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Violence, Paratexts, and Fandoms: *The Walking Dead* as a Societal Mirror

By

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Abstract

This project is a critical textual analysis of fan discourse surrounding the season seven premiere of *The Walking Dead* “The Day Will Come When You Won’t Be” that aired on AMC on October 23rd, 2016. Focusing on paratexts, fandoms, and the violence/horror genre as the theoretical framework, the project highlights fans role in the contemporary age of television and provides insight into how much violence and gore is acceptable for fans of the genre. This project also highlights how the premiere can be read as a societal mirror for violence’s representation in society. The artifact to be analyzed is fan comments on Reddit and Twitter as those sites provided a thread of posts in which fans engaged in dialogue with each other. In the analysis, examples from the episode are used to provide context for the fan comments and to connect the feedback to the episode itself. As a case study, this episode serves as a catalyst demonstrating that fans of the genre have a boundary for acceptable violence and that the episode can be read as a mirror for violence’s representation in society.

Keywords: violence, paratexts, fandoms, horror, *The Walking Dead*

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Violence, Paratexts, and Fandoms: *The Walking Dead* as a Societal Mirror

The third most popular television show of 2016, *The Walking Dead* (*TWD*), has been popular amongst fans since its inception in 2010 (Klein, 2016). As Sandefur (2016) discusses, *TWD* is the highest rated television series and has received many awards because of its examination of political society. On October 23rd, 2016, a total of 17 million viewers tuned in for the season seven premiere making it the number one watched television show for that night; it even surpassed Sunday Night Football (Rawden, 2016). The particularly high number of viewers for the season seven premiere was partly because season six ended with a cliffhanger of the main group facing the new villain, Negan, who was about to choose which person he was going to execute with his barbed wire bat, Lucille.

However, the initial ratings were not the only newsworthy aspect of the kick-off episode for season seven, as the content caused conversation and debate among fans and critics for weeks afterward. While *TWD* is not known for its lack of violence, evidenced by the first episode when the main character, Rick, shoots a young girl-turned-zombie in the head, six completed seasons later the most discussed aspect of the season seven premiere among the audience was the amount of violence, which was curtailed by producers after fan pushback (Millican, 2017). As the series is known for violence, what was it about this particular episode, in relation to violence, that sparked such a negative reaction from fans and resulted in producer action?

Moreover, the discussion among the fans and the resulting response from the producers demonstrates that there is an ongoing conversation among fans and producers. As Booth (2008) states, contemporary fans are using “digital technology not only to

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create, to change, to appropriate, to poach, or to write, but also to share, to experience together to become alive with the fan's community" (p. 516). This shift expresses the audience's active role in media; specifically the blurring of the audience's hand in media consumption and production. Further, because of the amount of violence in the episode, this premiere and surrounding conversation suggests that as an audience, we are not desensitized to violence as some critics have argued (Anderson et al., 2010; Chittaro & Sioni, 2012; Kennedy & Ceballo, 2016).

Therefore, in this project, I critically analyze the fan discourse around the season seven premiere of *TWD* as a case study for understanding where audiences create boundaries about the level of violence in a series that is known for violence and gore. The research area for this project is the integrated communication between television and other forms of media such as fan discussion boards and social media. Therefore, the purpose of my thesis project is to explore why the violence of this episode led to widespread communication among *TWD* community, to detail how the fans reacted to the violence of the episode in dialogue with one another on social and popular media outlets, and explain how fan reaction demonstrated that the level of violence was unacceptable for viewers.

Because of the fan reaction and the surrounding discourse, and the resulting discussion of potential changes in direction from the creators of the series, I argue that the reaction to the season seven premiere of *TWD* suggests that the level of violence in the kick-off episode was unacceptable for many long-time fans of the series, who expect the show to be full of gore and violence, and serves as a mirror of violence's representation

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in society. Ultimately, I suggest that this mirror reflects the dangers that humans pose in the world as the violence in the episode focused on human on human violence.

What is *TWD*?

To put *TWD* in context, it is important to understand the series as a whole. At this point in the series, the main characters are Rick, Carl (his son), Judith (his daughter), Carol, Glenn, Maggie, Abraham, Sasha, Rosita, Darryl, Morgan, and Michonne. Rick, Carl, Carol, Glenn, Darryl, and Morgan have been around since the very first season and have grown close to each other and call themselves family. This is evidenced by not only Rick and his kids but also, Maggie and Glenn are married and expecting a child while others of the group are dating.

Over the course of the series, the main objective of the group is survival and scavenging for supplies and food. Additionally, the group has battled zombies (the main threat) and some villains such as the Governor in season three specifically for their survival. While the series has shown villains throughout, season seven has a villain that the group is especially terrified of: Negan along with his group he calls “The Saviors.” He and his group made an appearance at the end of season six and season seven opens with him threatening the main characters. It was at this point that the group realized the dangerous position that they were in and were coming to the realization that not all of them would make it out of the meeting with Negan alive.

Understanding the Framework for *TWD*

In order to fully investigate how this premiere demonstrated a level of violence that was over the top for many viewers and how the controversy sparked conversation among fans, which led to action by the producers, it is necessary to first review the

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theoretical framework that helps to build the critical textual analysis. A critical textual analysis consists of a description of the unit of analysis or theoretical framework that will be used to analyze the artifact, the description of the artifact, and the resulting findings (Foss, 1996). For the purposes of this project, the theoretical framework will pull from scholars such as Paul Booth, Jonathan Gray, Henry Jenkins, and Carol Clover to provide a lens for understanding how the fan reaction surrounding the episode will be analyzed in relation to the violence of the episode.

The theoretical framework will illuminate the concepts and theories that are intertwined with the method to provide the lens that will interpret this communication phenomenon (Madison, 2012). Madison's (2012) discussion regarding theory and method demonstrate that critical analysis is useful for uncovering what is beneath the surface of the text, to provide insight into power issues, and to inspire change in regards to a communication phenomenon; in this case, the controversy sparked by the level of violence in episode 7.1. The theoretical framework is the mode of interpretation for this project consisting of a discussion of paratexts, fandoms, and the violence/horror genre. From there, the analysis will provide a short synopsis of *TWD* episode 7.1 "The Day Will Come When You Won't Be" before using the theoretical framework to provide a critical textual analysis of the artifact.

The primary artifact for this analysis is the surrounding fan discourse within a seven-day span of the episode. The fan discourse from Reddit and Twitter regarding the episode's violence was chosen because those sites are where fans turned during and after the episode to provide feedback in a discussion format with each other. These specific sites were chosen because they contained fan discussion and dialogue in a thread of posts

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showing fan interaction whereas other social media sites had individual videos or blog posts. In addition, examples from the episode will be utilized to explain the fan discourse and provide context to the comments. The theoretical framework of paratexts, fandoms, and the violence/horror genre will provide a roadmap for the critical textual analysis of the fan discourse surrounding the episode.

Therefore, in the remainder of this section, I outline the theoretical lens by detailing existing scholarship about paratexts, fandoms, including the audience's role within fandoms, and the violence and horror genre with the goal to illuminate the framework for analyzing the fan reaction surrounding the episode and provide an overview of the conversation surrounding paratexts, fandoms, and violence.

Paratexts

To start, it is necessary to understand what paratexts are, their function in media, and some examples of them. Paratexts surround and position the primary text to promote, explain, and guide the viewers' understanding of the text (Birke & Christ, 2013; Booth, 2015; Cavalcante, 2013; Gray, 2003; Gray, 2010; Genette & Maclean, 1991). For *TWD*, an example of one of its paratexts is *The Talking Dead (TTD)* where host Chris Hardwick brings actors or producers from the series on to talk about the previous episode with an audience of fans. Therefore, the context creates the paratext (Gray, 2003; Genette & Maclean, 2001). Depending on the medium, the paratext can vary; for example, the preface of a book is one of the book's paratexts (Genette & Maclean, 1991). Genette and Maclean (1991) and Gray (2003) discuss that while a text always has a paratext, a paratext can exist without a text. Gray (2010) discusses that commentary or dialogue about a film or television series that ended and has since been forgotten or commentary

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regarding something that may become a film or television show is an example of this.

Another example is *Girl Meets World*. This is a show that was talked about after the ending of the popular show *Boy Meets World* and after discussion about it, it became its own show. In this situation, the paratext helps to facilitate the creation of the primary text.

Paratexts' purpose is to be secondary to its primary text and is always devoted to the primary text as demonstrated through its relationship to the audience or public (Birke & Christ, 2013; Booth; 2015; Cavalcante, 2013; Gray, 2003; Gray, 2010; Genette & Maclean, 1991). For example, *TTD* is a show that only discusses *TWD* with a live audience and engages the audience in the conversation. In order to further understand the paratext's purpose, it is necessary to understand its functions.

Birke and Christ (2013) label the three main functions of paratexts: interpretive, commercial, and navigational. In the interpretive function, paratexts provide a way to understand and give meaning to the primary text in order for the viewer to interpret the text (Birke & Christ, 2013; Booth; 2015; Cavalcante, 2013; Gray, 2003; Gray, 2010; Genette & Maclean, 1991). In *TWD*, an example of the interpretive function is *TTD* as its purpose is to dissect the previous episode with fans and guest stars.

In the commercial function, the paratexts offer a way for the text to be advertised or promoted (Birke & Christ, 2013; Booth; 2015; Cavalcante, 2013; Gray, 2003; Gray, 2010; Genette & Maclean, 1991). For *TWD*, an example would be some of the associated apps including: *The Walking Dead No Man's Land*, *The Walking Dead: Dead Yourself*, or *Walking Dead: Road to Survival*. These apps are used to promote the show by having fans play them in between episodes or seasons.

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In the navigational function, paratexts map the primary text to help the audience approach and orient themselves within the text (Birke & Christ, 2013; Booth, 2015; Cavalcante, 2013; Gray, 2003; Gray, 2010; Genette & Maclean, 1991). For example, the apps that *TWD* has help fans envision what it is like to live in an apocalypse as the apps either have them try to survive the apocalypse or change their appearance to be that of a “walker” (zombies in *TWD*). These functions highlight what paratexts do, the purpose of paratexts, and the relationship of paratexts to the text.

Paratexts and media. With the application of paratexts’ functions, how do paratexts fit within media? As discussed, the paratexts offer an explicit connection to the primary text and allow the audience to move between the paratexts and the primary text (Birke & Christ, 2013; Booth, 2015; Cavalcante, 2013; Gray, 2003; Gray, 2010; Genette & Maclean, 1991). A clear example for *TWD* is the show *TTD* that comes on right after a new episode, and helps the audience move between this show and *TWD* by dissecting the previous episode, highlighting key aspects in the episode, and pulling fan comments from Twitter, Instagram, and other media outlets. This is a live show that has fans as audience members and invites one fan up to ask a question to any of the guest stars (usually at least one guest star is an actor or a producer from the show). The show allows for fans to have a voice because they are able to engage in a dialogue with the stars.

Specifically for media, there are three concepts that help to reinforce paratexts’ functions: how the paratext materializes, what its boundaries are, and its authorization (Birke & Christ, 2013). These three concepts from Birke and Christ (2013) can be applied to other forms of media such as television. The way the paratext materializes means that it cannot be separated from the primary text itself as it enhances it or is part of

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it, whether television, books, or social media (Birke & Christ, 2013; Booth; 2015; Cavalcante, 2013; Gray, 2003; Gray, 2010; Genette & Maclean, 1991). The paratexts' boundaries consist of whether or not it exists within the text (for example, preface of a book), outside of the text (for example, interviews), or both (the combination of the book and the interview); regardless of which, the paratexts inform us about the text itself (Birke & Christ, 2013; Booth; 2015; Cavalcante, 2013; Gray, 2003; Gray, 2010; Genette & Maclean, 1991).

The paratexts' authorization, the third concept that Birke and Christ (2013) discuss, becomes more muddled. While the primary text is authorized by the author or producer him/herself and directs the audience where to look, the audience may authorize and create paratexts especially when considering media audiences (Booth, 2013; Gray, 2010). Fan fiction and fan sites dedicated to the primary text, such as *TWD*, are examples of when the paratext is authorized by the audience. In contrast, *TTD* is a paratext that is authorized by the *producers* of *TWD*. To further understand paratexts purpose and functions, it is necessary to look more broadly at examples of paratexts.

Examples of paratexts. To start, one example of paratexts in relation to media is board games. Booth (2015) discusses board games as paratexts based on movies or television shows. He discusses how *TWD* and *The Hunger Games* board games encourage participatory fan culture because they promote interaction among the fans outside of the text itself. When fans play these games, they are going beyond the show, but are still participating in fan culture surrounding that film or television show (Booth, 2015). This highlights that fan culture goes beyond just watching the television show, to also participate in the surrounding paratexts.

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Gray (2010) also discusses how fans' use of paratexts engages in participatory culture. He talks about audience created paratexts that emerge through audience's interaction with the text. One of the biggest audience created paratexts that Gray (2010) discusses is spoilers. These can be created from audiences' predictions of what will happen next in the show, or if some fans watch the show before others (Gray, 2010). Further, because of the rise of spoilers in media, producers have been using the utmost secrecy when filming upcoming seasons to demonstrate their control of the information of the film (Gray, 2010).

Moreover, fans can take a topic that interests them and use it as a vehicle to not only show adoration and appreciation for it, but also to move it from mass culture to popular culture and potentially create fan fiction, another form of paratexts (Jenkins, 1988; Jenkins, 2006). This gives fans more freedom and opportunity to become excited about their conversations with other fans. There are fans who wrote about the episode 7.1 from Glenn's point of view and changed it so that both Glenn and Abraham (the two characters executed in the premiere) survived while Maggie, Glenn's wife, and Darryl were the ones to be executed (SSTB, 2016). SSTB (2016) said in the description of the fan fiction, that Glenn and Abraham were his/her two favorite characters and that seeing them executed was heartbreaking, so s/he wanted to write an alternative result. This paratext demonstrates that fans form connections with the characters outside of the primary narrative.

However, this connection can create strong emotions that fans have with the text itself (Jenkins, 1988; Jenkins, 2006; Booth, 2013). This creates fandoms that are very much self-aware and funnel these emotions into their conversations on social media

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(Booth, 2013). These conversations are outlets for fans to discuss a topic that they are both interested in and express their emotions with each other about what happened in the primary text. These conversations happen on social media sites such as Reddit.

Therefore, fandoms move beyond just adoration of the show or film, as in the past, and highlight that contemporary fans also have an emotional connection with the characters (Williams, 2011). To delve further into fan created paratexts, it is necessary to understand the role of fandoms as paratexts.

Fandom

Fan communities that consist of an affinity for a certain topic, series, book, etc are fandoms (Jenkins, 2002; Jenkins, 2006). Specifically, for series, these fan communities create fandoms where fans can discuss the series and can comingle their own experiences with the storyline of the series and sometimes with a specific character (Jenkins, 1988; Jenkins, 2002; Jenkins, 2006; Williams, 2011). When fans apply their own knowledge and experience to the series, it maintains their own opinions of those characters that they connect with creating strong emotions and attachments to the characters (Williams, 2011).

Even with these emotions, fans are encouraged to share their own opinions and ideas while respecting the creators (Jenkins, 1988; Jenkins, 2006). The fandom's ideology is to respect the creator's work and fans practice this respect by keeping to the text's originality while also being free to question the accuracy of that text; they are able to discuss and engage in a conversation with each other to expand beyond the film or show while maintaining respect for the work of the original creators (Jenkins, 1988; Jenkins, 2006). This conversation can be found on social media platforms such as Reddit

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and Twitter (Jenkins, 2002; Jenkins, 2006). Therefore, it is necessary to understand how fandoms function as paratexts.

Fandoms as paratexts. Fandoms go beyond engaging with producer created fan content (board games, advertisements, etc.) or sharing of leaked information (spoilers) because fans utilize and create paratexts, such as the fan fiction discuss previously, or start social media threads to talk about the series such as Reddit. Fans create fandoms to critique and discuss their own ideas and reactions to certain forms of media and create a bond with others interested in the same topic; thus, engaging in participatory culture (Booth, 2013; Buschow, Schneider, & Ueberheide, 2014; Gray, 2003; Jenkins, 2006; Williams, 2011).

As Jenkins (2014) discusses, fan participation is a “shared engagement with technologies, content and producers” (p. 283). Fans use technology to engage with the fandoms more frequently than face to face (for example at Comic-con) and show not only their opinions, but also to express any anger or frustration they may have with the series while discussing with other fans; this “convergence” comes not only between genres and audiences but also through industries and technologies (Jenkins, 1988; Jenkins, 2004). Audiences are able to use technology to express their opinions and views about the content of their topic and engage in a conversation with other fans and producers; fans do this on social media platforms such as Twitter, Reddit, and Facebook. Further, it is expected for fans of a particular genre to have a breadth of knowledge regarding the topic and use fandoms to facilitate the conversation (Gray, 2003). As Jenkins (1988) so eloquently stated, “to enter fandom is to escape from the mundane to the marvelous” (p. 474; see also Jenkins, 2006).

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As technology and media have grown, fans have been able to use the internet to create, interact, and respond to other fans and media; this shift helps to influence fans' and fandoms' sense of self (Booth, 2008; Booth, 2013). Online fandoms facilitate a way for fans to interact and generate meaning from the texts they watch through the conversations that they have (Booth, 2008; Booth, 2013; Gray, 2003). Specifically, media fans are those who experience a wealth of knowledge about the text and feel a strong emotional attachment to it from the surrounding paratexts and the participatory fan culture (Booth, 2013; Gray, 2010)

Fandoms facilitate audience empowerment. Through fandoms and technology, audiences become empowered (Jenkins, 1988; Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, 2004; Turow & Draper, 2014). They are able to use their voices through fandoms to challenge power dynamics in mass media and create support for changes to create a better society (Jenkins, 2006). Through this, "consumption becomes production; reading becomes writing; spectator culture becomes participatory culture" (Jenkins, 1988, p. 490). The text can move beyond just the producers to fans whom, through fandoms, are empowered to speak freely and expressively about the text online (Jenkins, 1988; Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, 2004; Turow & Draper, 2014). Thus, moving beyond the text itself.

While this may highlight audience empowerment in media, the producers also maintain their right to have ownership of the text through clearly regulating what they believe the text to mean or what they want the audiences to experience (Jenkins, 2006). Turow and Draper (2014) point out that it is not the fans or people who have power to influence or shape media, but it is the media companies who encourage audiences and fans to think that they do have a voice in shaping media. This demonstrates the lack of

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respect that some companies have for audiences and fans because they manipulate their belief of their level of power in shaping and potentially controlling media (Turow & Draper, 2014). For example, Turow and Draper (2014) talk about how the “media-buying business” fundamentally has a lack of respect for audience empowerment (p. 650).

With that said, there are media companies who are trying to expand their markets to embrace fan empowerment and promote collaboration between companies and fans instead of just making those fans *think* that they have a stake in shaping media (Jenkins, 2004; Turow & Draper, 2014). For example, digital technologies such as social media outlets like Reddit, Twitter, and Facebook allow fans to reach more people and provide feedback. Fans want to be able to exercise their power to control the flow of media and become more active in what is being shown to them (Jenkins, 2004; Nikunen, 2007; Maris, 2016). Fans want to be able to actively have a hand in shaping the media (Jenkins, 2004; Nikunen, 2007; Maris, 2016).

Jenkins (2004) talks about how the relationship between producers and fans can either be beneficial or detrimental in the long run. Some companies and producers want to create enhanced and helpful relationships by encouraging fans to promote change and engage in dialogue while others do not feel comfortable promoting those relationships and or fan participation (Jenkins, 2004; Maris, 2016). For example, Jenkins (2004) talks about game companies, such as Nintendo, who have built relationships around fan communities who have created their own ideas and products and work to keep those communities running. On the other hand, there are companies who want to shut down fan websites, such as Warner Brothers in regards to *Harry Potter*, because they want to assert their rights to the franchise (Jenkins, 2004). With this dialogue and expectations from

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fans and producers, the role of the audience in media has been changing and growing with the help of fandoms.

Specifically, the violence/horror genre has a particularly devoted fan base that is attracted to it simply for its violence or horror. In order to understand the role that violence/horror plays in media and in relation to paratexts, specifically fandoms, it is necessary to review key aspects about violence/horror genre. This will expand the theoretical framework for the fan discourse surrounding *TWD*'s season seven premiere. To do so, a shift from paratexts and fandoms to a discussion of the violence/horror genre is important to understand its role and why viewers are attracted to it.

Violence/Horror

The violence/horror genre is known for its ability to thrill and scare its viewers and this is partly why it is attractive to audiences (Clover 1992; Keisner, 2008). However, one of the main aspects of violence/horror is its predictability (Keisner, 2008). In order to fully understand and explore the violence/horror genre, it is necessary to look at the existing scholarship, which currently focuses primarily on these two areas: film and media. From there, a better understanding of why viewers are attracted to this genre becomes clear.

Film. Generally, the postmodern horror genre in film typically consists of a killer or monster chasing after a group of people and can be referred to as a slasher film (Clover, 1992; Keisner, 2008; Kocurek, 2015). Further, the violence and horror found in films tends to be culturally framed around a focus on gender, race, and class; thus, working as a mirror to represent the society that we live in (Kocurek, 2015). For example, gender is culturally framed in horror films when the girl who survives, also called “the

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final girl,” stereotypically represents what is expected of women in society (Clover, 1992). Because the final girl in films was almost always a virgin, the representation of her suggests that women should remain celibate until marriage and should not engage in premarital sex; and, if they do, they deserve to die (Clover, 1992; de Villiers, 2011; Keisner, 2008). While this is a common theme of most horror films and can work as a mirror into society, by reflecting expectations about gender, race, and social status, there are other commonalities that exist among them.

According to Keisner (2008), there are four principles that define postmodern horror that will help to understand how the genre works as a mirror into society. The first principle discusses the killer and states that he/she is normally someone who challenges or disrupts the current social order of the group of victims (Keisner, 2008). The second principle states that the line between good and evil is not always clear and can sway between the two (Keisner, 2008). Even further, the third principle explains the level of someone’s adaptability in the role of the victim; thus determining if they will be able to survive and if so, they may have a more difficult time than the others (Keisner, 2008). The fourth and final principle of postmodern horror expresses that there is not any clear and distinct closure (Keisner, 2008). Keisner (2008) uses the example that the killer rises from the dead at the end of the movie leaving the audience to wonder when s/he will strike again and who will be the next victims. The ending of season six of *TWD* is a clear example of this. The audience was left to spend the next nine months wondering who would be executed at Negan’s hand and how bad it was going to get.

Video games. Understanding how violence works in films gives insight into its role in that medium. However, there are also video games that many of the viewers of

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TWD may have grown up around as the key demographic is 18-49 year olds (Rawden, 2016). Some scholars argue that people who grew up playing violent video games do not react as harshly to seeing violence in other mediums as they have become used to viewing it (Rothmund, Gollwitzer, Bender, & Klimmt, 2015). This is not to say that the violence they are exposed to does not affect them because it can affect their relationships and levels of trust with others (Rothmund et al., 2015). However, it does demonstrate that individuals who have played video games are less likely to react to violence in other mediums such as television and film (Rothmund et al., 2015). This can be said for *TWD* as well as Bricken (2016) points out that the series has never been classified as a happy show but recognizes that the show is supposed to be violent. He brings up an episode in season three in which Maggie has to perform a C-section on Lori and then Lori's son, Carl, has to shoot her in the head so that she does not turn into a zombie and recognizes that fans were okay with that because it fit the narrative of the series.

While *TWD* has operated from that frame from the beginning, violence in other mediums such as video games has as well. For example, violence in video games is created based on cultural narratives, such as race, class, and gender, and doing so allows for the violence to be more acceptable among players; because it is based on a cultural narrative, most players are familiar with this set up (Kocurek, 2015). For example, Kocurek (2015) discusses how zombies are used as a metaphor for class disputes and as being the equivalent of social outcasts where they are dehumanized through the color of their blood in the games (normally green or black). She explains that the cultural framework and dehumanization of the monsters in the games is reflexive of what is happening in society with marginalized groups and reinforces cultural and societal

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violence. Because of this, it would make sense that players continue to play without realizing the harmful effects that it can have on their own relationships and experiences (Kocurek, 2015; Rothmund et al., 2015). This is also supported by studies by Rothmund et al. (2015) and Kennedy and Ceballo (2016) who explain that long-term exposure to violent video games can cause physical aggression in social interactions.

With the normalization of violence in video games, it is important to also look at how this has been argued to create violence desensitization when exposed to media violence. When individuals are exposed to violent video games over a long period of time, they become desensitized to violence and tend to be more aggressive in social interactions (Anderson et al., 2010; Chittaro & Sioni, 2012; Kennedy & Ceballo, 2016). Further, when exposed to physical violence, especially when showing blood or a pained expression, individuals are desensitized to responding in real life situations when a victim is experiencing this type of violence (Anderson et al., 2010). Individuals can also become more aggressive but not have a strong reaction to violent images in video games or other media (Chittaro & Sioni, 2012). Moreover, systemic desensitization theories propose that when consistently exposed to violent or gory scenes in media, viewers have lower emotional responses to seeing other victims of violence in different mediums beyond the video game (Anderson et al., 2010). Even so, people are still attracted to violence and horror and it is necessary to understand why.

Attraction to violence/horror. In order to shift to why audiences are attracted to the genre, it is necessary to review a few key aspects. One of the biggest reasons why the violence and horror genre attracts audiences is its ability to thrill and scare viewers even though repetition is a characteristic of the genre (de Villiers, 2011; Keisner, 2008). As

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Carol Clover (1987) explains, the horror genre entices audiences because of the experience it provides; its sole purpose is “to horrify and stimulate” creating an experience of fear that the audience can identify with (p. 189). It is its repetition that gives the viewers a layout of what to expect specifically in terms of how the killer and victims operate while still maintaining the thrill (Clover, 1992; de Villiers, 2011). As Keisner (2008) states, “horror films offer an instant thrill ride of terror” (p. 414). This ride, although fictional, shocks the audience, causing an emotional or physical response such as an increased heart rate, flight or fight instinct, and anxiety that is very much real (de Villiers, 2011; Keisner, 2008).

Therefore, the genre pushes the boundaries of reality; thus challenging our perception of reality (de Villiers, 2011; Keisner, 2008). The genre pushes viewers to examine what they believe to be real and not real and potentially to expand those boundaries. This pushing of boundaries occurs through direct address, which brings the audience’s attention to who is holding the camera, making the narrative appear to be based on true events. Doing so is the filmmakers attempt to persuade the audience that it is real and not fantasy by making it look as if they were experiencing it (de Villiers, 2011; Keisner, 2008). One of the more recent examples of this is *Paranormal Activity* in which the camera is held from the character’s point of view or as security cameras. *TWD* does not utilize this filming technique, however, it does utilize the theme of having a supernatural element, zombies, throughout the series.

Just as in *TWD*, the horror genre tends to have a supernatural element or a monster in it that goes beyond reality allowing the viewers the opportunity to push beyond their own version of reality to consider a reality that goes outside the natural

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world (Keisner, 2008). That supernatural element or monster is there to represent the unethical side of society because it tends to give in to unacceptable conventions or desires (Keisner, 2008). For *TWD*, that would be the zombies. The viewers accept this reality for the duration of the film or show but afterwards, it encourages them to push their own boundaries and limits of reality once it is over. For example, Keisner (2008) discusses that this is common in children who are exposed to the genre as they are not able to move past the emotional response and see reality clearly; cognitively, it is harder to apply logic and reason to what reality is in comparison to the violent or horrific film. For adults, when exposed to more violence growing up, it becomes their reality and, because they are exposed to violence for so long, they do not react as harshly as others who were not exposed to the same amount of violence (Keisner, 2008; Kennedy & Ceballo, 2016).

While the genre pushes the viewers to question their own grasp on what reality is, there is also a theory that suggests that it creates an opportunity for viewers to experience death without actually dying; horror promises pain and evokes a desire to experience it (Clover, 1992; Keisner, 2008). Viewers are able to enjoy the film or show and experience the punishment or death without actually living through it (Keisner, 2008). When the experience of death is coupled with the blurred reality and the emotional response, audiences are able to experience rage and anger without consequences (Clover, 1992; Keisner, 2008).

The violence coupled with the emotional response ties into the idea of real and fantasy. Audiences are able to experience rage, anger, and death without the real consequences as discussed above. Also, when the audience feels connected to the characters, it makes it that much harder to separate the fantasy of the show with reality

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(de Villiers, 2011; Keisner, 2008). As with *TWD*, fans feel connected to characters that have been around since the beginning such as Rick, Carl, and Glenn. As I will discuss in the following analysis, when a character that has been around for so long dies, especially in a violent way, it is difficult for audience members to watch it happen. And, the resulting discourse as the audience attempts to come to terms with the loss creates an interesting case study for understanding how boundaries of acceptable violence are created.

Season 7 Premiere: Did *TWD* Go Too Far?

Through the critical framework of paratexts, fandoms, and violence, the following analysis of *TWD*'s surrounding fan commentary after episode 7.1 "The Day Will Come When You Won't Be" provides insight into where the audience stands with violence in the media and how this episode works as a mirror of violence's representation in society. Therefore, the purpose of studying the reaction to one specific episode in a seven season series is to investigate how *TWD*, a show known for its violence, led to widespread communication among fans regarding the violence. The season seven premiere can be utilized as a representative case study to analyze how the audience, using social and popular media outlets, demonstrates their reaction to the violence and how this episode and the surrounding fan reaction suggests that there are boundaries when it comes to violence more broadly. Understanding the episode along with a critical analysis of the fan commentary on Reddit and Twitter gathered within a seven-day span of the episode, allows this event to serve as a mirror for understanding violence's representation in society.

Episode 7.1 "The Day Will Come When You Won't Be"

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Episode 7.1 “The Day Will Come When You Won’t Be” opens with Negan, the new villain, staring into Rick’s eyes after he has just executed two of Rick’s friends with his barbed wire bat, Lucille, dripping with blood and brains. Season six ended just before Negan chose who he was going to execute and this premiere has started after the executions have been made to prolong the suspense of who is chosen. Negan then takes only Rick and Rick’s RV to a separate location away from the rest of the group and throws Rick to the walkers without a weapon. When Rick makes it to safety, he flashes back to just a few moments before when Negan executed both Abraham and Glenn. Now about five minutes into the episode, fans find out whom Negan chooses to execute. His first choice is Abraham and he takes Lucille and beats him on his head continuously while blood splatters on the other characters until nothing but brains and blood is left. Darryl retaliates and charges Negan and Negan decides to teach Darryl, and the rest of the group, a lesson by bashing in Glenn’s head, to the point where his eye is bulging out of his skull, using Lucille in the same manner he did Abraham.

After Rick’s flashbacks, Negan and Rick return to the group who are still mourning their losses, and Negan tries to make Rick chop his son’s, Carl’s, arm off as a test to see how far Rick will go under his control. Negan tells Rick that if he does not chop off Carl’s arm, he will have all of Rick’s other group members executed at gun point. However, because this was test to see how much control Negan has over Rick, Negan decides to stop Rick just before Rick completes the task and then demonstrates to the group that they now answer to him by scavenging for him and his group, The Saviors (dubbed The Saviors because they claim to save people from walkers by killing the walkers). After all of this, Negan finally leaves the group because he has proven his point

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that he has control over them and expects that they now owe him for being their Savior in regards to him saving them from the walkers. After Negan leaves, the group mourns and finally takes Abraham and Glenn's mangled bodies and leaves with Negan's threatening demeanor leering over them.

As a catalyst, this episode, although widely watched, may have kick started the subsequent loss of many loyal, longtime viewers, where the season seven finale was the lowest watched episode since season two (Colon, 2016; Fowler, 2017). Further, the fans of *TWD* expect gore and violence but this particular episode, according to the fan conversation, took violence to another level and left many fans questioning the producers' motives. What the fans' commentary surrounding the episode suggests is that there are certain levels of acceptable violence, and when violated, fans reject the real/fantasy boundaries created by producers. To understand the fan discourse, the following analysis focuses on a discussion of fan commentary demonstrating that the violence was unacceptable for fans, *TWD*'s participatory fan culture, and producer/fan discourse.

Fantasy or Reality? Violence Crossed the Line

While *TWD* has not been shy with gore and violence since its inception, this particular episode led to widespread communication among fans. Fans were commenting on Reddit and Twitter about the horror being too much and over the top. Reddit fan purplepanda5 (2016) comments on the horror by explaining that in the past, the walkers were the biggest problem in the post-apocalyptic world but because of the violence and horror of the episode, the walker's role was forgotten: "it was kinda a halting moment for me – like, oh that's right. The walkers were technically the main threat of this new world.

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But all of that was forgotten given the horror of this episode.”¹ For this fan, it is one thing to see violence from or against a walker because that character is no longer a person, but this episode placed walkers as an afterthought.

Instead, the violence came from Negan, one of the human characters, who was inflicting pain and fear on the main characters with his barbed wire bat. This scene highlights a shifting focus in *TWD* from the threat of the walkers to the threat of other surviving humans. While this is not entirely new for *TWD*, the shift lies in the main characters being the hunted versus the hunters. In the past, the main characters only killed other humans if it was for survival. This is unlike Negan, who kills to prove his dominance and teach lessons to other human survivors.

Because of the violence coming from another human, it is important to note how this can serve as a societal mirror. Based on Kocurek’s (2015) study of video games, which explains how horror and violence in the games is culturally framed, such as class, race, gender, and climate change narratives, this begs the question, is this the case for *TWD* and, if so, was episode 7.1 mirroring society’s current narratives about what humans represent in society? Many fans comments can be read as a reflection on this topic. For example, commenter pkosuda (2016) posts on Reddit:

With the whole "humans are the real monsters" theme that *TWD* has had going, I took it as representing the walkers as what picks up the remains of what the people in that world do to each other. Basically, the people do the real damage. The "walkers" are just there to clean up what's left.

Negan represents the monsters that humans have become in this world and when

¹ All message board posts are listed verbatim.

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the walkers come up to Rick's group after Negan leaves, Rick's group pays them no mind and the walkers just eat up the leftover blood from Glenn and Abraham. The walkers used to be the biggest problem that the group had to face but now, it seems that Rick would rather deal with them instead of Negan. Dydegu (2016) on Reddit discusses "Like, he'd prefer to be surrounded by walkers than have to deal with Negan. But he doesn't even have that luxury anymore. Dealing with walkers was one thing, but now Rick and company are trapped in something far worse." This furthers the idea that now the humans are the problem; they are the monsters that Rick and the group must face. In the past it was about survival and killing whomever you needed to in order to keep your family alive whether it was walkers or humans. Additionally, in past episodes, Rick and his group have always escaped when being faced with execution from other humans. However, in this particular episode, it is the shocking violence that the main characters cannot escape from humans against humans, that is particularly jarring for fans. This is part of the societal mirror that this episode reflects. It is showing that humans are now the real danger and walkers are not.

With this horror now shifting to humans inflicting the violence on other humans versus the walkers being the primary threat, fan reaction continued, arguing that it was too hard to watch and even when they thought that they were numb to horror and violence, they were still struggling to get through the episode. For example, Twitter user J. Clark Allison (2016) comments, "@TheWalkingDead Episode 1 season 7 jumped the shark already. I've been into horror since age 12. This is unwatchable. Gratuitous and gross." Reddit member stebbibg (2016) responds to fellow commenters' concerns about violence stating, "I am glad I am not the only one feeling like that. I am usually cold af

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watching horror movies/shows and don't feel anything, but damn I thought it was difficult watching this episode." Comments like these reveal that even those fans that thought that they were desensitized to horror and violence were appalled at not only the level that the producers took it to, but also because it is humans who are now the real danger and causing the violence.

Even further, given the way season six ended with Negan pointing the barbed wire bat at the group while they were kneeling before him as he was about to choose which one(s) he was going to beat to death, fans claimed that the premiere's violence still crossed the line. The length and detail of it made it disgusting and hard to watch. In the episode, Negan first chooses Abraham to kill, and it was not a quick death as Negan beat his head in repeatedly until all that was left on the ground was blood and brains. Reddit user SFjake, 2016 posts about Negan's second victim Glenn: "seeing him barely able to speak with his head caved in and his eye popping out was the most disgusting shit I've ever seen," to which mcbobboreddit (2016) responds, "I totally, completely, emphatically agree. I cannot think of a single other episodic show that's crossed the line. The killing is par for the course, clearly, but the reveling in it has to be new." The choice of the word "revel" to describe the gratuitous use of violence in the killing is particularly vivid especially when the violence is coming from another human being. To revel in something is to take pleasure in it and fans thought that was taking the violence too far.

TWD is a fictional series but for these fans, this specific episode went too far and put the killing of characters that fans have watched grow over seasons front and center. As Keisner (2008) discusses, the boundary between fantasy and reality for the horror genre is something that is there for viewers to be able to enjoy the fantasy element while

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watching the film or show but can potentially shift their own perspective of reality and what is real. For fans who have grown close to the characters, it as if they have lost a friend or family member even though in reality, they are not friends or family.

Further, the fan discourse depicts that fans have an acceptable threshold for violence and will make their voices heard when it pushes past those boundaries as they have on social media thus far. The series has been on for seven seasons and has had violence and gore throughout, especially since the very first episode consisted of Rick shooting a little girl, who had turned into a walker, in the head. As Brickner (2016) explains, the series is not a happy show and violence is part of it when it furthers the plot, but when it is violence for the sake of violence, it is not worth it for many fans.

It is important to note that even though the majority of fans on Reddit and Twitter agreed that the violence was too much to handle, there were a few here and there that mentioned that the violence was not over the top or horrific. On Reddit, Anklebender91 (2016) states that it “wasn’t brutal enough for me.” This may show that for some viewers, they remembered that it is just fiction and did not feel as attached to the killed characters as much as the majority of fans. While these comments were few and far between, it shows that not all of the fans were disturbed by the level of violence that the producers created and drew out.

Emotional attachment coupled with violence. As the violence was the main discussion among fans, some fans also acknowledged that the violence was just part of the general horror of the episode. Even without the violence, the episode was painful to watch because they felt an emotional connection with the members of the group, specifically Glenn. While Abraham was Negan’s first victim, Glenn was his second, as he

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wanted to teach Darryl a lesson for retaliating after Abraham's death by executing another member of the group. Glenn has been in *TWD* since the first season and many fans acknowledge that they saw him grow over the seasons and felt like they knew him. On Reddit, crunchyturtles (2016) responds to a previous poster who says "Maggie wanted to mourn Glenn by herself but Rick choked out a stutted, 'he's our family too.' Heartbreaker" (whutchamacallit, 2016) and remarks:

Broke my heart cause I felt he was saying that to the audience as well. We've known Glenn for seven years, watched him grow physically and mentally and emotionally into a strong lovable person and then... dead. In the most horrific way imaginable.

The fans talk about how it was heartbreaking and how the death was horrific. Another fan, Tville88 (2016) posts on Reddit, "The dent from the force of the impact defined how severe the hit was. You knew he was gone in an instant. It'll never be the same without glenn." This suggests that the audience felt as if they lost one of their own and the horror made it that much more difficult to witness. As these comments reveal, because of the closeness the fans felt with the characters, it became difficult to watch the way that they were executed and fans turned their frustrations to other fans online.

The executions that the fans witnessed led to their discussion online about how sad and heartbreaking the moment was when Glenn and Abraham were murdered. TheLittleCandelaBra (2016) on Reddit states "I didn't know a TV show could have me feeling so sad." Ilbakanp (2016) on Reddit says "That was the most heartbreaking point for me. I loved Abe, but they barely showed his death. Glenn we saw Every. Single. Thing. And when he desperately tried to speak to Maggie? Whatever was remaining in my heart died." This connection that the fans felt with Glenn made the violence that

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much more difficult to handle. Coming back to Keisner's (2008) discussion of fantasy versus reality in the violence and horror genre, it is clear that the emotional attachment that the audience felt can be connected to this idea.

The acceptable level of violence for fans may have something to do with the real attachment that they feel towards the characters. This may depict that it is not just the violence that bothered them, but also, to whom the violence was inflicted upon and can demonstrate how the episode serves as a societal mirror because, with the rise of violence in our country over the past few years, people able to have access to real life violence whether that is videos shared on social media or on the news and affect the way they view the world.

Therefore, the fantasy and reality line has been blurred. Fan google_results_bot (2016) discusses a clear example of this emotional connection on Reddit:

I've seen gore and stuff before and It never really phased me because I had no connection with the person. With Glenn, I knew about everything he's been through and everything he's about, and to watch someone you've basically known for years get his skull crushed and turn into a partial vegetable is so much more traumatic than if it was just anyone else.

This fan discusses the connection that was felt with Glenn and was not the only fan commenting like this. Even though Glenn is a fictional character and should remain in the world of fantasy, fans have become emotionally attached and felt as if they have known him for years, as if he were a friend. This may be in large part because of the paratexts that *TWD* has such as *TTD* that sometimes brings stars from the show to guest star. There have been occasions where actor Steven Yeun (who plays Glenn on *TWD*) guest stars and

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shares his experiences as Glenn to the fans in the audience. Seeing the actor in this context and then seeing him executed in a horrific manner can make it harder for fans to separate him from the show. Therefore, the line of fantasy and reality has become blurred and viewers have become emotionally attached to the characters that have been violently executed.

Subsequent loss of viewers. *TWD* lost viewers over the course of season seven, making season finale the lowest watched episode since the second season (Colon, 2016; Fowler, 2017). Colon (2016) attributes the loss of viewers to the “savage brutality” of the premiere and argues that many fans could not handle the amount of violence in the episode (para. 1). Although the causality cannot be proven, based on the fan commentary, there may be some correlation.

For example, fans were saying that the scene with Glenn’s eye popping out and his head dented in was disturbing and may be the reason that they stop watching the show. As Reddit commenter tinninja (2016) says “That scene really disturbed me, like 'not sure if I want to continue watching this show' disturbed me.” This comment was not the only one as many fans were discussing the impact that Glenn’s bulging eye had on their view of the show. Another commenter pixel_light (2016) says “As soon as I saw that I stopped watching.. first time I'm going to just look up online what happened as it was just so horrific.” Notice how this commenter connected the scene with Glenn’s eye to being horrific. It was at this point that the violence became unacceptable for these fans.

Further, on Reddit, CloudEnt (2016) comments “I know this won't be a popular comment but this episode went too far for me. I'm not sure if I'll keep watching if this is what they want to do from now on. They tortured people I love.” This fan seems to have

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built a connection with the characters and seeing them tortured was too much for this fan to witness. Another fan, BadMeetsEvil24 (2016), called out the showrunners and claims that the show to replace *TWD* will be *Game of Thrones* in his comment on Reddit:

I honestly was completely turned by the finale last season. I read comic spoilers so I knew it was coming, but the showrunners really fucked it up. I wasn't even looking forward to the premiere and it really lost a lot of emotional impact for me.

Again, I didnt read the comics but Jeffrey Dean Morgan is doing a pretty good job, I think. But thus far Negan doesn't seem interesting at all. Like he's just a deranged sociopath but... that's it? Bleh. That really turned me off the show. And this is coming from someone who teared up when Glenn fake died.

Ah well. Here's to GoT.

Even though BadMeetsEvil24 (2016) explains that while s/he was not looking forward to the premiere, the character building of Negan is what ultimately turned him/her off to the show. While many fans were reacting by claiming that they would stop watching the series across social media afterwards, viewers went into the premiere with the understanding that it was not going to be the most pleasant episode given how season 6 ended with the cliffhanger of who of the group was going to be murdered; however, the premiere felt like “torture porn, *Saw* style” and it felt different than other deaths on the show (Eames, 2016, para. 4).

While the deaths felt different than those in the past, the idea that the episode was filled with “gore porn” or “torture porn” attributes to the acceptable and unacceptable level of violence/horror. Fan kaylatastikk (2016) on Reddit posts “I'm pretty pissed tbh. Like, sure game of thrones kills and rapes infants, but never has a scene on that been as

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blatantly gore porn as this.” As Clover (1987) discusses, the horrific element in this genre is meant to attract viewers and may be why *TWD* has been a success over the years, but, as the fan commentary has demonstrated, the violence of this episode was unbearable. This shows that there is an unacceptable level of violence and gore even when exposed to it over seven seasons.

Further, this goes to show that if the impact that the violence and gore had from episode 7.1 “The Day Will Come When You Won’t Be” does have a correlation with the loss of viewership, then the loss of viewers demonstrates that audiences will not tolerate it when the level of violence crosses their boundaries. The backlash against the violence expressed in fans’ comments demonstrates that audiences have an active voice in response to what they are being shown in media; it offers a boundary for what they will stand for and what they will not. Moreover, it highlights that, as a societal mirror, the fact that the violence was coming from humans was the most disturbing aspect, demonstrates that humans pose a real threat when they are the ones shown inflicting the savage “torture-porn” style violence.

Given today’s climate, the numerous mass shootings that have happened over the course of the past few weeks, months, and years and the accessibility that people have to see violence on social media and the news highlight that humans are a real danger in the world and this episode only mirrored this idea. Understanding how fans reacted to the violence of the episode gives context into why this episode crossed a line for many viewers and illuminates how this episode served as a mirror for violence’s representation in society and allows to move to a discussion *TWD*’s participatory fan culture and how it is part of the ongoing conversation between fans and producers of *TWD*.

TWD's Participatory Fan Culture

As the violence was the most discussed aspect of the episode among fans, this discussion also furthers the participatory fan culture for *TWD* that is evident through its paratexts. One of the most popular and expansive paratexts that *TWD* has is *TTD*, as discussed earlier. This show includes guest stars, occasionally actors from the show, and encourages a conversation with the fans that occurs after each new episode of *TWD*. There are segments that pull in the fan commentary on Twitter and occasionally Instagram. They also take a question from a fan in the audience and from a fan over the phone, and spend an hour dissecting the just aired episode. This not only encourages the conversation among fans and the guest stars, but also extends the length of time that the viewers are invested in *TWD*.

Additionally, *TTD* includes a segment that honors the walkers and any of the characters that were killed. This segment helps to create a connection to the characters by honoring their deaths. It is one way to make it seem as if the audience knows the characters beyond the show. This is furthered when the guest stars are either actors from *TWD* or the producers. Fans are able to hear from them directly about the characters or producers intentions behind the episode. This intimate conversation allows audiences to become closer to the text and feel as if they are part of the conversation among producers and actors of the show and engage in the participatory culture surrounding *TWD* (Jenkins, 2002; Jenkins, 2006)

Producer/Fan conversation. This conversation that occurs on *TTD* encourages fans to engage with the guest stars and each other. Because, occasionally, a guest star is a producer, it is interesting to see what the producers' motives are behind the creation of

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TWD. Ross (2016) discusses that according to the showrunner, Scott M. Gimple, in terms of the direction and mechanisms of this premiere, everything that happened was purposefully done in order to preserve fan experiences with the series. This is because producers have gone into the series with the frame that no character is safe and everyone is vulnerable to the new world. The producers expect fans that have watched from the beginning to understand and acknowledge that. In a way, the violence and loss of the main characters is done in order to remind the audience of this fact and continue to emphasize that part of the experience is that the series is unpredictable and anything can happen.

With that being said, the audience reaction was opposite of what Gimple was trying to achieve. Reddit commenter Motowilly (2016) responds to gnagflow69 (2016), who said “Killing a character that has been there from the very first episode seems like a terrible idea” by arguing “That’s kinda a big part of the show though, no one is safe.” Even with this acknowledgement from the fan, the premiere crossed a line in terms of violence, and received negative feedback from many fans and critics (Eames, 2016; Fowler, 2017).

The audience’s negative feedback resulting from this controversial and violent episode not only facilitates the fan participatory culture and serves as another paratext for *TWD*, but also acknowledges that there is a conversation that both fans and producers engage in. As Kim (2016) states, “the show encourages its viewers to become media analysts while simultaneously (and inadvertently) revealing the shifting priorities in consuming commercial television” (p. 1). When viewers become media analysts and share their opinions about the show through other forms of media, it gives them power to

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potentially impact the show itself; this is especially true when the producers react and respond back to the fans as they can on *TTD*.

For example, Executive Producer, Gayle Anne Hurd, reacted to the controversy the fans created regarding the level of violence in episode 7.1 at a panel discussing television violence and stated that the producers read what fans had to say about the episode and understood that the level of violence crossed the line (Millican, 2017). She then stated that for episodes that they were still filming in terms of the violence, “we did tone it down” (Millican, 2017). As Segado, Grandio, and Fernandez-Gomez (2015) discuss, the audience uses the Internet to express their opinions and beliefs of the show and helps to not only promote the show, but also provide feedback.

This feedback shows that there is an ongoing conversation with fans and producers. It is noteworthy to understand that while many researchers such as Jenkins and Booth have found over the course of their research that audiences have power, this episode shows that there is an ongoing conversation between fans and producers to help shape and mold what media is becoming. In this next section, I first discuss the relatively few fans that did not condemn the violence, but instead related the violence to the creative goals (or lack thereof).

Fan engagement with the premiere. As there has been conversation among fans and producers regarding the level of violence after the episode, fans were also critiquing the episode in terms of its reliance on cliffhangers and its creativity. This can be evident with the way season six ended leaving fans wondering who was going to be murdered. Bill_b4 (2016) on Reddit comments:

Unbelievable and unrealistic melodrama. The plot is only written to keep the

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viewers tuning in episode after episode with cliff-hangers and thirst for revenge. Of course everyone is going to watch this season to see the group get their revenge...but we've been here before. This was done over once already with *The Governor*. Negan is just Governor 2.0. It's not really about the zombies or survival...or even progressing the story toward some type of equilibrium or message or cure...it's just rehashed plot devices to keep people tuning in episode after episode. Truthfully...I have better things to do with my time...At this point its just whatever it takes to continue to feed the viewership machine...it's hardly even a show about zombies anymore - the zombies are just scenic backdrop.

This fan is pointing out that the show is utilizing cliffhangers to emphasize that it seems as though all the producers care about is the viewership and are not putting in any more creative thought. He feels as though they are reusing old plot lines, such as his analogy of Negan to the Governor (the villain in season three). He also points out that the show focuses more on what it takes to keep viewers from tuning in instead of focusing on the threat that the zombies pose. Mai_tais_and_yahtzee (2016) agrees and says on Reddit “the plot is only written to keep the viewers tuning in episode after episode.” As Bricken (2016) discussed, when the violence is used to further the plot and narrative, it is acceptable, but when it is just there to aid viewership, it becomes gratuitous.

Fans have also compared the episode to the comic and claim that the comic is much better than the show, specifically this episode because there was not a cliffhanger. Fans are claiming that they did not like the episode primarily because they had to wait for the pay off until the start of a new season. For example, fan Allstarcappa (2016) states on Reddit: “I enjoyed the show way more in the comic than in the show.” Another fan,

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Worthyness (2016) states:

It was better in the comics because it came right at the end of the issue. It was an immediate pay off for the tension that was building. We had to wait a whole season before we got the impact in the TV show, so it doesn't quite hit you until they do it as a 'surprise!'”

While this was the case for some of the fans, others were happy that the episode stayed so close to the comics in the sense of the gore that was provided in the comics. One of the scenes, in both the comic and the episode, Negan beats Glenn over the head with Lucille (the bat) and Glenn's eye bulges out of his head with blood dripping down his face as he tries to speak his last words to his wife, Maggie. A fan, acaseyb (2016), comments on Reddit and says “I was quite shocked that they kept it so close, including the eye. I thought it was important in the comics (and the eye thing really impacted/bothered me), but I never thought AMC would pull it off that well.” This fan gives credit to AMC for pulling off the scene on television, but acknowledges that it did bother them.

This demonstrates that fans anticipated the gore and violence, especially with the frame that the producers have set up from the beginning, but seeing it on television versus a still in a comic was too much to handle. Further, it demonstrates that there is an ongoing dialogue among fans and critics and fans are questioning the motives and creative ability of the producers while still acknowledging that the violence was very different in the episode versus the comics. Therefore, this project has demonstrated that a deeper focus on the discourse about violence from the fans goes beyond recognizing that the violence crossed the line, and instead creates rules about acceptable and unacceptable

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violence.

Final Thoughts

This project's purpose was to critically analyze the fan commentary surrounding *TWD*'s episode 7.1 "The Day Will Come When You Won't Be" to demonstrate how paratexts help to facilitate audience's participatory culture and what audience's acceptable level of violence and horror is in media. With a theoretical framework of paratexts, fandoms, and violence/horror, the project illuminated viewers' understanding of what is acceptable and unacceptable violence in media through their use of paratexts such as fandoms.

Additionally, it capitalized on the research about fans' concepts of fantasy and reality and what it means when fans become too attached to characters that are then brutally executed. Ultimately, the episode demonstrated that when violence is coming from humans in the series, it mirrors society in that violence's representation in our world tends to come from other humans and it is at this point that the violence in the media becomes unacceptable for viewers.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this project focuses on audience commentary after the season seven premiere of *TWD*, it would be interesting to apply this to other series such as *Game of Thrones* or *Into the Badlands* to see what fans are saying about those shows as well or if it only applies to the *TWD* fan base. Additionally, it would be beneficial to interview fans individually to see if what they are saying online is consistent in face-to-face communication. The interviews may provide a more inclusive understanding of what fans

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are saying in regards to the violence in the media and be able to determine if it is consistent with the fans' online voice.

It would also be interesting to take this unit of analysis, specifically using paratexts, and apply it to the idea that with the rise of technology, humans are becoming more like walkers in terms of the current social media climate. This would be interesting to take a postmodernism perspective as well and look at *TWD* through that lens along with paratexts. This may be useful to continue to flesh out the idea that *TWD* is a societal mirror on many different levels other than the takeaway from this project that humans are now the real monsters who inflict the violence not only in the *TWD* world but also in society.

As all of this is beyond the scope of this project, the themes discussed were not able to touch on any of these topics and may prove to be beneficial to the current scholarship surrounding those topics in a different critical analysis.

Implications

For this project, the purpose was to explore the fan reaction following the season seven premiere and how it demonstrated the audiences grappling with a level of violence previously unseen on the series, and one that turned many viewers off for good. Further, when fans feel an emotional connection to characters that are then brutally executed by other humans, it makes the violence inflicted upon them more difficult to watch. The analysis also demonstrated that because the violence was coming from humans, it may be read as a societal mirror reflecting the fact that humans are inflicting violence.

Further, this project allowed for an understanding of the role of audiences in the contemporary age of television. It demonstrated that fans become attached to fictional

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characters and will speak up when a popular show, such as *TWD*, crosses a line in terms of violence for many loyal fans. It also shed light on the ongoing conversation that producers and fans are having by explaining the steps producers took based on the negative feedback received from the audience. This integrated communication between television producers and fans on other forms of media facilitates and understanding of what it means to be a fan in the current age of television.

Therefore, the fans' reaction implied, not only that *TWD* crossed a line and that there is a conversation between producers and fans, but also, that viewers were going to stop watching if this level of violence and gore continued. While that cannot be proven to be the cause of the decline in viewership, it is important to note that fans were stating that because the violence and gore was unacceptable, they would stop watching and because of that conversation, producers did acknowledge it and lower the violence level in future episodes. This communication phenomenon shows that audience members will speak up when a series known for its violence crosses a line and will turn to social media to voice those frustrations. Additionally, the project showed that, as a societal mirror, the episode highlighted that humans pose real danger in the world and are capable of inflicting violence on each other, and this is the real horror.

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