounding/doxing that led to the suspension of the 'suspects' own YouTube, Facebook and Google accounts. In this way, Berlinger shows that the websleuths were working beyond the mechanisms of the criminal justice system and involved in activities that 'entail punitive consequences for suspects, by concentrating negative publicity long before the complete facts are established' (Loveluck 2020: 235). Furthermore, the worst 'real, embodied consequences' (Yardley et al.

2018: 84) of those actions was the sharing of the lasting negative impact that the actions of the websleuths had on the mental health of the wrongly accused guest.

In devoting a large part of the narrative of the last episode to this destructive and retributive mode of websleuthing, Berlinger addresses and comments upon ‘moral implications, legal consequences and democratic compatibility – or lack thereof’ (Loveluck 2020: 236) of the phenomena. It is here then that *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* finds the solution to the central tension of the series: “[h]ow do you tell that story without making the viewer feel cheated because you’re leading them down a certain path that you correct at the end?” (Berlinger in Kilkenny 2021). Through the presentation of the wrongly accused guest as collateral damage to the self-indulgent infotainment activities of the websleuths, Berlinger moves the narrative toward a doubt-centred approach to understanding the contemporary legend (Mould 2018). This approach, when combined with the final police disclosure of investigative details not available to the websleuths during their time of activity, reveals that the contemporary legend surrounding the disappearance of Elisa Lam is, and was, entirely erroneous in nature.

Conclusion

In *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*, Netflix appropriated, reconstructed, disseminated and debunked the contemporary legend surrounding the disappearance of Elisa Lam as a vehicle of popular entertainment. In exploring the dynamic between truth, post-truth and speculation, series producer/director Joe Berlinger challenged his audience. By using first the aesthetics of websleuthing and first-hand testimony to (re)construct, reinforce and amplify the possibilities and potentials of contemporary legend, Berlinger was then able to use those same mechanisms to disrupt that process of (re)construction by switching the legend narrative from that of a truth-centred approach to a doubt-centred approach.

(Re)creating the experiences of the websleuths for the viewer was central to this process. At the heart of this (re)creation was the Cecil Hotel. The Cecil Hotel is fetishized throughout the series as a site of urban legend. That legend is specific in its presentation,

and overwhelming in the narrative. Drawing on the interwoven narratives of the murky history of the hotel, its grand past, its location in downtown Los Angeles and the tragic events surrounding the death of Elisa Lam, the Cecil Hotel undergoes a creative transformation in the series. It becomes the vessel through which all other narratives in the series must be read and gain meaning. The function of this transformation is to temporarily legitimise the conjecture of the websleuths and entertain the viewer. In order to disrupt the legend, the legend first must be (re)created.

The use of first-hand testimony in the narrative is complex. Such testimony is both presented and, in the case of Elisa Lam, recreated. Elisa is brought to life in the narrative via dramatisation of her social media postings. This process allows the audience to develop a proxy parasocial relationship with Elisa and better empathise with the motivations of the websleuths. First-hand testimony in the series also gives voice to those who either directly or indirectly experienced the events of the disappearance of Elisa Lam. This in-person testimony functioned to legitimise the competing tales being told. As is common in the creation of urban legend, each narrative was structured around the unravelling of a puzzle. Through the slow unravelling of those competing puzzles the unreliable narrators are exposed and the truth of the circumstances surrounding Elisa Lam's death emerges.

The piecing together of the desperate narrative strands and sources of information recreates for the audience the experience of infotainment. At first, that infotainment is presented in a constructive fashion, where websleuths work with the publicly available information to attempt to resolve the disappearance of Elisa Lam. As the narrative progresses, however, that process devolves into a range of self-indulgent behaviours, hostile to the official investigation and employees of the hotel.

Marked amongst these behaviours was the phenomenon of legend tripping. Here the frivolity of the websleuths is pronounced in its mechanisms of self-promotion and indulgence. This mode of interaction revealed the appropriative nature of the websleuths' engagement with the matter. Indeed, such trips represented a shift in the content creation of

the websleuths that was focused not on achieving justice for Elisa Lam but driving attention toward the legend trippers themselves.

As the series neared its conclusion, this notion of frivolity gave way to representations of an antagonistic form of retributive vigilantism. This represented the most significant shift toward the disruption of the plausibility of the websleuth narrative. Here the websleuths weaponised their activities. Drawing on incomplete and incorrect assumptions and information their actions were shown to have real world implications. By showcasing the websleuths' doxing/harassment of a wrongly identified suspect, the series migrated to a doubt-centred narrative, now focused on deconstructing the contemporary legend surrounding the disappearance of Elisa Lam rather than affirming it.

In the end, *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* used the websleuthing and the urban legend of the Cecil Hotel to attract, entertain, persuade and then challenge the audiences' susceptibility to the formation of contemporary urban legend. Yet when the final credits have rolled, and the full details of the tragic and accidental death of Elisa Lam have been revealed, the Cecil Hotel remains. Its narrative unresolved. Its murky history unrefuted. Its legend intact?

Future Studies

Future studies could explore further the work of Berlinger to consider his prolific work as producer/director for Netflix, working mostly in the true crime documentary mode. Using works such as *Murder Among the Mormons* (2021), *Crime Scene: The Times Square Killer* (2021), *Conversations with a Killer: The John Wayne Gacy Tapes* (2022) or *Conversations with a Killer: The Jeffery Dahmer Tapes* (2022), additional studies could explore how Berlinger has refined and developed the deployment of the urban legend as a means to attract, titillate and then challenge the viewer, when actual criminal activity has taken place.

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