

The Purge

(Blumhouse Television, 2018-19)

The *Purge* franchise has seen significant box-office success over the course of four feature films – *The Purge* (2013), *The Purge: Anarchy* (2014), *The Purge: Election Year* (2016), all of which are directed by James DeMonaco, and *The First Purge* (dir. by Gerard McMurray, 2018). Following the release of the prequel film, *The First Purge*, the franchise then expanded into television, with a ten-episode spin-off miniseries airing later in the same year. The premise of *The Purge* is an intriguing thought experiment: what if, for twelve hours a year, all crime was legal? The series takes place in a totalitarian United States controlled by the ‘New Founding Fathers of America’ (NFFA), who have established ‘the Purge’ as an annual holiday, during which all law and order is suspended for a night. Ostensibly, the Purge has been put in place to reduce criminal activity: citizens indulge in violence ‘for one night only,’ with the understanding that all bloodlust is consequently exorcised and exonerated for the rest of the year. However, it slowly becomes increasingly apparent that the Purge is in fact a deliberate form of social cleansing, designed specifically to cull the population. In many ways, the Purge resembles Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the ‘carnavalesque’ – where the normal hierarchy and conventions of society are temporarily suspended for a time of bodily excess and social subversion – but here these ideas are taken to violent extremes.¹

The films serve as a sort of anthology of different stories, and the TV show adopts a similar style. The first season is set over one night of the Purge in 2027, with episodes focusing on an ensemble cast of characters and their experiences during this event, the narrative cutting back and forth between the different protagonists’ viewpoints within each episode. The various characters include Miguel (played by Gabriel Chavarria), a soldier trying to rescue his sister Penelope (Jessica Garza) from a cult; Rick (Colin Woodell) and Jenna (Hannah Anderson), a couple trying to climb the social ladder at a party for the elite; Jane (Amanda Warren), a financial worker who decides to kill her boss to get past a glass ceiling; and Joe (Lee Tergesen), a disenfranchised blue-collar worker who uses Purge Night as a chance to act as a vigilante. These characters start off largely unconnected, but as the series progresses, these stories become increasingly intertwined, finally coming together in the season finale.

¹ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

The series keeps close visual and thematic ties with the films, drawing on thoroughly familiar iconography that has become ingrained in the franchise: people panicking before the Purge, sirens declaring the start of the night, and then scenes of the protagonists being menaced by masked psychopaths and avoiding danger on the streets until the narrative climax, when the sun rises, the Purge ends, and normality is restored. The biggest change in the adaptation from cinema to television is pacing; although set over the course of one night, the ten hours of runtime, compared to two hours of a film, enables more characterisation and more exploration of the moral 'greyness' of the protagonists. The show uses flashbacks to fill in character backstories, something normally relegated to the opening scenes of each film, allowing, in this instance, for deeper character development. Moreover, as the franchise's creator, James DeMonaco, explained in an interview, 'the real estate of TV lets us truly analyze why anyone would resort to violence on Purge Night', comparing the 'slower burn' of television pacing to the 'punch in the face' events of a feature film.²

With this increased focus on characterisation, the television version of the franchise relies less on showing acts of violence simply for shock value. The franchise centres on an inherently violent premise, but the depiction of violence in the television series is notably more restrained, which is perhaps surprising, given the fact that violent imagery on television has become more commonplace, and less prone to censorship in recent years. Though people are stabbed, shot, and burned alive in *The Purge*, the violence shown is not overtly graphic, especially compared to other contemporary horror-themed television shows such as *The Walking Dead* (2010-present). Showrunner Thomas Kelly stated that the aim was not to 'revel in the violence' but rather to explore '[h]ow does violence echo out; how does it reverberate; how does it change and color these characters' lives and the story itself?'³

Though depictions of murder and torture are part of *The Purge*, the violence is not designed to titillate the audience, and is not focused on in an exploitative or fetishised style, but rather as something repulsive and to be feared. For example, several episodes see Miguel infiltrating the 'Carnival of Flesh', a fair where people can pay to torture and murder innocent victims in booths themed around various historical atrocities. Like Bakhtin's carnival, this is a place of chaos, where normal notions of society and morality are suspended, and indulgence and excess are celebrated. Rather than linger on these booths, the camera quickly cuts

² Clark Collis, 'The Purge TV Show Will Mostly Take Place on Purge Night After All', *Entertainment Weekly*, 4 May 2018 <<https://ew.com/tv/2018/05/04/the-purge-tv-show-details/>> [accessed 17 April 2019].

³ Danielle Turchiano, 'The Purge Boss Breaks Down Series Politics, Violence, and Flashbacks', *Variety*, 3 September 2018 <<https://variety.com/2018/tv/features/the-purge-thomas-kelly-usa-politics-violence-interview-1202912453/>> [accessed 17 May 2019].

between them, giving the audience information on what is happening, without allowing them to revel in the spectacle – there is enough violence shown to titillate the audience, but the lack of explicit detail allows the show sufficient moral distance to criticise the cruelties being inflicted, and avoid accusations of exploitation. In one episode, Miguel sees one of his friends from the army at the Carnival, and finds that his friend expresses no shame or remorse in paying to torture and murder civilians, nor does he mention a motive for his actions, aside from the fact that the Purge gives him the chance to. It is in moments like this that the series is most effective in evoking a sense of horror. By humanising the people who carry out acts of violence on Purge Night, the audience is shown that the main characters aren't overcoming a faceless Other, or inhuman monsters, but that the people under the masks are the people you know – people like us – who have chosen to give up their humanity and turn on their fellow citizens for pleasure.

Social commentary and satire have been prominent elements in the films, with considerable focus on the class divide in America, which shows a world where the gap between the rich and poor has grown to the point of actual conflict. The TV version of *The Purge* uses these elements in a way that is not always subtle, but does serve to ground an outrageous premise in a wider social context. In the Carnival of Flesh, violence is commercialised, as abducted victims are forced into cattle pens for people to purchase at auction, scenes which invoke the imagery of the historical slave trade, contextualising the franchise's central premise within the uncomfortable realism of America's past. *The First Purge*, released earlier the same year, commented on the Trump administration by referencing symbolism used by left-wing protestors in recent years, as the film warns against public apathy towards politics. Despite the clear human-rights abuses committed by the New Founding Fathers, America falls into dystopia by the end of the film, in line with the warnings of the protestors. While *The Purge* television show doesn't take aim at a single political figure or movement overall in quite the same way, then, there is still plenty of social commentary. The series takes ideas that have become major topics of debate – sexual harassment, and differences between healthy and toxic masculinity, and so on – and deconstructs them via the exaggerated world of the Purge.

With the #MeToo movement bringing discussions of sexism into the public sphere, sexual harassment is a major topic, especially within Jane's season arc. In one episode, Jane's boss Ryker (William Baldwin) is revealed to have kidnapped women and kept them tied up for his sexual gratification, while ranting nostalgically about the 'old days' when sexual

harassment was normalised as a part of corporate culture. Ryker therefore functions as an avatar for the recent conservative backlash against progressive ideals. The character of Joe represents another contemporary fear – the ‘lone-wolf’ terrorist. At first, Joe’s vigilantism against Purgers seems to be a positive force, as he rescues innocent victims of violence, but the final episodes reveal that he has become self-radicalised due to his failure to find a healthy outlet for his economic and social frustrations, and has constructed an elaborate revenge fantasy, putting the other characters through a mock trial for slights against him, both real and imagined. Joe’s character therefore references the figure of the mass shooter – someone who has a psychological break and seeks revenge on society, a problem that remains a constant source of violence and danger that America has struggled to deal with in recent years. Indeed, there are clear satirical parallels between the ongoing gun debate and *The Purge*: throughout the franchise, supporters of the holiday often justify the violence by citing that the right to purge is enshrined in the American Constitution, mirroring the ways in which the Second Amendment has hindered attempts to curb gun violence.

The second season has no direct narrative connections to the first, and moves the setting to the city of New Orleans in an unspecified year, with a new cast of characters who again find their stories intersecting over the course of the season. The new protagonists are Esme (Paola Núñez), a surveillance analyst for the NFFA; Marcus (Derek Luke), a doctor with a Purge-Night bounty on his head; Ryan (Max Martini), a bank robber planning a Purge-Night bank heist, and Ben (Joel Allen), a college student who self-radicalises after a traumatic Purge experience. The biggest departure from the first season is that this one largely takes place in the year-long gap between two Purges. The first episode opens in the closing hours of one Purge Night, and then the bulk of the season takes place in the months leading up to the next annual Purge, with title cards counting down the remaining number of days, and the final episodes taking place during this anticipated Purge.

One of the themes of this season is corruption, as the characters challenge the NFFA’s claims that the Purge is good for society. Esme finds that evidence of the Purge’s failings is being suppressed, and has to go on the run from a system for which she previously worked. Ryan and his crew are former police officers, who resigned after discovering their Captain’s criminal activity. Marcus finds himself increasingly crossing moral lines in his search for who wants him killed. In the most violent of the four storylines, Ben becomes obsessed with the mask worn by his attacker and escalates to committing murder while wearing it during the year, undermining the NFFA’s entire rationale for the Purge. The other major theme is

predatory capitalism, with people using the Purges as money-making opportunities. Each episode has a ‘cold opening’, using a darkly comedic vignette themed around the Purge as an extreme extension of American capitalism. For example, in one such opening, the board of a company that manufactures masks sees media coverage of Ben’s crimes, and decides to quickly mass produce replicas of his mask before Purge Night to capitalise on the controversy, regardless of any ethical concern (the fact that Ben’s mask is a reused design from *The Purge: Anarchy* may serve here as a jokingly self-referential commentary on the real-world merchandising that has accompanied the franchise). Moving beyond the other texts within the franchise, which all take place on Purge night, this series therefore expands the setting and narrative by finally exploring what this society is like the rest of the year. Engaging with themes and ideas such as trauma, government surveillance, and revenge, to name a few, the series further contextualises the dystopia and social commentary established in earlier instalments.

An anthology series set in the world of *The Purge* had lots of potential for deconstructing and satirising current events. As these examples suggest, with the faster production time that television provides compared to film, the series is able to tap into the cultural zeitgeist much more deeply than the more generalised approach to issues surrounding class tensions that the films offered. Although the show was cancelled after two seasons, it realises the flexible storytelling opportunities of the franchise. While the original 2013 film functioned as a satire on class division, the expansion of the political commentary into further fields, such as gender politics, proves to be a seam that the show can mine effectively, if unsubtly, to explore new topics.

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