

***The Last of Us* and *What We Do in the Shadows*: Reinventing Horror with Heart and Humor**

Grouping pieces of media based on similarities has been a common practice for centuries, allowing audiences to label and organize what interests them. Genre is not a hard-and-fast checklist of qualities but rather a broad category of texts sharing attributes. As media has expanded and evolved, so too has genre, becoming an extensive conversation between texts that push and define the boundaries of genre marked by four shared attributes. These attributes are iconography – the visual images and symbols associated with a concept, formulas – common plot devices and progressions, conventions – distinct and smaller pieces of action within a narrative, and finally, themes – the greater unifying messages of a piece of media (Klein 2018, 195). That being said, texts within the same genre can be *vastly* different as is the case with *The Last of Us* and *What We Do in the Shadows*. By relying on precedent horror iconography and conventions, the pilot episodes of both shows, Craig Mazin’s “When You’re Lost in the Darkness” from *The Last of Us* and Taika Waititi’s “Pilot” from *What We Do in the Shadows*, demonstrate the fluidity of genre by pushing the boundaries of horror while still remaining firmly within the label, giving horror a fresh and heartfelt facelift.

The Last of Us, at face value, functions like a classic zombie story with apocalyptic undertones, but has a heart of healing rather than horror. It reinstates typical anxieties and universal rules established in preceding zombie fiction like “don’t get bit” or “survival of the fittest” to play on audience expectations and capitalize on accompanying audience suspense. At its core, however, it’s a found family story about the beautiful adoptive relationship that develops between a father, Joel, who couldn’t save his biological daughter, and Ellie, a hardened, orphan pre-teen. *The Last of Us*’ warm and gooey center of the found family is held together by a shell of recognizable themes and iconography to craft a new branch of the horror genre tree. The horror aspect is built through gritty realism and human-driven suspense, employing traditional apocalyptic iconography like desolate cities, claustrophobic interiors, and infected monsters to set a grim stage that’s reminiscent of classic zombie lore. The pilot draws on the established ‘us versus them’ binary as Joel, his daughter, and his brother fight to stay together, stay alive, and stay uninfected, a typical horror trope. By focusing on nuanced survival and emotional stakes, *The Last of Us* expands horror’s scope to include a slow-burn exploration of human resilience in the face of loss and moral ambiguity, emphasizing the genre’s flexibility to probe complex emotional and ethical questions beyond fear alone.

What We Do in the Shadows strays even farther from what we know as horror, but looks the most similar to classic movies of the genre. The show is not a classic narrative structure but rather a mockumentary following a group of old-country vampires living together with their human familiars in modern-day Staten Island. The intent of the show is not to invoke fear but to parody the horror genre. It’s rife with classic elements without the usually intended effect, from body horror to deaths of innocents and traditional S-class monsters. Some might argue it’s not horror because it’s not scary, but that’s not necessarily the requirement of the horror genre. When

examining the horror corpus, or body of texts and media that composes the genre (Klein 2018, 199), the semantic approach explains how to determine whether or not something belongs in a genre. The semantic approach reviews the surface structure of the text via elements like iconography, convention, formula, and themes, supplemented by using narrative features, visual style, character archetypes, and others to make this determination (Klein 2018, 199). This insinuates that it matters more how media looks than feels when considering the genre, giving more credit to the theory that genre is a form rather than a substance. Genre provides a framework for a narrative without necessarily defining its deeper meaning. This theory implies that genres are flexible templates that organize stories, rather than fixed molds that prescribe specific content or messages. Though *What We Do in the Shadows* is not necessarily scary as it parodies the vampire subgenre, it certainly fits the bill of horror. It's haunted mansion environment coupled with candles, low lighting, and cobwebs is nothing if not a horror setting. It uses conventions such as the killing of virgins as many vampire texts have done before. In the "Pilot", one of the vampires, Nandor, turns into a bat to fly away but awkwardly runs into a wall. The comedic undercut does not diminish the use of a precedent and traditional iconography. By focusing on the challenges of immortal beings adapting to a modern world they no longer understand, the show reframes horror from an existential lens, showing how even mythical monsters grapple with identity and purpose. Through these choices, *What We Do in the Shadows* reveals horror as a versatile tool for exploring themes of belonging and isolation, using humor to deepen its emotional resonance while keeping one foot firmly in horror's aesthetic.

Both *The Last of Us* and *What We Do in the Shadows* demonstrate how the horror genre can serve vastly different purposes, whether that be an exploration of psychological and emotional depths or the deconstruction of timeless archetypes via absurdity. By using genre conventions to either intensify dread or deflate it, both shows remain within the horror genre while expanding their emotional and thematic possibilities. These pilots reveal that horror is not defined by a single mode or message, but rather it can accommodate nuanced explorations of survival, loss, and human fragility or celebrate the comedic potential of the genre's darker elements. Through their distinct approaches, *The Last of Us* and *What We Do in the Shadows* illustrate how horror's boundaries are both flexible and expansive, capable of reflecting the multifaceted nature of human experiences, whether tragic or comically absurd. The inclusion of these shows in the horror genre expands the intertextuality of the category, allowing for broader conversations about what makes "horror" and being conducive to fresh and original substance in a beloved form.

References

Klein, Amanda Ann. "Genre" in *The Craft of Criticism: Critical Media Studies in Practice*, edited by Michael Kackman and Mary Celest Kearney, 195-205. New York, NY: Routledge, 2018.

Mazin, Craig, dir. *The Last of Us*. Season 1, episode 1, "When You're Lost in the Darkness." Aired January 15, 2023, on HBO.

Waititi, Taika, dir. *What We Do in the Shadows*. Season 1, episode 1, "Pilot." Aired March 27, 2019, on FX.