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A Review of *The Curious Creations of Christine McConnell* (2018)

Reviewed by Rachel Mizsei Ward

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IMPOSSIBLE CREATIONS FOR THE GOTHICALLY MINDED

Review by Rachel Mizsei Ward

McConnell, Christine, creator. "Season One" *The Curious Creations of Christine McConnell*, Performances by Christine McConnell, Adam Mayfield, and Dita Von Teese, Wilshire Studios, Henson Alternative and Netflix, 2018. Television.

As a crafter and lover of the Gothic *The Curious Creations of Christine McConnell* (2018) looked like a wonderful Halloween treat to binge-watch on Netflix. Although the show turned out to be the light and effervescent mix of genres that I had hoped for, it highlighted significant issues surrounding the lifestyle Gothic and the way that genres are combined to create what can be an unsatisfactory whole, despite their individual pleasures.

The show is a multi-genre confection combining light Gothic comedy-drama with creative craft projects. The star and show creator is Christine McConnell, an Instagram celebrity who specialises in elaborate cakes and crafts. The show's introduction describes her as "a woman who uses her unique skills at baking, sculpting, and sewing to create delicious confections and hauntingly disturbing decor." The episodes form a narrative around the heroine Christine and her puppet friends, featuring a crazy cousin who wants her inheritance and a romantic relationship with a serial killer. The puppets are created and animated by Henson Alternative, a division of Henson Productions that specialises in productions aimed at adults. The puppets portray a number of key characters that Christine interacts with in every show, specifically Rose (a re-animated racoon with a fork for a hand), Rankle (a mummified Egyptian cat), and Edgar (a wolf man). As this summary suggests, the show features several Gothic tropes, such as the 'mad woman,' and the serial killer, along with a ghost portrayed by Dita Van Teese who lives in a mirror, and an undead grandmother in the graveyard. The Gothic is frequently considered to be a feminine genre, often featuring female lead characters, dealing with issues that concern women. This show's use of Gothic generic tropes, along with several strong female characters, combined with its concentration on handicrafts marks this as a show targeted at the female viewer.

Catherine Spooner identifies lifestyle Gothic as a way that the Gothic is expanded beyond something that adherents read or watch into something that they live (*Post-Millennial Gothic* 29-48). Much of this is due to a slippage between Gothic as a genre, and the Goth subculture where consumption is an important way of creating one's identity (36). The lived expression of the Gothic includes clothing, hair and make-up, homewares and home decoration. Much of this requires an act of bricolage by the Gothic consumer, combining items from many different places to create their individual expression of a gothically lived life. Sometimes this requires craft skills as well as creative bricolage to create bespoke items that are not available in shops.

The show is an expression of this kind of Gothic bricolage through its sets, costuming, and crafts. These work together to present a kind of Gothic lifestyle rooted in a vintage aesthetic, something which Spooner identifies as a core part of twenty-first century Gothic style (49). The vintage styled kitchen is one of the most important sets in the show, acting as the main stage for Gothic creation. The styling recalls the 1960s, with its pastel accessories, including an authentic period pink refrigerator. A Gothic touch is incorporated through the cupboards, with their cobweb patterned doors; this is where we watch Christine make most of her curious creations. The show demonstrates how to create a variety of Gothic crafts, including a shortbread ouija board, three-dimensional biscuits shaped like bones and shrunken heads, spiders made from toffee, and a spooky gingerbread mansion.

However, this apparent autonomous creativity is where the show becomes problematic. Although we watch Christine making her creations, she gives the viewer no recipes or detailed instructions on how to recreate the crafts. The show is not supported by a complimentary website or cookbook for viewers to refer to, like many other cooking or craft shows. Beyond this, the crafts shown are highly intricate and time consuming to create, and often require specialist equipment such as an air-brush, a dremel tool, and an industrial sized refrigerator, that the home crafter may not have. A three-dimensional biscuit werewolf is decorated with pieces of shredded coconut to create individual hairs, then air-brushed with food colouring, while the shrunken head biscuits are carved with a dremel. All of this, therefore, creates a tension in the show between the Gothic crafts and your ability as a viewer to recreate the crafts depicted. Although the show provides some inspiration for a gothically lived life, it becomes almost impossible for the viewer to take part by recreating Christine's crafts. This means that the show is generally more of an entertainment, rather than an instructional programme. Instead those that want to make Gothic crafts are better returning to the crafting stalwarts of YouTube and Pinterest for more realistic practical tutorials. This makes the show's narrative and humour more important than it might otherwise be, in order to support the under-explained crafting content. Like *Heston's Feasts* (2009-2010), the show becomes "cooking as pure fantasy, a spectacle to enjoy but not emulate" (Spooner 45). For the viewers of *The Curious Creations of Christine McConnell* this can lead to the show becoming an ultimately dissatisfying experience. This is due to the inherent differences between the two shows and the way the central personalities are constructed. Both Heston Blumenthal and Christine McConnell are highly skilled professionals who make a living from food, with McConnell being described by *The New Yorker* as "Martha Stewart meets Tim Burton" (Rosner). However, within the context of her own show, Christine McConnell is presented as a dilettante housewife who just happens to have the time to play around creating curious creations, rather than someone with incredible skill and creativity. This is part of a frequent longstanding problem within the cooking show genre, where male presenters are presented as expert chefs while the expertise of women is frequently minimised, being reduced to the position of the unthreatening home cook. In a sense this also relates to traditional early Gothic texts of the nineteenth century, where women are not presented as an example of the rational, rarely occupying the space of the expert investigator, or scientist. Instead women are usually portrayed as emotional, hysterical characters who rely on their intuition to make decisions.

To a degree the show questions its own nature as a part of the instructional genre. As is typical for a cooking or craft show, Christine breaks the fourth wall to explain how to make her creations. However, the puppets Rankle and Rose both ask, "Who is she talking to?" in Episodes One and Two, pointing out the artificiality of the genre norms for cooking shows. The unusual multi-generic mix of the show featuring aspects of the Gothic, comedy, and lifestyle genres means that it already challenges the notion of the traditional cooking show, which more frequently pairs itself with travelogue, historical, and competitive reality genres. This deconstruction of the cooking show appears to be part of a trend on Netflix, with its highly successful show *Nailed It* (2018-) where home cooks are shown failing at complex bakes, in an atmosphere of comedy and a celebration of mediocrity.

Rather than primarily being an example of the cooking genre, *The Curious Creations of Christine McConnell* is more easily identified as an example of the whimsical macabre which Spooner suggests "reconfigures the gruesome and grotesque as playful, quirky, and even cute" (99). One of Christine's craft projects is the resurrection of Rose, in the Gothic manner of Frankenstein and his monster. Although this is a gruesome sounding origin, Rose is a cute puppet character who is the source of much comic interaction in the show. On her birthday in Episode Five Rose becomes jealous when she thinks Christine is making a replacement for her, but it is instead just a life size cake. The show's nature as a multi-generic oddity combined with its mix of human and puppet characters helps to mark it as a playful popular culture product. As a show *The Curious Creations of Christine McConnell* potentially has many different sources of pleasure for a variety of viewers. As its Netflix trailer suggests, "it's a place where the strange and unusual are welcome," making it a place where the gothically minded can feel at home, even if they cannot make the crafts depicted.

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BIONOTE

Rachel Mizsei Ward is an Eisner Award-nominated scholar who works on aspects of transmedia and the critical responses to them. Her edited collection *Superheroes on World Screens* is now available in paperback. She has published in *Comparative American Studies*, *The Journal of Popular Television*, and the *Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*. Her latest project is on the discourse surrounding adult colouring books.