

## Television Horror: *Santa Clarita Diet*

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In October 1996, *The X-Files* (1993-2002, 2016-18) broadcast one of its most notorious episodes, 'Home' (4.2). With themes of incest, infanticide, and extreme bodily deformity, the episode was met with audience complaints and was never reshowed on Fox. It continues to be listed as one of the scariest examples of TV Horror (Tallerico 2017). In 2017, the global on-demand streaming service Netflix launched an original series *Santa Clarita Diet* (2017-), a half-hour sitcom about middle-aged realtors Sheila (Drew Barrymore) and Joel Hammond (Timothy Olyphant) who must cope with the discovery that Sheila has become a zombie, with the requisite hunger for human flesh ('So Then a Bat or a Monkey' 1.1). With its California location, sunny lighting, and warm colour scheme, this series could not seem more different from 'Home', an episode that pushes *The X-Files'* iconic chiaroscuro to horror-laden extremes. Yet both, broadcast over twenty years apart, use horror to deconstruct themes often central to horror and to TV: family, gender, suburbia, and home. Their focus upon the domestic demonstrates that television is an ideal location for horror and the genre has been integral to television history, particularly in the USA and UK. *Santa Clarita*, however, highlights a changing landscape in which horror has reached unprecedented visibility and popularity across multiple broadcast platforms; takes a multitude of forms and formats; and is aimed at diverse audiences. Twenty-first century TV horror continues to transgress the boundaries of genre, gender, acceptability, good taste and, even platform, spilling out from our screens onto laptops, tablets and phones, making *Santa Clarita* an ideal starting point for examining television horror.

Since releasing its first 'original production', *House of Cards*, in 2013, Netflix has become the go-to site for talked-about TV. It is hardly a coincidence, then, that its second original series was *Hemlock Grove* (2013-15), a horror series since followed by a range of horror TV such as *Mindhunters* (2017-), *iZombie* (The CW, 2015-), *Black Mirror* (Channel 4, 2011-13; Netflix 2016-), *Dark* (2017-), and *Stranger Things* (2016-). Some are Netflix productions, others originated elsewhere before being bought by Netflix, and yet others are canned products snapped up by the streaming service. *Black Mirror* is British while *Dark* is the first German-language (and German-produced) Netflix original series, and a Turkish horror series (another first for Netflix) has been announced for 2018. The abundance of

horror television available via Netflix demonstrates how horror has bled from traditional TV into a convergent, multimedia world, finding new (global) models and operating as transmedia.

Netflix plays with the forms of TV horror in series like *Santa Clarita* and those mentioned above. *Stranger Things* taps into 80s retro-nostalgia through music, narrative detail and visual design, with the award-winning title design influenced by earlier eras of horror. Michelle Dougherty, of credit sequence designers Imaginary Forces relates, ‘When [series creators] the Duffers came to us, they wanted it to feel like Halloween in the Eighties..’ The Duffer Brothers were, according to Dougherty, eager to evoke typefaces from 80s horror novel covers, specifically Stephen King books (*Telegraph* reporters, 2017). Pre-launch season 2 promotion included a Twitter campaign #strangerthursdays which featured mash ups of old horror movie posters such as *The Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi 1981), *Firestarter* (Mark L. Lester 1984), and *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven 1984). Promotion for *Santa Clarita* has not been as elaborate, though it combines genre imagery: crisp images of the main characters are bathed in California sunshine, presenting an idyllic suburban family until you notice the blood—a spatter, a drip, a smear. Without attentive study, the images could easily be taken at face value as promoting a white picket fence sitcom.

Less well-known examples exploit distinctiveness and the potential of multiple platforms. Canadian web series *Carmilla* (2014-), comprising multiple seasons, inter-seasonal content, and a movie, is a highly successful digital adaptation or reimagining of Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 novella with episodes averaging one million YouTube views. Translated into 20 languages, with viewers in 193 countries, the web series demonstrates the flexibility of horror and television, tapping into new technologies and media forms by telling its story via the vlog of university student Laura. *Carmilla*'s contemporary campus setting inflects and updates how the characters—almost all non-binary/non-heteronormative—operate within the story. In a less overt fashion, *Santa Clarita* introduces the Hammonds as middle-class, professional, heterosexual, white suburban dwellers—but the normative is subverted once Sheila becomes a zombie. Horror unsettles and destabilizes; on TV it plays with pleasure and transgression in terms of content and the televisual, often by juxtaposing genres.

Genre hybridity is inherent in television drama and plays a significant role in contemporary TV horror, as evidenced by the integration of horror with the police procedural (*CSI*), psychic investigation (*Medium*), zombie apocalypse (*The Walking Dead*) and detective fiction (*Veronica Mars*) in *iZombie*. The focus on character development led to George

Romero describing *The Walking Dead* as a ‘soap opera with a zombie occasionally’ (cited by Han 2013). Today’s competitive media often structures long-form serial narrative upon a hybrid genre matrix and Netflix uses micro-genres to appeal to many potential audiences, as argued by Stella Gaynor (2018), and seen in *Hemlock Grove* and *Stranger Things*, as well as *Santa Clarita*. *Hemlock Grove*’s hybridity merges family melodrama, teen TV, romance, Gothic and horror in the tradition of *True Blood* (2008-14) and *The Originals* (2013-17); *Santa Clarita* is one in a line of supernatural sitcoms beginning in the 1960s with *The Munster’s* (1964-66), *The Addams Family* (1964-66) and *Bewitched* (1964-72) where ‘staple Gothic characters [were presented] as “just plain folks,” taking the American-Gothic family-centric narrative and image repertoire into the suburban world of the white picket fence and the Ladies League’ (Wheatley 126). Like these earlier series, *Santa Clarita* merges family sitcom with horror and teen comedy to attract multigenerational audiences. The mainstream success of *The Walking Dead* signals the crossover potential for horror—no longer exclusively targeting established horror fans but drawing viewers through its character melodrama—and *Santa Clarita* maximises this with parallel narratives focused on Joel and Sheila dealing with the changes to Sheila’s zombified body in relation to work and their marriage, alongside arcs tracking how daughter Abby (Liv Hewson), accompanied by geeky friend Eric (Skyler Gisondo), develops a maturing understanding of her parents’ fallibility and mortality. The first two seasons follow Abby’s transition from wanting to do ‘cool’ things like her parents (including killing people and disposing of bodies), to taking on a productive role within the family, high school, and society by protecting her parents from discovery (‘Strange or Just Inconsiderate’ 1.7), saving Eric from a zombie-girlfriend (‘The Queen of England’ 2.4), defending a fellow student from bullying (‘The Queen of England’), and rescuing Santa Clarita from fracking (‘Going Pre-Med’ 2.5).

While the show takes ground covered by earlier supernatural sitcoms, the incorporation of the zombie allows a more abject and inherently unstable presence to erupt into the familiar sitcom landscape. Lily Munster (Yvonne DeCarlo), Morticia Addams (Carolyn Jones) and Samantha Stephens (Elizabeth Montgomery) regularly disrupted the traditional family home and offered transgressive gender depictions, yet their monstrous nature was contained by network sitcom conventions. The zombie, however, is physically and metaphorically abject, and Sheila transgresses physical, emotional, psychological and moral boundaries. Every time she seems to be narratively contained, by a cure or by chains in the basement, she breaks free, even if that means dislocating her thumbs to get out of

handcuffs ('No Family is Perfect' 2.1). Thus she has much in common with Kieran Walker, the zombie-protagonist of BBC series *In the Flesh* (2012-14) who disrupts the status quo of his home town Roarton by overturning zombie truisms and queering the genre. In *Santa Clarita*, the abject zombie signals the overt transition of the supernatural sitcom from Gothic to graphic body horror, transgressing expectations and aesthetic boundaries.

In *TV Horror* we argued that 'from the early days of television to the present, industrial and broadcast restrictions encourage horror creators to use stylistic excess to convey the macabre, the abject, the gothic and the uncanny, and to generate fear or unease' (Jowett and Abbott 2013: 13). This stylistic excess continues in *Penny Dreadful*'s (2014-16) wallowing in the aesthetics of nineteenth century Gothic classics, and *American Horror Story* (2011-) embeds visual and aural citations to classic horror films such as *Freaks* (Tod Browning 1932), *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock 1960), and *The Hunger* (Tony Scott 1983) within its sumptuous aesthetic design. More significantly, the shift from the 1950s-80s network era to the on-demand era of the 2010s has witnessed an increasing liberalisation of television that has rendered horror far more visible; the excessive styles of *Penny Dreadful* and *American Horror Stories* incorporating graphic blood and gore. This is evident by the positioning of *The Walking Dead*, initially developed for NBC, on cable channel AMC, who, in 2010, were far more receptive to the visceral requirements of zombie TV. By 2013, however, NBC were broadcasting *Hannibal* (2013-15), a series featuring weekly depictions of serial murder and cannibalism that merged art-house stylistic excess with graphic splatter. *Santa Clarita* demonstrates the next stage of this liberalisation, integrating comedy and horror but emphatically *not* using comedy as a substitute for gore nor to render the horror safe. Instead, the series, like Starz' *Ash vs Evil Dead* (2015-18), liberally splatters the screen with blood and bodily excretions, daring the audience to laugh, recognising and successfully navigating the fine line between horror and comedy.

The first episode, 'So Then a Bat or a Monkey' includes two graphic set pieces. The first is when Sheila, showing a house to prospective buyers, unleashes a torrent of green vomit onto a bedroom floor, first in medium close-up as vomit spews toward the camera, then moving to long shot, emphasising its spread and consistency. Further highlighting the simultaneously disgusting and humorous nature of this moment, Sheila plays out the rest of this scene with vomit entangled within her hair and smeared across her face. The second set piece has Sheila's colleague Gary (Nathan Fillion) make unwanted sexual demands; she responds by first licking his fingers but then biting two off. As blood fountains from Gary's

hand, Sheila, covered in blood, tells him, ‘I know: weirdest foreplay ever’. This marks her final transition into a zombie: once she has tasted human flesh there is no going back, as reinforced by the episode’s final image when Joel comes home to find Sheila kneeling over an eviscerated Gary. With bits of flesh and sinew dripping from her mouth, she tells Joel, ‘I really want to make this work’. The graphic gore in this episode and throughout the series signals Sheila’s—and the show’s—transgression. Repeated images of Sheila covered in blood challenge conceptions of normality. This is, after all her ‘new normal’ (as Barrymore describes it in one interview) and the comedic use of blood and gore insists that Sheila cannot be recuperated into traditional gender roles.

Themes of identity, power, the body, and voyeurism ensure that gender is a key factor in horror. Increasing attention to how media products are made, and by whom, means that horror is now debated in terms of women behind as well as in front of camera: Barrymore’s role as executive producer of *Santa Clarita* and her performance as Sheila indicate a high level of engagement with the series, despite her reluctance to accept the role initially (Shoen). Recent research has shown that horror is the genre where female characters speak most and have most screen time (‘The women missing from the silver screen...’). Of course, greater screen time doesn’t mean women are represented positively. Peter Hutchings argues that horror ‘functions as a potentially queer space for its audiences, one that offers illicit and transgressive (especially sexually transgressive) identifications and pleasures, if only ultimately to recuperate and contain these’ (2004: 89). Therefore, horror allows for gender fluidity, and is prepared to celebrate transgression of social norms, rules and limitations.

Lorna Jowett has argued elsewhere that horror speaks to women and girls because of the horrors of female lived experience (see horror’s rape revenge subgenre, for instance) (forthcoming 2018). In order to survive this, it helps to have a support network, and *Santa Clarita* is a neat example of this. Horror often presents the mother as monster but Sheila is no abject monstrous female—or not in a bad way. The fate of the predatory Gary indicates that *Santa Clarita* celebrates the monster as a release from social expectations. This is seen increasingly during season 2 where Sheila works off zombie energy by boxing with sheriff’s deputy Anne (who is one half of a lesbian couple); Eric’s would-be girlfriend Ramona is content with her lack of ‘normal’ emotion; and Abby addresses social media harassment by publicly hitting the offender in the face with a tray (‘The Queen of England’). The positive relationship between Sheila and her daughter is given significant screen time: in season 1 they enjoy mother-daughter time (‘The Book!’ 1.9) and in season 2 when Sheila is chained

in the basement Abby joins her and Joel in bed, thinking it isn't right for her to be alone ('No Family is Perfect'). As a female monster, Sheila is accepted by those who love her, and none of the characters are under the illusion that they, or the events they now experience as everyday, are normal (unlike the supernatural sitcoms of the 60s).

Given how Sheila relishes her release from social conventions, the series' representation of masculinity is also affected. Joel often laments the loss of normality and elements of gender reversal are apparent in his 'hysterical' responses to ongoing events (shrieking, nervousness, especially when having to distract others from zombie goings-on). Sheila's energy and the gore that surrounds her, coupled with Joel's screams and bizarre postures suggest that neither can neatly 'fit' gender or other social categories, both burst through attempts to confine them to particular roles or behaviours. Their ability to adapt to and embrace non-normative identity indicates an openness to new ways of being also reflected in their acceptance of Gary's decapitated-but-conscious head (now free of machismo, presumably because he is equally free from patriarchal social structures), and of Ramona and Mr Ball Legs (the organ vomited up by new zombies, which later grows legs), while their selection of neo-Nazis as ideal victims ('Moral Gray Area' 2.3) slyly suggests that they still have recognisable standards.

Barrymore and Olyphant appearing on breakfast TV to promote *Santa Clarita*, signals its mainstream success along with the ubiquitous nature of horror on twenty-first century television. But as we have shown this ubiquity does not necessarily mean that horror on television cannot, or does not, continue to push boundaries. In fact, it signals the degree to which TV horror continues to transgress and cross thresholds into the home in new and unsettling ways.

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