BBC Wales' Torchwood as TV I, II, and III:

Changes in Television Horror

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Horror on television has recently attracted much scholarly attention (see, e.g., Hills; Peirse; Robson; Totaro; Wheatley). As Alison Peirse says: "there has been a distinct evolution of late in terms of horror television... [Though this partly reflects] network interest in capturing the post-*Buffy* audience, it can still be argued that the contemporary television series is growing increasingly obsessed with horror" (*Uncanny* 129). Writers such as myself (*Pleasures* 125) and Simon Brown and Stacey Abbott have argued that TV horror has shifted from a position pre-1980s where it was viewed as "inauthentic," or as less present in television schedules, to having a considerable presence today:

> the post-network, multi-platform landscape of contemporary TV has led to a much broader range of programming strategies beyond the 'Least Objectionable' approach of the network era. ...networks, netlets, and cable and pay-TV channels are specifically targeting smaller, loyal markets, making the horror

aficionado an increasingly lucrative, while still niche, market (Brown and Abbott 207).

However, this argument relies on contrasting network TV to the post-network age; it hinges on a binary of "mass" TV drama versus the "niche" of horror fandom. In *The Pleasures of Horror* I similarly argued for a tension between these two industry practices (128). Here, though, I want to complicate such binary approaches to TV horror. I will use arguments surrounding what have been termed TV I, II, and III (Reeves, Rogers and Epstein *Rewriting*; Rogers, Epstein and Reeves *Sopranos*) before presenting *Torchwood* (BBC Wales, 2006-present) as a case study to articulate the differences of TV horror in these changing contexts. I will argue that horror has not just become attractive to target niche audiences, but has offered a strategy for the branding and 'making-cinematic' of television drama. This branding relies on a symbolic equation of horror with film, meaning that *the genre's rapprochement with TV is relationally structured against a view of 'ordinary' television as not evoking horror's conventions.*

First, I will sketch out TV I, II, and III. These refer to periods of time in the US TV industry: "TV I (roughly 1948 to 1975) and TV II (roughly 1975 to 1995). ...American television has now entered its third stage of development: TV III (about 1995 to the present)" (Rogers, Epstein and Reeves 43). The first stage means "network TV," and a "period dominated by a three-corporation oligopoly [ABC, NBC, CBS]" (Rogers, Epstein and Reeves 24-5). This era focused on "least objectionable programming;" it was about brute ratings, and "resulted in the primetime schedule evolving into a nightly showcase for... "consensus narrative;" stories that attempt[ed] to speak for, and to, the core values of American culture (Rogers, Epstein and Reeves 25).

TV II eroded this focus on mass audiences, by reshaping "popularity in terms of the quest for 'quality demographics' — a giant step toward...'niche audience' strategies" (Rogers, Epstein and Reeves 30). This was still about attracting audiences that were desirable to advertisers, as 'quality' demographics meant those with disposable income, or more likely to be active consumers. *The X Files* has been analysed as an exemplar of TV II by Reeves, Rogers, and Epstein; it challenged the old networks, being a Fox show, and was aimed at a series of niche cult TV audiences rather than a mainstream, mass audience.

Rogers, Epstein and Reeves summarize their taxonomy by noting that "where TV I was the age of mass marketing, and TV II was the age of niche marketing, TV III...must be considered the age of brand marketing" (*Sopranos* 48). Linked to the importance of branding is a different commercial model, the "first-order commodity relations of TV III" (*Sopranos* 47). This means that rather than being sold to advertisers, and so paying indirectly for the TV shows they watch, now audiences pay directly for their viewing, e.g. subscribing to the likes of HBO. This is why Showtime, AMC, HBO, Syfy, etc. have to be strongly branded: customers need to be familiar with the values they are quite literally buying into. Texts can also act as brands; some can become "signature" products linked to their providers, reinforcing the parent brand. The exemplar of TV III for Rogers, Epstein and Reeves is *The Sopranos*, connoting HBO's distinction in terms of risk-taking, creative freedom and a liberal approach to representing violence and sex.

However, despite their broad periodization, TV I, II and III can and do co-exist:

> broadcast television continued to exist in the so-called "cable era," and... broadcast and cable television will continue to exist in the "digital era." The same could be said for mass marketing and niche marketing in the age of branding...Ultimately, we see the major developments that demarcate the three eras as additive.

Residual aspects of TV I...persist in the TV II and TV III eras (Rogers, Epstein and Reeves 55).

A further complication is that the model is based on US TV, and doesn't work as clearly in the UK context, particularly since public service television plays a stronger role here (in the UK). The BBC is not part of "first-order commodity relations:" consumers don't choose to subscribe, since it is funded through a universal licence fee. Neither is it a "second-order commodity," i.e. advertiser-funded commercial TV. BBC television thus confuses the model: strictly speaking it is neither TV I, II, or III. However, sections of the BBC can be thought of as akin to TV I in that they aim for a mass audience premised on primetime "consensus narrative." This would be 'mainstream' BBC1 output, competing with ITV1 in order to justify its licence fee. As Catherine Johnson has pointed out:

> ITV1 and BBC1 remain largely conceptualized as mixed programme channels for consensus audiences. As a consequence, the notion of 'cult television,' with its implications of exclusivity and specialness, goes against the very remit of these two main terrestrial channels... Even the NBC series *Heroes*...appears on BBC2 rather than BBC1 (145).

Niche, cult telefantasy shows identifiable as TV II are thus "more likely to find a home on BBC2 with its status as a 'minority audience' channel" (Johnson 145); *The X Files* started out as a BBC2 show in the UK. Within this publicly-funded, mixed ecology, TV I and II can operate side-by-side in the schedules.

TV III also has its UK analogies; Sky TV represents a pay-TV service, having recently bought up the UK rights to HBO's output. But other digital services available without subscription on Freeview are also closer to TV III than I or II. For example, E4 and BBC3 are branded so as to offer distinctive texts for youth audiences; as a result their shows are often 'edgier' or more permissive in terms of representation, moving closer to the symbolic economy of TV III. Robin Nelson argues that TV III's branded texts proffer pleasures of "ontological insecurity" via their innovative, unpredictable forms, as opposed to the ritualized familiarity of comforting TV I and the recombinant genres of TV II (19). In this sense, BBC3 and E4 stand out as brands which go beyond merely being 'niche', instead connoting values of edginess and innovation. The line between TV II and III is blurred here: BBC3 is niche TV, but it also stands at a symbolic, branded distance from the output of BBC1 and BBC2. The BBC's various channels can, at different moments in their scheduling, approximate to versions of TV I, II, and III.

Having set out these approaches to television drama, I now want to apply them to BBC Wales' *Torchwood*. A spin-off from *Doctor Who*, *Torchwood* is an unusual show in that it was commissioned by BBC3 (its first series in 2006), then moved to BBC2 (for Series Two in 2008), and then relocated to primetime BBC1 (for *Torchwood: Children of Earth* in 2009). The show has cycled through different UK production contexts, being reformatted after its initial BBC3 run.

Torchwood thus represents one brand that has nevertheless moved through different textual lives in relation to TV III (as a challenging, unpredictable BBC3 series); TV II (as a niche, telefantasy show suited to BBC2); and TV I (as a mainstream SF-thriller suitable for BBC1). I will focus on how such an evolution has affected the show's status as TV horror, building up an argument regarding the tripartite (or more) modes of horror in contemporary television. Although TV I, II and III may appear to fit *Torchwood*'s history rather neatly, if not too neatly (3 forms of television; 3 series to date; 3 different channels), this tidiness should

the biggest monster of all." Susan Wolfe and Courtney Huse Wika argue that "changes in mood and action occur continually in the series…we are kept continually off-balance by shifts between…the human and the monstrous" (32). This resonates with Trisha Dunleavy's observation that:

> TVIII's generic mixing is…a considerably more radical blending of programme ideas, forms, and styles than TVII's 'recombination'…approaching [greater] conceptual and/or aesthetic novelty…The success of high-end dramas characterised by generic mixing — leading TVIII examples including *The Sopranos*… and *Dexter* — has underlined the brand value of the conceptual novelty that it can provide (216).

Torchwood offers precisely this "brand value" by intertwining the horror genre with representations of moral ambiguity and fluid sexuality in Series One. Though episodes often carry a 'monster of the week,' they also dwell on emotional realism, particularly loss and alienation. In 'Out of Time' (1.10), Jack muses that there is "no problem to solve. No enemy to fight"; an observation which punctures the con-

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not distract from the value of theorising contemporary TV horror as a branding strategy, as well as niche/mass television. It might also be suggested that *Torchwood* is *not* TV horror; that it is, instead, telefantasy or SF TV, and so my arguments here miss the mark. *Contra* any such genre policing, I would point out that *Torchwood*'s opening episode 'Everything Changes' features a monster attack which playfully refers to *Hellraiser*, and depicts blood jetting out of a character's neck wound: intertextual and generic debts to horror are placed front-and-centre at the show's very inception. Though horror intertextualities may weaken in later series, this forms part of my own argument, as shall become clear.

Torchwood begins as TV III. Series One mixes genres to take on marked tonal variation, veering from camp CGI action sequences (a Cyberwoman versus a pterodactyl) to intense emotional confrontation, and the questioning of heroic/monstrous roles. As Ianto (Gareth David-Lloyd) tells Captain Jack Harkness (John Barrowman) in 'Cyberwoman' (1.04): "You like to think you're a hero. But you're

ventions of telefantasy and creates a more existential depiction of fear than TV horror often attains. Here, John Ellis (Mark Lewis Jones) admits that he's scared of living without purpose, in a scene intercut with series regular Owen Harper (Burn Gorman) conceding that he too is scared – of powerful feelings of love. Characters are disturbed not (just) by generic monsters in Series One, but also by life's existential challenges. Ultimately, 'Out of Time' represents John's suicide, whilst Captain Jack comforts him — a hard-hitting sequence which stands out as conceptual novelty against the niche telefantasy characteristics of TV II, and the 'least objectionable programming' of TV I.

The standardized imagery of horror monsters like Weevils which "we believe we are *supposed* to fear… is among the least frightening of the monsters we encounter" (Wolfe and Huse Wika 33), as genre codes are subverted by "ontological insecurity." Series One consistently articulates generic monsters with "the most terrifying of all…monsters: real life" (Waterhouse 280). Gwen Cooper

(Eve Myles) betrays her partner via a workplace fling, and Owen displays a damaged disregard for human affection. Captain Jack also evades "the strict categorization of either good or evil" (Rawcliffe 107), being prepared to sacrifice the little girl Jasmine (Lara Phillipart) in 'Small Worlds' (1.05). As Wolfe and Huse Wika state: "Jack's monstrosity has to do not only with his immortality, but with his...

wears its horror film intertextuality on its sleeve, citing hillbilly horrors in iconographic and narrative terms. It is not alone in obviously using filmic intertexts to promote "Not TV" distinction, for just "as 'Countrycide' paid homage to *The Hills Have Eyes* and its ilk, so 'Combat' [1.11] obviously draws a great deal of inspiration from the...movie *Fight Club*" (Walker *Inside* 197). And each narrative reinforces a

ethics...Jack is a Utilitarian, willing to kill...for the greater good" (40).

In its BBC3 series, *Torchwood* exhibits TV III's "'Not TV' difference from traditional broadcast product through... 'cinematic' sophistication" (Dunleavy 241). The horror genre's treatment by TV I and II — where it is either largely absent or coded through the restricted abjection of colourful, fantastical goo rather than bloody gore (Hills and Williams 2005) — means that TV III can code its 'cinematic' difference precisely by deploying the horror genre in more full-blooded ways. Horror offers one short-hand for connoting the 'filmic' among branded distinctions of TV III. This strategy is embraced in 'Countrycide' (1.06), described by fan-scholar Stephen James Walker as "the goriest, and scariest, episode" (*Darkness* 154). 'Countrycide'

sense of veering between human and monstrous: the killers in 'Countrycide' are not aliens, but cannibalistic locals, whilst the ultimate monsters of 'Combat' are thrill-seeking, disaffected young men. *Torchwood*'s BBC3 incarnation thus trades "on the...'subaltern' sheen of an erstwhile 'midnight movie' culture" (Tompkins), branding itself as "cool" via references to horror and cult movies. To be clear, I'm not arguing that the 'cinematification' of TV drama depends on, or derives from, the horror genre *per se*; 'filmic' TV is obviously a far wider trend, often linked with single-camera shooting styles and aesthetics. Rather, my point is that the horror genre offers one readymade short-hand, one specific strategy, for television drama to position itself as 'Not TV.'

Series Two of *Torchwood* may not seem to differ greatly from year one. Whereas BBC3, as a digital, youth-oriented brand, has sought edgy, challenging drama, BBC2's terrestrial, 'minority' channel is currently linked with more standardised telefantasy. However, *Torchwood*'s characters continued to "risk...becoming the alien Other" (Wolfe and Huse Wika 31) most notably in Owen's case. Series Two also continued another horror strand, that of "the human form which conceals an alien" (Wolfe and Huse Wika 34), with 'Sleeper' (2.02) and 'Adam' (2.05) carrying on the tradition of 'Day One' (1.02) and 'Greeks Bearing Gifts' (1.07).

Nevertheless, Stephen James Walker constructs a perceptive argument about Series Two, suggesting that the show moved

> further away from the domain of mainstream adult drama and a bit closer to the world of standard telefantasy: a world in which the heroes are always likeable, invariably friendly to one another and never swear or have illicit sex...In Series Two...*Torchwood*'s subtle shift in tone gave it a little less in common with shows such as *Dexter*...and...more in common with ones like...*Heroes* (Walker *Darkness* 241).

Series Two scaled back its representations of nudity, swearing, sexuality, and moral ambiguity, resulting in a difference that, for Walker, was encapsulated by the following:

> [W]hile it is easy to imagine that a character in...*The Sopranos* might ask something like 'When was the last time you screwed all night? When was the last time you came so hard and so long that you forgot where you are?' — something that Owen says to Gwen in 'Countrycide' — it is inconceivable that anyone in a standard telefantasy show like *Smallville* might deliver such a line of dialogue — and similarly unthinkable that Owen might say such a thing... in Series Two (Walker *Darkness* 241).

In Walker's argument, the shift is one of genre; he argues that "mainstream adult drama" has given way to "standard telefantasy." Yet his exemplifying choices are intriguing: Series One is compared to *Dexter* and *The Sopranos*, whereas Series Two is likened to *Heroes* and *Smallville*. I would suggest that what Walker is identifying here is, in fact, an ambivalent shift from TV III status (*The Sopranos* and *Dexter* being key examples of this), to *Torchwood* as TV II instead. The TV III branding of Series One, which took "science fiction...elements...and coupled them with the aesthetic and mode of expression of...adult drama" (Walker *Darkness* 242), is weakened in *Torchwood*'s second outing. As such, "mainstream adult drama" is an unhelpful term, since *The Sopranos* and *Dexter* are precisely not 'mainstream', TV I products.

In Series Two, *Torchwood*'s bid for brand distinction via horror film intertexts is also reduced: there is no gory 'Countrycide'; no slasher flick rendered as TV horror. TV III often symbolically competes with horror cinema, seeking to emulate its visual excesses, e.g. in *Dead Set* (E4, 2008) and Showtime's *Masters of Horror* (2005-7). Where Series One of *Torchwood* is at pains to be readable as 'like film', particularly horror film, Series Two surrenders this ambition. Likewise, tonal collisions between realist and generic forms of monstrosity are less pronounced — though Jack's brother Gray (Lachlan Nieboer) is ultimately revealed as the series' 'Big Bad' there is little moral complexity here. Gray is a generic 'black hat' villain, lacking emotional realism. 'Adrift' (2.11) approaches the existential bleakness of 'Out of Time': it features no generic monster, and challenges Gwen's view of what it means to help a mother whose child is missing. But 'Adrift' is at odds with the consistency of Series Two, whereas 'Out of Time' forms part of Series One's unpredictable diegetic world.

By the time of *Children of Earth*, *Torchwood* had evolved again — this time into 'event' television, scheduled across one week on primetime BBC1. This industrial recontextualization brought it closer to TV I, and resulted in some critics arguing that:

> *Children of Earth* can be seen as a kind of anti-*Torchwood* that deploys earlier characters and...relationships in the telling of its tale but is considerably more SF than gothic...A conceptually binaristic piece, *Children of Earth* thus pits good guys against bad guys, humans against aliens, Americans against Brits...in an entirely un-*Torchwood* way. It is shot and edited in a straightforward TV Realist style (lacking the...incongruous tonal juxtapositions of earlier series) (Blake).

Linnie Blake concludes that this "is...an anti-gothic *Torchwood* for a mainstream BBC1 audience...far removed from the first two series" (Blake). The loss of gothicized instability, seriality and fluidity in favour of a repurposed action-thriller can be read as a move into TV I and "consensus narrative." TV horror is recontextualized here too. Echoes of *Torchwood*'s former bleakness persist in Frobisher's (Peter Capaldi) shocking murder of his wife and family and his own suicide, though these are played out literally behind a closed door, unseen as shots ring out on the soundtrack. And the cliffhanger to 'Day Three' refers to Jack's monstrous utilitarianism, placing him as a collaborator with aliens known only as 'the 456'. When Gwen asserts that "he fights the aliens," Jack responds: "No...I gave them the kids...1965, I gave them 12 children....as a gift."

Rather than *Children of Earth* representing gore, the '456' creatures vomit yellow-green gloop. This abjection — an opening up of the body — is hence securely coded as science-fictional rather than realist (Hills and Williams 208). When pronounced human gore appears in the serial, it is in a science-fictional inversion of horror's codes: in 'Day Two' we see Captain Jack's disintegrated body reassemble under the cover of a body bag, before recomposing as a bloodied skeleton and then as a skinned body. Jack's raw red face is shot in tight close-up, fleetingly shown. The conventions of horror are thus drawn on, but in reverse — Captain Jack's damaged body is shown in the fantastical process of re-composition. This represents TV I's use of horror "in the service of…thematic elements... [e.g.] the ability of skilled physicians to salvage a body in torment" (Brown and Abbott 208) or, here, Jack's ability to salvage himself. *Children of Earth* thus has to "redefine the semantic and syntactic elements of the cinematic genre in order to create...televisual horror" (Brown and Abbott 209). This includes constructing horror that is conceptual rather than graphic, e.g. the Cabinet's discussion of surrendering 10% of the UK's children in 'Day Four', which audaciously links real-world policy on school league tables to a shocking notion of some children's dispensability.

This is certainly not TV I as a comforting "consensus narrative," but it speaks to core cultural values by placing these under threat — Jack and Ianto are both given families to defend, in a profound shift from *Torchwood* Series One and Two. And just as Frobisher takes an impossible decision to spare his family from science-fictional torment by the 456, so too is Jack given the ultimate utilitarian, monstrous choice. After all, the alien threat is not one of invasion, but is instead a challenge to the sanctity of the family, albeit on a societal scale. *Children of Earth* might almost have been entitled *Families of Earth*, given its TV I emphasis on meanings of 'the family.' *Torchwood* doesn't cease to act as TV horror altogether here, but its horrifying material is coded into a predominantly 'conceptual' rather than 'visceral' register, often occurring off-screen as well as being strongly inflected by science fiction. It shares these strategies with a longer history of horror as TV I, of course, where the genre has often been filtered through others (SF; comedy; even soap opera). As Brown and Abbott note, (re) inflected horror has always been there as part of mainstream TV: "You just need to know where and how to look for it" (209).

In short, *Children of Earth* presents a different symbolic economy, and a changed industrial context for TV horror in comparison with both Series One and Two. Using *Torchwood* as a case study here, I have aimed to demonstrate the mutability of contemporary TV horror, and how this cannot be theorized simply as a matter of 'mass' versus 'niche' TV. Peirse reminds us that there is "not a one-size-fits-all approach to presenting horror...on television" (*Uncanny* 129), but neither are there convincing binary approaches. Scholarship can benefit from linking TV I, II and III to uses of TV horror. The genre's historical connection to film, and its relative (by no means absolute) absence in TV I, mean that it can brand TV III shows as 'Not TV.' TV horror can hence be deployed as a short-hand for 'edgy,' youth-oriented, conceptually novel television drama which emulates movies and seeks to transcend the genre limits of TV I and II — as in BBC3's *Torchwood*. But we also need to pay careful attention to national contexts, since the tripartite model fits US television more neatly than the UK's public service tradition. And the same text can be recontextualised very differently as TV I, II or III within different national broadcasting systems. For example, *Torchwood*'s 'parent' show, *Doctor Who*, was a mainstream, mass audience BBC1 show in the UK, but a niche, cable show initially bought by the Sci Fi channel in the US. Similarly, Fox's *Fringe* played as neo-network television in the US, but was targeted at a more specifically 'hip', youth demographic in Canada. As such, the nationally contextualised presence of horror within TV I, II and III needs to be further explored.

Torchwood's future suggests another mutation. As a co-production between premium cable channel Starz in the US, BBC Wales, and BBC Worldwide, the show's fourth run is likely to transmit on Starz in America (TV III), and on BBC1 in the UK (potentially TV I). Quite how these different contexts can be hybridized remains to be seen, but the outcome will no doubt generate further debate over the changing roles of TV horror.

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