

Z-Day: An Exploration of Zombies, the Apocalypse, Loss, Instinct, Renaissance Political Philosophy, Community, Fear, and Fascination

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They're coming for me, and I can't stop them. I've been trying to lose them for what feels like hours, but no matter what I do, it's never enough. And, wouldn't you know it, I'm fresh out of bullets. Fucking bummer. I make a run for a nearby, abandoned building, hoping to find refuge. No dice. They follow without faltering; it's like they can smell me. I run down the halls and find an emergency exit. Score! I hurl my weight against the metal lever of the door that stands between safety and men. The door opens and the previous moment's hope is replaced by the most crushing sense of despair I've ever experienced. Hundreds of them clog my only exit route; I'm surrounded on both sides. Fuck. This isn't how it's supposed to end. I'm supposed to be the one that makes it out alive – I'm supposed to be the hero. The hordes surround me and I prepare myself for the inevitable, all the while praying that my death will be quick and without much pain. Then, I jolt awake, wet with my own sweat.

This happens to me at least once a week.

They're everywhere you look. You can't escape them. They've infected society, and the contagion they bring with them will only continue to spread. They're in your books, your televisions, your movies, music; not even your cell phones are safe from their imminent threat. Yes, it's true: Z-Day, the zombie apocalypse is upon us. The epidemic has begun, and there's nothing we can do to stop it.

It's Sunday night. The room is dark, the mood is tense, and Rick Grimes is trapped in a tank, surrounded by zombies. It's the premiere of AMC's *The Walking Dead* and a handful of friends have gathered at my apartment to take part in the phenomenon. The series is the first of its kind to take on the ubiquitous "zombie apocalypse" sub-genre of horror, which pits a small group of survivors against a world taken over by the undead. Over the course of the 90 minutes first episode, a dozen or so zombies are killed, including a small girl whose face is half-missing and a woman who has been reduced to an emaciated torso, painfully dragging herself across the ground in search of some sort of easy prey to devour (Darabont). Some turn their faces away from the screen to avoid taking in the grisly images of the mutilated reanimated while others gaze intently at the screen, soaking in every detail and taking mental notes on both what to do and what to avoid should this fictional scenario ever become reality. Though reactions differ greatly from one person to another, at the end of the episode, it is obvious that each and every one of us is hooked. Each of us has found something intriguing about the premise of this so called "Zombie Apocalypse."

My own personal love affair with the zombie and the mythos that comes along with it started at the age of fourteen. My father was watching Zack Snyder's 2004 remake of George Romero classic, *Dawn of the Dead* in the living room and I was supposed to be asleep, taking a nap. Eventually, he fell asleep and I no longer had to feign unconsciousness; I was free to enjoy the movie all to myself. I had recently watched Romero's original *Night of the Living Dead* in my high school's film club and, while I thought it was a good film, I never considered it or its zombies "scary." They were slow, stupid, and only really capable of doing any real damage in comically oversized groups. Snyder's *Dawn of the Dead* changed everything. These zombies were fast: they could run, jump, climb, and

even use tools. Some were missing body parts, others only a chunk of faces here and there. The amount of gore that came along with these zombies shocked me. Whereas Romero's zombies had just been actors in pale make-up, these things really felt and looked like bloodthirsty monsters, hell bent on tearing you limb from limb; their eyes were red, blood covered their faces, and they moved in quick, staccato patterns. My adolescent mind had no idea how to handle what I was seeing. I was terrified for a good week afterward. This is when the nightmares became a regular occurrence.

A few weeks later, I found myself at my friend Baxter's house. It was around midnight or so when he suggested to me and another friend, Greg, that we watch a movie. I remember being abnormally tired that night and a movie sounded like the perfect way to wind down. Then Baxter popped Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* in to the DVD player. With my previous zombie-horror experience still fresh in my memory, I gently suggested we try something a little less visceral and pants-shittingly horrifying to end the night on. No dice – I was outvoted two to one. This movie was even more terrifying than the last. It took the idea of a zombie to a level I hadn't ever considered. Not only were the zombies incredibly fast and formidable like the ones from *Dawn of the Dead*, but they were also the product of a transmittable virus that was carried in the blood of those infected. Holy shit, a virus that turns people in to zombies – how scary is that? Before, zombies were just boogeymen, scary to think about, but pure fantasy. But now, the idea seemed plausible, as crazy as that sounds. But, after finishing *28 Days Later*, I found myself fascinated by these creatures that had thus far succeeded in scaring the shit out of me and ruined one of my favorite pastimes: sleeping. That movie changed what a zombie is to me.

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According to the Random House dictionary, a zombie is, traditionally, "The body of a dead person given the semblance of life but mute and will-less, by a supernatural force, usually for some evil purpose" (Dictionary.com). The mythology behind the zombie has roots that can be traced to the West African tradition of voodoo. In voodoo, a zombie is an individual who has died and been reanimated, either by a special spirit known as a *zombi* or a voodoo sorcerer. Writers of the early 1900s, most notably H.P. Lovecraft, took this idea and popularized it in a variety of gothic horror and science fiction short stories and novellas. The 1950s saw zombies adapted for comic books and then finally, in 1968, George A. Romero released his seminal work, *The Night of the Living Dead*.

While the plot of *Night of the Living Dead* may seem familiar to us now, at the time, it was groundbreaking. The story of a small group of people trying to survive an uprising of the undead, the movie broke ground in psychological horror not just through its grisly imagery of cannibalism, but also for how it dealt with the idea of death. Though controversial upon its release, the movie has become the single most referenced piece of source material of the modern conception of the zombie. *Night of the Living Dead* brought the zombie into the mainstream. And, while its images of pale-faced, slow-moving, and easily conquerable monsters may evoke more laughter than terror now, they were no doubt instrumental in their contribution to the ubiquity of the presence of zombies in contemporary media. It is only recently that writers, directors, and other artists have started to deviate from the form established by Romero and his *Dead* series.

Zombies have been a part of our popular culture for nearly a century, but how have they managed to stay so prominent? What are they so intriguing? How do they manage to simultaneously inspire fear and fascination in us? It's not as though they're a feel good

presence that imbues hope in people; they're the polar opposite—dark, depressing, forcing us to deal with an issue we as humans tend to avoid: our own inevitable mortality. We fear loss: loss of material goods, loss of status, loss of loved ones. During any sort of apocalyptic scenario, we lose all of those things. But eh zombie apocalypse is especially sinister. When a loved one is lost in the middle of an undead uprising, a loss is dealt with not once, but twice. A bite from a zombie is equivalent to a diagnosis of a fatal, terminal illness. Once infected, all one can do is accept his or her fate, and wait for the unavoidable.

As humans, we fear the unknown. And part of that fear manifests itself in an apocalyptic zombie scenario, especially one based around the idea of infection. Death is the ultimate unknown, with disease and infection closely associated with it. The Black Plague was responsible for eradicating an entire third of Europe's total population in the 14th century. ("The Black Death"). The zombie apocalypse models the exact kind of widespread ruin and destruction the plague did in medieval Europe. But, we're living in the age of globalization, a time when planes and ships can carry diseases across continents in a matter of hours without anyone realizing it. Once that happens, it's all down hill. A half a day's worth of flights would have the entire world turning into flesh eating monsters in no time at all.

Typically, when someone dies, that's the end of the story. Not the case in a zombie apocalypse. Chances are, if someone dies, he's going to come back, hungry and looking at you. So, what happens when it's a loved one that dies and comes back to "life"? He or she doesn't recognize you, has no memory of who you are or what you do. All that person knows is that you look really, fucking tasty. This person you knew—perhaps a brother, or a lover—is now just a walking, empty shell of who he used to be, driven purely by instinct, deprived of his humanity. It would be a sad, powerfully moving event. The person has completely lost his identity, and thus, you've completely lost him.

Oddly enough, these symptoms actually mirror those of other well-known diseases. Take Alzheimer's for example. Common symptoms include memory loss, difficulty with speech/verbal communication, and a dramatic change in mood and personality ("Alzheimer's Association"). No, people with Alzheimer's aren't zombies, but there are certainly similarities, which is part of what makes looking at a zombified loved one so frightening. In both scenarios, you lose your identity because of circumstances that are beyond your control. The concept of a person losing his identity is somewhat familiar to us; it makes the idea of this scenario that much more relatable. The tension between what was and what is creates a wonderful, sad kind of drama which most of us can recognize and find some way to relate to our own experiences.

But another part of the fear comes from how easy it is to imagine this happening to us, and how truly unprepared we would be to deal with the ramifications. We depend on so much: the government for protection, foreign countries for our goods, hospitals to heal our sick. What happens when society collapses and these institutions fall apart, and we're left to fight for ourselves? Instinct begins to take over, and we're left with no choice but to go back to our primal roots. In most apocalyptic zombie scenarios, the focus is kept on a small band of survivors who come together in an attempt to increase their chances of survival. Members of said group are often written closely to familiar archetypes: the leader, the witty sidekick, the loose cannon—the list goes on. Though civilization has broken down around them, they stand together and attempt to forge some sort of semblance of the lives they used to live.

In his renaissance classic, *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes discusses what he proposes as the “state of nature.” In this state, the mantra “anything goes” is the only law—whatever one must do to survive is the greatest, most moral action one can take (Hobbes). However, he proposes that creating a covenant with others is actually the most beneficial way to survive in the state. Those that enter this covenant agree to relinquish all power to the Leviathan, a metaphor for a governing state. This is what the idea of the survivors is based around. Surrounded by the state of nature, they band together struggles—perhaps futilely—against it.

And, just like any dystopian scenario, the stress that comes along with the end of civilization tends to bring out the worst in people. Fights are frequent, personalities clash often, and power struggles are in no short supply. For some reason, we love to watch each other reduced to our crudest, most miserable forms. Why else would reality shows like *Bridalplasty* exist? Take *The Walking Dead*, for example. After spending the first half of the first season looking for his family, Rick Grimes is finally reunited with his wife, Lori, and son, Carl. He also finds himself in the company of his partner at the police station where he worked, Shane. While one would expect these people to cooperate unquestioningly, because of the close relationships they share, the three adults fight constantly about nearly everything. Shane and Rick struggle to determine the alpha-male of the group, Lori and Shane fight because they’ve been sleeping together (they thought Rick was dead), and even Rick and Lori fight. In the comic series from which the television show is adapted, the competition between Rick and Shane becomes so dramatic that latter is actually killed as the result of a vie for power at the end of the first volume (Kirkman).

This struggle between trying to reconstruct society and the primal instinct that drives us is another source of tension that creates interest. One could even argue that the entire survivor versus zombies horde dynamic is actually a metaphor for the struggle against our own instincts. Zombies are creatures that are, by definition, incapable of complex thought; they’re driven purely by instinct. And yet for some reason, they’ve managed to topple our highly complex, cerebral society while running solely on their primal drive. They’re the embodiment of the return to the brutal, heartless, Hobbesian state of nature. They personify the fear of our own instinct and our own, primitive ancestry.

But for all the gloom and despair the zombie apocalypse has to offer, there is a common thread of hope strung throughout all of these scenarios. Just like how the trying nature of the genre has a tendency to bring out the ugliest, most raw parts of characters’ humanity, it also tends to bring out the best and most valiant qualities as well. While the band of survivors may struggle to exist with one another, the simple fact that they do shows exactly what humans are capable of in a situation where there is no law or order. By choosing to fight for their lives together, taking care of each other, and trying to reconstruct some sense of order in the midst of unimaginable chaos, the survivors demonstrate what good each of them is capable of achieving.

In the second to last episode of the first season of *The Walking Dead*, Andrea loses Amy—her sister and only surviving family—to a zombie bite (Mazzara). For her, the loss is almost unbearable. She makes it clear in the next episode, when the group is attempting to escape from a building that’s about to explode, that she no longer wants to live and plays on staying behind; all that waits for her and the others is death. But an older member of the group, Dale, talks her out of giving up. Even though it would be more beneficial for Dale, not

to mention the rest of the group, to simply leave Andrea behind, he tries his hardest to convince her to keep going. "You don't get to come into somebody's life, make them care, and then just check out," he tells Andrea, showing that even in the middle of the end of the world, reverence for life and taking care of each other is paramount. When he fails to convince Andrea, Dale stays behind with her. "I know what's out there," he says, "and I don't want to face it alone" (Fierro).

Dale's relationship with Andrea supersedes his will to continue and has prepared him to make the ultimate sacrifice for her. In a moment of clarity, Andrea has an epiphany and decides to continue after all. She and Dale rejoin the group and keep on surviving, together. While there may be little hope for the long-term survival of any group that find themselves outnumbered by zombies five-thousand-to-one, the notion that humans are capable of selflessness and compassion even in the darkest times is a comforting thought. In the fifth episode of the first season, Rick and a number of other men from the group head into an Atlanta, overrun with zombies, in order to find weapons and food. Upon returning, they find their campsite under attack. Eventually, the horde is driven off, and Rick shows the weapons to the group: "Now we're strong," he says. But, Lori is unimpressed, and reminds him that in the attack, they lost human lives, and for that, they are weaker. In the middle of the apocalypse, the most valuable commodity is neither food, nor weapons, but community and the people that compose it.

Recently, I asked a small group of friends I watch *The Walking Dead* with what their thoughts on the phenomenon were and whether a supernatural or disease-driven zombie apocalypse was a more frightening idea. I also asked why they were interested in the series, and what about it frightened them. Responses varied from person to person: one said he was simply fascinated by the idea of survival and how the show made the situation seem so possible (Lister). Another said she enjoyed watching the show because zombies are a manifestation of death, and everyone's "fascinated by death" and "curious about the unknown" (Hoard). To her, the scariest part of the whole idea was that there was "no hope, if it [were to] happen, there's nothing you could do to stop it."

However, the last friend I interviewed gave what was perhaps the most interesting perspective. She was the only one to pick the supernatural case as the more terrifying of the two, explaining that she has, "More faith in our ability to cure an infection than in a God that could save us" (Lister). To her, the human aspect of the zombie apocalypse was the most interesting and was the reason she found herself compelled to watch, despite the violence and gore. "It's interesting to see how people work together, how society would continue/fall apart in a difficult situation, how alliances are made and broken, etc," she explains. "It's basically the reason *The Lord of the Flies* and other dystopian works are successful—they remind us to cherish what we have, while reminding us that we're all capable of perverted, evil, or immoral shenanigans."

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