

We're Done With the *Independence Day* Era of American Cinema
American violence was always a horror story — not against aliens, but its own citizens.

In a pivotal moment of Roland Emmerich's 1996 sci-fi action blockbuster *Independence Day*, the film's fictional POTUS delivers an impassioned speech to the U.S. fighter pilots, who are about to embark on a last-ditch, full-throttle battle against the alien race terrorizing the planet. "Perhaps it's fate that today is the Fourth of July, and you will once again be fighting for our freedom," he says, as the distinctly '90s orchestral score swells in the background. "We will not vanish without a fight! We're going to live on; we're going to survive! Today, we celebrate our *Independence Day!*" The speech is met with immediate cheering and whooping from the troops.

The sequence is a schmaltzy slab of American exceptionalism, a rousing lead-up to the guns-ablaze climactic battle that follows. It also serves as the perfect centerpiece to a film that follows the most prized storyline in our nation's mythology, imagining a large-scale exterior threat to our democratic utopia that we must overcome through perseverance and good old-fashioned warfare. It's a narrative dear to American culture, even serving as the subject of our national anthem, and it follows the same logic underlying America's reverence for its troops: the notion that fighting – i.e. committing violent acts – for one's country is the most patriotic thing an American can do. It places violence on a pedestal as a means to American heroism and makes warfare a source of national pride, a way for Americans to protect themselves against the "Other." In the case of *Independence Day*, this "Other" is extraterrestrial. But the threat often rears its head far closer to home.

Turn on the news, and this nationalist fantasy comes crashing down. Each day seems to bring word of another mass shooting, hate crime, or other senseless attack. Violence in America goes far beyond the fight for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, beyond defending our nation against the Other. It is not something that unifies us as Americans — it divides us.

In *Independence Day*, the president tells his troops that Americans "can't be consumed by [their] petty differences anymore." Keeping with the film's nationalist outlook, the line belittles the mass inequalities and gross injustices that plague American history and contemporary society and shifts the blame for such injustices away from those who most deserve it – members of social, economic, or political privilege. The line suggests that, in being concerned with their personal happiness, all Americans have been guilty of the divisions that plague their society. It does not acknowledge that the powerful have often maintained their positions by suppressing the powerless.

What would a story look like that saw American history from a different perspective? Could there be a style of popular entertainment which admits that the dangers to equality and freedom don't threaten from outside the nation's borders but from within its own history? That injustice comes not from monstrous aliens, but from the abuse of power in our midst?

American Horror Story says the answer to those questions is yes. The television program, created by Ryan Murphy, is a horror-melodrama anthology series that each season delves into

a different macabre aspect of American history and culture. It points its focus inward, using violence as a mode of examining the horrors of America's past and present, reflecting not upon alien enemies but on the Other that already resides within the nation--the marginalized and oppressed.

American Horror Story's Gothic History

In these ways, *American Horror Story* offers not a heroic, but a gothic vision of American history. One of the most essential influences of the program, in fact, is its tie to Gothic literature. The program's second season, *Asylum*, for instance, cements its Gothic nature from its opening shots: in modern times, a newlywed couple approach the last stop on their "haunted honeymoon tour," the now-abandoned tuberculosis-ward-turned-mental-hospital known as Briarcliff Manor. Immediately, the show has established an emphasis on location as a means of connection to the past – a distinctly Gothic trope that serves as an iteration of the show's mission statement of delving into atrocities of American history, past horrors that left a mark on the buildings they took place in.

While its purpose differs between writers, the Gothic genre uses history both as a means for social commentary and as a loophole from the binds of realism. *Asylum* makes use of both of these functions, using the past to comment on the treatment of the marginalized and the mentally ill while simultaneously taking artistic license in depicting the past – each of these functions serve the season's purpose of reinterpreting America's relationship to violence.

While the season's opening minutes depict Briarcliff as it stands in modern day, they mainly serve as a connector between the audience and *Asylum's* true premise – the majority of the season takes place in the 1960s, when the Catholic Church-run Briarcliff is still up and running as a psychiatric hospital for the criminally insane. The injustices that take place within the walls of the institution serve as the key horror of the season, and its protagonist, Lana Winters, serves as the vessel through which we perceive said horrors. She begins the season as an ambitious journalist working for the local paper who bristles at being relegated to cooking columns and fluff stories because of her gender. Determined to prove her worth as a serious journalist, Lana devises a plan to break into Briarcliff in the middle of the night in the hopes of interviewing Bloody Face, the ward's recently-admitted serial killer, as well as of exposing the corruption taking place within the asylum. She is caught, however, and subsequently locked up – the institution's head, Sister Jude, blackmails her lover into signing Lana over to Briarcliff's custody with the threat of exposing their same-sex relationship

Lana is committed to Briarcliff under the public justification of her sexuality – a completely logical reason, at the time, for deeming someone insane – which emphasizes the unjust social politics of the period. Moreover, Lana threatens that even without a pen or paper, she will be able to remember all of the injustices of the asylum, prompting Jude to submit her to electroshock therapy treatment. Keeping with the rest of the season, the violence here is committed not by any of the patients at Briarcliff – the Other, the presumed threat to society –

but by the forces keeping the institution in place. The show takes the perspective of the Other, pointing to the oppressive forces of conventional society as the true villains.

It Makes Violence Uncomfortable — and Not Heroic

Violence is a cornerstone characteristic of the horror genre, as it is of war stories like *Independence Day*. But rather than portray violence as something heroic and clean, horror uses it to evoke revulsion and fear – particularly in the case of *American Horror Story*, violence is used as a form of what literary theorists call abjection.

According to [literary critic Julia Kristeva](#), the “abject” commonly refers to that which is alluring but simultaneously evokes disgust – death, decay, etc. – as well as “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.” The abject can be found in a car accident, for example – you shudder at the sight of it, yet can’t look away.

American Horror Story infuses the physically abject (death and dismemberment, subject matter common to the horror genre) into stories about the socially abject – those who are cast out from society because they disrupt social order. *Asylum*, for instance, focuses on the mentally disabled and the sexually non-conforming, who are hidden away from civilization in carceral institutions.

However, the true horror of the show comes not from the socially marginalized but from how such outcasts are treated by the authorities trusted to care for them—oppressive nuns and sadistic doctors. *Asylum* is something of a bait-and-switch, attracting viewers with the notion of a horror show about “crazy” people, then turning the story on its head to reveal a tale about the horrors historically endured by the mentally ill at the hands of corrupt power and societal neglect. American history, the program implies, has always been a story of the powerful preying on the powerless. Normal American life, in this case, is scarier than any sci-fi horror monster.

It Gets Rid of the “Masculine” View of Violence

The horror genre also helps *American Horror Story* to defy the *Independence Day* interpretation of America’s relationship with violence by stripping violence of its association with righteous masculinity. Film scholar Carol J. Clover [points to horror](#) as a place where the lines separating gender roles often blur, such as in the case of the slasher genre and its “Final Girl” trope – the almost-always female survivor of the antagonist’s killing spree. The Final Girl is a symbol of female strength in the horror genre; she acts as the film’s hero. *Asylum*’s Final Girl is Lana Winters, the aforementioned reporter who is committed to Briarcliff under the justification that she must be cured of her homosexuality.

Thus, *American Horror Story* asks its audience not merely to identify with a woman, but with a gay woman, further toying with horror's disruption of societal conventions of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, the majority of the horrors experienced by Lana are a result of her identity either as a woman or as a gay woman, thus giving the audience view into the hardships that plagued both groups in 1960s America.

To go along with its subversion of conventional social values, *American Horror Story* follows in the Gothic tradition by subverting narrative expectations as well. From its first appearance in the 18th century, a key feature of Gothic literature has been its rejection of norms of well-mannered storytelling. Gothic literature has always emphasized the bizarre, the outlandish, the exaggerated, and the disorderly, and its story lines have often been intentionally disorienting. *American Horror Story* follows in this tradition, rejecting conventional, realistic storytelling and using often grotesque imagery to explore topics outside the bounds of "good taste." Indeed, the show is notorious for [being over-the-top](#), a deviation from the self-serious procedurals and family dramas found elsewhere on television.

To play up that outlandishness, the program supplements its core allegiance to the Gothic tradition with numerous references to other disregarded genres—along with horror films, campy melodramas and soap operas. Not only are these all "undervalued" genres, they also have a traditional connection to female audiences, as well as the gay community. In pulling its influences from such unrespectable sources, the show takes on a queer perspective – it uses methods of storytelling outside of the mainstream to tell the stories of those rejected by mainstream society.

Luckily, TV Shows and Films Are Following *American Horror Story's* Lead

In the context of current events, it is difficult not to look skeptically at a film like *Independence Day*. A '90s box office smash, the film glorifies violence as a form of heroism and feeds into America's victim complex, ignoring the disturbing amount of violence that occurs within the nation's (metaphorical) walls. *American Horror Story* is not known for being a crowd-pleaser, at least for mainstream audiences. It doesn't provide the same nationalist, underdog success view of the white man's America that is perpetuated by films like *Independence Day*.

But *American Horror Story* isn't alone in its pivot. In the great television renaissance that sprouted in the late 2000s and has blossomed throughout the 2010s, the program is but one of many innovative shows examining American life with a critical eye focused on voices of the marginalized, falling in line with *The Americans*, *Mad Men*, and *American Crime Story* (also from Murphy), as well as *Orange is the New Black* and *Transparent*.

With *American Horror Story* leading the way and using special Gothic and horror elements, American history does not become a source of pride and nationalism, feeding the fear of a looming exterior threat to our democratized egalitarian paradise. It becomes a horror story, reminding us of the injustices ingrained in our history.