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THE WALKING DEAD AS CONSERVATIVE CULTURAL CRITIQUE

Killing zombies can be understood as a form of ritual sacrifice with two purposes: To reinforce the solidarity of the survivor community, and second, to perform the sacrifice of a victim who by virtue of innocence relieves the community of its internally divisive tensions. The first function, in American zombie fiction, is routine enough to be considered cliché. The unity of the group is manifest foremost in its collective defense against a common enemy. The second is no less significant, but only takes place occasionally and in special conditions. One finds clues to the meaning of both in consideration of this question: Why is it necessary to kill zombies with what seems to be excessive violence (e.g., hacking, slicing, gouging)?

The focus is the American television series, *The Walking Dead*, and argues that Christian sacrifice and the restoration of traditional marriage are important themes. In effect, the series functions as conservative cultural critique. This is contrary to the popular assumption that the world of the zombie apocalypse is synonymous with the collapse of traditional social structures and systems of meaning. Here the opposite conclusion is considered. The ritual of sacrifice serves to re-affirm traditional institutions and to reconstruct the post-apocalyptic world on the basis of a conception of marriage restored to its "traditional" form. *The Walking Dead* is thus a form of cultural revanchism masquerading as a fantasy of destruction.

Extreme Violence and the Sacrifice of Innocents

A clue to this trajectory is found in the nature of violence. In the television series, zombies are not merely dispatched, coolly and efficiently, but killed with a violence that goes beyond what standard zombie physiology would seem to require. They are hacked and stabbed, not once but repeatedly, and sometimes in highly ritualized settings (e.g., torch-illuminated arenas) whose purpose is to excite and titillate an audience. Could the reason be anger, or even the desire for bloodthirsty revenge? Revenge killings function in many societies as a mechanism for maintaining social solidarity. For revenge to be present as a motivating factor it is necessary, but not sufficient, for the perpetrator of the vengeful act to feel that he or she has been wronged somehow by the victim. This is personal vengeance of the sort Francis Bacon described as "wild justice." What might be termed "vicarious vengeance," on the other hand, is directed at the person or people who stand in for the person or group that is believed to have wronged one's own community. If it is vengeance of this kind that is on display in *The Walking Dead*, could that explain the extra measure of violence that killing zombies often requires?

In the anthropological literature, killing in order to restore balance between structurally opposed social groups (or subgroups) is a common phenomenon. Barth's study of the Swat Valley Pathans in Pakistan is a case in point (Barth

1966; see also Lindholm 1982). Reciprocal violence between groups can go on for years as members in turn kill and are killed by their counterparts. Then there are the Waorani (formerly known as the "Auca") of Amazonian Ecuador, whose internecine violence --- mostly between Waorani subgroups -- threatened until recently to decimate the tribe (Robarchek & Robarchek 2002). The process is vicarious because the killer and his victim usually stand in for the groups or subgroups of which they are members. Violence is experienced by the victims on behalf of (and therefore vicariously) the groups they represent. The origins of the animosity may be long forgotten. What counts now is the violence itself, and the social calculation of being temporarily one up in the cycle of reciprocal killing.

There is a similarity to violence against zombies. Here, too, personal vengeance is notably absent; rarely, in fact, does the zombie-killer know the zombie, and when he does this makes for a certain pathos, as in the first episode of *The Walking Dead*. In the series' first episode, when a man tries (but fails) to shoot his zombie-wife, she eventually ends up biting and killing their son, and the husband eventually goes insane. Presumably this is intended to suggest the moral dilemma in killing someone who is known and loved, and (more importantly) to foreshadow the child sacrifice that later serves as means for reconstructing social solidarity on the basis of reproductively fertile marriage. But for the most part "walkers" (the term used in the series for zombies) are not known to the people who stab them, run over them, or decapitate them. In this respect they resemble the victims of vicarious violence in tribal societies. But victims of violence in this sense must stand in for a group if the violence against them is vicarious in the sense described above. Do zombies qualify?

In one sense, of course, the answer must be negative: Zombies do not simply stand in for groups of other zombies. Killing them is no different from killing any other dangerous predatory creature. But the fact that zombie-killing goes beyond mechanical expediency or the need for self-preservation is what is at issue. In other words, a zombie that is stabbed fifty times, and is already "dead," doesn't have to be stabbed fifty more times in order to get the job done. And yet we find violence of this magnitude commonplace in *The Walking Dead*. The "extra" violence, as it were, could be the direct result of the fact that zombies stand in for someone else -- and possibly for the survivor group itself.

In his studies of ritual sacrifice, Girard (1976, 2007) showed that victims of group violence often function as "scapegoats" for the group itself. A society previously held together by structures of differentiation and mechanism of retaliation, finds its viability threatened by escalating vengeance of all against all, aggravated by famine, pestilence, or disorder. In order to mitigate internal tensions and the threat of intra-group violence, a group will select -- or someone actually volunteer -- to serve as a receptacle for the group's own pent-up hatred (see also Volkan 2010). The victim is then sacrificed with elaborate ceremonial violence. Something about the scapegoat's marginality makes the execution appear fair to the perpetrators. The scapegoat may then be refashioned as noble sacrifice, even a savior figure, since the violence against him worked to cap the escalation of violence and bring peace. Then the group returns to homeostatic balance -- at least for a while. If this were true in the case of zombies, it would have to be

shown, first, that zombies stand represent the group; second, that tensions within the group threaten its internal solidarity; and third, that killing the zombies distracts the group from its internally divisive tendencies and provide a respite from the cycle of violence that otherwise might threaten to destroy the group.

Not all zombies serve equally well for this purpose. Random zombies converted from ordinary adults – usually because they have been bitten by other zombies -- serve as the mundane mechanism of sacrifice. Killing them with wanton violence confirms the social solidarity of the survivor group. But ideal victims, the one whose violent extermination best serve the solidarity-reinforcing function of sacrifice, must (if the Girardian hypothesis is correct) be defined innocent even through their status as zombies makes killing them necessary. Here one recalls the child “Sophia” in the second season of *The Walking Dead*. Sophia is a little girl who wanders off and is later discovered in a barn full of zombies who must all be shot, assembly-line fashion, as they emerge from inside. She is now a zombie, too, but visually bears only a few marks of her transformation. Sophia is still more childlike in appearance than zombie, thus making her the ideal sacrifice on behalf of the group. She is still, partly at least, a member of the survivor group, and as her mother looks on, we see the group respond to her presence both with dread and loving recognition. An innocent victim always makes the best sacrifice. The shot is fired by the leader of the group, a former sheriff, and this serves two functions. First, the sheriff acts in the role high priest to perform the group’s most perfect sacrifice, its own child. Second, it serves to solidify the group, which had, up this point, been on the verge of disintegration through competition and alienation among its members. The group now shares participation in a sacrificial killing – they are all to blame – and the internal divisions diminish in due proportion.

Now, an interesting question concerns the mental status of the walking dead. As we have seen, the sacrificial victim that functions most effectively to reinforce the social solidarity of the group is someone the group actually knows (or knew) when the victim was still a living and conscious human being. Zombies generally lack these features. Zombies do not have memories; they have limited cognitive processing abilities; and they appear to retain no trace of their previous identities. Does that make them less effective as sacrifices, or would the sacrificial act have been improved if the zombies still possessed rudimentary awareness?

The Walking Dead actually spends some time pondering this question. Take, for instance, a scene in the protected city presided over by the menacing figure of “the governor.” His weak-willed assistant is performing an experiment to see if a carefully conditioned human being can remember who he is after he has “turned,” that is, become a zombie. The patient, in this case, is an old man who is dying of prostate cancer, an untreatable condition given the primitive medical capabilities of the survivor community. In the days before his death, the doctor presents him with a series of visual and auditory cues, training him to respond by simply raising his hand. The idea is that if these simple mnemonic devices survive zombie transformation, it will prove that zombie consciousness consists of something other than the compulsion to eat human flesh. It will also give the governor hope that his daughter – already a zombie, but kept hidden in a locked

closet, can be cured – something the governor himself needs if he is to retain any trace of his own humanity.

The experiment is cut short when “Andrea,” one of the survivors, kills the patient with a stab to the head. He has just died, and the doctor is beginning his experiment at the moment the patient shows signs of coming back to life as a zombie. Andrea is afraid he will escape his fetters, and ends the experiment prematurely. Not long after, another survivor – Michonne, one of the few black characters to survive more than a few episodes – kills the governor’s daughter when she finds the zombie-girl in the governor’s apartment. What have these incidents to do with each other? As we have seen, acts of violence that goes beyond merely exterminating the zombies affirms the solidarity of the group by stressing their difference from the beings they kill, and also (most crucially) by confirming them members of the same group. But communal vengeance is not necessarily sufficient to create the cohesiveness the group requires, especially when that quality is constantly put at risk by the selfish designs of individual group members. Vengeance might be enough among the Swat Pathans of Pakistan or the Waorani of jungle Ecuador, but it is not enough in a drama as thoroughly steeped in Christian values as the average television zombie show. *The Walking Dead* requires stronger sacramental medicine. Vengeance is always incomplete, according to the Christian view, because it is never completely fulfilling.

To be rendered complete violence must transform itself into the sacrifice of innocence. More than that, the sacrificial victim must resemble the people who are scarifying her. “The true distinction,” as Girard puts it, “between the sacrificeable and the non-sacrificeable is never clearly articulated” (1996: 83). That is probably why Sophia is not hacked or bludgeoned, but shot cleanly with a bullet to the head. She is “like us” and her execution must take place with a minimum of violence. Sophia’s killing marks the transcendence of vengeance through the redemptive logic of sacrifice and into a sacramental rite that can restore the institution of marriage.

How do we know that the sacrifice of innocence serves the purpose Girard said it should – that is, to prop up the social solidarity of a group whose internal tensions threaten to destroy it? Consider the social dynamics of the survivor group. Up to this point the group has lost members and its leader, the sheriff, has barely withstood a powerful challenge to his authority. They have lost their place of refuge – a farmhouse – after it is overrun by a “herd” of walkers. The survival of the group is in doubt. Killing more zombies will not exorcize the demons that haunt the group and threaten it with disintegration. Something else is needed, and the solution is in keeping with the traditional Christian view of sacrifice. Recall the moment, not long before Sophia is killed, when the sheriff finds himself in an abandoned Christian church. He and his fellow searchers are drawn to the church because somehow the church bell is still ringing every hour. (They later discover it is on an automatic timer.) They do not find Sophia – she has already been bitten and turned into a zombie – but they do find a large crucifix within the church, and Rick prays to the image of Christ. This is the only time in the first four seasons of the television series we observe a major character involved in an act of Christian prayer. The fact that Christ has been revealed in

this episode, and as part of a request to redeem childhood innocence (in the character of Sophia,) suggests that the two are related symbolically. In other words, the young girl and Christ are perfectly innocent, and their sacrifice means more than simply a restoration of group solidarity. Indeed, that is the whole point: vengeance as a cure for declining social solidarity can only take the group so far before the powerful logic of Christian redemptive sacrifice – the sacrifice of the perfect innocent -- is required to fully redeem the solidarity of the group on whose behalf the sacrifice is made. Killing, but not vengeful killing, does restore group solidarity, and it is the logic of Christian sacrifice that serves as the mechanism.

Forgiveness and the Restoration of Marriage as an American Institution

In *The Walking Dead*, forgiveness between husband and wife turns out to be critical to the restoration of marriage as an institution. In fact, marital reconciliation – in a traditional form – is a fundamental objective of the zombie genre in general. This might seem surprising. Despite decades of critique and the decline of matrimony as a social practice, the conservative Christian ideal of marriage persists. *The Walking Dead* presents the case for its restoration. But how can zombies perform this function? Zombies themselves are notably devoid of matrimonial features or sexual inclinations. In their standard cinematic form, zombies cannot kill or be killed without extreme violence. To kill, a zombie must bite, although whether or not it can orally ingest its victim is unclear; some zombies do not possess any body parts or appendages below the level of the neck. Even when zombies are still in possession of whole bodies -- with the ability to walk, run, and use their hands -- they remain incapable of sexual violence. There is no such thing as a male zombie with an erection, or, apparently, a zombie who can commit rape. Nor do we find female zombies described as victims of sexual assault. Whatever else zombies may do, or have done to them, sexual crimes are notable by their absence. If David Schneider (1980) is correct, and sexual intercourse is the key symbol of American kinship, then it is hard to see how zombies can provide motive force to the institution of marriage.

In the television series, a small group of people led by a former sheriff make their way in and out of Atlanta and through the Georgia countryside as they try to escape the walkers. The political organization of the sheriff's group is interesting. It begins as an ostensibly democratic body with decisions reached through consensus. As it gets smaller -- there are many deaths through zombie depredation and attacks by other human beings -- the democratic forms wither until finally the sheriff declares (with his face aglow from a campfire) that the group is no longer a democracy, but a patriarchy led by one man (i.e., the sheriff.) The series suggests that reduced to its essence, a kind of primitive patriarchy, society can be rebuilt. But how?

Earlier, the sheriff and his wife, Laurie, had been separated at the beginning of the zombie apocalypse. When he finds her, she is already with a group that includes the sheriff's deputy. Rick (the sheriff) does not know that Laurie and deputy have been sexually involved with each other, and it comes as a surprise to both when Rick turns up having survived the zombie-packed streets. The deputy is

not pleased, and over the course of several episodes gradually hatches a plot to eliminate his rival. But Rick kills him first – and then kills him again when he (the deputy) turns into a zombie. All seems right with the world. And yet we find a troubling disquiet in the relationship between Rick and Laurie. He cannot forgive her for her sexual indiscretion, even though it was committed in ignorance of his own survival. She cannot forgive him for killing her former lover, and for not forgiving her. Their marriage formally redeemed, the two are more estranged than ever, and this (the series suggests) puts at risk the restoration of society in the post-apocalyptic world. And yet the fact that Laurie is pregnant (with whose child is not clear) provides scope for marital repair.

Marital redemption, it turns out, is a function the zombies perform. They make forgiveness possible by enabling husband and wife to restore marital sexuality and its approved product, childbirth, to their traditional positions as core constituents of American social structure. Rick and Laurie are forced, slowly but surely, to recognize their marital relationship as central to the survival of the group. They are, after all, the sole married couple in the survivor group. And for a social structure defined by marital sexuality to be restored, Rick and Laurie must prove that marriage works. There is no way to do that in the American cultural scheme of things without the birth of a child.

The contrast to productive marital sexuality is the zombie. Zombies are perverse because they privilege the alimentary over the sexual, and thus subvert the primary symbolic importance of marital sexuality and childbirth. Pregnancy and birth are not alimentary processes. They stand in opposition to a zombie morality that defines action solely through consumption – that is, through proper or improper ingestion. But that is not to say that the two symbols are always clearly opposed. As in any symbolic system, the near approach of opposing signs requires each to distinguish itself to keep the boundary between them intact. Sometimes, in fact, it is by deliberately juxtaposing radically divergent symbols that the preferred or dominant symbol receives motivating power. Pregnancy/birth is a case in point. As an extension of the primary symbol of marital sexuality, childbirth must be maintained as a distinct point of meaning, in order to preserve marriage as the fundamental building block of the social order. But *The Walking Dead* makes this essentially Victorian point by setting it side by side with something that looks like the product of virtuous sexuality but is something else.

A full belly is not easily distinguished by appearance alone from pregnancy. In fact, for a long time the two were considered related -- as in the belief, still current in parts of the United States, that a woman may become pregnant by eating certain things. *The Walking Dead* makes the contrast explicit. After Laurie is dead, her half-deranged husband encounters a zombie with a peculiarly distended belly in near proximity to the place where his wife died. This is the first fat zombie we have seen. Rick repeatedly stabs the monster, not in the head, where it can do the most good, but in the stomach. Does he believe the zombie has glutted himself on his wife's remains? The episode does not make this clear. The point seems to be that the full stomach of the zombie represents improper ingestion – a kind of false image of pregnancy, thus representing its opposite. Laurie's distended belly represents the triumph of marital sexuality -- a triumph

of the gestational over the alimentary, of correct reproduction over evil consumption. It is true that we do not know for sure if the sheriff, Laurie's husband, is the biological father. But the film makes it clear that socially the child will be considered his, and this is all that is necessary to confirm the overriding importance of marriage as a social bond.

The process is not complete, however, until husband and wife are restored in forgiveness of each other. Forgiveness is represented as a thoughtful (almost mystical) coming to terms of Rick with his own guilt at having failed at reconciliation while his wife was still alive. The issue is complex because there remains the troubling possibility that Laurie was impregnated by her lover (the deputy), and not by her husband (the sheriff.) But Laurie dies in childbirth. Her death "solves" the problem and, paradoxically, restores the sanctity of marriage. Rick eventually comes to terms with his failure earlier to accept his wife, no matter what, and regardless of who the actual father of her baby is. Laurie herself is now utterly ethereal and without corporeal passions. She appears to Rick as a disembodied voice over a dead phone line and as a ghost who finally extends her hand and gently caresses Rick's cheek. Two things make martial redemption possible. One is the birth of the child, a daughter, who stands in for Laurie and forces Rick to choose life over death and guilt. The other is Laurie's ghostly existence as a phantom produced by Rick's own guilty conscience. The reproductive power of marriage to restore society is maintained, and the survivor community (although much diminished and under threat) can continue. Morality is thus established in the first instance by defining what should go into and what should come out of the body. Here the woman leads the way by asserting, through pregnancy and childbirth, that marital fertility wins out over simple consumption. But it is left the husband to complete the process, by forgiving himself and his wife, and by doing so reclaiming the superior status of martial reproduction over individual consumption as a foundation for society.

Despite its violence and child sacrifice, *The Walking Dead* is fundamentally a commentary on key social structures, presented in surprising traditional forms. This fact is critical to our understanding of the moral economy of zombies. From Schneider we know that sexual intercourse is the paramount symbol of the marital relationship in American culture. The fact that this symbol remains a fixed point fixed point of reference in the post-apocalyptic world suggests that monogamous marriage itself transcends the apocalypse. A key purpose of the narrative apocalypse is to restore marriage and the power of marital reproduction to serve as a principle identifying symbol for the social order. Not surprisingly, we find remarkably little experimentation with alternative relationship structures, like polyandry or group marriage. The ideal of monogamous marriage remains remarkably intact, one that the struggle for survival only serves to intensify.

But, again, we come back to the question -- Why zombies, or rather, why do they serve so effectively as the background against which to reconstruct the traditional ideal of marriage? The zombie apocalypse is useful because of it pits the overwhelming atavism of the zombies against the formation and maintenance of marriage, the primary traditional bond in American kinship. The symbol of selfish atavism is individual consumption, and zombie fiction reduces consumption to its fundamental essence: eating. The threat is that of alimentary

individualism, a thing that zombies typify, since they are perfect consuming machines and nothing else. Only living humans can get married. It seems like a simple enough point, but think what a difference it would make if zombies were shown acting in pairs? It would be funny -- a fact not lost on the makers of zombie spoof films (e.g., *Warm Bodies*) which deliberately un-do the usual horrors of the undead by linking the life after death the search for romantic happiness. And then there is the more recent social phenomenon in the United States of "zombie theme weddings" -- but this subject, however fascinating, would take us too far afield.

Conclusion

Cultural conservatism is the point of view that says that current problems can be solved by a return to traditional social structures and practices. The "problem" presented in the American television series, *The Walking Dead*, is that zombies have nearly ended human society. The people who are left must somehow cope, and do so, slowly and with setbacks, by attempting to rebuild the society that unrestrained individualist consumption has almost destroyed. Sacrifice and kinship are basic to this process. The first functions to relieve the survivor community of its divisive internal tensions by choosing a sacrifice -- a young girl whose obvious innocence makes her the perfect substitute for the group itself. In killing her, they do, in a sense, mortify themselves, but the sacrifice of her innocence (like that of Christ's) renews the community's sense of purpose. They must now, in the words of one character, live their lives "for her," as her death becomes a monument to their own desire to rebuild society.

A society renewed on the basis of child sacrifice -- a form of vicarious violence against itself -- can be rebuilt using the kinship structures known to have withstood adversity in other crises, from disease to natural disaster. Schneider sees marriage as the fundamental social unit in American society. The fact that it was is less debatable than the proposition that a post-apocalyptic world seek to return to the conjugal ideal as the basis for beginning again. The fact that it performs this function is another indication of the television series' implicit cultural conservatism. Of course, to redeem marriage it must be carefully refurbished. This means getting rid of the elements that in American society are usually thought most inimical to marriage: selfishness and its correlate, infidelity. *The Walking Dead* fixes all this, and resurrects marriage by grounding it in the fundamental importance of reproduction. It is surely significant that the only child born in the first two seasons of the television show is the child of a couple whose marriage has been nearly destroyed and then redeemed through the mystical powers of matrimony -- powers, the show suggests, that transcend even death. The newborn's name, incidentally, is Sophia -- the name of the girl whose innocence made her the perfect sacrifice earlier in the show. It makes sense to see this, too, as confirmation of the redemptive power of sacrifice, since, like Christ, the girl who represents the group is resurrected (if in name only.)

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