

## It's a Question of Degrees: Morality, Justice, and Revenge in Telefantasy

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### Introduction

Many explorations of 'telefantasy' (Johnson 2005: 1) look at *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (BtVS, 1997-2003) as the cornerstone of the television genre (see Braun 2000, Williamson 2005 and Cover 2005), but the field has grown since the conclusion of *BtVS* into a wider range of representations and more complex interactions between the subject and the abject. In this context subject refers to the human aspect within telefantasy and abject the "monstrous". This work seeks to consider the roots of the moralities at play in telefantasy and explore the development and evolution of telefantasy to encompass the evolving relationships between human and monster within their narratives. Specifically moving on from the traditional articulate and complex vampire explored in literature and in *BtVS* into shows where the other abjects, usually cast as mindless and bestial, now also have voices, consciences (conscious and conscience) and individuality.

This article will use *BtVS*, (1997-2003) and more recent series such as *Supernatural* (2005-2020), *iZombie* (2015-2019), *Z Nation* (2014-2018), *In the Flesh (ITF)* (2013-2014), and *Lucifer* (2016-present) to explore the progression of the telefantasy genre. These texts have been selected as they offer a pathway from the vampire focussed *BtVS*, through to the introduction of the morally ambiguous demon/angel in *Supernatural* and *Lucifer* to the lucid zombie in *iZombie*, *Z Nation* and *ITF*. As indicated, *BtVS* offers the foundation of this iteration of supernatural television and as such provides a key text that scholars in the field have considered. The elements of traditional horror and relationship to religious doctrine and associated concepts of prophecy and predestined selection that *BtVS* uses (Buffy is 'the

Chosen One’) find extension in two of the other selected texts. *Supernatural* and *Lucifer*, which both deal directly with Judeo-Christian doctrine using biblical iconography and religious dogma as a focus for the evolving narratives. *Supernatural* focuses on the Winchester brothers Sam and Dean as they fight demons and other monsters for an ever changing ‘greater good’. *Lucifer* follows the exploits of the Devil (Lucifer) as he searches for redemption and revenge on earth.

To fully identify the evolution of the telefantasy genre three zombie-centric shows have also been selected for consideration. Each offers the articulate zombie as a main protagonist and enables the consideration of the impact of the integration of the infectious abject into humanity. *iZombie* follows Liv Moore, a recently infected human who learns to ‘live’ with, manage and use her new status as conscious abject. The arc of the show encompasses the move from underground fantasy to incontestable actuality of the zombie other. *In the Flesh* (ITF) offers a similar concept but explores the ideas of enforced experimentation upon and treatment of the infected. Kieren Walker is the treated Partially Deceased Syndrome (PDS) sufferer who returns to his family after having reanimated during ‘The Rising’, living as an abject killer before his capture and enforced rehabilitation. Finally *Z Nation* offers the more traditional post-apocalyptic vision of a world surviving with zombies. Within the narrative, however, despite the initial introduction of zombies as traditional threat and soulless killers, the potential for sentience and cure is explored. In line with *ITF* the show also identifies the use of enforced experimentation when searching for a cure to the zombie infection. Each text selected offers the opportunity to explore the evolution of telefantasy through its use of moral codings and challenges to more traditional expectations related to the establishment and use of good and evil or right and wrong. Central to this is a consideration of the key concepts used within such texts to explore the ambiguities

in character and motivation offered when traditional binary oppositions of good and evil are challenged. Each text mixes human with abject yet conscious other: exploring a range of traditional hero and villain roles with equally morally ambiguous motivations.

The format of these telefantasy shows – one hour and from three to eighteen episodes – offers the opportunity to explore the characters and narratives in an extended way unavailable to a film. Such scope offers the chance to move beyond the general survival narratives offered in horror and supernatural entertainment and to investigate the moralities of the protagonists, opening ethical considerations within a genre with traditionally clear-cut representations of good and evil, right and wrong. The chosen texts, listed earlier, have less defined hero and villain roles and consequently behaviours; ‘monsters’ on many occasions having a self-knowledge missing from the traditional filmic iterations of such creatures with the ensuing explorations of good and evil less simplistic and more nuanced. Characters no longer only offer the human point of view. Central protagonists are vampires with souls, sentient zombies or all manner of supernatural hosts or creations that now have a voice and purpose which demand consideration. With this in mind, this work seeks to explore the moral quandary that ‘monster killing’ can now elicit within a narrative and so in an audience.

### **Right and Wrong in Telefantasy**

Telefantasy offer the chance to explore the ambiguities of right and wrong within a familiar format and known genre, that of horror. The series examined here still offer the killing and torture of the ‘monsters’ that represent opposition to the protagonists, but there are within that questions raised about the moralities of such actions. Telefantasy creates a space which encourages consideration of both sides of the elementary ‘us and them’ conceit, humans and their right to life versus every other iteration of existence. The moralities of narrative and

motivational concepts such as revenge, justice, and repentance are key areas to examine within telefantasy. This work will identify the moral principles within these texts and explore the subtleties of action and reaction that might be found if we consider the non-human as sentient or a saveable/sparable life. As Michael-Fox (2020: 112) confirms ‘this is particularly so when the dead are articulate, and when the narratives that house them explicitly provoke practical, philosophical and existential questions about mortality’. If we extend Michael-Fox’s consideration of the articulate dead to the lucid ‘other’, such ‘questions’ offer the opportunity to explore definitions of heroes and villains in telefantasy and how these texts approach the moralities of actions which have for a long time in entertainment been focussed on the assertion that right always lives with the human protagonist.

Corruption of the soul used to be the preserve of the monster, an elemental force of evil overtaking the human body, subsuming the subject and creating the abject in its place. Within this construction the killing of the monster was correct, their removal a benefit to the world and humanity. However, we can look towards the telefantasy as both an extension of the Gothic sensibility of the sympathetic other and as a text that encourages both the viewer and the protagonist to question the established binary oppositions of the horror genre. Such a shift in morality and approach can be seen within the internal and external struggles offered through the central protagonists as they address their place within situations not of their making. As Williamson (2005, 79) asserts in relation to vampire narratives in popular culture, ‘all of the core characters suffer the pathos of their predicament, the human and the demons, and this links the suffering of the ‘self’ to the suffering of the ‘other’’. Such understanding of the ‘other’ from both sides of the established opposition offered within the horror genre allows the opportunity to consider the moralities of killing, or indeed murder, within the telefantasy as moralities move and actions become conflicted. As these texts mix human and

‘monster’ so thoroughly, we can also contemplate the impact of death within the shows and how cessation of life is used to move and surprise an audience used to infinite resurrections or supernatural intervention when expiration appears. This consideration will initially focus upon the killing of ‘monsters’ and the ways in which those deaths are constructed as either moral or morally corrupt. The effect upon the central protagonists of the lives they take and torture they commit is an integral part of this aspect of telefantasy. Aligned with this are ideas of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ death, deserved and undeserved and what narrative impact such moments hold for an audience when a character does die unexpectedly and irrevocably. If the ‘horror film is an example of a genre which enables us both to approach and to distance ourselves from this area of experiences by distorting and fictionalizing it’ (Parkes et al 1997: 4) then telefantasy allows the audience to explore, consider and moralise about it.

### **Morality in Context**

The first area to consider is what we mean by morality within the context of the texts we are focussing on and the geographic location of those texts. It is important to note that the texts all come from British and North American popular culture and broadly follow Judeo-Christian concepts of good and evil and the associated moral coding therein. The initial focus of this discussion, then, is the concept and application of morals, the decisions made in service of a ‘greater’ need than the individual and the use of what might simply be termed right and wrong or good and evil. It is important to note that moral and right may not always be aligned when we are looking at the bigger picture usually presented in narratives.

Additionally, such narratives also only loosely apply the morals of law, with murder and torture used freely countering Kant’s (1993: 36) humanist concept that everyone should ‘act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end’. The

decisions or wishes of the individual can be, at many times, at odds with the ‘greater good’ with discussions of whose ‘good’ we are considering also up for debate. However, within this area we can begin to define the idea of morality as it plays out within telefantasy narratives. An important consideration as the application of moral codes and the vacillation found within decisions affecting more than just an individual becomes a corner stone of the telefantasy narrative. Additionally, the use of religion varies within the genre but does find agreement in the concept that there is hypocrisy and inexactitude within organised faith. In turn actions, even those undertaken to literally save the world have unforeseen and very personal consequences for the shows’ protagonists. Williamson’s (2005: 80) pathos of the ‘melodramatic heroine’ in *Buffy* can be widened to speak to many of the central characters in telefantasy and especially those texts selected for specific examination in this work. They, the main protagonists, have the ‘strength with which to intervene in the circumstances [they] did not choose, and in this way [...] speak more directly to the experience of circumscribed choices’ (Williamson 2005: 80). In many cases the strength is supernatural; they are imbued with physical ability from a higher power. Or they are now the lucid other, infected but still functional, preternatural in their ability. Both are involved in struggles they did not ask for in roles they do not (always) want.

How ‘monsters’ and indeed humans are used within telefantasy does relate strongly to the foundational arguments of moral philosophy. Such ‘a disagreement about the objectivity of morality’ (Graham 2011: 1) found in the work of Plato and the Sophists, and onwards, reflects the tensions between subjectivity and objectivity located in the actions of the characters within these selected shows and beyond:

... Sophists believed that good and bad and right and wrong reflect *subjective* opinion and desire—how we as human beings and as individuals feel about things—Plato and Socrates believed that good

and bad and right and wrong are part of the objective nature of things—how the world around us really is. (Graham 2011: 2)

Such ‘simplified’ contrasts are offered through the decisions and actions of characters, as we shall later see, with the certainties and absolutes of earlier post-Universal monster narratives, for example the Hammer Horror cycle (1955-74), *The Living Dead* (1968) *They Live* (1988), and *The Evil Dead* franchise (1981 to 1992) where evil and good are easily identified, being subsumed to ambiguity and uneasiness with some of the choices characters are called upon to make. Indeed, it is where the ‘nature of things’ meets the concepts of ‘opinion and desire’ that the most interesting moral choices occur within these narratives, as Graham (2011: 11) confirms ‘morality is an aspect of human life that can engage our rational faculties as well as our feelings’. Such a connection is strongly offered within the chosen texts, primarily as central characters are in most cases placed in situations where they must walk a line between what might simplistically be termed good and evil, with concepts of ‘lawful behaviour’ sidelined for the convenience of narrative. Where in the past such distinctions and so associated actions were easy to define, ‘[t]he concept of the normal is properly a variant of the concept of the good’ (Benedict 1934: 35). The extended narratives of television, therefore, allow for deeper explorations of character, situation, and evolutionary opportunity meaning that such definitive ideas of morality have become a matter of moral degrees and discussion.

Telefantasy’s longer running time allows characters the space to evolve within the episodes no longer placed and maintained into one role within a show or film. A central part of this evolutionary aspect is the return to the use of moral ‘degrees’ seen in Gothic horror. Telefantasy’s use of the traditionally ‘bad’ monster as the (or a) central protagonist, challenging Benedict’s identification of the normal, in this case human, as automatically ‘good’. The use of the sentient zombie in *iZombie*, *Z Nation* and *ITF* mean that a traditional antagonist now gets a voice and a purpose as well as the viewer’s support, again a return to

the tropes of Gothic horror and the thinking/feeling ‘monster’. In *Supernatural*, *Lucifer* and *Buffy* although our heroes are, for the most part human, surrounding ‘monsters’ again have voices and motivations beyond only mindless killing and feeding, again adding ambiguity to the death and destruction dealt out in such narratives. This equivocal positioning is reflective of classic gothic horror literature and golden era Universal ‘monster’ movies inhabited by Braun’s (2000) ‘sympathetic’ vampire and in turn other ‘creatures’ of feeling. This work posits that telefantasy around and since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has offered both a return to and extension of the ambiguity of the sympathetic other. Through format and scope, which the use of the feeling abject enables, telefantasy utilises the potential for exploration of ‘monstrous’ deeds and the evolution of more enigmatic characters ‘concerned with the troubles and contradictions of contemporary society that lurk beneath the surface of reality or rather, hover in the half light dusk of the undead’ (Williamson 2014: 90). Telefantasy moves beyond the sympathetic monster to the debates surrounding action and consequence; repentance and revenge begin to inhabit the same plain and the moralities of both humans and monsters become uncertain.

As we shall explore, the moral quandaries that are encountered are not ‘just’ killing although many monsters still meet their demise in the selected texts but also torture, experimentation and oppression as ‘today’s viewing public is drawn to drama that engages intellectually, morally, and viscerally’ (Thompson 2015: 22). Although zombie films, in particular, have offered a forum for the exploration of social ills and supernatural fantasy has provided insight into the darker motivations of humanity, the longer running time offered in a TV series expands the scope of the ethical and moral dilemmas which can be offer. As Cover (2005: 73) confirms ‘the complexity of the relationship between performative subjecthood and invasive abjection can occur only through the longer narrative arcs made available in a multi-season series’. Each of the shows offers the fun of seeing ‘justice’ done, monsters are

killed when necessary and sometimes not, the audience is also asked to consider the concept of revenge and punishment and importantly the price of these desires on both the victim and the perpetrator. The moral ambiguities of characters in supernatural television displays an aspect which ‘permeates’ both human and inhuman characters (Braun 2000:89). Telefantasy then offers a landscape where ‘monsters are variously imagined as both desirable and loving toward, and terrifyingly indifferent to, human needs’ (Braun 2000: 94). Importantly the reverse is also true in telefantasy with humans being equally ambivalent to monsters and ordinary people. Within the realm of supernatural fantasy characters can vacillate between roles. As Braun (2000: 94) confirm,s a character can be corrupt and unrepentantly so in one episode of a series and truly good in the next . Within such moral changes lies the opportunity to consider that people have mixed motivations and needs. By blurring the boundaries of action and intent telefantasy provides the stage on which ‘the human predicament at depths that often elude more realistic representations (Braun, 2000: 94).

### **Moral Mazes and ‘Good’ and ‘Evil’ Characters in Telefantasy**

These moral mazes suggest we need to look at the concept of good and evil and how these initially simplistic terms are applied and explored within the narratives of supernatural horror on television. According to Vaughn (2016: 8) ‘many people believe that morality and religion are inseparable—that religion is the source or basis of morality’. Indeed in many of the selected texts, concepts such as the divine are explored or alluded to and find form within the basic notions of religious good and evil, wherein ‘the cosmos not only becomes intelligible as a “place” or state of interpersonal relationships, but also a moral-ethical process in which evil is ultimately transcended and injustices and wrongs are righted’ (Davies 2016: 32). Whether there is a need for religious belief as a foundation of morality could and has been debated. However, within each of the texts considered here there is a danger to humanity which must

be addressed, Davies' righting of wrongs, and a protagonist or protagonists who are able, if sometimes unwilling, to become a champion.

As Taylor (2013) suggests, the ways in which we might identify good within a character places that character within a situation where there is an expectation of self-sacrifice. The positioning of this action can be seen within the telefantasy as aligned with aspects of atonement, reparation or indeed penance alongside the serving of a greater good:

‘Good’ means a lack of self-centredness. It means the ability to empathize with other people, to feel compassion for them, and to put their needs before your own. It means, if necessary, sacrificing your own well-being for the sake of others’. It means benevolence, altruism and selflessness, and self-sacrifice towards a greater cause (Taylor, 2013)

Such ‘self-sacrifice’, importantly, carries a price for each protagonist and it is this individual cost which offers dimension to the character, as doing ‘good’ is not always as easy as it might seem. The danger is not necessarily just the threat of the ‘other’ but also the idea of the danger that humanity and its self-established importance poses for those not in that ‘club’. Additionally, it is important to note that the capacity for doing right of wrong is not solely reserved for one species, and that divisions which fall easily into concepts of good or evil are not always adhered to.

With this in mind it is relevant to consider that the ‘evils’ committed in telefantasy narratives are again a matter of degrees, with our central protagonists behaving in ways which come perilously close to the actions of the traditional villains within their story arcs:

‘Evil’ people are those who are unable to empathize with others. As a result, their own needs and desires are of paramount importance. They are selfish, self-absorbed, and narcissistic. In fact, other people only have value for them to the extent that they can help them satisfy their own desires or be exploited. (Taylor, 2013).

Taylor's definition works well especially for the narrativised concept of evil. Those positioned in roles defined as 'evil' do indeed offer these tendencies, but importantly at times so do the designated heroes of the texts. Such potential ambiguity and transient disenchantment with 'doing the right thing' means that we are offered complexities in the actions, behaviours, and motivations of characters that we would not receive in a more limited time frame. For example, in *BtVS*, *Prophecy Girl* (Se1 Ep12), Buffy rails against the foretelling of her death, the concept of predicted and so inescapable demise in contradiction to the needs of a teenager. Actions have consequences which can burn through entire seasons and beyond. For example in *Supernatural*, Dean selected to not offer details of his time in purgatory to his brother Sam, a decision which formed the basis for a rupture in their relationship for much of season 8 of the show. Importantly within telefantasy texts, such as *BtVS*, *Supernatural*, and *Lucifer*, differentiation and direction for heroes or ambiguous villains comes from the presence of others and a duty or connection to those people. As Taylor (2013) indicates, devaluing people is the defining aspect of an evil doer and therefore where allegiances lie there is a chance for good.

### **Religion and Science as Moral Structures in Telefantasy**

British and American dominant religious doctrines create a clear identification of good and evil, which is widely understood and has broadly become embedded in stereotyped hero and villain characters within the horror genre. In each of the chosen texts there is either an overt or covert consideration of the traditional Judeo-Christian religious expectations of heaven and hell, and the placement of good and evil, at a basic level within that established tradition. In some of the shows the existence of God and the Devil are explored in detail or if not are alluded to through the use of terminology reflective of such longstanding personifications of religious and associated moral behaviour. *BtVS*, *Supernatural*, and *Lucifer* make direct

reference to the physical sites of heaven and hell. In each characters are from and specific references are made to heaven and hell: in *Supernatural* and *Lucifer* they are also repeatedly visited. Through such initial binary oppositions there is raised the opportunity to redefine such assertions as problematic within the shows. Actions and reactions by characters challenging the ways in which good and evil might be recognised through the use of moral ambiguity, religious doctrine, and the sympathetic monster. The archetypes created from such associations to the bible and to existing genre expectations creates the space in which they are not simply repeated but also interrogated. The hypocrisies of the church and of religious doctrine in each are explored with the ambiguous other an important part of such challenges. Heaven and Hell become interchangeable concepts for those involved in these literal and figurative 'holy' wars, with the protagonists variously suffering for their voluntary and involuntary participation.

*Z Nation*, *iZombie* and *ITF* use religion differently and in a more covert manner, yet its application is still used as a short-cut to initial ideas of good and bad: its moralities and use problematised. Within these texts the source of the zombie infection is either ambiguous or man-made, with ideas of celestial involvement not approached. Religion is used as both palliative and control rather than actuator or regulator of events; ideas of salvation and redemption alongside retribution for suffered ills tied up in its presence. Each of the shows have zombie-related religious doctrines identified and used by their leaders for both positive and negative purposes. *Z Nation* has both the Resurrection Cult, a pathway to God with zombies identified as the holy resurrected, and the concept of 'mercy' being awarded through the killing of the infected. *ITF* has contrasting uses of the bible, firstly it is used as a conduit for vengeance against the infected via the character of Vicar Oddie, a cleric in the fire and brimstone tradition. Secondly, the bible and resurrection of Christ is aligned by the character

of 'The Undead Prophet' to the infected's experience. The figure of the fundamentalist cleric is also present in *iZombie*, as 'Brother Love' establishes a church which preaches to the disaffected and disenfranchised zombies of 'New Seattle'. Although each religion is offered as a potential place of hope for the outsider, the zombie other, it is also presented in each case as a deception with the leader of the congregation having hidden reasons for their devotions. Through direct acknowledgment of organised religion the ambiguity of the moral certainties it presents offers the opportunity to question and explore them. In telefantasy, actions undertaken for what is perceived as the 'greater good' may be considered and weighed against the decisions our protagonists will have to make in response.

Alongside the moral ambiguities presented by religion *Z Nation*, *ITF* and *iZombie* all explore the role of science and its associated claims to rectitude. In each there is an implication that science, although a possible ally and source of hope, can also be an unethical pursuit. Cures are sought and found in each of the shows and the various pathways to and implementations of the medication having varying moral costs. *Z Nation* and *ITF* offer actual or implied enforced experimentation to find a cure to the zombie infection, with *ITF* taking it one step further and offering a world of forced treatment and repatriation to humanity. Through such enforced experimentation and the slightly less contentious use of voluntary human guinea pigs, *iZombie* raises important questions regarding the concept of the greater good and also whether good and moral can necessarily always be identified within the same scope. In each of the zombie based shows science is shown to have its short-comings, either offering a 'cure' which has ambiguous consequences for the individual or wider society as in *ITF*. Or, as in *iZombie* and *Z Nation*, not fulfilling its promises fast enough to cure the infection. Consequently in each of the shows the religious observance underscores the lack of information humanity possesses in the zombie orientated narratives. When science is

deficient, then religion comes to the fore. Such decisions, individual need and want against the larger machinations of unseen powers both physical and metaphysical, means that telefantasy in these examples presents a range of consequences for the characters within them. Although such characters are free to act outside of conventional behaviours and principles there is importantly still a price to be paid somewhere.

### **Moral Ambiguity in Telefantasy**

Awareness of one's crimes, actions taken in a revenant state where normal behaviour is subverted or subsumed by 'evil' or indeed where a character has acted in line with their moral code, is an ongoing trope and one which offers the opportunity to consider the impact of sentience upon those influenced or infected within these narratives. In *Lucifer*, personal guilt and the inability to release one's self from that is the mechanism that condemns a person to hell, rather than a generalised weighing of value or action in the afterlife. Morality then in *Lucifer* is a key aspect of personal responsibility in all states and is therefore a key element of the narratives explored in the series. Such individual consideration is central also within *ITF* as central character Kieren must internally and externally atone for his actions when in a rabid state, his efforts to make peace with his actions both before (dying by suicide) and after death central to his narrative journey. Equally, our human heroes also have to learn to live with their decisions regardless of the moral certainties of their actions or their otherworldly sponsors. Such actions and their consequences are a central aspect of these texts. In a narrative world where the normal rules of justice seem not to apply, our characters must think about what they have done and indeed potentially carry that weight with them regardless of the services to humanity they have undertaken. In traditional zombie narratives

There is such comfort in the simplicity of knowing all one needs to do is to target the brain of the "other", destroy that "other's" brain, and the problem would be resolved; no diplomacy, no traditional ethical

considerations, no rational analysis, no compromise required  
(Thompson 2015: 23).

The ease of killing within all of the selected texts is still present because, as we have identified, part of the visceral pleasure is seeing villains overcome or destroyed. Moral ambiguity therefore most strongly links to the killing of other sentient beings, the concepts of remorse or lack thereof and the discussions that are raised when we as an audience (and the characters) are reminded that those who are being killed are aware of their fate, have agency and cannot so easily be placed into the box marked evil.

The narratives of supernatural horror tend to take humanity's 'side' as a matter of course, the entertainment offered in such narratives being the actions taken by those remaining or pitted against acknowledged 'evil' to survive or end the threat. When sentience is out of the picture, these actions find a home in visceral action, killing of the threat in exciting and in some cases imaginative ways which offer the thrill of violence and anticipation to the viewer. When we introduce characters in the telefantasy genre who were traditionally threatening but now have a voice, the narrative changes and the effects of such violence begin to become increasingly acknowledged and explored. For example, the presence of vampires as normally soulless creatures in *BtVS*, who may be punished with knowledge of their crimes when 'cursed' with a soul, alongside the character of Oz's somewhat aware werewolf, offers a way to explore the feelings of 'monsters' about their actions. The treated zombies in *ITF* primarily through the central characters of Kieren and Amy, the zombies in *iZombie* and *Z Nation*, and the many sentient 'monsters' of *Supernatural*, all continue this potential to understand the feelings of those once so easily ignored or discounted.

At this point it is perhaps salient to consider why we as an audience should care about the moralities of the characters in these telefantasies and their moral ambiguity. To explore the reasons for the inclusion of moral discussion and questions about the actions of our heroes we need to consider what value complexity and moral ambiguity hold for a spectator. Initially we can look to the elements which remain, the thrill of violence seen within the shows and the physical prowess of our heroes as they dispatch their enemies. Graham (2011: 14) points towards a wider need for justice to be served in society: ‘while personal virtues like friendliness and generosity are certainly to be valued, we can get by without them. But justice is indispensable for social life. That is why it warrants force—compelling people to act against their choice or preference’. With this in mind we can look to telefantasy as a conduit through which justice might be apportioned but also that actions are not always aligned with an accepted morality. Importantly characters in telefantasy offer ambiguities even when they deal in ‘justice’, with judgements meted out in service of both personal and common ‘good’. It is in these moments of compulsion where the narratives of the identified shows find their edge and can generate real consideration of action and consequence upon a character.

When we speak of justice and punishment in telefantasy, there tends to be a focus upon the gifts or extraordinary physicality and ability of all of the protagonists and the fate of all concerned. Our central characters tend to be able or skilled in their actions, and the ensuing fights and deaths/injuries are strongly entertaining elements of any of these shows. When it comes to death, those they deal out tend to be graphic and violent. More broadly, ‘[i]f we look at representation of death in popular culture as a media form, sometimes we see very graphic, gruesome, sensational forms of death’ (Penfold-Mounce 2020). To be able to reach such sensationality we need able and skilled characters who can fight and wield the many specialist weapons which accompany many of these telefantasy narratives. Violence in

its many forms finds a focus within the telefantasy, both as attraction but also as portal to wider discussions of morality and justice. The near equality of fighting means that the protagonists and antagonists all have honed and visually exciting fighting skills, although in many cases if it is a fight to the death it is not necessarily the scramble of survival seen in older monster or zombie movies. Yet the assistance of the protagonists' friends offers the opportunity to see a range of characters involved in the punishing of perceived threats to humanity. All of the selected telefantasy texts discussed in this work move between the two aspects, with the extraordinary protagonists eventually needing the assistance of their more ordinary friends or family. Within the world of supernatural fantasy, deaths can be differently sensational but still gruesome. The act of dispatching a monster or an enemy tends to be a visceral experience, the use of stakes or knives being central to the process of such violence. This intimate method of murder, morally instigated or otherwise, adds a sense of extremity and ruthlessness which works in part to counter those moments when sentience gets in the way of the wish to attack. Such closeness in death offers the narrative opportunity to consider the cost of such actions to those dealing it. The individual consequences experienced and endured are an important aspect of a characters evolution.

### **Redress, Revenge and Malevolence in Telefantasy**

Graham's (2011:14) assertion of the importance of justice – that 'justice is indispensable for social life' – is an interesting one when placed within the context of the selected texts, where ideas of right and redress are mixed with revenge and malevolence. Specifically the selected zombie based texts take such ideas more strongly forwards as we encounter characters who, as with *BtVS's* Angel, committed acts while not in control but who now must live among those they hurt and fully aware of their actions. In *ITF* and *iZombie* we find new societies where zombies are amongst the living majority. *ITF's* treated zombies Partially Deceased

Syndrome sufferers (PDS) may return to their homes after the violence of the ‘The Rising’. *iZombie* offers in contrast a ghettoised ‘sentient’ zombie population ‘treated’ with rationed brains. In each text the wider human majority lives in fear of being overtaken, while those infected live in fear of also being ‘overtaken’ and succumbing to their contagion.

The Human Volunteer Force (HVF) in *ITF* and the The Dead Enders and CHICS (Concerned Humans Imposing Common Sense) in *iZombie* dedicate themselves to the eradication of those infected. Each series considers the forced integration of the infected with the living, *ITF*’s PDS sufferers into the communities they ravaged and zombies in New Seattle in *iZombie*. In each series we find humanity’s (and in turn the infected’s) capacity and wish for revenge flourishing. Concepts of protection and justice are at odds with the zombie communities in each series. In *ITF* Hunting parties chase ‘rotters’ and government policies seek to position the sentient PDS afflicted as second-class citizens, perpetually punished for actions outside of their control. While in *iZombie*, segregation and forced identification of those infected is a central theme. ‘Justice’ is meted out on an individual’s whim with moral righteousness identified by either side of the scenario, human or zombie.

The post-apocalyptic scenario of *Z Nation* offers a slightly different landscape of a world ravaged by a zombie infection. However, once again the moralities of the traditional zombie genre the ‘kill or be killed’ scenario are challenged when it is found that those infected have both the beginnings of returning sentience and can be treated. That treatment is possible (vaccine in *ITF*, an ambiguous cure in *Z Nation* and human brains initially in *iZombie*) positions the actions of those terminating zombies as morally wrong. Primarily this is because of their potential to return to humanity, but also within *iZombie* and *Z Nation* larger questions of the possible benefits to humanity of a zombie bite (infection in *iZombie*

halts the death of the terminally ill) and the implications of a new sentient species (*Z Nation* offers the notion of the ‘blended’ a hybrid of human and zombie, a possible evolutionary leap).

Concepts of revenge and reprisal and the associated gratification for both character and audience are aspects which are seen within many of telefantasy shows and in particular in those selected for discussion in this work. The character of 10k is introduced in SE1 Ep1 of *Z Nation*. His goal is to kill 10,000 of the creatures and he displays his ability by picking off zombies at a distance with his slingshot. Importantly he is shooting for distanced retribution rather than immediate survival, the audience offered pleasure in his skill and developing role. In *Supernatural* the first season offers this concept of retribution through the protagonists’ desire for reprisal for the murder of their mother. The growth of Sam and Dean’s skills and knowledge of the evils of the world grows across the series, as is the case with 10k again offering pleasure through the characters’ evolution and action. Revenge and reprisal also can be found within the *iZombie* narrative once more through the knowledge gaining and development of Liv, our central zombie protagonist. This idea of revenge, either intimate or more generalised is frequently encountered in telefantasy with the moralities of keeping promises or taking retribution explored through the choices and motivations of the characters. Revenge and pleasure are close bedfellows within the chosen shows and concepts of wholesale slaughter and torture are central elements within their exploration.

### **Torture in Telefantasy**

It is the use of torture that feeds further into the ethical debates which continue to be central to discussions of moral conduct in these texts. In terms of the moral uncertainties embraced by telefantasy, torture is used frequently. It is a practice which draws a fine line for the

audience between pleasure and revulsion, the moral righteousness of the act narratively giving way to the reality of the actions when we are reminded of the ‘humanity’ at the centre of the monster. Additionally, because we now have more sentient and articulate monsters the idea of torture might also be extended to the experiences of those once infected or possessed.

To explore the memories of actions undertaken in a revenant state offers a pathway to a greater generation of sympathy for the monster that must exist with their actions. *ITF*, *iZombie*, *BtVS*, and *Lucifer* all explore this concept: what it is to live with the involuntary acts of another existence. These two forms of torture are each important in their own way. In *Supernatural* torture is used by all manner of characters, demon, seraphim, and human alike. This ethically amoral practice finds a space within the narrative that is ongoing and both character and narratively driven. The combination of the archaic and modern that these examples of telefantasy inhabits offers a potential reason for the acceptance of the visceral violence that torture represents. The weapons of telefantasy, when used, reflect the historic connections of the protagonists functioning in a contemporary world. Blades, axes and stakes alongside teeth and claws connect the violence to an intimate act (torture is a very good example of such intimacy), one which is removed from the distance of the gun, a less frequently and successfully used weapon in such shows. Such plots offer the need to do what is right and not what is necessarily moral in everyday terms but also explores the individual’s price for taking such actions.

Conversely, *Lucifer*’s torture specifically centres on the human experience although it is useful to note that Lucifer too is a tortured soul who cannot forgive himself. Within the series Hell’s torture focusses upon the individual’s inability to forgive themselves, their purgatory of repetition ongoing until they acknowledge their ability to absolve themselves.

The need for the individual to forgive themselves of their actions is an aspect of telefantasy which is repeated. Similar considerations are offered within the conscious zombie narratives of *ITF*, *iZombie* and *Z Nation*, the infected in each case having the potential (and in *ITF* and *iZombie* actual) ability to function within the world and suppress or control their abject actions. Each treated or sentient zombie remembers their actions and in the case of central protagonists of *ITF* and *iZombie* regret their actions and are fearful of returning to a revenant and uncontrolled state. In these fears of becoming a full ravenous zombie, a ‘Romero’ to use *iZombie*’s intertextual term for such a creature, the central characters perform a kind of self torture as they live with regret and fear.

Telefantasy asks the audience to move from clear concepts of good and evil to more ambiguous readings of characters motivations and actions, seating the narrative in moral grey areas rather than clearly identifiable as right or wrong. A useful example can be seen in *Supernatural*, Ep3 Se7, Amy, a kitsune – a creature which sucks from the brain’s pituitary gland - spares Sam’s life when they are both children and then lives from mortuary offerings as an adult. When Amy begins killing sketchy people locally, the Winchester brothers become involved and Sam rediscovers his childhood friend. Amy is warned away by Sam, a moral act and a debt honoured when we consider she killed her mother to save his life, and in the world of the Winchesters such actions must be recognised. Amy could easily be seen as threat; she sustains from the already dead (as does Liv in *iZombie*) and when killing she chooses those who many might say ‘deserved it’. Ostensibly we might say Amy is on the side of right, her actions not necessarily detracting from an imperfect situation. Dean’s worldview means that he judges Amy and kills her. She is a monster and will always revert despite her assurances to her monstrosity. Her child Jacob witnesses his mother’s murder and becomes a new cog in the wheels of revenge upon which the series partly runs. Botting’s (2002: 286)

assertation that ‘excluded figures once represented as malevolent, disturbed, or deviant monsters are rendered more humane while the systems that exclude them assume terrifying, persecutory, and inhuman shape’ is highly relevant here. Sam’s actions stand in opposition to Dean’s trenchant approach, embracing the penumbra that telefantasy inhabits. For Sam there are justifications and a debt to be repaid within the boundaries of a world which is at once aligned with and at odds with our shared reality.

### **‘Others’ and Outsiders in Telefantasy**

Concepts of persecution, and what that means to characters and audience members, become more central when we utilise the contemporary articulate and conscious ‘other’ within our narratives. To act morally and correctly is something which many audience members would wish to do. To generalise about audiences of such fictions, many have perhaps felt excluded or peripheral to mainstream actions and groups, with such experiences reflected in *Buffy*, *Supernatural*, *Lucifer*, and *ITF* characters’ experiences. Such narrative directions, a return and, in the case of the demon and the zombie, an evolution towards the fuller Gothic inflected exploration of the complex ‘monster’, raise useful conversations when we compare the ideas of right and wrong so clearly presented in horror iterations of the post-gothic and post-Universal classic monster genre. As Botting (2002: 286) emphasises:

Where the restoration of symbolic, normative boundaries was celebrated in the violent climaxes to older tales of terror, monstrous figures are now less often terrifying objects of animosity expelled in the return to social and symbolic equilibrium. Instead, they retain a fascinating, attractive appeal: no longer objects of hate or fear, monstrous others become sites of identification, sympathy, desire, and self-recognition (Botting 2002: 286).

Telefantasy offers the audience the opportunity to experience being an outsider, one who does not fit or follow the mainstream conventions of society and for whom that separation is both a blessing and a curse. Importantly for some with outsider status they are also gifted or

‘called’ to their role. Buffy is ‘the chosen one’, the Winchester brothers identified by higher powers to play out their stories and Lucifer literally a fallen angel.

To be an outsider may be a minus in the real world but within the telefantasy such characters are extraordinary, although not always happy with their lot. Williamson’s ‘outsiderdom and ambiguity’ finally truly speaking ‘not to one set of disavowed experiences, but many’ (2014:90) as the sympathetic vampire gives way to a myriad of comprehending ‘others’. The telefantasy genre has offered inclusion to the zombie, giving voice, conscience and actuation to the traditionally literally and metaphorically empty body. In the supernatural text such ‘outsiderdom’ can be seen as a mark of specialness, individuality or finding oneself and a greater role in the world. We have circled from the gothic articulate, through the intervening monstrous and back again, where contemporary creatures have motivations beyond simply feeding and voices and agency to articulate their narratives. Alongside this shift we are also asked as an audience whether some of those ostracised monstrous characters deserve to be and in turn if some of the accepted humans warrant such inclusion as we are reminded that ‘underneath our civilized demeanors, we all have the capacity for evil (Braun 2000:94). Through such considerations the sympathetic monstrous (both human and conscious abject) become representatives of the disenfranchised and voiceless allowing those stories to be explored at one remove in the most affirmative traditions of telefantasy.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately how humans treat ‘others’ is a way of exploring the frailty of humanity and how we might hope to improve ourselves. Through the application of divine or otherworldly concepts within telefantasy, simplistic notions of good and evil are introduced but within these initially primitive concepts the format of the shows allows for more complex

explorations of ambiguous morality and ethical responsibility. Via the narratives and characters of telefantasy we can consider the moralities of imposing human need and desire upon the 'other'. These stories encourage the exploration of revenge and justice via extremes of action and outside of the everyday laws which govern such matters, empowering characters to take agency in situations that the spectator cannot. By giving the voiceless voice, via the thinking and feeling 'monster', telefantasy enables discussions regarding many general ethical and moral dilemmas, framing them in ways which encourage consideration rather than dismissal. As entertainment, the violence of justice and revenge, explored outside of the law, produces a visceral thrill and engages the viewer at that level of gratification. If, as Botting (2002) identifies, the monstrous can be made more humane through the realisation of the systems which act to repress and persecute them in the name of humanity then through these enfranchised 'others' of telefantasy we can, in turn, find routes to understanding that the application of discussions of morality within such texts is a central element of the enjoyment of the show for the audience. By allowing an audience to consider the actions of protagonists and consider the ambiguities within that behaviour, we can find a richer narrative stream and more opportunities to explore our reactions to moral and ethical quandaries.

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