GENDER AND CONTEMPORARY HORROR IN TELEVISION

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EDITED BY

STEVEN GERRARD
Leeds Beckett University, UK

SAMANTHA HOLLAND
Leeds Beckett University, UK

ROBERT SHAIL
Leeds Beckett University, UK

United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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This book is dedicated to the following people: my mum, Ann, and her brother, Perry, for letting/making me watch horror films, especially *Salem's Lot* on its first release when I was 9; my dad, Viv, for getting me to support Burnley FC and the mighty Wales; and finally, my mates Griff, Klause and Dr M without whom I would not have had so much fun, adventures, and Brew XI beer.

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List of Contributors

Chloe Benson is a Lecturer in Film and Media Studies at Federation University Australia. Her recently completed doctoral thesis unites her interest in film, media and sexuality studies by examining the complex interplay between promotional para-texts and representations of bisexuality in contemporary cinema.

Kylie Boon is a Tutor at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and teaches across a range of creative disciplines. She is currently researching the application of philosophical concepts in contemporary TV series. She is also a fellow of the Higher Education.

Fernando Canet is an Associate Professor in Film Studies at Fine Arts College, Polytechnic University of Valencia, Spain. He has two monographs, two co-authored collections and three co-edited books. Fernando has edited *Hispanic Research Journal* and *L´Atalante. International Film Studies Journal* whilst publishing in *Communication & Society*, *Studies in European Cinema* and *Studies in Documentary Films*.

Despina Chronaki (Dr) is an Adjunct Lecturer at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and Hellenic Open University. Her research focuses on audiences of popular culture, porn studies, and children's experiences with media. She has participated in EU-funded European, National (Greek) and International projects since 2007 (https://en-uoa-gr.academia.edu/DespinaChronaki for a detailed record).

Nadine Dannenberg is undertaking her PhD at Institute for Media Studies, University of Arts, Braunschweig, Germany. Her interests include Surveillance Studies, Feminist (Techno) Science Studies, Queer Film (and theory) & Media Studies and Post-human Philosophy. Her publications include 'Vlogging Asexuality' for *onlinejournal culture & geschlecht* No. 17 (July 2016) and 'Die Cyborg – Eine feministische Utopie' for *Wir Frauen* No. 34, 4 (2015).

Jessica George focused her PhD research on evolutionary theory in the fiction of Arthur Machen and H.P. Lovecraft. She has published for *Supernatural*. Her current research focuses on Gothic constructions of authorship and audience and has interests in literature and science in the nineteenth century and contemporary Welsh writing in English. She is based at Cardiff University.

Steven Gerrard is Reader in Film at Northern Film School, Leeds Beckett University, UK. He has written monographs celebrating the *Carry On* films and modern British horror movies. Steve is co-editor of *Crank it up – Jason Statham: Star*! and has published extensively on horror for *We Belong Dead* and *Dark Side Magazine*.

Víctor Hernández-Santaolalla is Assistant Professor at the Universidad de Sevilla. His research interests include mass communication, political communication, propaganda, surveillance and social media. He has published for *European Journal of Communication and Information, Communication and Society*. Victor has edited books about *Breaking Bad* and representations of television serial killers.

Samantha Holland is Senior Research Fellow at Leeds Beckett University, UK. Her research interests include gender, leisure, subcultures and popular culture. Her publications include *Alternative Femininities: Body, Age & Identity*; *Pole Dancing: Empowerment & Embodiment*; and *Modern Vintage Homes & Leisure Lives: Ghosts & Glamour*.

Khara Lukancic is a Doctoral Student in Mass Communication and Media Arts at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. She has published film reviews in *Film Criticism and Gateway Journalism Review* and has authored a book chapter on the intertextuality of *Halloween* and *Moby-Dick*. Her academic interests include horror studies and film criticism.

Erika Tiburcio Moreno's PhD focuses on the Serial Killer in American horror movies (1960s−1980s). Her publications include 'The Day When the Rural and the Urban World Had to Struggle: Mother's Day' for *No Escape: Excavating Multidimensional Phenomenon of Fear* and 'America Through a Camera: Horror Cinema as a Historical Discourse' in *The Last House on the Left*, for Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea, 38, 2016. Erika is based at University Carlos III, Madrid.

Natasha Parcei is a PhD Student at the Northern Film School (Leeds Beckett University). Her research focuses on Cultural Gerontology within the field of British Cinema. Natasha has delivered conference papers at Gerontology and Gothic conferences. She has contributed a chapter about Jason Statham as an ageing action hero for *Crank it up − Jason Statham: Star!*

Susan Cosby Ronnenberg is an English Professor at Viterbo University in La Crosse, Wisconsin. She is the author of *Deadwood and Shakespeare: The Henriad in the Old West* (2018).

Clare Smith is the Heritage Centre Manager for the Metropolitan Police Heritage Centre, London. Clare wrote her PhD on the Depiction of Jack the Ripper and the Whitechapel Murders on Film. Her book, *Jack the Ripper in Film and Culture: Top Hat, Gladstone Bag and Fog* was published in 2016.

Lauren Stephenson is a Lecturer in Film Studies at York St. John University. Her recently completed PhD research focuses on representations of class and masculinity in the British 'hoodie horror' film cycle. Lauren has presented work in the U.K., Europe and Canada, covering various aspects of her research into the horror genre.

Dahlia Schweitzer is a pop culture critic and writer based in Los Angeles, California. She is the author of *Going Viral: Zombies, Viruses and the End of the*

World and *Cindy Sherman's Office Killer: Another Kind of Monster*. Dahlia has contributed essays to *Journal of Popular Film and Television* and *The Journal of Popular Culture*.

Marta F. Suarez is based at Liverpool John Moores University. She lectures on modules on film theory, race, genre and screenwriting. She has written on adaptation, race and immigration. She has a forthcoming chapter for Women who Kill (female characters in *The Walking Dead*). Her research interests include: immigration, gender, (post)feminism, (post)colonialism, race, TV science-fiction, fantasy and dystopian/post-apocalyptic worlds. She is part of the editorial board for *Open Screens* and a member of the EC at BAFTSS (British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies).

Liza Tsaliki is Associate Professor at the Department of Communication and Media Studies at the National and Kapodistrian Univeristy of Athens. Her research record spans across the following fields: political engagement and participation (including young peoples'); celebrity culture and activism; gender and technology; porn studies; children/youth and media; children/youth and sexualization; popular culture; post-feminism, body aesthetics and motherhood; fitness culture.

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Introduction

Steven Gerrard

> The horror genre is frequently considered to be in bad taste or to be excessively violent and this is one reason there has been little consideration of TV horror, since TV itself is assumed to be a mainstream medium that cannot sustain the graphic nature (visual or thematic) of horror's subject matter. Moreover, it is assumed that the 'limitations' of the small screen mean TV does not have the capacity to render horror effectively.
>
> (Jowett and Abbott, *TV Horror: Investigating the dark side of the small screen*, 2)

When the Gothic horror novels of Walpole, Shelley, Radcliffe, Stoker, Poe and Stevenson became the Penny Dreadful or the tawdry tales found serialized in newspapers of the nineteenth century, few would have ever considered just how important horror would remain as one of the most popular viewed pastimes for a sensation-seeking public. The tales of Frankenstein's creation, the mysteries of Udolpho, Varney the Vampire or Count Dracula travelling through a fictionalized *mittel* Europe, where rhubarbing villagers sat huddled in tavern corners as death and decay swept in from castles in Otranto, were usually seen as nothing more than sensationalist products of their times. But horror is more than that. Horror – in all its guises – not only helps the reader/listener/viewer live out these fantasies from the safety of their own seats, but just as importantly reflects the culture and times that produced them. The very best horrors become encrusted with the meanings and trappings of their period, commenting upon, acting within and reflecting on the very society that produced them. *That* is the power of horror.

Horror, as a genre, and like most other genres, runs in cycles. Through the ebb and flow of decades, its fortunes fluctuate: for one era, it is popular, the next

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not. Then, as with most genres, it returns, much like fashions do on the High Street. Since the early Gothic novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were released on a sensation-seeking audience, horror has certainly remained incredibly popular. Whilst the stories remained virtually unchanged, the media in which it was produced certainly did. The Gothic novel transformed into broadsheet serializations, and from there into theatres where wily entrepreneurs lured their patrons into the auditorium to watch the latest version of *Dracula* amidst the greasepaint and lime-lit flickering on their playhouse actors.

When early cinema masters such as George Meliés used trick effects to both amuse and terrify their audiences in equal measures, horror was seen as a staple entertainment of a burgeoning new industry. Horror fed into this industry across the next hundred years: from the German expressionist horrors in the post-Great War years; through Universal Studios' wonderful horror-cycle of the 1930s and 1940s; the sublime works of Val Lewton at RKO; past the colourfully lurid and sensationalist Hammer Films reworking of Dracula, Frankenstein and the Mummy of the late-1950s and 1960s; the British and American independent horror scene of the 1970s; big budget films; low budget movies; the 1980s *penchant* for slasher films and their numerous sequel/franchise series; and the huge revival of horror in the post-Millennium years, horror has certainly celebrated its longevity through the decades and through changing tastes in what is considered 'horror'. For example, since 2000, over 500 *British* horror films have been registered and/or released on an unsuspecting public, whilst the American, European and certainly Asian horror films have reflected a changing political climate than ever before. Likewise, wider platform releases such as Netflix, HBO, streaming, festivals, etc. have helped filmmakers to push their product out of the shadows and into the light. And one such 'newer' platform is television.

According to Jowett and Abbott (2013, p. 1), television production history is broadly categorized into three distinct time periods: 1950–1975,1975–1990 and 1990s–present. Perhaps this needs amendment, slightly, with the Millennium heralding in a newer, wider scope for horror across all media platforms. The changing patterns of TV production, technology and transmission methods meant that consumers watched TV in various ways: by scheduled timetabling, or through binge-watching, downloading and streaming (as of the 2000s). What remains though is this: that by defining the eras of television, one can then see how horror was, and remains, an important trope in the televisual landscape. A short overview of *some* of the major TV programmes now follows, to aid and guide the viewer from the past and into the present.

The 1950s had ground-breaking horror/science fiction hybrids such as Nigel Kneale's exemplary *Quatermass* trilogy (BBC: 1953, 1955, 1958), which emptied pubs up and down the land, and a version of 1984 (BBC, 1954) that had questions raised about its brutality in Parliament. With Universal's *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* series of films being syndicated on American TV, the 1960s saw a real upswing in horror on American TV, which was then later broadcast in the UK. This ranged from anthology series such as Boris Karloff's *Thriller* (NBC, 1960–1962), *The Outer Limits* (ABC, 1963–1965) and *The Twilight Zone* (CBS,

1959–1964); comedies like *The Addams Family* (ABC, 1964–1966), *The Munsters* (CBS 1964–1966) and *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964–1972), the children's cartoon *Scooby Doo: Where Are You?* (CBS, 1969–1970) was (and still is) immensely popular; the long-running 'soap' *Dark Shadows* (ABC, 1966–1971); with numerous other 'one-off' productions such as *The Night Stalker* (ABC, 1972), *The Night Strangler* (ABC, 1973) and *The Norlis Tapes* (NBC, 1973) that led to the series *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* (ABC 1974) showing that horror was still, despite its usual critical mauling's, important.

In the UK, and to name only a few productions, *Doctor Who* (BBC, 1963–) led the way, although *Mystery and Imagination* (ITV, 1966–1970), *The Stone Tape* (BBC, 1972), *Beasts* (ATV, 1976), the BBC's 'Ghost Story for Christmas' (var. years), *Count Dracula* (BBC, 1977) and *Sapphire and Steel* (ITV, 1979–1982) certainly kept viewers hooked to their ghastly, ghostly and horrible storylines.

Arguably two pieces of work that clearly showcased the importance and power of televisual horror were the two-part adaptation of Stephen King's *Salem's Lot* (publ. 1975; CBS, 1979) and *Ghostwatch* (BBC, 1992). The two were thematically and stylistically poles apart. *Salem's Lot* was a drama with out-and-out horror overtones: a small mid-American town is plagued by a vampire. Whilst the story is pure hokum, the strong production values, excellent cast (David Soul, James Mason, Reggie Nalder, Lew Ayres, Geoffrey Lewis, Elisha Cook Jnr. and Bonnie Bodelia) and genuine *frissons* of menace and fright meant that its (old fashioned scares and) audience and critical success was assured. *Ghostwatch* became the *cause celebre* of its era. The premise was simple: the BBC interrupted its own advertised nightly schedule and broadcast 'live' from the council house of Mrs Pamela Early. Early's home had apparently been plagued by strange noises, weird smells, cutlery bending and doors slamming shut, for months. The ensuing two-hours had cutaways between Michael Parkinson in the TV studio and Sarah Greene on location. It was all filmed in a realistic style some two weeks beforehand, but broadcast as 'live television', with handheld cameras, poor sound and juddering edits well in evidence. That the British public complained in their thousands to such a frightening 'true' event clearly showed the importance and force of horror on the small screen: that is, it had *invaded* homes. *Nowhere* was safe.

As genres are often cyclical in nature, horror almost went away in the Eighties, but had a resurgence in the following decade. The biggest production was *The X-Files* (Fox, 1993–2002), which clearly paved the way for programmes like *American Gothic* (CBS, 1995–1996) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB, 1997–2001/UPN, 2001–2003), although *Twin Peaks* (ABC 1990–1991; Showtime, 2017) certainly showcased some of the most bizarre horror outings through its original 48-episode run and continued the story in a limited 'Event Series' run of 17 all-new episodes to a bewildered public expecting closure to its convoluted narrative. However, it was in the run up to the Millennium and beyond that horror seems to have once again found a genuinely strong foothold on television. This has certainly been helped by new channels such as Netflix and HBO, whilst downloading and streaming has ensured that American

programmes like the social surrealism of *Carnivale* (HBO, 2003–2005), *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006–2013) and *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013–2015) can sit alongside such British fare as *Afterlife* (ITV, 2005–2006), *The Fades* (BBC, 2011) and *Psychoville* (BBC, 2009–2011), whilst *Channel Zero* (SyFy, 2016–) and *Lore* (Amazon, 2017–) have used their web-based media approach to great effect.

As the chapters in this book testify, there is a resilience to horror in the market place. Part of that is to do with canny marketing, whilst it could also be argued that there is a genuine psychological 'need' for horror to be present in the (fantastical) everyday so that 'we' can 'cope' with the horrors that are shown on news programmes on a daily basis. Interestingly, some trends seem to emerge here: audiences want longer and more-involving storylines, where characters and story arcs can evolve; they also want better production values. Much of the horror output of the *fin de siècle* period centres around either a nostalgic look back to its own past (e.g. *Frankenstein* (ITV, 2007), *Jekyll* (ITV, 2007) and *Dracula* (BBC, 2006; NBC, 2013–2014)) or attempts to present these older ideas anew. Arguably the most nostalgic approach to horror is the UK/USA co-production *Penny Dreadful* (Sky/Showtime, 2014–2016), which uses the Gothic tropes and characters of yesteryear to terrific effect to comment upon present day attitudes towards class, sexuality and gender. A series like *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–) despite its graphic novel beginnings is also nostalgic: its hero sheriff is a lone cowboy in a desolate wasteland of zombies, protecting his frontier in the best way he can. The programme's popularity has impacted upon such zombie-themed productions as *Z Nation* (SyFy, 2010–) and *iZombie* (The CW, 2015–), which uses bricolage effects to create their chills combined with nods and winks to George A. Romero's zombies of the past, whilst *Ash vs the Evil Dead* (Starz, 2015–2018) continued on the titular hero's adventures against his erstwhile adversaries. This nostalgia goes further. Without a doubt, *American Horror Story* (FX, 2011–) is the most important horror show of the post-Millennium era. With its convoluted narrative arcs, set across different eras (from 1950s small town American freak shows, through 1960s asylums, to modern-day suburbia), and with same actors appearing as different characters throughout the series, its high production values, genuinely frightening and horrific moments, and its no-holds barred attitudes towards love, death, sex and violence have certainly shown how important horror is at confronting humankind's basest elements in the twenty-first century.

What has also helped to propel horror back into the limelight is the audience that watch horror. In a pre-Millennial world, horror was arguably seen to be only viewed by 'geeks', 'nerds' and aficionados – those who deliberately sought out horror to watch either on their own or within a like-minded group setting. It has been previously (and incorrectly) assumed that the majority of horror audiences were mostly younger males. However, according to a recent *Guardian* article, the upswing in women characters in horror films moving away from the 'damsel in distress' to becoming the major characters has ensured that female audiences are increasing in number (Berlatsky, 2016). This is not a new thing: both Buffy and Dana Scully have become icons of female strength and passed on from the strong characters of Daphne and Velma from *Scooby Doo,*

respectively. Indeed, Buffy's reversal of traditional gender roles was an ideal platform for the target audience of 12- to 34-year-olds to engage with, whilst Scully's equal footing with her FBI partner, Fox Mulder, where she argued cohesively and logically as she fought alongside him (despite their constant negotiations of what constituted 'truth' and 'lies') was a clear role model through which many could identify.

Therefore, with 'films' being supplanted by 'television', the argument for strong female characters in horror TV can be seen as a positive move away from the victim of yesteryear and towards the horror heroines of today. Indeed, films like *The Conjuring* (James Wan, 2013), *The Purge* (James DeMonaco, 2013) and *Mama* (Andy Muschietti, 2013) had female audiences of 53%, 56% and 61%, respectively, clearly demonstrating that there is an appeal for women who like and want to watch horror (Berlatsky, 2016). Horror, over all other genres, deals openly with questions of gender, sexuality and the body. Whilst the female form is often photographed as Object rather than Subject, horror is one of the few genres where women can truly become the star, have rich emotional experiences and be physically strong. Likewise, the male star, whilst often showcased as 'traditional' in terms of patriarchy, is also revealed to be a mixture of both traditional physical strength (masculine) and emotional weakness (feminine). The rewards for the audience are then multiplied, where the characters that they identify with can be men, women, transgendered, neutral or transspecies. In the world of horror, money and privilege cannot help to save you. In the world of horror, equality rules. It is this equality that helps bring individuals to groups and casual watchers into fandom.

Arguably one of the first TV series to garner a devoted fan following was *Dark Shadows* (1966–1971). After it was sold to syndication, released on VHS, had big screen adaptations and numerous books that furthered the adventures of the vampire Barnabas Collins, fan groups began to spring up. The collation of fans grew into conventions, comics and audio dramas. All perpetuated – and celebrated – the story of *Dark Shadows*, propelling it back out to a more-cult-than-mainstream audience. This 'overflowing' of fan activities has now been seen as being passed onto other programmes: *The X-Files*, *Buffy*, *Doctor Who*, *et al*. have fan conventions devoted to celebrating *their* programmes, texts that have been pushed from what could be termed 'cult' viewing into mainstream consumption. This audience loyalty remains an important part of the televisual landscape. By being able to extend the narratives of TV programmes *beyond* the confines of the living room meant that these texts could now move onto transmedia platforms and through different ways of storytelling. Henry Jenkins (2006) calls this 'the art of world making' and that in order to experience a fictional world, the consumer must

> assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that

> everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience (Jenkins, 2006, 21).

It is this 'richer entertainment experience' that is at the heart of this book. Whilst a (very) brief overview of the history of television horror will, inevitably, not cover other important programmes, themes or tropes, one of the most important themes of horror is how *gender* is portrayed within its narratives. Much has been written about gender in horror, and some key works includes work by Creed (1993), Benshoff (2004), Clover (2015) and Grant (2015). But these focus on horror cinema. Little has been discussed in the analysis of gender issues in television horror. It is at this juncture that the book you are reading comes in.

This edited collection has been divided into three parts, based in part on Barbara Creed's (1993) ideas of the 'Monstrous'. Whilst Creed's work focused mostly on the 'feminine' aspects of ideas about 'monstrous' from a psychoanalytical viewpoint, this book broadens out to look at genders from various perspectives. That is not to say that all viewpoints will be covered, although further work would be most welcomed in the study of gender in horror across all platforms. For the purposes of this edited work, the collected terms 'Monstrous Feminine', 'Monstrous Masculine' and 'Monstrous Other' have been used as catch-all terms in which to place each chapter.

The 'Monstrous Feminine' portion of this collection investigates how female characters have been presented in numerous ways across various TV series. This section covers such areas as the gendering and sexualization of female 'monsters' of numerous descriptions; how older actresses are represented through their characters; and how women are perceived as heroine, victim and 'monster'. For the 'Monstrous Masculine' segment, the traditional 'Hero' is analysed through such characters as Dean Winchester in *Supernatural* (WB, 2005–2006; The CW, 2006–) and Dr Lecter in *Hannibal*. This is then further investigated with a look at 'sympathetic vampires' and zombiedom. For the final part of this book, the 'Monstrous Other' can take on many forms. For example, one chapter examines how *American Horror Story* was received by female audiences in Greece. For two essays, the role of the house and the home is discussed. Two of the main characters from *The Walking Dead* are analysed across their narrative arcs, whilst Norman and Norma Bates from *Bates Motel* demonstrate that the 'Other' remains arguably the most important part of horror studies.

After all, are we not all, in some shape or form, 'Other'?

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