

**The Gilded Age of Gore:
Review of *The Alienist* (2018)**

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The Alienist

Written by Hossein Amini, E. Max Frye, Gina Gionfriddo, Cary Joji Fukunaga, John Sayles, and Chase Palmer

Directed by Jakob Verbruggen, James Hawes, Paco Cabezas, David Petrarca, and Jamie Payne.

TNT, Paramount Television, USA 2018 (TV series)

After watching the relentlessly grim yet never suspenseful *The Alienist* (2018), TNT's ten-part adaptation of Caleb Carr's 1994 novel of the same name, pacing is a significant drawback to enjoying the series. According to Jake Nevins, adapting Carr's *The Alienist* has been a challenge for over two decades:

In June 1993, before the novel was published, Paramount Pictures and producer Scott Rudin purchased the film rights for \$500,000. Various screenwriters toiled away at various scripts, locations were scouted, and production was slated to start by the summer of 1995. But the book and its grizzly contents were hard to adapt to the screen – at nearly 500 pages, truncating the story to an acceptable Hollywood running time proved impossible – and the adaption never surfaced. (Nevins 2018)

As a viewer who glanced at the clock more than a few times while watching the protracted series, “truncating” the novel could have potentially galvanised TNT's lagging narrative. However, editing Carr's densely

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historical novel, set in late nineteenth-century New York City, would require bold and decisive choices that the directors and writers were unwilling to make, perhaps having been granted so much time to sprawl on screen.

John Paul Athanasourelis claims that Carr is “a traditional writer of historical novels”, who “uses the detective genre to conduct an investigation of both history and historical fiction”, while “ask[ing] the reader to assess our society’s maturity, to see if we have made progress” (Athanasourelis 2007: 37, 40). The thematic question of progress in America posed in Carr’s historical text should have been maintained more decisively when adapting *The Alienist*, since exploring American progress would not only force viewers to become intellectually engaged in the unfolding drama, but also provide an emotional touchstone. Ultimately, *The Alienist* is not just about a serial killer, or even the new psychological profiling techniques used to capture a serial killer, but primarily about the perilous lives of the killer’s victims – the poor and exploited children in turn-of-the-century America, most of whom are immigrants. If this theme cannot evoke reflection at this point in time in America, then it never will. And, unfortunately, by unsuccessfully attempting to turn Carr’s historical novel into a horror series, where children are murdered in exceedingly gruesome ways that play out like snuff films, any question or message the directors may have intended about child poverty/victimisation gets buried under the bones of the children they exploit to titillate viewers. Gratuitous gore, without empathy or emotional investment, does not horrify or provide suspense; it just turns the viewers’ (at least this viewer’s) stomach.

To be fair, there are other issues that make Carr’s text challenging for adaptation. Carr’s first-person narrator, John Moore (Luke Evans) is not the hero of the novel, who is instead Dr Laszlo Kreizler (Daniel Brühl). While the TNT series maintains this dynamic, it too often results in a division of focus, where the viewer never becomes attached to either character. In addition, Carr’s novel is an extended flashback narrative. Moore and Kreizler attend the funeral of Theodore Roosevelt in 1919, and Moore reflects on their hunt for the serial killer, Japheth Dury, in 1896, in which Roosevelt was tangentially involved. As a result, the text has a nostalgic quality, as well as emphasising the depth of friendship between Moore and Kreizler that is wholly absent from the series, which begins in 1896 with the severed arm of Giorgio Santorelli (Nicolo Borgatti), a child

prostitute and cross-dresser, dripping blood from on top of the unfinished Williamsburg Bridge into the pure white snow below. This combination of carnage with a heavy dose of symbolism is repeated constantly throughout the series, whereas it comes across as less heavy-handed in Carr's novel.

The most puzzling aspect of the series' overall failure in adaptation is the number of truly talented artists involved in the process: Cary Joji Fukunaga directed the first season of *True Detective* (2014-present), John Sayles wrote and directed *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994), *Lone Star* (1996) and many other award-winning films, Jakob Verbruggen directed episodes of *Black Mirror* (2011-present) and *House of Cards* (2013-2018), playwright Gina Gionfriddo penned *Becky Shaw* (2009) and *Rapture, Blister, Burn* (2013), and screenwriter Hossein Amini adapted *The Wings of the Dove* (1997) and *Drive* (2011). How could all these talented individuals create a neo-Victorian psychological thriller that intermittently becomes quite tedious to watch? Perhaps it is too many cooks, creating a grisly stew that lacks in spice while abounding in dismembered body parts.

The first three episodes, 'The Boy on the Bridge', 'A Fruitful Partnership', and 'Silver Smile', are all directed by Jakob Verbruggen and written by Hossein Amini, E. Max Frye, and Gina Gionfriddo. Verbruggen excels at bringing Carr's poverty-stricken and systematically corrupt late nineteenth-century New York City to life (even if the series was filmed in Budapest). Replete with dirty tenements and shanty towns on the Lower East Side, the camera pans large cityscapes as well as intimate interior shots, including line after line of hanging laundry, ostensibly clean but still looking filthy. This creates the sense that nothing can be washed clean in this city. The initial episodes abound with crooked Irish cops and mobsters, slum lords and a seemingly endless stable of street urchins, who are also cross-dressing 'boy whores'.

Adding further depth to the novel, Carr utilised real historical figures in his depiction of the early Progressive era in New York, such as Theodore Roosevelt, who is a main character in both the novel and the series, played by Brian Geraghty, the wealthy and powerful business tycoon John Piedmont Morgan (Michael Ironside), Bishop Henry Potter (Sean McGinley), and gangsters Paul Kelly (Antonio Magro), Biff Ellison (Falk Hentschel), and Jack McManus (Rocci Williams). Verbruggen maintains these real-life figures, since they highlight the class system in America. The clear demarcation between the haves and have nots is well demonstrated in

the third episode, in which members of the wealthy Van Bergen family (Sean Young and Steven Pacey) are questioned about the deviant predilections of their son, Willem Van Bergen (Josef Altin), who is a suspect in the murders. Instead of answering the police, they eat their treacle pudding, their gestures and noises even more grotesque than those in the previous scene, where the eyes of a boy's corpse are removed and placed in a jar. The Van Bergens illustrate the protection offered by wealth and privilege in late nineteenth-century New York City, while also hinting at genetic abnormalities born of intermarriage between upper-class families.

The visuals for *The Alienist* (2018), the costumes, setting, and cinematography, are stunning – from Kreizler's office with its dark leather and wood, its rolling library ladder and maps and magnifying glass, to the marble and gold details and chamber music in Delmonico's restaurant, to the exterior shots of gas lamps, horse-drawn carriages, cobblestone streets, night-time alleys, and bustling daytime market places. Similarly, the camera is used to engage when the plot stalls, such as a dizzying downward shot of a spiral staircase in a run-down tenement that is likely an homage to a similar shot from Fritz Lang's *M* (1931), a film also about the hunt for a serial killer of children. With costs coming in at “nearly five million dollars an episode” (Littleton 2015), the visual effects are sumptuous, whether fair or foul. In particular, the opening sequence features different parts of New York City constructed and deconstructed, such as the scaffolding around the Statue of Liberty that serves to deconstruct America's icon, turning her face into an eerie skeleton and underlining the issues of immigration raised throughout Carr's novel. Unfortunately, the music that accompanies such cinematic mesmerism is not period-based but synthesised. This auditory anachronism not only jars viewers' immersion in the series but is overused in an attempt to build tension in action sequences that might have worked better with diegetic sound.

While the first two episodes establish a believable and compelling historical setting, they also establish the main characters. As an alienist for ‘disturbed’ children at the Kreizler Institute for Children, as well as a victim of childhood abuse himself, Dr Laszlo Kreizler is often less concerned with the welfare of his patients, wards, and street children than with his obsessive attempts to understand the mind of a serial killer, who ironically hunts those very children. Meanwhile, John Moore shifts from a police reporter for *The New York Times* in the novel, useful to Kreizler for his knowledge of the

city's underbelly, to a cartoonist for the newspaper. This is an intriguing choice that allows for some graphic sketches of mutilated corpses, but it diminishes the importance of Moore's role in the investigation. In the TNT series, Moore is initially called to Williamsburg Bridge to draw the dead body of Santorelli, but is later maligned for his efforts by Kreizler, who claims Moore's sketches are too artistic: "You've idealized it. It's no use to me" (Amini 2018). Kreizler's subsequent demand for Moore to recite all the gruesome details from memory comes across as sadistic – a trait that manifests itself frequently in Kreizler's character in the series only. In fact, the relationship between Kreizler and Moore is consistently antagonistic, with little to no friendship between them. Because Moore is a likeable/relatable character compared to Kreizler, despite his drinking and debauchery, Kreizler becomes not simply enigmatic and remote, but villainised. The iceman persona ultimately alienates the alienist from viewers.

The interest in alienism has been explored recently in a number of neo-Victorian television series. In *Alias Grace* (2017), an adaptation of Margaret Atwood's 1996 novel of the same name, Dr Simon Jordan (Edward Holcroft) analyses Grace Marks (Sarah Gadon) regarding her crimes. Similarly, Dr Fisher (Dan Stevens) evaluates the governess Ann (Michelle Dockery) in a psychiatric institution in the 2009 BBC adaptation of Henry James's novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). In *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016), Patty LuPone plays Dr Florence Seward, an alienist who tries to help Vanessa Ives (Eva Green) with her depression and supernatural torments. While *The Alienist* does not offer many scenes of doctor/patient sessions, each episode nonetheless begins with the opening quotation from the novel: "In the 19th century, persons suffering from mental illness were thought to be alienated from their own true natures. Experts who studied them were therefore known as alienists" (Carr 1994: Note). In TNT's *The Alienist*, Kreizler must study his patient, Dury, from afar and believes he must vicariously 'become' the murderer in order to fully understand him. The series depicts alienists as mainly maligned for their profession, so that viewers would not necessarily know that Carr modelled Kreizler after Henry James's brother William James, who established the first psychological laboratory in the United States at Harvard University, where he also taught Theodore Roosevelt anatomy (see Carr 2006: 491-492). In Carr's text, Kreizler is widely and well respected in his field:

Kreizler was known throughout the patient, as well as the criminal, medical, and legal, communities in New York to be the man whose testimony in court or at a sanity hearing could determine, more than any other alienist of the day, whether a given person was sent to prison, to the somewhat less horrifying confines of a mental institution, or back out on the streets. (Carr 1994: 29)

In the late nineteenth century, more and more, alienists were being called as experts in trials. For example, Dr Henry Charlton Bastian successfully defended Annie Cherry in 1877 for the drowning her children by claiming that she experienced “homicidal mania”; thus she was not held criminally culpable for her crimes (Eigen 2016: viv-x).

In contrast, the respect for Kreizler’s position, in the legal community and by the police department, is nearly non-existent in TNT’s series. However, Kreizler’s clout in determining whether a suspect is sane or not is briefly alluded to in the pilot episode, when Kreizler interviews a suspect in the murder of Santorelli, a man named Henry Wolff (Jack Kesy), who suffers from advanced syphilis. The graphic portrayal of syphilis seems to be the more important factor in the scene as opposed to Kreizler’s analytic abilities concerning Wolff’s mental state. This occurs in later episodes as well, for instance when Willem Van Bergen, dubbed ‘silver teeth’ due to mercury poisoning from being treated for syphilis, is shown leering at boys in a malt shop. Since disease is a primal fear for humans, along with being devoured, TNT capitalises on these fears in an attempt to fit snugly within the horror genre. Yet syphilis, albeit in a less graphic manner, also seems to be part of a larger trend for characters in neo-Victorian series such as John Marlott (Sean Bean) in *The Frankenstein Chronicles* (2015-present) and Prince Ernest of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha (David Oakes) in *Victoria* (2016-present). This might reflect the rise in syphilis and other sexually transmitted infections in America and Britain today. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the cases of syphilis climbed by 76% in the U.S. in 2017. As a result, the fear of the disease, as well as its treatment and prevention, becomes more relevant in *The Alienist* and other neo-Victorian series (see Thompson 2018).

Kreizler's professional determination to understand the mind of the killer, syphilitic or otherwise, is futile and, eventually, boring. In a scene in which he discusses his intention to meld his mind with the killer's, he speaks to Mary Palmer (Q'orianka Kilcher), his housekeeper and subsequent lover, who is likewise a victim of childhood abuse. In the novel, Kreizler scrupulously avoids sharing information with Mary, since he does not wish to upset or frighten her. In the TNT series, he subjects Mary, as he does everyone else, to his symbiotic goals with the killer:

His acts are so wretched, so evil that only if I become him – if I run my knife through a helpless body and pluck innocent eyes from a horrified face, only then will I recognize that what drives me is not an absence of emotion – no, rather, a torrent of feeling, the kind that gives meaning and purpose to my own blackened soul. (Amini 2018)

As an alienist, he does not wish to become the killer in order to stop the killer as much as to understand him. While this would be understandable, and in following with the novel to some extent, the idea that he, too, possesses a “blackened soul” is not a notion that viewers should be in whole-hearted agreement with. Comparatively, Moore's affable, ineffectual character provides relief from Kreizler's unremitting bleakness, but this is still a far cry from the strong hero/heroine this story could use. In Carr's novel, Roosevelt acts as a counterweight to Kreizler; he is decisive and steady where Kreizler is moody and withdrawn. However, in the TNT series, Roosevelt provides no such stabilising presence. Roosevelt, recently established as President of the Board of Commissioners of the New York City Police Department, a role he kept from 1895 to 1897, selects Kreizler to help find the serial killer targeting immigrant children. In the novel, he repeatedly gets in on the action in his enthusiasm to solve the case. Carr's depiction of Roosevelt, though sober and strong-willed, jibes historically with what is recorded of Roosevelt. Recent biographers like David McCullough and Michelle Krowl, echo Carr's representation of Roosevelt's lust for life. In an interview, Krowl discusses Roosevelt's opening day of work at the NYPD in much this sense:

On the first day, the commissioners are coming down the street, and they're walking, and he [Roosevelt] is running he's so excited about this job. He comes into the office and he's saying hello to everybody and he's running up the stairs and asking, where's the office? What do we do? What do we start now? He's just so exuberant about all of this. (Krowl 2016)

Krowl goes on to chart Roosevelt's "midnight tours" or "midnight rambles" with Jacob Riis (Krowl 2016), where they disguise themselves in order to roam the night-time streets of New York City in anonymity to catch corrupt police officers red-handed.

TNT's Roosevelt, played by Brian Geraghty, may be determined to fight corruption in the police department, but he comes across as cautious, humourless, dour, and a stickler for rules. There is none of Roosevelt's trademark enthusiasm or his cultivated rapport with the press. Instead, Geraghty's Roosevelt is stymied by his higher ups and bullied by kingpins. As Jacob Oller notes on this biofictional misrepresentation,

[wh]en you cast such a bombastic role, with such a solidified image in the American psyche, you have to play into it or undermine it hard with little-known facts. Here, Geraghty is merely milquetoast and serviceable – two things Theodore Roosevelt would've knocked your teeth in for if he heard you describe him as such. (Oller 2018)

Roosevelt, historically, would not have been as cowed or constrained as the series depicts him to be.

Sara Howard, played by Dakota Fanning, is another potential hero that never quite manifests as heroic in the series. As the first female secretary working at the NYPD, where the #MeToo Movement would have found fertile ground, Howard, in Carr's novel, is a plucky, smart, ambitious young woman, who also happens to be a gun expert with a sharp eye and a quick draw. However, her television counterpart is too often struck dumb and passive, targeted repeatedly by the loathsome Captain Connor (played brilliantly by David Wilmot), her blue eyes wide with terror. Yet, there is potential, a promise that never materialises, in the early episodes when her

character is considered within the context of the ‘New Woman’ of her age. Howard’s reflection is displayed in a mirror as a maid removes her corset, which leaves painful red marks on her skin. Howard smokes (another unladylike quality) and stares contemplatively at her own image as she describes the men she works with, ending her monologue with “to hell with them” (Amini 2018). While this intimate view of her character, her rebelliousness and anger, does not return, Howard does investigate as effectively as any member of the team. Cohenour writes that Howard’s job “requires her to disassociate with her upper-class peers to some extent because she shuns cultural expectations of women, an action compounded by her earlier background as a nurse” (Cohenour 2014: 90). Howard’s identity as an upper-class woman leading a non-traditional life is explored in one more captivating scene in ‘Silver Smile’, when she attends a reunion at Vassar College where she is the only single woman left in her graduating class. The women, with their male companions, commence playing a parlour game where a murderer, unknown to participants, winks at his victims, who must fall to the floor and feign death. When the man/murderer winks at Howard, she remains motionless, unwilling to play the game or play the victim.

To round out this team of crack detectives, brothers Lucius (Matthew Shear) and Marcus (Douglas Smith) Isaacson are introduced as two pioneering Jewish detectives, whose new forensic methods are not yet accepted by a technologically backwards and bigoted NYPD. The brothers conduct many grisly post-mortems on dead children. In one memorable scene, they test a theory using a cow’s head, removing its eyes from the socket with a type of bowie knife they suspect the killer uses. The sound effects alone are more nauseating than *Supersizers Go Victorian* (2008), where a Corleone-esque cow’s head is rendered down by a chef into a number of ghastly Victorian dishes. The detectives are mainly utilised to further the investigation, although the series adds a love affair between Markus and a hot young socialist/single mom named Esther (Daisy Bevan). While some reviewers considered their tryst as TNT’s opportunity to add even more romping sex scenes, I found myself enjoying the reprieve from merciless carnage.

Although the victims are explicitly and continually shown in the first three episode, perhaps most memorably in a gothic morgue filled with lit candles, with lighted tubes inserted into the small corpses, the killer, Japheth

Dury (Bill Heck), who operates under the assumed name John Beechum, is kept in shadow. In the first episode, as in a nightmare or fairy tale, viewers follow a black cat down a back alley where the killer butchers a child, canning the eyeballs like his pioneering parents canned beans, then feeding extra titbits to the feline. In fact, we never get a clear look at his face, with its trademark facial tick, until the finale. Since this trait is frequently described by characters that witness it in the novel, and to a fair number in the series as well, the scene where Kreizler takes on the killer warrants more than one palsied twitch, which is all the viewer gets on screen, whereas, in Carr's text, Drury's tick makes the reader cringe in horror and a strange sort of sympathy.

The fourth and fifth episodes, entitled 'These Bloody Thoughts' and 'Hildebrandt's Starling', are directed by Joseph Hawes and written by Gionfriddo, Frye and Cary Joji Fukunaga. Kreizler continues to search for answers as to why the killer commits his crimes. He visits a dominatrix, Mrs. Williams (Katherine Kingsley), who is also a former patient, inquiring why vulnerability arouses certain men. The cinematography emphasises her insights through close-up shots of pinned butterflies under glass. She claims that perpetrators enjoy inflicting wounds, because they have wounds of their own. She suggestively touches Kreizler's arm when speaking, which we know he cannot use, not due to a deformity but as a result of his father's physical abuse. The parallels between catcher and killer, alienist and patient, are thus repeatedly underlined. In contrast, readers of the novel are perhaps invited to consider the significance of 'nurture' over 'nature' when considering Drury; however, they are not invited to voyeuristically identify with him. Besides looking into the killer's painful past, Kreizler wants to convey to his team that anyone is capable of committing heinous crimes. To illustrate his point, Kreizler and Howard sit on a park bench watching a mother rock her perambulator only to discover it is empty. Kreizler provides background on the woman, another former patient, telling Howard that the mother drowned both her children, because she succumbed to society's pressure to become a wife and mother when she was not meant to hold either role. He says, "We all possess the raw material" (Gionfriddo and Fukunaga 2018). As with the skewered flies, Kreizler's lesson is delivered with a heavily symbolic image of little girls playing jump rope in front of a water fountain.

‘These Bloody Thoughts’ marks the entrance of Joseph or Joe (Jackson Gann), an imperilled ‘boy whore’, who provides dimension to Moore’s character. Moore, who is not keen to understand the killer’s sick mind, instead attempts to act as protector to the killer’s potential victims. Moore rubs the garish make-up from Joe’s face and gives the boy his number. Meanwhile, Kreizler continues his quest to empathise with Drury in ‘Hildebrandt’s Starling’ by dragging Moore with him to visit Jesse Pomeroy (Stephen Louis Grush) in Charlestown State Prison. By talking to Pomeroy, a former murderer of children, Kreizler hopes to learn something about what makes Dury tick. Donning heavy neck and wrist chains, Pomeroy tells Kreizler that he killed children because he did not like how they stared at his deformity (he is blind in one eye). Then Pomeroy laughs, clearly showing that he has manipulated Kreizler, before attempting to shiv him. When the guard arrives and beats Pomeroy brutally, Moore and Kreizler hightail it out of prison. This is a key scene in the novel, because Kreizler, not prone to violence, pulls the guard off of Pomeroy and commences thrashing him. TNT’s Kreizler is not so protective of Pomeroy; so the scene simply shows the continued futility of Kreizler’s quest, mirroring an earlier scene where Kreizler interviews a boy who used to kill animals. After Kreizler probes for a deeper motive, the creepy child simply shrugs his shoulders and says, “They’re just stupid dogs” (Gionfriddo and Fukunaga 2018). Although the series ostensibly attempts to humanise perpetrators through the eyes of Kreizler, because Kreizler too often comes across as monstrous himself, the series does not really humanise anyone, including its protagonists.

By the sixth and seventh episodes, ‘Ascension’ and ‘Many Sainted Men’, directed by Paco Cabezas and written by E. Max Frye and John Sayles, the detectives have discovered that the killer preys on his victims during religious holidays. The combination of ghastly/gorgeous symbolism remains as the sixth episode opens on a dead white horse lying in the road, its silvery hair stroked by one of the street children, before the scene cuts to Stevie (Matt Lintz), Kreizler’s ward, being tied into a white corset, letting his father figure tart him up and pimp him out to lure the serial killer. In Carr’s novel, in contrast, Stevie is attacked, but Kreizler does not use him as a sexual decoy. In the series, dovetailing Kreizler’s imperilment of Stevie, Moore’s concern for Joe’s welfare grows. Buying Joe an egg cream, Moore provides a sketch of Dury and warns Joe to stay away from such a man.

Meanwhile Stevie, unlike the countless child victims, including the soon-to-be-scalped Rosie, who teaches Stevie how to seductively bat his eyes at potential clients, is not submissive prey, not a cross-dressing Little Nell angelically awaiting his inevitable disembowelment. Instead, Stevie provides perhaps the most satisfying line in the entire series, which he delivers with disgust to a lascivious John: “Go bugger yourself” (Frye 2018).

As Howard and Kreizler wait for the outcome of Stevie’s sting, Howard confronts Kreizler about the truth of his childhood abuse. She calls him a “coward” for not addressing his past (Frye 2018), at which he slaps her hard in the face. This violent act further demonstrates that there is no bond between the detectives, who rather treat each other with animosity and cruelty. In contrast, there is no slap in the novel, and Howard does not peck away at Kreizler about his past; instead, she shares the information with Moore and they both agree not to confront Kreizler with a painful memory he has chosen to forget. In the series, Kreizler has few redeeming characteristics; so his unexpected violence against Howard, his endangerment of young Stevie, and his coldness towards Mary, who clearly loves him, makes him odious. Then, in episode seven, Kreizler’s character seems to officially transform into a villain when he stares down at Rosie’s corpse, then traces the boy’s pale abdomen with a scalpel before puncturing him for no obvious reason except to feel what it is like to cut a child’s flesh. Kreizler then apologises to the corpse in menacing German.

The romance between Mary and Kreizler should serve to humanise him, but her roles as housekeeper, barber, cook, and seamstress create a disparity in power relations that the series does at least acknowledge. When Kreizler finally asks Mary to join him for dinner, they listen to *Aida* (1871) together, and he says, “I don’t know why I didn’t ask before” (Sayles 2018). We accept that he is emotionally stunted from years of abuse, which explain his coldness and reticence with Mary, but it still does not excuse the scalpel or the slap. And their courtship is fittingly bloody: Mary cuts her finger slicing vegetables, and Kreizler sucks the blood from Mary’s finger, as viewers witness a mutual licking of wounds in their courtship.

Episode eight, ‘Psychopathia Sexualis’, named after the pivotal text by Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing (1886), which is also referenced in the novel, directed by David Petrarca and written by John Sayles, starts on an upbeat note, which is rare. However, especially for those who already know

the story, there is an increased sense of foreboding and inevitability as Mary happily smells a bouquet of flowers and Kreizler, looking on, breaks into his sole smile of the series. In addition to the budding romance, this episode takes a literal breath of fresh air by leaving New York City for the rural northeast. This is by far the closest to a Sherlock/Watson bromance that the series gets. Kreizler and Moore actually work together to uncover Japheth's history, discovering a solidarity through Kreizler's confession of his feelings for Mary, while Moore shares his recent and shallow infatuation with Howard. They tease each other, then save each other when their horse-drawn cart is attacked. This rare humor and camaraderie continues with the Isaacson brothers as they travel to the Dakotas. Seated awkwardly across from two large Indigenous American men, the Isaacson brothers appear like a postcard with a caption, 'Hi Ma, we're not on the Lower East Side anymore!'. I doubt I was alone in finding it refreshing to have the persistent sense of doom and claustrophobia lifted with a little levity. In addition, the narrative unfolds more gradually as Japheth's brother's Adam Dury (David Meunier) is allowed to provide a significant memory about his brother's sexual abuse in a thoughtful scene that trusts the actors to slowly and skillfully tell a story. While the episode ends with a murder, it comes after a tense action sequence, where Mary and Captain Connor grapple with a knife until she falls from the second floor window to the ground, dying instantly. This episode consistently favors action sequences over lingering shots of mangled prepubescent corpses, which makes it one of the strongest episodes in the series.

The ninth and tenth episodes, 'Requiem' and 'Castle in the Sky', are directed by Jamie Payne and written by Fukunaga, Sayles, and Chase Palmer. While Kreizler mourns Mary, comforted briefly at the funeral by Roosevelt, who had lost his own wife, Alice Hathaway Lee, the street children once again take front and centre stage, terrorised by real and imagined bogeymen. In one scene, a group of boys (girls being strangely and consistently absent from the series) play a game of fee-fi-fo-fum, hiding from what at first seems like the killer but in fact turns out to be a police officer. The killer becomes less a spectre as detectives find his previous residence, interviewing his landlady (Flip Webster), who claims her former tenant was "not a friend of the kitties" (Amini 2018). This is grotesquely proven when the detectives discover a dead cat under the floorboards. Just in case the viewers' imaginations are nonexistent, the camera provides an

extreme and lengthy close up of the dead cat. *The Alienist* never learns that what your mind conjures up may be more terrifying than what the camera can show – the series’ default position is to gross-out stunts. The killer also becomes more of a physical presence in ‘Requiem’, with quicks cuts to Japheth, naked and exercising, reminiscent of *The Fall* (2013-2016), which effectively accomplished a dual point of view between the killer and the catcher. The most disturbing sequence occurs in a boys’ public pool, where Joe and another boy get caught by the killer. While hiding in a closet, Joe watches the first boy being butchered, his body leaving a trail of blood as he is dragged past Joe’s hiding place. Truly, this sequence more than any other recreates the nightmarish terror of a child in jeopardy, and because viewers have come to know Joe through Moore, there is an emotional investment in the killer not finding him.

Regarding Joe’s survival, the finale deviates from the book by allowing him to live, which would be an appealing change from the novel had the writers actually utilised this decision to make the narrative more engaging. But they failed to do so. After the detectives realise Joe has been kidnapped by the killer, Moore regrets that he did not take Joe into his upper-class home, which actually belongs to his grandmother (Grace Zabriskie). Moore laments, “Why didn’t I take him home?” (Fukunaga, Sayles and Palmer 2018). Meanwhile, Joe, in possibly the most troubling scene I have watched on television (and bear in mind my previous reference to *The Fall*), is tied up, lying in his own urine, and forced to watch the killer put a cat in a bag and then smash that bag against the wall until the cat is dead. As Kreizler and Moore eventually make their way to the old Croton Reservoir, where Japheth has taken Joe to kill him, a knife is held against Joe’s throat as he cries for help. When Moore desperately searches for him, Japheth chokes Joe until he passes out. We never see Joe fully conscious again. This is because Moore, despite his earlier regrets and promises, despite his frenzied efforts to find and revive Joe, despite more than enough time devoted to wrapping up loose ends in the series, apparently forgets the tow-headed street urchin post rescue. And the writers, who made the decision to keep Joe alive in the series, never even mention what happened to the boy after the Reservoir, let alone provide a scene with Joe frolicking with his new adoptive dad in Central Park.

Instead viewers get two ‘heroes’, who have both been given plenty of time to carefully plan the rescue at the old Croton Reservoir. Yet Moore

and Kreizler stumble about, weaponless, in slow-witted surprise that the killer actually resists their efforts to stop him. Then, mercifully, the filthy Captain Connor saves the day by shooting Japheth, and Kreizler scrambles to ask the dying killer: “What made you kill them?” As if this is not preposterous enough, Kreizler later refers to Japheth as a “wounded child” (Fukunaga, Sayles and Palmer 2018), after literally stepping over a wounded child to aid the killer.

Besides the grisly gore, which never raised one hair on my head but certainly made my stomach turn, *The Alienist* fails as gothic horror and psychological thriller, though the historical setting is impressive. Without empathy or attachment to any of the characters, there is little reason to care what happens to them. And if one of the main intended themes is how America once (and thus currently) treated its most vulnerable citizens (poor immigrant children), then it fails again. Despite Kreizler’s look of concern in the sixth episode as he stares down at three homeless boys sleeping in a stairwell, his obsession with the killer ultimately trumps his concern for children. In reviewing the series, Ben Travers writes that “[s]uch a rallying cry for the oppressed and discarded would be better heard if *The Alienist* wasn’t so focused on the grizzly nature of its crimes” (Travers 2018). In the end, the constant filmic attention bestowed upon the brutalised and exposed bodies of young boys undermines any ostensible concern for their welfare. When a piece of fiction, in this case one set in the late nineteenth century, becomes depoliticised not only from its own time period/setting, but from the one that produces the retrospective, then it becomes spectacle without substance.

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