

The Zombie in American Culture

by

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## **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## ABSTRACT

My research explores how the oft-maligned zombie genre reveals deep-seated American cultural tendencies drawn from the nation's history with colonization and imperialism. The zombie genre is a quintessentially American construct that has been flourishing in popular culture for nearly 60 years. Since George A. Romero first pioneered the genre with 1968's *Night of the Living Dead*, zombie narratives have demonstrated a persistent resilience in American culture to emerge as the ultimate American horror icon. First serving as a method to exploit and react to cultural anxieties in the 1960s, the zombie genre met the decade's tumultuous violence in international conflicts like the Vietnam War and domestic revolutions like the Civil Rights Movement. It adapted in the 1970s to expose a perceived excess in consumer culture before reflecting apocalyptic fears at the height of the Cold War in the 1980s. Following a period of rest in the relatively peaceful 1990s, the genre re-emerged in the early 2000s to reflect cultural anxieties spurred on by the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the subsequent resurgence of war those attacks inspired. Its ability to grow with American culture and reflect the relevant crises of the age in which each narrative is conceived suggests the genre can act as a barometer of cultural and social change and unrest.

The zombie genre is ultimately an American construct as it is the only folkloric monster born of an American imagination. Romero's re-envisioning of the genre to an apocalyptic siege narrative rather than an icon of Haitian lore presented American audiences with a perfect outlet to embrace survivalist fantasies that hearken back to the nation's birth on the frontier. It can be aligned alongside the plight of early settlers, as its characters find themselves displaced between a lost concept of society and the need to rebuild in a new, hostile environment. An environment which allows the return of iconic frontier figures like Daniel Boone, while redefining the role of

the family to suit the needs of such an environment. It provides scenarios in which the nation can be regenerated through violence as the emergence of an antagonistic foe devoid of morality and consciousness must be met with extreme prejudice. It strips the antagonist of personality and thought, allowing audiences to return to an imperialistic conquest of a conquerable foe while eliminating any guilt associated with the act of colonization. In doing so, the genre glorifies the American past, allowing the reopening of the frontier in the zombie apocalypse as a method of escaping current cultural anxieties and romanticising concepts like the Indian hunter while stripping them of negative association. This thesis will suggest that the zombie has emerged as the ultimate American horror icon, and that it will continue to remain as such so long as there are instances of tumult and instability in the American cultural zeitgeist to which it can react.

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## **Chapter One: An Introduction to the Dead**

A small group of American citizens find themselves holed up in an isolated farmhouse on the Pennsylvanian countryside. Outside the house, an endless supply of the reanimated dead scrape at the windows of the reinforced house. Inside, a motley crew of survivors face significant culture clash as the presence of the dead amplify the social structures of changing American life. With an encroaching threat intensifying class disparity within the farmhouse, the survivors attempt to surpass the threat of the dead whilst simultaneously dealing with internal turmoil born of their differences. This is the scenario of George A. Romero's 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*, which takes the Haitian concept of the zombie and repositions it as an American siege-narrative reminiscent of iconic American struggles like the defence of the Alamo.

Romero's film, from a modest budget of around \$125,000, would see international success with overall profits in excess of \$80 million. Culturally, however, the film has much more significance than the turnaround on its budget. In *American Zombie Gothic*, Kyle William Bishop writes "since the occupation of Haiti by the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century, the word *zombie* has become a fixture in American culture" (Bishop, 12). The zombie which Bishop is referencing, however, is a far cry from the slow, lurching creatures we see in popular culture today. Prior to its release, the zombie was an ineffectual entity, an enslaved solitary figure under control of one main villain, typically a mad scientist or sinister voodoo priest.

The modern American zombie film pioneered by Romero bears little resemblance to the original incarnation created in Haitian mythology. First gaining popularity in America through William Seabrook's Haitian travelogue *The Magic Island* in which the author gains access to Haitian zombification rituals and claims to have encountered several zombies, the imported

zombie can then be positioned as a product of imperialism. Bishop relates that "a direct result of the limited U.S. occupation of Haiti at the beginning of the twentieth century was increased Western awareness of and greater curiosity about and fascination with voodoo rituals and zombie practices" (47). For a nation concerned so intensely with the concept of freedom, stemming from its own birth in imperialist conquest, the American representation of the zombie is a stark departure from its Haitian origins and as a result, decidedly insensitive. Romero's films ignored the cultural implications of slavery and autonomy and instead transplanted the monster into simple siege narratives focused on the survival of small groups of Americans. Bishop relates an instance from *The Magic Island* that demonstrates the insensitivity of the American zombie film. He writes: "Seabrook chillingly narrates the encounter he had with three of the creatures, describing them as dumb workers, 'plodding like brutes, like automatons... The eyes were the worst... They were in truth like the eyes of a dead man, not blind, but staring, unfocused, unseeing. The whole face, for that matter, was bad enough. It was vacant, as if there was nothing behind it'" (49). Here, the zombie is an emotionless, thoughtless figure paraded in front of Seabrook to sate his curiosity. While the image of Seabrook's zombie is an interesting one, it is presented as an image of horror for the writer rather than the subject. As a result, the zombie falls under the colonial gaze of Seabrook, and of American audiences, as a foreign subject which can be explored and capitalized upon.

The troublesome nature of this thought lies in the horrific understanding of what it would mean to be a zombie for the Haitian population. The zombie allows a new iteration of the movie monster to be explored and consumed in American media, but for Haitians the concept of zombie is decidedly terrifying given their historical oppression. Bishop relates the Haitian perspective of the zombie, noting:



The mythology... taps into fears associated with Christian dogma, for zombification represents a violation of God's laws, a process by which one's eternal rest is interrupted and whereby one's autonomy is exchanged for a new existence of slave labor and isolated pain. The risk of becoming one of the living dead, therefore, constitutes the greatest fear of the voodoo-practicing Haitian; being forced to work as a virtually mindless slave represents a fate far worse than death itself. (52)

The zombie myth as a loss of autonomy and will holds a specifically terrifying possibility for Haitians. As a nation, Haiti's birth as a colonial entity populated by slaves displaced from their home and its subsequent liberation in the Haitian Revolution reveal a history teeming with the implications of slavery. The zombie myth, then, presents a horrific scenario in which a liberated Haitian is eternally indebted and enslaved by Voodoo practitioners. Having escaped the clutches of slavery through intensely tumultuous conflicts, the thought of a return to slavery, an eternal one at that, can be seen as the worst ultimate fate.

The use of the zombie in American culture, beginning with Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, skirts these facts and instead repositions the zombie as an antagonistic Other. Romero's films follow a siege narrative reminiscent of the iconic American battle at the Alamo, avoiding the cultural implications of the zombie and instead positioning the American as an outnumbered heroic figure tasked with the extermination of the risen dead. In doing so, the American zombie ignores the racial constructs of its original myth. In *Race, Oppression, and the Zombie*, David Inglis relates that "in Haiti's case, European and North American negative depictions of the country as a feverish inferno of Voodoo-induced depravity were very much stimulated by racist fears over what was in the nineteenth-century a glaring socio-political anomaly, the world's first 'black republic'" (45). If the original scope of the zombie is found in the traditional Haitian mythology of a single individual zombified for the intents and purposes of carrying out labour, then the amplified hordes of the undead swarming a group of American citizens in the American zombie film can be read as a literalization of racist fears stemming from Haiti's liberation. As the

first "black republic," Haiti emerged as a contentious nation for Americans, and its mythology was subsequently transplanted into an Americanized vision of classical frontierism—that is, a small group of virtuous Americans combating an endless army of racial Others hell bent on the destruction of their values and society.

In *Dead Subjectivity: White Zombie, Black Baghdad*, Jennifer Fay explores the implications of America's occupation of Haiti and its use of the zombie myth. Fay asserts:

In the field, Americans reimplemented plantation agriculture in place of the land-tenure system, turning independent farmers into subsisting laborers ... for many locals, it was the economic violence of the occupation that most endangered the long-term sustainability of Haitian life. Schmidt argues that however much the Wilson administration trumpeted the principles of democracy and national self-determination, the occupation “consistently suppressed local democratic institutions and denied elementary political liberties” ... The “dominant theme of the American presence in Haiti was materialistic rather than idealistic” ... Moreover, as the Foreign Policy Association argued before the U.S. Senate, the very occupation of Haiti without an official declaration of war from Congress was itself a violation of U.S. and international law ... The African-American press, especially, pointed to the hypocrisy of Wilson’s championing the sovereign right of self-determination for small countries while imposing a police state in Haiti... In this context, voodoo in Haiti, though illegal and “officially marginalized” since the revolution ... was perforce connected to a cultural and political opposition to the American occupation, even as caricatures of voodoo projected in the United States seemed to justify the military measures of neo-colonial rule. (89)

The American occupation of Haiti was problematic, and in poaching their iconic mythology and transforming it into a familiar Americanized siege narrative whilst simultaneously engaging in a resurgence of imperialistic colonialism, the use of the zombie itself can be read as an act of colonization. Rather than portray the implications of slavery and oppression, the zombie is repurposed to suit a satisfying image of American exceptionalism. The genre utilizes Afro-centric concepts like scatology in its treatment of the dead, but while scatology was used by African and Caribbean writers to indicate a state of decay spurred by Western presence, American utilization of scatology is incorporated as a method of blending in with an Othered presence. This is reflected in Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead*, in which two characters

cover themselves in the blood and guts of dead zombies in order to mask their scent and walk amongst the undead hordes. In doing so, Kirkman's narrative again reconstitutes literary conventions of the colonized to present an Americanized version that shines a light on heroic figures overwhelmed by swarms of an Othered presence. The use of scatology to idolize the heroes of *The Walking Dead* continues to move the genre away from its initial incarnation as a mythological and cultural being important to Haitian lore whilst simultaneously positioned as the Haitian's worst fear. Inglis relates that "the Haitian *zombi* was, once again, transformed into the zombie of Euro-American fiction, strongly implying that claims as to the existence of zombies belong not in the laboratory but in the movie theatre" (58). In removing and Americanizing aspects crucial to the Haitian culture's image of the zombie, the American zombie emerges as a form of orientalism embroiled in colonial conquest. This conquest would become a significant aspect of the American zombie genre, allowing the reopening of the American frontier in an apocalyptic environment populated by hordes of an Othered undead. These aspects of conquest and frontierism, I will argue, define the American zombie genre as a survivalist fantasy through which an audience can reengage with the undead wilderness. Zombie narratives offer varying scenarios of survival that present a simultaneous desire for a regeneration of American ideologies through violence as well as a return to a simpler way of life identified and romanticized as a new American frontier.

The colonized zombie of Haitian birth is far removed from Romero's creatures, as Bishop asserts that the filmmaker "reinvents the almost-forgotten spectre of the voodoo zombie, fusing the dumb automatons of Haitian folklore with the masses of bloodthirsty dead from films such as Ubaldo Ragona and Sidney Salkow's *The Last Man on Earth*" (12).

Through this reinvention, Romero tapped into a collection of social and cultural influences of the 1960s to create something that is wholly American. Bishop categorizes Romero's films as "zombie invasions... a worst case scenario for the collapse of all American social and governmental structures" (23). He asserts that "this terrifying breakdown of social order leads to one of the more curious allures of zombie films: their ability to fulfill survivalist fantasies" (23). This scenario will form the brunt of my thesis, as I will argue that the concept of frontierism is both deeply ingrained in the American psyche as well as frequently reflected in zombie narratives. I will trace resonant factors of these narratives from four key perspectives: landowner rights spurred from the enclosure act in England and its influence on American settlers, romanticism for the frontier, the use of the zombie as social critique, and the impact of digital culture or digital enclosure on American life.

In order to understand these concepts, I will first provide a look at the genre's inception in 1968 and its ensuing popularity, followed by its decline in the 1990s and eventual renaissance in 2002. In *George A. Romero Interviews*, editor Tony Williams assembled a collection of discussions about the zombie genre with the filmmaker who redefined it. In an interview with Dan Yakir for a 1977 issue of *Interview Magazine*, Romero notes his inspiration and offers his thoughts on the genre he created:

I read a book called *I Am Legend* by Richard Matheson and got very much into the socio-political through-line that's present in it... I wrote a short story which dealt with a revolutionary society coming into being in the form of a zombie society- people coming back to life as soon as they die... the new society appears and attacks every aspect of our society and all the mores down to religion and concepts about death. People don't really know how to deal with it other than just defend themselves. (Ed. Williams, 48)

It is this concept of defence that informs the arguments of this thesis. While Romero's films offer plenty of violence and gore, a staple of popular horror films, I will argue that it is instead the dichotomy of defence and the strategies employed in order to ensure safety that define the

zombie genre as it currently stands. While the voodoo zombie was a substantial figure in Hollywood prior to Romero's film, it failed to resonate with American audiences in the manner in which Romero's creatures quickly would.

Following *Night of the Living Dead's* release in 1968, Romero pursued other projects before returning to the genre with 1978's *Dawn of the Dead* and rounding out his initial trilogy with 1985's *Day of the Dead*. Perhaps more-so than his other two *Dead* films, *Dawn* struck a chord with audiences both across America as well as internationally. Released in Europe as *Zombi*, the film heralded an unofficial sequel widely regarded as another key film in the zombie pantheon from Italian filmmaker Lucio Fulci, *Zombi II*. Fulci's film utilized the same zombie invasion premise that Romero popularized, borrowing the slow roaming creatures and transplanting them to a Caribbean island location. With Fulci's film audiences were exposed to a key development in zombie lore, one that distances the film from Romero's rules and reveals a significant component of the zombie genre in creating and developing a cause for the rise of the dead. Returning to the roots of the creature, Fulci's characters discover that at the root of the zombie invasion is a simple and traditional voodoo curse.

The popularity of the zombie genre has reached immense heights in America at the time of this thesis. Extending beyond its original incarnation as Haitian construct and its Americanization in Romero's films, the zombie can now be seen in countless genres ranging from comic book series (*The Walking Dead*), video games (*Resident Evil*), children's books and films (*A Zombie in Love*, *ParaNorman*), and even real life representations in the form of "zombie walks" and zombie "survivalist" camps.

The elements of *Night of the Living Dead*, shifting away from the voodoo creatures of Seabrook's *The Magic Island*, focus heavily on Bishop's concept of survivalist fantasy. He asserts

that "zombie movies repeatedly reacted to social and political unrest, graphically representing the inescapable realities of an untimely death (via infection, infestation, or violence) while presenting a grim view of the modern apocalypse in which society's supportive infrastructure irrevocably breaks down" (11). Lacking this infrastructure and guiding voice, survivors are forced to rely on their own merits to overcome the risen dead, creating a tumultuous relationship not only with zombies themselves, but with other survivors with different incentives and strategies. It is this combination of social and political reaction combined with the struggle to survive that, I will argue, gives the zombie genre its distinctive resonance for American audiences.

With Fulci's Italian film *Zombi II*, however, came an oft-cited stipulation for audiences in viewing zombie invasion scenarios, the necessity to at least develop, if not explore, the cause behind the uprising of the dead. In *Night of the Living Dead*, Romero provides a brief yet culturally expository scene in which the survivors watch a broadcast that mentions the return of an irradiated satellite returning to Earth. Released just prior to the culmination of the space race with the successful Apollo 11 moon landing mission, the scene attracted unwanted attention to an aspect of his film which Romero had not intended to spotlight. Speaking with Yakir, he notes:

The scientific community has no answers. The radiation scenario that people feel is an explanation in *Night of the Living Dead* was actually one out of three that were advanced in the original cut of the film, but the other ones got cut out and people have adopted that radiation thing as the reason why the dead are coming back. I really didn't mean that to be. So, in *Dawn of the Dead* I was careful to avoid any explanation of the phenomenon. (48)

Romero's lack of interest in exploring the cause of the zombie outbreak is indicative of the focus on survivalist fantasy rampant throughout American zombie narratives. This focus would carry on throughout American zombie narratives such as Max Brooks' *Zombie Survival Guide* and *World War Z*, Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, and perhaps most significantly Robert

Kirkman's epic comic book series *The Walking Dead*, an ongoing series that began in 2003 and continues to see record-breaking sales now well over the 100 issue mark (a rare feat for a comic book series, especially a non-superhero horror book). Kirkman's series has since been adapted into, again, a record-breaking television show of the same name beginning its run on the AMC network in 2010. Kirkman and executive producer of the television series Glen Mazzarra have expressed a similar apathy for the cause of the infection, with Mazzarra noting in an 2012 interview with Lesley Goldberg for *The Hollywood Reporter* that:

Robert has not been interested in addressing [the cause of the zombie outbreak] in the comic book, and I'm not interested in addressing in the show... The cause of the zombie outbreak seems irrelevant. I always want the show to play like a horror movie every week. If you define what caused the outbreak, that puts us in a world of science fiction, and this isn't science fiction... it's horror. (Goldberg, 2012)

Both the show and the comic have flirted with the idea, but altogether ignore any significant answers pertaining to the cause of the outbreak. Eugene, a character in the comics, feigns a background as an important government scientist with answers to the outbreak in order to gain entry to a group that can offer him protection in the increasingly hostile world. An unassuming and overweight high school science teacher, the character utilizes his scientific background to lend credence to his story and ensure his continued safety, but the story is ultimately revealed to be an outright lie. It is a relatively minor detail in the series, but significant in the manner in which the cause of the uprising is always on the mind of the audience, if not the creators. In the television show, Rick Grimes (the central character of both the show and the comics) leads his group of survivors to Atlanta's Centre for Disease Control in the first season finale, only to discover that the sole surviving scientist, Dr. Jenner, has been unable to find any answers related to the cause, but does offer one important piece of information for the series—if you die, you rise as a zombie regardless of infectious contact with the risen dead.

The continued popularity of the zombie genre is immense despite a general disinterest in the cause of zombification in American narratives. This popularity indicates that while audiences might not agree with Kirkman's, Mazzara's, and Romero's sentiments, they are happy to explore this world and the various survivalist techniques employed by the living without any actual hints to the cause of infection. Outside of America, however, interest in the outbreak is indeed significant.

Fulci's *Zombie II* provides one of the first examples of the cause of the undead as an important factor to the overall story with the revelation that the outbreak is linked with a voodoo curse. In Peter Jackson's 1992 film *Braindead*, the New Zealand film points to an unnatural "rat-monkey" hybrid whose bites initiate infection. The immensely popular 1993 video-game series *Resident Evil* (*Biohazard* in native Japan), which has spawned numerous game sequels and film adaptations, points to the "T-Virus" created by a sinister pharmaceutical company The Umbrella Corporation. For Norwegian director Tommy Wirkola's 2009 *Dead Snow*, undead Nazis rise from the dead to claim enchanted pieces of stolen World War Two gold coins. In Australian filmmakers Michael and Peter Spierig's 2009 film *Undead*, the cause is simply aliens, while in Bruce McDonald's Canadian film of the same year, *Pontypool*, it is an unknown terrorist attack infected and spread through the speaking of the English language, seeing the characters of the film employing French and Armenian to avoid contamination.

English filmmaker Danny Boyle brought new life to the genre in 2002, with the release of his film *28 Days Later*. Kyle William Bishop credits Boyle's film with having "officially kicked off the 'zombie renaissance' with the first truly frightening zombie movie in years" (16). Boyle's film is opened with an animal liberation group freeing a group of chimpanzee's from a scientific laboratory, only to be infected with a newly developed "Rage Virus." The virus turns the infected



into similarly ravenous beasts as Romero's creatures but distinguishes itself in the infected horde's retention of motor skills, heightening both the danger and the likelihood of contamination with the ability to sprint towards their victims, rather than slowly lurch like Romero and Kirkman's zombies. The concept of fast zombies quickly entered the genre's lexicon, with sprinting infected popping up in the release of Zack Snyder's 2003 *Dawn of the Dead*, a remake of Romero's film, as well as the 2007 Spanish film *Rec* from directors Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza.

The nature of the outbreak in these films plays a significant role in how the characters embrace their respective apocalyptic challenges, but also serves to reflect some cultural and historical truths born of the various nations from which they arise. The use of language in the Canadian *Pontypool*, for instance, suggests an ongoing prevalence of Canada's longstanding multiculturalism and the tensions that have risen as a result of embracing bilingual heritage. In *National Identity, Canadian Cinema, and Multiculturalism*, Scott MacKenzie asserts:

As well as being the first postmodern and perhaps first postnational state, Canada is also the first co-dependent State, where each nation needs the others in order to preserve its own fractured and highly tenuous sense of identity. Identity, in this context, can only be generated through the projection of an "other" who is both dialogistic and antagonistic in nature. (MacKenzie)

In placing the Other as an antagonistic, ruthless foe of malicious dialogistic origin, *Pontypool's* zombie-like infected are positioned as a device to explore national and cultural identity in a continually tense linguistic national dichotomy. The film follows the tradition of Romero's work as a simplistic horror premise elevated beyond violence and gore to one of cultural reflection and nationalistic undercurrents. Mackenzie questions that "to talk of Canadian cinema, in the first instance, seems oxymoronic. After all, with the majority of Canadian screens showing nothing but American feature films, and the majority of our audiences seeing these same films, where

can one begin to conceptualise a properly 'Canadian cinema?'" The answer, as suggested by its interesting use in *Pontypool*, can be found in the thematic undercurrents of an otherwise culturally discarded genre, the zombie film. MacKenzie claims that "it is important to examine the inter-relationship between the cinema and other discourses within the private and public spheres of culture. One must pay particular attention to the ways in which cinematic texts are used and appropriated by a culture in its quest for self-definition." *Pontypool* certainly fits into this category in its linguistic appropriation, while serving as one of many examples of national and cultural identity bleeding into and feeding the zombie film as intensely reflective of these concepts.

The Nazism throughout Norwegian film *Dead Snow*, specifically in relation to the undead tethering with stolen artefacts, could indicate persistent sentiments of loss and theft tied back to Germany's occupation of the country in the Second World War. In the film, a group of friends seek out a relative's cottage in the snowy Norwegian mountains. When a local man arrives at the cottage, he relates a story regarding the Nazi occupation. He claims:

During the Second World War, Oxford was seen as a vital area for the Germans... A significant link for stopping the trade convoys between Russia and England... Unlike most places where the Germans got along well with the local population, that was not the case here... They made life hell for the local people. People were tortured, beaten and mistreated every day. Trust me on this, these were evil, sadistic devils... Shortly thereafter the Germans were in for a hell of a big surprise. Secretly, the local population had united and decided enough was enough. The three thousand inhabitants needed to release all their rage and anger that had built up during three years. So they gathered up any weapons they could find... When the night time fell, they attacked them. The 300 soldiers didn't stand a chance and they knew it... Colonel Herzog and many of his soldiers managed to escape. They ran into the mountains, they brought along a lot of the stolen goods, damn greedy bastards. The people from Oxford followed them, but they lost track of them, up here, in these mountains... That's why one must tread very gently. There is an evil. An evil you don't want to awake. (Wirkola, 2009)

In *Folklore Fights the Nazis: Humor in Occupied Norway 1940-1945*, Kathleen Stokker examines Norwegian resistance to German occupation in the Second World War. Stokker relates:

Memoirs from the period describe the galling effect of 'having to watch [the occupiers] walk in streets that were ours, swagger around our shops and send home goods we needed for ourselves, paid for by money they had taken from us...' On 19 August 1942 the diarist Greta Dahl comments: 'The soldiers here are fat as pigs. When they go home on vacation, they lose weight in a hurry... Here they get all the things they've had to do without for years in Germany' (22 November 1940). Understandable or not, the shortages of food, fuel, and fiber created hardship and ill will. It also aroused ... a flourish of anecdotes and jokes. (Stokker, 25-26)

With *Dead Snow*, Wirkola carries on that tradition of anecdotal resistance in presenting a decidedly campy zombie film that, yet again, reveals an undercurrent of nationalism and culture. The film includes a horror-movie aficionado, clad in a *Braindead* t-shirt, offering tips on survival while pointing out the various poor choices made by film characters in similar situations. When he meets his demise at the hands of the zombified Nazis, another character promptly quips "I told you we should have gone to the beach" (Wirkola, 2009). The film embraces the humorous tone pioneered in camp zombie films like *Return of the Living Dead* and *Evil Dead II*, even offering an allusion to one of the latter's most iconic scenes when one character must sever a limb with a chainsaw in order to avoid the spread of an infectious bite. More importantly, it aligns the films with Norwegian anti-Nazi humour first pioneered in the country's World War Two occupation.

Stokker asserts:

By convincingly portraying the Norwegians as unanimously engaged in a fearless degradation of the Nazi regime, the jokes created a wartime feeling of solidarity that crucially assisted the resistance effort while also helping to establish a core of values that critically assisted Norwegians in making a smooth transition to peace. (210-212)

In *Dead Snow*, Wirkola elevates his film beyond a simplistic two word pitch of "Nazi Zombies" to a nationalistic narrative that reflects an important cultural mindset moored in one of the

darkest points in the country's history. Furthermore, it is an additional example of the complexities that can be found in the zombie genre that work against its stereotypes as a generally thoughtless narrative type.

Boyle's attention towards an animal liberation's group in the introduction to *28 Days Later* could stem from a revitalized sense of cruelty in animal testing, a concept bubbling beneath the surface since the Victorian anti-vivisectionist movement reacted to HG Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. The film's opening sees a radical animal liberation group entering a laboratory filled with test chimpanzees. The group finds, amongst a myriad of horrific abused animals, a chimp strapped to a table and forced to watch a series of screens displaying acts of terror and violence in a scene that is reminiscent of the iconic 1971 dystopian film *A Clockwork Orange*. When one of the scientists discovers the infiltrating group, he exclaims in panic "I know who you are, I know what you think you're doing... the chimps are infected, they're highly contagious. ... In order to cure, you must first understand... The animals are contagious, the infection is in their blood and saliva, one bite, stop! You have no idea" (Boyle, 2002). Rather than adhere to the panicked scientists warnings, one protestor responds "Listen you sick bastard, we're going and we're taking your torture victims with us" (Boyle, 2002). The scene effectively positions Boyle's infected amongst both the zombie genre as a whole in its use of a contagious, highly infective bite, as well as within the growing radicalism emerging in anti-animal experiment protest groups in the country with the bull-headed activists mistake.

In *Political Animals: A Survey of the Animal Protection Movement in Britain*, Robert Garner traces British animal activism from the inception of the National Anti-Vivisection Society in 1898 to late 20th century activist groups. Garner notes "the most distinctive feature of the revitalisation of the animal protection movement in recent years has been the startling growth

of active local groups. This is inextricably linked with the growing radicalism of the movement" (Garner, 1993). Garner relates that "in the 1980's, the Labour left—particularly at the local level—advocated animal welfare reforms on the grounds that animals could be regarded as an exploited group, along with the poor, gays, and ethnic minorities" (Garner, 1993). In focusing on the liberation of rage-infected chimpanzees, torture victims for the activists, Boyle positions his film amongst a narrative backdrop of animal activism that has been gaining traction since the late 19th century. That the activist figure ignores the scientists concern, and identifies the chimps as "torture victims," further relates to Garner's concept that "only moderate reforms improving the welfare of animals are considered by decision makers" (Garner, 1993). Garner asserts that radicalism amongst these groups works against overall animal welfare improvement, noting that "the long-term aim of the campaign may conflict with the short-term attempt to influence government, particularly if...a radical campaign actually condemns the negotiating stance of the moderates" (Garner, 1993). Boyle effectively positions both an animal rights radical in ignoring negotiation with a member of the scientific community, even in the face of safety, which ultimately leads to the fall of the English nation as explored through the events of the film. The tenuous relationship between anti-vivisection groups and government regulation, then, forms an important relationship to the films position within the zombie genre. Garner notes:

Anti-vivisection groups have a greater impact when they challenge the validity of animal experimentation on practical grounds—that they do not produce benefits or that the benefits produced are unnecessary because trivial—rather than on the ground that they are unethical because they infringe rights irrespective of the human benefits derived from them. (Garner, 1993)

While the scientist's argument that "in order to cure we must understand," may be negated by the cruelty inflicted on the tested apes, the tactics of the liberation group result in national epidemic of apocalyptic proportions, purporting the difficult relationship between these two groups while

serving as an additional example of the zombie film as a reflection of cultural zeitgeist.

Furthermore, *28 Days Later* serves as an additional example of a non-American zombie film with a narrative that is reliant upon and structured from a direct cause-correlation effect for the escalation of the zombie apocalypse.

These films represent a small portion of the international zombie film, but each serves to indicate an important narrative feature for non-American zombie narratives in the development and exploration of a root cause of infection. Bishop relates that "although the zombies are not always literally dead as in Romero's films, hordes of cannibalistic creatures, various forms of large-scale apocalypse, and the total collapse of societal infrastructures remain central and telling features" (26). Each of the aforementioned films rely on the concept of the cause to work as effective narratives, while each differing explanation for what caused the uprising further cements the zombie genre as one of intense cultural reflection. That such an important tool in the development of zombie storytelling outside of America is largely absent from the major American works in the genre further purports what this thesis will attempt to explain—that the survivalist fantasy inherent in zombie invasion films is an entirely American concept born of an unyielding, idyllic pursuit of American concepts of freedom, manifest destiny, and frontierism. In *Regeneration Through Violence: The Myth of the American Frontier 1600-1860* Richard Slotkin asserts that:

The mythology of a nation is the intelligible mask of that enigma called the 'national character.' Through myths the psychology and world view of our cultural ancestors are transmitted to modern descendants, in such a way and with such power that our perception of contemporary reality and our ability to function in the world are directly, often tragically affected. (Slotkin, 3)

I will argue across four chapters that the American zombie narrative is largely indicative and reflective of the country's cultural zeitgeist, a correlation influenced by and corresponding with

Slotkin's perception of American mythology. While the cause of zombie outbreak is crucial and culturally revelatory for the aforementioned narratives, the lack of interest in the zombies' origins in American culture can be attributed instead to the survivalist aspects of American films. The interest is not in how the zombie emerged, but how American citizens can band together, stake a claim to an isolated locale, and survive the scenario by immersing themselves in their new wilderness and clearing from it the hordes of the dead. I will argue in my first chapter that this aspect of survivalism finds its roots in the expropriation of British citizens to life in the New World as early American settlers sought freedom and the elimination of restrictive policy that rid them of property on British soil. I will then move into an analysis of the zombie as social critique in my second chapter to reflect how and why American audiences might be interested in a return to the wilderness or frontier when faced with tumult and a perceived restriction of rights and freedom. Finally, I will incorporate the mythology of the frontier in my third chapter to explore the lingering presence of Frontier iconography in the zombie film. Finally, I will conclude with an analysis of current American issues like digital enclosure and offer assertions on how they have already and may continue to impact the American zombie film.

## **Chapter Two: Expropriation and the Zombie**

If the zombie genre relies on an American relationship and yearning for a return to the freedoms of the frontier, then it is useful to explore what spurred these concepts of freedom amongst early settlers. In this chapter, I will explore the influences of the zombie narrative with consideration of the impact stemming from land enclosure disputes in Britain and on early American settlers, prior to the opening and closing of the frontier. With an increasing disparity between agrarian workers and the controlling authorities in Britain, tensions quickly developed into narratives of resistance. Through an exploration of the psyche of expropriated settlers, I will track this resistance as a fundamental building block of the American psyche. I will position the modern zombie narrative presented in Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* franchise alongside an example of resistance and an alternative way of life for the expropriated sailors of the ill-fated *Sea-Venture* en-route to the troubled Virginia Colony. Both instances present displaced groups tasked with the formation of a new society while dealing with an increasingly disparate sense of societal values and responsibilities in the face of heightened danger, toil, and oppression.

In *Regeneration Through Violence: The Myth of the American Frontier 1600-1860*, Richard Slotkin asserts:

There is a strong anti-mythological stream in our culture, deriving from the utopian ideals of certain of the original colonists and of the revolutionary generation, which asserts that this New World is to be liberated from the dead hand of the past and become the scene of a new departure in human affairs. (3)

The zombie narrative, as pioneered by George A. Romero with *Night of the Living Dead*, stands in stark contrast to Slotkin's concept of "anti-mythology." As Kyle William Bishop notes in *American Zombie Gothic*, Romero's iteration of the zombie stands alone amongst a litany of adapted horror icons as an entirely American construction. Bishop writes "The zombie is



curiously unique because it began its infamous career in folklore, drama, and cinema—not in literature, like vampires, ghosts, werewolves, and golems. The zombie is also a singular and important figure in American historical and cultural studies, as it is the only canonical movie monster to emerge in the New World" (31). This positions the zombie as an entirely unique American creation, one that is used to encapsulate thematic and cultural influence from American history in a way that few genres can.

The image of Rick Grimes atop a horse, utilized in both iterations of the series, is an example of the importance of the frontier rampant throughout these narratives. Slotkin offers a separate definition of American mythology outside of the typically heralded format of "the great American novel." He instead attributes the progression of the frontier, and those involved in either aiding or deterring its opening and closing as the main source of American mythogenesis. Slotkin writes:

True myths are generated on a sub-literary level by the historical experience of a people and thus constitute part of that inner reality which the work of the artist draws on, illuminates, and explains. In America mythogenesis the founding fathers were not those eighteenth-century gentlemen who composed a nation at Philadelphia. Rather, they were those who... tore violently a nation from the implacable and opulent wilderness—the rogues, adventurers, and land-boomers; the Indian fighters, traders, missionaries, explorers, and hunters who killed and were killed until they had mastered the wilderness; the settlers who came after, suffering hardship and Indian warfare for the sake of a sacred mission or a simple desire for land; and the Indians themselves, both as they were and as they appeared to settlers, for whom they were the special demonic personification of the American wilderness. Their concerns, their hopes, their terrors, their violence, and their justifications of themselves, as expressed in literature, are the foundation stones of the mythology that informs our history. (4)

Slotkin's description, I will argue, suits both the narrative of the frontier as defined in history as well as the zombie narrative, in which a new frontier is opened. A conquerable frontier, rife for expansion. A frontier in which an everyman can rise and explore the elements of American mythology Slotkin attributes to those early explorers and settlers. In the zombie narrative, the

explorer is replaced with survivor, the "demonic personification" transferred from Native-Americans to the faceless hordes of the undead. This perception of the undead as a replacement for Native Americans as the main antagonistic force for those on the frontier will be further explored in a later chapter tracing the influence of the frontier. To consider the lasting appeal of the frontier, however, we must first trace the roots of early American settlers back to imperialist Britain and explore what defined and informed the characteristics of said figures.

Early settlers counted amongst their ranks many of the expropriated disillusioned. Displaced from their homes and former modes of life, a romantic yearning for the past becomes evident in the cultural zeitgeist of early American settlers, as expressed in poetry and literature of the time. I reference these sentiments as they provide insight into the tumultuous home-life from which early settlers were departing, which is in turn valuable in assessing the concept of American mythogenesis as defined by Richard Slotkin. An example of such tumult can be seen in William Wordsworth's "pastoral" poem, "Michael". In the poem, Wordsworth presents a portrait of pastoral, agrarian life and the ensuing influence of corrupting industrialization. For the titular Michael and his family, hard work in an agrarian environment is rewarding and bountiful. Wordsworth writes "not fearing toil, nor length of weary ways, he with his father daily went, and they were as companions" (206-208). Michael, his wife, and his son Luke, work long hours but are happy to do so as their farm reaps the rewards of such toil. When a debtor arrives to collect on an agreement Michael had made to look after the interest of his nephew after he befalls financial misfortune, Michael is forced to send his son into the service of a merchant. Luke's departure is intended to serve as financial generation to regain the land lost due to his nephew's mismanagement. "Our Luke shall leave us, Isabel; the land shall not go from us, and it shall be free, he shall possess it, free as is the wind that passes over it" (254-257), Wordsworth writes.

Luke, however, succumbs to the corrupting force of life in the city, as exemplified in Wordsworth's description that "meantime Luke began to slacken in his duty, and at length he in the dissolute city gave himself to evil courses: ignominy and shame fell on him, so that he was driven at last to seek a hiding-place beyond the seas (451-456). Luke's corruption serves to highlight the growing disparity between agrarian and industrial life. Furthermore, it indicates the growing dissolution of the merits of hard work and property ownership. Luke's exile demonstrates a loss of the pastoral way of life despite hard work. "Michael" can then be seen as an example of resentment towards colonizing and industrial forces that bled into the construction of the new world, and can be counted amongst Slotkin's American mythogenesis. That an entire way of life was often lost for rural farmers informs the romanticism for a return to an idealized version of the former methodology for the British common man. It can also suggest a yearning for a place in which these former conceptions of proper life could be reclaimed, such as the American frontier.

In *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker examine the romantic era through the lens of colonial expansion and exploration. The pair offers a mission statement for their book, noting:

Our book looks from below. We have attempted to recover some of the lost history of the multiethnic class that was essential to the rise of capitalism and the modern, global economy. The historic invisibility of many of the book's subjects owes much to the repression originally visited upon them: the violence of the stake, the chopping block, the gallows, and the shackles of a ship's dark hold. It also owes much to the violence of abstraction in the writing of history, the severity of history that has long been the captive of the nation-state, which remain in most studies the largely unquestioned framework of analysis. (Linebaugh and Rediker, 7)

Through this lens, the sentiment of Slotkin's image of American mythology begins to take shape. With increasing governmental oppression dictating the lives of those selected to embark across

the Atlantic, dictated often without choice, the concept of freedom was immediately engrained in early settlers of the New World. In *The Many Headed Hydra*, the pair focuses on this concept through the use of one ship, the *Sea-Venture*, and its eventual wreck off the coast of Bermuda while en-route to "Virginia, England's first New World colony" (8). The area in which the ship was wrecked, explain Linebaugh and Rediker, was "long considered by sailors as an enchanted 'Isle of Devils' infested with demons and monsters, and a ghoulish graveyard for European ships" (9). Despite this reputation the crew reached an island and discovered that "the reality of Bermuda... was entirely different from its reputation. The island, in their view, turned out to be an Edenic land of perpetual spring and abundant food, 'the richest, healthfullest and pleasantest [place] they ever saw'" (10). On this paradisiacal island, the crew of the *Sea-Venture* would quickly engage in the creation of a microcosm of society that is enormously revelatory in the creation of Slotkin's mythology and the overall sentiment of New World settlers. Just as Michael would yearn for a life in which his hard work could pay off, and in which former ideals of such work and a way of life should be reclaimed, the survivors of the *Sea-Venture*'s society act as an example of the reclamation of such an existence. I will frame the aforementioned shipwreck alongside a similar eruption of society constructed by the survivors of Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* as they too are displaced between two worlds with survival at stake. Both societies strive for an idealized utopia that reflects a romantic yearning for an imagined former way of life that can be reclaimed through the reformation of society in new environments.

Linebaugh and Rediker offer three components for colonial expansion in the Virginian colony—one, that "all good Protestants in England had an obligation to help convert the savages in America to Christianity and to battle their Catholic enemies abroad"; two, that "all had a duty to extend English dominion and to embrace beckoning national glory"; and three, that

colonization should be positioned as a "solution to domestic social problems in England" (15).

This positions the crew of the *Sea-Venture*, and all other departing settlers, as enlisted in British imperialism and the expansion of the empire's dominion. The problem in tasking such significance on these settlers, however, is that those perpetuating British propaganda failed to realize the significance of the resentment of such settlers in their forced imperial roles, and as a result the desire for a former way of life. The pair notes the appeal, or pitch, of the Virginia Company for British propagandists:

The company... would provide a necessary public service by removing the "swarmes of idle persons" in England and setting them to work in Virginia... The New World was the place for "irregular youths of no religion," for persons dispossessed by "ract rents," for anyone suffering "extream poverty"— in short, for all those "who cannot live at home."  
(16)

This solution to the increasing disparity between those deemed "irregular" by British standards, but perfect for the New World, contributes to Slotkin's concept of American mythology. Slotkin asserts that "all emigrants shared the anxious sense that they had been, willingly or unwillingly, exiled from their true homes in the motherlands of Europe... all felt impelled to maintain traditions of religious order and social custom in the face of the psychological terrors of the wilderness" (18). This is especially problematic in those forced to colonize the new world unwittingly. "Of the people aboard the *Sea-Venture*, we know that a number of them were among the dispossessed," (16) Linebaugh and Rediker write, offering examples of dispossession as enacted by the "big landowners" (16). "They radically changed agricultural practices by enclosing arable lands, evicting smallholders, and displacing rural tenants, thus throwing thousands of men and women off the land and denying them access to commons" (17). This disruption of agrarian prosperity, or even simply security, initiated growing resentment amongst the dispossessed population, while furthering the strife felt by such citizens. Linebaugh and

Rediker note that "by the end of the sixteenth century there were twelve times as many propertyless people as there had been a hundred years earlier. In the seventeenth century almost a quarter of the land in England was enclosed" (17). They continue; "Most agricultural laborers were less fortunate. Unable to find profitable employment, without land, credit, or occupation, these new proletarians were thrust upon the roads and ways, where they were subject to the merciless cruelty of a labor and criminal code as severe and terrifying as any that had yet appeared in modern history" (18).

It is of no surprise, then, that the survivors of the ship-wrecked *Sea-Venture* took kindly to their bountiful new habitat in Bermuda. As the pair reflect, in the face of increasing adversity in their homeland and reputable hard work on the Virginian colony, a new start on an island which "caused many of them vtterly to forget or desire euer to returne from thence, [since] they liued in such plenty, peace, and ease" (10) would be extremely attractive. Early settlers, a mix of the dispossessed, elite, criminals, and government officials, reflect the melting pot image so popularized in American thinking. For those willing to go, the image of robust Virginian Native Americans as "idle, but not starving... inflamed the collective imagination of Europe, inspiring endless discussion—among statesmen, philosophers, and writers, as well as the dispossessed—of peoples who lived without property, work, masters, or kings" (24). The image of the New World for early settlers, then, was largely a fabrication of Edenic proportions that played into the desire for the common man to reclaim agrarian modalities. A land free from governmental regulations that had proven so disastrous for them in their home-nation, one of abundance and pleasure. It offered hope, but more importantly, liberation from the perceived shackles of British rule. America, however, was not an untarnished land in the mind's fabric of British settlers. Linebaugh and Rediker reflect that "when the commoners of the *Sea-Venture* decided that they wished to

settle in Bermuda rather than go on to Virginia, they explained to Virginian Company officials that they wanted the ease, pleasure, and freedom of the commons rather than the wretchedness, labor, and slavery awaiting them in Virginia" (21).

In keeping with Slotkin's conception of American mythology as born in the early settlers of the nation, the hardships and dispossession so common amongst those embarking for the New World suggest, as *The Many Headed Hydra* reflects, a palpable desire for reconstruction. For something new, and most importantly, something free. The wreck of the ship (its crew a motley mix of passengers from varying backgrounds such as government officials, criminals, even Native Americans) and the subsequent eruption of a microcosm of society indicates further insight into this mythology that can still be seen in current American works. That mythology is perhaps more apparent now more than ever as demonstrated in Robert Kirkman's zombie franchise *The Walking Dead*.

Linebaugh and Rediker position the wreck of the *Sea-Venture* as follows;

This is... a story about the uprooting and movement of peoples, the making and the transatlantic deployment of "hands." It is a story about exploitation and resistance to exploitation, about how the "sappe of bodies" would be spent. It is a story about cooperation among different kinds of people for contrasting purposes of profit and survival. And it is a story about alternative ways of living, and about the official use of violence and terror to deter or destroy them, to overcome popular attachments to "liberty and the fullness of sensuality." (14)

While related to the aforementioned ship, there is perhaps no greater description of the thematic elements of *The Walking Dead*, than the preceding quote. Following the decimation of civilized society as the dead begin to rise, the survivors of the zombie apocalypse in Kirkman's narrative follow a similarly idyllic existence after intense periods of unrest. The solution to Britain's vagrancy issue (chiefly, an overabundance of prisoners) was, as Linebaugh and Rediker report, offered in the "Beggars Act of 1597... whereby vagrants and rogues convicted of crimes (mostly

against property) in England would be transported to the colonies and sentenced to work on plantations, within... 'a prison without walls'" (20). The New World is hereby seen as an idyllic pastoral setting offering solutions to nearly any significant issue of the time. It is interesting, then, that in an odd twist in Kirkman's franchise it is a literal, fenced-in prison that acts as a place of asylum and refuge for the survivors of the zombie apocalypse. That the prison can serve as refuge rather than confinement suggests that former conceptions of freedom have been lost, and that a new form of society must now rise in the ashes of former conceptions.

The prison is cleared of any wandering dead, surviving prisoners are enlisted in the group's ranks, and the prison grounds are tilled and farmed. The prison serves as a haven teeming with life and abundance in what would typically be the antithesis of agrarian prosperity. More importantly, it serves as the setting for the foundation of a new civilization that closely mirrors the colony constructed by the survivors of the *Sea-Venture* in Bermuda. The competing narratives around the Virginian colony to which the crew of the *Sea-Venture* (one of utopian paradise, the other relentless toil and death) was headed, informs the desire for the group to settle and begin anew in their environment. For the survivors of the zombie apocalypse in *The Walking Dead* comics, this question of prosperity or death is similarly questionable. The ensuing reversion to a formerly lost way of life, such as the society constructed in Bermuda, suggest an ongoing romanticism for pastoral existence still present in American myth.

Kirkman's group, led by protagonist Rick Grimes, find themselves alone in dangerous territory following the uprising of the dead. While early settlers were dispatched from their homes as a result of land enclosure and expropriation, Rick and his group are forced to evacuate their homes in order to reach safety zones that have been rumoured to erupt in major cities. For the survivors, this destination is initially Atlanta. Just as the *Sea-Venture's* crew had been made



aware of the toil in Virginia, however, this proves to be false hope. In one of the first major conflicts of the series, Rick's former police partner Shane argues that the group will find safety only by staying near Atlanta in order to await rescue, while Rick believes they must move to avoid both the exposed wilderness of their outdoor camp as well as the encroaching winter. Awakening from a coma at the onset of the series, Rick is told in *The Walking Dead, Compendium One*, which collects the series' first 48 issues, that "before they stopped broadcasting they told us to relocate to the bigger cities. They said they could protect us all there" (Kirkman Compendium One) and that the Georgian capital will be the most likely location to find his family. Upon arrival, however, he finds the city completely overrun and densely populated by the undead. As Glenn, another survivor in the series puts it, "the government tried to herd everyone into the cities so we'd be easier to protect. All that did was put all the food in one place. Every time one of those things kills one of us, we become one of them. It took a week for just about everyone in the city to be killed" (Kirkman Compendium One). Here, the plight of Rick Grimes and the other survivors of the zombie apocalypse is aligned with those competing narratives told to early settlers destined for the Virginian colony. The similarities between both stories suggests a heightened sense of resistance to authority when faced with situations of such peril, reflecting an aspect of American myth born of early settlers and still present in the national psyche in modern narratives.

Upon being led by Glenn to his family, and a larger group of survivors settling on the outskirts of Atlanta, Rick is installed as a defacto co-leader alongside Shane. Shane clings to the early concept of liberation and safety, convinced that rescue can only be found by remaining close to one of the government's intended safe zones. Shane, in a fatal confrontation with Rick, bellows, "I thought I could make it... I thought I could hold out... wait until they came and

rescued us. They would have brought us nice beds... and hot showers... and fresh clothes! They were coming Rick! We were going to be okay!" (Kirkman Compendium One). Shane's blind faith in government rescue, and his stubborn refusal to relent to common sense in lieu of his surrounding's increasingly harsh and dangerous environment, results in his following the narrative of rescue to the point of attempting to kill Rick in order to remain in their camp rather than seek shelter elsewhere. Witness to the increasingly hostile scene, with Shane threatening Rick at gunpoint, Rick's son takes action and shoots the antagonist, killing Shane.

The incident serves as the first in many problematic clashes for Rick and the survivors. It is also the catalyst which sets the group back on the road in search of a safer place. Along the way, they seek refuge in an abandoned suburb and a farm, both proving insufficient in providing the security they require in order to continue to survive. Following a major zombie attack at the farm that kills several of its inhabitants, the group returns to the road until they stumble upon the prison. It is this prison that best serves as a reflection of the microcosm of society formed by the survivors of the *Sea-Venture*, and it is in this setting that Rick's group replicates the strife of these early settlers most closely.

Linebaugh and Rediker reflect the strife of those affected by land enclosure, like those early settlers on the *Sea-Venture*. They note that "those who had been expropriated had not only a grievance, but a living memory and lore of open-field agriculture and "commoning". Thus for many people the absence of 'bourn, bound of land, tilth' was not an ideal dream but a recent, and lost reality" (22-23). Similarly, Hershel, the proprietor of the farm, relates his pastoral existence shortly after the arrival of Rick's group. "I've been at it for five years now. It's honest work, I can see why my dad loved it so much. There's nothing quite like living off the land... providing for yourself... knowing exactly where every piece of food you eat comes from. It's certainly come in

handy in light of recent events" (Kirkman Compendium One). For the British dispossessed, the loss of such an idyllic pastoral life came in land enclosure and expropriation, for Hershel and the survivors in *The Walking Dead*, it is disrupted by frequent zombie attacks.

With the discovery of the prison, then, comes a place that is well guarded from the outside world. A place with open fields that can be harvested, and with untapped food supplies lying dormant in the prison's stocks. As Rick notes, upon the discovery:

It may not be safe now but look at that fence. It could be made to be safe. That place has beds, supplies, clothes, maybe even some food—it has to. Look at all the land inside the fence... safe, secure. We could make a life here. No... we can clean it up. There can't be that many inside. This is too good a place to pass up. We can make this work. It's perfect. We're home. (Kirkman Compendium One)

Inside, the group discovers that a small group of survivors have made it through the zombie uprising. Dexter, the defacto leader of the group, proves Rick correct, noting that the prisoners "probably have enough to feed everyone in this room if all these seats had asses in them—and that's just the meatloaf. This place is stocked out the ass. We got enough food to feed the entire prison population for weeks—and just in case you ain't noticed, there was four of us here," (Kirkman Compendium One).

For the survivors, the prison offers shelter, safety, and an overabundance of food—just as the Bermudan colony presented similar options for the survivors of the shipwreck, while simultaneously shielding them from the toil in Virginia. More importantly, for characters like Hershel, it offers the opportunity to resume a way of life considered lost in the wake of the zombie apocalypse. Hershel notes, "this place—it's special, Rick. It's going to be a new life for me, my kids. This is a new beginning for us" (Kirkman Compendium One). The prosperity, the shot at a new beginning, bears exceptional similarities for both Rick's group as well as the crew

of the *Sea-Venture*. Isolated and tasked with the construction of a new form of society, however, both groups would find that such a task is not without difficulties.

Linebaugh and Rediker reflect the problems faced by those in Bermuda, noting:

The history of the *Sea-Venture* can be recounted as a microcosm of various forms of human cooperation. The first of these was the cooperation among the sailors, and eventually among everyone on the ship, during the hurricane, as they steered the vessel, struck sails, cleared the decks, and pumped out the water that was seeping into the hull. After the shipwreck, cooperative labor was extended and reorganized among the "hands" ashore, in part by the leaders of the Virginia Company, in part in opposition to them. This work consisted of building huts out of palmetto fronds for shelter and commoning for subsistence—hunting and gathering, fishing and scavenging. Beginning with the challenge to authority aboard the ship, the commoners, led by the sailors, cooperated on the island in the planning of five distinct conspiracies, including a strike and marronage. (26)

Similarly, the survivors of Kirkman's series work together to clear the grounds of any remaining zombies, to till the land in order to farm inside the gates, and to construct their own version of society that remarkably emulates the tensions of the expropriated *Sea-Venture* crew, both before and after the voyage.

The prison group, after settling and finding "safety behind bars," faces similar acts of conspiracy. Both groups encounter and react to racial tensions, with the crew of the *Sea-Venture* working alongside Native Americans, and the Georgia-bred farmhands reacting to the inclusion of black characters like Tyrese, his daughter, and the newly arrived Michonne. While Hershel and his family interact with these characters, Southern racial tensions bubble to the surface when Otis, from a farm neighbouring Hershel's, confronts his ex-girlfriend, Patricia. He rants:

Don't talk to me like that. You shut yer mouth an' listen. You wanna dump me—fine. I don't even give a shit no more. But the shit they telling me you did—it ain't right. It just ain't fucking right. You've lost it, girl. You let that killer out and he almost killed you—and then—then you was gonna let them two—them two kick alla us outta here. You sided against us with—with—...a couple niggers. (Kirkman Compendium One)

Following the dissolution of her relationship, Patricia feels excluded from the group. When Dexter decides to enact a mutiny against Rick and the group, she sides with them in the hopes of starting fresh with someone she can be closer with. The incident, and especially Otis' exchange with Patricia, serves as a stark reminder of racial tensions in southern pastoral Georgia.

While early settlers and the survivors of the *Sea-Venture* held differing levels of tolerance for Native Americans, the *Walking Dead* group reflects such issues of race and integration in modern America. Linebaugh and Rediker note that "English colonists regularly fled to the Native Americans, 'from the moment of settlement in 1607 until the all but total breakdown in relations between English and natives following the 1622 massacre'" (33). For Otis, working with the African American prisoners is a larger insult to this belief system than freeing a white prisoner, Thomas, who had just brutally murdered two of Hershel's young girls. Posing as wrongly imprisoned for "tax fraud" (Kirkman Compendium One) to infiltrate the group, Thomas was hiding his violent past. When freed, he finds the two girls playing unsupervised in the prison's barbershop and decapitates them. For Otis aligning with the prisoners is akin to the betrayal of nationhood for defecting settlers, who, as Slotkin asserts, would have been seen as "the demonic personification of the American wilderness" (4).

In the construction of a new society, clashes of personality and beliefs are practically inevitable. The incident that spawned Otis' rant, however, serves as a larger indication of the brewing class tensions amongst the prisoners and Rick's group. Rick, a former police officer, is positioned as the controlling leader of the group. Following discovery that the murder of the girls was committed by Thomas and not Dexter (a self-confessed murderer), Rick loses control and nearly beats the man to death. Having attempted to get by with as little violence as possible,

Thomas offers both a significant problem as well as a major turning point for the survivors in the prison.

Attempting to work together amicably, class distinctions were immediately obvious in segregating the surviving prisoners from Rick's group. Sleeping in different areas, and without the added protection of firearms, the prisoners were largely controlled by Rick and company. This is indicated in an early exchange between Rick and Dexter as they tour the prison. Dexter notes that it would "be a little easier if I had one of those. You gonna give me a gun?" (Kirkman Compendium One). Rick's answer positions him as socially elevated above Dexter, as he notes "Way I figure it—if you're a decent man you won't mind provin' it... We haven't shot you yet—so you're just going to have to trust us" (Kirkman Compendium One). Dexter's response sums up his new position in the prison following Rick's arrival; "Whatever—like I got a choice" (Kirkman Compendium One).

The crew of the *Sea-Venture* was forced to survive on an island among Governors and Virginia Company officials who were, if not partially responsible, part of the system enacting their expropriation. In *The Walking Dead*, Dexter and his small band of prisoners are now similarly subjugated by the return of an authoritative police officer. With society crumbling, Rick's installation as the leader of both groups becomes increasingly problematic upon the discovery that Thomas has killed two of Hershel's daughters. The group accuses Dexter, with his past conviction acting as the deciding factor in who committed the crime. Isolated and accused, Dexter begins to enact a mutiny against Rick and his group. When visited by his lover and fellow prisoner Andrew, Dexter instructs the man to find a hidden cache of weapons he had kept secret from Rick. Making his move, Dexter relates:

You listen up. These fucks ain't our friends. They ain't fucking normal. They crazies. They thought we was living the high life in that cafeteria. What they been through, out in

the world—it's tore 'em up. They broken. Now they killing each other an' blamin' us. Only one way out of this. You gotta figure out a way into A Block—where the guard center is. That's where they got the riot gear and the shotguns an' shit. Enough ammo to kill an army in there. They stocked up for riots. You get in there, we home free. You just gotta do it on the down low. I never trusted these fucks—they don't know about the guns... That's what's gotta happen. Otherwise, I rot in here until they decide to off me. And it's you next. (Kirkman Compendium One)

Dexter's mutiny falls at a time when tensions are coming to a boil in the prison. While he constructs his and Andrew's split from the group, however, Rick and the other survivors are more concerned with what to do with Thomas in light of his newly revealed murder of the twin girls.

Linebaugh and Rediker note:

Even though Sir Thomas Gates was invested by the Virginia Company with the power to declare martial law at his discretion, the gentlemen had a terrible time establishing their authority, for the hurricane and the shipwreck had levelled class distinctions. Confronted with resistance that proposed an alternative way of life, the officials of the Virginia Company responded by destroying the commoning option and by reasserting class discipline through labor and terror, new ways of life and death. They reorganized work and inflicted capital punishment. (30)

Similarly, while Rick's former position of authority has both been relegated by the destruction of society through zombie invasion as well as tarnished through Dexter's perception of having been broken by life outside the prison (resulting in many deaths in the group), Rick clings to his title in the face of Thomas' violent transgression. He asserts his dominance to his wife, Lori, and the rest of the group:

I'm just making sure we do what's right, Lori. I was put in charge after we left Atlanta. Honey, listen to me. I'm a cop—I've been trained to make decisions like this. I'm the only one here in a position of authority. I'm making the choice that's best for all of us. That's what you all look up to me for. That's why everyone comes to me for advice and guidance. I'm in charge. (Kirkman Compendium One)

In AMC's television adaptation of the same name, Rick demonstrates this "position of authority" with a more totalitarian assertion. In the episode *Beside the Dying Fire*, he proclaims that "this isn't a democracy anymore" (*Beside the Dying Fire*). In the comics, he follows through on his

self-positioned leadership role in a manner that emulates the decisions of the Virginia Company officials in Bermuda. Linebaugh and Rediker reflect that "one critical instrument of control was the public hanging... Hanging was destiny for part of the proletariat because it was necessary to the organization of transatlantic labor markets, maritime and otherwise, and to the suppression of radical ideas, as on Bermuda" (31). For Rick, the same holds true:

I trust my wife is the only one that is against capital punishment at this point? We have to make an example of Thomas—we have to make the statement once and for all—we do not kill. We do not tolerate it. We will not allow it. That is our rule—our pledge. You kill. You die. No exceptions. Now—help me get Thomas up. We're going to hang him. (Kirkman Compendium One)

Both groups find themselves torn between former legislation and present circumstance, and both groups turn to the use of martial law and capital punishment to control their respective microcosms of society. For Rick, he is making a sensible claim for the safety of the group. For Dexter, and his fellow newly dispossessed prisoners, he is furthering the gap between their respective classes. This leads Dexter to enact his mutiny. Following the death of Thomas (by gunfire after an escape attempt), Dexter takes advantage of the tumultuous state of the prison. "You ain't going to be talking to nobody—or bossing anyone around, big man. Not after we're done... I'll make this really simple for you, farm boy. We were here first—and you wore out your welcome real quick. Get the fuck out of my house" (Kirkman Compendium One).

While Rick's sentencing of Thomas to death can be lent credence by the man's atrocious murder of two children, Dexter's qualms with Rick and the prison group are arguably justifiable. Having sent Andrew to find the guns in the prison's storehouse, the mutineers fail to recognize the threat of zombies still remaining in the still infested A-Block. As a result, just as Dexter engages in mutiny, a zombie outbreak occurs within the prison. Surrounded, Dexter has no choice but to offer guns to Rick and his group in order for them to work together to clear out the



undead. Seeing this as an opportunity, Rick aims his sights on Dexter in the heart of the chaos and executes the man, ending the insurrection. Having contradicted his no-killing stance, he is confronted by fellow survivor Tyrese, who notes "I think you did the right thing. The way things were looking that fool was going to attack us as soon as the roamers were cleared out, anyway. Who knows who he would have killed. Fuck him, y'know. Still kinda throws the whole 'you kill you die' thing out the window, huh? Maybe you should rethink your no killing stance" (Kirkman Compendium One). Officials of the Virginia Company would eventually assert their dominant position, enact martial law, and force the survivors of the *Sea-Venture* to construct vessels and renew the voyage to Virginia. Similarly, Rick clings to his life as a police officer and carries on his form of justice over the prisoners.

Both groups deal with racial tensions, mutiny, and a heightened sense of danger following their respective excursions into the formation of new societies. The close, reflective nature of each example provides insight into the psyche of early expropriated settlers, and serves as a reminder that the American nation was born of a significant distrust of authority. It reflects Slotkin's concept of American mythology as derived from early settlers and adventurers, and positions the zombie narrative as a highly Americanized genre that feeds off the nation's historical and cultural foundations.

While the mutiny in the prison ends the tumultuous period of survival and heralds a long standing pastoral period in which they cultivate the prison grounds, Rick and his group would soon face tensions from the outside rather than from within. Having found refuge in the prison and claiming it for their own, the survivors of the *Walking Dead* installed a microcosm of society that closely relates the one created by the expropriated crew of the *Sea-Venture*. The similarities lend credence to Slotkin's perception of American mythology as derived from early settlers and

ingrained in the population's psyche. Further contributing to Slotkin's theory, the survivors soon face land disputes and confrontations that once again mimic the plight of the expropriated and enclosed who would sail for the New World (whether by force, or of their own choice) to attempt to construct something different.

When a helicopter flies overhead and crashes nearby, Rick and some of the survivors depart the prison to see if they can rescue the helicopter's crew. Instead, they find no survivors, but pick up a trail leading to the nearby town of Woodbury. Woodbury, led by the malicious Governor, soon becomes the first main antagonistic force encountered by the survivors. The name of the villain itself, The Governor, positions the series' most iconic antagonist as a representative of government. This reflects the propensity with which the zombie genre aligns itself as critical of, and even counter to, government institutions. Slotkin suggests that "during the first centuries of its existence, colonial society was fragmented into hostile cultural enclaves and rival governments, each speaking for separate and isolated fragments of that society" (23). This is also true for the newly zombified environment of *The Walking Dead*. The manner in which the Governor positions himself in a place of power with ruthless tact while clinging to a government title, for instance, further suggests an ongoing disparity between zombie narratives and perceptions of mismanaged government while reflecting the tenuous relationship between fragmented societies in a wholly new environment.

While Rick served as the defacto leader of the prison group due to his former occupation as a police officer, the Governor serves as a mirror to the English elite. Linebaugh and Rediker reflect that "the ruling class of England was especially eager to challenge the Iberian countries' grip on the New World and to enrich itself while doing so" (15). Indeed, the Governor's view of

Rick's prison follows similar desires. A member of Rick's group, Andrea, reflects her concerns after coming to view the prison as home. She notes:

Do you remember what this place looked like from the outside? How happy we were to find it? Do you think we're the only people out here—the only people still alive? I doubt it. What happens when another group shows up—a bigger group. What if they come and don't want to share? (Kirkman Compendium One)

Andrea's concerns are realized by the Governor's capture of Rick and a selection of the prison survivors. Noticing insignia on the riot gear the group wore as armour to face the outside world in safety, the Governor quickly discovers that Rick and his friends have discovered and cleared a prison. Just as the British government saw the New World as a means of expansion and enrichment, the Governor sees the prison as a viable location for survival and prosperity. Quickly, he moves to terrorize and torture the captors in the hopes of gaining information on the prison's whereabouts.

In a show of power, the Governor cuts off Rick's hand to emphasize his superiority before torturing the remaining prisoners, Michonne and Glenn. The conflict and ensuing terror is ultimately derived from a land dispute—the Governor's actions further reflecting similar instances involved in expropriation in England. Linebaugh and Rediker note:

Most agricultural laborers were... unable to find profitable unemployment, without land, credit, or occupation, these new proletarians were thrust upon the roads and ways, where they were subject to the merciless cruelty of a labor and criminal code as severe and terrifying as any that had yet appeared in modern history... Laws against vagabondage meanwhile promised physical violence against the dispossessed... vagabonds were whipped, had their ears cut off, or were hanged. (18)

Similarly, Rick's hand is cut off, Glen beaten, and Michonne whipped, raped, and forced to enter a gladiator style arena to serve as entertainment for the Governor's Woodbury society.

The Governor employs a similar strategy to the officials of the Virginia Colony in raising troops to attack and colonize the prison. While the Virginia Company spoke of prosperity,

rallying against "vagabonds [who] were... 'a hydra-headed monster poised to destroy the state and social order'" (18), the Governor utilizes similarly false propaganda. After several days of torture, the group escapes Woodbury. Michonne, however, turns back to exact revenge for the unspeakable torture she endured. She mutilates the Governor, severing his arm and gouging out one of his eyes before leaving him for dead. He survives the attack, however, and utilizes it as a means of vilifying the prison group. He proclaims:

As you know, it's been a long time since we've had any new people arrive in town. So recently, when a small group of survivors showed up, I was thrilled. I thought they were like us, happy to be alive, thankful to see other survivors, but that was not the case. There is evil in this world—and not all of it is in the form of those undead monsters clawing at our fences. At first I had no idea what they were capable of. I trusted them—it was a grave mistake. They needed supplies, some things we seemed to have plenty of. They live in a nearby prison, they took our head of security, Martinez back with them—to show him around. There was talk of combining the camps—one group moving to the safest place to live. Some of them stayed behind—and one night, while my guard was down, they tortured me—mutilated me... and left me for dead. They escaped—but along the way, they killed Doctor Stevens. They're ruthless, inhuman savages! ... These savages know where we live! They know what we have! They know our strengths and weaknesses! I say we strike at them before they have a chance to come at us! I refuse to stand down and allow them to destroy us—not after everything we've lost—not after everything we've sacrificed! We've worked too hard to build what we have here—and I'll be goddamned if I'm going to let anyone take it away from me! (Kirkman Compendium One)

The Governor's manipulation of the citizens of Woodbury serves to illustrate the new world in which these characters find themselves in. He perceives the prison as a necessary means of extending the survival of Woodbury, and by extension, the human race. Proponents of the Virginia Company utilized deceptive narratives of prosperity as an incentive while disregarding the plight of the expropriated in early colonies, a tactic similarly employed by the Governor. He succeeds in gaining support for his mission to attack and colonize the prison, but when the conflict comes to a head and results in many deaths on each side, a citizen of Woodbury unveils the Governor's deception and kills him. Authority, in both instances, was manipulated to ensure

the population would follow orders and play into the controlling party's aspirations. The crew of the *Sea-Venture*, and many early settlers of the Virginia Colony, refuse these aspirations in revolt and desertion. Similarly, the citizens of Woodbury find themselves unable to continue their support of the Governor after he heralds intense conflict and death.

Both narratives serve to reflect the increasing disparity between those making orders in a time of upheaval and those tasked with carrying out such orders. Both indicate an increasingly anti-establishment counterculture that plays out in defiance of authority figures after an upswing in death and despair. Finally, both express a romantic yearning for an idealized version of a former way of life to erupt in new societies following cataclysmic social disruption. This element of the zombie narrative is indicative of Slotkin's concept of American mythology, as the remarkable similarities between each new society reflect a heightened narrative of national re-birth in opposition to the decisions made by those in power. The wreck of the *Sea-Venture* and the collapse of the prison society, therefore, indicate two instances of survival gone awry in the birth of a new nation. For the expropriated, the New World often served as a death sentence, while simultaneously giving hope for a better existence. For the survivors of *The Walking Dead*, the new apocalyptic landscape and the ensuing tensions therein are remarkably similar. Each instance is analyzed here to demonstrate the similarities of survival in a "new world." Former protocol has been disrupted, the displaced (either by expropriation or the rise of the dead) tasked with the erection of a new way of life that matches their new environments. For both groups, what comes next follows a similar path: the opening of the frontier in American history, and the emersion of a second frontier in the apocalyptic wasteland. In my next chapter, I will examine the zombie as a form of countercultural expression to further indicate the disparity between authority and those impacted by the decisions of authority figures. In a country born of

"independence" from a controlling government, the zombie narrative serves to question the choices made by such figures, while highlighting the plight of those oppressed by such decisions. The prison scenario's mirroring of the wreck of the *Sea-Venture* lends credence to Slotkin's concept of American mythogenesis as having erupted from early settlers. Both scenarios illuminate the disparity between authority figures and those enlisted in their plans. A fundamental aspect in the foundation of the country and its national psyche, American resistance to government can be traced back to the earliest of New World settlers and can now be found thriving in the narratives presented in the zombie genre.

### **Chapter Three: The Zombie as Social Critique**

In the last chapter, I discussed the remarkable similarities between newly erupted societies constructed by citizens displaced by disaster and oppression. That the prison group in Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* explore an idealized restoration of antiquated societal institutions in the face of an ever-changing present, as I discussed, such reconstitutions of society can be seen as a romanticized yearning for a return to an existence closer to the wilderness, and by association, enhanced freedom. For the expropriated British, the Bermudan society created by the crew of the *Sea-Venture* is a documented historical event that reflects the tensions of its time. Why then, should Kirkman's narrative follow so closely the structures instituted by early American settlers? It is the focus of this chapter that the zombie, as a genre, has a history of being decidedly countercultural and anti-establishment. Since its inception in 1968, and through its renaissance in the early 2000s, prominent zombie narratives emerge primarily in times of tumult and instability as a reaction to government policy, decisions, and misdirection deemed unacceptable by the creators of such narratives. This chapter will focus on explaining significant cultural anxieties in concordance with zombie films released in close proximity, while offering analysis of how the genre reacts and adapts to instances of tumult and injustice. Specific focus will be placed on narratives that directly react to such instances, as reflected in the zombie genre's persistence throughout the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, excessive consumerism, Cold War paranoia, as well as terrorist attacks like 9/11 and subsequent war stemming from those attacks.

To explore the zombie as a countercultural genre one must pay strict attention to the historical and cultural backdrop surrounding the release of its major works. History has shown time and time again that tumultuous periods result in an outpouring of violent and disturbing

literature. The birth of the Gothic genre amidst the backdrop of the French Revolution, for instance, exemplifies this fact. Similarly, the zombie genre seems to reach creative heights at times of insurrection, war, and shifting social values as demonstrated in the first release in the genre, *Night of the Living Dead*. In *American Zombie Gothic*, Kyle William Bishop asserts that "one of the defining features of Romero's zombie films is how motley groups of human are forced into hiding, holing up in 'safe houses' of some kind where they barricade themselves in and wait in vain for the trouble to pass. This claustrophobic situation invariably reiterates societal problems and tensions, particularly those of the patriarchy, gender, and race" (155). The use of a cramped, confined space to heighten cultural anxieties is a trait Romero's films share with Gothic novels. Writers of the Gothic tradition were largely reacting to atrocity and horror stemming from incidents in the French Revolution, as indicated in Elizabeth MacAndrew's *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction*. MacAndrew suggests Horace Walpole initiated the genre with an attempt to "present his age's concept of human evil—pride, hatred, violence, cruelty, incest—as part of man's psychology" (19). The same can be said of the zombie genre. While the evil is largely an outright force of the raised undead, the true horror is derived from the breakdown of societal norms and the devolution of humans in face of such changing realities. Bishop asserts that the Gothic is:

Especially suitable to both a psychological and a social/Marxist critical approach, which helps to explain how "the longevity and power of Gothic fiction unquestionably stem from the way it helps us address and disguise some of the most important desires, quandaries, and sources of anxiety... throughout the history of Western culture." The Gothic features of *Night of the Living Dead* reveal how the film uses its central location to common on contemporary anxieties, particularly the state of the family in the 1960s. (121)

Just as the French Revolution inspired the initial Gothic movement, the zombie genre reaches peak popularity in times of unrest. This is perhaps best exemplified in the first film of the genre,



Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, and the tumultuous decade in which it was released, the 1960s.

The survivors of the zombie uprising in Romero's film find themselves holed up in a Pennsylvanian farm house. From the film's opening seconds, the dynamics of family are almost immediately disrupted. Barbara and her brother are introduced paying respects to their dead father's grave, displaced from their home after a cross-country journey to do so. A staple of the Gothic tradition, an inescapable haunting from the past, is given new meaning when the dead start to rise. The trip is transformed from one of familial dedication to a battle between the living and the dead. Barbara's brother is killed by a risen zombie, and as a result, recruited into the hordes of the dead roaming the countryside. Her father, if presumed to be similarly affected, no longer rests in his grave but now claws at the top of his casket, another family member enlisted in the army of the dead. Barbara then finds herself abandoned by patriarchal males and spends the rest of the film largely mute, rendered nearly comatose by the traumatic events of the film's opening. Barbara's deconstruction is a fascinating element in the film. Positioned as the lead character, we follow Barbara from the opening scenes to her eventual death at the hands of her zombified brother. The breakdown in familial relationships serves as an example of the Gothic tradition alongside the use of antiquated space represented in the film's farmhouse.

The manner in which Ben rises while Barbara falls, however, is indicative of the changing social norms in the American '60s. In *The Road to Dystopia: Landscaping the Nation in Easy Rider* Barbara Klinger presents a survey of cultural shifts leading up to the release of Dennis Hopper's 1969 *Easy Rider*, a film released one year after *Night of the Living Dead*.

Klinger relates:

While the Cold War continued to provide the incentive for nationalistic sentiments stressing diversity, unity, and democracy throughout the 1960's, by the end of that decade

massive civil unrest in the form of the Vietnam War protest, the radical youth movement, race riots, and the black liberation movement, as well as the assassination of political figures such as Malcolm X, John F. Kennedy, his brother Robert, and Martin Luther King, dramatically enhanced the instabilities of the Cold War era by questioning the democratic claims that had traditionally served as the basis of national identity. To the counter-culture and Civil Rights workers, democracy was compromised by imperialism, racism, and repression as the United States fought a questionable war in Southeast Asia and battled African-Americans and youth protestors on the domestic front. (185)

Hopper's film is often pointed to as a beacon of changing social values, while *Night of the Living Dead* is largely ignored by cultural critics outside of zombie studies. Klinger notes "unlike many films from the past... *Easy Rider* didn't have to wait for retrospective canonization... It was literally a legend in its own time, serving as an instant emblem of its generation (179). Klinger's sentiment is not limited to the 1960s, as the film is often hailed as a defining production of American cinema to this day. The thematic elements that embody the film, I will argue, are also present in Romero's film, and perhaps even taken to a higher degree as a reflection of emerging anti-establishment values.

Klinger points to *Easy Rider's* "twin social themes of freedom and repression" (180) as a focal point of the film's aim. In the last chapter, I discussed these themes as present in the zombie genre, specifically in Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead*. *Night of the Living Dead* provides a glimpse into the tumultuous times of the '60s a year before Hopper brought them to the mainstream in his classic road film. Klinger writes: "The film juxtaposed 'America the beautiful' with 'Amerika the ugly': the pristine wilderness of the landscape, representing the great potential of the country's historical past, with the profane sentiments of its fascistic and bigoted inhabitants, threatening the very foundations of democracy in the present" (181). While this holds true for Hopper's film, the racial tensions and reversal of social norms in *Night of the Living Dead* utilizes these elements to a higher degree.

Klinger reflects:

Mass circulation magazines as well as other sources, most notably Pop Art, were busy disarming earlier idyllic and romantic images of America. These sources portrayed apocalyptic, disaster-filled scenarios of modernity via competing depictions of the country's landscape. Through either an ideological identification with the counter-culture or a kind of hysteria born of 1960's political violence, alternative depictions of the nation emerged and flourished alongside the more conventional. (182)

Amongst these less conventional narratives emerged a prime example in Romero's film. The 1960s' instability Klinger points to is well documented, and the manner in which the survivors of Romero's film consistently huddle around a television for information on the growing apocalyptic tragedy serves as a reflection of the period's tumult. The '60s in America were a time of social unrest and activism, of violence and war, and of the struggle to be heard. Following a long period of growth for America as a nation, the '60s were a sobering period that incited intense reflection amongst the nation's citizens. 1968, the year of Romero's film's release, alone saw the assassination of both Martin Luther King Jr. as well as Robert F. Kennedy, while earlier years in the decade saw similar instances of shocking violence broadcast on a relatively new medium.

In *America in the Sixties*, John Robert Green explores the shift in television broadcasting necessary for a decade of unrest. Green writes:

The media's coverage of the Civil Rights Movement also helped to create a new type of journalist—a "revisionist reporter," if you will. Reporters now stepped into the field of government watchdog. They began to resist age-old scriptures and traditions that led the media to self-censor. No longer would reporters blindly accede to White House orders like the one that insisted, for example, that the only pictures to be published of Franklin Roosevelt were to be pictures that did not show him on crutches (if this pact was violated, the offending newspaper or magazine would be shunned from the press). Gone were the days when, as in the Eisenhower years, press conferences edited by the White House would be aired. And soon to be discarded were any limitations on covering the personal lives of governmental officials, as the press had done by not publishing their knowledge of the sexual affairs of both Kennedy and Johnson. Reporters now wanted to get, in the words of one famous radio personalities of the broadcast period, "the rest of the story." (Green, 131)

This shift in reporting, and resistance to government direction, provided the American population with unseen images of an increasingly graphic nature. Images of the Vietnam War, for instance, paved the way for a new style of journalism that exposed atrocity and corruption within the United States army, rather than solely exposing such instances as committed by opposing forces.

Green continues:

This development of a new media attitude towards government would be accelerated by the Vietnam War. Always hungry for a war to cover, young journalists, many of whom had covered various phases of the Civil Rights Movement, competed with each other to get to cover Vietnam firsthand. When they did, they discovered that the official releases of the military were simply wrong. They had discovered what would soon be dubbed "the credibility gap"—the enormous chasm that existed between official explanations and the truth. Refusing to accept press releases from military command as fact, as had been done in previous years... these reporters observed for themselves, "embedding" themselves with platoons and companies in the field *long* before that term was made popular in the Gulf Wars of the next century... Their resourcefulness, along with the willingness of their editors to print and broadcast their stories, led to coverage of the war that soon became harshly critical. (131)

What followed was a bombardment of images of unbelievable violence and terror. The refusal to accept military deception further aligns the decade as one of social unrest, and subsequently influenced cultural output of the time. The increasingly frantic nature of the broadcasts in *Night of the Living Dead* indicates a growing anxiety associated with the new form of media. The broadcasts cover a variety of significant moments from the decade, such as the speculation that a wayward satellite carrying radiation back to Earth is responsible for the rise of the dead. The competitive nature of the broadcasters, arguing over what should be done with the zombies, further indicates a growing detachment from authoritative broadcasting relayed from the orders of those in charge, and the rise of the refusal to accept such narratives. The newsmen in Romero's film nearly come to blows as their world falls apart around them, reflecting the intense period of protests and countercultural endeavours.

The images of Duane Jones' Ben in *Night of the Living Dead* further reflect the atrocities broadcast from Vietnam. The hero and sole survivor of the farmhouse, Ben is non-ceremoniously shot, dragged across an open field by a posse member's meat hook, and dropped onto a funeral pyre filled with bodies as the film's militant group marches onwards to clear the next city of the dead. The scene is presented as if broadcast on a news channel, images of a grisly and inconceivably violent war with the dead. Kyle William Bishop asserts that it is "no coincidence that the modern cinematic zombie cycle began on the eve of the Tet offensive in Vietnam, when the general populace was being exposed to graphic images of death and violence regularly on the nightly news" (21). The viewer must watch Ben's unjust death at the climax of the film after following him as the virtuous protagonist, reflecting the increase in exposure to the deaths and violent acts of American citizens. Just as the protagonists of Hopper's film are senselessly killed following their journey to reflect an increasingly dystopian landscape, Ben meets a similar fate in a film that predates the release of *Easy Rider* by one year. The death of such protagonists was a common element in films of the 1960s, as Klinger relates that the "paranoid and apocalyptic culture of the late 1960s was often materialized through extreme filmic violence, as in the endings of *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *The Wild Bunch*, where the protagonists were shot literally to pieces in slow motion" (197). *Night of the Living Dead* certainly follows that tradition, reflecting the national landscape of political strife and violence.

The Vietnam War incited an increase in negative response to the American government's actions, adding to the already tumultuous decade of political strife and violence both internationally in war efforts as well as in domestic protests. Amongst the decade's most poignant rebellions was the increase in activity surrounding the Civil Rights Movement. Reacting to segregation, voter suppression, racial hate-crimes, and a litany of additional race-

related issues, the Civil Rights Movement aimed to bring racial equality to the forefront of American issues. Amidst 1960s cries for racial equality came Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, one of the first American films to feature a prominent starring role for an African American actor, Duane Jones, in a horror film.

Duane Jones' casting as Ben is in itself remarkable and indicative of the growing change in racial sentiment in 1960s America. While Romero is on record noting that the role was initially written for a white man, Jones' casting cannot be dismissed. In *George A. Romero: Interviews*, Romero notes that "we had no preconceived notion as to the role being a black role, Duane came in, he looked right, he read well, so we used him. We never took any further note of it. It's not mentioned in the script at all, although I know we're getting a lot of press comment over that fact" (10). Though Jones was simply the best actor for the role, a black man as the protagonist in a film of apocalyptic proportions who not only slaps a white woman, but kills an upper-class white man, is revolutionary. His acts of violence are necessary to keep order in the house, and to ensure the survival of the group for whom Ben acts as the rational and strategic leader. This positions him as elevated beyond artificial racial constructs; he is a strong leader and virtuous character first, a black man second. Romero's decision to utilize Jones is indicative of the growing change towards racism in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, and aligns the film with the anti-race movement championed by Walter D. Mignolo and Jose Marti. In *The Americas, Christian Expansion, and Racism* Mignolo asserts that:

The wretched are defined by the *colonial wound*, and the colonial wound, physical and/or psychological, is a consequence of racism, the hegemonic discourse that questions the humanity of all those who do not belong to the locus of enunciation (and the geo-politics of knowledge) of those who assign the standards of classification and assign to themselves the right to classify... The shift in the geo-politics of knowledge... began with the recognition that even the post-modern endorsement of pluralities of interpretations cannot be celebrated as long as it is restricted to a *diversity of interpretations within the one Eurocentric frame of knowledge*. (8)

Refusing to classify the role of Ben as assigned to a particular race, and instead allowing the character to speak for himself through virtuous and strategic actions, positions Romero's film as contrary to the perception of race in the American '60s . It is then aligned with Jose Marti's assertion in *Our America*, that:

There is no racial hatred, because there are no races. Sickly, lamp-lit minds string together and rewarm the library-shelf races that the honest traveler and the cordial observer seek in vain in the justice of nature, where the universal identity of man leaps forth in victorious love and turbulent appetite. The soul, equal and eternal, emanates from bodies that are diverse in form and color. Anyone who promotes and disseminates opposition or hatred among races is committing a sin against humanity. (7-8)

Indeed, Romero's use of Duane Jones, not because he was a black man, but because he was the best available actor for the role, positions the film among perceptions of race as both fundamentally incorrect and in stark contrast to solely euro-centric conceptions of such constructs. Furthermore, it reflects a growing shift in the acceptance of minority populations emerging in the 1960s and suggests that this racial enlightening influenced Romero's film.

Bishop traces Romero's film's roots in the tumultuous 1960s, and specifically amidst the backdrop of the Vietnam war, noting that "the 'new' zombies of the late 1960s and beyond work as uncanny manifestations of other repressed societal fears and insecurities, such as the dominance of the white patriarchy, the misogynistic treatment of women, the collapse of the nuclear family, and the unchecked violence of the Vietnam War" (95). As mentioned in the preceding paragraph, Ben's death and the documentary-like filmic style following his fate serves as an allegory of the images brought forth from Vietnam. Misogyny to women is reflected in the manner in which women are marginalized in the farmhouse. Barbara, for instance, reverts to a child-like state of delirium and is unable to cope with the rise of the dead, eliciting a slap from patriarchal figure Ben intended as a sobering act. The dominance of the white patriarchy is

reflected in Mr. Johnson's refusal to take orders from the black Ben, while his increasing irrelevance and the death of both himself and his family act as an instance of the collapse of the nuclear family.

Klinger continues to map the dystopian tendencies of films in the 1960s. She asserts:

Along with its more affirmative cultural commentary on the state of the nation, *Easy Rider* also partakes of apocalyptic, disaster-filled predictions on the future of the country. While *Easy Rider's* politicized regionalism centers the apocalypse in the South, it uses the region to depict the closing of the frontier, the death of freedom in a modern landscape contaminated by fascistic intolerance and violence. (193)

While Hopper utilized the open road and the American South to demonstrate these apocalyptic predictions, Romero isolates his characters in a small farmhouse where similar tensions and anxieties play out to increasing disparity. In placing a black man, a nuclear family, a (formerly) bubbly blonde, and two "all-American" young lovers in a situation of intense violence, Romero sets the scene for a microcosm of American culture and culture clash. In doing so, he paints a broad portrait of American life in the '60s, while remaining consistent with the apocalyptic tone that defined the decade's cinematic works as exemplified in *Easy Rider*. Klinger continues:

The preoccupation of some Pop Artists with death sought to reflect the omnipresence of violence, particularly against the backdrop of the 1960's, through an unsentimental, deromanticized lens which was clearly at odds with American aesthetic traditions showing the valor in death... Death is treated forthrightly as a fearful, alienating counterpoint to idealistic conceptions of the American dream... in postwar art death is not related to either spiritual or heroic themes... Rather, death is shown to be a brutal end, a purposeless finality, a haphazard disaster caused not by divine or natural means but by human madness or political strife. (197)

This reflection of a nation lost to government inadequacies, reflected in *Night of the Living Dead*, further aligns the film in the Gothic tradition's means of exploring such tumultuous periods with instances of graphic violence, death, and enhanced isolation.

Romero's film laid the groundwork for the zombie genre as social criticism, but its successors would build on those tropes and modify thematic elements to correspond with their



cultural climates. Following *Night of the Living Dead*, Romero released his second film in what would be his initial zombie trilogy with 1978's *Dawn of the Dead*, which also incorporates an emphasis on social critique. Romero's sequel follows a similar siege-narrative to the first film, with a shopping mall serving as refuge in lieu of the first film's farmhouse. Klinger reflects a sentiment derived from an essay in *Look* magazine that "we have created ugliness where there once was beauty... We escaped an Old World into a New Eden... there are no New Eden's" (194). *Dawn of the Dead*, however, presents the first instance of a New Eden in zombie narratives in setting the film in a shopping mall filled with supplies and distractions, allowing the formation of a microcosm of society in which the protagonists temporarily flourish, as indicated by scenes like the famous "shopping" montage in which the characters parade throughout the mall, try on expensive clothing, and even loot the mall's bank. The film remains consistent with the apocalyptic narratives of the '60s, as Klinger relates that "alarmism competed with optimism, redefining the United States through a sense of heritage wilfully and violently lost and progress grown out of control. These forces have made the frontier a distant memory in danger of never being resuscitated" (194). Romero opens his 1978 feature days after the zombie apocalypse has not only begun, but reached a tipping point in favour of the zombies, suggesting the world has fallen to the undead menace. Marking a perceived failure of the Civil Rights Movement, the film opens to a police force tasked with the retrieval of a criminal in a ghettoized apartment building. Despite the moves forward in racial tensions following the 1960s, *Dawn of the Dead* immediately reminds the viewer of the persistence of racism and the condemnation of poverty. With society falling apart around them, the police officers succumb to racism and bigotry, with one officer enacting a rampage on both the living and undead citizens of the apartment complex. While *Night of the Living Dead* presented race as a non-entity, choosing instead to attribute value

to a character's actions over skin colour, race plays an important role in the 1978 follow-up. The rampaging officer, Wooley, reveals his prejudice before executing several citizens of colour, shouting "Yea, come on Martinez, show your greasy little Puerto Rican ass, so I can blow it right off. Blow all their asses off, lowlife bastards, blow all their lowlife little Puerto Rican and nigger asses right off" (Romero). The scene separates itself from the pastoral and rural setting of Romero's first film in the genre, replacing an unspoken racial equality with an outright condemnation of perceived racial inferiority in the slums of an industrial city.

The scene is important in distinguishing the sequel from its predecessor, as it not only places race in the foregrounds but also reflects an increasing disparity in wealth and poverty. Wooley continues his tirade, shouting "how the hell come we stick these low lifes in these big ass fancy hotels anyway? Shit man, this is better than I got. You ain't gonna talk 'em outta here. You gotta blow 'em out. Blow their asses!" (Romero). The contrast of idyllic rural setting and seedy industrial center between the two films indicates that the trajectory of America, as mapped by Klinger in *The Road to Dystopia*, has continued unchecked to reach new heights of desolation in the late 1970s.

After distinguishing the economic disparity in the opening scenes of the film, Romero continues to explore the ramifications and corruption of the economy as perceived in the 1970s. The film plays out in a similar siege-narrative as developed in *Night of the Living Dead*, but expands the time frame to display what a similar group would do following the zombie apocalypse if they were spared some extra months. The result is a cornucopia of excess, with the characters treating the mall as if it were an inherited theme park. The film is a well-noted example of consumerism criticism, again aligning it as a countercultural feature. When the characters successfully clear the inside of the mall, they take to the roof and examine the

surrounding hordes of the dead who have accumulated outside of the shopping centre's walls. In a famous quote from the film, one character asks why they're attracted to the mall. She is answered by a revelatory quote for the film's thematic aims, claiming that the massive gathering is due to "some kind of instinct. Memory of what they used to do. This was an important place in their lives" (Romero). In *The Idle Proletariat: Dawn of the Dead, Consumer Ideology, and the Loss of Productive Labor*, Kyle William Bishop asserts:

By setting the bulk of the action in a shopping mall, Romero consciously draws the audience's attention toward the relationship between zombies and consumerism. The insatiable need to purchase, own, and consume has become so deeply ingrained in twentieth-century Americans that their reanimated corpses are relentlessly driven by the same instincts and needs. The metaphor is simple: Americans in the 1970s have become a kind of zombie already, slaves to the master of consumerism, and mindlessly migrating to the malls for the almost instinctual consumption of goods. (234-235)

The zombies themselves can be seen as a critique of consumer culture, as they are defined not only by the consumption of flesh, but by the unending desire to consume. The zombies, a sublime reflection of humanity, consume and consume with insatiability—or as Bishop puts it, "because all biological functions have ceased to exist in the zombie's dead physiology, they do not eat for sustenance—instead, they eat simply for the sake of eating" (237).

Similarly, the protagonists of the film fall into the trap of consumption for consumption's sake, in their obsessive domination of the mall. With an abundance of food and clothing available in the mall, the characters succumb to similar degrees of excessive consumption that mirrors those of the undead, and reflects a growing disdain for 1970s American consumer culture. Bishop asserts that:

They are largely going through the motions of a lost life, just like the zombies... The four humans have become fundamentally idle; having all that they need, they do not have anything truly productive to do. The work they conducted in their former lives is no longer required—there is no news for Fran to report, no traffic for Stephen to observe, and no civil unrest for Roger and Peter to control. The consumable goods they need exist in abundance, so they have no reason to toil or labor to produce food, goods, or even

extravagances—and the dialectical development of a human being from an ignorant slave to a self-aware individual hinges on labor. (242)

Resigned to excessive consumption, the characters identify the mall itself as a possession worth dying for. This is exemplified in the raid carried out by a group of renegade bikers who stumble upon the mall. They give the characters warning that they will enter, and when they are refused, they decide to take the mall (or more importantly, the mall's supplies) by force. An Edenic setting of relative safety, there is plenty of material to share with the bikers to ensure the peaceful continuation of their sheltered habitat. When even a small portion of those supplies are threatened by the biker group, however, the characters refuse to let them take what they need and pass, and instead resist with lethal force. Stephen, specifically, grows enraged by the biker's assault on his perceived property. "It's ours," he claims, "We took it. It's ours," (Romero) before emerging from a safe hiding spot and shooting at several bikers. Stephen's attack reduces the focus from the emerging threat of zombies entering the mall following the dismantling of the barricaded perimeters by the bikers. Refusing to cede any of the mall's supplies to the bikers, Stephen neglects the threat of the dead and instead engages in a battle with the living, to disastrous results. More and more zombies pour into the mall, reducing the formerly safe environment to one infested with both hordes of the dead and an antagonistic militant force in the form of the bikers. As a result, Stephen gets cornered and is bitten, transforming him into a zombie, while several bikers are killed and the mall is lost to the dead. While the three remaining survivors may have stood a chance in clearing the mall and ensuring their safety, Stephen's actions reduce the group to Fran, a pregnant woman, and the increasingly fatalistic Roger, who are unable to restore the mall to safety. Failing to realize that they had enough, even with the losses resulting from the biker's raid, the mall is lost to a desire of excess, its destruction a sharp

critique of consumerist culture and excess that again aligns Romero's films in the countercultural tradition.

While the consumerist criticism element is important to the film, Romero is careful to include significant issues relating to a distrust of government policy and action as initially defined in *Night of the Living Dead*. Following the 1973 Roe Vs. Wade verdict legalizing abortion in the United States, anti-abortion protests were a constant and prominent example of competing social and cultural ideologies in the '70s. Furthermore, the Hyde Amendment of 1976, two years prior to the film's release, restricted access and funding for abortions. The amendment removed government funding for abortions in any case other than those of rape and incest. This initiated public outcry, as the amendment reduced access for low income mothers who would rely on government funding, while failing to address the need for abortions in cases in which the mother's life would be at risk. Romero injects these concerns in the character of Fran, who discovers she is pregnant. Given the new hostile zombified environment in which the film takes place, the characters engage in several dialogues regarding the virtue of birthing and raising a child in the midst of the zombie apocalypse. Peter, the film's protagonist, notes "we can deal with it. It doesn't change a thing. Do you want to get rid of it?... Do you want to abort it? It's not too late, and I know how" (Romero). In placing such a divisive and controversial issue as a significant plot point in the film, Romero continues to position his films alongside narratives of personal freedoms and the sovereignty of the body. While Roe Vs. Wade successfully championed abortion rights, the continued divisive nature of the issue, as indicated with the Hyde Amendment, aligns the film as an additional example of working against oppressive policies and instead allowing the characters to choose for themselves under new circumstances.

Romero's next film in the original "Dead" trilogy, 1985's *Day of the Dead*, would continue to reflect social and cultural anxieties and continued distrust of government policy. Following the brief discussion of abortion in *Dawn of the Dead*, Romero's third film features an ethical debate concerning reproduction and Sarah, the film's protagonist, perceived obligation to carry children in order to repopulate society. This continuation suggests an ongoing cultural anxiety concerning woman's rights and abortion issues in the 1980s.

More important to the decade's political climate, however, is found in setting the film in an underground government bunker. Inside, the characters experiment on zombies, with one Doctor going as far as feeding the remains of dead soldiers to his zombies to attempt to initiate docility. The setting serves as a reminder of the international tumult of life in the American 1980s, deep in the midst of the Cold War. In an article for *The Atlantic* titled "The USSR and the US Came Closer to Nuclear War than We Thought", Douglas Birch provides insight into the precarious relations between the USSR and the United States in the 1980s. Romero's films, released in 1968, 1978, and 1985, all take place within the time frame of the Cold War. That the final film in his initial trilogy takes place in an underground bunker, the above world transformed to apocalyptic wasteland, suggests a continued anxiety in relation to the threat of nuclear war that reached a tipping point in the 1980s. Birch presents a look into 1983 through declassified documents, relaying that "tensions had heated up that September, after the Soviet shoot-down of Korean Air Lines Flight 007, which had strayed into Soviet air space. The administration responded with stepped-up surveillance and provocative naval manoeuvres, and pressed for the deployment of new Pershing II missiles in Europe capable of reaching Moscow in less than ten minutes" (Birch). That *Day of the Dead*, released two years after war games brought the USSR and the United States precariously close to nuclear war, relies on the apocalyptic bunker setting

to tell its story suggests heightened levels of paranoia and fear during the tumultuous decade, while further aligning Romero's trilogy as a countercultural response to a mismanagement of international relations.

These three films serve as a barometer for cultural anxiety and tension in America throughout the 60s, 70s, and 80s, when war and even the apocalypse were fresh in the minds of the American population. That the relative peace of the 90s saw a significant decrease in the production of zombie films suggests, then, that the zombie genre resonates most deeply during times of tumult. In *American Zombie Gothic*, Bishop relates that "the 'serious' zombie narrative thus largely disappear into micro-budget shot-on-video (SOV) movies during the 1990s, being replaced in the mainstream by lighter fare" (187). He attributes the lack of notable serious zombie narratives in the 90s to the relative peace of the decade, noting that:

Historically, zombie cinema had represented a stylized reaction to the greater cultural consciousness—primarily social and political injustices—and America in the 1990s settled perhaps into too much complacency and stability to warrant serious, classical zombie narratives. The Cold War was over, the Berlin Wall had fallen, Ronald Reagan's Star Wars defense system had been proven unnecessary, and George H. W. Bush's Gulf War had seemingly been resolved. In fact, aside from some skirmishes in third-world countries, Americans were largely insulated from global warfare... With nothing specific to react to or to protest against, cinematic versions of the zombie subgenre declined steadily. (15-16)

The zombie renaissance of the 2000s, however, carries on the Romero tradition of presenting cultural anxieties through zombie narratives. Bishop attributes the resurgence of the zombie film in the early 2000s to heightened international and domestic tensions, relaying a quote from Max Brooks that:

"People have apocalypse on the brain right now... It's from terrorism, the war, [and] natural disasters like Katrina." In fact, during and after the collapse of the World Trade Center towers in New York, numerous journalists and bystanders commented on how the events seemed unreal—like something out of a movie. Hurricane Katrina had a similar effect: nightly news clips showed the deserted streets of New Orleans as if the city were a film set, with abandoned cars, drifting newspapers, and stray dogs. (27)

Following the attacks on the World Trade Center, the zombie re-emerged with films like Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* in 2002, in the comic books of Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* that began its run in 2003, and in Zack Snyder's remake of *Dawn of the Dead* in 2004.

In *Horror After 9/11*, Aviva Brifel and Sam J. Miller track the resurgence of the horror film following the horrific World Trade Center attacks. The pair asserts that horror films were "a genre whose obituary many critics composed following the events of September 11, 2001. In the darkened-tower issue of the *New Yorker*, Anthony Lane wrote that the day 'presented circumstances that Hollywood should no longer try to match.' How could American audiences, after tasting real horror, want to consume images of violence on-screen?" (1). Aligned with the Gothic tradition of reflecting social unrest and unspeakable violence through horror literature, however, the Zombie genre rose from its period of rest in the 90s to deal with and reflect the attacks on New York City, the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and additional domestic tragedies like Hurricane Katrina.

In *American Zombie Gothic*, Bishop writes that post 9/11 zombie films have "been reconditioned to satisfy a new aesthetic, but they have also returned to prominence because the social and cultural conditions of a post-9/11 world have come to match so closely those experienced by viewers during the civil unrest of the 1960s and '70s" (25). Indeed, films like *28 Days Later* and Snyder's *Dawn of the Dead* reconstitute the rules of the zombie genre, while continuing to reflect the social and cultural thematic elements first seen in Romero's original trilogy. Boyle's vision of post-apocalyptic London, for instance, bears a striking resemblance to scenes of desolation and destruction broadcast from New York following the 9/11 attacks. Jim, the film's protagonist, awakes from a coma alone in a hospital to find a once-thriving city reduced to ashes, its formerly heavily populated streets now barren and teeming with rage-



infected zombie-like creatures. More importantly, the film ratchets up the threat of the dead, doing away with the slow-moving decayed figures from Romero's film and replacing them with hyper-violent and inhumanly quick-sprinting infected.

This increase in danger positions the dead as significantly more threatening, reflecting a descent in the perception of safety following the disruption of peace in the form of the 9/11 attacks. That Boyle's vision of a faster, more deadly zombie jumped across the pond and into Zack Snyder's remake of *Dawn of the Dead* in 2004 comes as no surprise. Snyder's film continues to reflect issues of its time, just as zombie films before it, to present a vision of the zombie apocalypse on American soil with the increased danger of "fast" zombies. Bishop relates that in addition to the lingering presence of 9/11, Snyder's remake "was shot during the SARS epidemic of 2003, and Snyder immediately noticed the alarming parallels between his film and the nightly news, as both were fraught with panic and misinformation" (28).

Snyder's film is decidedly different than the Romero original on which it is based, a fact that heralded some concern and disdain from critics. In *Back from the Dead: Remakes of the Romero Zombie Films as Markers of Their Times*, Kevin J. Wetmore identifies an instance of such critical backlash. Wetmore relates that "reviewers 'bemoan the fact that Snyder uses the shopping mall as a location, but not additionally (as Romero had) as an occasion to critique consumer culture'... Kendell R. Phillips believes the Snyder-helmed remake 'gives up any sense of the political commentary in Romero's 1978 classic'" (137). As I have identified in earlier instances in this chapter, the zombie reacts and adapts to social and cultural instances of tumult. While a consumerist critique may have been valuable in 1978, the 2004 version is tasked with reacting to unprecedented levels of unrest in the United States. It is therefore justified in leaving behind Romero's critique of consumer culture and instead focusing on the more harrowing

aspects of a new threat of increased danger—a threat which, in the opening minutes of the film, transplants the characters from a position of suburban peace to face an apocalyptic wasteland, where even the cute rollerblading eight-year-old next door has transformed overnight into a flesh-hungry demon. Wetmore instead suggests that the differences between the 1978 original and the 2004 remake make Snyder's reimagining "the quintessential post-9/11 horror film" (145).

Wetmore provides examples that distinguish each film, while relaying the post-9/11 American climate. He points out that following the attacks, "President Bush suggested that the most patriotic thing Americans could do was go shopping. *Dawn* literalizes this suggestion" (147). While the film's setting is lifted from the original film, and not Mr. Bush's sentiment, the remake reflects cultural anxieties that can be directly attributed to the 9/11 attacks. Wetmore relates:

The opening credit sequence features a number of news clips and seemingly raw, live, documentary footage. One of the first images is a group of Muslims bowing in prayer, followed by images from disasters, news broadcasts, and indistinct shots, brief and out of focus. The film begins with imagery designed to evoke terrorism and 9/11. The bowing Muslims from the opening give way to images of zombies. The credits end with what looks like a television journalist reporting from a hotel in the Middle-East; the camera suddenly turns to show soldiers being attacked by zombies in the hotel room, and the final zombie attacking the camera, also looking Middle-Eastern. The visual link is made— threat is world-wide, but America and the American way of life are particularly at risk. We are under assault from without and within, just as on 9/11. The zombie is a terrorist. (146)

While discussion of the zombie as terrorist (or Other) will be dealt with in the following chapter, the images broadcast documentary style in the credits can be attributed as a reflection of the footage of the 9/11 attacks, and can therefore position the film alongside its brethren in the countercultural tradition.

Wetmore also highlights the differences between each film, most poignantly in the use of Ken Foree's famous speech from the original. In Romero's film, Foree's character relates an

anecdote of his grandfather, who used to proclaim that "when there's no more room in Hell, the dead will walk the earth" (Romero). In the remake, however, Ken Foree plays a different role, that of a televangelist, condemning the actions of American society. He bellows "Hell is overflowing, and Satan is sending his damned to us. Why? God is punishing us. You have sex out of wedlock. You kill your unborn. You have man-on-man relations, same-sex marriages. How do you think your God will judge you? Well, friends, now we know. When there is no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth" (Snyder). The difference in the speeches, delivered by the same actor, reflects a growing cultural anxiety following the attacks of 9/11. Wetmore relates the similarities between the revised and original version of Foree's speech with:

The words of Rev. Jerry Falwell on *The 700 Club* immediately after September 11: "The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million innocent little babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way — all of them who have tried to secularize America — I point the finger in their face and say, 'you helped this happen.'" (148)

The echoing of Falwell's speech in the *Dawn of the Dead* remake suggests that this sentiment was, if not popular, common. That the protagonists sit and watch a speech of such misled fury indicates a growing resentment in the cultural zeitgeist for such narratives. Wetmore asserts that "rather than considering American's own aggressive imperialism and its own actions in the Middle East as possible provocations, Falwell blamed homosexuals, feminists, and the ACLU for 9/11. Foree's line in the remake is meant to directly echo this sentiment" (184). Again the zombie film takes up the mantle as cultural curator, reflecting a refusal of the sentiments of such people as Falwell and instead utilizing his condemnation to serve as a reflection of cultural problems and anxieties in the wake of disaster.

Robert Kirkman's ongoing zombie epic *The Walking Dead* can be further aligned with both the Gothic tradition as well as post-9/11 anxieties. Following the attacks on 9/11, the United States engaged in two wars in the Middle East. With the advent and increasing ubiquity of the internet, the war in Iraq brought with it a new exposure to graphic imagery on a level unseen since the Vietnam War. This is exemplified in two instances: 1, the exposure of abusive treatment of detainees in the American-run Abu Ghraib, and 2, in online videos depicting the beheadings of American citizens by Iraqi militants. In *'American' in Crisis: Opinion Discourses, the Iraqi War, and the Politics of Identity*, Amanji Ismail, Mervat Yousef, and Dan Berkowitz explore the release of such atrocious incidents and their impact on the American psyche. They relate that:

Nick Berg, a US civilian, had been missing since 9 April 2004. His family was informed that his body was found on 8 May, and a video of his killing was streamed on the internet on May 11... Just as the prison scandal raised questions about the purpose of the war, the beheading of Nick Berg stirred up discourse about the difference between the presumably civilized Americans and the enemy who beheads civilians. (151)

Just as the media exposed previously unseen images of graphic violence in wartime during the Vietnam War, the war in Iraq, combined with the increasing ubiquity of the web, brought new images of unthinkable violence to the homes of American citizens. Nicholas Berg's broadcast execution created a sense of hysteria in the American public—this was not a soldier killed on the front lines, but a civilian in Iraq to conduct business. It brought the conflict directly into the sight of American citizens, with the video spreading throughout the public and even reaching his family back home. Furthermore, the beheading was proclaimed by the militants who carried out the execution as an act of retribution for the torture of detainees in Abu Ghraib, justifying the execution by positioning the United States government as partly responsible. In an article for the

*LA Times* titled "Web Amplifies Message of Primitive Executions", Lynn Smith explores the new broadcasting medium and its implications on war time violence. She relates:

The first time she felt numb. The second time she cried. Lillian Glass, a Beverly Hills psychologist, was stunned at the barbarity of terrorists beheading their hostages, right there on her computer screen. Equally surprising was how easily she found the video online. "You can't imagine anything worse," she says. "Right now, they're coming into your home. It's like they're using technology as a vehicle for war." (Smith)

The use of the internet to broadcast the executions of American citizens created, as Glass hints, an increased perception of invasiveness extended beyond the front lines of the conflict and into the homes of the American public. Smith continues:

Publicizing their atrocities has always been part of the strategy for Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups, says Josh Devon, an analyst at the SITE Institute in Washington, which tracks terrorist activities. "The point of terrorism is to strike fear and cause havoc—and that doesn't happen unless you have media to support that action and show it to as many people as they can," Devon says. Terrorists used to circulate propaganda via publications and audio- or videotapes, but the Internet has supplanted those methods. "Suddenly, it's not only text, but pictures and video and audio clips which are attacking all the senses at once," he says. (Smith)

Imagery as a form of terror brought a new dimension to warfare with the advent of the internet. As I identified earlier, the images broadcast from the Vietnam War were dealt with and reacted to in the zombie genre as exemplified in the death of Ben in *Night of the Living Dead*. The "broadcast" of executions of community members in front of their friends (who are reduced to helpless bystanders), in *The Walking Dead* indicates a similar reflection. Following the increased presence of online executions throughout the Iraq war, the zombie genre incorporated similar instances of atrocious violent acts reflecting prominent cultural anxieties of the time. This is indicated in the deaths of two major characters in Robert Kirkman's comic book series (Tyrese in issue 55, and Glenn in issue 100).

Each example finds the group helplessly watch a member of their community executed by an outside threat. Tyrese is beheaded in front of the prison by the Governor in an act of war,

while Glenn is chosen at random and beaten to death by Negan as a means of asserting dominance over the terrorized group in order to restrict insurrection. Glenn's death, occurring in front of the surrounded group which includes his wife and adopted daughter, is indicative of the helpless nature of the viewer when confronted with images like the executions broadcast from Iraq. That his family is present, yet unable to intervene, suggests an invasion into what these people see by the hands of an outside force. Tyrese's death, however, mirrors the executions of American citizens more closely as it is at once an act of war as well as intended to serve as propaganda for a competing political agenda.

When tensions between the prison group and the Governor's Woodbury society reach a head, Tyrese and fellow survivor Michonne embark on a pre-emptive strike with the intention of eliminating as many of the Governor's group as possible. When they are overwhelmed, however, Tyrese is captured while Michonne escapes. Long serving as the group's co-leader alongside Rick, Tyrese had been shown as one of the more pragmatic and capable survivors of the group, going as far as clearing a horde of the undead from the prison's gym singlehandedly. Furthermore, his moral compass positioned him as one of the more likable characters in Kirkman's series, his sympathetic nature heightened by the loss of his daughter to a suicide pact. When he is paraded in front of the prison, the Governor's purpose is twofold. First, he aims to terrorize the inhabitants of the prison with whom he is at war. Second, he utilizes the death of Tyrese as propaganda to ensure his own group's complicity in the war. He spins Tyrese's death, claiming "we tried to get them to open their gates—trade their man for access inside. We even threatened the man's life. These crazy—evil sons of bitches shot their own man! We had a bit of leverage and so they shot their own guy in the fucking head! They killed him so we couldn't use him against them!" (Kirkman Compendium One).

Here, Kirkman aligns the execution of a fan-favourite character with the acts of terrorism and beheadings in Iraq. This is further exemplified in the manner in which Tyrese is killed. Rather than present a quick, guillotine-style execution carried out with one swing of a sword, Tyrese is executed in a slow, clumsy fashion. What could have been a scene relegated to one comic panel in the series is instead delivered over several hacking cuts across two full pages, mirroring the executions depicted online. In extending the scene across two pages, Kirkman and artist Charlie Adlard create a cinematic quality to the beheading— the reader is forced to watch as the Governor raises his sword and brings it down on his helpless victim time and time again, cutting deeper and again raising his sword until the act is completed and Tyrese lays decapitated on the ground. This replicates the use of online videos as a means of "invading" the home, as described by Smith, in the online broadcast of extremist executions as the group is forced to remain confined by the prison's walls as they watch one of their own meet his end at the hands of an extremist opponent. Tyrese's death incites an all-out war between the two groups, resulting in many casualties on each side. When one of the Governor's members realizes that he has been falsely leading them into a war against ordinary people rather than the vicious murderers he had described them as, she kills him. This act of dissent can be further aligned with the competing narratives surrounding the execution of American citizens in Iraq, as Ismail, Yousef, and Berkowitz point out that "regardless of how they choose to designate or envision the 'other,' they are *all* different from the other since they share condemnation of what happened to Berg" (166). Just as the action from an extremist few cannot speak for an entire nation, ethnicity, or religious background, the Governor's use of terror and propaganda is questioned and refuted by members of his group, further cementing Tyrese's death with an allegorical approach to the broadcast of

executions online. In doing so, Kirkman carries on the zombie genre's tradition of dealing with and reflecting instances of atrocity in fiction.

These instances serve as examples of the zombie genre's propensity to reflect instances of civil unrest, violence, and war as drawn from historical incidents. In doing so, Kirkman, Romero, Snyder, and more present significant cultural anxieties of their respective times through the use of the zombie. The expansion of the zombie apocalypses timeframe in the zombie film, from one night in *Night of the Living Dead*, to months in *Dawn of the Dead*, years in *Day of the Dead*, and an endless zombie-apocalypse future in Kirkman's *The Walking Dead*, is indicative of the frontierist aim of the genre. One night in the zombie apocalypse provides the ability to present cultural anxieties and changing social realities in the representation and interactions between surviving characters. One year, however, allows the characters to grow and accept one another, and to attempt to rebuild a society on top of the ashes of their old reality. The rise of the dead is interesting, but not so fascinating as what the characters will do to survive in the wake of such a monumental shift. Rather than present an isolated scenario of survival in varying settings over one night, Romero expanded the chronological parameters of the genre by allowing more and more time for his characters to form and function in unique microcosms of society. In doing so, cultural anxieties can be explored in a new manner in allowing the characters to confront their issues and attempt to work beyond them in a way that would not have worked in their prior existence. That the zombie so consistently rises to meet and reflect historical instances of tumult, as exemplified in this chapter, suggests that these microcosms of society hold within them the opportunity to return to an idealistic American way of life by offering scenarios in which the re-opening of the frontier is a viable, and indeed necessary action. In the next chapter, I will focus on how Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* and other examples of zombie literature embody concepts



of the frontier to position the zombie genre as an example of both frontier literature, as well as indicative of a romantic yearning for a return to the frontier in the American psyche.

## **Chapter Four: The New Frontier: Zombie Apocalypse as a Return to the Wild West**

In the last chapter, I provided a history of the zombie genre's propensity to align itself with periods of intense turmoil in the United States, while equating the act of doing so to the Gothic tradition and a romantic yearning for the past. When citizens feel unsafe, at odds with government policy, or believe their rights are being restricted, zombie narratives arise to reflect these concerns, acting as a fictional "reset" button for society. The American zombie film, then, presents a world in which a conquerable yet menacing foe permeates the nation's landscapes, where violence is a necessary and everyday occurrence, and where the survivors must stake out a claim to specific territories and work long hard hours to secure safety in the area in which they settle. In doing so, the creative forces behind such narratives create scenarios in which the American frontier is reopened, and their characters return to the survivalist fantasy of life in an apocalyptic wasteland that mirrors frontier narratives of the Wild West.

While the propensity to include an imagined new frontier in the zombie apocalypse is present throughout many works in the genre, Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* acts as the leading proponent of the zombie frontier. Kirkman's saga is designed as an ongoing narrative, with the creator's intentions for the series extending beyond the typically short timeframe of zombie films and instead showing what happens months, and even years after society has ended. Kirkman reveals his mission statement for *The Walking Dead* in an interview with IGN.com's Richard George, proclaiming:

I always liked zombie movies. But my main complaint was that the endings were always kind of crappy. Not so crappy that they ruined the movie, but it was sort of this "Hey, we're out of time, now everyone's going to die!" or "Hey, we're out of time, these guys are going to die and these others are going to take off in a helicopter and we're not going to see where they go!" And I was always wondering where they go. There had, at that time, never been a zombie movie series that continued from one to the next with the same characters. So I set out to do the zombie movie that never ends. I started a comic book

series that would start where most zombie movies end and followed where these characters go, where they live, how they continue to exist in this apocalyptic world where they're trying to find food and shelter. How would living in this harsh world change them over time? So that was pretty much it! (George)

With the series passing over the 110 issue mark, *The Walking Dead* has delivered on that mission statement, the characters of the series having survived several altercations with both the dead and the living while trying to survive their new reality. In doing so, Kirkman has presented a narrative that not only reflects the birth of the American nation in the opening of the frontier, but positions the characters amidst a backdrop that relies on the use of frontier tropes to restore a semblance of American life as initially defined in the Wild West.

In the first 48 issues of Kirkman's series, collected in *Compendium One*, the characters of the series struggle to survive. Following decimation at their prison colony, however, they are shuttered from their homes and forced to confront the deadly landscape of the zombie apocalypse. In doing so, the characters grow to understand, accept, and adapt to their new reality and begin taking steps to restore society. In *Compendium Two*, which collects issues 48 through 96, the survivors find themselves no longer interested in simply surviving, but in *living*. To do so, they are forced to confront their new position in an increasingly hostile world, stake out claims to land and even titles, and to clear out hordes of the dead from their inhabited safe zones. The resemblances to frontier narratives in *The Walking Dead*, particularly in *Compendium Two* and beyond, are resounding.

In *Regeneration Through Violence, The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, Richard Slotkin analyzes the realities and myths stemming from life on the frontier that can be aligned with Kirkman's series. Slotkin offers a look at the lasting impact of the frontier, and how life on a new continent shaped the mythology of American narratives. Slotkin forms the basis of

his theory in the antagonistic relationship settlers on the frontier employed with Native Americans. He writes:

Even at the source of the American myth there lies the fatal opposition, the hostility between two worlds, two races, two realms of thought and feeling. "The land was ours before we were the land's," said Robert Frost. The process by which we came to feel an emotional title to the land was charged with a passionate and aspiring violence, and "the deed of gift was many deeds of war." Because of the nature of the myth and the myth-making process, it is a significant comment on our characteristic attitudes towards ourselves, our culture, our racial subgroupings, and our land that tales of strife between Native Americans and interlopers, between dark races and light, became the basis of our mythology and that the Indian fighter and hunter emerged as the first of our national heroes. (18)

Slotkin perceives this concept as a defining element of American myth. The classification of hostility "between dark races and light" has long been a staple of American fiction, a staple that embodies the zombie genre at its core. Zombies, a dark race, have risen from the dead to challenge the lives of the living. This, coupled with Kyle William Bishop's thought in *American Zombie Gothic* that "not only is the zombie a fundamentally *American* creation, but it is also perhaps the most unique member of the monster pantheon... The zombie is the only supernatural foe to have entirely skipped an initial literary manifestation" (12-13) positions the zombie genre not only within American myth, but as a fundamental example of what Slotkin suggests defines American myth and culture. The use of the zombie as a representation of the American Indian will be explored later in this chapter, but in order to understand the dead's place in American myth, we must first analyze the living.

Slotkin asserts that "the most striking quality of life in the New World was the relative absence of social restraints on human behaviour, the relative ease with which a strong man could, by mastering the law of the wilderness-jungle, impose his personal dream of self-aggrandizement on reality. In Europe, all men were under authority; in America, all men dreamed they had the power to become authority" (34). Indeed, the same can be said of life in

the zombie apocalypse, in which a new frontier opens of necessity in order to combat the ever encroaching threat of the dead. This is exemplified in stories like Kirkman's *The Walking Dead*, in which strong men like Rick and the Governor ascend to positions of power and authority. Rick's unyielding placement as the group's leader, for instance, can be seen as an act of claiming and asserting authority. He consistently demonstrates an enhanced ability for survival in a world that claims his wife, best friend, daughter, and many other people entwined in his various efforts at rebuilding society. While his authority is indeed challenged, he rises above his antagonists to shape his new world into a place worth living.

In many ways, Rick serves as an embodiment of the American frontier hero that has dominated Western culture in pulp novels and Western films. Its contemporary incarnation of the zombie frontier reopens in *The Walking Dead* as a new form of fatal environment that sees the living displaced amongst the dead. Slotkin argues that this archetypal hero myth finds its origins in 1784 with John Filson's *The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke*. He relates:

Filson faced the classic problem of writers about the frontier since Underhill's time: how to portray the promise of the frontier without destroying his own credibility by glossing over the obviously perilous realities of the pioneer's situation. Filson attempted to persuade his audience by composing, as an appendix, a literary dramatization of a hero's immersion in the elemental violence of the wilderness and his consequent emergence as the founder of a nascent imperial republic. In "The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boone" Filson created a character who was to become the archetypal hero of the American frontier, copied by imitators and plagiarists and appearing innumerable times under other names and in other guises — in literature, the popular arts, and folklore — as the man who made the wilderness safe for democracy. (268-269)

Rick follows the Boone myth relatively closely. He navigates the new zombie frontier with exceptional skill, often leading the charge against antagonists both living and dead, even after the severing of his hand. More importantly, he attempts to bring democracy and a semblance of his society lost to the dead back in his newly apocalyptic reality. The Boone myth is further exemplified in Rick when considered alongside Slotkin's assertion that:

A myth is narrative which concentrates in a single, dramatized experience the whole history of a people in their land. The myth-hero embodies or defends the values of his culture in a struggle against the forces which threaten to destroy the people and lay waste the land. Myth grows out of the timeless desire of men to know and be reconciled to their true relationship to the gods or elemental powers that set in motion the forces of history and rule the world of nature. In the case of the American colonies, whose people were not native to the soil, this desire took the form of a yearning to prove that they truly belonged to their place. (269)

Rick's relationship to his new environment is tumultuous; he follows the Boone myth in embodying and defending cultural values in his various attempts to install democracy in the increasingly lawless world, while defending his charges from the dead who threaten these values. More importantly, his reconciliation with his place in a new, foreign, and fatal environment positions him alongside Boone as an embodiment of a new national myth erupting in the zombie apocalypse. This is reflected in his proclamation in the midst of his attempt at a new society in the prison, where Rick positions himself and his fellow survivors as a minority group (or light race) tasked with the removal of the dead (or dark race). He bellows:

Things have changed. The world has changed—and we're going to have to change with it. Understand? Do you people still think we're going to be rescued?! Do you?! They're not coming! Think about it!! It's been almost a year!! We're on our own—it's just us and this place. That's all we have for sure. If you still think things are going to go back to the way we were—stop! They're not! Nothing will ever be the way it used to be. Ever! Do you think you're going to watch television again? Go to the bank? Buy groceries? Drop your kids off at school?! Ever?! It will never happen! You can come to grips with that sad fact—or you can sit around wishing for it to happen! You can sit around trying to follow every retarded little rule we ever invented to make us feel like we weren't animals—and you can die... We have to adapt to this world if we are going to survive. Have I gone a little crazy? Maybe—but so has the world... I will do whatever I have to do to keep us safe. Whatever it is—I will do it... This is our life. We're not waiting here. We're not biding our time—waiting for what comes next. Or waiting to be rescued! This is what we have! This is all we'll ever have. If you want to make things better, make this place better. We have to come to grips with that... We already are savages... The second we put a bullet in the head of one of these monsters—the moment one of us drove a hammer into one of their faces—or cut a head off. We became what we are... That's what this comes down to. You people don't know what we are! We're surrounded by the dead. We're among them—and when we finally give up we become them! We're living on borrowed time here. Every minute of our life is a minute we steal from them! You see them out there. You know that when we die we become them. You think we hide behind walls to

protect us from the walking dead?! Don't you get it? We ARE the walking dead!  
(Kirkman Compendium One)

Here, Rick follows Filson's Boone myth in several ways. He not only positions himself as one of the sole men capable of fighting back against the undead, but one capable of installing and enacting a democratic push to maintain a new semblance of society now that the old manners of doing so have been rendered moot. While he questions the use and efficacy of former legislation, he does so out of necessity in the face of new challenges he and his group face in the new world. He reconciles himself with his new environment, completing the transition from a small town cop to an embodiment of the frontier hero myth of which Slotkin explores. Rick's new place in the undead frontier is a further example of the Boone mythology, which adds credence to a question raised by Slotkin on Filson's literary dramatization. He writes:

Filson's narrative, then, to qualify as myth, would have to draw together all the significant strands of thought and belief about the frontier that had been developed in the historical experience of the colonies, concentrate those experiences in the tale of a single hero, and present that hero's career in such a way that his audience could believe in and identify with him. Moreover, the tale would have to be constructed in such a way that it could grow along with the culture whose values it espoused, changing and adjusting to match changes in the evolution of that culture. (269)

That the Boone myth can be represented so thoroughly in Kirkman's depiction of Rick suggests that Filson's dramatization indeed entered the American mythology, a sentiment reflected by Slotkin, who asserts that "the evidence suggests that the Boone legend first put before the public by Filson did, in fact, fulfill these requirements" (269). Its resurgence through Rick marks *The Walking Dead* as an exceptional instance that indicates the Boone myth has indeed grown alongside "the culture whose values it espoused," a myth that American culture continues to embrace. While Rick's "we are the walking dead" speech comes at a time of specific prescience for the character and his place in his new environment, Rick follows Boone's narrative of

discovery and understanding remarkably. This is an understanding developed and learned through intense conflict and difficult survival. Slotkin reflects that:

Boone's initiation into the wilderness becomes the reader's own experiences, as each chapter of the book carries him deeper into the wilderness, into a more intimate knowledge of the pioneer and the Indian. This quality of narrative unity helps to give the Boone narrative its aura of myth by making it easier for the reader (and prospective settler) to identify with Boone and to accept Boone's adventures archetypal of the frontier experience... Thus later writers were able to take the Boone narrative out of its original context and use Boone's character to sanctify their own visions of the West. (272)

Certainly, Kirkman can be counted amongst the later writers who would carry on the Boone tradition, as demonstrated in *Rick*. In the opening pages of *Compendium One*, Kirkman presents Rick, alongside his partner Shane, pre-apocalypse in an altercation with escaped convicts. Shane's name in and of itself is reminiscent of the American Western genre. Kirkman borrows the character's name from the classic Jack Schaefer 1949 novel as well as its 1953 film adaptation by George Stevens, both bearing the title *Shane*. Similarities extend beyond the title, however, as Kirkman's narrative follows Schaefer' and Stevens' use of the titular Shane as a virtuous yet problematic injection into the lives of a family on the frontier. The Western incarnations feature the heroic cowboy, Shane, taking up temporary residence with a small family. Shane quickly forms a bond with the family, acting as a father-figure for the family's young boy while subtext indicates an emerging emotional relationship with not only Marian, the matriarch of the family, but also Joe, the patriarch. In Kirkman's narrative, Shane similarly protects Rick's wife, Lori, and son, Carl. He forms a romantic relationship with Lori, while also acting as a father-figure for Carl in the absence of the comatose Rick. Furthermore, the brotherly bond of Joe and Shane in the Western versions is emulated in Rick and Shane's partnership, as they often reference being not only partners, but lifelong best friends. While the Western incarnations of Shane culminates in the titular character riding away from town and away from



the family (thereby negating any familial tensions resulting from Shane's brief tenure on their land), there exists no such option in Kirkman's zombie frontier. Since Shane cannot ride off into the sunset due to the ever-present threat of the dead, he remains as an antagonistic figure for the Grimes family. As a result, the injection of Shane into Rick's family results in Shane's death after he could not reconcile his place in the group following Rick's return. While Joe is slightly ineffectual in his dealings with an oppressive cattle baron, Rick rises to meet the demands of the new zombie frontier as a heroic embodiment of frontier-myth.

In opening the series pre-apocalypse, Rick is seen from the outset as an authoritative figure with an established set of values and convictions pre-conceived in his embodiment as police officer tasked with preserving the values and safety of his society. Prior to his immersion in the zombie apocalypse, Rick is already positioned as a heroic figure, a leader, and a moral compass through which the audience can identify. When Rick is shot in the conflict, he lapses into a coma which sees him unconscious throughout the uprising of the dead. In doing so, Kirkman allows the world to change without Rick. When he wakes up to find this new reality, he is dropped into a changed world with no knowledge of how to adapt. In doing so, Kirkman follows the Boone legacy by allowing Rick to learn and adapt to his new reality alongside the reader. He sets out to find his family, and in the process picks up key attributes, skills, and knowledge that define the world of *The Walking Dead* while furthering Rick's position as the central character and hero. He meets several survivors along his quest to find his family, who instruct him on the new world's rules, explaining to both him as well as the audience what is at stake and how to survive. Kirkman then utilizes Rick as a lens through which we can both see and identify with the new reality of the zombie apocalypse, just as Filson did with Boone. This allows the reader to sympathize with and align themselves alongside Rick as the most capable

survivor, as we have followed him and learned with him along his journey to become the heroic figure of the story. When Rick shoots Dexter to ensure his continued rule of the prison, then, the audience is willing to forgive an act of murder as the rules and Rick's relationship with them have been clearly delineated, serving as a reminder of the mythic perseverance of Filson's Boone legend.

Rick comes to terms with his new world in the "we are the walking dead" speech, condemning his earlier proclamation that "you kill-you die," noting that "that was probably the most naive thing I've ever said. The fact is—in most cases, now, the way things are—you kill—you live" (Kirkman Compendium One). Such an assertion is problematic and troubling, but the audience can identify with it and even champion its claim, as they have followed Rick throughout his immersion in the zombie apocalypse. They understand where he is coming from, have been witness to instances that verify his stance, and can accept Rick as the embodiment of the new frontier experience and therefore trust a statement that would sound sociopathic from a newly introduced character like the Governor. We can accept Rick shooting a zombie in the head because we have watched him explore the new world and display empathy for the dead, as indicated in one of his earliest encounters with a zombie. After leaving the hospital Rick finds a zombified woman emaciated, skeletal even, on the side of the road. He drops to his knees, devastated, and weeps at what has happened to the world while he lay unconscious. In the pilot episode of AMC's *The Walking Dead*, he reconciles his new place in the world after gazing upon the same figure, offering "I'm sorry this happened to you" (Days Gone Bye) before shooting her in the head. Rick exemplifies the American mythic figure developed in Filson's narrative, further exemplified by Slotkin's relation that:

Boone undergoes a series of initiations which give him progressively greater insights into the life of the Indians, the peculiar necessities imposed by the wilderness, and the natural

laws which govern life. Through his attempts to interpret these initiations, Boone attains a higher degree of self-knowledge and self-discipline and an ability to impose his own order on both the wilderness and the settlement. (274)

Indeed, Rick's journey from the empathetic executioner of the emaciated zombie to the stern authoritative figure who defines himself and his group as the walking dead follows the same process, and therefore aligns *The Walking Dead* as a continuation of frontier literature and mythology.

Slotkin reflects that "American writers (and their readers) were attempting to work out for themselves a clear concept of a representative American—a hero who could be set off against the culture heroes of Europe and express the Americanized Englishman's new sense of himself, his new perception of his place in the wilderness and the world" (189). If the American hero of the frontier emerged in Filson's Daniel Boone narrative, as Slotkin suggests, then Rick's parallel as a Boone-like figure reconciling with the land and his place within it indicates an ongoing literary relationship to the frontier mythologies that emerged in early American literature. Rick enters a new world, adapts to it, and begins to impose his values on the various settlements he encounters. This is reflected in his continued presence as not only a lawman, but a leader.

In *Compendium Two*, following the dismantling of his prison colony, Rick embarks on the road to Washington, where promises of a safe-zone have reinvigorated hope in his group of survivors. Upon arriving at the safe-zone, Alexandria, a suburb of Washington designed by the government to withstand apocalyptic scenarios like a nuclear holocaust, Rick refuses to secede his power to the safe-zone's governing body. Just as early settlers on the frontier found new purpose in defining their own roles of authority in the American West, Rick follows a similar path in the zombie apocalypse. When his group is confronted by a member of Alexandria on the outskirts of the colony, they treat him as an Other, a being outside of their groups control and

therefore dangerous. Despite his peaceful claims that he is there to recruit them in the colony, Rick knocks the man unconscious and ties him up. Having been exposed to the harsh realities of his new environment, Rick's treatment of the scout, Aaron, is justified in that he has learned the rules of this new world alongside the reader. The living have proven deadlier than the zombified hordes, so Rick's distrust is merited. When the group arrives at Alexandria, he is initially positioned as the safe-zone's constable. Since the group has lived in relative peace and harmony while Rick and his group have faced war, cannibalism, and endless conflict with the dead, Rick is wary of the new group and its governing body. He immediately begins breaking their rules and challenging their leadership. Refusing to cede access to weaponry as mandated upon his arrival, he instead breaks into the armoury and redistributes his groups weapons. Having followed Rick from his coma, to the conflict of the prison, and now the safe-zone of Alexandria, Rick's dominance is accepted and justified because, as he claims "I don't care what these people say, this place is too important... I'm not taking any chances. I want our guns back" (Kirkman Compendium Two). Rick becomes the embodiment of the American frontier-hero, having lived and learned in the wilderness and having faced several initiations to the new world through violence, he can now assert his authority over those with less experience because he has not only reconciled his (and the other survivors) place in the new world, but excelled within it as an authoritative leader.

While Rick serves as a continuation of the frontier-hero mythology, his family comes to embody the traditions and roles of the frontier family as originally defined by representations of early settlers. In *A Helpmate for Man Indeed, The Image of the Frontier Woman*, Beverly J. Stoeltje categorizes the role of women on the frontier in three representations and possibilities: the genteel lady, the helpmate, and the bad woman. Stoeltje relates:

The environment was one which placed hardships on women, and some women, especially the gentle lady types, were not able to adapt to these conditions. Barbara Welter has explored the image of this gentle lady type as it appeared in women's popular literature between 1820-1860. She defines the four cardinal virtues of "true womanhood" as piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. (30)

While piety, purity, and submissiveness were seen in the original image of the frontier woman, the role of women throughout the development of the American nation improved steadily until men and women were positioned as equal, reducing this perception in modern times. The reopening of the frontier in Kirkman's zombie narrative, however, would explore the role of domesticity within women through the lens of life in the zombie frontier. Rick's wife Lori, having fled her hometown and comatose husband in order to survive, can be presented as an interesting look at some of the concepts outlined by Welter. Her piety and purity questioned as a result of an affair with Rick's partner Shane, Lori represents a modern take on several aspects of the frontier woman. While she developed an intimate relationship with Shane, it can be justified in both the dire circumstances of the world around her and her husband's presumed death during the zombie uprising. Submissiveness is never contemplated by Lori, who repeatedly stands as a voice of opposition to Rick's assertions after he rejoins the group, reflecting a contemporary take on the role of the frontier woman. Domesticity, however, becomes an interesting role for Lori which Kirkman explores. Her relationship with Shane results in a pregnancy, and while she is unable to distinguish whether or not the child is Rick's or Shane's, it is implied that Shane is the paternal father while Rick treats the child as his own. Lori is then positioned as a domestic figure, tasked in her pregnancy as a domestic force capable of continuing the repopulation of the decimated new world.

This is further compounded in her insistence in both the television show and the comic book series that she, and the other women, contribute to the group in domestic tasks. When

Donna, a member of the group, challenges the role of women in the group with her assertion that "I just don't understand why we're doing laundry while they go off and hunt. When things get back to normal I wonder if we'll still be allowed to vote" (Kirkman Compendium One), Lori accepts her role of domesticity. She claims, "this isn't about women's rights... It's about being realistic and doing what needs to be done" (Kirkman Compendium One). Here, Lori accepts both a domestic role which plays into the "genteel lady" type Stoeltje explores, while also moving into Stoeltje's second female role of the "helpmate." Stoeltje defines the helpmate as:

The woman who successfully adapted to the frontier conditions. The primary distinction between this woman and the refined lady is in the strength and initiative exhibited in coping with the hardships and the demands of the life they led. Her strength was physical and emotional. She was able to carry out routine, everyday chores of milking, cooking, sewing, gardening, caring for chickens, childbearing and child rearing, caring for the sick, and generally acting as partner with her husband.... The primary defining feature of this group of women was their ability to fulfill their duties which enabled their men to succeed, and to handle crises with competence and without complaint. (69)

Lori accepts her domestic role of doing laundry, caring for the sick, and carrying out everyday chores because she sees herself incapable of handling weaponry and assaults, as indicated by her assertion that "I can't shoot a gun... I've never even tried" (Kirkman Compendium One). Her willingness to carry out tasks like laundry while refusing to practice and learn proper gun control suggests that she is content in the role of helpmate, which eventually contributes to her death. During the heart of the prison conflict, she flees alongside Rick and Carl while carrying her newborn daughter. During the melee, a bullet tears through her and her newborn, killing them both. Having accepted her domestic role, Lori refuses to participate in battle, instead staying behind to care for her daughter. In doing so, the prison loses a member who could assist in the war effort and the battle shifts in the Governor's favour. Lori's death cannot be solely attributed to her natural desire to care for her newborn daughter, but it does indicate that the roles of the

domestic genteel lady as well as the helpmate are incompatible in the new zombified world, as well as in the modern America in which *The Walking Dead* is set.

In the television adaptation's episode *18 Miles Out*, Lori not only reconciles her position as helpmate but enforces it on others. She confronts Andrea, who has taken an active interest in learning how to handle a sniper rifle. She challenges Andrea's position as the group's apprentice sharpshooter, asserting:

The men can handle this on their own. They don't need your help... There's plenty of work to go around...It puts a burden on the rest of us. Me and Carol and Patricia and Maggie, cooking and cleaning and caring for Beth and you... you don't care about anyone but yourself. You sit up on that RV working on your tan with a shotgun on your lap... We are providing stability. We are trying to create a life worth living. (18 Miles Out)

Here, Lori fully embodies the characteristics of the genteel lady, and more specifically the helpmate. Stoeltje asserts that "women brought institutionalized 'civilization' to the 'wilderness'... Their roles became established within the new environment, and values and emotions were expected to conform to these roles" (26). Lori certainly embodies these values, and her death in both the television and comic book incarnations of *The Walking Dead* suggest that while these values were acceptable and expected in the original frontier, they hold little merit in the new frontier of the dead.

Taking place in the present day, long after women gained the right to vote and were seen as equal citizens in American society, antiquated concepts of the genteel lady and the helpmate can no longer survive in the new frontier. Instead, Stoeltje's third categorization of the frontier woman, the "bad woman," becomes the most successful and capable frontier-woman to survive in the new world, as evidenced by the death of Lori (as well as Carol and Donna, the two women who assist her in "everyday chores" rather than fighting). Stoeltje asserts that "given the demands of the environment, the refined lady image in its pure form could not survive... Perhaps the only

woman who survived as a female was the bad woman" (40). She defines this iteration of the frontier woman as "generally associated with sex and raw Nature. The role of bad woman was certainly not created on the frontier, but in adapting to the conditions of the frontier it assumed a prominent and special position there" (38). Certainly, the characters of Michonne and Andrea (two of three of the longest surviving female characters) share traits with Stoeltje's image of the bad woman. Michonne, in particular.

If the bad woman is close to nature, Michonne's first appearance redefines the role for the new frontier of the dead. The natural environment now belongs to the dead, so to survive in nature Michonne joins their ranks. She cuts her teeth in the zombified world in a similar manner to Rick, surviving on her own long enough to reach a small civilization. When she does arrive at the prison, she is escorted by the zombified remains of her boyfriend and his best friend, whom she guides with chain leashes latched around their necks. She has severed the arms of her two companions to reduce grabbing, and removed the jaws and teeth to ensure they cannot bite her. In doing so, Michonne utilizes the two zombies as camouflage while immersing herself in the new natural world of the dead, bringing her closer to the zombie hordes than any other character in the book.

Michonne's sexuality is an additional shared trait with the bad woman. She engages in several relationships throughout the course of the series, even tempting Tyrese away from his girlfriend, Carol (a genteel woman). Stoeltje asserts that "it must be remembered that many cowboys and respectable men could be bad men when they chose to visit the saloons and bad women, their respectable roles being reassumed upon return to the ranch or home" (39-40). When Tyrese and Michonne engage in a sexual relationship in the prison's gym, Carol sees the encounter and subsequently attempts suicide. Her role as a genteel woman, helpmate, and



companion for Tyrese is jeopardized by Michonne's bad woman, leaving her unable to reconcile with the new realities of her environment. Instead, she reverts to domesticity, attempting to engage in a poly-amorous relationship with Rick and Lori to gain a semblance of domestic life. When they refuse, she succeeds in a second suicide attempt by offering her neck to a nearby zombie. As the zombie bites into her neck, Carol embraces death with "oh, good... You do like me" (Compedium One). Unable to adapt to her new environment, Carol reverts to domesticity and relies on relationships to get her through the zombie apocalypse. When those relationships collapse, she cannot cope with her situation and adapt to the new world, instead taking her own life.

Stoeltje relates that relationships between bad men and women "did not require that the female partner be a helpmate, and a working partner, but that the female be available for temporary periods of time when the male's activity brought him into her presence. The bad woman, then, was also subject to the male role for a definition of the female image" (40). While Michonne's activities with Tyrese may fit this mould, she extends beyond the frontier definition of the bad woman to develop a new persona in the second frontier filled with the dead. Having moved beyond antiquated perceptions of sexuality and the woman's role in society, the modern representation of Michonne sees her move beyond a reliance on male characters. Instead, she outlives the majority of her paramours, and proves herself to be the most capable survivor of the entire remaining group.

Michonne's categorization as bad woman follows the use of such roles in prominent Westerns like John Ford's iconic 1939 film *Stagecoach*. *Stagecoach* follows the traditional Western siege-narrative closely, focusing on a motley cast of characters endangered by hordes of an Othered Native American presence who consistently attack the titular stagecoach in which the

protagonists are travelling. The role of the bad woman is taken by the character Dallas in the film. Introduced as she is run out of town by the "Law and Order League" due to her profession as a prostitute, Dallas is immediately positioned as the film's bad woman. On the journey, Dallas is wooed by the heroic (yet fugitive) Ringo, who eventually proposes to her. Dallas not only escapes oppression at the onset of the film, but emerges with a fiance with whom to share the rest of her life. While Dallas acts as the bad woman and emerges in a better position than the one in which she starts the film, her foil Lucy, a genteel woman, cannot cope with the increasingly harsh surroundings. During the height of the group's conflict with the raiding Native Americans, this is exemplified by the character's near death at the hands of fellow traveller Hatfield. Hatfield aims his gun on Lucy during the climactic battle, choosing to end her life rather than allow her to survive and be taken by the Native Americans. This indicates a growing antiquity of the genteel woman as American culture progressed to include women's equality, who is unable to cope with harsh conditions while the bad woman thrives. This is lent further credence in the scene in which Lucy gives birth. Following the successful delivery of her child it is Dallas, not Lucy, who emerges from the birthing room with the infant babe in hand. Dallas' emersion with the child indicates that it is not the genteel woman who's legacy will inform the next generation on the frontier, but the bad woman. Dallas' eventual acceptance of Ringo's proposal, however, serves as a reminder of Stoeltje's concept that the female frontier character depends on a male counterpart. While the images of women on the frontier may have depended on their relationship to categorized male roles on the frontier and in early Western films, the new frontier exists well beyond those notions of sexuality and duty, and as a result Michonne can be seen as the "new" bad woman best suited for existence in the new frontier with no real need for a male counterpart.

The picture of the modern frontier family begins to take shape in Rick's family after an analysis of their relationships to the original figures of the frontier. Rick embodies the frontier hero, the Boone-legend, while Lori assumes the more traditional role of a helpmate. Rick excels in his position amongst the dead, while Lori succumbs to the fatal environment. With these roles filled, their son Carl also assumes the traits of a frontier figure, that of the inheritor to the new world. A significant aspect of Slotkin's concept of American mythology revolves around the inheritance of the new world by a younger generation, and their initiation into the new realities of such an existence. Slotkin considers this inheritance as:

An initiation into a higher level of existence and power, echoing the movement of the boy from childhood into manhood: the departure from the world of parental nurture and law into the world of maturity and independent responsibility... For the initiate, the achievement of maturity depends on his ability both to understand and take upon himself the power and knowledge of his parents... and to differentiate himself from them... The most significant rituals of the tribe center about the rites of initiation, since these must provide a continuing supply of competent men to sustain the society. (11)

Carl certainly embodies this aspect of the frontier myth. While Rick becomes the frontier hero after immersing himself in the natural world of the new dead frontier, Carl grows up within the harsh parameters of the zombie apocalypse. Kirkman takes Carl from a gleeful child to a capable warrior. In an early issue of the series, Lori questions whether or not Carl should be allowed to carry a firearm. In a recent storyline, Carl not only carries weaponry, but enacts a one-man assault on an antagonist's fortress, killing several men with an assault rifle before being captured. Carl witnesses Rick face increasingly difficult decisions, such as whether or not to hang the murderous Thomas, and he learns from his father that these decisions have to be made. When another child in the group, Ben, begins demonstrating sociopathic tendencies that culminate in the murder of his twin brother, Carl takes action and kills the child, fearing that no one else would have it within them to either leave behind or murder a young member of their group. Rick

questions Carl as to why he killed Ben. His response positions him alongside Slotkin's concept of initiation and inheritance. He responds to Ricks questions, claiming:

You know why. The same reason you have to do everything. Because it needed to be done. And because no one else would... I was never going to tell you. I'm strong, I can handle this, dad. I can. But you said you thought I wouldn't love you anymore if I knew what you did to those people that hurt Dale. I love you because of what you do to keep me safe. I know why we do what we do. We do it to protect the weak. To survive. You and Abraham knew what needed to be done... But you couldn't do it. You couldn't kill a kid. I didn't want to kill Ben. I had to. (Kirkman Compendium Two)

Having lost his mother, daughter, and several friends, and having faced countless undead, Carl has been initiated into the world of *The Walking Dead* and embodies the next generation of the new zombie frontier. In doing so, he positions himself as a capable warrior, no longer a child but a man of competence who can succeed Rick should he have to, and impose his own will on the various settlements the group encounter.

The image of the family on the zombie frontier is a dark depiction of the realities one would face in such a world. Rick and Carl survive, while Lori perishes, because they can handle, accept, and lead in their new environment while Lori could not. What unifies the three different roles of man, woman, and child is their combined need for survival against a menacing outside threat. For early settlers and pioneers on the frontier, this threat came in the form of a perceived group of "savage" Native Americans. The final study of this chapter, then, must come in the representation of the zombie as an Other.

In *We Are the Walking Dead: Race, Time, and Survival in the Zombie Narrative*, Gerry Canavan positions the zombie as an aspect of the colonial gaze. Canavan asserts:

Zombie narrative, I argue, should be understood as operating under... this sort of colonial gaze. Zombies—lacking interior, lacking mind—cannot look; they are, for this reason, completely realized colonial objects. Zombies cannot be recognized, accommodated, or negotiated with; once identified, they must immediately be killed. (437)

For early settlers, the Native American functioned in similar respects as an Other figure limited by a language barrier and a fundamental misunderstanding of culture. On the new frontier, this figure is heightened beyond reason. There is no want, aside from the consumption of flesh, and certainly no negotiation or accommodation. Slotkin reflects that the "racial-cultural conflict pointed up and intensified the emotional difficulties on the colonists' attempts to adjust to life in the wilderness" (15). Certainly, the same can be said of the zombified Other in *The Walking Dead* and zombie narratives in general.

The surface similarities between the dead and the mythic figure of the Native American on the frontier are rather obvious. Both threaten the survival of settlements, and both act as an ever present danger in the wilderness. Beneath the surface, however, additional interesting parallels arise. Canavan writes that "those who are imagined to threaten the population as a whole become not merely a danger, but a kind of anti-life that must be sequestered from (white) life at any cost. Any contact with a zombie, after all, might lead to infection, just as the racial Other must be disciplined and quarantined to prevent 'intermingling'" (438). This aspect of infection as a result of "intermingling" is an obvious concern for the survivors in *The Walking Dead*, but was also a real possibility for early settlers. In *Strangers in Two Worlds*, Scott Zesch relates the impact of captivity on frontier children. Zesch relates that "in many cases, the captives were adopted as full-fledged members of the Indian family either as a way to replace sons or daughters who had died, or just to build up tribal numbers generally." (60) Facing decimation at the hands of a colonizing presence, Native Americans utilized captives as a means of adding to their own ranks. Similarly, the zombie's infectious bite follows the same reasoning. In *The Walking Dead*, Carl launches an assault on Negan's camp in an attempt to murder the man antagonizing his group. He is, however, captured by Negan, who takes an immediate interest in

the child after viewing his attack as a display of strong will and virtue. Negan eventually releases Carl, who returns to Rick angry at his father for a perceived willingness to submit to Negan's demands. Canavan asserts that "countrymen do not band together in the zombie crisis, and the nation does not have its finest hour; instead, allegiances fragment into familial bands and patriarchal tribes, then fragment further from there" (443). Any group falling outside of the survivor's patriarchal fragment of society is then embroiled with the living dead as a form of Other. Negan and his group then function as a similar Othered presence as Native Americans were to early American settlers. Zesch relates that "the adopted children became converts to the ways of the native people, usually within a year or less. As friendships grew deeper, the children's desire to escape faded" (61). While Carl does not accept and join Negan's group, he gains access to their lives and holds regular conversations with the man. When he returns to Rick, a wedge has been driven between the two after Carl perceives his father as weak, partly due to some of Negan's suggestions that he would be better off staying. The threat of conversion, then, is present in both groups of the living and the dead in both the original frontier, as well as the zombie incarnation.

Canavan continues to explore the zombie as colonization parable, noting:

Zombie apocalypses, like imperialistic narratives of alien invasion, repackage the violence of colonial race war in a form that is ideologically safer. Zombie films depict total, unrestrained violence against absolute Others whose very existence is seen as anathema to our own. Others who are in essence living death. In our time, when this sort of unrestrained racial violence is officially suspect but nonetheless *unofficially* still a foundation for the basic operation of technological civilization, zombie narratives serve as the motivating licence for confrontation with these sorts of genocidal technologies and power fantasies. (439)

Canavan's aspect of genocidal fantasy against an ideologically "safe" Other is a strong example of why Kirkman's series, and the zombie narrative itself, is so popular in the current America. Recent cases like the shooting of Trayvon Martin have reinvigorated racial debate as well as a

discussion on the efficacy of America's gun laws in the current climate. The "Stand Your Ground" law which saw Martin's shooter released certainly indicates a desire to return to the frontier, as antiquated concepts surrounding gun control used to exonerate Martin's killer hold more merit in the Wild West than in the current political climate, especially after tragedies like the shooting at Sandy Hook. As a survivalist fantasy, the zombie narrative can remove these concerns about right and wrong, and even race, as the zombie functions as an ever present vessel of death that under all circumstances must be exterminated.

In *American Exceptionalism*, Deborah L. Madsen explores the Western genre and iconic figures of the frontier. Madsen asserts:

The popular nineteenth-century image of America as a redeemer nation, a new peace-loving Christian democracy, innocent of the hatred and violence of the past and with a mission to bring peace, prosperity, and democracy to the world was a compelling cultural self-image. Yet the vision contrasted profoundly with the reality of an inordinately high level of individual and social aggression, beginning with the revolution which created the new nation and continuing through domestic and foreign wars of moralistic conquest and the violent subjection of black people and Indians. To preserve the self-image it has been necessary to disguise the aggressive impulse of these historical realities under the mask of moral purity and social redemption through violence. Thus, there has always been an observable similarity between the pattern of justifying rhetoric used to defend American military policy and the Western drama. (144)

With an increasing technological ubiquity moving Americans further away from the concept of the frontier, and even away from the wilderness itself, the persistent popularity of the zombie genre can be explained as a replacement and next step for the defining concepts of the Western drama. Kirkman's narrative in particular, expanding the scope beyond a simple siege narrative, displays these Western concepts in its vision of the new zombified frontier. Kirkman utilizes frontier mythology like the role of the heroic Boone-legend in Rick, the roles of women on the frontier through Michonne and Lori, and the role of the initiate in Carl. Furthermore, the genre allows for a menacing foe devoid of moral and social constraints, creating a conquerable frontier

filled with an antagonistic body which can be colonized and eradicated without the troublesome associations of the Indian as typically exemplified in the Western genre. In doing so, Kirkman redefines the zombie narrative on a level unseen since Romero's original vision of the genre in 1968. These aspects position *The Walking Dead* as the quintessential zombie narrative, allowing the creative team to explore concepts of the frontier with an unlimited and ongoing scope that has, at the time of this thesis, now expanded beyond 113 issues, a remarkable feat for an independent comic book series.

The inclusion of iconic and mythic frontier figures like the Boone-legend, the initiate, the helpmate, the bad woman, and the ever present Other in Kirkman's narrative continues to position the zombie genre as a form of American romanticism. Having lost touch with the wilderness of the frontier, as well as the ability to survive in such an environment, the survivalist fantasy presented in narratives like *The Walking Dead* allow audiences to vicariously return to the frontier. Furthermore, they reduce the guilt associated with the atrocities committed in early American life in the New World, as the senseless zombies feel no pain and must be exterminated. As a result, Kirkman enters his series into the Western gothic pantheon, providing access to a new frontier in which readers can explore and engage. In my final chapter, I will summarize the main points of my thesis while offering insight into where the zombie genre is currently positioned, and where it may be going.



## **Chapter Five: Conclusions of the Dead**

The zombie genre is a quintessentially American construct that has been flourishing in popular culture for nearly 60 years. Since George A. Romero first pioneered the genre with 1968's *Night of the Living Dead*, zombie narratives have demonstrated a persistent resilience in American culture to emerge as the ultimate American horror icon. First serving as a method to exploit and react to cultural anxieties in the 1960s, the zombie genre met the decade's tumultuous violence in international conflicts like the Vietnam War and domestic revolutions like the Civil Rights Movement. It adapted in the 1970s to expose a perceived excess in consumer culture before reflecting apocalyptic fears at the height of the Cold War in the 1980s. Following a period of rest in the relatively peaceful 1990s, the genre re-emerged in the early 2000s to reflect cultural anxieties spurred on by the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the subsequent resurgence of war those attacks inspired. Its ability to grow with American culture and reflect the relevant crises of the age in which each narrative is conceived suggests the genre can act as a barometer of cultural and social change and unrest.

The zombie genre is ultimately an American construct as it is the only folkloric monster born of an American imagination. Romero's re-envisioning of the genre to an apocalyptic siege narrative rather than an icon of Haitian lore presented American audiences with a perfect outlet to embrace survivalist fantasies that hearken back to the nation's birth on the frontier. It can be aligned alongside the plight of early settlers, as its characters find themselves displaced between a lost concept of society and the need to rebuild in a new, hostile environment. An environment which allows the return of iconic frontier figures like Daniel Boone, while redefining the role of the family to suit the needs of such an environment. It provides scenarios in which the nation can be regenerated through violence as the emergence of an antagonistic foe devoid of morality and

consciousness must be met with extreme prejudice. It strips the antagonist of personality and thought, allowing audiences to return to an imperialistic conquest of a conquerable foe while eliminating any guilt associated with the act of colonization. In doing so, the genre glorifies the American past, allowing the reopening of the frontier in the zombie apocalypse as a method of escaping current cultural anxieties and romanticising concepts like the Indian hunter while stripping them of negative association.

That the genre has consistently risen to meet cultural anxieties at nearly every instance of tumult in American history since its inception in 1968 suggests that it will be a continued and constant presence in American culture. The genre is fuelled by tumultuous anxieties. As long as there will be instances of tumult and anxiety for the zombie to consume, it will consistently rise to expose perceived injustice and reflect uncertainty. That the zombie can be so aligned with frontier ideology and mythology suggests that there is reinvigorated interest in a return to a simpler way of living. Since the Industrial Revolution, there has been no greater advancement in society than the advent of the internet. With such profound changes in the last 15 years brought forth by the advent of the internet's ability to connect citizens from around the globe, it can be asserted that the future of the genre will grow to reflect and adapt to cultural anxieties brought forth from the emerging digital culture which has swept over the planet. In this final chapter, I will analyze the impact of digital culture on the zombie genre while offering an analysis of how and why the zombie will be as present in the ever-changing digital world.

In 2013, director Marc Forster released an adaptation of Max Brooks' novel of the same name, *World War Z*. The film serves as a bridging gap between cultural anxieties, imperialistic societal tendencies, and the increasing presence of digital technology. In the film, the United Nations call upon the retired Gerry Lane to travel the globe in search of a cure for the zombie

plague. In focusing on the UN's reliance on a sole American retiree as the only possible saviour for the human race, the film is immediately positioned amongst the imperialistic and colonial natures of the zombie genre. This is only compounded by the use of foreign entities in the film. Lane travels the globe in search of solutions for the plague, which eventually leads him to Israel, one of the only intact nations left. Israel, a longstanding ally of the United States, has survived the zombie apocalypse. Arriving in Jerusalem, Lane learns that the Israelis have opened the gates that block the zombified dead to allow Palestinian refugees entrance to their safe zone. Upon entering, however, loud celebrations (specifically of unified Jewish and Muslim prayer) ring out and attract the dead, leading to the fall of Israel after brief reconciliation with Palestine.

The film's use of a unified Jewish and Muslim prayer celebration is problematic to say the least, but it follows the zombie genre's propensity to highlight American exceptionalism, manifest destiny, and imperialism in its use of a Middle-Eastern shared antagonist between Israel and the United States. Not only does it play to American exceptionalism and survivalist fantasy, but it also begins to display cultural anxieties and reliance on digital culture, perhaps acting as a bridge between zombie films of yesteryear and the future. This is exemplified in the hyper-quick manner in which Lane traverses the globe, reminiscent of the heightened connectivity of network society in a digital age which eradicates the perception of distance. Network society is further demonstrated in the satellite-phone Lane uses to call his wife. In an overly dramatic scene, Forster switches back between Lane's character and his wife as they enter their respective partner's names into their phones' database. Though the phone can only be connected to one line, it is an impersonal object until each character can transplant their spouses identity onto the piece of machinery, humanizing it and allowing it to emerge as an avatar of their love. The tense final scenes of the film take place in a medical facility in Wales, in which a group of ragged scientists

desperately watch Pitt's character seek a cure through security cameras mounted throughout the facility. The scene serves as a reminder of both the ubiquity and reliance of digital technology, indicating an ever-growing presence of recording cameras permeating the world. *World War Z* acts as a film that connects the colonialist fantasies of the zombie genre with the increasing pervasiveness of network society and digital culture, indicating a new step for the zombie genre.

If the zombie genre's roots can be found in a desire to return to a wilderness state where freedom is left to patriarchal colonies rather than oppressive government regimes, then recent government activity to restrict and exploit digital privacy is a natural catalyst for future zombie narratives. The internet was long thought to be a bastion of free thought and speech, uncontrollable and wild in a manner unseen since the original frontier. In *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization*, Alexander Galloway argues that this perception of freedom has always been a myth, and that the use of the internet allows the government unprecedented access to personal property in American culture. He claims that "since new communication technologies are based on the elimination of centralized command and hierarchical control, it follows the world is witnessing a general disappearance of control as such. This could not be further from the truth" (8). This claim is certainly lent credence by the recent exposure of American digital-information mining brought forth to the public by Edward Snowden's leak of the government's surveillance program PRISM.

Galloway proclaims that the internet is merely another extension of government control.

He asserts that:

At the core of networked computing is the concept of *protocol*. A computer protocol is a set of recommendations and rules that outline specific technical standards... Protocols refer specifically to standards governing the implementation of specific technologies. Like their diplomatic predecessors, computer protocols establish the essential points necessary to enact an agreed-upon standard of action... Instead of governing social or political practices as did their diplomatic predecessors, computer protocols govern how

specific *technologies* are agreed to, adopted, implemented, and ultimately used by people around the world... Protocol is a technique for achieving voluntary regulation within a contingent environment. (6-7)

Galloway argues that internet protocol acts as a governing presence that promotes and governs acceptable behaviour in a manner similar to road signs and street lights that dictate semi-autonomous movement through city streets. Just as citizens are filtered into certain roads and abide by the restrictions of the rules of the road, internet users follow protocol dictated by the government in their online navigation. Snowden's exposure of how far this form of governance extends created an outpouring of public outcry against a perceived restriction of freedom and autonomy on the web. His leak revealed that the United States government has been data mining phone and internet records on a widespread basis for years, and that they have been engaging in illegal activity to do so. In an article for the CBC, American Civil Liberties Union representative Alexander Agbo relays that a disturbing methodology was enacted to collect this information, citing an audit released to the public following Snowden's leak. He relates:

These documents make it clear that not only are they listening to Americans' communications and reading their emails, but they're doing so even when the law doesn't allow them to... The bigger problem, the more serious problem, is not the NSA's failure to comply with these laws, but the NSA's implementation of laws that allow them to do what they want... The laws give them unfettered authority to listen on Americans' international communication en masse, without ever going to a court to get a specific order allowing them to do so. ("NSA Spying Broke Rules")

Such a gross mishandling of private personal property has created a flurry of media activity around Snowden's case. After fleeing the country, Snowden was granted asylum in Russia after spending over a month in a Russian airport. The case has revealed a level of government intrusion on American citizens and incited a litany of debate around whether or not Snowden's actions were justified.

Such a massive imposition on the personal freedoms of American citizens revealed an emerging anxiety concerning internet protocol and government policy. If a focus of this thesis involves the propensity with which the zombie genre aligns itself with cultural anxieties, then it can be asserted that future zombie narratives will begin to exploit these issues and incorporate them within the zombie lexicon.

Cultural anxieties concerning technology and network society are not solely limited to a misuse of governmental authority, but also incorporate growing concern of how everyday human are affected by such technological ubiquity. While the zombie genre largely features a world in which technology has been rendered obsolete, narratives in which a growing hysteria surrounding a "digital enclosure" have already begun to emerge. This is reflected in recent works in the zombie genre, like Stephen King's 2006 novel *Cell*. King's novel places the focal point on the world's increasing reliance on connectivity. When a virus is unleashed via cell phone signals, anyone using their mobile phone is transformed to a mindless zombie as the world crashes around the living. Those infected with the virus first experience a breakdown in communication, repeating words and developing a loss of autonomous speech. This aspect can be read as a metaphor for the manner in which digital culture has transformed communication in the modern digital age. The increasing ubiquity of network society in the form of the internet and cell phone use has indeed spurred widespread debate about the impact these technologies have on communication and intelligence.

In Douglas Rushkoff's *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*, the author asserts that digital technology and enclosure have incited a form of digital schizophrenia in the American public. Rushkoff asserts that "by dividing our attention between our digital extensions, we sacrifice our connection to the truer present in which we are living. The tension between the

faux present of digital bombardment and the true now of a coherently living human generates... what we're calling *digiphrenia*—*digi* for 'digital' and *phrenia* for 'disordered condition of mental activity'" (75). Disparity between digital extensions and "true now" have already begun to emerge in zombie narratives, exemplified in George Romero's 2007 return to the genre *Diary of the Dead*, which involves a group of film students utilizing a handheld video camera to record the zombie apocalypse rather than actively fight against it. In *World War Z*, an infection outbreak raises panic on the streets of Philadelphia. During the ensuing chaos, director Marc Forster focuses on the cell phone of one citizen as she, again, records the attack rather than flee from the increasing hordes of ravenous undead. Rushkoff identifies this kind of behaviour as a sign that "our culture becomes an entropic, static hum of everybody trying to capture the living moment. Narrativity and goals are surrendered to a skewed notion of the real and the immediate; the Tweet, the status update. What we are doing at any given moment becomes all-important—which is behavioristically doomed" (6). Certainly, for the characters of Romero's film and the recording citizen in *World War Z*, their deaths are ensured by their focus on clinging to technology in the face of apocalyptic collapse.

The zombie genre allows a resurgence of human connection in the absence of technology, which explains some of the romanticized aspects of the frontier persistent throughout the zombie genre and most wholly realized in *The Walking Dead*. The advertising blurb on the back of both *Compendium One* and *Two* of *The Walking Dead's* reprinted issues certainly lends credence to this assertion. The advertisement reads:

How many hours are in a day when you don't spend half of them watching television? When is the last time any of us REALLY worked to get something that we wanted? How long has it been since any of us really NEEDED something we WANTED? The world we knew is gone. The world of commerce and frivolous necessity has been replaced by a world of survival and responsibility. An epidemic of apocalyptic proportions has swept the globe causing the dead to rise and feed on the living. In a matter of months society

has crumbled—no government, no grocery stores, no mail delivery, no cable TV. In a world ruled by the dead, we are forced to finally start living. (Kirkman Compendium One)

As I discussed in chapter four, *The Walking Dead* represents the zombie genre's reliance on frontier themes more than any other work in the genre. That the series utilizes an advertisement focused on romanticizing a lack of technological interference suggests a growing cultural anxiety regarding the pervasive ubiquity of network society and technology. Rushkoff suggests that zombie films like *28 Days Later* "use the undead to explore today's hazier ethical climate. Instead of fearing magic or consumerism, we are scared of the unintended consequences of science and technology... Rather than reaching zombification through magic or rampant consumerism, the undead in this film series have been infected by man-made virus called 'rage'" (249).

The increasing disparity between technological reliance and real, human, interaction becomes embroiled in the zombie genre's propensity to crystallize and reflect cultural anxieties, as exemplified in *Diary of the Dead* and *World War Z*. The use of digital devices in these films, coupled with the revelation of government spying leaked by Edward Snowden, suggests that Rushkoff's concept of "digiphrenia" will take up the mantle of Romero's culturally expository tradition. Just as the dead subjects rise to consume the living in the genre, the genre itself rises from periods of rest in peaceful times to comment on and expose cultural anxieties and instances of tumult. If the zombie continues to emerge throughout popular culture, it will grow to respond the technological implications of an ever-changing digitized network society seemingly distancing the gap between human understanding and technological evolution. The world has entered a new stage of connectivity and technological prowess unseen since the industrial



revolution. Natural anxieties associated with such pervasive changes can only be expected, and as such, the zombie genre shows no sign of decay in the modern age.

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