



## Genre Development: Horror on TV

The aims of this Factsheet are to:

- Identify the reasons why genres need to adapt and change – specifically the horror genre
- Consider the institutional constraints TV has historically had on the horror genre,
- Discuss the way institutional developments have had an impact on modern horror.

Horror has proved itself to be one of the most resilient of genres. In one form or another horror has been appealing to audiences since the early days of cinema. Perhaps one of the reasons for its longevity is the genre’s ability to adapt to meet changing audience needs and behaviours. Horror offers a **cathartic** experience where audience’s fears and concerns can be played out in a **safe environment** and where audience members can engage with things that are usually **taboo** or reflect **dark desires**.

### Genres: Adapt to Survive?

If genre products simply continue to present the same conventions over and over, audiences will become bored and see these conventions as **clichéd**. Audiences soon learn what to expect within genres and they want to have their expectations met. However, if expectations are met too often, then media products become predictable – for all genres, this is a problem. Horror, however, is a genre that specifically relies on being unpredictable. To be successful, a horror text must be able to surprise and scare its audience and predictability makes that almost impossible.

Horror’s need to scare its audience creates its own problems. Over time, audiences become more and more difficult to frighten. Audiences become aware of the techniques used by the genre and so media language choices that act to shock, scare, or surprise the audience become less effective. For example, the audience becomes less ‘sensitive’ to the use of the **jump cut** to create surprise, and so the horror producers must try to find new ways to shock. Audiences can also become **desensitised** to the violence and taboo imagery that horror provides. The first few times an audience member encounters horror, the genre may be successful in frightening audiences. However, audiences soon become accustomed to the images and techniques used by the genre and so its ability to create fear is diminished.

The genre also has to adapt to the cultural fears of its audience. Things that scared audiences in the past may not frighten modern audiences. This can be, at least in part, down to **desensitisation**, but people in different historical periods have different **cultural fears**. For example, in the 1950s Hollywood produced lots of ‘creature feature’ horrors where monsters terrorised people. These monsters were created when science went wrong in some way (for example, *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), *Them!* (1954), *Tarantula* (1955), and of course *Godzilla* (1954)). Many of these monsters were mutants - giant ants, spiders, and bees were very popular. The audience in the 1950s had lived through World War 2, and most were in the ‘atomic age’. They had witnessed the devastating impact of science in the dropping of nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the ongoing nuclear

threat of the Cold War, so it is perhaps not at all surprising that these fears were reflected in the horror films of the time



### Them!

<https://uk.pinterest.com/amandanewby359/1950s-movie-posters/>

A review of horror films over time shows distinct patterns in terms of the types of monsters or the source of threats. The decline of the dominance of traditional religion can be seen in US horrors such as *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) and *The Exorcist* (1973). In the UK, similar themes were being played out in folk horror films such as *The Wicker Man* (1973) and *Blood on Satan’s Claw* (1971). US horror films of this type were set in modern, urban environments, whereas these UK films had isolated, rural settings, perhaps identifying how US and UK audiences responded differently to the **secularisation** that characterised late 20th Century culture. These themes and representations around religion are no longer the dominant focus of modern horror as these issues do not have the same level of impact on audiences now as they did in the past.

### Activity

Here are some methods used to scare audiences in horror. Identify horror films that you think use these techniques (some films may use multiple techniques).

Horror Technique	Film example?
Blood and gore to ‘gross out’ the audience	
Suspense and tension	
Shock and surprise	
Taboo-based themes	
Unseen ‘monster’	
Mundane ‘monster’	
Supernatural ‘monster’	
Threat from outside the community	
Threat from inside the community	
Other techniques?	

Technology has also been an influence on the way horror has developed over the years. Horror relies on being able to create horrific imagery. Early horror tended to rely on lighting and sound effects - unsurprising when the technical limitations of the time are considered. Some camera effects could be used, but the technology limited the effects that could be achieved. These early horrors did, however, create some of the codes and conventions of the genre that are still used today. 60s and 70s horror also relied on light and sound effects but, increasingly, film-makers had access to improved technologies to help create visual effects. This included improvements in special effects make-up and prosthetics that enabled the construction of visceral effects allowing the genre to provide more grotesque images complete with lots of fake blood and gore.



### *Shadows on the wall in Nosferatu(1922)*

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horror\\_film](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horror_film)

Modern horror has attempted to create different experiences in an attempt to attract and maintain an audience. For example:

- *Scream* (1996) revisited the slasher genre and subverted and commented on the sub-genre's clichés and conventions,
- *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) took US horror back into a rural environment and was the first of the modern 'found footage' horror films
- *The Ring* (2002) used Japanese horror conventions and integrated them into a classical Hollywood narrative structure
- *Saw* (2004) focused on providing extreme gore and its many sequels and other similar films that followed it were dubbed 'torture porn',
- *Paranormal Activity* (2007) used 'home video footage' to tell ghost stories.

These attempts to revitalise the genre didn't always work and currently film horror is struggling to have the kind of impact on audiences that it has had in the past. However, television has provided a new home for the genre and is allowing it to develop in new way allowing it to experiment more with its own form and to reach new audiences.



### *The Blair Witch Project*

<http://mentalfloss.com/article/66812/17-found-facts-about-blair-witch-project>

### **Activity**

Research some more recent horror films. Can you identify any that can be shown to be trying to create different experiences to build and maintain an audience? For example: *Oculus* (2013)? *The Babadook* (2014)? *It Follows* (2014)? *Lights Out* (2016)?

### **20<sup>th</sup> Century Horror on TV**

Horror has always had a home on TV, but as TV shows are broadcast direct into people's homes, the genre has always had to play it safe in this format. The genre's need to scare its audience meant that horror on TV historically, has had to dilute its main function to be able to meet broadcast rules. Early versions of horror on TV were parodies of the genre. Programmes like *The Munsters* (1964-66) and *The Addams Family* (1964-66) parody the gothic monster movies that had been produced by Hollywood in the 1930s. Monsters that were originally used to scare cinema audiences were used for comedic effect in these TV sit-coms. Herman Munster was the Frankenstein-like father of the Munster family who, despite his appearance, was a gentle and loving father and husband. *The Addams Family* had a similar looking character, Lurch, who was the family's gloomy butler. Both programmes were comedies that were broadcast early in the evening. They took horror codes and conventions and reframed them in a way that was suitable for a family audience. They focused on recognisable visuals (the gothic mansion, vampires and witches, etc.) and subverted expectations by taking the 'scare' out of them. Once a horror convention is satirised or is used to make audiences laugh, it is very difficult to use the convention to frighten the audience again

Broadcasting channels in this period had to provide entertainment that was appropriate for the viewing audience. As concerns are often raised about what type of material is available to children, most television programming had to be seen to be suitable to all viewers. In the 1960s there were very strict rules about what could and could not be shown on TV. The idea of the **watershed** enables broadcasters to separate youth and adult audiences. In the UK, 9pm is used as a cut-off point; before 9pm programmes have to be suitable for all age groups, even where adults are clearly the main target audience. After 9pm, it is assumed that younger children were in bed and older children and teenagers would have their TV viewing monitored by their parents.

Therefore, after 9pm, broadcasters are allowed to include more adult themes and images in their programming - although, throughout the latter part of the 20th century there have always been strict rules about what was allowed to be shown on TV, hence early TV horror being a safe and 'family friendly' take on the genre. In the 1930s and 40s, audiences found the gothic horror genre scary and films such as *Dracula* (1931) and *Frankenstein* (1932) were infamous for the effect they had on audiences.



*The Munsters*

Both *The Munsters* and *The Addams Family* relied on their audience being aware of the conventions of gothic horror. The producers used this knowledge to enable the audience to laugh at what had become horror clichés.



*The Addams Family*

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/21/addams-family-photos\\_n\\_4316085.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/21/addams-family-photos_n_4316085.html)

<http://www.munsters.com/about.php>

Broadcasting regulations did relax a little and so by the 1990s TV producers were more able to use more explicit horror imagery and tell scary stories - but still within reason.



*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) became a success and was a hybrid between horror and teen-soap with its High School (and later college) setting and its focus on a group of teens experiencing the trials of growing up whilst simultaneously saving the world from demons, werewolves and, of course, vampires.

The show presented real peril to its characters and its 1999 episode 'Hush' is, according to a recent [www.tv.com](http://www.tv.com) survey, one of 'the most frightening TV episodes of all time'.



However, the show's horror was diluted with comedy and romance, and in the character Angel it created the idea of the vampire as a dark and brooding (and sometimes dangerous) boyfriend rather than a monster simply to be destroyed.

The show used CGI to create some of its special effects, although most monsters were created with masks and make-up. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was broadcast in the UK at 6pm on BBC2 and so still had to abide by the pre-watershed regulations.

<http://www.tvguide.com/news/buffy-vampire-slayer-hush-oral-history-1090857/>  
<http://josswhedon.blogspot.co.uk/2012/04/buffy-and-angel-episode-viewing-order.html>

### Contemporary Horror on TV

Recent developments in the way audiences access 'television' products have meant that the genre has been able to go back to its roots and TV has proved to be the outlet that could be used to scare the audience once more. The regulations as to what can and cannot be shown on conventional TV (e.g. The BBC, ITV etc.) have relaxed further and, whilst the idea of the watershed still exists, programmes broadcast after 9pm are able to represent increasingly more adult imagery and themes. Producers have even more freedom to tap into their audiences' fears when they make horror for subscription channels (such as HBO, Showtime etc.) and streaming services (such as Amazon and Netflix). These channels have created an additional barrier between 'shocking' media products and the audience, as audiences have to subscribe to these channels/services and so the responsibility to protect young audiences is with the subscriber rather than the broadcaster.



The watershed has no real meaning for subscription services as audiences can choose when they watch. This means that there has recently been a rise in the availability of horror on TV and the horror that is available has returned to the genre's original function, as it tries to scare its audience rather than simply amuse them or play safe with soap-like romance stories.

Teen audiences were targeted with parodies that offered lots of gore-type scares in programmes such as *Scream* (MTV: 2015) and *Scream Queens* (Fox: 2015). Both these programmes use the codes and conventions of 80s slasher films and use them in an extended narrative. Audiences are invited to laugh at some of the old clichés of this genre, but they are also presented with extreme violence and lots and lots of blood. Like the slasher films of the past these TV shows focus on a group of (mostly) teenagers who are threatened by a masked monster. The TV shows create a 'whodunnit' narrative to help sustain the story over a number of episodes and uses red herrings to keep the audience guessing and help maintain their interest. *Scream Queens* deliberately played on the ridiculous nature of the sub-genre and even made a genre-based joke as it cast Jamie Lee Curtis as a college principal. Jamie Lee Curtis is an actress who became best known for her role as the 'final girl' survivor in the original *Halloween* (1978).



*Jamie Lee Curtis*

[https://www.buzzfeed.com/staceygrant/dating-tips-from-michael-myers?utm\\_term=ton7g3nnZY#\\_dd3Y40ZZpo](https://www.buzzfeed.com/staceygrant/dating-tips-from-michael-myers?utm_term=ton7g3nnZY#_dd3Y40ZZpo)

<http://collider.com/jaime-lee-curtis-scream-queens-season-2-interview/>

### Activity

Here are some methods horror can use to scare audiences again. This time, identify examples of TV horror that you think use these techniques. (Again - some programmes may use multiple techniques).

Horror Technique	TV example?
Blood and gore to 'gross out' the audience	
Suspense and tension	
Shock and surprise	
Taboo-based themes	
Unseen 'monster'	
Mundane 'monster'	
Supernatural 'monster'	
Threat from outside the community	
Threat from inside the community	
Other techniques?	

The TV programme *Scream* is using a film series as its inspiration. Other horror films have been revisited on TV. There are TV versions of the *Omen* series of films (*Damien*: A&E, 2016) and *The Exorcist* (Fox, 2016). *Bates Motel* (A&E: 2013) tells the story before the events of *Psycho* (1960) and *Hannibal* (NBC: 2013) pre-dates the story told in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). *Bates Motel* focuses on an unusually close relationship between Norman Bates and his mother and whilst it does use violence, it relies more on tension and suspense to create fear and trepidation for its audiences. *Hannibal* uses media language to create a surreal and discombobulating world that is full of dream sequences and hallucinations that are often difficult to discern from reality. The programme uses a lot of violence and gore to create shock and horror, and touches on taboos such as madness and cannibalism. These shows are for older audiences and so deal with adult themes.

**Hannibal**

<https://www.wired.com/2015/06/binge-guide-hannibal/>

*American Horror Story* (FX: 2011) uses taboo and shock to create horror. It focuses on uncomfortable topics like incest, domestic violence and abortion, and presents its stories in increasingly grotesque ways. Each series is a different stand-alone story and each has used a different style of horror and, what have become clichéd, horror locations. Its use of the haunted house, the asylum and the circus used old conventions, but updated them to tell horrific tales. The series deals with gender roles and ideas about sexuality in a frank and unusual way. It uses its stories to consider the history and development of attitudes to racial difference, mental illness, religion and gender/sexual fluidity. The programme has used **gothic** and **carnavalesque** settings to tell stories that reflect modern fears and concerns and highlight current taboos. It uses shocking imagery and graphic violence as well as suspense and surprise and its producers seem to be actively trying to test the boundaries of the genre and test what audiences are prepared to accept on TV. The programme can do this because its producing institution does not have to fit into the conventional narrow regulations about what can and cannot be shown on TV. The producers recognise they are targeting an adult audience and these adults will be controlling their viewing using some form of subscription service to view the programme. The producers and broadcasters don't need to decide what is and is not 'appropriate' for home viewing. The audience are able to do this for themselves.

**American Horror Story**

<http://www.betches.com/american-horror-story>

It is these institutional and technological changes that have allowed modern horror to reinvent itself as a genuinely unsettling and disturbing genre. The genre may not be to everyone's taste but it has a significant and loyal following that seeks to be scared. After many years of struggling to meet its basic function, TV has allowed horror to be horrific again.

