



## *The Walking Dead* as a Critique of American Democracy

by Isaac Berk

In 2002 *The Wire* awakened many Left film critics to a new area of serious study—television. When the series ended in 2008 with no successor in sight, it seemed reasonable to consider it an anomaly. With the cultural space previously monopolized by feature films eroded by the popularity of television dramas the situation seemed dire. Because studios were able to make changes whenever convenient, there would be no more Left narratives that “sneak through” (e.g., *They Live*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, etc.) and we were to be relegated to watching literally days of 24 only to conclude that it was imperialist. While attacking all that is bad in capitalist film/television should be the main concern of the anti-capitalist critic, wading through the muck to find a gem of social critique is ever more important in an age where points of shared reference are increasingly coming from our TVs. But in 2010 such a gem appeared: *The Walking Dead*, a show under the guidance of “show-runner” Frank Darabont (*The Shawshank Redemption*, *Green Mile*), that used a small group of survivors in a zombie apocalypse to portray the real situation of American democracy.

However, when someone tries to exalt the “real” radical nature of something as widely popular as *The Walking Dead* we might safely assume there was a degree of finding-what-you-were-looking-for. To be sure, this is not a secret manifesto for which we should throw away Marx and Bakunin. Rather, I will argue with a small leap of Leftist faith the narrative is unmistakably critical,

even beyond the progressive DemocracyNow!ism of *The Wire*. This leap is that Rick, the Sheriff turned group leader, is in charge because of implicit power dynamics, not simply his natural abilities. We see the drama that surrounds him coming not from a sincere will to fulfill his duty as a Sheriff to protect others, but instead from a desire for power and dominance over the group to protect his family. The radical critique developed under Darabont (fired in July 2011) survived under Glen Mazzara in the third season but withered under attack from new show runner, Scott Gimple, in the fourth. My analysis will focus on the first three seasons with a brief analysis of how the critique was dismantled, character by character, in the fourth.

But first we need some coordinates. Who are the characters? Delinquents and misfits? An elite, best-of-the-best team? The underdogs with a heart of gold? No, the characters represent a cross-section of the general American population. From the initial group of survivors we have the whole spread of token American demographics: white bigots (Ed, Merle), good-natured working class whites (Carol, Daryl), blacks (T-Dog, Jaqui), Latinos (Morales family), Asians (Glen), liberal, middle-class whites (Dale, Andrea), and a political class (Rick, Lori, Shane). The dynamics of the group are not meant to show how people change in extreme situations but to reflect how people already are under capitalist democracy.

The opening sequence of every episode confirms that the show is about people not zombies. We see places where we know zombies really are (the streets of Atlanta, open fields, abandoned stores) totally empty. The zombies function as a natural disaster irrelevant to the storyline. Digitalspy.com quotes Darabont as saying, "I don't know if I can bring anything new to the zombie metaphor, so my focus is the human part of the story."<sup>1</sup> The only agents capable of affecting the story are people. As Subcomandante Marcos, mouthpiece of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico, wrote in a communique in February 2013:

Yes, we sympathize with the zombies, not only because of our physical resemblance, (even without makeup we would take every spot in the casting of *The Walking Dead*). Also, and above all, because we think, like George A. Romero, that, in a zombie apocalypse, the craziest brutality would be the work of the surviving civilization, not of the walking dead.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the enduring legacy of civilization, as Marcos points out, is situated as a central theme early in the first season through the confrontation between Rick and Guillermo which highlights the role of leadership in social organization. In response to Guillermo, leader of a group of thugs turned nursing home protectors,

describing the people that have tried to rob the nursing home, T-Dog says, "Guess the world's changed." Guillermo responds, "No, it's the same as it ever was. The weak get taken." The latter goes on to explain his reluctance to be a leader, how he doesn't understand why the others look to him for answers—to which Rick replies, "Because they can." (Season 1, Episode 4, "Vatos"). This apparently frank discussion between two leaders ends up revealing differences rather than similarities. Guillermo is a leader in name only; rather than constantly directing the group's actions, he stands idly by while the rest spend their time fixing up cars which Guillermo sees as pointless. Even his plan to get Rick to hand over the guns by threatening to feed Glenn to the dogs (which we find out are Chihuahuas) is frustrated by an elderly woman who walks right between the two groups pointing their guns at each other, invites Rick, T-Dog, and Daryl inside, and shows them right to Glenn, while Guillermo begrudgingly lets them through. He can be in charge in certain situations, like the stand-off, but his role is more of satisfying people's desire for leadership than actually making crucial decisions, presenting an alternative to the top-down leadership often seen in post-apocalyptic groups.

Rick is Guillermo's opposite. As Steven Lloyd Wilson writes in a 2013 article for *Salon.com* "The Walking Dead: Anti-libertarian Critique," "Rick is a police officer, the symbol of the old order, tossed up in charge for no real reason other than that damned uniform he put on out of habit. He takes in his hands the hard decisions. He is [sic] the state as thoroughly as old Louis."<sup>3</sup> Though he is theoretically an equal member of the group he makes decisions unilaterally that the group follows. After his statement indicating some innate human weakness that causes leaders to take charge ("because they can"), he starts handing over the weapons without even feigning a need for group approval.

In this pivotal episode we also see a correction to potential stereotyping. Guillermo's group<sup>4</sup> is mostly made up of people who talk and dress like stereotypical Mexican gangsters. When we first meet them we think the show is introducing just one more token group. By the end of the episode this has been turned on its head. Social position before the apocalypse is not a function of natural talents as it often is in zombie films. Rick and Shane would be cops because of their natural skills as protectors, which now means they make the best leaders; people who robbed and stole before the apocalypse should, therefore, be robbing and plundering afterward. Yet we see the opposite in both cases, the gangsters protect the sick and elderly after the staff of the nursing home abandoned them. Rather than simply magnifying "nature" the apocalypse allowed for a new social organization where people work together using their personal abilities (fixing cars, smashing heads with bats) to protect one another.

This is Marx's dialectical nature of crisis: it can be a time to reassert power, as Rick and Shane do in the absence of the state, or a time for substantial social progress. Even when former pizza deliverer Glenn, who recently saved Rick's life and reconnected him with his family, comes up with a plan to rescue their weapons using his skills of navigating city streets, he looks to Rick for approval. While Guillermo could be said to be doing the same thing, re-appropriating his skills as a custodian to take care of the building in a new way there is an important symbolic difference: when unarmed Glenn finally gets the bag of guns, he sees the zombies steadily approaching, he turns to run away but doubles back for Rick's sheriff hat, an image of authority *par excellence*. Even if their actions may be similar, Rick's drive to protect his family, for which the rest of the group is convenient, is politically very different from Guillermo's drive to protect the people in the home. Guillermo's group represents the gold standard of "from each according to ability, to each according to need" but in keeping with *The Walking Dead's* pessimism the group is never mentioned again.

In the show, as in US party politics, the pool from which the leader is chosen is rarely questioned. Rick and Shane are the only two ever seriously considered for the position and represent the two sides of mainstream political parties. Shane champions the making of hard choices while Rick is empathetic for the desperate (e.g., Randall) as long as it doesn't harm the group. Though never a serious contender, Dale appears as the third party Ralph Nader character with such laughable ultra-liberal ideas as getting rid of all the weapons.

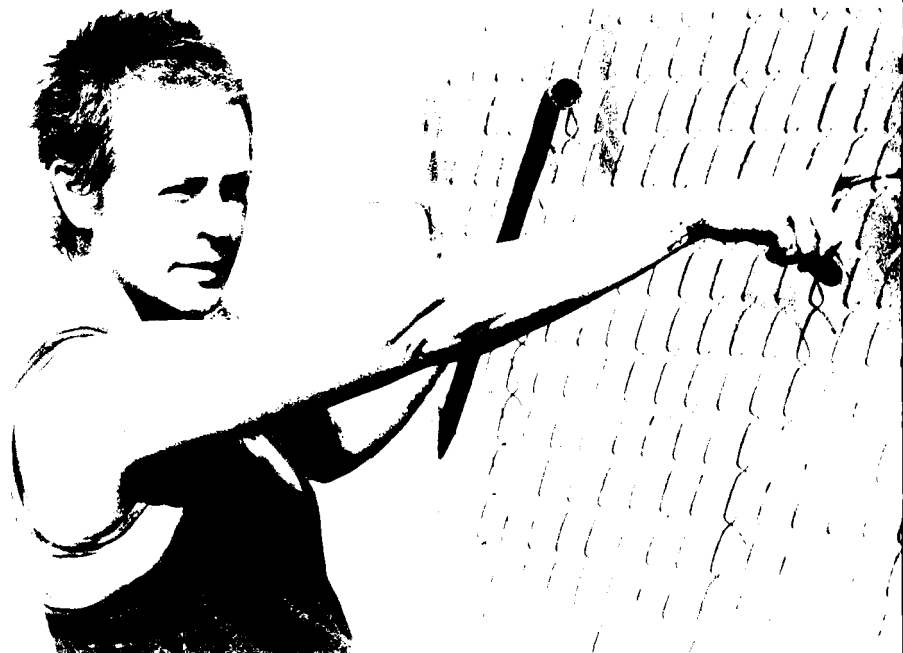
The second season continues the critique by showing the apolitics inherent in modern day elections. Though zombie attacks interrupted by romantic melodrama is what one would expect from a straightforward horror/action film, Season 1 clearly demonstrated that that would not be the focus of the plot. So why would they choose to introduce such a weak plot device in the second season? Other than dealing with Hershel's family, the driving plot line of the second season is Rick and Shane's competition for Lori. The gradual blurring of politics (that is, what the group should do) and inter-personal problems frustrates the entire second season. This frustration brilliantly shows us a reflection of American politics.

When we examine any specific issue (e.g., Randall's fate, the war in Afghanistan) we see a genuine problem—of the two options posed

one is inevitably better than the other. But when we zoom out slightly we see a bleaker picture of two old friends bickering while people are dying all around them. Let's take the case of Shane sacrificing Otis. While for the viewers this was damning evidence about Shane's true egotistical nature, Rick not only admits but prides himself on the fact that he would have done the same. They argue, essentially, over who is more prepared to kill other members of the group in order to protect Carl or Lori (2.10 "18 Miles Out"). Just as we screamed at the rest of characters, "Stop keeping secrets and positioning yourselves behind fickle individuals! Make these decisions collectively!", so should we during every election cycle.

If the issue between Shane, Rick, and Lori is a pseudo-conflict, that is, a frustrating distraction from more substantial issues of group politics and effectively rebuilding (reorganizing?) society, then the other characters represent various positions on the political spectrum. Some more active and others more passive.

An obvious example of this is Carol, who was a fairly minor character in the first two seasons. Her role shifts between being protected, pitied, and berated. This is the frank reality of rural working class women in America today. Contrary to much of today's feminist film criticism, giving women "agency" in a film is not necessarily the best thing for feminist politics and can, in some cases, have quite the opposite effect. Carol is excluded from group politics proper because working class women *are really* excluded from the political process. If she were to be an independent woman who "speaks truth to power" (whatever effect that supposedly has) and doesn't let the men tell her what to do, one would conclude that what women need is simply stronger character traits. In a 2013



article on PolicyMic.com “The Walking Dead Season 3: 3 Sexist Things the Show Says about Women,” Monique Collins writes, “It’s just a matter of time before Carol Peletier dies. She’s our waif in this show. She’s innocent, naïve, passive and kind. She’s victimized by her abusive husband, but instead of standing up for herself in the wake of a zombie apocalypse, she is saved by Shane. After her husband dies, she still doesn’t take charge for herself or her young daughter.” The problem in this analysis is that it assumes sexism could effectively be combated by “standing up for yourself” and “taking charge” rather than sexism being rooted in political/economic systems that have drilled themselves deep into our culture. The scene by the lake when Shane beats up Carol’s husband Ed is not portrayed as absolute necessity, Andrea and the rest of the women (minus Lori of course) were ready for a showdown, but that’s not what happened throughout history. The state stepped in to “protect” women just as the feminist movement was growing in strength and militancy and the movement dissipated without addressing the root (i.e. political) cause, leaving room for the same dynamics to continue.

Neither depiction, realistic or utopian, is innately more feminist than the other; the question is whether or not the depiction is situated as part of a broader critique. Collins continues, “Carol, for some ridiculous reason, ended up alone with no weapon. So, what does she pick up? A piece of wood. That wouldn’t have been a problem, except for the fact that she started swinging it frantically, clearly having no idea how to protect herself.” Again, the problem is that *The Walking Dead* doesn’t portray women as they really are: martial arts masters. The show, instead, decides to do something much more radical; it demonstrates that even when everything else has changed (her husband is dead, society as we know it has ended) sexism will continue to thrive as long as there is political inequality. While Rick or Shane is in charge, with the rest of the men with guns behind them, there is no need to consult Carol on serious issues. She finds her value to the group in cooking, cleaning, and staying quiet and only a significant political shift could change that.

Similar to Carol, T-Dog is a perfectly productive and able member of the group yet he is still thoroughly excluded from all decision making. When the situation is bad he’s willing to discuss inequality. For example when he and Dale are waiting by the side of the road unable to find the medicine he needs, he says, “[T]hey think we’re the weakest. What are you? 70?” Dale answers, “64.” “And I’m the one black guy. Realize how precarious that makes my situation?” “What the hell are you talking about?” “I’m talking about two good ole’ boy, cowboy sheriffs and a redneck whose brother cut off his own hand because I dropped the key. Who in that scenario you think is the first one to get lynched?” When T-Dog suggests they take the RV and leave the group Dale can’t believe what he’s hearing. He checks T-Dog’s forehead

and says, “You’re burning up! ... We gotta knock that fever down” (2.2 “Bloodletting”). Just like real racism, it doesn’t have to be open or egregious to be effective. Although outrage can be rallied around individual incidents (e.g., Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown), we are a far cry from the relatively unified anti-capitalist black power movement of just 40 years ago. Without this unification and deeper analysis complaints are easily brushed off as pent up rage to be remedied by more social programs. T-Dog’s inability to sustain his critique of the group dynamics leads to his asking Dale two episodes later to never mention the incident again, content if everyone “kicks in and does their part” (2.4 “Cherokee Rose”).

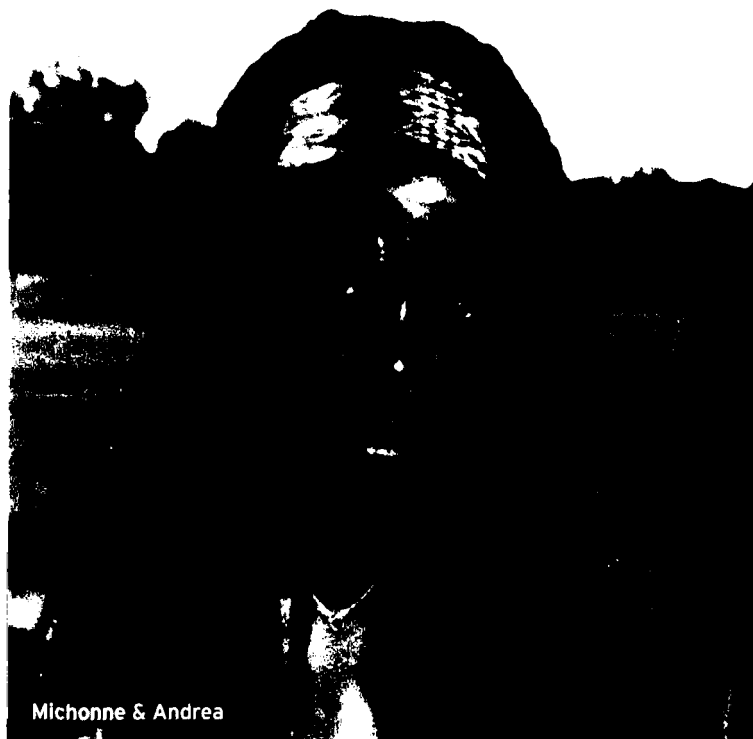
Even one of the few heroes of the show, Daryl, meets a tragic political end. The younger brother of racist redneck Merle and absent in the comics, Daryl represents southern and rural populism, which must overcome its racist and sexist past. He is juxtaposed to another image of rural “traditionalism”—Hershel—who ends up formalizing for the first time (“I’ll control my people, you control yours” (2.5 “Chupacabra”)), and later submitting to, Rick’s position of dominance over the group. Daryl, on the other hand, does not directly oppose many of Rick’s decisions, most of which are quite logical. He does however categorically reject his dependence on Rick as a leader. When Rick asks him, “You OK on your own?” he doesn’t hesitate to say, “I’m better on my own” (2.4 “Cherokee Rose”). We recognize immediately that this can be the basis for much Right-wing, libertarian rhetoric. But in “Chupacabra” after dedicating himself to finding Sofia (a nod to potential solidarity with his downtrodden counterpart Carol) and then falling off a cliff onto an arrow, he confronts his brother’s ghost. The ghost asks him, “You [Rick’s] bitch now?” “I ain’t nobody’s bitch.” “You’re a joke is what you are. Playing errand boy to a bunch of pansy asses, niggers, and Democrats. You’re nothing but a freak to them, redneck trash.” In classic Right-wing extremism you see the promise of personal independence and disdain for elitism that can be appealing to working class whites. Embedded in this is a call-to-arms that Daryl is so close to taking up. Not to lose the kernel of radical populism that was once prominent in rural America<sup>6</sup>. As he climbs up the cliff, Merle again appears above him, taunting him and calling him Darleena. When he approaches the top Merle’s ghost reaches for him and says, “Grab your friend Rick’s hand.” What was motivating Daryl? His hatred for Rick or his hatred for Merle? When he finally gets to the top of the cliff (after having ripped an arrow out of his side just in time to kill a zombie with it) we see that it was only through both—his rejection of his racist sexist past *and* his prideful refusal to submit to Rick’s leadership—that he perseveres.

Though the show recognizes the potential for a reassertion of populist politics, it makes sure not to embrace rural whites as necessarily the base for the next radical

movement. The survivors regroup after Rick and Shane's feud turns into a battle to the death and Rick kills Shane, attracting a horde of zombies that overrun the farm, and it's revealed that Rick had been hiding an important characteristic of the zombies since Season 1. Carol turns to Daryl and says, "We need a man of honor." Daryl, betraying his independent nature and fulfilling Merle's errand boy prophecy (in regards to the Democrat part that is) responds, "Rick's got honor" (2.13 "Beside the Dying Fire"). He then goes on to become his right-hand man, a new, subservient replacement for Shane.

One character even more poignant than Daryl is Andrea who, much more than Carol, depicts the story of 20<sup>th</sup> century feminism. In her first interaction with Rick, after she, Glenn, Morales, Jaqui, and T-Dog save his life in Atlanta, she pulls her gun and threatens to kill him for putting them all in danger (1.2 "Guts"). We are reminded of the history of feminist militancy, when women took to the streets to demand concessions (e.g., suffrage). But we find out shortly that, in fact, her gun's safety was on the whole time. That is to say, the earlier movements never had the real potential to overthrow the political system, they were asking, however forcefully, for the state to provide them with something. Just as moments later when Merle beats up Morales and T-Dog and then points a gun at the group, forcing them to vote for him as leader, it's heroic Rick that steps in and saves them by handcuffing Merle to a pipe. This is a reasonable enough response, who doesn't enjoy thinking about the national government going to war with Southern racism like the case of the Little Rock Nine. The problem is that these movements struggled to go beyond the limits of liberalism, that is to say, take the safety off and see the state itself as the root of the problem.

Back at the camp Andrea becomes firmly situated as the feminist character. Discussing with the women what they miss most about society, she makes everyone laugh by saying it's her vibrator, a clear reference to the sexual liberation movement (1.3 "Tell it to the Frogs"). Carol's husband Ed tells them to stop laughing and get back to work causing a scuffle between him and the women. Andrea is even clearly frustrated by Shane stepping in to help them. This is the peak of 60s and 70s feminist militancy. We are reminded in this episode that Andrea was a civil rights lawyer and 12 years older than her sister Amy<sup>7</sup>. She apparently wasn't close to her sister and now wants to use this time to get to know her, representing the very real separation between campus feminists and the majority of oppressed women. As Andrea kneels over Amy's zombifying body she laments, "Amy, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for not ever being there. I always thought there would be more time" (1.5 "Wildfire"). Because the US never experienced a broad-based feminist movement like *Mujeres Libres* in Spain for example, the feminist movement always grappled with this practical distance. The trauma of losing Amy was both the direct trauma



Michonne & Andrea

of losing someone as it was the failure to close a gap—for American feminism this is the gap between relatively small activist circles and the broader oppressed population, a trauma that still haunts mainstream feminism today.

Crushed by Amy's death, Andrea falls into a depression. When she is given an opportunity to commit suicide at the CDC by staying in the building as it self-destructs she willingly takes it. While no one seems to put up much of a fight over Jaqui, a black woman, staying behind, Dale refuses to leave without Andrea. When feminism was on its last legs it was the institutional Left in the form of nonprofits (e.g., ACLU, Planned Parenthood) and electoral politics (The Democratic Party but also smaller third parties) that stepped in to preserve it. Andrea remains somewhat put off by Dale because of his paternalistic attempts to protect her but his liberalism certainly rubs off. She champions specific issues, like Beth's right to commit suicide, but she is unable to connect with the other women in the group. This may be good in the case of antifeminist Lori but a personal standoffishness prevents her from building relationships with Maggie, Carol, Patricia, or even Beth.

Andrea never fully recovers from the loss of Amy. Her feminist energy is funneled into being treated "just like one of the guys." She wants to be trained to shoot in order to prove her worth to the group. This is certainly a legitimate desire but the focus shifts from the treatment of women in general to her individual treatment as a woman. To this end she turns to a close relationship with macho powerhouse Shane. Just as appalling as one time feminist Andrea reaching out to Shane, so should 'radical feminists' appear looking to the state for equality. When



many of these campus feminists (both women and men) graduated and started looking for jobs, their radical analysis dissipated into shallow demands for equal pay for equal work. Rather than feminism being one facet of a struggle against all inequality, the struggle was for women to be exploited equally with men or, worse yet, that women should have the same opportunity to exploit others as men do.

As much as Andrea might have appeared cleansed of any serious feminist politics by the end of Season 2, she was resurrected in Season 3 by Michonne. Michonne is independent of any group and drags the toothless, armless zombie bodies of her boyfriend and his buddy (who, we later find out, were getting high at a rescue camp and were unable to protect her son when zombies attacked (4.16 "A")) around as pets to ward off other zombies. When Andrea asks her if she wants to talk about who they were Michonne firmly says, "They deserve what they got. They weren't human to begin with" (3.14 "Prey"). She represents Black Feminism, which proliferated in the 80s and 90s after frustration over the single issue nature of the civil rights and mainstream feminist movement. Just as Michonne protected Andrea when she was unable to defend herself so too did black feminism and solidarity with anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggle provide an opportunity for feminism to build up a broad base of support. It was the only serious hope if feminism, now in its "third wave," was to regain the movement status it once had.

When Andrea and Michonne were first taken in by The Governor they were both skeptical of Woodbury, the town he created. Slowly, though, the tension between the immediate material incentives and the larger political

ideology pull the friends apart. The first time they hear someone calling The Governor by his title he defends himself by saying, "Some nicknames stick whether you want them to or not." Andrea astutely responds, "Buzz is a nickname, Governor is a title. There's a difference" (3.3 "Walk With Me"). Shortly after, her disposition changes. It is fairly reasonable that one would be seduced by food, safety, and medicine in the midst of a zombie apocalypse but Michonne sees what's really at stake. When Michonne says, "I'd rather take my chances out there than stay here," referring to Woodbury. Andrea doubtfully asks, "Because your gut tells you there's something off about this place? About The Governor?"

This hypochondriacal fear of hierarchy is the defining characteristic that elevates Third Wave or Black Feminism above that of the liberal women's right movement. The state is unable, by definition, to protect women just as no number of hot showers are worth having to submit to The Governor for Michonne. As the 90s experience renewed interest in feminist politics, the 2000s saw its remission again into the nonprofit sector, and *The Walking Dead* shows this at its extreme with Andrea's cozy romantic relationship with The Governor.

Andrea's inability to take action and the propensity for contemporary feminists to immerse themselves in theory rather than movement building go hand in hand. After Andrea is told about how evil The Governor is she wakes up in the night after having slept with him and takes out her knife. She stands over him in the perfect position to kill him but puts the knife down instead, ostensibly in order to try to find a solution through dialogue (3.11 "I Ain't A Judas"). The focus on discourse, whether in academia or online, rather than organizing has been paralyzing for feminism and in the show it directly contributes to Andrea's horrific death. She got caught talking and, like the feminist movement today, was eaten alive. Even Michonne, who emerges from the third season as a hero, even if she did make some compromises with Rick, ends up attacking The Governor's zombie daughter rather than The Governor directly (3.8 "Made to Suffer"). This attack on the daughter, though, does put her in a position, after a difficult battle, to kill The Governor when Andrea steps in and saves him. This is an important lesson for radical feminists. It is not the case that the liberals will fall in line when they see our potential for real change, it will most likely be those who lay claim to the feminist title but have become inseparable from the state apparatus who will fight tooth and nail against us. While this is certainly a climax for the revolutionary potential of Black feminism in the show, it alludes to the tendency for today's feminists to focus on symbolic areas like the arts rather than direct political conflict (though she does take out his eye!).

The show, if my argument is to be coherent, should be understood as primarily character driven. Unlike television shows like *Law & Order*, *The Walking Dead* does



Carol, too, once a fairly passive, honest character, goes behind the rest of the group's back to teach the children how to use knives (4.1 "30 Days Without An Accident") and kills two sick minor characters to prevent the spread of the disease. Rick takes her on a supply run to confront her about the killings. Even though he sees she was trying to protect the group, he maintains that she should have consulted the rest of the group first so he banishes her (without consulting the rest of the group, of course) (4.3 "Isolation"). After reconnecting, the group is split up and she ends up with her two adopted daughters, Lizzie and Mika, baby Judith, and Tyrese. When Lizzie kills Mika in order to turn her into a zombie Carol must take her on a walk and shoot her in the head while telling her to "just look at the flowers" (4.14 "The Grove"), a sappy emotional ploy. Even the true hero, Michonne, shamefully pardons her boyfriend and his friend and admits that her anger really comes from an inability to forgive (4.16 "A").

not have a clear one plot per show set-up. Thinking back on a season there is no obvious break where one episode ends and another begins. The story is about characters and their positions, allegiances, etc. The social critique does not lie in any particular problem the group faces (e.g., fighting the zombies, rescuing someone) but in the symbolism of characters and their place in the group's dynamics.

In the fourth season this character-as-critique approach is dismantled. For example, Rick's character is flipped on its head; he is more or less docile and just wants to stay in his Voltairian garden. It's Hershel who urges him (on behalf of the "council") to carry his gun (4.1 "30 Days Without An Accident"). This device is stale and overused. When a character has begun to represent something (say, strong-handed leadership) one simply makes them do the opposite (give up fighting and be content to work in the garden) to create "complexity" in the character. The struggle ceases to be about good or evil but for each individual to find a balance within themselves. Rick overstepped his position as leader but now has overcorrected and left the group with the impotent "council." The solution is that Rick, this time slightly more pensive, takes control again. The structure of leadership is no longer the issue; it's the psychology of the leader. These soap-operaesque psychological struggles betray the political symbolism that Darabont created".

Season 4 is structured differently. After the first episodes involving the group, many of the episodes focus on two or three characters exclusively. This structure allowed for a drastic shift in plot focus. As described above, political conflict is turned into inner conflict. For example in "Still" (4.12) Beth and Daryl have been separated from the group and they come upon a country club. When they make their way inside Daryl starts breaking things and throwing darts at the pictures of old rich people. Beth is going through an emotional crisis and all Daryl wants to do is wreck stuff. Later in the episode they find themselves in an old shack with a still in the back. Daryl reveals that it resembles his childhood home and reminds him of his abusive drunken father. We see that his anger towards "elites" and "the rich," is not a sincere political position, as, I would argue, it was in the first three seasons, but a personal, psychological "daddy-issue."

Another way to rid a show of serious symbolic efficacy is to introduce apolitical themes. After the group has been splintered, the power dynamics are essentially gone. In order to fill this void the show sets the group up with other problems to face such as addiction, hope, and empathy for zombies (Lizzie). These are "tough" issues but the conflict is transferred inwards and turned away from politics. For these reasons there's a clear distinction between the first three seasons and the fourth.

*The Walking Dead* is not commonly held as a radical attack on false democracy; certainly other readings may also hold weight. That being said, upon reflection we see this basic power struggle as the underlying current for the advancement of the plot. When we ask the question, what is a TV show or film about, we should be careful not to rely on plot summary. *The Walking Dead* is not *about* zombies. While the make-up is high quality and the fight scenes are well done, the driving tension present in the show revolves around the character of the group itself—the morality, the politics, and the goals. In Woodbury people are so distracted by watching gladiators fight in a ring surrounded by zombies that they fail to see the threat of The Governor looming over them (3.5 “Say The Word”). The exciting battle sequences are secondary to the political context.

The zombies themselves are not a very big threat, since any small group can usually kill a large number of zombies provided they have a good strategy or chain link fence. Where the zombies wreak havoc it is in situations caused by other humans. The zombies represent problems in the general sense, in saving us from which leaders claim their legitimacy. As much as one may not like representative capitalist democracy, there is no other immediate option before us. Just as any character could, in the abstract, walk away from the group any time they disagree with Rick, they would face almost certain death if they tried. Rather than coming up with allegories for issues like health care, unemployment, etc., the show has condensed those concerns into one external threat: zombies.

While Rick may not be widely considered a villain, he has not enjoyed the same kind of popularity that the real stars of the show, such as Daryl and Michonne, have. As Subcomandante Marcos (the above mentioned Mexican revolutionary) explains in a communique from January 2013, “I also think that Daryl Dixon ... shouldn’t die, nor Michonne [*sic*]... but maybe the screenwriters fear that both of them will become adherents of the Sixth [Declaration from the Lacandon Jungle which details the Zapatista’s desire for broad based struggle against capitalism outside of state mechanisms], it suits their characters.”<sup>8</sup> If it wasn’t clear before, the message of the show crystallized in the Season 2 finale when, in the last scene, Rick declares, “This isn’t a democracy anymore” (2.13 “Beside the Dying Fire”). The punchline, of course, being ... it never was a democracy!

The popularity of *The Walking Dead*, I argue, comes from people relating to the tension and frustration in the show. They too feel excluded and lied to. That their situation is too drastic to be able to take a stand. That even if they were to take a stand there is no clear enemy in front of them—the Merles and Governors of the world feel far away from the safe prison of America. The show demonstrates that who has the best answer to economic crisis, environmental disaster, etc., is not the real issue. If we

want to address the root problem preventing the organization of a better society we must question *how* those solutions are chosen, and see that every particular issue is frustrated by unequal dynamics of power in liberal democracy.

We learn in the show that you don’t have to be bitten in order to become a zombie; we all have the innate ability to “turn.” It’s not Rick, or Shane, or Obama but the structure of hierarchy embedded in the state that can turn anyone against humanity. The state turns its biggest victims, the oppressed and downtrodden, into the most devoted servants in the service of capitalism, like zombies joining the herd.



#### Notes

- 1 Jeffery, Morgan. “Darabont: ‘Romero inspired Walking Dead.’” Digital Spy. [www.digitalspy.com/tv/s135/the-walking-dead/news/a259220/darabont-romero-inspired-walking-dead.htm#~oEKWMvnD5vO8LV](http://www.digitalspy.com/tv/s135/the-walking-dead/news/a259220/darabont-romero-inspired-walking-dead.htm#~oEKWMvnD5vO8LV) (accessed May 9, 2014).
- 2 Enlace Zapatista. Them and Us. VI. - The Gaze. <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2013/02/09/them-and-us-vi-the-gaze/> (accessed May 28, 2014).
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- 4 Added by Darabont but nonexistent in the comics and originally planned not to have a leader according to an interview with actor Neil Brown Jr. who plays Guillermo. “Q&A - Neil Brown Jr. (Guillermo).” AMC Blogs. [blogs.amctv.com/the-walking-dead/2011/06/neil-brown-jr-interview/](http://blogs.amctv.com/the-walking-dead/2011/06/neil-brown-jr-interview/) (accessed May 18, 2014).
- 5 Collins, Monique. “3 Sexist Things ‘The Walking Dead’ Says About Women.” PolicyMic. [www.policymic.com/articles/29968/the-walking-dead-season-3-3-sexist-things-the-show-says-about-women](http://www.policymic.com/articles/29968/the-walking-dead-season-3-3-sexist-things-the-show-says-about-women) (accessed May 22, 2014).
- 6 For example, *The Appeal to Reason*, out of Kansas, was the most popular socialist paper in the early 1900s with circulation peaking at 500,000.
- 7 The show chose to exacerbate the gap which was only two years in the comics.
- 8 This is not all that surprising considering Mazzara, interim show-runner after Darabont, was replaced by Scott Gimple, who was previously best known for co-writing the 2012 Golden Raspberry nominee for Worst Prequel, Rip-Off, Remake, or Sequel - *Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance* starring Nicolas Cage.
- 9 Enlace Zapatista. PS’s to The Sixth that, as its name indicates, was the fifth part of “Them and Us.” <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2013/02/03/ps%C2%B4s-to-the-sixth-that-as-its-name-indicates-was-the-fifth-part-of-them-and-us/> (accessed May 26, 2014).



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## Call for submissions

### CineAction n° 96 SEXUAL POLITICS: PAST & PRESENT

This issue is devoted to the exploration of sexual politics in narrative film. We invite an array of possibilities ranging from pre-code Hollywood through international cinemas in the present day. Although contemporary cinema has evolved to include a broad perspective on sexuality and gender politics, one can equally argue that the Sternberg-Dietrich collaborations in the 30s, for example, are as audacious and radical in terms of their treatment of these issues as any produced thereafter. We welcome any creative interpretation of the subject, considering how the cinema's potential to address sexual politics helps challenge and define a cultural identity.

Papers may be sent in hard copy or emailed to the editors:

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SUBMISSION DEADLINE: FEBRUARY 28, 2015

### CineAction n° 97 ON FILM

The theme of this issue derives from the fact that in 2015 CineAction will have been publishing articles on film for thirty years. We would like to use this issue to look back on those three decades, with an emphasis on the changes that have taken place during that time. We welcome papers on all aspects of that change: the invention of and innovations in digital technologies and their impact on film production and post-production; the proliferation of new platforms for film distribution and reception, from the VCR and PC to YouTube and the iPhone; the shift from analog to digital in film teaching and education programs, and from print to digital media for film writing and criticism. Topics might include the industry adaptations and transformations that have occurred, as well as any individuals and/or films that should be singled out as particularly noteworthy.

Papers may be sent in hard copy or emailed to the editor:

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