

Wellbeing in the Necrocene: *The Walking Dead* as a Solarpunk Eco-Ustopia

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ABSTRACT

The zombie genre has a number of characteristics that allow for a more thorough consideration of the link between the fictive zombie outbreaks and the problems of the Anthropocene. The present study aims to scrutinize why this issue can be considered even when it is not directly addressed, as in *The Walking Dead* series (2010–2022), which is analyzed after an overview of how the zombie has transitioned from embodying individual and social condition to indicating ecological threats. The discussion intends to demonstrate that the social connotations within the zombie tradition identify the zombie-infested world with modern capitalist society, thus making the genre a possible parable of what Jason Moore calls the Capitalocene and Justin McBrien the Necrocene. The *TWD* series shows an interest in not only the ensuing catastrophe but also the potentialities of “good life” after climate change, portraying the protagonists as not only escaping the dead but building new communities for the living and developing green technologies necessary to adapt to the climate crisis. *TDW* therefore transforms the zombie genre from a “splatterpunk” dystopia into a solarpunk dystopia, or “ustopia,” considering that it presents an almost eco-utopian vision of a dystopic world. (AH)

KEYWORDS: zombie, *TWD*, ustopia, capitalocene, necrocene, ecology, ecopolitics, consumer society, wellbeing



The zombie and the Anthropocene

Tales of the Walking Dead (2022) is an American post-apocalyptic horror drama anthology television series based on *The Walking Dead* universe, a fictitious world overrun by zombies. In episode 4, a lonely scientist, Dr. Everett, who, in a hermit-like solitude, devotes his life to the study of the undead, takes center stage. He believes that the rise of zombies is contributing to the regeneration of the environment that humans have destroyed over the past hundred and fifty years—in the era that scientists call the Anthropocene (Biermann and Lövbrand 1). As Dr. Everett explains, “that is the problem

with *Homo sapiens*. All we do is take, take, take until there is nothing left. And then once nature corrects the damage, we go back and do it all over again.” A girl, saved from the zombies by the scientist, wonders why the man does not consider the undead to be abnormal abominations: “I am confused. Are you arguing for chompers or for nature?”¹ The scientist’s response reveals the rejection of such binarism: “They are one and the same now. *Homo mortuus* are part of nature; *Homo mortuus* will exist as long as humans are around, which puts our survival in question” (“Amy/Dr. Everett”). This approach posits the zombie epidemic as Earth’s mechanism to eliminate the problem posed by humans the same way some ecologically-minded people did two years before the show was created, at the beginning of the Covid epidemic, when they proclaimed that “we are the virus, and the coronavirus is the vaccine” (Lambermont) that is meant to heal the planet.

All this invokes James E. Lovelock’s Gaia theory, according to which the Earth is a complex self-regulating system that maintains the conditions for life on the planet through negative feedback loops. In his 1991 book *Gaia, The Practical Science of Planetary Medicine*, Lovelock claimed that Gaia “is sufficiently like a living organism to be subject to illness or injury.” Although Gaia is self-healing, “we have grown in numbers and in disturbance to Gaia to the point where our presence is perceptibly disabling, like a disease,” triggering a counter-reaction aimed at the “destruction of the invading disease organisms” (Lovelock 153). In episode 4 of the *Tales of the Walking Dead*, it is the *Homo mortuus* that seems to be the “planetary medicine” to the planetary malady caused by *Homo sapiens*.

While it is quite rare, even unique, that a reference to the ecological crisis is so direct in a zombie-film as it is here, the zombie genre has a number of characteristics that together allow for a more thorough consideration of the link between the fictive zombie outbreaks and the problems of the Anthropocene. In the following, I will discuss what arguments there are to demonstrate that “from the 1970s on, thanks to Romero’s films, the viral zombie has reflected our horror at the workings and effects of capitalism and consumerism and in more recent narratives fears related to an irreversible climate change as the outcome of the Anthropocene are stressed” (Limpár, “Matters” 229). Focusing on what may play on the viewer’s ecological fears—or, more precisely, climate anxiety—in zombie films, the present study aims to scrutinize why this issue can be considered even when it is not directly addressed, as in *The Walking Dead* series (2010–2022), which will be analyzed after an overview of how the zombie has transitioned from embodying individual and social conditions to indicating ecological threats.

The fiction of “zombification” often highlights the dark side of the economic system, and the social connotations within the zombie tradition identify the zombie-infested world with modern capitalist society, where people are marginalized victims of the capitalist economy or, through their absorption in consumer culture, contribute to the exploitation of others and nature, thus making the genre a possible parable of what Jason Moore calls the Capitalocene (122) and Justin McBrien the Necrocene (116). Finally, the post-apocalyptic surroundings in the films make it not only possible but inevitable for survivors to seek forms of society capable of self-preservation, which also allows the viewer to ponder the conditions of a sustainable economy.

Within this framework the post-apocalyptic drama series *The Walking Dead* (TWD) presents a vision of the end of capitalism, which becomes a specific solution to the ecological crisis. The zombies in the series—called walkers—function not so much as “ecoterrorist agent[s] of Mother Earth” (Kérchy) like in the spin-off *Tales*, but as remnants and reminders of the social and economic consequences of the necropolitical trends in contemporary society that make it impossible for many to live a decent life. The last seasons are distinguished by the fact that the protagonists no longer lament the end of the perished modern world but start to build a new one: one which is ecologically sustainable and in which social justice prevails. The drama demonstrates that wellbeing does not depend on the present economical abundance but is possible in conditions of scarcity and is measured by the quality of human relationships and an ethic of care. This is what makes TWD—or at least some of its episodes—worthy of being considered as an almost eco-utopian vision in a dystopic world, or a “ustopia,” a term coined by Margaret Atwood to describe worlds that contain elements of both dystopia and utopia.²

The zombie and the Necrocene

The zombie genre can easily be considered as a manifestation of the aversion toward the body, a testimony to the dualism of mind and matter, showcasing the spirit and individuality of the subject in opposition to perishable organic matter. As Margrit Shildrick writes, “the disruption of corporeal integrity and the open display of bodily vulnerability is always a moment for anxiety and very often for hostility” (309; see also Poole 207, Dudenhoeffer 9). Additionally, as disgusting things are mostly organic, according to Simon Estok, they might also be signs of ecophobia (6–7).

Indeed, the zombie does not only betray, but also represents “a deep-seated phobia about ‘nature’” that “has a long history, and it has been argued that such a sentiment, consciously or not, may lie at the heart of Western culture’s long-held desire to alter, change and even destroy those aspects of our environments that (seem to) threaten us” (Hillard 105). Biotechnology is an attempt to achieve this goal. In contemporary zombie films, such as *28 Days Later* (2002), *28 Weeks Later* (2007), *Resident Evil* (2002), or *The Crazies* (2010), the zombie plague appears as a side effect of pharmaceutical experiments (Schmeink 206). So, “despite the fantasies of virtual disembodiment and the utopian discourses stating that virtual reality will liberate us from the constraints of the material body, there seems to be ‘no escape from the meat’” (Detsi-Diamanti et al. 5), just as—for many characters—there is no escape from the zombies in this genre.

However, the narratives of zombie films are symbolic not only of the fear of the body or organic materiality. The decaying bodies may signify a problematic body politic, that is, they may serve as “a depiction of social and symbolic (dis)order” (Ureczky 10). Many would argue that the contemporary trend of featuring monsters is a symptom of social crisis, although not necessarily of climate crisis (Birch-Bayley 1138). At the same time, whatever triggers the disasters in the cinema nowadays, the outcome recalls predictions of the climate catastrophe: social breakdown, famine, violence, pestilence (McKibben 83). Cinema seems to heed these predictions when the plots begin with the outbreak of a zombie epidemic: the opening episodes are always about the sudden end of the familiar Western way of life and the need to introduce a new set of values. In serial representations, the plot is mostly set against a backdrop of wars for the possession of increasingly scarce resources. These narratives evoke not only the “climate wars” (Hulme 125-6) of the *future*, but also the dangers inherent in the *present* modern way of life, the most important of which is the growing number of consumers for the finite quantity of raw materials to be consumed. This is not a new development, though: the issue of sustainability came to the foreground in 1972 with the publication of a computer simulation-based report titled “The Limits to Growth,” which seems to have given a boost to zombie narratives. The ecological problems of the world became a hotly debated topic right around “the emergence of Italian zombie cinema in the 1970s,” and the reignition of these discourses after the millennium coincides with the era of the so-called contemporary “zombie-renaissance” (Hubner, Leaning, and Manning 8).

Many zombie films suggest that the undead are, in fact, a vitriolic metaphor for the mindless citizen absorbed in consumption. The association between the zombie and the consumer citizen was established in Romero's 1978 *Dawn of the Dead*, where the protagonists, who first fight the zombies and then the survivors for the possession of a plaza, are destroyed in the final battle because they cannot give up what they consider the territory of their own. This association has prevailed and become even stronger via visual representations in which the main behavior traits of zombies and humans are nearly indistinguishable—for instance, in the *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) or in *Warm Bodies* (2013). In these examples, the living either mindlessly consume or destroy, just like the zombies. "Capital is an abstract parasite, an insatiable vampire and zombiemaker," Mark Fisher observes, "but the living flesh it converts into dead labor is ours, and the zombies it makes are us" (15).

Indeed, the great era of zombie films coincides with the rise of global capitalism. Many researchers agree with Jason Moore that "the issue is not one of anthropogenic-drivers—presuming a fictitious human unity—but of the relations of capital and capitalist power. The issue is not the Anthropocene, but the Capitalocene" (286–87). Considering this notion, the zombie is clearly the signature monster of the end of the Capitalocene, where problems with "food and climate, finance and energy represent not multiple, but manifold, forms of crisis emanating from a singular civilizational project: the capitalist world-ecology" (Moore 290). To Moore's diagnosis Justin McBrien adds that the endless accumulation of capital "is not only productive; it is necrotic, unfolding a slow violence. . . . Capital is the Sixth Extinction personified: it feasts on the dead, and in doing so, devours all life" (116). That is why McBrien offers the name Necrocene as an alternative to Moore's term, which the zombie-apocalypse aptly represents.

In McBrien's and Moore's analyses, the economic expansion of the North and the Northern way of life was based not only on the exploitation of nature in general, but also on the resources and manpower of the Third World (McBrien 120–21; Moore 289). The residents of the South are the victims of the increase in consumption in the North, but they are also the scapegoats for the resulting problems. Two years after the publication of "The Limits to Growth," Garret Hardin wrote an influential treatise on the so-called "lifeboat ethics," which claimed that a solution to the ecological crisis was made impossible by the high reproduction rate of the poor world (173–77). As McBrien claims, "now the very reproduction of 'humanity' was a threat to human existence" (131). The discourse of overpopulation resurrected a misanthropic neo-Malthusianism that perceived the greatest

threat to the biosecurity of the globe in “the growing ‘hordes’ of the Global South,” a threat that the sight of the swiftly growing hordes of the undead in zombie films could easily evoke.

The trope of the zombie can be seen as representing the losers of colonialism and the subsequent capitalist restructuring, which may threaten the socio-political status quo. The term “zombie” was originally used in Haitian mythology to refer to the magically resurrected dead, deprived of their souls by the magic of vodou. In the colonial era, the zombie myth offered a fantastic explanation for slavery (Richardson 123–24, Bishop 76–78, 198; Schmeink 204; Murphy 49; Poole 194). In keeping with the zeitgeist, early zombie films between the two world wars drew parallels between the enchanted natives and factory workers on assembly lines. In contemporary zombie films (just like in vampire or werewolf fictions), the transformation into “soulless” beings is not caused by magic but is rather the symptom of an infectious disease spread by biting. On the one hand, this invention makes the plot more credible in a secular culture, while on the other hand, it connects the narrative to the current discourses on epidemics. The fear of disease often fuels (or is used as a pretext for) the exclusion of migrants from the Global South, who are frequently accused of spreading viruses (Pianigiani and Bubola) and who, in most media images, “migrate” in hordes or herds (McBrien 131–32), similarly to the undead in the films.

Racial tensions can also be linked to the anxieties arising from the increasingly sharp divisions between social classes. Today’s zombies rarely connote slavery, but are still often and easily associated with social pariahs or the precariat who—deprived of health care and clearly more exposed to disease—are confined to their vegetative functions (Bishop 71–73; Vint 135–36). Since in today’s movies zombies are created by infection, it is also possible to see them as the representations of our perception of being sick; their condition can easily raise questions that pertain to the ethics of care. The sight and the definition of the zombie in the movies as *living dead*—together with the danger of becoming one—may express fears that are rooted in the transformation of the health care system in the Northern countries in the 1990s, when the ethics of care was increasingly subordinated to “the authority of an all-encompassing market rationality permeating all areas of life, the economic and the political, the social and the intimate alike” (Brugère 68). Even the very proliferation of zombie films can be seen as a response to the decline in welfare institutions, a direct consequence of the neoliberal economic concept that was gaining ground in the 1970s and which had ecological roots, as it was intended to compensate for the increasing scarcity

and expense of natural resources by cutting wages and eliminating free or cheap forms of public provision. In this frame of thought care is promoted mainly as self-care, “referring only to health, to the able-bodied adult, or to human capital,” while providing support to “the poor, to migrants, to people who are stripped of any power” is not encouraged, because it is not profitable (Brugère 70). The ensuing crisis of care is best interpreted as “a more or less acute expression of the social-reproductive contradictions of financialized capitalism. . . . The care deficits we experience today are the form this contradiction takes in this third, most recent phase of capitalist development,” Nancy Fraser writes in 2016 (99–100).

It is probably no coincidence that the fashion for early zombie films began after the Great Depression of 1929 with *White Zombie* (1932). The genre’s rise after the turn of the millennium cannot be dissociated from the new waves of the financial crisis—so much so that a 2009 article in *Time* magazine by the famous fantasy writer Lev Grossman declared the zombie the “new vampire” and “the official monster of the recession,” while Chris Harman wrote a whole volume of social criticism entitled *Zombie Capitalism*, and David McNally analyzed the zombie as the “market’s signature monster” alongside the vampire. However, as Fred Botting argues, vampires represent the winners of “new times and global economic restructurings,” while in the same fantasy framework “zombies—occluded, outcast, overlooked—constitute the other side of the new global economy” (20).

In this context, the trend of zombie films can be seen as the illustration of what Achille Mbembe describes as the “late modern” trend in politics and warfare: “[I]n our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximally destroying persons and creating death-worlds, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead” (92). No wonder that in the world of the zombie-films “daily life is militarized. Local military commanders have the discretionary freedom to decide whom to shoot and when,” which Mbembe calls the manifestation of necropolitics (82–83).

***The Walking Dead* and solastalgia**

In the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of the epidemic, almost all zombie films portray life as reverting to the Hobbesian “natural condition of mankind” ruled by “continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes 138). The surviving humans, according to the scientist interviewed in *Dawn of the Dead*,

“have got to remain unemotional, rational, logical” (01: 41:18–25). In the fight against the zombies, the survivors emerge as the remaining bannermen of the intelligent, language-using, autonomous, self-conscious and self-interested *Homo economicus*. The focus of the films then usually shifts to the relationships of the healthy to one another, which are also mostly dominated by hostility, since it is generally taken for granted that there is no other way to survive than to compete with one another for the limited resources still available, thus providing an alarming image of the climate wars of the future (Drezner 37–44). As Vera Benczik explains about post-apocalyptic films,

Economic, social, and cultural regression is a common dystopian element in the (post)apocalyptic canon: survivors revert to old(er) social patterns, and a totalitarian system based on aggression, power, and oppression, a strictly patriarchal social order, and the sharp division of gender roles indicates that not only has progress stalled, but as a result of global trauma, humanity has been pushed back into a state from which there is no escape. (11)

In depicting the violence that seems inevitable to overcome the threat, antagonists and heroes become more and more similar: they are all “monsters” in some way or another (Vint 141). In the latest generation of zombie-themed series (*The Walking Dead*, 2010–2022; *Fear the Walking Dead*, 2015–2023; *Walking Dead: Beyond*, 2020–21; *Black Summer*, 2019–2021; *In the Flesh*, 2013–15, among others), the social/ideological characterization of the groups of survivors moves into focus, which is of interest in certain cases because they can be used to test the ideas of ecopolitical trends. Writing about the first season of *TWD*, Reed and Penfold-Mounce argue that “the most significant development that this fantasy horror television show makes is its ability to inspire the sociological imagination amongst its largely non-scholarly audience” in that “it stimulates consideration of human emotion and relationality within the context of large-scale social change” (136, 126).

Social structures that firmly justify “the stronger’s right to life” are not immediately demonized in *TWD* (Török 369–92).³ After the first five seasons of the show, Stephen Gencarella forthrightly stated that “the series is decidedly fascistic in nature, and celebratory of fascist masculinity as the key to surviving an apocalyptic situation” (125). The following seasons, however, testify that *TWD* prefers to allow the viewers to explore and judge the possible social contracts raised by the narrative. It is often argued that traditional democracy enabled by the abundance of fossil fuels and

technological development (Mitchell 32) is not viable in this world of scarcity. Rebacca Solnit highlights how “contemporary disaster scholars speak of vulnerability—of the ways that disasters find existing frailties and weaknesses in the system and pry them open to victimize some more than others. In this respect, disaster does not democratize” (112). In *TWD*, where democracy prevails at first sight, it usually turns out that terrible atrocities kept in the background challenge the notion of equality. For example, in season 5, a community in a place called Terminus promises care and safety to those who settle there. But visitors who take these promises seriously are captured and eaten, because that is how the locals feed themselves.⁴ As Negan, the charismatic and all-powerful leader of the so-called Saviors—another group introduced in season 6—believes, if someone is rescued from the clutches of the zombies, it costs them perpetual slavery, because no one can seriously believe that they are being kept and cared for out of sheer compassion.⁵

At first glance, the series, like other kinds of post-apocalyptic cinema, represents the fear of losing the way of life that has contributed most to the devastation of Earth. As the zombie crisis represents first and foremost the loss of a familiar consumerist lifestyle in the Global North, and the protagonists are all American, *TWD* seems to be the typical representation of Rebecca Solnit’s concept of “elite panic,” a view of the future that “expresses the elite’s fear of losing their own position” (Solnit 235; see Csányi and Kiss 168–69). It also seems plausible that the series, above all, tries to revive a sense of “solastalgia,” a term created by Glenn Albrecht for “the pain or distress caused by the loss of, or inability to derive, solace connected to the negatively perceived state of one’s home environment” (Albrecht et al. 96; see Csányi and Kiss 168). If that is so, it presumably encourages the viewer to cling to their current situation, which is an attitude that works against commitment to social change. All this appears to demonstrate that, as Tom Bentley claims, “the values of individualism, diversity and open exchange, which have been fought over for centuries, . . . are embodied in the structure of capitalism” (15). As these values are lost in the world of the film, the narrative warns the viewer to preserve it, since it still “constitutes the only viable possibility for organizing economies” (Bentley 15). *TWD*, however, eventually defies the expectation that showing the scarcity of the post-apocalyptic world can only amplify the greatness of the abundance characterizing contemporary consumer society.

The solarpunk utopia of *The Walking Dead*

The journey that the small group of *TWD*'s protagonists take has many interesting lessons in social theory and political science. One might even say that the narrative is a post-Anthropocene version of the Enlightenment traveling novel, presenting different possible social constructs so that the characters may try them all out as they move from one community to another. Scarcity is a feature of all the mini-societies of filmic zombie-worlds, many of which sustain themselves in the same way that almost all societies have done since the agricultural revolution: the exploited majority is forced to pay the cost of the elite's living. What the cannibals of Terminus and the Savivors have in common is that they support themselves by living off the labor of others. For the main characters, the challenge is to preserve the gains of democracy in conditions of scarcity without passing the costs on to their fellow human beings. Evolutionary biology believes that such behavior is not only feasible but is natural as well: "in the case of social animals the development of patterns in the behavior which includes altruistic decisions and what we call 'moral sense' gives them some adaptive advantages in their own social environment, and sometimes, among other groups or tribes" (Perez Bernardes de Moraes and dos Santos Millani 2). In the series, the protagonists' journey demonstrates a trajectory from selfishness to altruism. While they never find the perfect society, they become increasingly determined to develop a polity in which there is room for compassion, care, and tolerance.

In the last few seasons of *TWD*, we encounter several communities that share a commitment to direct democracy to ensure that the will of all members is taken into consideration. These communities cooperate and shake off the tyranny of the groups that oppress them. Besides wanting to be free, they also have one thing in common: they strive to become economically sustainable. Thus the aforementioned struggle to find the perfect social structure coincides with that of the eco-politicians who are trying to define the kind of social order that is ecologically sustainable as well as socially just and livable. Narrowly speaking, the series is not about the environment: the state of nature, the climate crisis, and the role of politics are barely even *discussed* over the long years of the series. Sustainability is demanded by the represented environmental factors: the lack of energy resources, the collapse of infrastructure, and the fact that existing non-renewable materials start to wear out.

Depending on the circumstances, sustainability takes many different forms in *TWD*. At one point of their journey, the protagonists arrive in a

settlement called Alexandria, which was designed to be ecologically sustainable and equipped with a range of green technologies (solar panels, fiber mills, closed and cyclical power supply, water reservoirs and ecological sewage treatment, resistant native crops, etc.) well before the zombie outbreak, as it was originally intended to be the home of enlightened elite consumers (Figure 1).



Figure 1.
The Walking Dead. Season 9, Episode 1

The characters then befriend a community on a farm called Hilltop, which has no such technology, and where they farm with traditional, premodern methods on common land (Figure 2).



Figure 2.
The Walking Dead. Season 9, Episode 1

In Oceanside, the traditional semi-nomadic village lifestyle of premodern cultures prevails. In the so-called Kingdom, the concept of urban permaculture seems to be dominant, with the community living its life in a cooperative system that provides a social net for the inhabitants: for example, the goods they produce are cooked and eaten in a communal canteen, schooling and day care for children are also communally organized, and the military for self-defense is formed by the inhabitants on a voluntary basis. In a sense, due to its long running time and the experimental possibilities this allows, *TDW* transforms the zombie genre (at least for a time) from a “splatterpunk” dystopia (Vint 137) into a solarpunk ustopia.⁶

The struggles of the characters in the show may simulate those necessary for adapting to the climate crisis. In the past century, economists seemed to believe that perpetual economic growth was possible and necessary. But as the Club of Rome predicted and climate change proves there are “limits to growth” (Heinberg, *The End* 23). In his book *Afterburn*, Heinberg claims that

What’s needed, evidently, is an attractive new paradigm that might lead us to proactively reduce our energy consumption. The voluntary simplicity movement blazed that trail back in the 1980s, and the Transition Network has made considerably more headway by organizing whole communities

around the task of reducing fossil fuel consumption while relearning preindustrial skills and rebuilding local economies. (44)

TWD may be seen as an attempt to make this “new paradigm” “attractive.” In season 8, the protagonists make a deal with a strange woman, Georgie, who requests food and music records in return for information written in a book. She insists that “inside, there are handwritten plans for windmills, watermills, silos, hand-drawn schematics, guides to refining grain, creating lumber, aquaducts, a book of medieval human achievement so that we may have a future from the past” (“The Key” 38:22–38:40). And indeed, in season 9 the lead characters put down their cars and switch to horses. In episode 1, titled “A New Beginning,” they visit the ruined Smithsonian Museum to acquire tools for production, including a canoe, genetically pure seeds, and a wagon. The leader of Alexandria, Rick Grimes, claims: “We are not just fighting to survive any more. We are making a New Beginning”.

The season’s third episode (“Warning Signs”) opens with Rick Grimes as he wakes up in the morning, kisses his partner, goes into his daughter’s room, and then out to the street. With a satisfied look on his face, he surveys the scene that will soon be revealed to the viewer too. In front of the high walls protecting the housing estate from zombies, the park and front gardens typical of the twenty-first century are replaced by tidy kitchen gardens and solar panels between the houses. Rick contemplates with contentment, walks to a tomato bush, plucks a fruit, then walks to a pile of stones—revealed earlier to be his son’s grave—and places the tomato on top (as is the way with flowers elsewhere), paying homage to the memory of his boy, whose last wish was that the living should fight not with each other but for each other. Indeed, a little later in the episode, Rick tells a friend that he believes it is time “to build life, not to take it” (27:43–46). Instead of presenting a picturesque spectacle of streams, hills, and untouched nature, the scene transforms into an aesthetic and moving portrayal of sustainable agricultural life.

In episode 6 (“Who Are You Now”) of the same season, just before the credits, the camera pans to a bird landing on a zombie’s shoulder, which is merged with a tree and is already not that different in color and material from it. The bird pulls a worm out of the zombie’s ear, and then we see that its nest is just a little further away, where several hatchlings await the worm (Figure 3).



Figure 3.
The Walking Dead. Season 9, Episode 6

The zombie becomes part of the cycle of life and a symbol of interdependence. Not only the organic materiality of the body, but its abject aspects and decay are also aestheticized (and turned downright kitsch). Living death here is no longer a state that is even more terrible than death but an expression of the vitality of matter which “counters and critiques the obdurate, though postmodern, humanisms that seek transcendence or protection from the material world” (Alaimo 4). If the migration of the zombie hordes may be a metaphor for the “aggressive expansion” and the “push for homogenization” in today’s consumer society as the “hallmarks of the desperate struggle for survival of every declining civilization,” the series clearly sees the potential for renewal in small communities, diverse as they are, that represent “the peaceful coexistence of alternative explanations of the world, ways of life and technologies” (Lányi 33).

Wellbeing in *The Walking Dead*

In seasons 8 and 9, it becomes almost a mantra that mere survival is no longer enough. Exceeding it, however, does not mean obtaining more material goods, but “rather the realization of a truly human striving towards a meaningful life” (Lányi 102–03). In the world of *TWD*, this is expressed in useful creative activities as well as in playing music, dancing, watching films, holding fairs, and engaging in conversations that make up a surprisingly large

part of the show. We almost get a utopia, although in Season 10 the narrative turns into a dystopia again when the homes and hard-earned wealth of the surviving communities are vengefully destroyed by an extreme zombie-centric subculture, the Whisperers (who live together with the undead, staying silent and wearing zombie masks).

In Season 11, another group, called the Commonwealth, comes to the rescue of the central characters. Not only at first glance, but for almost half the season, the Commonwealth delivers what in many cases was the seemingly impossible wish of almost all the characters: the restoration of the past world. If anything, this seems to be the perfect proof of *solastalgia*, and indeed, after many of the inhabitants of Alexandria and Hilltop move to the Commonwealth, we get insights into their life, which—in a way that has not been seen before in the series—resembles the life of Western societies in the twenty-first century. The citizens are not simply safe; a well-equipped army ensures their protection, so they almost live like they did before the crisis: in blocks of flats, taking home boxed food from the canteen for dinner, preparing for school or work. We even see a former journalist writing articles and a former surgeon operating on a patient. Money has been reintroduced, and the protagonists learn again what it is like to worry about finances.

However, something is not right, and the focal characters are feeling increasingly disturbed. This time the apparently pleasant everyday life does not hide dark, Gothic secrets (such as cannibalism or slavery) as we have seen in the antagonistic communities mentioned before. The most annoying things are the small details of the old world, such as long queues in the canteen or parents being unable to give their children pocket money because they do not have a well-paid job. More problematically, the police are corrupt, journalists' articles are censored so that newspapers can only publish propaganda that supports the status quo, and average patients have to wait so long for an operation that they die before getting to it. The way things are presented exhibit the exact condition that (eco-)political activists blame capitalism for: "the system is a more or less closed oligopoly of elite insiders. The political and personal connections between the largest corporations and government are so extensive as to amount to collusion. Transparency is minimal, regulation is corrupted by industry interests, accountability is a politically manipulated show" (Bollier).

Nothing illustrates this better than the Halloween party in the governor's mansion in episode 10, season 11. At the party, a journalist points out "the class divide on display" ("New Haunts" 29.41–49), to which Pamela Milton, daughter of the former US president, replies that her father would be

pleased to see how much his daughter cares about the health and wellbeing of their residents. A ruined soldier-turned-terrorist, however, exclaims: “This is bullshit! Does anyone here really believe that the Commonwealth cares for all its citizens? . . . This is what you care about. Fancy parties and paintings. Not people like me. We are nothing to you. Disposable” (31.48–32.56). When arrested, he keeps protesting: “There are thousands more like me. Resist the Commonwealth! Visibility for workers! Equality for all!” (37.25–33). Similar protest slogans appear on the walls of the buildings, and the viewer learns about the emergence of an underground movement that exposes the evils of the governance. The regime is eventually overthrown, thanks to a deliberately leaked monologue, delivered by the future leader, which states that “the Commonwealth is built on buying into bullshit. The desperate need to believe that the ol’ American dream is still real. You know, ‘Anything is possible.’ We could rise above our station! It’s a friggin’ joke. The reality is that the poor stay poor so that the rich can do whatever the hell we want. The game is rigged. There are no bootstraps to pull up” (“A New Deal” 38.03–38.31).

The ensuing uproar could be interpreted as a sign that people do not really want to be confronted with the reality of the rift between the social classes or, given the situation beyond the walls, are never satisfied with what there *is*. Another interpretation might be that now is the time they realize that the past should not be reanimated. Once the protagonists—and through them, the audience—experience a community with relative equality and direct democracy, a world like the one we live in today no longer seems like what it should be. The post-apocalyptic ordeal and the alternative communal structures it introduces provide a perspective from which the failures of the present practice of *business as usual* become much clearer. In light of the protagonists’ struggles and the results they achieve, the evils of the Western way of life become more visible, and the already proven fact that happiness does not depend on material wellbeing becomes more tangible. This is why “nowadays thinkers, politicians and even economists are calling to supplement or even replace GDP with GDH—gross domestic happiness. After all, what do people want? They don’t want to produce. They want to be happy. Production is important because it provides the material basis for happiness. But it is only the means, not the end” (Harari 30).

Overconsumption in today’s advanced societies does not translate into real wellbeing (Latouche 20). Because of society’s prevailing belief that the more one consumes, the better life they have, policies that promote GDP growth at all costs are implemented, making the environment and the poor pay the price. If the aim of social policy were to actually improve the quality

of life, the focus should be on education, health, and time for leisure, family, and community activities (Mont 35). As Richard A. Easterlin, the pioneer of wellbeing research, posits, “a reallocation of time in favor of family life and health would, on average, increase individual happiness” (11182). And indeed, the weary warriors of *TWD* invariably leave the relative material prosperity of the Commonwealth for the alternatives offered by Alexandria, Hilltop, and Oceanside, which, though harsh and difficult, define wellbeing in terms of freedom, natural environment, network of relationships, and equality.

When the Commonwealth plans to take over the weaker communities, a girl comments that “They just want to swallow up other communities. They are like the Whisperers. They just wear different masks” (“The Rotten Core” 26.11). The words “mask” and “swallow” in this reasoning link the social-philosophical problems of the series with the zombie theme in a most interesting way. The mask, worn by the Whisperers to hide among the zombies, becomes an expression of the allegorical potential of the zombie story, while the term “swallow” presents the political inclination to incorporate and violently subjugate others and it evokes the notion of cannibalism, a ubiquitous aspect of the zombie narrative, and thus makes the political implications of the zombie thematic even clearer than before.

Conclusion

Episode 4 of *Tales of the Walking Dead* has some traits in common with a recent trend in zombie fiction in which the zombie represents a stage of evolution beyond humans. In this new approach, the zombie “signifies the possibility of renewal and a complete change of perspective,” a “shift towards a post-anthropocentric, posthuman subjectivity that is willing to see beyond the fate of what is narrowly defined as human” (Limpár, “Able Zombies” 234). Some of the characters in *TWD* are also inclined to such a “change of perspective,” but it usually proves to be a fantasy, a departure from common sense. Unlike the films belonging to this trend, *TWD* confronts the world of the Anthropocene not through posthumanism, but through a critique of social norms and capitalism.

Season 11 concludes the social vision of the series by rejecting the possibility of resurrecting the current world without a trace of *solastalgia*. It also presents the sustainable communities we have seen before as sources of wellbeing rather than prosperity, which also makes it impossible to see the post-apocalyptic world of the series as an expression of elite panic. The innovative twist of the series, whereby the characters return to a world that

has been mourned for eleven years, offers a new perspective on the Anthropocene, illustrating how, “in the age now dawning, our hopes will shift and our ideologies will shift with them,” as Bill McKibben claims. Not surprisingly, then, the protagonists’ discoveries about the Commonwealth and themselves mirror McKibben’s revelations: “In the new world we’ve created, the one with hotter temperatures and more drought and less oil, big is vulnerable. We are going to need to split up, at least a little, if we’re going to avoid being subdued by the forces we’ve unleashed. . . . It shouldn’t be completely scary; we almost intuitively realize that for many things small is often better” (146).

Implementing no-growth economies in *TWD* “can be defined as a process of transition from management according to the traditional industrial-market paradigm of development to a paradigm of inclusive development, based on sustainability and restoration of ecological balance” (Adamowicz). Although in the world of the series this process takes place out of necessity, the change is in line with the objectives of eco-politics, since “in politics the greens aim to create the conditions for decision-making based on responsible participation and joint deliberation” (Lányi 14). *The Walking Dead* can even be viewed as offering a model for the solidarity economy. Alexandria, Hilltop, and the Kingdom “make the commons a core institution that ‘guides’ all other social forms . . . towards achieving the greatest common good and the maximum autonomy” (Bauwens, Kostakis, and Pazaitis 8). Although zombie films have always been highly critical of consumerism, recent representatives of the genre show an interest in not only the ensuing catastrophe but also the potentialities of “good life” after climate change. While portraying the protagonists not only escaping the dead, but also building new communities for the living, this example of the genre “offers a fresh vocabulary and logic for escaping the deadend of market-fundamentalist politics, policy and economics and cultivating more humane alternatives” (Bollier).

The fresh vocabulary also invents new names for the undead. An interesting feature of *TWD* is that the word “zombie” is never used—as if the concept and the myth of the zombie had not developed in the diegesis of the series. Every community has a different word for the undead in the local jargon, which makes sociological sense in linguistic terms, and all fit the undead. The Savivors simply use the term “dead ones,” elsewhere the terms “eater” or “biter,” “muncher” or “chomper” are common, and the protagonists use the word “walker,” since the undead are constantly on the move. The choice of words in a given context can be significant. Sometimes,

as could be expected, it denotes what is considered the other of humanist (rational, moral, aesthetic) ideals, such as “lamebrains,” “empties,” “freaks,” “deadheads,” “uglies,” or “stinkers.” At other times, the designation creates the other with the explicit purpose of portraying it as dangerous to provoke fear. Commenting on the name a totalitarian leader used for zombies in season 3, a user on reddit mused: “I always thought that the Governor calling them ‘biters’ reflected his need to create enemies to keep his dictatorial power.” In some cases, the name implies that this other is not external but reflects internal anxieties of the group. For example, “eater” is prevalent where people give up autonomy for food and safety. The cannibals of Terminus, who call zombies “cold bodies” in contrast to warm-blooded humans, perhaps use this term because they themselves kill their fellow human beings in cold blood. The Commonwealth, where the name for zombies is “rotter,” is described as rotten to the core by the main characters, whose most fervent desire is to finally escape the nomadic existence of perpetual wandering, projected on zombies in the term “walker.” This pattern connects zombie symbolism with the theme of ecopolitics: the zombie becomes a symptom of a socio-somatic disease that is the consequence of repressed or untreated collective problems—threats to the wellbeing of both humans and the Earth.

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Notes

1. There are countless words for the undead in *The Walking Dead* universe, for example “chompers” (as here), except for “zombie.” The problem of naming is discussed in the Conclusion.

2. “Utopia is a world I made up by combining utopia and dystopia – the imagined perfect society and its opposite—because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other” (Atwood).

3. The series was in its seventh season at the time of the paper's publication, and the author notes that "at this point in the series there does not yet seem to be any chance that 'the war of all against all' situation will change" (Török 383).

4. This threat appears in countless films, many of which present cannibalism not simply as a taboo violation, but as an eventuality in a post-apocalyptic, post-climate-crisis world. Examples include *Soylent Green* (1973), *Ravenous* (1999), *Tooth and Nail* (2007), *The Road* (2009), *Hell* (2010), *The Day* (2012), *Colony* (2013), *Snowpiercer* (2013), *Tear Me Apart* (2015), *Drifter* (2016), and *Mortal Engines* (2018). The first season of HBO's zombie series, *The Last of Us* (2023), also features a community that survives by cannibalism, even though not all members are aware of their own survival practices.

5. The Saviors do not live off the wealth they themselves produce but offer protection to others in exchange for their goods, a deal they force upon the communities around them.

6. The term is used by Sherryl Vint to describe the ubiquitous feature of zombie films that they devote long scenes to the mass smashing of rotting zombies (Vint 137).

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