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Abstract
In this article, I offer a critique of the five seasons of the television series The Walking Dead (TWD) broadcast to date (2010–2015). As the popularity of this show continues to rise, many viewers have demonstrated a willingness to praise TWD without carefully examining its narrative commitments to violence or to attack media critics who point out negative elements at work. My critique contends that the series is decidedly fascistic in nature, and celebratory of fascist masculinity as the key to surviving an apocalyptic situation. I analyse the show through a comparison with the literature of the Freikorps as detailed by Klaus Theweleit’s study of fascism, Male Fantasies ([1977] 1987, [1978] 1989). I examine in detail the prevalence of the ‘soldier male’ in TWD, the limited roles for women, and the representation of the ghoulis undead, drawing upon Theweleit and related scholarship on fascistic aesthetics.

It is not the corpses that this man loves; he loves his own life. But he loves it … for its ability to survive. Corpses piled upon corpses reveal him as victor, a man who has successfully externalized that which is dead within him, who remains standing when all else is crumbling.

Since its debut in 2010, AMC’s adaptation of the graphic novel *The Walking Dead* (*TWD*) has enjoyed swelling acclaim. The show premiered with 5.35 million viewers, garnered an average of fourteen million per episode in the fifth season, and drew nearly sixteen million for its finale in March 2015. Viewers discuss the series online with fervent rumination. Scholarly attention has also surfaced, with an initial burst of laudation increasingly giving way to exegesis. A number of professional and amateur media critics have castigated *TWD* for slow pacing, and several have expressed concerns about its representation – or lack thereof – of race, gender and LGBT issues, or critiqued its patriarchal underpinnings.¹ Such criticism is, however, almost always met by rabid hostility from fans. The following response to a mildly critical review by Margaret Lyons at *New York Magazine’s* website Vulture is representative:

> I wish I was as cool as you people and Margaret Lyons to be able to differentiate between a ‘good’ show and a ‘bad’ show. I do know the most haters of Walking Dead talk-backing are on Vulture […] The show is pulling in amazing numbers, America loves this show […] but you do not. Its cause Vulture commentators are cooler than most Americans, I get it. You’re all so cool. Wish I was cool.

(holbee, 18 March 2014)

This pales in comparison to comments posted to Erin La Rosa’s essay at BuzzFeed, ‘Why it’s time to stop watching *The Walking Dead*’ (2013), that comically demonstrates inconsistencies in the mid-season finale. Overwhelmingly negative, the nearly 200 responses insult La Rosa as lazy, stupid and bitter, and call her a ‘bratty kid’, moron, jerk, idiot, hater, ‘pro-hipster wannabe douche bag’, and blasphemer who wants to ‘piss off the largest fan base in the U.S.’ and should have her ‘writing authority’ revoked. Two comments of particular vitriol stand out:

> Yeah, whoever wrote this article was being a cunt. The Walking Dead is the best show ever.

(Rasm, 2 December 2013)

> Whoever made this post needs to shut their slutty mouths up right now before they get a sweaty dick pie stuffed in it.

(McEiver, 3 December 2013)

Threats of violence against critics of the series are not infrequent. An essay by Charing Ball at *Madame Noire* (2013), critiquing *TWD*’s penchant for white supremacy, sexism, and the ‘magical negro’ trope met similar condemnation, including the following:

> My husband and I love this show and I just talked to him at work and asked him do he think this show is racist and he asked me ‘where’s the columnist of this article so he can come slap the dog mess out of them thinking like this?’ We see nothing racist or sexist about the show or we wouldn’t be watching it.

(ChiTown Princess)

Incivility online is nothing new, but this behaviour serendipitously matches the subject matter: the history of zombie narratives overflows with obedient...
labourers who defend their master. And while I agree with Joshua Gunn and 
Shaun Treat’s admonition against an ‘obsession with the laboring zombie’ 
(2005: 144) as an allegory of ideology, I also believe this actual text about the 
undead demonstrates what is at stake when fans (including those within 
academia) are animated by the desire to praise rather than by critical distance. 
It is in the context of this alarming lack of reflection that I offer a critique of the 
television series as a profoundly fascistic narrative.

In the pages that follow, I compare the five seasons broadcast to date and the 
 writings of the Freikorps (violent paramilitaries during the Weimar Republic) 
analysed by Klaus Theweleit in his two-volume study, Männerphantasien/ 
without criticism itself, I believe the similarities between these two narratives 
are striking and warrant exploration through rhetorical analysis. In the follow-
ing section, I review the fascist aesthetics of TWD. Then turning to Theweleit’s 
work and examples from the series, I focus on the ‘soldier male’ as the fascist 
ideal of masculinity, and examine the women and monsters who oppose 
his attempt to dominate himself and others. I return to the problem of fan 
defenders in my conclusion, and argue that the show runs the risk of becom-
ing nothing short of a popular guide to the fascist life.

**FASCIST AESTHETICS IN POPULAR HORROR**

Academic assessment of TWD erupted with the series’ inception. To date, four 
edited volumes (Lowder 2011; Yuen 2012; Robichaud 2012; Keetley 2014) exist 
dedicated exclusively to the show; all drew from early seasons, so their assess-
ments may prove premature. Although subtle analyses do appear in these pages, 
most shower TWD with accolades, and the authors frequently confess their 
fandom. Forsaking intellectual distance, for example, one editor thanks ‘Robert 
Kirkman for the fantastic comic book series and television series that makes this 
work possible’ (Yuen 2012: ix). Devotion manifests in other brazen tributes, in 
which authors exalt the series for impelling viewers to ‘confront our most cher-
ished values’ (Robichaud 2012: ii). This is odd praise, since virtually any text 
could claim the same affect, including those as ethically pernicious as Mein 
Kampf (Hitler 2015) or Triumph of the Will. As I argue herein, demonstration of 
violence alone is hardly the standard to declare the greatness of an artistic work.

Critical engagement has not been entirely absent in favour of ovation, 
however, including in those four volumes. Gerry Canavan’s (2010) examina-
tion of the graphic novel was a promising start. Therein, he examined prob-
lems haunting the series, including themes of colonialism and patriarchy, the 
zombie as bare life, the state of exception under apocalyptic conditions as 
motivation for total violence, and its ‘uncritical relationship to a pre-feminist 
narrative’ (2010: 444). Two years later, Danee Pye and Peter O’Sullivan 
(2012) argued that the television series mutes certain pro-feminist themes in 
the graphic novels, and Shelley Rees (2012) similarly asserted that the show 
enacts a violence far more inviting that the originating text. Jeffrey Sartain 
(2013) echoed this analysis, suggesting that the television series simplified 
more complicated storytelling in the graphic novels through its reliance on 
representations of individualism and masculinization, hegemonic gender 
rules and the cult of hardness (as detailed by Susan Bordo). David Staton 
(2013) reiterated the show’s reliance upon hegemonic masculinity, and Kyle 
Bishop (2013) identified a serious divergence in the show from a condemna-
tion of unchecked violence in the novels.
Several contributions to *Thinking Dead: What the Zombie Apocalypse Means* furthered media analysis of the series. Among these, Patrick Hamilton (2013) expressed concern for the show’s potential desensitization to violence, and Murali Balaji examined AMC’s employment of multiple promotional platforms to cultivate enthusiastic fandom and consumption, resulting in a co-optation that is ‘highly problematic from the standpoint of audience agency’ (2013: 238). Martina Baldwin and Mark McCarthy (2013) offered a poignant critique of gender and race in the series, and concluded that *TWD* opted to enforce rather than challenge white, male, heterosexual authority. In the aforementioned collection edited by Dawn Keetley (2014), several articles raised similar alarm concerning gender, race and violence (Simpson; Young; Nurse; Kremmel; Heckman); this more critical bent may derive from the examination of three seasons rather than only the first, as earlier collections tended to do. Indeed, criticism grows as the series lurches on. Daniel Drezner (2014), for example, lamented that *TWD* inspires simplistic notions about guns, and Mark Anderson (2014) proposed that the show is a banal rather than unique reinvention of the US American cowboy messiah narrative. Most recently, Isaac Berk (2015) placed overt responsibility on Scott Gimple’s ascension to show-runner in the fourth season for questionable changes. In Berk’s opinion, earlier seasons offered a radical critique of false democracy in contemporary society, but Gimple dismantled such political engagement to focus on the psychology of leaders and on non-political themes appealing to a wider viewership.

To date, no scholar has confronted the potential fascist aspirations of *TWD*, although a few have mentioned fascism in passing as detailed by Deleuze and Guattari (Keetley 2014), or Nazis (Canavan 2010; Terjesen 2012; Biesecker 2012; Pokornowski 2014; Farnell 2014), or the Holocaust (Dima 2014), and in a similar vein, Christian Moraru (2012) has examined phallic desire within zombie narratives and mentioned *TWD* in example. One problem for such an undertaking is that, as Umberto Eco (1995) suggested, fascism is a fuzzy concept, running the gamut of definitions. On the one hand there is fascism opposed by Ernesto Laclau for its collusion with capitalism, and on the other by F. A. Hayek for its socialist roots. Moreover, *TWD* rarely cites fascism directly; the only significant reference appears when Merle Dixon explains his murderous behaviour against Michonne as ‘just following orders’, and she invokes the Gestapo (‘I Ain’t a Judas’, *The Walking Dead*, 2013). Accordingly, I feel compelled to offer explanation of my usage of the term herein.

There is perhaps no better starting place than the foundational text, *The Doctrine of Fascism* ([1932] 1973), written by Benito Mussolini and his Minister of Education, the philosopher Giovanni Gentile. Therein, they define fascism as an attitude towards life, simultaneously realist yet committed to certain principles. It is staunchly anti-individualist in promoting the state, defined as a people who observe governmental authority. Fascism opposes liberalism, democracy and socialism; views suicide as cowardice; promotes happiness as the exercise of power; refutes conceptions of the neighbour extended universally; and rejects perpetual peace, as ‘[w]ar alone brings up to their highest tension all human energies and puts a stamp of nobility upon the peoples who have the courage to meet it’ and its ‘alternative of life or death’ (Mussolini and Gentile [1932] 1973: 47). Surmising its ‘positive conception of life’, they contend:

Fascism desires an active man, one engaged in activity with all his energies: it desires a man virilely conscious of the difficulties that exist in action
and ready to face them. It conceives of life as a struggle, considering that it behooves man to conquer for himself that life truly worthy of him, creating first of all in himself the instrument (physical, moral, intellectual) in order to construct it. Thus for the single individual, thus for the nation, thus for humanity. Hence the highest value of culture in all its forms (art, religion, science) and the enormous importance of education. Hence also the essential value of work, with which man conquers nature and creates the human world (economic, political, moral, intellectual).

([1932] 1973: 40)

Defenders of *TWD* may immediately dismiss my claim on the grounds that the United States government is non-existent in the series, and that individuals are the primary focus. These are fair assumptions, but I would counter that rituals and anxieties of statehood linger, and that the show embodies ideas detailed by Carl Schmitt, for whom the concept of the political is reducible to the antithesis between friends and enemies. The state becomes, accordingly, any people organized within a bordered territory whose political status determines friends and enemies (Schmitt [1932] 1996: 19). By Schmitt’s reckoning, *humanity* itself is not a political concept, as humanity bears no singular enemy.

For Schmitt, the constitutive political distinction between friends and enemies frequently culminates in conflict, especially following judgements that ‘the adversary intends to negate his opponent’s way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought in order to preserve one’s own form of existence’ ([1932] 1996: 27). Political power, then, is the demand for members of a state to be ready to die and to kill enemies. Any group that refuses the possibility of war is certain to fail:

> If a people is afraid of the trials and risks implied by existing in the sphere of politics, then another people will appear which will assume these trials by protecting it against foreign enemies and thereby taking over political rule. The protector then decides who is the enemy by virtue of the eternal relation of protection and obedience.

(Schmitt [1932] 1996: 52)


According to Schmitt, the political would not be absent even if the state were, as long as combatant entities moved towards formal instantiation. And such hostility is precisely the world depicted by *TWD*. The organized groups that populate the series represent political factions at war with one another to determine sovereignty over an emerging state. The primary survivors regularly self-identify as ‘our people’ or ‘our group’, and often debate the inclusion, exclusion and potential violence towards strangers. Their actions mimic other groups who thwart their progress during the series, and as *The Doctrine* applauds, not everyone is welcome. Solitary individuals (such as a hitchhiker begging for assistance) are hastily disregarded unless they offer immediate benefit to a group. *TWD* knows friends and enemies but not neighbours.

Integration is possible, as the merger of the survivors with Hershel Greene’s family demonstrates, but martial competition is far more likely. Union is also contingent upon unconditional acceptance of a given group’s code of conduct. Joe, the leader of a gang of survivalists, makes this logic
explicit in enumerating their expectations and extreme punishments to a newcomer, noting that ‘When men like us follow rules and cooperate a little bit, the world becomes ours’ (‘Us’, The Walking Dead, 2014). This group most obviously – and violently – adheres to the concept of the political, but the main survivors and other collectives match with equal vigour. TWD suggests, then, that the collapse of nation states by an exceptional emergency would result in paramilitary gangs that rehearse residual rituals of statehood and separate friends from enemies by violent means.

Two further examples confirm this attitude. The first is the remarkable naivety of the protagonist Rick Grimes in the inaugural season when, confronted by a racist tirade, he asserts that:

There are no niggers anymore. No dumb-as-shit-inbred-white-trash-fools either. Only dark meat and white meat. There’s us and the dead.
We survive this by pulling together, not apart.

(‘Days Gone By’, The Walking Dead, 2010)

Rick’s paean to solidarity will be frustrated constantly and abandoned for a protectionist mentality towards those in his group. And by the fourth season, events turn on insincere promises for solidarity. In the wake of the destruction of a safe-haven (and Rick’s offer to broker unity with another group threatening assault), the scattered survivors pursue a widely broadcast invitation to seek Terminus, a location offering:

Sanctuary for All. Community for All. Those Who Arrive Survive.

(‘Claimed’, The Walking Dead, 2014)

This offer of salvation is nothing more than a trap, concocted by cannibals whose imposture demonstrates an utter lack of accord among humanity. When the fallen leader of this group begs for his life and promises never to compete again, his pleas are met with slaughter by machete at Rick’s hands.

Elana Gomel offers insights relevant to the critique advanced here. Examining the rhetoric of corporeality, she notes that fascist discourse conceptualizes the state as an organic body politic rather than a purely legal and economic entity. State membership equates to possession of racially pure blood, and therefore fascism obsesses over the fate of all bodies within its purview. In analysing fascism’s prevalence in science fiction and fantasy, she observes the preference for biological apocalyptic crises, and especially those emphasizing the bodies of adversaries (Gomel 2000: 134) against whom:

[s]adism becomes invested with an aura of civic virtue, and reducing the body of the enemy to bloody pulp is not a shameful pornographic daydream but a morally uplifting experience.

(Gomel 1998: 204)

Such obsession, argues Gomel, drives fascistic impulses to identify the non-human lurking in the human, and to transform enemies into monsters, both diseased and evil (a manoeuvre twice removing ethical responsibility). The correlation between this obsession and the infectious ghouls in TWD hardly needs explanation, but Gomel’s comments are prescient as the series replaces
gangs for nation states, all of whom remain paranoid about bodies – theirs, their enemies and the risen dead – and justify violence as necessary for maintaining membership purity.

While fascism opposes liberal individualism, it bears no qualms focusing on the leader – indeed, the sovereign often garners cult veneration – or on heroic males who sacrifice for the state by denying themselves or killing others. As detailed in the next section, *TWD* relies upon representation of the leader and the heroic male who subjugate the masses, living and undead. In this pursuit, Theweleit’s work proves most helpful. The texts he examines were (like Mussolini’s and Schmitt’s) tinged with anxiety about the collapse of the nation state. Most striking to him, however, was a recurrent gender politics that defined ideal masculinity as control of the body and suppression of emotions, a fusion of fascism and patriarchy.

Theweleit does not cite Susan Sontag’s ‘Fascinating fascism’, but would concur that fascist aesthetics is ‘based on the containment of vital forces’ ([1974] 1980: 93). Although occasionally hampered by anachronisms, Sontag’s controversial essay remains inspirational for those who seek to ‘detect the fascist longings in our midst’ ([1974] 1980: 97). In a critique of two books – Leni Riefenstahl’s *The Last of the Nuba* (1974) and Jack Pia’s *SS Regalia* (1974) – she offered admonition against the burgeoning attraction to fascism among youth culture. For Sontag, fascist aesthetics find particular appeal in the imagery of *Götterdämmerung* and

flow from (and justify) a preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behavior, extravagant effort, and the endurance of pain; they endorsing two seemingly opposite states, egomania and servitude. The relations of domination and enslavement take the form of a characteristic pageantry: the massing of groups of people; the turning of people into things; the multiplication or replication of things; and the grouping of people/things around an all-powerful, hypnotic leader-figure or force. The fascist dramaturgy centers on the orgiastic transactions between mighty forces and their puppets, uniformly garbed and ever swelling in numbers. Its choreography alternates between ceaseless motion and a congealed, static, ‘virile’ posing. Fascist art glorifies surrender, it exalts mindlessness, it glamorizes death.


Sontag notes the prevalence of memorials in fascistic texts; a conflation between vitality and physical ordeals; and juxtaposition between wide shots of masses and isolated close-ups of the eroticized male body, often in uniform or combat or death. Above all, she claims, fascist aesthetics rejects reflection, and displays contests whose outcome requires little thinking. As I will discuss, *TWD* routinely employs all of these techniques.

The centrality of death in fascist imagery is also relevant here. Mark Neocleous (2005a), drawing upon Roger Griffin’s notion of palingenetic rebirth myths, has considered this issue at length and concludes that fascist narratives are woven with tropes of immortality and resurrection, and hence the undead. The notion of the return promises lost warriors to fight for fascist causes, but also guarantees the reappearance of the enemy. In response, fascism operates by encouraging everyone to become a hero for a chosen group and prepare for death, and to make those who should not return properly dead. Elsewhere, Neocleous examines a discourse he calls ‘gothic
fascism’ (2005b), which owes existence to fears concerning endless mimesis and represents enemies as monsters at once superhuman and subhuman. He focuses on vampire narratives – monsters threatening to spill, suck and taint pure Aryan blood – but his observations apply remarkably well for the ghouls of TWD.

A more charitable read of TWD than the one I offer herein might suggest that the series is conscious about the fascistic aesthetics it replicates in its stories, themes, visuals and dialogues, or that it examines our disintegrating civil society and warns of a dystopia to befall us should we continue identifying those with different political perspectives as domestic enemies. Unfortunately, the cascading glorification of soldier male mentality makes it difficult to accept the series as an admonitory tale against violence and a fractured republic, just as the murderous seriousness of its distinction between friends and enemies makes it difficult not to question its homage to fascism. I chart these implications in the next two sections, turning directly to Theweleit’s study for assistance.

SOLDIER MALES AND TWD

Much has been written about the suspenseful opening of the pilot episode in which Rick shoots an undead girl, but I would draw attention to the next scene, a flashback prior to the cataclysmic events. Rick, a sheriff’s deputy, sits in a police cruiser with his partner, Shane Walsh. They hold a conversation that proves auspicious for the performance of masculinity throughout TWD:

Rick: What’s the difference between men and women?
Shane: This a joke?
Rick: No, serious.
Shane: Never met a woman who knew how to turn off a light. They’re born thinking the switch only goes one way: On. I mean, they’re, they’re struck blind the second they leave a room. I mean every woman I ever let have a key, I swear to God. It’s like: Come home, house all lit up, and my job, you see, apparently, because, because my chromosomes happen to be different is that I gotta walk through that house and turn off every single light this chick left on.
Rick: Is that right?
Shane: Yeah, baby. Oh Reverend Shane is preaching to you now, boy. Then this same chick, mind you, she’ll bitch about global warming. You see, this is, this is where Reverend Shane wants to quote from the Guy Gospel and say, ‘Darling, maybe if you and every other pair of boobs on this planet could just figure out that the light switch, see, goes both ways, maybe we wouldn’t have so much global warming?’
Rick: You say that?
Shane: Well, the polite version. Still, man, that, that earns me this look of loathing you would not believe and that’s when the Exorcist voice pops out: ‘You sound just like my damn father! Always, always yelling about the power bill and telling me to turn off the damn lights!’
Rick: And what do you say to that?
Shane: I know what I want to say. I want to say ‘Bitch, you mean to tell me you’ve been hearing this your entire life and you are still too damn stupid to learn how to turn off a switch?’

(‘Days Gone By’, The Walking Dead, 2010)

This dismissive conversation reflects conventional display of hegemonic masculinity; it also characterizes a series that, as Salon critic Lorraine Berry (2012, 2013) argues, quickly became beholden to white patriarchy. Beyond the traditional sexism, however, a fascistic undertone beats in this exchange, given its demonstrative threat of violence and control by men responsible for the protection of society.

The soldier male, as Theweleit explains, represents ideal masculinity under fascism, at once weaponized and in perfect command of body and emotions. They adhere to a distrustful and oppositional perspective:

[Soldier males] exist in the tortured consciousness of danger. Their body has the constant perception of an encroaching pulp in which it will founder; and in each new moment it addresses itself to its function of identifying the source from which that threat emanates.


It is a hard masculinity, best understood in relation to those experiences it resists and destroys: liquidity, multiplicity, femininity, the borderless, the amorphous, the unclean, and above all, decomposition (Theweleit [1978] 1989: 40). Throughout Freikorps narratives, the soldier male appears as an icicle, a dam, a fixed boundary, a set of body-armour, an erect phallus and a firearm (the weapon that discharges yet remains whole). Steeliness and stiffness, closure and control, mark this man who learns to dominate self and others through surviving rituals of bodily pain and assuming the embodiment of the quick over the dead. Homosocial with others like him, the soldier male is never homosexual. But he is rarely depicted as heterosexual either, for erotic pleasure risks contamination and loss of control; instead, the preferred orgiastic experience is trancelike violence (Theweleit [1978] 1989: 61).

TWD reeks of the soldier male. Among the main survivors, the list includes Rick, Shane, Daryl and Merle Dixon, Tyreese Williams, and Abraham Ford; Rick’s son Carl is tutored in soldier male mentality throughout the series. Virtually all of the antagonists and outright enemies of the group represent this formation as well, often in its most virulent form. TWD makes abundantly clear that, at least until the arrival at the Alexandria Safe-Zone (and in all likelihood, there as well in future seasons), there is no way to survive other than to adopt soldier male mentality and morality. The character of Glenn Rhee, for example, is a major protagonist from the first episode onward, and transitions over five seasons from a scrawny but resourceful delivery boy into a skilled combatant; he does not perfectly assume the soldier male role, but his metamorphosis underscores the importance of its acceptance. Other versions of masculinity, particularly those marked by the wisdom of negotiation (such as Dale Horvath or Hershel Greene) or knowledge (such as Bob Stookey or Milton Mamet) usually meet a gruesome or ignoble end.

In a deviation from the rigid gender politics of Freikorps literature but consistent with its promotion of the soldier male, TWD presents many female characters who transition from weakness to strength in a manner
akin to Glenn; namely, by adopting the militarism and mannerism of the soldier male. Throughout the series, Michonne, Andrea, Carol Peletier, Maggie Greene, Rosita Espinosa, Tara Chambler and Sasha Williams all come to embrace this perspective, and although some are introduced to viewers with adoption already in progress, quite a few are introduced as weak feminine figures who harden emotionally and physically and train in weapons to become effective slayers of ghouls and humans as the series progresses. Even as they are limited by their gender in full participation, the consistent display of this desire and necessity to become a soldier male reveals TWD’s underlying preference for this figure. More optimistic readings of these characters as feminist icons, then, need to reconcile with the fascistic logic at play, decidedly anti-feminist in its equation of one version of masculinity and survival.

The soldier males of TWD demonstrate remarkable kinship with those of Freikorps literature. They withstand seemingly insurmountable pain, often self-inflicted: Merle saws off his hand to escape imprisonment, Shane bashes his head against a tree to feign a struggle, Daryl survives a fall off a cliff and impalement, and Rick is beaten senseless on several occasions only to enact revenge or reconvene order. Feminine substitutes for soldier males shoulder similar ordeals, as when Michonne survives an attack in which the Governor, the primary villain of the third season, brutally smashes her head through aquarium glass. Even characters at the periphery of this mentality prove themselves through stoicism: Glenn bears torture, for example, at the hands of the Governor’s henchman and Hershel survives amputation of his leg. Resistance to pain is an abiding virtue for fascist soldier males; it is also, apparently, an ideal that animates TWD.

As Theweleit notes, the ability to withstand pain inspires the soldier male’s longing to deliver it to others. Torture appears throughout TWD, in forms considered justifiable by the protagonists, and similar acts of physical confrontation occur frequently. An early scene involves Shane ruthlessly beating Carol’s abusive husband Ed as onlookers (all women) beg him to stop. Abraham violently knocks unconscious Eugene, a man he pledged to assist, upon discovery of lies about his identity, and the Governor mercilessly harms Milton, once described as a friend, when the latter resists the former’s immorality. Throughout the series, Rick fights countless men; his leadership is established and maintained by his ability to win these matches at any cost, including tearing open an enemy’s throat with his own teeth or running over a fleeing opponent with a vehicle.

Suicide is regarded as cowardice among the soldier males of both the Freikorps and TWD. It is a fate that befalls minor characters in the series, or women, or men who are not soldier males. An entire episode, for example, revolved around Beth Greene’s contemplation of suicide, with all involved debating her supposed weakness for not wanting to live through the apocalypse. The series underscores its prohibition with occasional scenes of botched suicides that have become unusually suffering undead. Not surprisingly, suicide is unthinkable for the soldier males, who comment on it negatively: Rick condemns the scientist Edward Jenner for opting to die, Daryl dismisses random ‘douchebags’ who took themselves out, and the villain Joe provides the most abrupt expression when he enquires, ‘Why hurt yourself when you can hurt other people?’ (‘Us’, The Walking Dead, 2014).

Predictably, soldier males in TWD demonstrate stillness of emotions. Early in the series, for example, Shane delivers lines with the steeliness that both
Theweleit and Sontag would identify as the fascistic impulse to unreflective action. In an attempt to train Andrea as a marksman, he advises:

＞Turn off the switch. The switch. The one that makes you scared. Or angry. Or sympathetic. Or whatever. You don’t think. You just – act. ('Cherokee Rose', The Walking Dead, 2011, original emphasis)

You’re too damn emotional. You need to shut it down. Take all that guilt, take that fear and that being pissed off, take it out. ('Secrets', The Walking Dead, 2011)

This immobility is juxtaposed with the feminization of emotions, epitomized by Beth’s petitioning Daryl when he turns cold in the aftermath of an assault, ‘What the hell is wrong with you? Do you feel anything?’ (‘Still’, The Walking Dead, 2014, original emphasis). While this is one of the oldest gender binaries in western society, fascist discourse makes its explicitness essential to proving one’s masculinity. That is, it is not enough to act without emotion. The more one resembles the soldier male, the more necessary it becomes to disparage emotions as threats to security.

Akin to Mussolini’s celebration, war in TWD serves as the ultimate opportunity for affirmation of self-control and membership in a brotherhood. As Theweleit summarizes:

[T]he survival of the fascist male is made dependent on the delimiting defense of his boundaries; he survives by differentiating himself as a killer, in opposition to whatever he perceives as threatening. ([1978] 1989: 380)

War also serves as encouragement for young men to dream of conquest – the only response possible for them when, as Theweleit suggests, the world has gone to shit ([1978] 1989: 65). Hence the soldier male quickly becomes ‘rendered incapable of peaceful civilian existence’ (Theweleit [1978] 1989: 358) because his orientation to the world is through enemies. TWD displays this impulse frequently. War is the primary communication between groups and forms the spine of the third and fourth season; the series is further awash with firing squads and urban or guerrilla combat. Abraham quips on one occasion that he enjoys fighting, and the Governor declares feeling alive when he smells gunpowder. Key moments of battle are, as Sontag predicts, routinely filmed lingering in slow motion on the individual soldier male against the wide-angle shot of the masses.

Freikorps obsession with warfare points to another correlation with TWD. As stated earlier, Theweleit identifies a relationship between fascism and patriarchy, but one in which men coach hegemonic masculinity rather than attempt fatherhood. Although a group’s leader motivates as an abstract patriarch, actual fathers are generally absent in fascist discourse, or minimized in comparison to sons and brothers. Fathers are more influential through their weaknesses, a failure that cost them and their sons World War I and created ‘the morass into which [the soldier males] now feel themselves sinking’ (Theweleit [1978] 1989: 369). Biological fathers and sons are not unified, then, through mutual relations as parents and children, but through their bond as brothers-in-arms and their shared obedience to their leader and their group.
Older males, understood thusly, exist to educate younger males into the art of killing and to promote the youth’s hardening of self.

This logic permeates TWD. Most fathers who act out of parental love are doomed: Dale shows paternal affection for Andrea and Amy and is eviscerated; Hershel expresses unending love as Beth and Maggie’s father and is beheaded; and the Governor’s affection for his undead daughter perverts him and initiates a spectacular downfall. Rick, of course, has survived, and perhaps no relationship in TWD is more important than his with Carl, but increasingly, his parenting is tutoring in brutal realism and combat. Carl often expresses disgust and disappointment at his father’s failures to protect the group (especially early in the series), a signal of his readiness to assume manhood by the standards of TWD. Rick’s relationship to his infant daughter, while loving, is represented infrequently on-screen; her care and protection is left to others, especially when he leads expeditions of violence against other groups.

WOMEN AND GHOULS IN TWD

Elana Gomel (1998) productively recalibrates the premise of Male Fantasies ([1977] 1987, [1978] 1989) so as to consider the possibility that the soldier male, ever vigilant to keep his interiority from becoming exposed, is also motivated by love of the mother and an oceanic experience of union with her through war. Theweleit had already suggested that the collectivity of sons under fascism hearkens to their willingness to die for a common mother, the state, a mother raped during World War I. Gomel’s observations, drawn from readings of Mein Kampf (2015) and related materials, demonstrate how fascist sons become the mother in perceiving themselves as organic appendages of her body and by protecting her in a way that the absent father did not. In fascist mentality, then, the only solution to a devastated Motherland is unpentant military action by her sons.

It is striking how few mothers populate TWD. At the series’ onset, there is only one nuclear family among the survivors, the Morales, but they set out on their own. Rick, his wife Lori and Carl reconstitute their family, but Lori then dies in childbirth. Most of the other survivors lack mothers, and to illustrate, I will beg the reader’s apology for a lengthy list. Glenn’s is far away in Michigan; Merle and Daryl’s died in a house fire she caused by a cigarette when they were boys; Andrea and Amy mention both parents, but reminisce about their father; Jacqui recalls parenting her brothers after her mother passed; Hershel’s first wife (Maggie’s mother) died before the apocalypse, and his second (Beth’s mother) became a ghoul; Lizzie and Mika arrive at the prison shelter motherless; Tara hunkers down with her father, sister and niece; Donna arrives bitten, perishes and leaves her son Ben and husband Allen to fend for themselves; Abraham’s wife and children abandon him and are killed; and Noah escapes Grady Memorial Hospital to return home for his mother, only to find her corpse. Additionally, both Carol and Michonne were mothers, but lost their children to the ghouls and thereafter embraced the attitude of soldier males.

If we follow Theweleit and Gomel, the stark disappearance of the maternal in TWD suggests a fascist coding of the Motherland in need of protection and revenge through the violence of her soldier male sons. This helps to explain why motherhood reappears at the Alexandria Safe-Zone, the walled community where the survivors arrive in the second half of the fifth season. There, civilization exists that resembles pre-apocalyptic notions as closely as
possible, including the preservation of nuclear families. The leader of this area is a woman, Deanna Monroe, a former federal congresswoman. She makes all important decisions in a manner that is not tyrannical, but maternal towards the community, and is the mother of two men auditioning to become soldier males (and one of whom dies by violating the control of emotions necessary for the task). Her husband, a professor of architecture, embodies the typical posture of a man who is not a soldier male, and is perhaps not surprisingly slain by a more aggressive man. This action prompts Deanna to order Rick to execute the attacker, dramatically sealing the relationship between the soldier male par excellence and the mother and leader. The sixth season will pick up from this event, and will likely revolve around the defense of the Safe-Zone from outside threats.

Protection of the symbolic mother does not, however, translate to respect for femininity. Never much for complexity, Freikorps literature separates women into two categories: white women and red women. The former is idealized by the nurse, the sister-in-arms to the soldier male, who blooms at the time of his suffering and who is consumed by her own. In this manner, fascist narratives draw upon ancient patriarchal imagery of the feminine that serves the masculine, simultaneously rendering the nobility of the soldier male and the ‘deathlike beauty’ of the white woman (Theweleit [1977] 1987: 112). The nurturing capacities of the white woman poignantly appear in a scene from the second season that has garnered some criticism, during which Lori confronts other women to maintain a gendered division of labour:

*Andrea:* I contribute. I help keep this place safe.

*Lori:* The men can handle this on their own. They don’t need your help.

*Andrea:* I’m sorry. What would you have me do?

*Lori:* There’s plenty of work to go around.

*Andrea:* Are you serious? Everything falls apart and you’re in my face over skipping laundry?

*Lori:* It puts a burden on the rest of us. On me and Carol and Patricia and Maggie. Cooking, cleaning, taking care of Beth. You – you don’t care about anyone but yourself.


When Andrea again objects, Lori asserts the proper role of women in the new world: ‘We are providing stability. We are trying to create a life worth living’. Her words perfectly illustrate male fantasies of the white woman’s obedience.

To date, no character epitomizes the white woman more than Beth Greene. Introduced in the second season as a sheltered teenager, her early appearances largely entail domestic chores in the company of other women. As aforementioned, she attempts suicide, but retreats from the pain experienced by slitting her wrists and then discovers a renewed optimism and faith for living. In the third season, she entertains the survivors with her singing, and does not venture on expeditions beyond the camp; instead, she continues her domestic role and expands to medical nursing, bonds with Lori, and becomes the primary caretaker of the infant Judith following Lori’s demise. Underscoring her distance from the soldier male, a flashback in the fourth season presents a rare moment of levity in *TWD* with Beth wearing Rick’s
sheriff hat. She escapes the assault on the prison shelter with Daryl and tends to his emotional coldness, just as she tends to his physical injuries and those of other soldier males. She is abducted by members of Grady Memorial Hospital, where she is literally compelled to nurse others, and assists the escape of a fellow ward. She does see some battle and begins to train to defend herself, but her untimely death comes when she attacks Dawn, a uniformed officer in charge of the hospital – and a caricature of fascism herself – and is shot in the head.

Theweleit notes, however, that while white women do illuminate certain desires of the soldier males, they eventually evaporate in the Freikorps texts, because fascists are not genuinely concerned about women’s lives ([1977] 1987: 35). Revilement of the red women is much more prevalent than admiration for the white women. The red woman manifests as a whore, a castrator of the soldier male, and as a monster described by Theweleit in terms that would appropriately summarize the ghouls of *TWD*:

[A] beast that unfortunately cannot be dealt with by merely ‘planting a fist’ in its ‘ugly puss’… a fantastic being who swears, shrieks, spits, scratches, farts, bites, pounces, tears to shreds; who is slovenly, wind-whipped, hissing-red, indecent.


None of this is surprising to anyone who understands the long history of patriarchal narratives, but as fascism produced a unique emphasis on the suffering nurse as the epitome of the white woman, so too it advances a peculiar version of the red: the rifle-woman. Appearing as the most fearful incarnation of femininity in Freikorps literature, this monstrosity is a castrator who accomplishes her deed with the same phallic weapons of the soldier males.

Theweleit notes that while wives are rarely named in the literature he examines, the rifle-woman is almost always so, albeit with a single first name, ‘a stamp whose meaning is unmistakable’ for marking the ‘footloose, powerful, and dangerous – especially in times of disintegrating political order’ ([1977] 1987: 75). There are at least three such occurrences in *TWD*. Karen begins as the apparent rifle-woman, a member of the Governor’s army who literally stands with firearms in opposition to the main survivors. By a fateful twist, she survives the Governor’s vengeful slaughter of his own militia and joins the survivors when they rescue her from the ghouls of her former comrades. Karen will, however, contract a deadly infectious disease and subsequently be murdered and immolated by Carol, an act demonstrating the rifle-woman’s expendability and her impossible conversion to friend or white woman. Michonne, by comparison, threatens to devolve into a rifle-woman (her preferred weapon is a katana, but the phallic imagery is obvious) but rigorously abides by the authority of the survivors’ leader from the start and accordingly does not devolve into the monstrous. Michonne locates herself firmly in relation to friends and enemies and never deviates, representing something that the Freikorps did not imagine, but that we might judiciously understand as a domesticated rifle-woman: a substitute for the soldier male who remains obedient to the subordination of her gender. It is not surprising, then, that she is assigned the role of constable along with Rick upon arrival at the Alexandria Safe-Zone, for she fully internalizes the violent masculinization that *TWD* advances as necessary to maintain safety.
Andrea’s situation is complex, but I think it is erroneous to assume she represents a strong voice for women or for feminism as a few charitable critics have implied. She is a veritable mess, and I select that word deliberately to imply her failure to control her body. Andrea was a civil rights lawyer prior to the apocalypse, and hence her professional identity is rendered all but irrelevant in the new world (her opinions against the execution of a captive, e.g., are utterly ignored by the group). She is unwilling to conform to the expectations of the white woman, however, so she initiates pursuit of the soldier male and transforms from someone poorly equipped to handle a firearm to a sharpshooter foreboding of a rifle-woman. But she is unstable as well, a point made clear by the copious flow of her blood, vomit, tears and mucus throughout the series, far more in comparison to other characters. Her weakness appears as early as the first season with an initial decision to suicide, a position she is only moved away from by another character’s refusal to allow her perish without concurrently causing his own death.

Andrea’s consideration of suicide frames much of the second season, when her weapons are taken from her by the men and not returned until she accepts proper training by the solider male incarnate, Shane. As noted above, he instructs her to control her body and to learn to kill without emotion, but her libido erupts upon her first successful shootout with ghouls, and hopped up on the thrill of destruction, she initiates a sexual encounter with Shane. Her lust – and her lust for violence – returns in Woodbury, when she meets the Governor and becomes his sexual partner. She thereby joins the ranks of a select few characters that have two sexual partners (Lori, Shane and the Governor), all of whom perish in the series. She similarly first expresses disgust upon sight of gladiatorial matches between humans and ghouls to placate the Woodbury citizens, but later confesses to the arousing bloodlust it and combat creates for her.

Andrea’s lack of self-restraint and inconsistency of control demonstrates the danger of women in TWD: she is a walking dam ready to burst, and quickly becomes a liability for herself and all those around her. Her inability to be loyal further demarcates her as a rifle-woman for two groups, the survivors and Woodbury. Her ultimate death by suicide completes the full circle of her weakness and messiness; not a soldier male, or domesticated rifle-woman, or white woman, she is assigned the death that, in the logic of the series, lacks glory and reveals cowardice. It is plausible, further, to suggest that sexual contact with her contaminates two of the most powerful solider males in the series, Shane and the Governor, thereby confirming her whorish malevolence as a red woman. Andrea’s story is not a model of feminism in the new world, then, but an admonition closely akin to the Freikorps literature that insists soldier males must be ready to domesticate or resist the monstrous chaos that women embody.

From this example of feminine monstrosity, we come at last to the ghouls of TWD. According to Theweleit, the fascist’s obsession with controlled bodies and emotions must resist everything that flows and everything that would allow the soft interior to violate the hard exterior. The soldier male’s most intense fear is therefore of decomposition, when what happen to his body is no longer within his control, and no version is more frightening than the decaying mass ([1978] 1989: 17). Theweleit notes how often red-coloured floods torment fascist authors and drive them to paranoia – a coincidence met in TWD by Morgan’s declaration, after the loss of his son by his undead wife and his adoption of extreme martial existence, that ‘Everything I see is
red’ (‘Clear’, The Walking Dead, 2013). Disease also haunts the fascist imagination, and they are repulsed by (according to Theweleit’s list) dirt, mire, morass, slime, pulp, shit, showers of excrement, and soft secretions flowing from behind and through the body. These infectious contaminants are not easily defeated by weapons, of course, so they are best combated with erections (but erections representing vitality rather than pleasure). And when a controlled body is contaminated – a fear that undergirds fascist hatred of racial miscegenation and hybrids in general – swift and violent revenge is necessary to stabilize the disruption.

It nears the superfluous to mention the unlimited imagery of floods and contamination in TWD, but a few choice representations should suffice. Obviously the decaying bodies of the ghouls themselves incorporate all these elements, and the series frequently depicts ‘herds’ – that is, masses of the undead pouring into the streets or against walls built to keep them out. TWD is not lax in showing gruesome attacks upon and consumption of living flesh by the monsters, but it also offers special examples of disgust with the opening of the bodies of the ghouls. Early in the series, for example, Rick leads survivors to pulverize a ghoul so as to cover themselves with its organs and pass unnoticed through a herd. Rick and Daryl later gut a ghoul to inspect its innards, fearing it had consumed a survivor; much later, Rick will angrily and repeatedly stab a bloated ghoul that consumed the corpse of his wife. Another bloated ghoul appears in a well and is eviscerated, and an unknown victim of a disease at the prison shelter reanimates with his guts sliding out onto the floor. Carol practices a c-section on the remains of a ghoul (an unzipping later replayed in horror on Lori), and Maggie cuts open ghouls to write messages to Glenn with their bloody innards. In the episode prior to their arrival at the Alexandria Safe-Zone, the survivors plow through countless ghouls with their vehicles, covering the machines in bodily ooze and body parts.

The idea that ghouls represent the horror of the interior leads to another recurrent image. In the world of TWD, eradication of ghouls necessitates destruction of their brainstems. Other attempts fail: beheadings result in animated heads, immolation does not remove them automatically, and the crushing of other body parts and organs merely slows their progress. As the series continues, however, ghoul bodies rot more and become softer, allowing for easier penetration by knives, blunt weapons, boot stomps, and even high-powered water from a fire truck. The survivors become skilled at dispatching them, with initial expressions of fear giving way to looks bordering on boredom. With this imagery at work, the series provides ample opportunities for quasi-pornographic lingering on the punctured head of a ghoul, out of which flows dark and haemorrhagic liquid. TWD opened with this image when Rick shoots the undead little girl, and continued unabated for all five seasons. In one particularly grisly example, Michonne drives her katana through the reanimated head of fallen comrade Hershel, the camera pausing to gaze on the wet gash. Such ghoulish conquest of the ghoul confirms Neocleous’ idea of the fascist obsession with making the dead properly dead, but it also begs comparison with menstruation, especially as the pairing of women and ghouls resounds with the denigration of femininity in western thought. In one of the oldest and ugliest tricks of gender control, the term ‘pussy’ is the choice insult in TWD against men who fail the standards of soldier males; similar derogatory comments are hurled at female ghouls, such as ‘bitch’ and ‘skank’.
Two passages from Theweleit are of keen significance regarding this hybridization. The first entails the desires of soldier males to assault red women as they foment or lead the ‘bloody masses’. He writes:

It’s as if two male compulsions were tearing at the woman with equal strength. One is trying to push them away, to keep them at arm’s length (defense); the other wants to penetrate them, to have them very near. Both compulsions seem to find satisfaction in the act of killing, where the man pushes the woman far away (takes her life), and gets very close to her (penetrates her with a bullet, stab wound, club, etc.). The closeness is made possible by robbing the woman of her identity as an object with concrete dimensions and a unique name. Once she has lost all that and is reduced to a pulp, a shapeless, bloody mass, the man can breathe a sigh of relief.


The second passage, albeit in direct reference to the red woman as a member of the proletariat, lays out Theweleit’s interpretation of the fascist motives for depicting women as monstrosities:

It is surely in this sense that we are to understand the function of the over-explicitness of the fascist language of symbol: it safeguards both writer and reader against the experiences they fear. The conscious encoding of the revolutionary mass with the specific configuration of ‘devouring femininity’ successfully prevents any confrontation with an experience of the struggle against the mass and femininity as a struggle to contain the soldier male’s fear of the desiring production of his own unconscious. And yet in his role as the builder of dams, as killer, exterminator, the man draws closer to the ‘desire to desire’, to his own unconscious, his own life.

([1978] 1989: 6, original emphasis)

Theweleit’s observation plays out from TWD’s inception. In the pilot episode, the heroic soldier male Rick encounters three females who announce the new and horrifying world: the aforementioned undead little girl, an eviscerated female corpse lying in a pool of blood on the hospital floor, and the ghoul identified as ‘bicycle girl’ whose lower torso is missing and whom Rick puts down as a purported act of mercy – but also as an act of masculine and martial power that will cement all further episodes.

**CALLING A CRISIS INTO CRISIS**

Throughout this article, I have attempted to demonstrate that TWD is replete with fascistic imagery, characterization and narrative themes, coordinating other forms of oppression into a coherent whole for which militarized violence is the only solution to the problem of the political. The question of what to do about this situation remains. Following customary scholarly practice, I am not accusing anyone who enjoys the series of being a fascist. I am arguing, however, that if TWD is an ‘ethics for the masses’ (Dean 2012: 87) and a narrative about the human condition ‘deserving of serious discussion’ (Lowder 2011: xv), then we must not turn a blind eye to the fascistic impulses that animate – and increasingly anchor – the series. Narratives are choices,
after all, and hence could provide new possibilities for thought rather than old forms of domination. If the creators of *TWD* ask viewers to accept the fantasy of the undead, there is no reason they could not also imagine alternatives to soldier male mentality and fascist melodrama. And if they cannot provide a good story without recourse to exhausted aesthetics, then fans should question why they are loyal to unimaginative writers.

In many ways, devotion to this fascistic narrative is not solely the fans’ responsibility. One would be remiss to ignore, for example, the rigorous marketing of *TWD* by AMC that co-opted carnivalesque aspects of the undead; or the network’s strategic employment of a post-show discussion, *The Talking Dead* (2011), to model and provide language to praise the series and reject criticism; or the series’ routine employment of cliffhangers and other delayed-gratification techniques that stimulate viewer addiction. Taking these measures into account, one might at least partially exempt fans. But then, there are those online comments, those vicious and persistent derogations and threats of bodily harm to anyone who dares criticize the series. And recalling Theweleit’s suggestion that fascist narratives work to keep authors and readers from confronting their own ethical responsibilities by overstimulating desires to see others destroyed, one cannot simply allow fans off the hook.

A careful reader will have noticed my referencing the undead monsters in *TWD* as ghouls, not zombies, and this decision was deliberate. As many students of horror know, the zombie originally appeared as a thoughtless creature enslaved to a master. The term became associated with the risen dead feasting on the living after *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968), for which George Romero originally considered the more appropriate folkloric appellation of ghoul. Scholars of the evolution of the zombie from slow-moving servant to fast-moving carnivore have generally consented to this alteration, but I am reserving the term for unreflective, protectionist and violent automatons that toil for their leader’s profit. To put it bluntly, I am concerned that far too many fans of *TWD* are willing to become zombies for a tiresomely formulaic show about ghouls.

I have a special concern for critics of the show, popular and professional, within and outside academia. Slavish reception of *TWD* demonstrates the crisis of criticism looming since the 1990s and the failure of critics – those who assume the responsibility to call things into crisis, as Roland Barthes once defined it – to attend to their work. Throughout this article I have expressed solidarity with critics who resist *TWD*’s wanting portrayals of race, gender and violence. I hope to bolster and support those colleagues and to challenge the well-oiled machine that attacks those who do not unconditionally praise the series. But I will not consider this combat. Criticism, when done well, offers a hand even as it rejects expressions that articulate pernicious perspectives such as fascism or corporations that profit so handily from them. In short, critics have much work to do to keep fans from becoming the walking dead themselves, and I hope more will rise up to this task.

The title of my essay – ‘Thunder without rain’ – is excerpted from T. S. Eliot’s ‘The Wasteland’, another text written during the tumultuous period of the rise of fascism. Eliot’s own fascistic leanings are beyond the scope of this article, but I cite the poem as a simple illustration of a different conclusion for a world gone to hell. ‘The Wasteland’ is arguably the spiritual ancestor of *TWD*, sharing copiously in imagery of death, destruction, and even the game of chess (essential to the war between Rick and the Governor), as well as questions of morality arising when society lies in disillusionment and collapse.
The poem advocates self-control, but in collaboration with compassion and charity. And quite unlike its fascist interlocutors, it closes with a meditation on peace rather than with a recommendation to warfare. I think the writers, the fans and the laudatory critics of TWD would do well to re-examine Eliot’s poem, if only to appreciate how a skilled writer can glimpse the end times and find an alternative to the celebration of violence.

Shantih shantih shantih

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