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The Psychology of Dystopian and Post-Apocalyptic Stories: The Proverbial Question of Whether Life Will Imitate Art

Donna L. Roberts, PhD

"You walk outside, you risk your life. You take a drink of water, you risk your life. Nowadays you breathe and you risk your life. You don't have a choice. The only thing you can choose is what you're risking it for." - Hershel Greene, fictional character in *The Walking Dead*

In this 1889 essay *The Decay of Lying – An Observation*, Irish poet and playwright, Oscar Wilde argued, "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" (Wilde, 2008). Instead, one might argue that life imitates art imitates life in a chicken-and-egg circularity as each evolves, feeding upon the other.

The genre of dystopian, and its close cousin post-apocalyptic, fiction have long fascinated readers and philosophers alike. Dystopia (from Ancient Greek δυσ- "bad" and τόπος "place") typically depicts a society in the aftermath of some change – political, economic, social, environmental – that has left the world and its citizens (at least most of the ones the audience can relate to) in unfavorable conditions. Building on that basic theme, post-apocalyptic stories generally depict the aftermath of a more profound societal collapse.

While they differ in the details of their plotlines - it may be a tyrannical dictator or a contagion, a man-made nuclear crisis or a natural disaster – they are, at once, different, but the same. They share a future orientation that is just real enough, and just surreal enough, to leave the audience wondering if life will, in fact, imitate art. From George Orwell's *1984*, to Stephen King's *The Stand*, from *Soylent Green* to the *Mad Max* series, a vital question lingers . . . Could that really happen? Will that happen?

The American series, *The Walking Dead*, represents one of the current and most popular post-apocalyptic horror television series of all time. Beginning with its third season, *TWD* attracted the most 18- to 49-year-old viewers of any cable or broadcast television series (Rotten Tomatoes, 2015). That's a pretty wide range of viewers that no marketing segmentation plan would usually put together. It was even well received by critics.

The Plague (La Peste, in its original French, 1947) depicts the stereotypical plague scenario and its devastation on the French city of Oran, which had seen various bouts of disease and pestilence (e.g., the cholera epidemic) ravage its community in the years before Camus wrote his novel. While the context is the city in the midst of this plague, like virtually all works of the dystopian genre, it seeks to confront questions of human nature and destiny – particularly the contradictions of heroism and cowardice, honor and dishonor, integrity and depravity. It has come to represent the philosophical notion of Absurdism – the paradox between the human need to seek inherent value and meaning in life, and the human inability to find any in a meaningless or chaotic and irrational universe (Camus, 1970; Gray, 2007). At the end of the epic

struggle, the narrator of *The Plague* concludes that there is more to admire than despise about fellow humans, a message of hope, albeit one arrived at through struggle. The tagline from *The Walking Dead* - "Fight the dead, fear the living" – portrays a far more cynical sentiment, at least for now while we are still embroiled in this particular battle.

Turns out that since the beginning of humanity, or at least since we've been writing about it, we've been contemplating the end of humanity. From Bible stories to campfire stories, we revel in envisioning the ultimate destruction of the world as we know it, and what ensues in the aftermath.

In 2012, the Daily Mail published results of a survey that polled 16,262 people in more than 20 countries (see Figure 1). The results indicated that 22% of Americans believed world would end in their lifetime with 10% thinking the apocalypse was coming in that very year (Hanlon, 2012). Certainly, if this is your mindset, then it is only logical to be a wee bit obsessed with what might be in store for you.

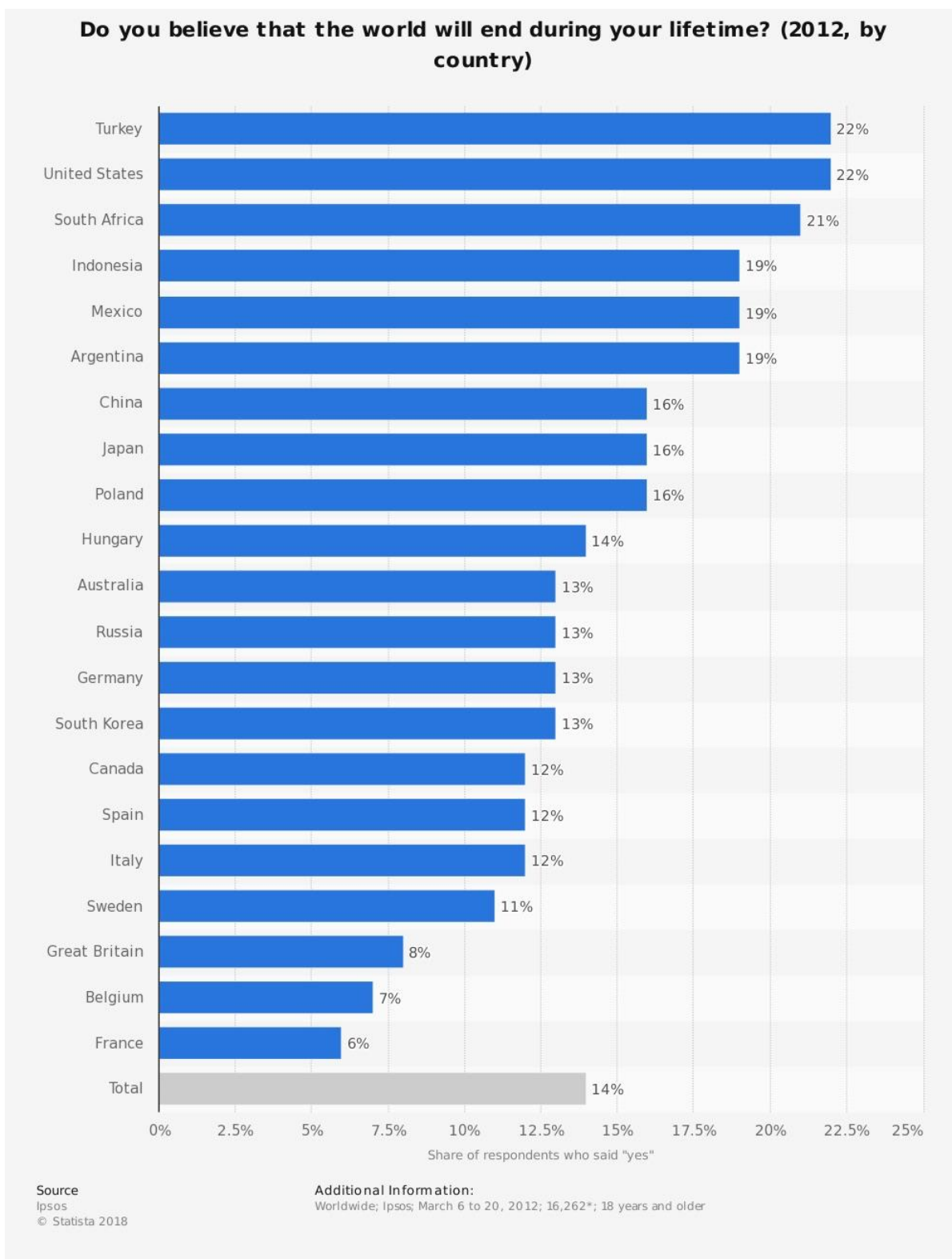


Figure 1: Global survey on the world probably ending during one's lifetime Published by Statista Research Department, Apr 30, 2012

Actually, skipping only a few years here and there, predictions of the end of the world have occurred for almost every year since 1910 and there are plenty more scheduled for the future. Historically, even various scientists have weighed in with estimates of cataclysmic destruction that would endanger human existence, though their dates typically range from a comfortable 300,000 to 22 billion years from now. However, given the instability of climate, the political landscape and containment of pathogens, more do seem to be cropping up with sooner best-before dates.

The media, including broadcast journalism, popular talk shows, documentaries and fictionalized productions have always played a role in our apocalyptic obsession. Adding a twist to the usual plot of following the experiences of survivors, beginning in 2009 the History Channel aired a two-season (20 episode) series, *Life After People*, where experts speculated on how the earth would evolve after the demise of humans. With the ominous opening, *Welcome to Earth ... Population: Zero*, it captured the morbid fascination of 5.4 million viewers, making it the most watched program in the history of the History Channel (Tucker, 2010).

From 2011 to 2014 the National Geographic channel ran a reality show, *Doomsday Preppers*, that profiled real survivalists preparing for various scenarios of the end of civilization. While some critics called it absurd and exploitative, it was the most watched and highest rated show in the history of the network (North, 2014; Raasch, 2014).

Typically, there are only a few oft-repeated variations on the theme — the deadly virus, the meteor strike, nuclear devastation and, the newest kid on the block, the “gray goo” scenario where nanotechnology runs amok and robots commit ecophagy. *The Walking Dead* in particular, and the zombie craze in general, seems to be the latest, and rather enduring, fascination with all things apocalyptic. Now in its 10th season, the show seems as strong as ever. The review site Rotten Tomatoes concludes, “*Blood-spattered, emotionally resonant, and white-knuckle intense, The Walking Dead puts an intelligent spin on the overcrowded zombie subgenre.*”

But just why do we engage in so much pursuit of these devastating what-ifs?

In one respect, the contemplation of ever-increasing disaster scenarios is just a gradual slippery slope from very functional, and necessary, learned behavior. From the time we are children, through both direct experience and the hypothetical, we learn cause-effect relationships, and thus how to avoid unpleasant and dangerous consequences. We learn not to touch the hot stove or play in traffic. We learn to think ahead and anticipate possible consequences. But in learning these, we also come to understand that there are some things that happen that you can't anticipate. Sometimes life turns on a dime. Sometimes disasters happen. Sometimes the world runs amok and all you can do is deal with the aftermath.

Enter the captivating world of the post-apocalypse.

Another cognitive construct that leads to our fascination with these doomsday scenarios is to combat the feelings of powerlessness and mistrust of those with power. There's nothing like all-out devastation to level the proverbial playing field. Without the structure that has maintained the hierarchy of power, life becomes a romanticized adaptation of Darwin's survival of the fittest and we become masters of our own fate, at least theoretically.

There is also a surreal romanticizing of the post-apocalyptic world. Taking us back to the basics of human survival releases us from the complex entanglements and overbearing demands of the modern world, if only for that short time of suspended disbelief.

Child psychologist and author of *Zombie Autopsies*, Steven Schlozman, M.D., notes, "*All of this uncertainty and all of this fear comes together, and people think maybe life would be better after a disaster. I talk to kids in my practice and they see it as a good thing. They say, 'life would be so simple — I'd shoot some zombies and wouldn't have to go to school.'*" Similarly, he recounts the following statement from another teenager, "*Dude — a zombie apocalypse would be so cool. No homework, no girls, no SATs. Just make it through the night, man ... make it through the night*" (Yuhas, 2012).

While in reality we might not share the exuberance of these kids or long for a disaster to avoid another work deadline, we can sometimes fantasize about a simpler world where our true strengths are utilized and appreciated. Our brains are always seeking a solution to what is plaguing us (pun intended) and causing anxiety. When no plausible solution is readily available, we can resort to more fantastical scenarios. Projecting ourselves into future worlds, where life can be better and we can be better, is akin to reverse nostalgia, much like that depicted in *A Stop at Willoughby*, the 1960 Season 1, Episode 30 of *The Twilight Zone*, where an overstressed advertising executive Gart Williams find his solace in the imagined town that is a "peaceful, restful place, where a man can slow down to a walk and live his life full measure".

The power and endurance of *TWD* lies not in its clichéd deadly virus plotline, but instead in the development of characters who touch us on a deeper level. While the circumstances are surreal, the resilience of the characters in the face of total devastation and imminent threat to survival, can reflect something much more real, and more universal. As John Russo, co-creator of the WD predecessor *Night of the Living Dead*, noted, "*It has important things to say about the human condition, which is one of frailty and nobility, weakness and courage, fear and hope, good and evil. These are the enduring puzzles and enigmas of our existence, and we can delve into them and learn from them vicariously when we sit down to watch The Walking Dead*" (Bouwmeester, 2015).

What more could you ask for from any form of entertainment?

In October 2019, the American cable television channel, AMC, announced that *The Walking Dead* was renewed for an eleventh season. In March 2020, pre-production was halted due to the 2019–20 coronavirus pandemic (Patten, 2020).

It remains to be seen whether life will imitate art . . .

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