

The Reason America Fell in Love With Zombies Again

This March, another season of *The Walking Dead* will come to a close, much to the chagrin of its devoted fan base. The show's success in particular, and the prevalence of zombie-themed shows in general, has led me and many others to ask:

Why zombies? Why now?

Surprisingly, the reasons for zombies' popularity are not so recent. A look back in history at apocalyptic literature reveals some of the same trends that have made zombie apocalypses so popular today.

Apocalyptic literature tended to be produced by an oppressed minority in times of political and cultural disarray. The literature offered its readers comfort from their current situation by describing the world that was to come—both on earth and in heaven. It would “unveil” the future world to its readers; hence the name “apocalypse,” which is from the Greek for “unveiling.” The literature told of a future victory in which the minority would triumph over the majority.

Like traditional apocalypses, *The Walking Dead's* popularity comes at a time of disarray. As evidenced by recent elections, America is politically, socially, and culturally divided. A dramatic rupture of our current way of life seems more and more likely, or imminent, if you're a “prepper.”

One gets the sense that many might secretly welcome such a rupture. As much as Americans like comfort, they are also bored. The American Dream seems either hopelessly out of reach, or hopelessly shallow. Most of us go through the motions of the monotonous rhythm of life pre-packaged for us by American society. *The Walking Dead* conceals a not-so-subtle contempt of modern American life. It symbolically offers

“victory” in the form of the destruction of this way of life and a return to a simpler (though plague-ridden) existence.

And this leads me to note another shared characteristic of traditional apocalypse and zombie apocalypse: *the “victory” always comes from the outside, rather than from human activity.* Past apocalyptic literature was typically written by those who had removed themselves from the dominant society—such as the authors of the famous Dead Sea Scrolls. They had abandoned the attempt to transform society, and contented themselves with living on the outskirts of it. The meaning of their lives was centered on a passive waiting for a major event to happen.

In *The Walking Dead*, too, the characters are awoken from their slumber by an external event. Most of the world’s population has been turned into zombies, and the remaining humans have no choice but to engage in a constant battle in order to survive against threats of violence, scarcity of food, and the elements. Meaning has been thrust upon them in the form of this singularly-focused life. The dramatic sub-plots happen within this overarching narrative of survival.

Apocalypses have traditionally served to offer hope, but they can also feed into the chronic human temptation to wait for things outside of us to give our lives meaning: a cataclysmic event, the election of a new president, a change in public policy... you name it.

But, according to Aristotle, the attainment of happiness cannot be completely dependent on things outside of us, for that leaves happiness to chance. No matter what the historical situation, we can always do the good, we can always live more virtuously, and we can always foster and deepen our relationships with those around us.

It will be through transformation within that our lives and our societies take on meaning, not from zombies without.?

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[Image Credit: AMC's *The Walking Dead*]