

The Strain (FX, 2014-17)

Adapted from a trilogy of novels of the same name co-written by Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan, the TV series *The Strain* (2014-2017) combines elements of Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula*, del Toro's auteur style of storytelling, and post-9/11 anxieties, updating vampire-focused horror fiction for a contemporary audience. The show begins with a clear parallel to *Dracula*'s journey to England, with a plane, in place of the novel's ship, landing in New York before going into radio silence. Fearing a possible terrorist attack, the CDC (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention) sends Dr Ephraim Goodweather (Corey Stoll) to investigate. On-board, he discovers that all the passengers are dead and that they are infected with parasitic worms. It is revealed that the plane was carrying The Master (voiced by Robin Atkin Downes), a vampire who aims to spread an epidemic throughout New York City, which will turn as many civilians into vampires as possible. The *Dracula* parallels continue throughout the pilot, as for example with the introduction of Abraham Setrakian (David Bradley), who is a clear analogue for Abraham Van Helsing, and is a key component of the show's conscious echoes of its source material. The programme as a whole focuses on a ragtag group of survivors, ranging from pest exterminator Fet (Kevin Durand), to retired luchador Angel (Joaquín Cosío), and a number of others who are forced to work together to stop the vampires.

The choice to adapt the novels into a television series instead of a film means that the narrative has more time to develop the characterisation of The Master and his vampires – who are referred to as 'Strigoi' (a term derived from Eastern-European folklore). Over the course of four seasons, the infectious outbreak spreads across New York and society crumbles, as The Master tightens his stranglehold over the city; in the fourth season, the Strigoi transform America into a dystopian police state. *The Strain* effectively balances two interconnected narratives, both with a distinct mood and tone: the show combines science fiction, as Goodweather tries to cure the disease, and gothic horror, in the scenes focused on The Master. The rules of how infection works are established early on and reinforced through scenes of lab experiments and autopsies, which serve to give the virus a pseudo-scientific grounding. Unlike much vampire fiction, which often ignores the exact mechanics of how vampirism works, *The Strain* thus compellingly applies the CDC's methods for investigating viral outbreaks to the supernaturalism of vampires. Stock horror clichés, such as vampires being vulnerable to sunlight, are now therefore explained in terms of physiology.

During the production of the pilot episode, del Toro stated, 'I'm trying to do what I do in my movies, which is to show it as a reality, but as a reality that is stylized. It's not like *CSI* or *The Wire*, it's real but it feels a little stylized'.¹ To produce this effect, *The Strain* employs multiple scenes of body horror. For example, the worms used to infect people with the virus are often shown in close-up shots burrowing into the eyes of their victims, simultaneously fascinating and disgusting viewers. Indeed, a poster advertising the premiere depicting a worm inside someone's bloodied eye in extreme close-up, with the gloved hand of a doctor holding it open, was removed from billboards in America after public complaints.² The depiction of the vampires extends this commitment to body horror; del Toro's fascination with monsters is a central theme in the majority of his cinematic works, from *Mimic* (1997) to *The Shape of Water* (2017), and the Strigoi are no exception.³ Rather than the romantic vampires popular in recent films, the Strigoi are animalistic, and the show highlights their visceral nature, focusing on their feeding habits and bodily fluids. With the exception of Quinlan (Rupert Penry-Jones), a tragic anti-hero vampire, who is introduced in the second season, the Strigoi are presented as unsympathetic figures and are increasingly visually coded as fascists. Bearing a strong resemblance to Max Schreck's Count Orlok from F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), the vampires are dehumanised, depicted as bald, marble-skinned predators who hunt in packs, unable to speak or think as individuals. The most striking element that differentiates them from other cinematic vampires is that they do not attack their victims with the traditional neck biting (and the sexual frisson that it connotes). Instead, they attack from a distance by using protruding stingers that emerge from their mouths, allowing them to drain their victim's blood and force the infectious worms inside them, as to so add another unwilling victim to The Master's army of vampires.

As well as portraying its vampires as feral, violent animals, *The Strain* employs vampirism as a metaphor for fascism. Flashbacks in the first season explore Setrakian's experiences as a Holocaust survivor, and his first encounters with The Master and Eichhorst (Richard Sammel), a vampire Nazi who serves as The Master's emissary. Those who are infected lose their identities, becoming mere vessels through which The Master imposes his

¹ Eddie Wright, 'Interview: Guillermo del Toro Takes *The Strain* to Dark Horse and Beyond', *MTV News*, 11 December 2012 <<http://www.mtv.com/news/2627191/interview-guillermo-del-toro-the-strain/>> [accessed 24 May 2018].

² Alex Ben Block, 'The Strain: FX Changing Controversial Billboards After Negative Reaction', *Hollywood Reporter*, 27 June 2014 <<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/strain-fx-changing-controversial-billboards-715542>> [accessed 24 May 2018].

³ Anne Thompson, 'Guillermo del Toro Interview: "At Home with Monsters" and That Missing Sketchbook', *IndieWire*, 8 August 2016 <<http://www.indiewire.com/2016/08/guillermo-del-toro-interview-at-home-with-monsters-lacma-museum-sketchbook-1201711728/>> [accessed 27 May 2018].

will on society. Indeed, in the second season, it is revealed that The Master can transfer his mind into other bodies to change his physical appearance. This can be read as a metaphor for the ways in which fascism can invade or overtake minds and erase individuality; The Master's voice comes from many bodies throughout the series, mirroring the erasure of individuality beneath the weight of a leader's ideologies.

In the fourth and final season, this vampirism-as-fascism subtext comes to the forefront, when the vampires use nuclear weapons to block out the sun and overthrow the American government, effectively controlling human society (the state of the rest of the world is largely ignored, and the show remains largely New York-centric). The *mise-en-scène* alters significantly in the last ten episodes to reflect this shift, becoming more claustrophobic and bleak, with a ruined Manhattan becoming a prison made up of dirty, dimly lit streets and constantly blaring propaganda, as the increasingly oppressed humans are rounded into concentration camps to be farmed for blood. These scenes use imagery associated with the Holocaust to explore the consistent and reoccurring nature of totalitarian societies. The flashbacks in the first season set in real-world Nazi concentration camps can be seen as a somewhat crass – adding a supernatural monster like a vampire into historical scenes of trauma could be seen as downplaying real-life human evil and as disrespectful to the suffering caused. By contrast, the modern dystopian scenes of the later season set in the show's present are more allegorical, distanced from historical events through a fictional, post-apocalyptic backdrop, allowing the show to comment directly on the nature of fascism.⁴

In addition to this figurative backdrop, as with many of del Toro's projects, *The Strain* employs imagery drawn directly from the gothic-horror and fantasy genres. Despite the fact that del Toro predominantly served as executive producer (taking on directing duties only for the pilot and two short segments within episodes directed by others, out of the forty-six that aired), elements of his distinctive gothic style can be identified throughout the series. For example, the set design of the villainous Eldritch Palmer's (Johnathan Hyde) office is made up of high ceilings with huge windows overlooking the city, decorated with strange medical devices and hearts in jars.⁵ Similarly, in his first appearances, The Master is reminiscent of a ghoul from Victorian-era horror, appearing with his face covered and being noticeably taller than the other characters, recalling characters such as Victor Frankenstein's creature. As the

⁴ Amber Dowling, 'How *The Strain* is Redefining Itself in Its Final Season', *Hollywood Reporter*, 16 August 2017 <<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/strain-showrunner-season-4-premiere-1021090>> [accessed 30 August 2018].

⁵ Julia Echeverría, 'Pathogens, Vermin, and Strigoi: Contagion Science and Vampire Myth in Guillermo del Toro's *The Strain*', *Journal of Science and Popular Culture*, 1.1 (2018), 43-57.

character is fleshed out, his appearance becomes more mundane – in the final season, with the Strigoi becoming the dominant species, The Master wears a business suit, the monsters no longer having to hide in the shadows from humans. In addition, a non-scientific mythology built up around the origin of the Strigoi is explored in the later seasons, with pseudo-historical flashbacks set during the Roman Empire tracing The Master's backstory. These two strands, the scientific and horrific, become increasingly connected and interdependent as the story unfolds over several seasons – as Goodweather treats the Strigoi in terms of fighting a disease, Setrakian sees the Master as the cause of a more philosophical battle between good and evil, producing a contrast that often serves as an intriguing source of friction between the two characters.

As all of this suggests, *The Strain* brings together disparate ideas and imagery that have been central to the gothic and horror genres since *Dracula*. However, del Toro's creative input and the story-telling opportunities presented by modern television allow for an inventive twist on a familiar monster story, by grounding the fantastical within a modern, post-9/11 context. As a film, *The Strain* would have struggled to stand out within the crowded vampire genre, but as a television series, it successfully balances its influences and ambitions, and carves out a niche for itself as a distinctive piece of vampire horror.

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