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MENNONITES, THE APOCALYPSE, AND THE APPEAL OF THE WALKING DEAD

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 15 years, the story of a world devastated by the walking dead has increasingly captured our attention through movies, television, and literature. The fictional narrative of zombie apocalypse has also shaped activities of government agencies, not-for-profits, and universities. Why is this narrative captivating? How might we be using it to navigate large-scale or personal challenges? This paper suggests some answers, bringing together zombie studies, narrative theory, and Mennonite studies to do so.

Keywords: *apocalypse, Canadian Mennonite, cultural narrative, emergency preparedness, narrative theory, personal narrative, popular culture, Russian Mennonite, survival, walking dead, zombie*

1. INTRODUCTION

Have you seen *Z Nation*? The SyFy television series challenges the conventions of zombie apocalypse. It moves beyond the rebuilding of society and conflict among communities of survivors to introduce new images and themes. In one episode, a half-zombie, half-human baby is born (Schaefer et al., 2015, S02E05). This birth occurs on old-order Mennonite farm, which is another, smaller way the show pushes the boundaries. We haven't seen Mennonites zombies before.

Not all Mennonites look like the ones in *Z Nation*. My particular group emigrated from the Ukraine to Canada in the 1920s (Wiebe, 2013). Most descendants of the Russian Mennonites work in cities rather than on farms (Regehr & Thiessen, 2011), and may only be distinguished from other Canadians by church membership or surnames like Wiebe and Redekop. While a Mennonite has written one of Canada's zombie novels (Redekop, *Husk*, 2012), there's no evidence that Russian Mennonites have embraced zombie pop culture more or less than other Canadians. But we are certainly well acquainted with the narrative of apocalypse, with "world-altering catastrophe" (Renner, 2012, p. 204). Our parents or grandparents had their world irrevocably altered when their prosperous "commonwealth"

(Zacharias, 2013) was decimated in the years surrounding the Russian Revolution. The traumatic experience of losing almost 100 villages, agricultural estates, hospitals, schools, and industry (Krahn & Sawatsky, 2011) is told and retold in family stories, literature, and scholarly papers and books.

The story of fictional zombie apocalypse has become just as familiar to us, to Canadians and Americans, as the story of escape from “the land of suffering” (Loewen, 2000) is to Russian Mennonites. This is largely due to the movement of zombies from horror film throughout pop culture since 2000. Zombie pop culture, including graphic novels, computer games, and apps, has been reported to contribute over \$5 billion to the world economy (Ogg, 2011). The zombie narrative is so widespread that the American Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has officially denied the existence of the zombie virus (Campbell, 2012). Moreover, Canadian Parliament has joked about national preparedness for a zombie invasion from the U.S. (Knowles, 2013). Why has this story of apocalypse become mainstream? What lies beneath its appeal? This presentation will suggest some answers inspired largely by scholarly publications, including my research on Mennonite experience. Given this Mennonite inspiration, and the example of other scholars who bring zombies into their own research, you will find Mennonite references woven throughout my presentation. I offer my overview of “why zombies attract” not only to fellow zombie fans curious about their interest in the zombie apocalypse, but also as a starting point for other scholars new to the interdisciplinary field of zombie studies.

2. THE ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE AS ENTERTAINMENT: ESCAPING OR CONFRONTING THE FAMILIAR?

Why are we captivated by the zombie apocalypse? My daughter Sasha says, “People like to be scared.” “But why scared by zombies?” I asked. “There are trends,” she said. “Vampires, werewolves, zombies.” My husband added that people are inherently violent, and it’s okay to watch zombies be killed because they are not alive. Perhaps even a pacifist Mennonite could kill zombies with a clear conscience. Permissible violence. This reminds me of an essay by Shelley Rees (2012). Rees describes how seasons 1 and 2 of *The Walking Dead* use the traditions of the Western. These include the promotional poster of deputy sheriff Rick Grimes, the “lone gunslinger” (p. 83) riding horseback into the seeming ghost town of Atlanta, and his group’s subsequent “perilous trek across the hostile landscape in search of a

homestead” (p. 86), encountering herds of zombies, in lieu of buffalo, along the way. Rees says that the escapism of the traditional Western includes “satisfying, justified violence” that audiences are free to enjoy because of the ultimate moral lesson of good characters winning over bad (p. 84). Another scholar, Kim Newman, argues that apocalyptic narrative (like *The Walking Dead*) is enjoyable because it offers “an exciting escape from daily existence that is at best tediously safe” (2000, p. 18 in Renner, 2012, p. 206).

So, for some, the zombie apocalypse offers an entertaining distraction from the daily grind. But for others, the story resonates because it re-imagines potential threat. Kyle Bishop (2009) says that the modern zombie film was born in 1968 with Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, but that following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Centers, there was a resurgence of zombie movies. Bishop observes that more than one-third of all zombie films have been released since 9/11 (2008, in Drezner, 2014, p. 825). He also points to the new development of zombie literature (2009, p. 19), which includes novels such as Max Brooks’ *World War Z* (2006), and Seth Grahame-Smith’s *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009). The number of zombie books published annually has quadrupled since 9/11 (Drezner, 2011, in Drezner, 2014, p. 826). In 2010, the zombie apocalypse moved to television. *The Walking Dead* is the first show to “mainstream the zombie genre” (Ambrosius & Valenzano, 2016, p. 70), and the most watched show in basic cable history (Fraustino & Ma, 2015, p. 222). Why are we experiencing a so-called zombie renaissance (Bishop, 2009; Platts, 2013)? Bishop writes, “Initially zombie movies shocked audiences with their unfamiliar images; today, they are all the more shocking because of their familiarity” (p. 24).

Scenes depicting deserted metropolitan streets, abandoned human corpses, and gangs of lawless vigilantes have become more common... appearing on the nightly news as often as on the movie screen. Because the aftereffects of war, terrorism, and natural disasters so closely resemble the scenarios of zombie cinema, such images of death and destruction have all the more power to shock and terrify a population that has become otherwise jaded by more traditional horror films (p. 18).

Perhaps we watch to escape the everyday. But the narrative of zombie apocalypse is also satisfactorily horrifying because it reflects the real and the possible. As Max Brooks says,

people need a “safe place” to explore their apocalyptic worries. They can’t read stories about real plagues or nuclear war. That’s too scary. That makes them turn away. Zombie stories give people the opportunity to witness the end of the

world they've been secretly wondering about while, at the same time, allowing themselves to sleep at night because the catalyst of that end is fictional" (Barber, 2014, para. 9).

3. THE ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE AND EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

Scholars and TV producers have tied the explosion of zombie literature, film, and television not only to the terrorist attack of 9/11 (Bishop, 2009; Platts, 2013), but also to other catastrophes ushered in with the millennium: financial crisis and political uncertainty (Schneider, 2014); outbreaks of disease; and natural disasters such as tsunami and hurricane (Platts, 2013; Renner, 2012). Current events influence programming (Ambrosius & Valenzano, 2016, p. 70). But zombies have shuffled out of pop culture and into our institutions. The zombie story has been adapted by teachers, such as our keynote Glenn Stutzy, and even some Mennonite ministers (Klassen, 2015; Schulz, 2014). It has been borrowed by government agencies for various emergency-preparedness campaigns (Ackerman, 2013; David, 2014; Khan, 2011; Lubold, 2014; Moon 2012). It has formed the basis of fundraising events for not-for-profits, like Windsor's own Downtown Mission (University of Windsor, 2016a). And, of course, scholars from across the disciplines, including those at this conference, have used the zombie apocalypse as the focus of, or an analogy within, their research. The number of scholarly articles published on zombies in the past decade has more than quintupled (Drezner, 2014, p. 826). When representatives from across institutions adapt the plot, character, or themes of the same story to attract an audience or express their points of view, it may signal that story has become a dominant or *cultural narrative*.

Cultural stories perpetuate the perspectives of community spokespeople (Richardson, 1997, p. 32). One message we are consistently hearing is that of emergency preparedness. The provincial government of British Columbia transformed its Emergency Info website into a zombie survival guide (Moon, 2012). The CDC launched "Preparedness 101: Zombie Apocalypse," a public health-awareness campaign (Fraustino & Ma, 2015). The U.S. Department of Defense implemented its "Counter-Zombie Dominance" plan as a way to prepare its troops for other threats (David, 2014). A massive open-online course at the University of California, Irvine used *The Walking Dead* to introduce topics such as mathematical modelling for predicting and containing the spread of infectious diseases like

the zombie virus (Kolowich, 2013). A popular online social-work course offered by Michigan State University uses the zombie apocalypse to explore human behaviour and disaster management (Windsor, 2014). The primary theme of today's conference is emergency preparedness (University of Windsor, "Interdisciplinary Approaches to Surviving the Zombie Apocalypse," 2016b, 2016c). Several government agencies and universities have agreed on the need to prepare for different emergencies, and all have borrowed the story of zombie apocalypse to make their message more attractive to a public that may not wish to think about disaster preparedness otherwise. As Max Brooks says,

It's a lot "safer" psychologically to ruminate on a zombie disaster rather than, say, a hurricane or an earthquake induced tsunami. When confronted with real anxiety, a lot of people shut down. For them, planning for an actual crisis is just too scary, too paralyzing to think about. Make it a zombie attack, though, then there's some psychological padding. Ask someone to pan for swine flu quarantine, you'll get "that's such a downer." Ask them to plan for a zombie siege and you'll get "that'd be awesome!" (Khan, 2011, para. 9).

"Awesome" was clearly one public response to CDC's "Preparedness 101: Zombie Apocalypse" campaign. Ten minutes after the CDC launched its public-health awareness campaign, 30,000 people visited the website and crashed it (Fraustino & Ma, 2015). However, researchers report that the CDC program seems to have increased exposure to the message of emergency-preparedness, but not actually encouraged follow-up action (Fraustino & Ma, 2015; Kruvand & Bryant, 2015).

4. THE MENNONITE AND ZOMBIE APOCALYPSES: WHEN CULTURAL NARRATIVES BECOME PERSONAL

Todd Platts (2013) writes that audiences often interpret zombie popular culture "in ways not intended by its creators" (p. 551). Yet, zombie studies "largely ignores viewers and their associated experiences" (p. 556). This is one way that my field of narrative inquiry can contribute to zombie studies. Among other things, narrative inquiry explores individual response to cultural stories. As narrative theorist Jerome Bruner explains:

- the way we tell others, and ourselves, about our lives is through story (2003, pp. 210-211; 2004/1987, pp. 691-692);

- through the stories we tell, we organize memories (2004/1987, p. 694) and develop understanding of our lives (2003, p. 210);
- the stories that we choose to tell are ones we take from the “culture in which we live” (2003, p 223; cf. 2004/1987, p. 694); and
- “to be worth telling,” our stories “must run counter to expectancy, must breach a canonical script” (1996, p. 139).

In short, when we tell stories of life experience to others or ourselves, we may adapt in unexpected ways the storylines that are familiar to us, such as the story of zombie apocalypse.

I first encountered Bruner’s ideas about life as narrative when beginning to study Canadian Mennonite experience. Four hundred years of Mennonite experience in Europe has been characterized by a pattern of migration, sometimes forced by intolerance from outsiders. Retelling this history of diaspora, this recurring end of the Mennonite world, is prevalent in the writing by Canadians of Russian Mennonite heritage (Wiebe, 2010; Zacharias, 2013). The epic story of diaspora shapeshifts in some personal narratives of Mennonite writers or their fictional characters. For example, in essays and poetry written between 1987 and 2003, Di Brandt builds the paradox of how her Mennonite community, although tracing its heritage to the dissenters of the Protestant Reformation and strengthened by centuries of diaspora, now exiles the outspoken writer (Wiebe, 2008). In Miriam Toews’ novel *A Complicated Kindness* (2004), the grieving protagonist compares the departure of her family members from their repressive 1980s Mennonite town to the escape of their forebears from communist Russia (Wiebe, 2010). In *Husk* (2012), Corey Redekop’s self-proclaimed “Great Canadian Gay Mennonite Zombie Novel” (Redekop, n.d., para. 9), undead Sheldon Funk leads the escape of his fellow zombies from the medical facility in which they are imprisoned. These are only some examples of how Canadians of Mennonite heritage are consciously or unconsciously adapting a cultural narrative of diaspora to tell new and different stories, stories that focus on more immediate and personal challenges.

Have you been doing something similar with the zombie story? That is, now that the story of zombie apocalypse has become so well-known, is it starting to creep into the stories that you tell about your own life? It’s crept into mine. My unconscious latched on to the disease-preparedness message that the CDC has attached to the zombie story. My family carries a genetic mutation that puts us at high risk of developing cancer. I did not learn this until recently, but the pattern of disease and death was enough to inspire nightmares of being

chased by a serial killer when I was a teenager. Some years ago, I began to look for a new story, a new way to think about my family history. I didn't want to continue to position myself as victim. Becoming a soldier in an army of pink didn't feel right -- for me -- either. One day, I recognized that zombies had become my metaphor for cancer. Like cancer, zombies are made of once-healthy human cells that have mutated and begun to devour the living. Moreover, much like preventative surgery is a recommended treatment for families like mine, so the removal of a limb is the survival option for those bitten by zombies. Thinking through the zombie survival story in these kinds of ways offered an alternative perspective to cancer victim *or* soldier: that of cancer previvor.

I'm not alone in adapting the zombie story to rethink the personal. Based on the slog of his PhD experience, Noah Toly (2013) concludes that academics need a new metaphor for the long process from dissertation to tenure, "something that mixes endurance with the active and sometimes capricious opposition that can mar the course of an academic career. What we need is the zombie marathon" (para. 13). Toly jokes, "Some of the things that appear to be helpful in a zombie apocalypse may also be helpful to PhD students and faculty," such as "Make sure that you are on defensible territory. You don't want to find yourself out in the open in some unpopular subfield with the legions of the undead closing in" (para. 20). Like Toly, Christopher Galaver (2013) also borrows from the zombie narrative when discussing personal academic challenges, namely his efforts to teach creative-writing students to move beyond the creation of cliché characters. Galaver encourages students to *become* zombies, by which he means "open[ing] a skull" of a character and "explor[ing] all the flavors"; that is, creating characters that are real, "messy and horrific [in] ways that readers recognize" from their own lives (para. 10-11). Galaver's challenge for his students to become zombie writers; Toly's reframing of his doctoral experience as zombie marathon; and my reshaping of zombie survivor as cancer previvor: all illustrate the educational theory that "humans are storytelling organisms who ... lead storied lives.... The study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). As Leonard Webster and Patricia Mertova write, "People make sense of their lives according to the narratives available to them. Stories are constantly being restructured.... [they] are shaped by ... community narratives" (2007, p. 2). The stories so freely available to us in our culture make their way into the stories we tell about our own lives.

5. CONCLUSION

Survival theorist and professional adventurer Laurence Gonzales offers examples of Holocaust and other survivors who designate particular places to face their anxieties, such as telling their stories to groups or in writing (2012, pp. 214-215). Similarly, in *The Walking Dead*, The Governor creates a ring in which residents of the walled town of Woodbury fight the undead. Discomfiting for some, this ritual nonetheless provides a safe way for residents to face their fears. Has your weekly watching of *The Walking Dead* become a similar ritual, providing a place to locate, or even confront, anxiety? Are you unconsciously or even consciously preparing for emergency when you watch *The Walking Dead* or jog with the *Zombies Run!* app (Sample, 2013)? Or does zombie entertainment simply provide welcome escape from the daily grind? Does thinking through the zombie story engender new perspectives on health, work, or other personal challenges? Or does the zombie story provide a trendy way to hook the audience of your presentations and reports? Perhaps you see yourself in some of these expressions of the popular interest in zombie apocalypse. Perhaps you have other ideas. Whatever your response, it's worth noting that the story of zombie apocalypse moved to the mainstream only in the past 15 years. It is not a story we inherited the way Canadian Mennonites inherited a 400-year old narrative of diaspora. We have witnessed the genesis of a cultural narrative, watching as zombies shuffled out of horror film to spread into the different stories we tell about living in the 2010s. Exploring these different and individual stories forms a potential new area of inquiry within the field of zombie studies.

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