Prospero | Blood spots on the American portrait

A powerful dramatisation of the murder of Gianni Versace

The new season of "American Crime Story" puts the killing in the context of 20th-century gay history

Jan 18th 2018

By A.X.S.

THE 20th century may be considered America's greatest, but gay men had a miserable time. Sodomy was a felony in every state until 1962, and it remained illegal in 13 states until 2003. Gay men were sacked from jobs in government and left to die in an epidemic many considered a punishment for their "sinful"

themselves. They were beaten and arrested by gangs of untouchable police (the

themselves. They were beaten and arrested by gangs of untouchable police (the same tactics are used today in many of the 72 countries that continue to criminalise homosexuality). In short, gay men were kept out of the portrait of American society.

Towards the end of the century, however, times were changing. The picture of acceptable America had expanded to include, even celebrate, some gay men. In particular Gianni Versace, a fashion designer from Italy, was able to let gay stigma slip like a silk gown to the floor. He had grown a business from a single boutique in Milan to a global fashion label—an Italian-American dream. He had good looks, money and a palace with an ocean view in Miami. Tourists stopped outside to snap photos to say they had stood where the great man lived.

But on the morning of July 15th 1997, as Versace returned from his morning walk, Andrew Cunanan approached him on the steps of his mansion and shot him in the head with a semi-automatic pistol. The murder was a sensation, and the tragic story is now portrayed in "American Crime Story: The Assassination of Gianni Versace". Like the previous season, which dramatised the racially charged trial of O.J. Simpson, an NFL player accused of two counts of murder, the show takes on cultural issues. It explores the standing of gay men in America through the twisted pathology of Cunanan, who killed five men on a three-month spree in 1997, including men who, like himself, had sex with other men. The series was written by Tom Rob Smith, based on a book by Maureen Orth, a journalist, and some creative liberties have inevitably been taken (the Versace family have distanced themselves from the show, calling it a "work of fiction"). By probing Cunanan's sense of entitlement but also the stigma around his sexuality, the story shows how America's prejudices endured despite the giddy heights of a few golden boys such as Versace.

What makes the show terribly watchable is seeing Cunanan's rage form (Darren Criss's thrilling performance, pictured, both seduces and terrifies the viewer). As something of a nobody, Cunanan is drawn to the idea of power, and the powerful; he wastes no time in penetrating loftier circles. One victim was the traditional picture of American success: a real-estate tycoon, married with a son, living in a big house. Cunanan achieves his own kind of success, of course—but only by committing horrific crimes. He doesn't have the cynicism of Patrick Bateman, Bret Easton Ellis's "American Psycho", but he similarly penetrates the glassy penthouses of capitalism and hacks their residents to death.

Cunanan's crimes are also seemingly designed to subvert traditional family

Cunanan's crimes are also seemingly designed to subvert traditional family values. It is not just that he sleeps with and murders married men. In one episode he murders a love rival, claims the boyfriend and then pops out to walk the dog with him. In trying to appear normal despite having left a body bleeding out at home, their stroll becomes an unnerving parody of a domestic situation gay men were often denied. Before he kills Versace in the show, Cunanan boasts of men who have proposed to him. He is delusional—the stories are probably lies, but even if they are true he does not acknowledge that gay marriage is legally impossible.

These different spheres of private experience are evident again when Donatella Versace bitterly asks Antonio, Gianni's bereaved partner, what he gave her brother. "Stability? Safety? Children?" she spits. "You've given him nothing." (Our sister magazine *1843* interviewed Ms Versace here.) With far more grace than Donatella—who is supposed to be the one with style and elegance—Antonio says: "We're not allowed." Nor do police officers understand the sanctity of the relationship. When Antonio describes how other partners were occasionally welcome, one cop cocks an eyebrow. If being gay doesn't throw the cop's suspicion on Antonio, being promiscuous does.

Perhaps the most important influence on Cunanan's behaviour is his sexuality. Cunanan does not always deny that he sleeps with men ("I tell people what they want to hear," he informs a friend), but he is clearly troubled by the dominance of heterosexuality and the shame of his own sexual subversions. "I want the world to know you're a sissy," he hisses at one married man he sells sex to. His sexual practices are of the dangerous and kinky kind that exemplified moral panics towards gay people. While Cunanan was on the run, the press speculated that his rampage was a reaction against being diagnosed as HIV-positive (he was not). Nineteen years later, in the aftermath of the massacre of 49 people at a gay nightclub in Orlando by Omar Mateen, the press speculated that his motive, too, was revenge for discovering that a male partner had HIV.

Cunanan did not choose to rage on behalf of the gay men beaten by police, those made homeless by their families or those failed by the government. It is thought he suffered from a personality disorder, but Mr Smith knows that the 20th century's treatment of gay men provided the parameters for its expression. This eight-part series is as unsettling as it is alluring; in considering the overlapping spheres of disenfranchisement and violence, "American Crime Story" acts as a warning.

warning.

More from Prospero

An American musical about mental health takes off in China

The protagonist of "Next to Normal" has bipolar disorder. The show is encouraging audiences to open up about their own well-being

Sue Williamson's art of resistance

Aesthetics and politics are powerfully entwined in the 50-year career of the South African artist

What happened to the "Salvator Mundi"?

The recently rediscovered painting made headlines in 2017 when it fetched $450m at auction. Then it vanished again