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From Locked Rooms to Haunted Decks: True Crime, Fear, and Audience Participation in BuzzFeed Unsolved

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Abstract: This paper examines how BuzzFeed Unsolved reshapes mystery and Gothic storytelling within the context of digital media. Focusing on “The Creepy Murder in Room 1046” and “The Haunted Deck of the Queen Mary,” it explores how traditional narrative forms of detective fiction and the Gothic are transformed in the age of social media. “Room 1046” draws on the classic locked-room mystery but replaces resolution with uncertainty and open-ended speculation. “Queen Mary” invokes haunted spaces and fear of the unknown, yet reframes terror through humour, visible scepticism, and conversational performance between the hosts. Unlike conventional documentaries that rely on authoritative narration, BuzzFeed Unsolved builds its storytelling through dialogue, disagreement, and audience interaction. The dynamic between belief and doubt becomes central to the narrative, while viewers extend the investigation through comments, theories, and online discussions. In this way, authorship becomes shared rather than singular, and storytelling continues beyond the episode itself. Suspense is shaped by pacing, tonal shifts, and cliff-hangers designed for online circulation. By treating YouTube as a significant space of contemporary narrative production, this paper argues that digital platforms are reshaping authorship, readership, and genre in the age of social media.

Keywords: Digital storytelling, YouTube narratives, True crime, Gothic genre, Audience participation, Narrative authority, Social media literature, Interactive spectatorship.



Introduction

The transformation of narrative forms in the digital age has compelled literary studies to reconsider the spaces in which storytelling occurs. Platforms such as YouTube do not merely distribute narratives; they reshape authorship, genre conventions, and audience participation. BuzzFeed Unsolved, particularly in episodes such as “The Creepy Murder in Room 1046” and “The Haunted Deck of the Queen Mary,” demonstrates how traditional mystery and Gothic structures are adapted for participatory, platform-based storytelling. By reworking the locked-room mystery and the haunted-space narrative through humor, skepticism, and conversational performance, the series replaces centralized narrative authority with dialogic uncertainty and extends storytelling beyond the episode through viewer interaction. In doing so, it reveals how digital media recalibrates the relationship between author, text, and audience.

The locked-room mystery has long been associated with narrative closure and rational explanation. From Edgar Allan Poe’s foundational detective tales to the structural puzzles refined by Agatha Christie, the genre promises resolution through logic and analytic reconstruction. Tzvetan Todorov argues that detective fiction consists of two intertwined narratives: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation, the latter restoring order through explanation. “The Creepy Murder in Room 1046,” however, disrupts this classical structure. The episode recounts the 1935 death of Roland T. Owen in a locked hotel room under suspicious and unresolved circumstances. Rather than providing authoritative reconstruction, the hosts present fragmented evidence, highlight inconsistencies, and repeatedly foreground the limits of available knowledge. The narrative withholds closure not as an oversight but as a structural principle. Suspense emerges from the persistence of ambiguity rather than its elimination. This structural refusal of resolution marks a significant departure from traditional detective fiction. Peter Brooks contends that narrative desire is oriented toward an ending that confers coherence and meaning upon preceding events. In “Room 1046,” that teleological drive remains deliberately unsatisfied. The hosts propose plausible interpretations yet avoid asserting definitive conclusions. The episode concludes with an acknowledgment of enduring mystery. Such openness recalls Umberto Eco’s concept of the “open work,” in which meaning remains indeterminate and invites interpretive collaboration. In the digital context, this openness is intensified: viewers extend the investigation in comment sections, debate competing theories, and circulate alternative interpretations across platforms. The narrative does not close at the episode’s conclusion; it continues through participatory engagement.

While “Room 1046” reconfigures detective conventions, “The Haunted Deck of the Queen Mary” reworks Gothic tropes. The Gothic traditionally centers on haunted architecture, atmospheric dread, and the destabilization of rational certainties. The Queen Mary episode invokes these conventions through its emphasis on confined corridors, historical accounts of death aboard the ship, and the anticipation of supernatural manifestation. Yet sustained terror is continually reframed through humor and visible skepticism. The believer–skeptic dynamic between the hosts becomes the episode’s central structural device. Fear is neither fully affirmed nor entirely dismissed; it becomes negotiated through performance.

This dynamic exemplifies what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as dialogism: the coexistence of competing voices that prevent the consolidation of a single authoritative perspective. The believer’s insistence on paranormal explanation is countered by the skeptic’s rational challenges, producing a narrative that thrives on tension and disagreement. Sigmund Freud’s analysis of the uncanny locates fear in the unsettling return of the repressed and the collapse of rational boundaries. In the Queen Mary episode, however, moments that approach the uncanny are frequently punctured by humor, self-awareness, and overt performativity. The haunted deck becomes simultaneously a Gothic space and a stage for comedic exchange. The destabilization characteristic of the Gothic is retained, yet it is filtered through irony and contemporary media sensibilities.

This performative and dialogic structure distinguishes BuzzFeed Unsolved from conventional documentary modes. Bill Nichols identifies the expository documentary’s reliance on authoritative narration as central to its rhetorical structure. In contrast, BuzzFeed Unsolved abandons omniscient voice-over in favor of visible mediation and conversational exchange. Knowledge appears provisional, contested, and relational. The hosts’ reactions—laughter, fear, disbelief—become integral to the narrative fabric. The camera foregrounds

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process rather than presenting seamless authority. Such transparency aligns with Henry Jenkins’s conception of participatory culture, wherein audiences actively contribute to meaning-making rather than passively receiving information.

The YouTube comment section functions as an extension of the narrative space. Gérard Genette's notion of the paratext identifies the thresholds surrounding a work that shape its reception. In digital media, the comment section becomes a dynamic paratextual environment where interpretation proliferates in real time. Viewers supply additional research, challenge claims, narrate personal experiences, and advance speculative theories. Roland Barthes's declaration of the "death of the author" finds concrete expression in this context: interpretive authority disperses among a networked audience. Authorship becomes collaborative rather than singular. The episodes' meaning is not fixed within their runtime; it evolves through communal engagement.

Platform logic further shapes narrative form. Episodic pacing, tonal modulation, and strategic cliff-hangers reflect the rhythms of digital attention economies. Moments of heightened tension are interspersed with humor, creating oscillation between dread and relief. Marshall McLuhan's assertion that the medium shapes the scale and pattern of human association becomes particularly resonant here. YouTube's architecture, its recommendation algorithms, metrics of engagement, and comment interactivity also condition how mystery and fear are experienced. Suspense becomes communal and iterative rather than solitary and contained.

Humor operates not merely as entertainment but as structural mediation. Linda Hutcheon's discussion of postmodern play with genre illuminates how BuzzFeed Unsolved simultaneously inhabits and ironizes traditional forms. The locked-room mystery is presented with genuine investigative curiosity yet remains open to parody. The haunted deck evokes

Gothic atmosphere while sustaining comedic distance. This tonal hybridity reflects broader shifts in contemporary digital culture, where sincerity and irony coexist. Fear is rendered shareable, memeable, and discursively negotiable without being entirely trivialized. The relocation of mystery and Gothic storytelling to YouTube underscores a broader transformation in literary production. Narrative authority is no longer anchored exclusively in print culture or institutional endorsement. Instead, it emerges through circulation, visibility, and participatory interaction. The global accessibility of YouTube facilitates transnational interpretive communities, supporting Arjun Appadurai's argument that media flows generate new cultural imaginaries. Viewers across geographic boundaries engage in collective speculation, reinforcing the collaborative dimension of digital narrative.

“The Creepy Murder in Room 1046” and “The Haunted Deck of the Queen Mary” ultimately illustrate how digital platforms reshape inherited genres. The detective story relinquishes guaranteed resolution; the Gothic accommodates skepticism and humor; authorship becomes distributed; and narrative continues beyond the frame through audience participation. Rather than displacing literary tradition, such digital storytelling adapts and extends it. YouTube emerges as a contemporary site of narrative experimentation in which fear, uncertainty, and curiosity are collaboratively constructed. The movement from locked rooms to haunted decks signals not the erosion of genre but its evolution within participatory media ecologies.

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