

## Why TV is more violent now than ever before (and we love it that way!)

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A serial killer drains his victims of blood, chops them into pieces and drops the body parts in the ocean. A horde of hungry zombies rip into the flesh of a wounded victim. A malevolent ghost takes an axe to a deluded actress's middle section. A grieving mother, who's just witnessed her son being fatally stabbed, cries out in pain and surprise as her throat is slit. Staked to death, a vampire explodes in a sticky mess of oozing red flesh... if any of these gory scenes sound familiar then you're among the millions of people all over the world who've watched some of TV's most popular series: *Dexter*, *The Walking Dead*, *American Horror Story*, *Game of Thrones* and *True Blood*.

You probably can't remember what you had for lunch two weeks ago, but if someone asked you where you were when 9/11 happened or when Princess Diana died, you'd probably be able to recall all sorts of details. What's the common thread? Awful, unspeakable acts of violence that, because of their very nature, are hard to forget. They aren't just relegated to the daily news, either – over the years, our TV diets have become steadily bloodier. Horror, for example, was once the domain of nerds and B-grade flicks, shoved off to the side of our staple viewing, but now it's gone mainstream. While the Oscars aren't likely to award a horror flick, the coveted Best Picture Academy Award, the Emmys and Golden Globes are more than happy to tap into the popularity of hit series like *American Horror Story*, which is overflowing with murder and mayhem.

### **Are we turning to the dark side?**

Even the police procedural genre – the beloved cop-vs-criminal crime show – has turned a darker corner (down a dingy alleyway?) to the point where seeing someone get shot in the stomach, a brutal rape scene, or delving into the sadistic mind of a serial killer are all deemed fairly normal viewing. Not even sweet, naive *Downton Abbey* could escape the allure of violence when it went dark for what many would argue was their best season (season 3), when two main characters were killed off, one in a car accident and another in childbirth.

Violence in entertainment is nothing new. Shakespeare's tragedies were filled with death and murder, while the Ancient Greeks were getting their kicks through some dark tales (*Oedipus Rex*, anyone?). Even Disney movies and Grimm fairy tales have elements of violence and death – the evil queen who wants Snow White's heart, Bambi's mom getting shot and Ellie's sad death at the beginning of *Up* are just a few examples. If violent storytelling has always been a part of history, then why is there more of it now? Three reasons: ratings, technology and the human psyche.

### **Things that go bump in the night**

TV may seem like it's all fun and games when you're binge-viewing your favourite series. But make no mistake, it's a ratings game. With hundreds of series competing for our attention (never mind movies, radio, games, novels, comics, YouTube and other forms of entertainment) the ratings battle is a lot more like one of *Game of Thrones'* epic fight scenes: brutal and over with pretty quickly. The net result is that new TV shows tend to get cancelled quicker than they get renewed for a second season, while the older and more established series have to fight even harder to retain (and increase) viewership. The TV graveyard is littered with single-season series that just didn't get enough viewers to warrant a follow-up season.

It used to be that a warm, fuzzy wedding would do the trick and draw in the viewers, but that's become a bit of an overused plot point in the writers' room. Instead, one of the more successful ways this happens nowadays is with shocks and surprises. Nothing provides that 'did-you-see-what-happened?' word of mouth talkability that is the holy grail of TV viewership than a sudden death. Or a character coming back from the dead (soap operas have done it for decades, but *Game of Thrones* was the talk of the town when Jon Snow was brought back from the abyss). Or a particularly violent smackdown, like in crime capers *Breaking Bad*, *Fargo* or *Banshee*. Getting good ratings often means scaling up the levels of violence. Why? Because deep down, we like it that way.

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### **Mind for violence**

Which brings us to the human psyche. In a weird way, bloodthirsty TV actually makes us feel safer. TV is a bubble. A happy place to escape to. The human brain is wired for storytelling – TV is just one of the many ways we indulge in it. Watching monstrous violence on TV is a kind of safe space because the storyline is resolved within the tale and we get a sense of closure. What you see on the news is often more than enough to terrify us, but the more violent a TV show, the more that sense of escapism worms its way into our minds. We know it's not real, so hey, it won't matter how awful the violence on our small screens is because it's all far, far removed from us (sometimes on a different planet or alternate version of Earth).

A bloody TV diet is a coping mechanism for the stresses and strains of our everyday lives and because these kinds of shows are so popular, they're also the literal definition of a vicious cycle: we like the violence and it makes us feel safe, so we crave more of it. Because we watch more violent TV, the ratings go up, so TV networks make more violent TV to cater for our whims and needs – and the cycle continues merrily along...

### **More bang for your buck**

Finally, there's technology, that great disruptor of the status quo. Better, cheaper technology, particularly special effects and CGI techniques, means that it costs a lot less to make things look a lot more terrifying. The gruesome Hannibal TV series, as well as recent favourite American Gods, relied heavily on CGI and special effects to sucker punch us with wave after wave of blood-spattered scenes, often in close-up or slow-motion glory so that every last drop of blood is captured by the camera in sickeningly beautiful detail.

As little as 10 years ago, most of that technology was deemed too expensive to be used on TV, so it remained only in the budgets of the big Hollywood film studios. Now, TV series increasingly have the look and feel of big budget blockbuster movies, with all the attention-grabbing bells and whistles.

### **We've come a long way, baby**

In 1960, when horror meister Alfred Hitchcock shocked the world with the infamous shower stabbing scene in the movie Psycho, he did it without showing even a nano-second of knife plunging into Janet Leigh's flesh. And yet, audiences fainted, people cried out in terror and Hitchcock developed a reputation for big screen scares. Fast forward 57 years and when Bates Motel (a modern-day TV prequel of the Psycho story) tackled the same shower scene midway through its final season, the camera showed the knife meeting flesh in close-up detail, blood everywhere. The only thing we didn't see was nudity. Rewatch Psycho now and you'll be confounded as to why it's still regarded as a horror flick. If the movie was released today, it would likely be categorised as a psychological thriller or crime drama. Point is, as we're increasingly numbed to the shock factor of death and violence on TV, it's safe to say that our bloodlust is increasing and TV is becoming edgier and darker. Whether that's a good thing remains to be seen, but what is certain is that the TV landscape has never been more entertaining.