



Medicine in Television Series

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The Walking Dead and the Collective Imaginary on Epidemics

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If Mad Men and Breaking Bad are the two series that have taken the cable channel AMC to such great heights as its competitor, Premium HBO, this post-apocalyptic tale based on a Robert Kirkman comic depicting a world populated by zombies is the show that has brought it audiences in the millions, greater even than many free-to-air productions. Premiered in 2010 with over five million viewers, it has managed to multiply this figure threefold in its recent seasons, approaching fifteen million viewers. Such a favorable reception enabled AMC to try its luck with a sequel set in Los Angeles, Fear the Walking Dead, a strategy that so far has shown fairly good returns.

Though series such as Mad Men, Breaking Bad, Fargo and True Detective scooped the major international awards, in the light of data from countries that publish audience levels, The Walking Dead is the most-watched series on cable TV. The same occurs in Spain. Is this a further example of viewers' preference for action and violence over complex and convoluted storylines? Perhaps, but the truth is that the series tries to go beyond the horror-series stereotype, and aims to analyze how far human beings will go when struggling to survive. The Walking Dead has not just earned viewers' applause, but also garnered academic interest. Theses, monographs and dozens of articles in science journals focus on the walking dead and its groups of survivors. Under the umbrella of such success, zombies and the undead are once again clamoring for attention, since The Walking Dead is another link in the chain of audiovisual products focused on such figures. In these pages, we highlight some of the cinematic milestones related to the living dead, their close relationship to the collective imaginary on epidemics and how this tradition crystallizes in the series, along with its peculiarities.

Epiphany of the undead

In 1943, Jacques Tourneur directed the film *I Walked with a Zombie*, shortly after publication of *Voodoo Death*,¹ a foundational article, based on ethnographic sources, regarding the physiological mechanisms related to voodoo death. The living dead and psychosomatic medicine were broached in a centuries-old debate on the capacity of witchcraft and spellcasting to summon and condemn souls to wander the earth. An example is the myth of the Santa Compañía ("Holy Company"), a procession of the dead that winds through the woods of Galicia, prompting villagers to lock their doors after sunset and erect *cruceiros* (calvary crosses) at crossroads to exorcise them.

Tourneur managed to conjure the mystery of the border between life and death, the intimate relation between reality and psychotherapy, by employing visual ellipsis prodigiously and elegantly regarding a beautiful undead woman. He knew how to visually represent the mystery of the Santería religion in a clinic for psycho-neurotic disorders. Prior to and even more ably than in

¹ Written by Walter B. Cannon in the magazine *American Anthropologist*, in 1942.

Ingmar Bergman's *The Magician* (1958), he depicted the contrast between the beliefs and cultural practices of magic, and medical rationalism. This is because, in contrast to the Swedish director, he speaks of the present, not of a figure of the past.

The undead, lost and wandering souls, form part of an ancient collective cultural imaginary, which drew new life from the romanticism of the Brothers Grimm and folklorists, Washington Irving's *Tales of the Alhambra* (1832), many of Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer's *Leyendas* (1854–1864) and the recovery of Oriental folklore.² Bishop (2010) considers, erroneously, that zombies in film correspond to highly idiosyncratic aspects of twentieth-century American culture. He does not take into account the genealogy of the undead in European literature and film. Spirits that become flesh populate stories retold beside the hearth, while the wind moans outside and rain batters the shutters. At the height of positivism, Allan Kardec (1804–1869) wished to bring them to life. Clustered around the lamp, believers invoked their presence, drafts without a source wafted the curtains, and the living were carried off into trance by spirits. In *The Canterville Ghost* (1887), Oscar Wilde wrote ironically about Americans who made fun of British ghosts, and in *Dracula* (1897), Bram Stoker invited the undead into Victorian drawing rooms as if they were an epidemic vector. Yet filmic epiphany of the undead should be attributed to *Nosferatu* (1922), by F.W. Murnau. It is a palimpsest of Bram Stoker's work, and an extraordinary visual recreation blending expressionism and neo-Romanticism. *Nosferatu* emerges from his coffin in the bilges of a barquentine swarming with rats, on which no souls remain alive, to alight in a romantic Bremen. Rats, sailing ships, quarantine, epidemics... After the First World War, the deadly "Spanish flu" revived a fear of the plague in the western cultural imagination, a scenario in which rats arrived by sea in the holds of ships and si-

lently invaded the cities, carrying the Black Death. The Flying Dutchman, a ghost ship, still haunts a collective imaginary that builds on the experience of sailing ships adrift which, an epidemic having killed both crew and passengers, roam the seas at the mercy of wind and wave endlessly seeking peace. A barquentine is likewise the improbable mode of transport in the 1940s by which the protagonist of *I Walked with a Zombie* reaches his destination in the British West Indies (a visual homage to Murnau?). This ship, however, is not plagued by any rats, undead or epidemic, since the witchcraft is on the island and forms part of a world that clashes with the rationalism of the clinics.

A cinematography of wandering souls

Murnau's and Tourneur's visual magic has perhaps faded over time and from the tapestries of memory. After the Second World War, film recovered Dracula the vampire, but not zombies. It is tempting to imagine that Tourneur raised the bar so high in terms of sophistication and narrative elegance that later creators dared not follow in his tracks. Yet the British film company Hammer generated extraordinary interest in "Draculas", Christopher Lee playing the role, in which he explored the vampire's sexual and erotic dimensions. Between Murnau's neo-Romanticism, *Nosferatu*'s monstrousness and Christopher Lee's Gothic yet very British elegance, there was, however, narrative and visual continuity. And so it was, until in the year of May 1968, with Vietnam escalating and race riots erupting in Pittsburgh following Martin Luther King's assassination, an unknown filmmaker named George R. Romero directed *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). In the midst of the Cold War, decaying corpses return to life, stepping, like Lazarus, from shattered tombs in all their rotting glory. For reasons never fully explained, they make the same gestures as *Nosferatu*, and feed on the living until their brains are destroyed.

² Lafcadio Hearn (1904) saw this in Japanese culture. Some of his stories evolved into a film masterpiece on the undead, the episode "The Woman of the Snow" in the marvelous *Kwaidan* (literally "strange stories", 1964), by Masaki Kobayashi (1964).



If, in *Nosferatu*, the narrative makes a link between the plague and vampires, playing on the cultural imaginary, epidemics were not perceived as a threat in 1968, but the apocalyptic context of radioactivity certainly was. Dracula's elegance, midway between bourgeois and aristocratic, from Bela Lugosi to Christopher Lee, and his capacity for manipulating social relations to reaffirm his own power and feed on the blood of the living, is absent from these putrefying, twisted, bleeding and dirty corpses that move by mere instinct. Yet precedents exist, such as representations of Mr. Hyde in the successive film versions of Stevenson's novel. However, Hyde is our hidden ego, lacking feeling, cold and calculating, and violent to boot, while the walking dead are beasts in a strict sense. They move due to an electrical instinct and only respond to simple stimuli such as noise, or the expectation of flesh.

Night of the Living Dead could be classed as a docudrama about the first night of the apocalypse, perhaps not too far removed from the Biblical tale, but with millions of Lazarus figures wandering the earth. The story, which falls within the context of fears that were reflected in US cinematography in the 1950s, highlights the human species' practical capability for survival and its absolute dependence on technology. Meanwhile, it claims as its own the phrase *homo homini lupus* ("A man is a wolf to another man") when trying to survive among supposed equals, in spite of the contention strategies of the state's armed forces, which quickly break down into the violation of any notion of right and the total dominance of violence.

Night of the Living Dead, filmed in dirty, gloomy and sinister black and white, when color was marching toward absolute hegemony of the medium, is a cultural product of the Cold War. Here, the plague's etiology is not taken into consideration, though the living, cannibalized by the dead, once dead, join their predators. If Victorian vampires abducted their victims and the

curse turned them into waxy damsels or anemic youths, Romero's walking dead are rotting Lazarus types who take over the world.³

Now enthroned in the pantheon of popular culture thanks to Romero's genius and the everyday life he portrayed to depict the tragedy, the undead have become an icon of postmodern society. That society has also digested the phenomenon, once more imbuing it with meaning and, to a certain extent, shedding any critical dimension it had of late-twentieth-century north-American society. Yet many studies on the subject reference specific aspects of the political discourse inherent in zombie film and TV. *Night of the Living Dead* became a cult film and the departure point for a genre that would overflow the borders of the film medium to invade graphic novels, including that which inspired the series we are looking at, *The Walking Dead*, in the early twenty-first century.

On plagues, epidemics and other calamities

Epidemics, since the metaphoric reference to the plague in *Nosferatu*, have been a subject less visited than others in the entirety of the cinematography focused on the field of health, disease and healthcare in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, we can highlight several films for their quality or their success. Here are various examples. Elia Kazan's *Panic in the Streets* (1950) is nowadays an interesting realist tale, likewise packed with metaphors and symbolism, bearing substantial ethnographic and historical value. It traces an epidemiological investigation into a classic outbreak in the port of New Orleans, originating from a human vector. Almost half a century later, *Outbreak* (1995) reflects the technical response and intervention protocols concerning an outbreak of hemorrhagic fever of a viral origin entering the US, a theme covered with more solvency in *Contagion* (2011). In *Panic in the Streets* (1950), the refer-

³ Romero's fable has several sequels, in which the filmmaker used the walking dead to speak of survival in a capitalist society, such as in *Return of the Living Dead* (1978), where the living are entrapped in those cathedrals of consumerism, sprawling north-American shopping malls.

ence point is the plague and prevention; in the other two, the emphasis is on capacity for technological response to epidemic outbreaks. *Contagion* also stresses the importance of investigation in the streets, an aspect that was portrayed in the TV production *And the Band Played On* (1993), centered on investigations leading to the discovery of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

Before *Outbreak*, and in the context of irrational fears of the Cold War with its epidemics of UFO sightings, to which Spanish weekly *El Caso* paid riveted attention, Robert Wise's *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), seemingly an exercise in science fiction so as to remain politically correct, highlighted the problem of biological weapons and their more than probable confinement to installations on the margins of citizens' view and control. Its most interesting aspect is its realistic portrayal of operational protocols in what were probably the first laboratories specialized in studying uncontrolled epidemic outbreaks. At the time of screening, no collective awareness existed, much less any "moral panic" (Garland, 2008), regarding any epidemic that was not bacterial in nature. That same year saw a minor cholera outbreak in Spain. In the quarter-century between *The Andromeda Strain* and *Outbreak*, epidemic risk from a virus became a more patent threat, albeit in limited circles, such as in the cases of the Marburg and Ebola viruses. This is a new model for limiting and curtailing risks, based on violent outbreaks, but modeled by political and rhetorical discourses on security. Despite its early confinement to specific behaviors and risk groups, HIV/AIDS signified the definitive awareness-raising on the coupling of epidemics and globalization, stoked even further in recent years by alerts regarding bird flu, influenza A virus (N1H1) and the latest Ebola virus outbreak.

Yet apart from these films in which collective terror arises from the "outbreak" of disease, the idea of the apocalypse associated to an epidemic is receiving unexpected film and TV development

via the emergence of the figure of the undead. It is not by chance that *Blade* and *The Walking Dead* have evolved from two graphic novels in which viral infection is the major cause of the apocalypse, in a context in which the threat of biological war generated after 9/11 has fed into popular fears.

The three film franchises of *Blade* (1998) and its sequel, *Blade: the Series* (2006), stay within the classic blueprint of the vampire genre, though with more gore, a lot more sex and a production design that systematically employs the present world as a referent for the underworld of the vampire minority. A recent trend, illustrated mainly by various TV series, is to treat the living dead and vampires as a minority who manage to coexist with humans. This is the case of *True Blood* (2008–2014), *Being Human* (2008), *The Vampire Diaries* (2009–) and its spin-off *The Originals* (2013–), among others, but especially the caustic British miniseries *In the Flesh* (2013). This BBC series accepts the hypothesis of apocalyptic viral infection, which it defines ironically as "partially dead syndrome" (PDS) enabling, on one hand, an interesting treatment on managing a chronic disease, and on the other, a highly critical dissertation on the tolerance of difference in current British society.

Cannibal undead and human assassins

When the channel AMC announced the screening of *The Walking Dead*, critics were aware that among the series creators were Frank Darabont, considered one of Hollywood's best scriptwriters; Greg Nicotero, the prestigious special effects creator,⁴ and Gale Anne Hurd, a successful producer. Another guarantee was that the idea and scripts originated from the authors of the homonymous graphic novel created by Robert Kirkman. This roll call meant the series would likely have a certain quality within a television panorama that had changed profoundly in recent years. The series has introduced new narrative languages in

⁴ Nicotero's first large project was, in fact, on a George G. Romero film, *Day of the Dead* (1985). He is considered one of the heirs of the tradition of creators of strange creatures, like Ray Harryhausen and especially Tom Savini, who he trained with.



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relation to film, and what is more important, ones accessible to world audiences through the Internet, allowing broad swathes of viewers access to the production of genre that, in film, would be more on the fringe.

The Walking Dead's genealogy no doubt includes both *Night of the Living Dead* and *28 Days Later* (2002), but with nuances. In *Night of the Living Dead*, the cause of the dead's resurrection is never clarified, but they are dead, while in *28 Days Later* and in *The Walking Dead* the scripts mention an infection of a more viral than bacterial nature, which means that the zombies are not "resuscitated" but "transformed", as with the idea of Partially Dead Syndrome in *In the Flesh*. Nevertheless, representation of the undead in *The Walking Dead* uses referents such as *Night of the Living Dead* rather than the image of a waxy adolescent as in the British series (closer to the adolescent vampires in *The Twilight Saga*, 2008–2012). The series dramaturgy is therefore far removed from the idea of a chronic illness, whether degenerative or not, but rather placed in a setting much closer to the original model of the resuscitated corpse, matching a culture that systematically practices thanatopraxis and embalming before burial.

Even so, by opting for transmission through biting, it harks back not only to vampires, but also to the cultural imaginary of rabies contagion, a topic that had significant cultural impact in the early twentieth century. It also evokes dementia leading to animalization, whose most obvious references in history are those associated with late-stage syphilis infection, or with alcoholism and epilepsy. However, the series goes beyond this, since it deals with a type of clinical decerebration, which governs maintenance of the most primitive phylogenetic structures in *homo sapiens* and which, curiously, is cured by physically decerebrating the zombie.

The path followed by *The Walking Dead* therefore clashes with the current evolution of the vampire genre, centering on post-adolescent bodies, or on versions that accentuate virility to a greater or lesser degree, such as Wesley Snipes in the saga *Blade*, or Amazons like Lenor Varela in *Blade II*, far removed from the classic manly style of Christopher Lee's *Dracula*.

Although in the classic representation of the zombie in *The Walking Dead*, the referents to the Paris-based theater of Grand Guignol (1897–1962) are fairly clear, the series aesthetic, in faded, slightly dirty tones, under gloomy skies, tries to reinforce, at least in terms of landscape, a certain documentary air. This is probably because it is dealing with landscape. If in *Night of the Living Dead* the protagonists are the living dead, this is not the case of *28 Days Later* or *The Walking Dead*.

According to García Novo (1989; 8–9) the term *epidemiai* had been interpreted like "visits overseas", though he emphasizes that the title probably refers to "being caught unprepared". Both definitions correspond very exactly to the fundamental themes in *The Walking Dead*. On one hand, the crisis the epidemic brings, in this case in its actual meaning, is skillfully narrated in the first episode. The plague surprises the protagonist, Rick Grimes, while he is convalescent in hospital, and from this unforeseen situation the plot arc for the first season develops, focused on the search for a vaccine and cure, leading them unsuccessfully to the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta. This first season, in reality a six-episode miniseries, is the most illuminating of all, because it illustrates the idea of the crisis, the unimaginable and, meanwhile, the hopeful itinerary of the quest for health of the founding group.

From the second season onward, the tone changes, on the assumption it is an out-of-control epidemic and that the forces that might have halted it have failed, leaving no alternative. In view of the infection's characteristics, "clinical or therapeutic" solutions are going to involve forceful responses. For this reason, in the third season, Carol applies euthanasia and amputates a leg of one of the members of the group to stop the gangrene that has developed from an infected bite. At the time of writing in its fourth season, the duo made up of soldier Abraham Ford and Dr. Porter are offered as a hope for a cure, an argument for survival.

It is not the apocalypse caused by the "partially dead" and the search for a cure which have been key to the popular and academic success

of this series, but the manner of portraying the development of those fighting against the undead. In most apocalyptic series (and in films such as *The Road*, an adaptation of the novel by Cormac McCarthy), as well as in the series we are looking at, the “good guys”, that is, the survivors of the human race who are fighting to save that heritage, evolve from perspectives we might call “democratic American” toward radically totalitarian and neo-fascist attitudes. Their view of the undead is fundamentally racist, with a seemingly unstoppable crescendo of violence. All of this leads to a collapse of values, generally justified as a form of safeguarding family values, in terms that are difficult to comprehend in Europe. In *The Walking Dead*, the characters—especially Rick Grimes—evolve toward often clinical levels of paranoia. This could also be interpreted as what is known as a “psychic epidemic”, taking on elements of classic descriptions of *folie à deux*, or shared psychosis, as seems evident in Rick’s and Carol’s attitudes in the fifth season. So not only do we have the cannibal undead but also the transformation of the “good guys” into a band of serial killers whose paranoia urges them even to kill each other. So the play between the hell represented by “the other” and one’s internal hell is one of the more fascinating keys to the series.

The storyline resulting from this type of “psychic epidemic” highlights the massive use of military technology, emphasizing the high degree of identification of broad sectors of North American culture with the fetishism of firearms, including the crossbow. It appears this scenario is often presented cynically: surviving at all costs as a payoff for literally becoming killers, or, if you prefer, modern-day gunslingers in a new film genre that has infused the old forms of the classic western with fresh blood.

Marta Allué (2008) has written a great deal about survival in terms that directly contradicts its mode of representation in *The Walking Dead*. The plot line of the series, based on concentrationary literature and on a careful ethnography, is that survival is the product of social and cultural learnings, even in situations of maximum violence, such as surviving in extermination camps. Survival, defined as a practice, does not lead to

any kind of pathology, but to the deployment of skills and the testing of these in order to resist. The root difference is in that it is not necessarily “the apparently strong” who survive, a nuclear argument when designing the protagonists of some series (in the case concerning us, Rick), but those who know how best to adapt to daily survival without necessarily being leaders or heroes. The best is not the one who dies, but the one who reaches the end. Yet this character is distrustful, given that “he comes to know what he has done”. Allué does not base her argument’s mainstay on a moral Christian model, a stance that would be overwhelmingly present in the heroes’ ideology and in the idea of redemption through death, another common theme in series scripts. To a certain extent, surviving means going unnoticed, but in *The Walking Dead*, if you do so, you do not survive.

The survival narratives that appear in the series signify a marked contrast. So, in some characters’ makeup, especially in the development of the protagonist Rick Grimes and in the moral coolness of his adolescent son, Carl Grimes, both appear as heroes, though often ruthless. Compared to them, Carol’s logic and common sense are much more closely aligned to the survival model Allué describes. At a certain point, she is forced to execute a girl who has become mad, just because she has gone mad, and under the circumstances, she endangers the other group members. Carol’s character is perhaps the most interesting. She represents a survival praxis based on systematic observation of the facts and on rational decision-making in extreme circumstances. This leads to her being banished for applying a measure that was inevitable in a situation without alternatives. The contrast between Rick and Carol, carefully managed by the scriptwriters, also links highly idiosyncratic US cultural contexts, where the weight of moral and religious discourse in the media underlines much of the scriptwriters’ work.

Wild men in the looking glass

Two decades ago, the anthropologist Roger Bartra (1992) published *Wild Men in the Look-*



ing Glass. The Mythic Origins of European Otherness, a compelling study on the imaginary of otherness in Medieval Europe, in which the endless greenwoods hid chimera and mysterious beings, wild men and women, and monstrous creatures. In the vastness of the Medieval forest, cleared land for farming and cities were spaces of light. In *The Walking Dead* –in contrast to the intensely urban *28 Days Later*, and with the exception of the first season– woods, fields and copses straddling abandoned highways and railway lines are the setting for the walking dead. Their transformation turns them into beings who live in nature, occasionally shut into houses or warehouses they do not know how to escape from, and they walk day and night in search of what, we suppose, is their food. Instead of deserted cities, fields of undead. Replacing the idea of quarantine, the exclusion of the savages, or shutting the pathological into institutions, the survivors, the sane in *The Walking Dead*, must live enclosed. They live barricaded in refuges, in small redoubts, where they can dig in, condemned to foray out to replenish their water supply or stock up on food, moving outdoors at risk, like the Spanish troops holed up in army blockhouses in the *Battle of Annual*, surrounded by the hordes of the Rif. The world is no longer human: nature, the undead included, have taken over, and as if it were a new Middle Ages, the refuges are surrounded by theoretically impregnable walls, or, in the greatest of paradoxes, prison and its prisoners become a space of freedom.

The play of contrasts between the dangers of the epidemic that govern the natural world and the need to build spaces of exclusion is interesting from a comparative viewpoint. The typology is suggestive in itself: in the second season, the farmstead; in the third, the free prison compared to the Governor's enslaved community, the railway station and its warehouses; and in the latest season, urban utopia, with links to the Franceville in Jules Verne's *The Begum's Fortune* (1879), is seen as hygienic, as a blueprint for civil society which the group of barbarous survivors who accompany Rick and Carol must assimilate. They reach it through a kind of initiatory journey that is the result of choosing to take the sergeant

and the doctor (once again, the hope of a cure) to their destination.

We do not know how the series will evolve in future. The latest season has focused mainly on the almost impossible rebuilding of civility for those who have been stripped of their theoretical humanity on their journey toward survival. On their odyssey through nature, their paranoia and profound distrust in human beings themselves have begun to spread like another epidemic. This situation stems partly from their incapacity to manage resources other than those of technological society. They are not country people; they depend on what remains in supermarkets. Even domestic animals no longer exist. Yet there is always gas for vehicles, and ammo to load the magazines of their assault rifles.

Conclusions

It is not a foregone conclusion that *The Walking Dead*, despite many filmic qualities, will join that cult group of series of the last decade. There is a lot of competition. Academic production on the series is in itself surprising, given that most of the elements it uses stem from a well-founded cultural genealogy, already dealt with in film, the roots of which delve at least as deep as European Medieval cultures. Even the plague, as such, is directly linked to the imaginary of modern and Medieval plagues, and the undead, to the living dead that populate folklore. Nevertheless, millions of viewers worldwide avidly watch the episodes as if zombies were a novelty. Such articles adventure numerous hypotheses, but perhaps it is simply the "it works" factor of audiovisual products –such a hard factor to define.

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