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"People in Hell Want Slurpees": The Redefinition of the Zombie Genre through the Salvific Portrayal of Family on AMC's *The Walking Dead*

Joshua D. Ambrosius & Joseph M. Valenzano III

AMC's popular, post-apocalyptic show The Walking Dead *follows a clan of survivors as they endure the zombie apocalypse while struggling to maintain their humanity. The characters pursue temporal salvation through four social institutions: family, government, religion, and science/medicine, identified by a preliminary soak. Through content analysis of dialogueic, visual, and nonverbal references to these institutions across seasons 1–3 (*N = 35*), we find that each respective season proposed, and then rejected to some extent, the redemptive roles of science, religion, and the state—mirroring actual contemporary distrust. Simultaneously, through persistent, underlying storylines, the show reveals a traditional understanding of the centrality of familial relationships to maintaining a liberal society's survival—which we argue redefines the zombie genre away from its leftist roots.*

Keywords: Genre Theory; Zombies; Social Institutions; Family; Television; Content Analysis

> Rick: [Jimmy reaches for a rifle; Rick stops him] "Hey, you ever fire one before?"
> Jimmy: "Well, if I'm going out I want one."
> Daryl: "People in hell want Slurpees." (S02E05, *Chupacabra*)

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Introduction to the Zombie Apocalypse

Recent years have seen various events, such as terrorist attacks, natural disasters, and disease outbreaks, coinciding with a rise in apocalyptic fare on network and cable television. Mitchell (2001, p. 283) observed that "the apocalyptic genre is generally not well suited to television." Despite his proclamation, post-2000 television shows, tracking the trends of other pop culture media, now increasingly feature apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic storylines within the horror and science fiction genres (Bishop, 2009; Renner, 2012). Examples include Showtime's *Jeremiah*, CBS's *Jericho*, TNT's *The Last Ship*, and CBS's *Under the Dome*.

Producers of television content underscore the influence current events have on programming. Schneider (2014, p. 6) reports that "several producers agree that the nation's ongoing economic uncertainties—coupled with an increasingly polarized [socio-political] landscape—have created an undercurrent of anxiety in society" to which these shows give voice. Rockne S. O'Bannon, producer of NBC's *Revolution*, is quoted by Schneider as saying, "I think there's just an inherent fascination and fear of apocalypse, it immediately taps into that very kind of visceral, natural vein … it's a way of facing our fears of mass death and destruction without actually having to face them" (p. 6). In O'Bannon's show the fears are not just about mass death, but over the collapse of social institutions and the loss of technologies on which we depend for daily life.

The most popular post-apocalyptic horror show currently airing is AMC's *The Walking Dead* (TWD). Based upon the series of comic books and graphic novels written by Robert Kirkman and first released in 2003 by *Image Comics*, TWD tells the story of a group of people who survived a zombie apocalypse, in which an unidentified plague killed and resurrected the bulk of the population as flesh-eating corpses, and struggle to live in a dystopic landscape in the American South. The television series premiered on October 31, 2010, and went on to receive a nomination for "Best Television Series—Drama" at the 68th Golden Globe Awards as well as win numerous accolades for its sound and visual effects. Now completing its fifth season, the show continues to draw the highest ratings for a television series in the history of AMC, with an average of over 13 million viewers each week for the fourth season.

In addition to its success, TWD also represents a successful shift for the zombie genre from cult films, such as George Romero's six … *of the Dead* films, to primetime. Zombies have shown that they can dominate the 21st century film box office, as *28 Days Later* (2002) and *World War Z* (2013), released a decade apart, have clearly shown. TWD, though, is the first television program to mainstream the zombie genre in what creator Kirkman has called "the zombie movie that never ends" (Bishop, 2010, p. 206). Other networks are trying to replicate the success of TWD, including the BBC's *In the Flesh* and Syfy's *Z Nation*. Little communication scholarship has examined TWD in terms of its content or relationship to the zombie genre, aside from the usual commercial books that accompany successful programs, and select chapters in collected volumes (Lowder, 2011; Rees, 2014). Interdisciplinary

scholars of zombie studies do cite TWD as a case, but without systematically documenting its content (Platts, 2013).

Based on a systematic content analysis of TWD, we argue that the show turns zombie genre theory on its head. Rather than supporting the traditional "leftist and subversive" (Platts, 2013, p. 555) critique of capitalism, individualism, and Western society, we argue that TWD displays a shift within the zombie genre to a more traditional narrative that prioritizes family as the central societal institution. Furthermore, we see TWD as what Kenneth Burke (1969, p. 59) calls a "representative anecdote" for larger cultural apprehensions and concerns regarding the stability and viability of primary social institutions, such as *science*, *religion*, *government*, and the *family*, in maintaining order in a seemingly chaotic real world. We identified these four institutions through a preliminary soak in the show's content and then critiqued their portrayals through quantitative and qualitative content analyses. Ultimately, we uncover a layer to TWD which situates it within what others have written about the show and contemporary trends at work within all media of zombie fiction (Dendle, 2012; Muntean & Payne, 2009; Rees, 2014; Vizzini, 2011). Taken together, the show's redefinition of the genre and its connection to institutional apprehensions contribute to its immense popularity.

A New Look at the Zombie Genre

Popular culture, when understood as "connected to world politics through the practice of representation" (Shepherd, 2013, p. ix) via revealing qualities about the society in which it is created (Mittell, 2001), increasingly delivers texts ripe for analysis by communication scholars. Hollywood films have naturally been the focus of the film studies field, but they also garner the attention of rhetoricians such as Medhurst and Benson (1991) and Ehrenhaus (2001). Television programs are no different, with analyses of the content of shows ranging from *The West Wing* (Holbert et al., 2005) to *Supernatural* (Engstrom & Valenzano, 2014). These studies all recognize the potency of the visual medium to influence meaning for audiences.

One of the primary methods of analyzing film and television is through the lens of *genre*. The modern rhetorical understanding of genre theory comes from Edwin Black (1965, pp. 133–134), who observed that "there is a limited number of situations in which a rhetor can find himself … a limited number of ways in which a rhetor can and will respond rhetorically to any given situational type." Campbell and Jamieson (1978, p. 20) further refine the definition of genre, noting that they constitute "groups of discourses which share substantive, stylistic and situational characteristics," but that what is distinctive is their occurrence and recurrence together. As Grant (2012, p. xvii) notes, entries within a particular genre "tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations." Genre analysis, though, is not simply about determining categorical fit, but rather identifying substantive, stylistic, or situational variations in a genre and how they depict cultural trends, values, or apprehensions at a given time.

One specific genre of film that has generated significant scholarly interest is horror. Researchers such as Poole (2011) focus on the meaning of specific monsters and the social fears they represent, while others examine monster movies as ideological critiques (e.g., Britton, 1979; Maddrey, 2004). Zombie stories, their own subcategory of the horror genre, receive a significant degree of attention from both of these approaches. More so than any other monster or horror film genre, Sconce (2014, p. 97) notes that "zombie movies are meant to be read as political statements more about the present moment than future predictions." This is interesting given that zombie stories are some of the most nihilistic and "cynical portrayals of human nature in any film genre" (Paffenroth, 2006, p. 12). In fact, as Zizek (2003) ruefully notes, zombie tales reveal that we are all zombies—some are just better at concealing it than others.

This negative and fatalistic perception of zombie stories arises from the tendency to focus on either what the zombies themselves represent through their condition, or what the human survivors left behind and how they represent that loss. As Paffenroth (2006) observes, the key theme of the zombie genre is moral and social criticism grounded in the resemblance of the monster to the humans they attack. With regard to the zombies and what they represent, Gunn and Treat (2005) divide zombies into two categories: the laboring zombie who lumbers across the screen doing the bidding of someone else; or the consuming zombie, constantly seeking more flesh to devour. In either rendition, the zombie figure, through its resemblance to humans, represents "the 'human face' of capitalist monstrosity" (Shaviro, 2002, p. 288). Whether it is the pursuit of wealth through the exploitation of corpses as cheap, mindless labor, or through the gluttonous greed of society, zombies serve as a foil for what "devours Western culture" which "is rotten to begin with" (Paffenroth, 2006, p. 17).

In point of fact, scholars have focused like a laser on anti-Western interpretations of zombie texts—especially since the Romero era. Sconce (2014) notes that zombies are themselves the embodiment of "social disintegration," brought forth by corruption, racism, sexism, and a host of other social ills. Hunter (2014, p. 128) expands the criticism to the scientific community, noting that "zombies present hostility to reliance on scientific solutions to human problems." Few things in Western life are left untouched by zombie criticism, as Gunn and Treat (2005, p. 151) add that it is "not surprising … [given] capitalism's role in the production and dissolution of the family unit."

We contend that TWD does not conform to the typical themes of the zombie genre. Other scholars have foreshadowed these arguments in their assertions that the genre recalibrated in the new millennium, following periods of lackluster entries in the 1980s and 1990s, in what resulted in a zombie "renaissance" (Bishop, 2009, 2010). Various scholars have directly connected this trend to 9/11, including Bishop and Muntean and Payne (2009), while some admit, like Dendle (2012), that the "images of destruction, plague, and civil collapse" are built into the genre and not unique to post-9/11 production. Nonetheless, it does seem that the genre now resonates with mainstream consumers to a much greater extent than previous generations of zombie entertainment. No other product of this zombie resurgence has succeeded like TWD

at connecting with audiences. TWD does share certain qualities with its cinematic forebears. Comparing TWD to zombie films, Kirkman (2003) wrote in the comic's debut issue:

> To me, the best zombie movies aren't the splatter fests of gore and violence with goofy characters and tongue in cheek antics. Good zombie movies show us how messed up we are, they make us question our station in society … and our society's station in the world. They show us gore and violence and all that cool stuff too … but there's always an undercurrent of social commentary and thoughtfulness. That's what makes the Romero films so great.

Thus, Kirkman sought to replicate the spirit of Romero's social commentary while eschewing the characteristic tropes of subsequent zombie fare—an intention that has translated well to the small screen. Nonetheless, TWD differs from Romero-era zombie stories in that it illustrates the salvific, rather than apocalyptic, potential of the family as a social institution. The televised format allows it to do so by extending the story out over several seasons, presenting potential sources of salvation in specific social institutions tied to the "old world," while also demonstrating their inadequacy to save the characters. In this way, TWD serves as both a critique of a reliance on social institutions, and also an argument for hope grounded in a traditional conception of the family as the only viable source of temporal salvation. This new twist of "hope over horror" illustrates a unique contribution of TWD to both our understanding of the zombie genre, as well as how that genre reflects the political social realities in which the audience resides. In fact, Kirkman (2003) abjures the *horror* genre, despite the zombies, in favor of labeling TWD as "survivalist adventure." In a sense, TWD succeeds both *because of* and *in spite of* the "walkers."[1]

The post-2000 zombie revival has led some to question previous ways of understanding the genre. For examples that question traditional interpretations, Dendle (2012) describes "right-wing reactionary readings of [contemporary] zombie films," and Muntean and Payne (2009) view *28 Days Later* as a product of "reactionary conservative ideology." Some scholars have begun to apply this "contra genre" framework to TWD, mostly with a focus on the singular character of Rick Grimes, the former sheriff's deputy and group patriarch. Rees (2014) identified the "frontier values" evident in Rick's actions, while Vizzini (2011) conducted an Ayn Randian, objectivist analysis of the character. Both readings are less than charitable, arguing that Rick has failed to live up to the law when he embraces vengeance. Nonetheless, these several sources show that the predominate leftist zombie narrative is fading. TWD makes an interesting case to analyze the translation of the zombie trope to television—a medium that Bishop (2010) believed held promise for evolving the genre. As the show was in development, he wrote:

> I believe that the most rewarding exploration into a zombie apocalypse will follow Kirkman's lead, and the cinematic version of this "longhaul" approach will work best on television. At the very least, such a production … would finally give the zombie narrative the time it needs to map out the complicated relationships that would result from a zombie infestation that ends normal society. (Bishop, 2010, p. 206)

Institutional References in the Text

Definitions of Institutions and Their Context

To undertake a study of how TWD differs from the themes predicted by the genre's theory, through how social institutions are portrayed, we must first define *institution* and its various types. Sociologist Jonathan Turner (1997, p. 6) defines social institutions as the complex arrays of:

> positions, roles, norms and values lodged in particular types of social structures and organizing relatively stable patterns of human activity with respect to fundamental problems in producing life-sustaining resources, in reproducing individuals, and in sustaining viable societal structures within a given environment.

Thus, institutions play a role in both sustaining life and community by addressing fundamental problems. Harre (1979, p. 98) adds that institutions possess "an interlocking double-structure of persons-as-role-holders or office-bearer[s] …and of social practices involving both expressive and practical aims and outcomes." Giddens (1984, p. 24) further notes that, "Institutions by definition are the more enduring features of social life." Nevertheless, institutions evolve over time and differ across societies. In apocalyptic media, some institutions and understandings endure better than others.

The four institutions explored in this study are: science/medicine, religion, government, and the family. We define each in turn, drawing on Turner (1997, 2003) and other social theory. Although human populations have developed technology and practiced rudimentary medicine for millennia, the institutions of science and medicine are more modern developments. Scholars have been treating science as an institution since at least the 1950s (Hartung, 1951). Hartung notes that previous definitions of science emphasize that it is both a body of organized knowledge and the means to obtain this knowledge. In a simple sense, he defines the institution of *science* as "that system of social rules and behavior by means of which man achieves control over his environment" (p. 38). We add that the institution of science also includes technologies developed from this knowledge—the applied sciences of medicine and engineering.

A second institution, religion, is an ancient institution with roots in the burial practices of pre-modern humans. Scholars debate the evolutionary advantages of religion. Emphasizing the perceived benefits, Turner (1997, p. 107) defines the institutional system of *religion* as:

> …that structuring of activities revolving around beliefs and rituals pertaining to the sacred and/or supernatural and organized into cult structures which have consequences for reinforcing norms, legitimating inequality, guiding socialization and social placement, and managing variable sources of tension and anxiety in a society.

From this view, religion helps societies survive by providing explanations for how individuals should behave in relation to others. Whereas most people intuitively identify with a substantive definition of religion—such as belief in God or gods—

others emphasize the functional attributes of religion, or how it helps people struggle "with [the] ultimate problems of human life" (Yinger, 1970, p. 7). For Turner, religion plays a central role in addressing these "ultimate problems."

As early human societies grew, the problems of controlling and coordinating members increased—the "decisions over what the society as a whole should do and over how to distribute valued resources became much more difficult" (Turner, 1997, p. 142). As Turner argues, societies that could not figure out how to bestow power on select members for the purpose of administration "were soon extinguished by internal chaos or external conquest" (Turner, 1997, p. 142). The existence of political communities with governing structures became a "necessary evil" (Turner, 1997, p. 142). Turner defines these as:

> …society-wide system[s] for consolidating and centralizing power in order to make and implement binding decisions with respect to coordinating activities among individual and collective actors in a population, allocating and distributing resources among actors, and managing deviance by, and conflicts among, actors.

In other words, government and politics compose a system for resolving "who gets what, when and how" (Lasswell, 1936). The USA, TWD's setting, resolved these issues by creating a liberal democratic republic with a federal structure.

The family is the most ancient institution—even, in a sense, predating modern humans. Turner (1997, p. 67) notes that, in early societies, the family was the basic "organizing principle of social life" and as societies grew, the institutions of religion and government arose. The family, at the most basic level, is a group of persons related by blood or marriage.[2] Turner (1997, p. 75) sees *kinship* institutions as "normative systems, infused with values" that "regulariz[e] sex and mating … [and] socializ[e] the young." While marriage is often the point at which two individuals become related, and thus identified as part of the same family, recent research has found that, while people believe family is a central, satisfying element in their lives, many believe marriage is becoming obsolete (Pew Research, 2010).

TWD's institutional content—arising from its producers and resonating with its consumers—is a product of uncertain times. Apocalyptic narratives rely on either a removal or reformation of traditional social institutions as elements of their storylines. In popular vernacular the apocalypse means "the end" of things as we know and experience them. To understand the connection between these stories and the cultures that produce them, it is necessary to establish the perception of the real social institutions depicted as failing in apocalyptic fiction. In the contemporary USA, media headlines and survey findings show that the public is losing trust in important social institutions. Public opinion polls conducted by both media outlets and professional pollsters have shown declining levels of trust in science, medicine, government, and religious institutions (Harris Interactive, 2012; Newport, 2013; Public Religion Research Institute, 2013). Faith in science and government is waning in light of the inability of science and government to effectively solve societal problems, demonstrated by high-profile failures including 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the government shutdown, and epidemics such as SARS, the swine flu, and the recent

West African Ebola outbreak. Furthermore, lack of trust in religious institutions is demonstrated by an increasing tendency for individuals to identify as religious "nones," which includes either those who profess no faith or belong to no denomination (Baker & Smith, 2009). Taken as a whole, public trust in traditional social institutions dwindles with each passing year (Wilke & Newport, 2013).

In addition to the lack of faith in those core social institutions, another, that of the family, has also seen significant changes in terms of public perception recently (Pew Research, 2010). In the wake of the movement toward "marriage equality" for same-sex couples, traditional conceptions of the nuclear family are transforming—prompting *The New York Times* to write that, "American households have never been more diverse, more surprising, more baffling" (Angier, 2013). Families affected by divorce and subsequent marriages, as well as blended families, unmarried mothers, and marriages without children, are also more common now than ever before. There are even individuals who see themselves as "families of one" (Angier, 2013). These trends illustrate how the definition of *family* is culturally fluid rather than set in stone. American post-apocalyptic fiction has long emphasized themes related to the family and will continue to do so because it personalizes the stories (Schwartz, 2006). Recent analyses of zombie fiction argue that zombie films such as *28 Days Later*, contra past trends, now position "the hetero-normative nuclear family as the natural, essential, yet potentially vulnerable core of civilization, which must be protected" (Muntean & Payne, 2009, p. 249). As our analysis shows, TWD serves as a text that reflects and helps redefine anxieties over society's institutions.

Content Analysis: Procedures and Operationalization of Definitions

To understand the portrayal of these social institutions in apocalyptic television dramas, we conducted a content analysis of TWD. We restricted our analysis to the AMC television program; we do not reference the comic book source material in this analysis.[3] Furthermore, we analyzed only the first three seasons of the show. We identified the four dominant institutional themes during a "preliminary soak" wherein each of the authors viewed all 35 episodes (Anderson, 2012, p. 288). *Religion*, *government*, and *family* are considered "core institutional systems" (Turner, 1997, p. 8), whereas the fourth, *science* and *medicine* combined, is considered an "emerging" institution for which one could "make a case that … [they are] also core institutions" (Turner, 1997, p. 8). Although Turner (1997, 2003) and others identify additional primary institutions, we did not see sustained evidence of economy or education during the soak. The show does develop themes around several of Turner's (2003) "categoric units," including gender, race, ethnicity, and class, but these are beyond the scope of this present analysis.

We developed coding guidelines for each institution and then again viewed all episodes separately while coding for references to each institution following Anderson's (2012, p. 289) suggestion for "multiple coders." Finally, we integrated and reconciled our counts for each institution. We calculated initial inter-coder reliability at 73% agreement on episode counts, which rose to 100% during reconciliation in which we

determined the definitive counts by comparing each piece of evidence to the operationalized definitions.[4]

We follow past precedent by identifying three types of evidence for each institution: dialogue, images, and nonverbal (Engstrom & Valenzano, 2014). *Dialogue* includes all vocal utterances and exchanges between characters that mention or allude to aspects of the four institutions. *Images* include all symbols, signs, structures, or settings that depict or reference aspects of the four institutions. *Nonverbal* references include actions by characters that reference or intimate the four institutions without use of spoken words. Additional "ground rules," created after the soak, are included in Appendix 1 that explains several difficult judgment calls made during coding.

Science/medicine, shorthanded as "science," includes all references to science, technology, the fields of applied science, and those who practice within these fields. *Religion* includes all substantive references to religious claims, images, or practices, including allusions to supernatural beings, scriptures, places of worship, and personal faith. *Government* includes all references to governing institutions, preexisting or reconstituted, and the actions that contribute to their establishment, preservation, or destruction. Military institutions, when officially connected to preexisting governments, are categorized as referencing government. *Family* refers to kinship relationships, including preservation of the family unit and the reconstruction of domestic relationships, such as romantic pairing and references to non-familial relationships as being like familial relationships (e.g., two unrelated males referring to each other as "brother").

Findings: Institutional Portrayals on TWD

Summary: Primacy of the Family

TWD is the story of a small band of survivors who struggle to regain some semblance of the world they lost—at first a solution to the zombie apocalypse and then a reclamation of some of the comforts of modern civilization. Each season witnesses the survivors fighting to reclaim an institution that nevertheless slips from their collective grasp. As one character succinctly put it, the seasons unfold with "every group we come across [having] a new rumor about a way out of this thing" (S02E08, *Nebraska)*. While this division is not entirely clear-cut, as our analysis indicates, there are definite differences in institutional themes and priorities for the characters in each of the three seasons. Sometimes "new … way[s] out" turn out to be little more than rumors, while other times they are "Slurpees" in "hell" that make life more bearable, but never for long.

Table 1 summarizes the findings for the 35 episodes of the three seasons and indicates that family has the highest number of references per season, average references per episode, and percentage of total references. Figure 1, which graphs institutional references per episode across all three seasons, shows that family consistently ranks as the most-cited institutional reference in the show for 25 episodes, including every episode of season two. Family begins high in season one, peaks in

Table 1 Institutional references in AMC's *The Walking Dead*.

	Science	Religion	Government	Family	Total
All seasons (1–3) total	147	69	231	437	884
Average per episode (N = 35)	4.2	2.0	6.6	12.5	25.3
SD	4.7	2.6	4.0	5.4	8.8
% total	16.6	7.8	26.1	49.4	100.0
Season 1 total	53	12	56	79	200
Average per episode (N = 6)	8.8	2.0	9.3	13.2	33.3
SD	8.3	1.1	6.4	6.0	10.2
% total	26.5	6.0	28.0	39.5	100.0
Season 2 total	44	45	64	197	350
Average per episode (N = 13)	3.4	3.5	4.9	15.2	26.9
SD	3.3	3.6	3.2	4.4	8.7
% total	12.6	12.9	18.3	56.3	100.0
Season 3 total	50	12	111	161	334
Average per episode (N = 16)	3.1	0.8	6.9	10.1	20.9
SD	2.7	1.1	3.1	5.1	5.5
% total	15.0	3.6	33.2	48.2	100.0
ANOVA (F)	4.290*	4.682*	2.837	3.751*	6.239**

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$.

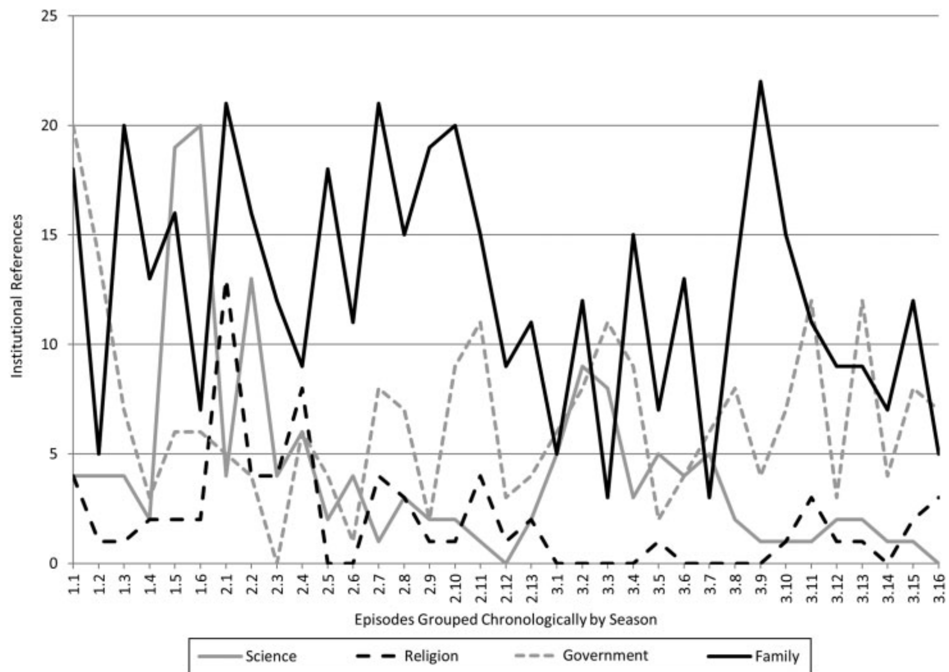

Figure 1 Total institutional references by episode of AMC's *The Walking Dead*.

season two, and declines slightly by season three. Government is a consistent second across the three measures and is the dominant institutional theme in eight episodes. It peaks in season one, declines sharply in season two, and moderately rebounds in season three. Science and religion references are much fewer, although science came to dominate the institutional references in the final two episodes of season one. Science peaks in season one, declines sharply in season two, and, by percentage of references, rebounds slightly in season three. Religion is a minor reference, overtaking science in season two. Figure 2, graphing average references per episode by season, is the best indicator of seasonal trends because it controls for the increasing length of seasons. We see here that family is the dominant theme, peaking in season two along with religion. Government and science seem to be correlated—both begin high but decline in season two as family and religion emerge.

We performed a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test for statistically significant differences in the means of the three seasons. In this case, the ANOVA tests the null hypothesis that the seasons have the same mean values for the institutional reference to which the test is being applied. The resulting *F*-statistics in Table 1 show that the null is rejected for all institutions except government. In other words, the average instances of governmental institutions per episode do not vary statistically by season but all other institutions do.[5]

As we will argue based on a qualitative content analysis, each season offered, and then discredited, these institutions as the solution to the crisis faced by the characters. Season one saw the characters seeking salvation in the preexisting institutions of government and science. When government and science failed, the characters sought solace, to some extent, in religion during season two. For some characters, religion

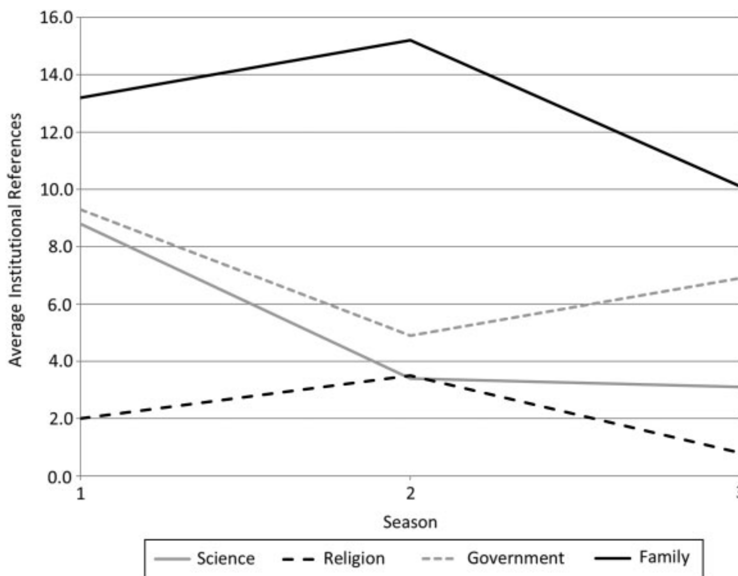

Figure 2 Average institutional references per episode by season of AMC's *The Walking Dead*.

was exposed as a crutch by the end of season two, but never truly disappeared. Season three offered a reconstituted government, along with some revival of science, as new sources of salvation, both of which ultimately failed again.

Ultimately, throughout all seasons, the family remains the one constant source of hope for most characters. Those without families, including those who lose family members during the show, seek out familial-style relationships with other characters to fill this void. Taken together, these observations describe a text that diverges drastically from traditional zombie theory—adding to and even redefining the genre. We now turn to a detailed content analysis of the narrative depictions of the four institutions within the world of TWD.

Science/Medicine: Opportunities Lost

After a jarring opening scene of a police officer shooting a zombie child, the storyline begins with Sheriff's Deputy Rick Grimes being shot and waking up from a coma in an abandoned hospital (S01E01, *Days Gone By*). Early science references relate to the medical setting and imagery, including IVs and hospital beds. As the season progresses, the characters make use of communication technology and discuss the opportunities presented by the nearby US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) headquarters in Druid Hills, Georgia. The final two episodes, which mark the height in references to science, witness the characters, now under the leadership of Rick, arriving at the CDC in search of safety and a cure.

While Shane Walsh, Rick's former partner and best friend, argues that the group should seek sanctuary at nearby Fort Benning, Rick's plan to seek salvation in science rather than the military wins over the group. This shows that the group's past experiences—including witnessing abandoned military vehicles and zombie soldiers—have limited their trust in the military, an institution of government. Furthermore, despite Rick's observations of the abandoned hospital, Rick and the group have seen no evidence that higher levels of the medical structure have been overrun. This decision to seek a cure at the CDC is also tied to a trust in higher levels of government, illustrated by Rick's statement:

> I heard the CDC was working on a cure … what if the CDC is still up and running?. …If there's any government left, any structure at all, they'd protect the CDC at all costs, wouldn't they? I think it's our best shot. (S01E05, *Wildfire*)

Nonetheless, the CDC represents trust in science over government because it is scientific expertise in the form of a cure that draws the group. They seek solace in a government building, presumably stocked with supplies, but reference the CDC as being the only hope for a cure. In dramatic fashion, the group faces barred doors at the CDC that eventually open to them when Rick pleas with a moving surveillance camera (S01E05, *Wildfire*).

Dr Edwin Jenner, the only remaining CDC scientist, offers them the comforts of home after testing blood samples from each of them. Previous scenes show Dr Jenner conducting experiments and documenting findings in a video log, but losing his only

remaining sample to a laboratory mishap. Viewers find out later that his wife, an even more brilliant scientist than him, was lost to the outbreak. Having lost hope in the power of science to end the crisis, Jenner considers suicide and ultimately takes his life by initiating a building-wide decontamination explosion. While group member Jacqui decides to die with Jenner, the rest of the group flees the CDC in search of survival on the road.

The ending of season one represents the failure of modern science to solve the crisis. Season two presents science, mainly through private medicine rather than public health, as a solution to smaller-scale problems. Most references to science in season two occur when Rick's son Carl is inadvertently shot and then treated by veterinarian Hershel Greene on his family's farm. These episodes feature references to medications including antibiotics and surgical procedures. Shane and Otis, Hershel's friend who accidentally shot Carl, go in search of medical supplies at a former Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) outpost. Hershel, in dialogue, holds out hope that science will still save them from the crisis. For example, he states that he believes the zombies can be "restored" (S02E07, *Pretty Much Dead Already*). Later, after the group kills zombies that Hershel was protecting in his barn, Hershel says that he "didn't want to believe that there was no cure," but knew now that there is "no hope for any of us" (S02E08, *Nebraska*). Rick confirms this sentiment by revealing what Jenner privately told him in season one—that whatever causes reanimation resides in everyone, "we are all infected.… At the CDC Jenner told me. Whatever it is, we all carry it" (S02E13, *Beside the Dying Fire).* Hershel, who is both a man of science and faith, now loses hope in the salvational potential of science like the larger group, but maintains his practice of medicine to aid others.

Season three presents a new opportunity as viewers are introduced to Woodbury, a small-town, gated community run by "the Governor." This reconstituted government engages in education, recreation, and the division of labor. The Governor appoints a "research team" that collects zombie specimens for experimental research by his assistant Milton into the causes of reanimation. While early science references in the series were intimately tied to preexisting government, these later references are tied to reconstituted government. Meanwhile, the main group continues to make use of medical procedures as Rick amputates Hershel's bitten leg and group member Carol trains to perform a caesarean section on pregnant Lori, Rick's wife. Faith in science and medicine are now in local, individual care, as government stewardship has failed.

Religion: Finding and Losing Faith

The series begins with some limited, but memorable, religious references that increase in number during the second season. The first season includes occasional references to God in dialogue and images: "God forgive us" written in blood on a wall (S01E01, *Days Gone By*), Merle Dixon's cries for God's mercy and Jesus' help while handcuffed to a roof (S01E03, *Tell it to the Frogs*), and Jacqui attributing the plague to the "wrath of God" (S01E06, *TS-19*) are a few examples. Nonetheless, no episode in season one makes more than four references to religion. In the first few episodes of

the show's second season, the survivors find temporary rest in an abandoned church while looking for Carol's missing daughter Sophia and then, for a longer time, at the home of the religious farmer Hershel. It is here that religion references peak (13 in S02E01) and have a sustained impact on the storyline of the show.

Early in season two, the group stumbles upon the "Southern Baptist Church of Holy Light" with a sign quoting an apocalyptic verse (Revelation 16:17).[6] They discover electronic church bells and zombie parishioners in the pews before an image of Christ on the cross (S02E01, *What Lies Ahead*). The church and the circumstances under which the group encounters it allude to a limited role for religion in the group's salvation. Several characters, including Rick and mourning mother Carol, take the opportunity to pray, with Carol asking for both God to punish her for wanting her abusive husband to die as well as provide mercy for Sophia, while Rick admits his lack of faith and antagonistically questions God's plans:

> I don't know if you're looking at me with what? Sadness? Scorn? Pity? Love? Maybe just indifference. I guess you already know I'm not much of a believer. I guess I just chose to put my faith elsewhere. My family mostly … I could use a little something to help keep us going. Some kind of acknowledgment, some kind of indication I'm doing the right thing. You don't know how hard that is to know. Well maybe you do. Hey look, I don't need all the answers. Just a little nudge—a sign. Any sign'll do. (S02E01, *What Lies Ahead*)

Both Rick and Carol seem to turn to God in desperation following the events at the close of the first season. Tellingly, Rick also acknowledges he put his faith in family before God but seems to desire the Almighty's assistance now in keeping that unit together.

Later, Rick reflects on his moments of vulnerability when he tells Hershel that the, "last time I asked God for a favor and stopped to admire a view, my son got shot" (S02E04, *Cherokee Rose*). He adds, "I try not to mix it up with the Almighty anymore. Best we stay out of each other's way" (S02E04, *Cherokee Rose*). Rick's son Carl, once recovered from his wound, expresses a similar lack of faith as his father. Carl tells Carol that it is "stupid to believe in heaven" and that it is "just another lie" (S02E11, *Judge, Jury, Executioner*).

Hershel, a man of faith as well as science and medicine, becomes the central moral compass among the group early in season two. His character reveals flaws in religious believers too, as he only reluctantly gives sanctuary to Rick's group after Carl was shot, but wants them to leave as soon as possible. Maggie questions his desire to push the group out by quoting John 13:34 to him.[7] Later, in a drunken relapse, he self-righteously defends his actions as doing "the Christian thing" (S02E08, *Nebraska*). Just as he loses his faith in science, his faith in God is diminished by the events of season two. During the latter half of the season, he even tells Dale that he will not interfere with Rick's plans to execute the captured teenager Randall—a sign that he is relinquishing his role as the group's moral compass (S02E11, *Judge, Jury, Executioner*).

Rick eventually chastises Hershel, providing the clearest indication of the lack of certainty that the zombie apocalypse and the season's events introduced into his

faith. Rick challenges Hershel to remember who he was, saying, "You are a man of God. Have some faith," to which Hershel replies: "I can't profess to understand God's plan—but Christ promised the resurrection of the dead. I just thought he had something a little different in mind" (S02E13, *Beside the Dying Fire*). Despite the damage done to his faith in God, Hershel continues to read scripture in later seasons. He quotes Matthew 5:29–30[8] to Merle (S03E11, *I Ain't No Judas*), reads Psalm 91:5[9] to his daughters before going to war (S03E15, *The Sorrowful Life*), and leaves a Bible open to a highlighted John 5:29[10] for the Governor to find upon invasion of the group's prison home (S03E16, *Welcome to the Tombs*), all in season three.

Other characters have experiences with God through interactions with each other in season two. Group member Glen attempts to pray alone on the farmhouse's porch when his love interest Maggie instructs him in her own doubts. In response to Glen's questioning about God's existence, Maggie says, "I always took it on faith. Lately I've wondered. Everything that happened, there must've been a lot of praying going on and seems quite a few went unanswered" (S02E03, *Save the Last One*). She seems to have given up on faith even more so than her father.

Aside from the moment at the church, most references to religion are to personal beliefs and struggles rather than organized religion. While the main group conducts funerals, there is little attempt by them or Woodbury to reconstitute religious institutions or other rites. Maggie's sentiment to Glen that he should "Feel free to believe in God.… [because] you gotta make it okay somehow" seems to be the show's philosophy of religion (S02E03, *Save the Last One*). Some characters seek out God for emotional comfort, but do not believe this institution is essential to their temporal survival. On the whole, characters' rejection of religion seems to be largely due to the troubles of this life, which Jesus himself promised would come—even to the most ardent believers (John 16:33). Much of the residual religiosity that does appear could be attributed to the show's setting in the American South, an area often portrayed by its fundamentalist beliefs.

Government: Preexisting and Reconstituted

The lack of government in the face of a crisis is a major area of concern for the characters across all seasons. References are highest in seasons one and three when government, in its respective preexisting and reconstituted forms, appears. Season one occurs after the zombie apocalypse, except for brief flashbacks containing police officers and military responses, and viewers only see preexisting governments in their decimated forms. For example, Rick and Shane wear police uniforms. Following the zombie outbreak, Rick continues to refer to himself as a policeman, and is mockingly referred to as "Officer Friendly" by Merle and others. These characters recognize that there is no law anymore. Rick echoes this development by breaking laws himself, such as breaking and entering and theft, while still adhering to his desire to "protect and serve" (Vizzini, 2011). During season one, we also see the remnants of police stations, military vehicles, and government emergency operations—all symbols of a government that failed to stop the zombie onslaught.

In season two government references decline alongside science references. The group leaves Atlanta and finds refuge in a rural setting on a farm. Government references in season two largely relate to images and nonverbal actions, mostly the uniforms that some characters continue to wear. For example, Rick gives Carl his sheriff's hat, which Carl wears throughout the second and third seasons (S02E04, *Cherokee Rose*).

Seasons one and two, while not featuring any formally reconstituted governments, show a great deal of informal political infighting in Rick's group. Most notably, Rick and Shane argue over the future of the group. Despite Rick's perceived role as group leader, which leads Carol to call Rick's wife Lori the "unofficial first lady" of the group (S02E05, *Chupacabra*), the group is often shown engaging in communal decision-making. In season two the group convened a council of sorts in Hershel's farmhouse when deciding whether to execute the captive Randal (S02E11, *Judge, Jury, Executioner*). During this meeting the group debates whether to hold a vote, and whether the result needed to be unanimous, or just a majority. A few episodes later, after Shane dies while trying to kill Rick and the farm is overrun, Rick delivers a speech to the group where he admits to killing Shane and alters the group's informal form of government:

> Maybe you people are better off without me. Go ahead. I say there's a place for us, but maybe it's just another pipe dream, maybe I'm fooling myself again. Why don't you go find out yourself? Send me a postcard! Go on, there's the door. You can do better, let's see how far you get. No takers? Fine, but get one thing straight. If you're staying, this isn't a democracy anymore! (S02E13, *Beside the Dying Fire*)

Here Rick essentially eliminates the council-type, communal decision-making process and declares that if he stays there will be no more voting.[11] Hershel reminds Rick of this statement later when faced with the threat posed by another group (S03E11, *I Ain't No Judas*).

The third season sees the group settle down in the ruins of a prison while the rival community, Woodbury, puts its hopes for salvation in the dictatorial Governor. Group member Andrea, who is separated when Hershel's farm is overrun, and newcomer Michonne are picked up by now-henchman Merle, who the rest of the group thought died in season one, and taken to meet the Governor (S03E03, *Walk with Me*). The Governor succinctly describes his "public" approach to ruling Woodbury to Andrea upon her arrival:

> The real secret [of Woodbury] is what goes on within these walls. It's about getting back to who we were—who we really are. People here have homes, medical care, kids go to school, adults have jobs to do. There's a sense of purpose. We're a community.… Compromise our safety, destroy our community, I'll die before I'll let that happen. (S03E03, *Walk with Me*)

Like Rick, his use of "I" in the last sentence indicates he sees himself as the one responsible for the community of Woodbury—its sole decision maker.

A theme that lurks in the background of the entire show and emerges at the end of season three is the superiority of a liberal government over an authoritarian one. The two groups eventually come into conflict, culminating in the Governor's assault against the prison (S03E16, *Welcome to the Tombs*). Both groups make use of preexisting government infrastructure and arms, including military vehicles and guns collected from a military convoy and prison/police stockpiles. Even in the face of all-out war with the Governor's well-armed militia, Rick's camp rejects the Governor's offer of handing over Michonne, who attacked and mutilated him previously, in exchange for peace. In the happiest ending of all three seasons, Rick's group repels the attack and absorbs the Governor's civilians into its prison settlement. In the wake of the Governor's assault where he recruited child soldiers ("adolescence is a 20th century invention," he says; S03E11, *I Ain't No Judas*) and slaughtered his own people, the combined prison group finds Rick in retirement and an official council established to govern the group's affairs, representing a return to a liberal republic of sorts going into season four.

Family: Prioritized, but Beyond Kinship

Our quantitative analysis found that family is the central institutional theme of the show. Many characters lost or lose their families during the show—Andrea loses her sister Amy, Carol loses her (abusive) husband Ed and her daughter Sophia, and Morgan loses his wife and, eventually, his son Duane. Several of these lost loved ones come back as zombies and the family members are forced to put them down. It is very rare that characters have any family left, and those that do go to whatever lengths necessary to protect them. When the group leaves their campsite for the CDC in season one, Morales and his family instead decide to head for Birmingham, Alabama, where they have relatives, because he needs to "do what's best for [his] family" (S01E05, *Wildfire*). Jenner, the CDC doctor who lost his own wife to the outbreak, says that the other doctors at the facility "left to be with their families" (S01E06, *TS-19*).

Rick, the central character of the story, wakes up from a coma in the pilot (S01E01, *Days Gone By*) and immediately makes his way to his abandoned home where he gains hope from noticing that family pictures were removed—presumably by Lori. He encounters Morgan and his son Duane who tell the tale of their zombie wife/mother who wanders the neighborhood streets. Morgan is a caring and protective father who does not have it in him to end his wife's resurrected life. Viewers find out later that this compassion toward her results in his son's death—at the hands of his zombie mother (S03E12, *Clear*). Without his son, Morgan loses his humanity and spends his days doing obsessive-compulsive tasks to survive: including "clearing" a street block of zombies, drawing and writing on walls, and stockpiling weapons (S03E12, *Clear*). Family, in this instance, serves as a person's tether to reality.

During the period when Lori believes Rick is dead, she relies on Shane to protect her and Carl and develops a sexual relationship with him. Throughout the first season, scenes and dialogue suggest both that Shane developed a greater attachment

to her and possibly fathered her daughter Judith. When Rick reappears at their camp outside Atlanta, Lori is astonished and Carl is overjoyed (S01E03, *Tell it to the Frogs*). Shane is shocked. Lacking a family of his own, Shane adopted Rick's family but is now left family-less. This "loss" leads Shane to begin a downward spiral that results in him attempting to rape Lori at the CDC, having casual sex with Andrea near Hershel's farm, and eventually attempting to kill Rick. This final act results in Rick killing his "brother," a name Rick calls Shane repeatedly throughout the first two seasons.

There is much that could be said about Rick, Lori, and Carl because a significant share of the screen time is devoted to their relationships. After the initial shock and joy of Rick's return wears off, tension develops between Rick and his wife and son. Lori and Carl repeatedly urge Rick to not leave on any more supply runs or searches, but Rick goes anyway. Carl's injury, Lori's hidden pregnancy, and her infidelity with Shane (which she eventually admits to Rick) all add to the tension in the family—and by extension, the group. At one point, Lori asks Rick if they should "hire a lawyer, get divorced, and split [their] assets," facetiously referring to the now defunct government function in dissolving marriages (S03E02, *Sick*). Lori's meddling endangers the group from time to time—showing that family is not always portrayed positively.

Despite this tension, Rick is devastated when he learns of Lori's death while delivering Judith by cesarian section (S03E04, *Killer Within*). After Maggie delivers the baby, Carl is forced to shoot his own mother before she comes back as a zombie (S03E04, *Killer Within*). This event destabilizes Rick as he begins to see visions and hear voices of those he has lost, including Lori. He shows limited interest in Judith after his mourning period, but instead relies on Hershel's daughter Beth to care for her for the most part. The group collectively raises her, illustrating that it does take a village to raise a child after the apocalypse.

Hershel shares a close but complicated connection with his two daughters, Maggie and Beth. Hershel's first wife died when his girls were young and he remarried a woman named Annette, who (along with her son Shawn) was bitten and resurrected prior to season two. Hershel's commitment to his family is demonstrated by his secret protection of these loved ones, along other zombie neighbors, in his barn. Maggie and Hershel initially fight over her relationship with Glen, and at one point she corrects his borderline racist comments about Glen, and argues in favor of allowing the group of outsiders to remain with them on the farm. Hershel eventually becomes convinced of Glen's love for his daughter and gives him his grandfather's pocket watch, a symbol of his blessing to date Maggie and join the Greene family (S02E11, *Judge, Jury, Executioner*; S03E15, *This Sorrowful Life*). Despite his initial hesitance of Maggie associating with the "Asian boy," he opens up his family to whoever his daughter chooses to love: "No man is good enough for your little girl," Hershel says, "until one is" (S03E15, *This Sorrowful Life*). Hershel's other daughter Beth's lone plot point involved a suicide attempt stemming from the loss of her mother and step-brother. Her half-sister Maggie, especially, is devastated by Beth's selfish act but Beth repents and chooses to live (S02E10, *18 Miles Out*).

Maggie and Beth are not the only sibling relationship of significance in TWD. Daryl and Merle Dixon are brothers from an abusive home in Georgia with a love–hate relationship. While they are hard on one another, they both love and miss one another when apart. After Merle cuts off his own hand to escape being handcuffed to a roof by Rick in season one, Daryl hunts for him unsuccessfully through downtown Atlanta. During the hunt for Sophia in season two, Daryl rides off alone and, after being injured and nearly bitten by zombies, has visions of Merle ridiculing him. In season three, Merle returns to the show as one of the Governor's henchmen and attempts to find his "baby brother." The brothers ultimately get pitted against each other by the Governor, escape, go off on their own and eventually return to the prison group. In this series of events Daryl first chooses "blood" over the group, but ultimately returns to the group in time to help fend off an incursion by the Governor's forces. Daryl does not want to make a choice as he wants both his brother and his new "family." Carol, Daryl's closest connection in the group, at one point warns him to "not let his brother drag [him] down" (S03E11, *I Ain't No Judas*). As Daryl and Merle's characters reveal, family is not as simple as blood ties—the connection to non-biological "family" can exert even greater pull than one's own relatives.

In fact, one of the major family themes in TWD is the construction of non-traditional family relationships. Glen considers the group as a whole to be his family, but actually becomes part of Hershel's family when he "marries" Maggie by giving her a ring removed from a zombie woman's finger (S03E15, *This Sorrowful Life*). In other cases, "families" are established when people are thrust together by the crisis. In season one, a group of what seem to be "gang bangers" in downtown Atlanta care for elderly residents of a nursing home, whether they are related or not (S01E04, *Vatos*). The prisoners who initially inhabit the prison call each other "family" after being confined together for 10 months (S03E05, *Say the Word*). Carol tells Daryl that he did more for her daughter, the missing Sophia, during the search than her biological father ever had (S02E05, *Chupacabra*). All of these words and symbolic actions redefine the core elements of family away from a blood-based definition, to one based on love and affection.

The message of the show is that the family, both formal and informal, is all that is left when the Hobbesian state of nature is restored. The survivors bond together in clans, collections of individuals and nuclear families, which take on the role of pseudo-family. Characters who have lost their families, both spouses and children, become even more like the zombies that walk around them, lacking a spirit and purpose. These characters often attempt to regain an element of family with unrelated characters, whether through romantic or adoptive connections. These include: Lori's draw to Shane; Andrea's connections with Dale, Shane, Michonne, and later the Governor; Carol's attraction to Daryl; and Daryl's to the group. Absent a healthy state, a society based on family and clan is inevitable (Weiner, 2013).

Discussion and Conclusions: A New Zombie Genre?

TWD tells a human story that in many ways could be told through any tale of global calamity brought on by disease, acts of terror, or natural disaster—as Kirkman (2003) wrote, it is "survivalist adventure." The inclusion of zombies as the antagonists (along with other humans who maintain their agency) adds another dimension to the crisis because the threat is inside everyone, can be anyone, and pits loved ones against one another. It is this zombie connection that makes our reading of the show surprising. Rather than embodying the zombie genre's leftist critique of Western society and individualism, the show exhibits an almost conservative, or at least traditional, understanding of society where family is the enduring central element of a healthy community. The zombies do not consume us; we consume ourselves if we do not put family, broadly defined, first. Sometimes this "family first" philosophy physically endangers the characters (e.g., Rick and Morgan), but their humanity nonetheless requires it.

Throughout all three seasons, each institution fails to truly save. These failures pattern after the contemporary distrust of traditional institutional forms in the USA. Just as trust in science and medicine is diminishing, the characters find that the CDC cannot cure zombies nor solve the crisis. Just as religious belief are declining, religious faith cannot save the characters from—or make sense of—the reality around them. Just as the public believes government is broken, the preexisting and reconstituted governments all fall apart. And just as the "one-size-fits-all" conception of family is rapidly fading, the characters realize that their loved ones will all die and be reborn as the living dead. But if one is going to make it through this crisis, he or she must find a way to keep his or her family alive or find others to fill the void. The desire to join large, multifamily clans shows that, post-apocalypse, this institution returns to the traditional form it held during the hunter-gatherer stage of human evolution—predating religion and government (Turner, 2003; Weiner, 2013). Without family, each person would go the way of Morgan or Shane—who lose their families first, then their souls.[12]

As society and technology become increasingly complex, shows with apocalyptic themes and post-apocalyptic settings will continue to resonate with audiences. As of this writing, TWD shows no sign of waning. Average audiences have increased by two to three million per season. With the show in the midst of a fifth season (whose premiere was viewed by a record 17 million), and poised to continue well beyond that, TWD will be a cultural staple for at least the remainder of the millennium's second decade—continuing its role as a mirror for our society's obsession with, and fear of, the apocalypse. It also will continue to reflect the tenuous precipice on which social institutions sit and our fear of what will happen if, or when, they deteriorate.

If the comic storyline is a true indication, the show will likely continue to explore the salvational potential of post-apocalyptic political arrangements and, eventually, reconstituted economies between them, highlighting the promise of trade—and the dangers of forced tribute—to sustain the hunter-gatherer economy. The introductions of the Terminus community (loosely based on a group from the comics) and

the character Dr Eugene Porter in seasons four and five reveal that the show's producers want to continue teasing out the hope (real or imagined) offered to members of the group by science and (preexisting or reconstituted) government through respective quests to a mysterious safe haven and, later, to Washington, DC, for an unknown government operation to cure the outbreak.[13] This demonstrates that, despite the past hopelessness offered by most institutions, the characters are willing to give them another chance because they may be succeeding in locations outside the US South. Religion also makes a comeback in the fifth season when the characters encounter Father Gabriel Stokes, who fills the vacant role of the group's moral compass despite his own damnable past actions.

But each of these institutions is again discredited when Terminus and Porter are both revealed as frauds (or worse, in Terminus' case), and the group savagely exacts revenge on Terminus' members inside "the Lord's house"— which Maggie remarks is nothing more than "four walls and a roof" (S05E03, *Four Walls and a Roof*). Given the remnants of society around them, the characters cannot help but make contact with institutional remains that, time and again, prove that these institutions cannot save them. The "clan-as-family" mentality is validated when Rick Grimes rallies his group to successfully escape Terminus by saying, "They're screwing with the wrong people" (S04E16, *A*). The fifth season further teases the redemption of Morgan's family-less character as he treks to find a new family in Rick's group.

The show might also explore new avenues apart from the plot of the comic. These storylines may adapt as real-life events influence the writers. After all, in the wake of fears of global influenza outbreaks that occurred after the initial publication of the comic, the CDC storyline was added to the show. While this analysis assumes that the show portrays social institutions in a fictional environment, let us not forget that television and film themselves constitute institutions which shape our culture and behavior. Notably, the show raised the profile of the CDC and the idea of a zombie apocalypse so much that the real-life CDC began using "Zombie Preparedness" as a gimmick to advertise general disaster readiness.[14] In the wake of several bizarre biting incidents, some people actually came to believe in real-life zombies and the CDC had to issue corrective statements (Campbell, 2012). At times, the line between fiction and fact is thin indeed—and the 2014 Ebola outbreak may only intensify these connections.

This show highlights our society's fears about the ending of civilization. It does so while using themes from our own society that resonate with viewers—showing that the forces disintegrating our institutions today may be the same forces that deter our survival following an apocalyptic event. As the show illustrates, without clear social institutions to guide and organize us, we ourselves become "the walking dead." While governments, religions, and science all fade, it is the family—in its nuclear and tribal varieties—that sustains our survival as a species. It is this observation, along with the show's implicit praise for liberal democracy, that upends zombie genre theory. Kirkman (2003) recognized immediately that his creation broke with past, Romero-era zombie entries while still maintaining the tradition of social critique. We see it as the complete redefinition of zombie lore—making it more palatable to a much wider audience, across the political spectrum.[15] Government and its science programs

cannot save us, but neither can the church. Family, according to TWD, matters most at the end of the day—and at the end of the world.

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Notes

[1] We maintain convention by using the term "zombie" throughout this essay. TWD, however, eschews this label—instead preferring "walkers" and other terms ("biters," "lame-brains," etc.).

[2] We use "family" to mean the same thing as Turner's (1997, 2003) term kinship.

[3] While we do not formally analyze the graphic novel's content, both authors have read the bulk of the *Image* comic series through at least the second compendium (issues 1–96) and recognize the similarities and differences between the comic books and the show. Seasons one through three roughly correspond with issues 1–48, although the ending of season three differs from the comic storyline.

[4] Of 140 data points (four institutions across 35 episodes), we agreed on the institutional counts per episode in 102 cases (73%). In the 38 cases where we did not initially agree, we were on average disagreeing over +/– two institutional references per episode. We decided on final episode counts by reconciling our disagreements. Nonetheless, we each initially identified over 95% of the agreed-upon references across the four institutions. This consistency validates our operationalized definitions and methodological implementation.

[5] We also performed a post hoc analysis known as Tukey's HSD (honest significant difference) test. This test found that significant differences between the three season means for each institution were due to negative differences in the following season pairs (others not significant): science (1 and 2; 1 and 3); religion (2 and 3); and family (2 and 3).

[6] "And the seventh angel poured out his vial into the air; and there came a great voice out of the temple of heaven, from the throne, saying, It is done" (King James Version, KJV).

[7] "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you…" (KJV).

[8] "And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell" (KJV).

[9] "Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day" (KJV).

[10] "And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation." (KJV)

[11] Fans refer to the aftermath of Rick's speech as the "Ricktatorship."

[12] Rick would also fit this category of experience if it were not for Carl (and less so in the television show, Judith). After Lori's death in the comics and show, Rick dedicates himself to doing whatever it takes to ensure Carl's survival.

[13] This brief discussion of seasons four and five is based on our preliminary viewing, which lacked the systematic content analysis applied in our second viewing of seasons one to three.

[14] See: http://www.cdc.gov/phpr/zombies.htm

[15] Initial studies showed that TWD was favored by liberal Democratic viewers (Zennie, 2011). More recently, a study of Facebook "likes" found that the show's appeal stretches across the political divide (Gilman, 2014).

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Appendix 1

In addition to the definitions in the text, we also established several ground rules early in our viewing for what constitutes evidence of each institution. Although not comprehensive, these provided guidance for coding recurring references to the four institutions.

(1) References to Rick or Shane as Sheriff's Deputies count as evidence of government. Their sheriff's uniforms count as one nonverbal instance of government per episode in which they are worn. A badge or hat will not count separately as an image unless shown apart from the uniform. A police cruiser or the police station counts once per episode when shown.
(2) References to and the use of firearms (unless discharged by a government representative, in which case it is nonverbal government), non-governmental vehicles, and tools are not evidence of any institutions, despite their status as technology derived from scientific advancement.
(3) Actions using communication gear count as nonverbal evidence of science. The content of these communications can also count as dialogue if referencing other institutions.
(4) References to God in swearing/cursing are not counted as religious dialogue. However, if such references can be reasonably construed as human communication with God (e.g., prayers or requests for aid), they count as evidence of religion.
(5) Family members portrayed together do not count as evidence unless they are engaging in dialogue about family matters (e.g., spouses arguing or parents disciplining a child) or performing nonverbal actions of familial nature (e.g., kissing or embracing one another).
(6) References to division of labor in the larger group between men and women count as evidence of family when reasonably construed as relating to gender roles in family units.