

Zombies Say More Than “Uungh”: A Walker’s Social Commentary

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From 1975 on, there has been a significant spike in the production of zombie films. Annalee Newitz, an American author and journalist, used her in-depth research to create a graph illustrating the correlation of this trend with the rise in violence and social anxiety in our current society. In short, the graph makes the statement that, throughout the last 50 years, zombie cinema has both reflected and commented upon the cultural anxieties of the time. Most recently, the television series *The Walking*

Dead (TWD) has drawn attention to the current violent state of society and to how our society reacts to this new societal norm. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s article, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” delves into an exploration of what does, and does not, define a monster. While all seven of Cohen’s theses provide useful insights, this paper will focus on the two theses, “The Monster’s Body is a Cultural Body” and “The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference.” These theses explore the idea that monsters both embody “pure culture” (Cohen 4) as well as the idea that monsters “call horrid attention to the borders that cannot – *must not* – be crossed” (Cohen 13, emphasis original). The characters in *TWD*, particularly the prominent villains, each provide an accurate illustration of both theses explored by Cohen. This paper focuses specifically on how the directors and writers address to what degree evil can emerge from new social norms through their development of violent, malicious villains, how our society is reflected in these reactions, how these villains dwell on the border of human and monster, and what that means in regards to our current societal state.

ABSTRACT

The spike in zombie cinema in recent years is thought to be due to the fact that cultural and social anxieties are on the rise. This paper explores how zombie film and television comments on these anxieties and forces its audience to think about the world around them. It specifically focuses on *The Walking Dead* and how this famous television show utilizes villains and villainous behaviors to comment on our current, violent, and desensitized state of society.

A HISTORY OF THE LIVING DEAD

To best understand the commentary provided by zombie cinema, it is important to first understand under what context the “living dead” came to be. Zombie culture can be dated back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, deriving specifically from Haitian culture. At this point in history, Haiti was under French rule and was inhabited by African slaves working on sugar plantations. The idea of the zombie originated from the combination of slavery, Haitian culture, and the accompanying casualties:

The original brains-eating fiend was a slave not to the flesh of others but to his own. The zombie archetype, as it appeared in Haiti and mirrored the inhumanity that existed there from 1625 to around 1800, was a projection of the African slaves’ relentless misery and subjugation After the Haitian Revolution of 1804 and the end of French colonialism, the zombie became a part of Haiti’s folklore. The myth evolved slightly and was folded into the Voodoo religion, with Haitians believing zombies were corpses reanimated by shamans and voodoo priests. (Mariani)

While zombie culture began in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it became popular in America beginning in 1932 with Victor and Edward Halperin’s *White Zombie* and continued with iconic zombie films such as George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* and *Dawn of the Dead*. Throughout the years, and with the slew of zombie cinema that has been written and produced, the spike in production of these films correlates with times of high social anxiety such as the Vietnam War or the events of September 11, 2001, among others (Dendle 50, 54).

These correlations are important to note because they point directly at Cohen’s first thesis, that a monster is born from a cultural moment (4). Zombie cinema not only aims to thrill and frighten but also to provide its audience with a horrific reimagining of the society in which they reside. Kyle Bishop, author of *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*, observes that “since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, zombie movies have become more popular than ever, with multiple remakes, parodies, and sequels. The renaissance of the subgenre reveals a connection between zombie cinema and post-9/11 cultural consciousness” (17). While the idea of the “living dead” has been around for centuries, so has the connection between zombie commentary on societal happenings and the anxieties that accompany them. These connections begin with the projection of misery in Haitian slaves and continue on to the acceptance of violence in our media and the desensitization to violence in everyday life that is reflected in today’s zombie cinema.

SOCIAL COMMENTARY & ZOMBIE CINEMA THROUGHOUT THE YEARS


While there is a vast inventory of zombie film and television to explore, two specific works are the best representation of zombie commentary in relation to this argument: *28 Days Later* (2002) and *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). These two films provide an abundance of social commentary and illustrations of societal fears during the timeframe each film was written and produced. To understand where *TWD* fits into this conversation, it is important to first understand what has already been contributed to zombie commentaries.

To begin, Romero's choice of an African American protagonist, Ben Huss, for *Night of the Living Dead* provides a crucial example of the use of zombies as social commentary in relation to race:

The originality of this movie . . . is correlated precisely with the *absence* of any explicit reference to Ben's race in the course of the film. The absence does not of course mean that *Night of the Living Dead* escapes in any sense the imaginative constraints of contemporary racism. Rather, the zombie-image opens onto racism's genocidal violence in its own terms. (McFarland 24, emphasis original)

This movie provides its audience with the original zombie trope, without explicitly referring to the films' monsters as "zombies." *Night of the Living Dead* has a stronger, subtler theme of the effects of violence and racism in the context of the Vietnam War, which took place during both the production and debut of this film. This theme further illustrates Cohen's first theory, in that the monster is a projection of its cultural surroundings (4). The societal anxieties during the timeframe of this film accurately depict the "monstrosity" that is racism in this war-time era. The most obvious aspect of racial commentary in the film is the ending, in which Ben, after surviving a hoard of zombies and watching the rest of his group perish, is killed by a group of all white men that closely resembles a lynch mob. This not-so-subtle ending hints at a racist society and forces the audience of the film to consider the inherent racism in the film as well as the world that they live in.

While *Night of the Living Dead* has a strong focus on the racism in and around the Vietnam War era, *28 Days Later* focuses on the effects of violence on a more current society. This film addresses the idea of a "zombie" in a unique fashion. They are represented as being infected with what is described as a "rage-virus" and are therefore not, for all intents and purposes, dead but are still defined as a "living dead" character. Thus, embodying Cohen's second thesis, the monster walks the line of what is possible (5). The "monsters" defined in this film walk the border between what it means to be alive and what it means to be dead, causing the audience to question what it means to truly be a monster and, in the case of this




film, how violence plays into that definition. The opening scene of *28 Days Later* is a collection of violent video clips from across the globe being played on an endless film loop, depicting the chaos and brutal state of society. The overarching theme of this film is the correlation between violence and its influence on the masses through the idea of the “rage-virus” that overcomes the globe. This film provides the most direct relationship between the use of rage-infected zombies in the film and their commentary on our violent society.

As in many zombie films, as well as *TWD*, the villain in *28 Days Later* is revealed, to be not the zombies, but the human beings who rise to power in the new world order set by the “zombie apocalypse.” In the case of *28 Days Later*, the villain is none other than the country’s own military, the very people employed to protect the country and the citizens residing in it. This “villain” plays into societal anxieties surrounding war and military presence itself. This film was released in 2003, only two years after the 9/11 terrorist attack in New York City, while tensions were running high over the war in Iraq, happening across seas. This is not the first, or the last, commentary on the correlation between war, violence, and society’s reaction to the chaos of its surroundings.

THE WALKING DEAD

Whereas *Night of the Living Dead* and *28 Days Later* each put forth important commentaries on the state of society as well as the people who make it up, *The Walking Dead* provides a current perspective on how the undead are used to force audiences to question society and their reactions to it. *TWD* has taken the American society’s pop culture by storm through its engaging characters and continuous commentary on violence, specifically through the increase in brutality with each subsequent villain introduced throughout the past seven seasons. While the two previous examples of zombie film and their corresponding social commentary had only a few hours to make a point, *TWD* has aired 99 episodes as of April 2, 2017, each of which work to touch on various societal happenings, and has had the opportunity to grow alongside our society and culture. The writers have reflected the growing unrest in our society through the villains introduced throughout the course of the series over the last seven years of production. Although both the academic and popular culture realms have conversed over the social commentaries put forth by the abundance of zombie cinema, *TWD* has not been added to the ongoing conversation in a significant and meaningful way.


It is important for *TWD* to be addressed as valuable cinematic work. The show provides an ongoing commentary on the state of violence and unrest in our society using a “zombie apocalypse.” The depiction of a zombie apocalypse



highlights the effect of this event on the characters throughout the series because it provides the American people with a chance to question why our society is violent and why we have become desensitized to violence. While many aspects of the show provide a commentary, the villains in the series contribute the most controversial commentary on violence throughout the series. In addition, *TWD* and its accompanying villainous characters provide a detailed and exemplary example of Cohen's two theses that have been previously discussed. *The Walking Dead* television series is based upon an ongoing series of graphic novels created by Robert Kirkman. In the introduction of the graphic novel series, Robert Kirkman, who is also a writer and producer of the show, makes the statement, "[g]ood zombie movies show us how messed up we are, they make us question our station in society and our society's station in the world. They show us gore and violence and all of that cool stuff too but there's always an undercurrent of social commentary and thoughtfulness" (*The Walking Dead, Vol. 1: Days Gone By*). This insight from the creator of *The Walking Dead* depicts the importance he puts on illustrating the problems in our society through this apocalyptic zombie television series.

Keeping the underlying commentary on our society's faults in mind, the three most important villains to touch on throughout this series are as follows: Shane, the Governor, and, finally, Negan. Each villain gains relentless, vile behaviors and an indifference towards cold-blooded murder. When this show began, the 2010 murder statistics were cited by the Federal Bureau of Investigation at 14,748 and have now risen to 15,696 ("Crime in the U.S."). This data further illustrates the corresponding increase of violence in our society alongside the increase in violent villains introduced throughout the series. Each character, with their own specific attributes and villainous tendencies, works to illustrate the frightening realities of our society and how its members react to societal change.


The first villain, Shane, did not begin as a villain at all but as protagonist Rick Grimes's deputy and best friend. He was an upstanding citizen and a law enforcement official, and was presented as a character with strong morals. He protected Rick's family when the world as they knew it fell apart and protected Carol, a member of their post-apocalyptic group, from her violent husband. While Shane begins the series as an arguably decent human being, he does not remain that way for long. In the third episode of the second season, "Save the Last One," Shane takes a very clear turn to the dark side when he shoots an innocent man in the leg to save himself ("Save the Last One"). This moment is a turning point in the series, as it is the first instance of a character being overcome by this new world order. In an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, Robert Kirkman defends Shane by saying, "He is one of the most nuanced characters on the show. It's really a



tragic story for him because he really is trying to do good every single time he does something that seems to be crazy and irrational. He is really just a scared individual trying to feel his way through this insane world” (Goldberg). Through Kirkman’s thoughts on Shane and the struggle Shane goes through, it is clear to see the show’s commentary on the effect a major societal change has on a human being. Kirkman’s words regarding Shane’s complexity and terror imply that his reactions are natural and that Shane is simply succumbing to the pressures of the new world order. In direct relation to Cohen’s theory regarding a monster representing a cultural moment (4), Shane’s reaction to this major societal change reflects the effect on our population due to dramatic changes, such as terrorist attacks like 9/11 or natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina. Upon discussing his thesis further, Cohen states, “[t]he monster is born only . . . as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself” (4). These dramatic events in our society, much like what happens to Shane, cause people to think, feel, and act differently, thus creating a monster such as Shane, who transforms into a cold-blooded killer because of his new surroundings. He is a representation of the monster that comes from a significant cultural moment, one that elicits fear from those affected and one that has the potential to create cruel, destructive monsters in its wake.

We now move down the apocalyptic road to Woodbury, where the audience is introduced to Philip Blake, more commonly referred to as the Governor. At first, he seems like a normal human being, as he is the leader of a sort of “safe haven” in this apocalyptic new world and introduced as a fair leader, a widower, and a father. The audience soon comes to realize that Woodbury is anything but a safe haven. The audience’s hopes and dreams of the Governor being a kind-hearted new character come crashing down when he shows his true colors, i.e., keeping severed heads in fish tanks stowed away in his closet, hosting gladiator-esque battles with walkers pitted against human beings, and two main characters being held captive and tortured in the depths of this so-called “safe haven.”


The Governor works to represent Cohen’s thesis regarding monsters “dwelling at the gates of difference” (7). As the audience is initially introduced to the Governor as a “good” character and soon finds out that he is anything but “good,” the connection is then made with the fine line between human and monster. Cohen states that a villain “moves between Monster and Man, [and] the disturbing suggestion arises that this incoherent body, denaturalized and always in peril of disaggregation, may well be our own” (9). This idea that a human being has the potential to constantly walk the line of good and evil, monstrous versus human, is well represented through the Governor throughout his time on *TWD*.



For example, in the final episode of season three, “Welcome to the Tombs,” the Governor commits what is, arguably, his worst villainous act: the brutal massacre of his own people. This act of brutality illustrates the rising acts of violence in our society. Just three months before this episode aired, twenty-seven people were killed in Newtown, Connecticut, in the tragic mass murder of multiple children and teachers. This connection between the mass slaughter conducted by the Governor and the murderous rampages happening in our own society folds seamlessly into the research exploring the correlation between zombie cinema and moments in history that create chaotic, societal anxiety, as well as Cohen’s thesis that human beings will always have the capability to walk the line of monster versus man (9).

Finally, the most recent, and villainous, character is introduced to the world of *TWD* – Negan. This barbed-wire-covered, bat-toting sociopath enters the show in a manner described by *Slate Magazine* as “remarkably gory – the bloodiest deaths in the show’s history and perhaps television’s as well” (Adams). In his grand entrance, Negan dismantles the skulls of two beloved characters on the show with a baseball bat, and what is more disturbing is his lack of remorse or even second-thoughts for his incredibly violent actions. Upon bashing the skull of a major character, Glen Rhee, Negan states, “Buddy, are you still there? I just don’t know. It seems like you’re trying to speak but you just took a hell of a hit! I just popped your skull so hard your eyeball just popped out... and it is gross as shit!” (“The Day Will Come When You Won’t Be”). This brutal villain jests at the horrific death he produced, putting forth the implication that he feels no sympathy or remorse for his murderous actions. The overwhelming violence portrayed in this episode of *The Walking Dead* ties frighteningly well into the current state of society today – a society in which its inhabitants have become numb to violence in an incredibly appalling way.

Our society is suffering from a lack of compassion due to the mass amounts of violence we see each day, and the writers and directors, of *The Walking Dead* are working to show our society the ever-growing level of inhumanity towards violence, death, and cold-blooded murder through characters such as Negan. He works to provide a social commentary on the violence that is displayed non-stop in our real-world media, which has been found to desensitize our population. In a study done by Craig Anderson and Brad Bushman, they found that, “violent media make[s] people comfortably numb to the pain and suffering of others” (273). This research further illustrates the mirrored implications between *TWD* and our society today. In *TWD*, we are shown a society in which its inhabitants are challenged with a new world order that is extremely and necessarily violent at times. The audience witnesses the rise in violence among the living characters, but it is not until




Negan arrives that we get a strong taste of the desensitization that has occurred throughout the series thus far.

Much like *TWD*, our society has been changing drastically. While we have progressed in some ways, we have regressed in other, very important aspects such as the aforementioned desensitization to violence. We see our society mirrored in that of *TWD* through Negan. He is a distinct representation of the outcome of a drastic change in the societal norm – namely that of our increasingly violent society and our growing lack of empathy towards the violence. While audience members were shocked to witness the extreme violence occur in Negan’s grand entrance, they should be just as shocked when watching the evening news and hearing about the endless shootings and other acts of violence that are happening across our country at an alarming rate. The brutality portrayed by Negan is a direct, albeit extreme, outcome of how desensitized a person can become when exposed to a new world order.

CONCLUSION

The greater implications of the social commentary put forth by the creators, directors and writers of *The Walking Dead* insinuate that our society is heading down a violent, inhumane road. Through the growing brutality with each succeeding villain throughout the series, we are shown a new perspective on the society that we are residing in. Through both an over-dramatization as well as, at times, an extremely accurate depiction of the violence and desensitization in our society today, *The Walking Dead* forces its audiences to reconsider their perceptions of violence and our society’s treatment of human beings. The ongoing commentary regarding American society through the use of zombie cinema provides our population with a new viewpoint with which to view our current station in society.


While there are ample amounts of specific correlations between zombie films and moments of cultural anxiety, the overarching theme is that, through zombie cinema, audiences are able to grasp that zombies are not the true monsters: human beings are. As a whole, the zombie is only a representation of a drastic change in society, such as a terrorist attack, natural disaster, or tragic mass murder, and the true monsters rise from this overwhelming change, or new world order. As Jeffrey Cohen stated, “a monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy” (4); therefore, the “living dead” are a physical representation of our cultural fears and anxieties, and the characters living in these apocalyptic worlds are portrayals of every human being that walks the Earth. Cohen’s theses are accurately exemplified when villainous characters of *TWD* are closely analyzed. The writers of *TWD* further support the theses that monsters both represent cultural anxieties



as well as walk a fine line between man and monster through characters such as Shane, the Governor, and Negan. Using these characters and ideas, the directors and writers address to what degree evil can emerge from cultural anxieties and grand societal changes, how these villains, and consequently our society, react to these fears and transformations, and what this means for our society's future.

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