

kolchak: the night stalker

The most unlikely heir to Dr. Van Helsing that one could imagine.

KOLCHAK: THE NIGHT STALKER An ABC Television Series. Friday nights, 8:00 EDT. Premiered 9/13/74. 52 minutes. InColor. Produced by Paul Playdon and Cy Chermak (Universal Television). Created by Jeff Rice. Story consultant, David Chase. Contributing writers: Bill S. Ballinger, Rudolph Borchert, Dennis Clark, Robert Earll, Steve Fisher, Al Friedman, Bob Gale, John Huff, Norman Liebman, Larry Markes, Zekial Marko, Tim Maschler, Donn Mullally, L. Ford Neale, Paul Playdon, Arthur Rowe, Jimmy Sangster, Bill Stratton, Robert Zemeckis. Contributing directors: Allen Baron, Michael Caffey, Alex Grasshoff, Gordon Hessler, Bruce Kessler, Gene Levitt, Robert Scheerer, Don Weis. Director of photography, John Gaudiso. Art director, Raymond Beal. Set decorator, Robert Freer. Sound, John Kean. Edited by Robert Leeds. Main title designed by Jack Cole.

Carl Kolchak Darren McGavin
Tony Vincenzo Simon Oakland
Ron Updyke Jack Grinnage
Emily Cowles Ruth McDevitt

Guest Stars

Julie Adams	Milt Kamen
Charles Aidman	John Marley
Frank Aletter	Arthur Metrano
Maureen Arthur	Corrine Michaels
Jim Backus	Marvin Miller
Val Bisoglio	Kathleen Nolan
Suzanne Charney	J. Pat O'Malley
William Daniels	Lara Parker
Severn Darden	Dick Van Patten
Antonio Fargas	Benny Rubin
John Fiedler	Phil Silvers
Nina Foch	Joseph Sirola
Elaine Giftos	Abraham Sofaer
Ned Glass	Carol Ann Susi
James Gregory	Mary Wicks
Pat Harrington	Keenan Wynn

Reviewed by
Stuart M. Kaminsky

Stuart M. Kaminsky teaches in the film division of Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. He is the author of several books including *Don Siegel: Director* (Curtis), *Clint Eastwood* (Signet), *American Film Genres* (Pflaum) and forthcoming anthologies on Ingmar Bergman (Oxford) and genre theory (Pflaum). In preparation are books devoted to Charlton Heston and American film comedy. Kaminsky, a regular contributor whose analysis of *NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD* appears elsewhere in this issue, recently completed work on his first fantasy film which he co-wrote and co-directed with Steve Fagin.

He wears a rumpled light-weight, light-colored suit, often out of season, a distinctive and not particularly attractive straw hat, a tape-recorder over one shoulder and a camera over the other. He is Carl Kolchak (Darren McGavin), the night stalker, at first glance the most unlikely heir to Dr. Van Helsing that one could imagine.

Kolchak, as the character has evolved on the 1974-75 ABC Television series *KOLCHAK: THE NIGHT STALKER*, based on two made-for-television features (*THE NIGHT STALKER*, 1972, and *THE NIGHT STRANGLER*, 1973), is very much a man of the media, an apparently paranoid hero, whose paranoia always turns out to be based on reality, though that may be questionable since each tale in the series is told by Kolchak, who may not be totally reliable. Let's examine the character. The pattern of each show, the formula, relates distinctly to the evolution of horror in the media.

Generally, *KOLCHAK: THE NIGHT STALKER* opens with a ghastly murder narrated by Kolchak. We find that some initial horror is loose and, by virtue of the voice, we discover that Kolchak has survived that horror and that we are about to see his version of the tale. Invariably, Kolchak is telling his story to a tape-recorder; he is recording his diary for posterity and self, very much like Jonathan Harker, for no one in his world is ready to believe or listen to him. In the episode "The Werewolf," for example, Kolchak tells his tape-recorder of his encounter with a werewolf on board a ship. Behind him a dock porter patiently waits, paying no attention. Kolchak's narration into the machine is cathartic for him, a spewing out of his nightmare from start to finish. Often Kolchak records at his own desk in the office of International News Service where his fellow workers ignore him completely. It is Kolchak's nightmare. The world will not accept it, will not listen, as the world will not listen to the warnings of Dr. Miles Binnett in Don Siegel's *INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS*.

Following the initial crime, the titles for the show come on. One credit is placed over a scene of Kolchak alone at night, at his desk, typing. He hears something. He turns. Freeze frame close-up of Kolchak, frightened, but at his machine. His is a world of paranoia realized.

In contrast to the tape recorder that Kolchak uses to talk to himself and retain his sanity, we have his two other tools, the typewriter and the camera. The evidence of the camera, the pictures of monsters he takes are either destroyed or not believed. The hard evidence of the photo is of no value to Kolchak. His other professional tool, the typewriter, is equally ignored. Thus, word and image are not accepted as evidence.

Invariably, Kolchak gets involved in the horror we have seen initially by being sent out on a story by Tony Vincenzo (Simon Oakland), his editor, a

curious, chastising father figure. Often the story he is sent to get is routine. That is exactly what Tony wants, routine stories, stories which people expect and it is the unexpected which Kolchak finds. The series is set in Chicago, a rather strange Chicago in keeping with the show, but a Chicago noted for its use in the gangster genre, not horror. In fact, several times Kolchak has been involved with gangsters in the series. In "The Zombie," a series of gangland murders were being committed by a zombie. In "The Spanish Moss Murders," Tony tries to get Kolchak to cover a gangland murder, but the genre doesn't interest the reporter. "They're all the same," bleats Kolchak. "Nobody talks. Nobody says anything. Routine." Kolchak's desire is to make the public aware of the horror which lurks in their midst. In psychological terms, it is not unreasonable to say that Kolchak's goal is a kind of public analysis. Let the public know the truth about the horrors it has nurtured, the vampires, werewolves, zombies, swamp monsters. A recurrent motif in the series is Kolchak's discovery that the monster has been created from the human psyche, a monster from the bayou country released by the repressed nightmare of a man undergoing sleep research in "The Spanish Moss Murders," for example. The parallel, perhaps, can be seen with the monster from the Id in *FORBIDDEN PLANET*. In any case, Kolchak becomes a kind of unheeded amateur public psychologist.

Yet, each time he tries to get his story onto the wires of INS, he is stopped, forced away from the public forum which is his profession, to the private diary, the tape recorder. In conjunction with Kolchak's frustration in his profession is that the institutional forces of the city invariably are also hostile to Kolchak's assertions that something beyond their knowledge is responsible for the destruction of human life. Police lieutenants, ship captains, hospital administrators, representatives of established order, shout at him, abuse him, try to keep him and themselves from the truth. Inevitably the police or authority figure is forced to face the truth of the horror he cannot understand. Once the horror has been faced, and defeated, however, the representatives of order refuse to acknowledge that the monster ever existed, refuse to challenge the social view of the order of things and face the terror of their nightmares. The police deny him, his boss refuses to print his story, and he turns to the tape recorder. In fact, it sometimes happens that at the end of an episode Kolchak is jailed for murder, for the police cannot publicly accept that Kolchak has destroyed a monster threatening us all. Instead, he is called mad or a murderer. The forces of law label him a law-breaker; his boss labels him mad or overworked. "Take a few days off Carl, you've been working too hard," groans Tony, turning to polish up a Kiwanis

speech or finish a meal.

Generally, Kolchak will then seek an outside ally, enlist the aid of someone with special powers: someone representing religion or mysticism rather than a rational view of the world. Invariably, Kolchak will be betrayed or abandoned by the witch doctor, the gypsy, the religious mystic who in the past has been the hope of salvation in so many horror films. Also, invariably, Kolchak will be forced to face the horror alone. Each monster encountered has the potential to destroy the world (or at least Chicago) and Kolchak, the rumpled, wise-cracking, middle-aged reporter, with the non-heroic name must become the hero, must face and destroy the monster. He is not a spiritual figure or a doctor common to the destroyers of horror in the past, but a reporter, a representative of the non-mystical, who possesses no skills or knowledge beyond our own. He is not a superior or inferior being. He is, in many ways, a common man. His only drive is to get the story even if no one wants it, to uncover the truth. Inevitably, he becomes personally involved and must face the monster with tools provided by someone else who will not or cannot face the evil. In "The Energy Eater," an Indian (American) witch doctor played by Roger Smith runs away from a hospital being threatened by an Indian spirit; in "Horror In The Heights," an eighty-year-old Indian (East) played by Abraham Sofaer, is too feeble to destroy the monster.

It is always Kolchak who must step forward with the ancient tools and face the evil directly. Guns are always useless. Kolchak, armed with stake, the sharpened branch of a swamp tree, a cross bow, bullets made of silver, the needle-thread-and-salt to sew up the mouth of a zombie, must stand face to face with the creature. He may run screaming, but he always recovers, turns, and faces the creature, who always appears in the night world of horror, the world of dreams, not the world

Scenes from *KOLCHAK: THE NIGHT STALKER*, an ABC-TV television series. Facing Page: Darren McGavin as Carl Kolchak, a wire service reporter who strives to make the public aware of the horror which lurks in their midst. Left: In "Bad Medicine," Kolchak encounters a Diablero (Ted Cassidy), an ancient Indian spirit capable of assuming animal form. Right: In "The Spanish Moss Murders," Kolchak attempts to warn sleep researcher Severn Darden (right) that his subject (Donald Mantooth) has materialized a legendary bayou monster from his subconscious mind as a result of the experiment. His warning goes unheeded by the doctor and policeman Keenan Wynn (left). In fact, Kolchak is never heeded. The world will not accept the story he has to tell. The world very often is not even willing to listen. It is Kolchak's nightmare. His is a world of paranoia realized.



Top: In "The Ripper," Kolchak tries to convince Tony (Simon Oakland), his boss, that the murders of pretty Chicago massage parlor girls are being committed by Jack the Ripper. Middle: Kolchak, hammer and stake in hand, seeks out his adversary in "Vampire." Bottom: In "Mr. R.I.N.G.," Kolchak uncovers a secret military robot (Craig Baxley) run amuck, being protected by its creator (Corrine Michaels).

of daytime violence in police shows. The Chicago of **KOLCHAK: THE NIGHT STALKER** is an appropriate setting for the series, for it is a nether world. It is neither Chicago or an unreal city. We frequently see Kolchak driving down State street past the Chicago Theatre, down the outer drive past the Hancock Building. We see the icons of Chicago which the world can recognize. We have root in a supposedly real world. Yet, when we get into each episode, we have a dreamlike general city. We have a place called Roosevelt Heights which looks like a lower middleclass urban Jewish neighborhood, existing only as a past memory, not a present reality. We have a place, supposedly on the South Side, where Southern fiddlers play on the street for quarters. No such place exists in the real city. Yet, what we have in the series is the surface of reality, the simple things we can recognize, followed by the generalized city attacked by horror.

The monsters which Kolchak encounters are an extension of the American horror monsters we know. They are often more brutal—killing dozens, defiling the bodies—and, more importantly, much less secretive. From the first vampire in Los Angeles to the werewolf on board a ship, the monsters in **KOLCHAK: THE NIGHT STALKER** do not need to hide, to lurk. They are in the streets, yet society does not wish to recognize the fact. Only Kolchak, the very old, and the religiously mystical are willing to acknowledge this street-walking horror, and only Kolchak is willing to face it. In fact, it often comes down to Kolchak having to face the monster, for his probing becomes a threat to the creature. His role as reporter, prober, seeker after truth, is a threat to evil, and he becomes the next potential victim. No show passes without Kolchak's life being directly threatened by the monster, by Kolchak taking the viewer's burden and fear on himself. He is no traditional hero. He feels and shows fear, but he accepts his task.

Kolchak's world is an enclosed one. We never see him as a human outside of his job, a man with friends other than contacts and colleagues. He appears to have no interests other than his job. His co-workers, like the police and the socially acceptable, are a hindrance rather than a help, yet they are his only family. His boss, a bumbling father figure, never believes his stories. Ron (Jack Grinnage), his fellow worker, is a complete pragmatist, a smug brother, a young man with facts about everything at his fingertips. Ron is dull. Carl is a man of vision. Ron never leaves the office. Carl is restless in it. The other primary co-worker is Emily (Ruth McDevitt). Ron is the young member, Carl the middle-aged, and Emily the old potential mother. She is constantly championing senior citizens, resenting comments about the enfeebled, the old, the ancient. She is forever asserting her right to life, writing novels, going on dates. Her life affirmation, the very thing Kolchak tries to champion, makes her Kolchak's best friend, a pseudo-supportive mother. In "Horror In The Heights," Kolchak is told that the monster takes on the appearance of the person the victim most trusts. Kolchak announces that he trusts no one. The monster ap-



pears to him as Emily, and Kolchak must fire a crossbow directly at her, which he does, a potentially traumatic Oedipal murder which Kolchak accepts without blinking.

Thus the problem Kolchak faces inside his office is familial, represented by the rational, unfeeling Ron on one hand who is, ironically, young; and the life-affirming Emily on the other, who is old. Between them is the vacillating Tony who must act as judge and who always votes for the status quo. Kolchak is seen as the errant son. On the outside, Kolchak is between two forces also, the officials of society on the one hand who operate in daytime and are, like Ron, rationalists, and the horror creatures of the night, the emotional, physical monsters. Caught between is the populace which is decimated and Kolchak, their hero, who avenges them without reward.

Kolchak himself is a life-affirming creature of great activity. He is constantly in motion, compulsively talking, joking, probing, making himself vulnerable. At the same time, his job makes him an outsider, an intruder, most people in authority do not want to deal with him, yet to save the institution, the society, Kolchak must force himself on them. Kolchak, ultimately, is a man unappreciated by his colleagues, his society and its leaders. Publically, he is a clown and a nuisance. In press conferences, which are depicted frequently in the series, he asks embarrassing questions, separates himself from his fellow reporters. His public face is seen in the light of day, and he is treated without respect by a series of smug officials played by such character actors as Kennan Wynn, William Daniels, Severn Darden. The ultimate irony of Kolchak is that he is engaged in a public profession yet his satisfactions are never made public.

Finally, the monsters of the series are traditional in that they represent an immortal evil, yet none of them feel the anguish and remorse we have come to expect. The curse of immortality is alluded to in the shows on vampires and werewolves, but we do not see the immortality passed on to the victims. In **KOLCHAK: THE NIGHT STALKER**, to die is not to be turned into an immortal creature of evil. It is to be turned into nothing. In this sense, the series does not deal with coming to terms with mortality as American horror films so frequently have in the past. We have no anguished monsters, no creatures crying for release in random rational moments. The horror of **KOLCHAK: THE NIGHT STALKER** is the horror of the street, the horror of violence, the horror in a dreamlike urban city. Our hero is not the traditional savior of horror films who can bring us to terms with mortality through religion or knowledge. Our hero is a pragmatist, a reporter, who accepts that horror exists, that it is violent and sudden, and that it is his and, possibly, our responsibility to face it.

The humor of the series is often derived from an understanding that traditionally Kolchak is such a strange savior, perhaps an unworthy man elevated by chance, fear and professional zeal to protect society. He is not unique in this. Reporters as probers, representatives of society, have appeared in many horror films as heroes (**DR. X**, for example), or clowns (**MAD LOVE**). In the past, however, the reporter has fallen back on the police, a religious figure or a scholar to help him defeat evil. In **KOLCHAK: THE NIGHT STALKER**, as we have seen, Kolchak is rejected by all, and at the end is a man alone, alone with the monster, alone with his tale, rumpled, frightened, possibly amused, perhaps unreliable, but ever vigilant.

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