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# *Hang 'Em High and Bury 'Em Deep: Thematic Connections between Western and Zombie Fiction*

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Zombies first shambled onto the scene with the release of *Night of the Living Dead*, a low-budget Romero film about a group of people attempting to survive mysterious flesh-eating husks; from this archetypal work, *Night* ushered in an era of the zombie, which continues to expand into more mediums and works to this day. Romero's own *Living Dead* franchise saw a revival as recently as 2004, more than doubling its filmography by the release of 2009's *Survival of the Dead*. As a testament to the pervasiveness of the genre, Max Brooks' zombie preparedness satire *The Zombie Survival Guide* alone has spawned the graphic novel *The Zombie Survival Guide: Recorded Attacks* and the spinoff novel *World War Z*, the latter of which has led to a film adaptation.

There have been numerous articles that capitalize on the popularity of zombies in order to use them as a nuanced metaphor; for example, the graduate thesis *Zombies at Work: The Undead Face of Organizational Subjectivity* used the post-colonial Haitian zombie mythos as the backdrop of its sociological analysis of the workplace. However, few, if any, have attempted to define the zombie-fiction genre in terms of its own conceptual prototype: the Western. While most would prefer to interpret zombie fiction from its horror/supernatural fiction roots, I believe that by viewing zombie fiction through the analytical lens of the Western, zombie works can be more holistically described, such that a series like *The Walking Dead* might not only be described as a "show about zombies," but also as a show that is distinctly American dealing with distinctly American cultural artifacts.

A staple of zombie-fiction is the depiction of the zombie apocalypse itself; scenes or flashbacks dramatically chronicle the confusion and chaos associated with the total collapse of law, order, and the world as we know it. According to Gerry Canavan, a contributing author of the *Science Fiction Film and Television* journal, the zombie apocalypse trope is prevalent because of how it reflects socio-political criticism. The failure of government institutions and agencies to protect its citizens from the hordes of the undead leads to a rejection of this authority as a kind of rebellion, bringing the protagonists one step closer to the freedom of the ravaged frontier ("Fighting").

Canavan, in an earlier article, concluded that, like any empire, "the fortress" of safety against the undead "is always, in the end, to fall" ("*We Are the Walking Dead*" 445). Any bastion of civilized life, whether that be a designated safe zone, evacuation center, or literal fort, is doomed to fail at the hands of the undead (*Dawn of the Dead* [2004], *I Am Legend* [2007], *28 Weeks Later*); in agreement with his later work, Canavan further concludes that the undead are the real protagonists of this

narrative, the ones that an audience expects and relishes seeing in a zombie work (445). The concept of *biopower*<sup>1</sup> and its abolishment is cyclic, as illustrated by a quote from a current, ongoing *Zombie Survival Guide* preparedness initiative sweeping the nation: “no place is safe, only safer”, meaning that even individual survivor groups cannot expect to maintain permanent “establishments” before being forced from their position of power (in this case, over the zombies).

Building upon the spirit, if not the letter, of rejecting biopower, Fred Botting wrote a complementary piece for the *London Gothic* journal on the cultural commentary of *28 Weeks Later*. While Botting's article was intended to draw more attention to the social commentary on globalization than the corruption of political power, it arrived at more or less the same conclusion: to escape the slaughter, the survivors needed to flat-out abandon their duties in order to take safety and security into their own hands, or as Botting put it, “Fuck the Chain of Command” (165). The thread tying Canavan and Botting's theories together is subversion of societal establishments, essentially rejecting the system because it no longer works, which indicates a recurring ethos appeal of zombie-fiction. As Canavan explicitly stated in his article, the audience not only expects, but seeks out the fall of civilization, as a kind of renewal or escape from the harsh social reality that exists in 'real' life.

Meanwhile, from a more microcosmic point of view, practical survival in a zombie apocalypse/post-apocalyptic world tends to involve a healthy sense of knowing who to trust and who to kill. However, classifying the world in terms of “us” and “them” eventually degenerates into survival in the purest sense of the word, keeping “us” alive at any and all costs to “them.” Sara Sutler-Cohen's cleverly self-referencing article, “Plans Are Pointless: Staying Alive Is as Good as It Gets,” describes exactly that. The first portion of the title, “Plans Are Pointless,” describes the futility of attempting to “plan ahead” in the zombie apocalypse; as Canavan also notes in his article, “We

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Are the Walking Dead,” the driving appeal behind the zombie genre is the knowledge “that the heroes' preparations and fortifications will *never* be enough” and that “the zombies will break through...because *this is what zombies do*”(“Walking Dead”, 445). In other words, we're drawn to the idea of a zombie apocalypse not because (or not only because) of the survivors, but because of the zombies, who inevitably take center stage as they storm the barricades. In a way, the zombies are the protagonists; they are rebels who rise from the depths of death itself to topple a regime trying to control them with superior firepower, flesh-eating notwithstanding.

The second portion of the title, “Staying Alive Is as Good As It Gets,” describes the discrimination that occurs between a survivor and an Other; this category of “Other,” denoting alienation from and specifically hostility to, not only includes the undead, but it also includes potentially dangerous non-group members or those who are a part of rival groups. Deborah Christie introduces this dichotomy as a continuum, with survivors having varying degrees of extremism when it comes to “Othering.” Canavan reaffirms this, and discusses Othering at length in “We Are the Walking Dead”: Canavan asserts that survivors inherently call upon colonial-style racism by defining a person or group as “Other,” in agreement with the zombie's Haitian mythos origin and associated tropes.

For example, Robert Neville in *I Am Legend* tends toward hyper-vigilism; by pre-emptively killing and experimenting on infected based on superficial appearance and typecasting them as

<sup>1</sup> “Biopower” is defined by social theorist Michel Foucault as modern governments' control over the bodies and health of their populations.

rabid brutes, Neville actually hampered social progress of the now-sentient infected. On the opposite end of the spectrum, several survivors in *Night of the Living Dead* were unable to Other their loved ones, even to preserve their own lives.

This particular trope is perhaps a defining characteristic of zombie-fiction: from the first major zombie film (*Night of the Living Dead*) onward, the question of whom to consider an ally and whom to consider an Other continues to provide the foundation of conflict in most zombie films, including the current television series *The Walking Dead*.

Canavan's article offers yet another alternative in the title of his own article, "We Are The Walking Dead." In Canavan's case, staying alive *is* as good as it gets, which is to say, no better than being the walking dead in the first place. He explains the surprising revelation through the universal concept of death, or rather, undeath: regardless of how they've hunkered down or what they've done to prevent it, death is the ultimate fate of all survivors, and none of them will stay alive indefinitely. Any actions they take to stave off the walking dead are in vain, and in their vain efforts to stay alive survivors inevitably must resort to (and be resigned to) the same state of unfeeling as the undead; thus, survivors straddle a line between life and death as the "walking dead" (441), paralleling the biological state of the undead themselves.

With these aspects in mind, the biggest hurdle to establishing an alternate analytical framework would be exploring prior precedent, which could then be used to uncover new insights in works past and present. Most writers, including the ones mentioned in this article, analyze the zombie-fiction genre either as a metaphor of their own sub-fields or in relation to its horror premise, by drawing conclusions based on the presence or absence of classical zombie-horror elements such as those from *Night of the Living Dead*. However, *Night of the Living Dead* was, in more than one way, informed directly by Westerns.

The basis of this conclusion can be traced back to the cultural influence of Westerns on the prototype of the American zombie film, *Night of the Living Dead*. At the time of its 1968 release, *Gunsmoke*, a popular Western TV series, had just bounced back from its near-cancellation in 1967, and the Western genre had been resurging in the cinema in the form of films like *Hang 'Em High*; as the zeitgeist of the time, it is unsurprising that Western tropes had been incorporated. Consider that *Night of the Living Dead*'s premise hinged on a "last stand" of sorts, echoed in traditional Western works such as *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral*, or the fact that a lever-action Winchester rifle was used as a prominent plot device in the film. Granted, the rifle was and still is relatively common as a hunting rifle (Barnes), but the small-farm rural Midwest setting and aforementioned thematic similarities have convinced me that such a weapon selection was not a coincidence.

Take *Zombieland* as another example. The influence of Westerns on the film can be seen rather readily in the character Tallahassee: his weapon of choice could have been taken straight from the '60s-era Western TV show *Wanted: Dead or Alive*; he acts on instinct and with disregard for the consequences of risky gambles; and, to literally top it off, he wears a cowboy hat.

Each of these elements, individually, wouldn't be indicative of any correlation to a Western, except when viewed as parts of the whole. Both Tallahassee and Columbus' weapons of choice, a shortened lever-action Winchester rifle and a double-barreled shotgun respectively, date back to the American West and were used in both iterations of *True Grit*, as well as countless Western films. In the same vein, the mentor-mentored dynamic between zombie-slaughtering Tallahassee and aimless college boy Columbus is reminiscent of the Western trope seen in *True Grit*, where a cynical man of experience (U.S. Marshal "Rooster" Cogburn, or Tallahassee) takes a young greenhorn (Mattie, or Columbus) under his wing in order to give them both a renewed sense of purpose.

The more recent and still ongoing series *The Walking Dead* borrows even more heavily from the Western genre to establish its pathos appeal with the audience. The series itself has been marketed by AMC by using the familiar Western tropes of "sheriff," "deputy," and "townspeople," and, for the most part, the series plays these tropes straight: in Season One, Rick Grimes assumed

the quintessential role of sheriff, both in appearance, with his trusty six-shooter, badge, and cowboy hat, and by acting as a guiding authority for the rest of the survivors (“townspeople”) to follow. In Season Two, the gradual rejection of Western tropes, starting with the handing off of his hat and ending with the replacement of his six-shooter with a modern Glock handgun, reflected his bleaker outlook on life, morality, and his identity within the group.

A line from the second to last episode resonates perfectly with this inversion of characterization: Shane provoked Rick to “fill [his] hand” (S2E12, *The Walking Dead*) in almost the same fashion as “Rooster” Cogburn did in the original *True Grit*, to which Rick responded with a knife point to the chest. Prior to this episode, he had already put away his badge in a drawer, signifying that he had relinquished his role as sheriff and its accompanying position as moral authority, and handed off his sheriff’s hat, perhaps in hopes that his son could take up the position as a better man than he was. By baiting Shane into his knife point by relinquishing his revolver, Rick completed his subversion of the ideal Western sheriff. By rejecting his traditional revolver in favor of a modern Glock pistol (S2E14, *The Walking Dead*), it could be said that Rick rejected the traditional Western morality associated with works from the weapon’s time period and accepted “modern” character flaws associated with current works, such as Revisionist Westerns. Revisionist Westerns, such as the 2007 remake of *3:10 To Yuma*, reject idealism in favor of “re-envisioning” characters as inherently tragic and morally corruptible, which parallels Rick’s character development in Season Two.

Applicability to these works aside, however, this analytical model can only be used when the zombie work obeys the conventions first laid out by the *Night of the Living Dead*, because it relies on certain assumptions: that both Westerns and zombie works are set in a pre-industrial (post-apocalyptic) world, where isolated settlers (survivors) fend for themselves in a harsh frontier in the absence of government intervention against rogue vagrants (hostile survivors) and disturbed natives (zombies). These assumptions can generally be extrapolated to a zombie work, but certain works subvert the above assumptions and thus invalidate the model. The subversion itself, however, still reveals something about the work in question.

For example, the 2007 film *I Am Legend* can be analyzed both in context of conventional zombie-metaphor methodology and this new Western/zombie model: its flashback sequences depicting the breach and failure of the military quarantine invokes the classic imagery of biopower, where the establishment of supposedly safe government protection is shattered by the infected, while the “lone wanderer” premise of the film’s protagonist could be compared to any number of Western works, such as *Hang 'Em High* (1968) or *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964). The same cannot be said of *Fido* (2006), which inverts the traditional zombie-biopower dynamic; instead of humans being crushed under the inertia of their own establishment, the main premise centers around the domestication of zombies as part of a retro-alternate reality, where zombies arose in the '50s only to be defeated and reintegrated as “pets” (hence the title). However, even though *Fido* cannot be directly connected to the Western, it can be viewed in terms of the *absence* of Western influence; perhaps such works could be described as ‘modern,’ in contrast to the ‘classical’ benchmark of *Night of the Living Dead*, or more directly described as satirical as opposed to zombie narrative-based (with the latter drawing more heavily on Western tropes).

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comparing zombie works to Westerns could add another analytical lens to the spectrum; through the lens of the Western, one can more easily understand the mechanisms of mainstream zombie appeal. For example, instead of viewing the destruction of society as a deconstruction of social establishments, one could instead view it in terms of the idealism of the Western frontier. The idealized Western frontier is built on the idea that hard, honest work in the outdoors can be preferable to a plodding existence in the city. In reference to this fact, the *Gunsmoke* series ran its ending credits with the image of an old-fashioned coffeepot on a stove, invoking nostalgia for the simpler times of the West, and, similarly, the *Walking Dead*'s opening is intercut with scenes of an unkempt rural cabin. While the latter example is decidedly not an ideal image, when juxtaposed with the ominously ransacked scenes of Atlanta, it too implies a certain comforting escape from city life. Likewise, instead of viewing real-life zombie preparedness initiatives as evidence of social discontent as per the biopower metaphor, one could instead view it in terms of similar spinoff social affairs like the game "Cowboys and Indians."; the extension of the genre into ordinary life can be seen as an extension of the genre's escapism by allowing participants to figuratively escape into the fantasy outside of the genre's works themselves. One could even argue that escapism is a vital aspect of American mythos, considering that this viewer-genre relationship within the zombie genre appears to have seamlessly overlapped with the decline of the Western genre.

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