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RESEARCH

When the Zombies Came for Our Children: Exploring Posthumanism in Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead*

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Through the theoretical lens of cultural posthumanism, this essay offers a reading of writer Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* comics series (2003 ongoing). By referring to specific passages of Kirkman's script, this essay explores *The Walking Dead*'s psychologization of childhood as its narrative moves away from a satirical construction of the zombie apocalypse into the inquiry of contemporary (in)humanity.

Keywords: zombies; The Walking Dead; humanism; posthumanism; childhood

Introduction

Robert Kirkman's comics series *The Walking Dead* (2003–ongoing) questions what humanity is and what our role is in the evolution of humankind. One of the major ways Kirkman packages this philosophical reconsideration of humanity is in his constructions of children, most notably Rick's son Carl, as they struggle to mature in a human way during a posthuman moment.

Just over ten years ago, Elaine Ostry made a poignant statement regarding the future of childhood: "the future young adults face is that of a science fiction novel come to life" (2004). Her remarks began a discussion of what a child, or even childhood itself, might look like when "biotechnological feats and possibilities stimulate much discussion about ethics." More specifically, the discussion revolved around underpinning the ethics of humanity in a period promising advances towards a normative posthuman state (Ostry 2004). Landmark in this thinking is the fact that one might think technological and biotechnological advancement concerned with the

lengthening of life or even changing the nature of life might be considered a discussion meriting enthusiastic and/ or optimistic debate. Not quite: "The implications of the posthuman age baffle and frighten adults", Ostry writes. For, "if adolescence is the time when one considers what it means to be human, to be an individual," (2004) then what happens when society approaches a moment when, at a cognitive, emotional, and/ or social transition, traditional human society ceases and transforms into a posthuman apocalypse?

Interestingly, critical posthumanist approaches to Kirkman's comic series are scarce (cfr. Hassler-Forest 2012; Gavaler 2014; Beil and Schmidt, 2015). Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro devote an entire volume, *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human* (2011), to the subject with only a passing mention to the eponymous AMC television show, and less remark on the comics. One would have expected more academic production to employ posthumanism as the most obvious theoretical lens applicable to the comic. As Richard Gooding remarks:

> the posthuman has become a major locus of cultural studies and literary theory [. . . .] posthumanism emerges out of a complex convergence of disciplines— philosophy, informatics, biotechnology, and cybernetics, among others—that, in various ways, trouble liberal humanist definitions of the self as coherent, autonomous, and rational. (2011).

Gerry Canavan sees the undead through a post-colonial lens: the walkers are "an interrogation of the 'future' of late capitalist hegemony, and its concordant state racism, through fantastic depiction of its breakdown and collapse" (2010). Canavan sees the zombie as a great metaphor for "the biopolitical origins [insisting] that before we can ever hope to "become zombies" we first must come to terms with the historical and ongoing colonial violence of which the zombie has always ever been only the thinnest sublimation" (Canavan 2010). Essentially, Canavan picks up on previous Romeroan notions of the zombie as metaphor and reifies the idea; he finds them absent of any interiority, "lacking mind," and thus permanently subjected to a colonizing gaze. Kyle Bishop comes closest to addressing the idea of posthumanism in

his discussion of "human devolution" (2013) where he posits that, in true Romeroan fashion, the walkers of *The Walking Dead* "represent humanity" as social commentary. According to Bishop, Kirkman "present[s] the otherwise sympathetic *protagonists* as monstrous creatures," inverting the binary in the post-apocalyptic horror narrative to indicate that "*humans* are truly monstrous" (emphasis mine, Bishop 2013). Bishop, like Kirkman, sees *The Walking Dead* not as horror but as "survival" where humanity undergoes a "monstrozation" (2013) by being forced to make "*hard* choices" (emphasis mine), as Cory James Rushton and Christopher Moreman (2011) put it, emphasizing exactly how hard one must be in the posthuman moment when actions against zombie and fellow human alike are not even conceivable by the normative populace in the human moment.

Last Rights: The Dead Shall Inherit the Earth

"In a liberal humanist society," claims Naarah Sawers, "[our] narratives foster a more nuanced ethical dialogue with the issues that new science brings about, and they thus speak quite specifically to the cultural anxieties" (2006). In other words, the fictions we craft often speak of the things that we are uncomfortable discussing. Our concerns regarding life and how to live it, prolong it, and, arguably, better it for humanity are at the core of humanist society. Sawers notes that what she describes is "a *liberal* humanist, capitalist society," (emphasis mine) where "concepts of subjectivity and agency pivot around the definition of human and the distribution of property" (Sawers 2006). That definition contains an inherent distinction between 'haves' and 'have-nots' who will vie for success at the other's expense given a finite amount of goods and services. Harmony between the two clearly empowers the one while diminishing the other.

Following Sawers, if we examine some of our more popular fictional works, we find an ethical tension running throughout popular narratives dealing with the undead. Taking that cue, for example, in the film *Ghostbusters* (1984) one might notice during the montage set to the iconic Ray Parker Jr. song of the same name that there is a faux cover of *The Atlantic* whose headline posits: "The Politics of the Next Dimension: Do Ghosts have Civil Rights?" In 1984, that was an apt satiric

moment built from the Romeroan mold, but, in 2015, it holds far-more significant implications: if one considers Romero's rules for dealing with zombies (or, more recently still: the far more heavily-articulated rules from *Zombieland* [Reuben Fleischer 2010]), rarely do initial human-on-zombie negotiations seem to get much further than a gaping head wound or decapitation. In 2007's *Fido* [Andrew Currie], yet another satirical film, humans subjugate zombies with a mollifying collar and remote control assembly that turns zombies into working slaves of the human population. In both of these cases, human rights trump the rights of the undead, and the human race foils a competing organism, thus re-asserting an anthropocentric ideological model.

What happens when the binary is inverted? When the once disenfranchised corporeal undead now occupies the dominant subject position after a bloody genocide of humanity who gets slaughtered and processed like feed cattle? One must return to the work of George A. Romero, who lays the groundwork for everything that comes afterward in popular depictions of the zombie as the dominant species. Bishop notes that Romero's early work with the genre establishes conventions and tropes that are

> relatively simple and remarkably consistent: ordinary characters in ordinary places are confronted with overwhelmingly extraordinary challenges, namely the unexpected appearance of an aggressive horde of flesh-eating ghouls. Zombie cinema is essentially a macabre romp-a live-action comic book brought to the big screen both to horrify and entertain. (2006).

Romero's adherence to genre types and forms creates a hermeneutic circle with the comics and graphic novels that follow him: he borrowed periodic conventions from comics and invested them into his films, and his films reinvigorated the comics that adopted and adapted the principles to which he added his particular style and flair. At the heart of Romero's construction is concept of the zombie as a "grotesque metaphor for humanity itself," (Bishop 2006). This is a chilling if not satiric embellishment of the human condition—a mob of familiar forms and faces all devoid of

thought simply shuffling along, incapable of communication or speculation regarding life, akin to the perception of today's pedestrian strolling about town with a face-buried into a smart phone, incapable of communicating otherwise. Kirkman and Romero account for what occurs when "society's infrastructure begins to break down" (Bishop 2006). However, the zombies in Romero's satiric construct do not necessarily act as the monsters; they're more akin to predatory animals. The humans behave in monstrous fashion both to each other and to the zombies; in what they perceive to be the end times, they are willing to do whatever they must in order to survive just a bit longer, when all prior human considerations toward order and rights are suspended in ignorance and fear.

The characters in *The Walking Dead* seem to notice these conditional changes. Hershel Greene, farmer and humanist moral echo throughout the series, has a telling conversation on the nature of zombies with Rick Grimes, *The Walking Dead's* primary protagonist, an otherwise constructed good cop who awakens from a coma to find himself in a post-apocalyptic world. At a telling point in the comics, he asks Rick what his group has been doing with the "roamers," and, upon learning of Rick's lethal solution, Hershel's response is, some might say, *unique* to the reader's normative assessment of the situation:

Hershel says: You've just been **KILLING THEM?**

Rick rejoins: We're putting them out of their misery, and keeping them from **killing** us! Those things **aren't** human. They're undead **monsters**. They're trying to **eat** us for God's sake.

Hershel: You don't know **why!** You don't even know what's **wrong** with them. **Nobody** does. We don't know a **damn** thing about what happened or what's going on.

Rick: I know those things are trying to **kill** us—and that the less of **them** there are out there the safer **we'll** be! (**Figure 1**; Kirkman 2006).

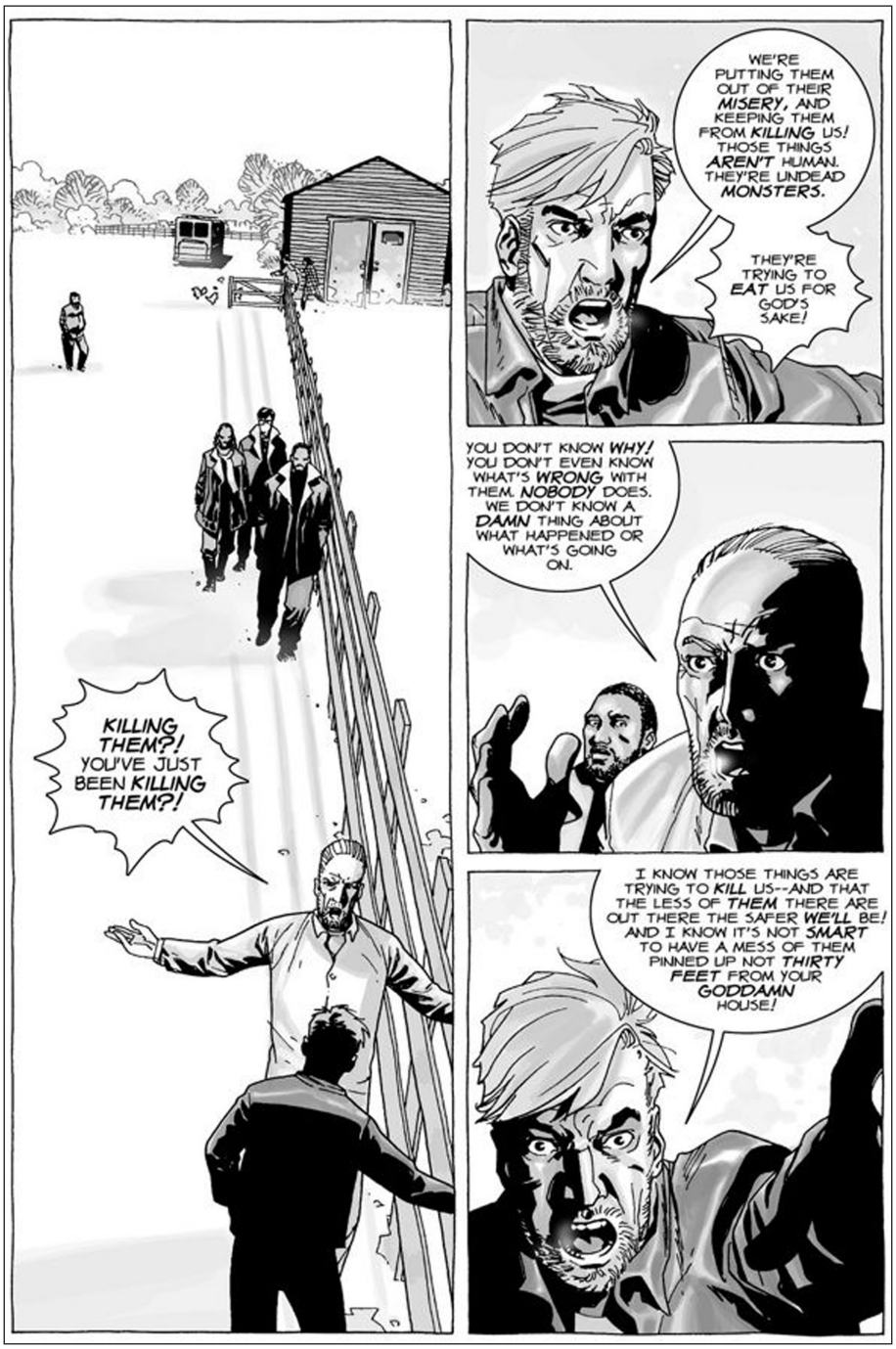

Figure 1: Kirkman, Robert (w) Tony Moore (a) and Charlie Adlard (a). Page from Kirkman, R. 2006. *The Walking Dead*: Book 1. © 2006 Image Comics.

Rick imposes what Andy Miah refers to as "cultural manifestations on moral perspectives" (2008); he reduces the matter to the survival of the fittest. Rick's view, his first rule for surviving the posthuman moment, holds that basic human law should be upheld. Humanist morality, for Rick, has transmogrified from the established order of the days of humanity and evolved into a post-human morality with significantly different markers. What sort of morality could possibly exist when existing practices and norms (religion, law, honor) have failed or been entirely abandoned?

Hershel, a staunchly religious man, argues on the side of the angels, viewing the zombies he corrals into his barn, former friends and family, as the sick or infirm still possessing the same basic human rights they held prior to the onset of their 'condition'. He takes what he perceives to be the humanist moral high ground. He sees himself as a metaphorical Samaritan, a would-be shepherd corralling the lepers into a barn and hoping for a miracle (cfr. the Gospel of Luke, 17:11-19). Rick simplifies the argument by cutting the Gordian knot of humanist doctrine and religious sanction with a single stroke when he tells Hershel: "They're **dead**. Before they get back up—before they try to **eat** you—they die. You saw your son **die**. He's dead. Those things are rotting **corpses** with **pieces** missing. . . They're **not** sick people. . . They're **dead.**" (Kirkman 2006).

Given the circumstances, this argument appears conclusive, but there is some fallibility to it—Rick mentions rotting corpses and missing parts and the unequivocal nature of those beings as dead. Technically, human beings are born into a state of constant decay (It is the human life cycle after all.). And, like it or not, life *literally* begins to enter into a state of decline near the age of 21. Rick's remarks, however, contain subtle but clear implications: where does one draw the line between life and death in the twenty-first century? Innumerable medical reports recount humans being clinically dead for as many as 45 minutes who revived to a full recovery four days later (the condition is referred to as "Lazarus syndrome").

Do these characters qualify as dead or even undead? And what of those who receive artificial life support such as heart and brain pacemakers, bio-artificial livers and lungs, let alone other prosthetics – do these characters not qualify as humans anymore under Rick's limited rubric? By some rubrics, Cary Woolf's for example, these characters might be considered "transhuman" (2010) in an

increasing movement towards cyborgs: are they biologically-cybernetic? And, if so, do they not represent evolutionary steps beyond the rigid, formal definitions of humanity? The horror Kirkman presents here works not as satire or lock-shock melodrama; rather, it operates as a "negotiation of cultural repressions" (Halberstam and Livingston 1995) between the accepted cultural norms of the reader, exemplified by Hershel, and the new posthuman identity embodied in Rick, who works to retain as many 'Hershels' as he can while aiding their evolution into posthumans in this brave new world.

Towards a Moment After Humanity and the Humane

While dealing with ethics and morals, the approach we'd like to present here eschews so-called philosophical posthumanism, otherwise known as the 'post-Enlightenment' track of posthumanist studies (cfr. Herbrechter 2012). At stake here is post-anthropocentrism, qualified by Francesca Ferrando as being "'post' to the concept of the human and to the historical occurrence of humanism, both based, as we have previously seen, on hierarchical social constructs and human-centric assumptions" (2013). Or, as Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston consider it, observing the "various challenges to the coherence of the 'human body' as a figure through which culture is processed and oriented" (1995). In the perspective of "cultural posthumanism", static concepts of human nature are subject to a fluid and evolving technocracy. At what point along the scale of what has been traditionally considered natural life does humanity cross a line into something past or 'post' that which is considered natural? Questions of organicism are crucial here: humankind once considered Dr. Frankenstein's creations "monstrous", but nearly 200 years later it sees physiological alterations as viable means of extending life.

Be it nanotechnology or the ultimate evolution away from the flesh into a virtual reality that Arthur Clarke blithely labeled "mind" (1968), posthumanism posits the decline of humanity *vis-à-vis* the introduction of superior extropic advances that render the current model obsolete. *The Walking Dead*, by comparison, looks at the posthuman condition through a revitalization of entropic conditions where the desiccated and decayed circumstances of the dead, who greatly outnumber the living over the passage of time, become the dominant life form through reanimation. That this reanimation leaves them in a state most humans would call "monstrous"

becomes merely an argument of aesthetics, the author's presentation, and/ or one's comfort with, arguably, a new 'lifeform'. As an aside, zombies and the irony of their condition are not always fictionalized as monstrous, especially to the younger population. For example, *iZombie* (2015), *Warm Bodies* (2013), and *Dylan Dog: Dead of The Night* (2010), present the idea of 'cute' youthful, zombies who aid the living. Whether or not this cuteness parodies the normal considerations of the undead or not, protagonists in these cases are as zombified as any other walker, but they are both seen as empathetic and sympathetic to traditionally othered classes.

Neil Badmington distinguishes the "human" from the "inhuman" by suggesting that "only the former has the capacity for rational thought" (2000). But this distinction is simply a Cartesian reversal: I *am* because I *think*. Further, as Badmington suggests, does not humanism, by its own construction, anticipate its own "post-" prefix (2000)? And, if that is the case, does that not explain Rick's dire pronouncement to his group huddled behind a fence: "You see them out there. You **know** that when we die—we **become** them. You think we hide behind walls to protect us from **the walking dead!** Don't you **get it? WE ARE THE WALKING DEAD?**" (**Figure 2**; Kirkman 2007).

Rick speaks the truth of Kirkman's world: whatever *happened* there, upon death, a person is reborn a zombie, absent the Cartesian guidelines for "am-ness" that are replaced by, "I *eat*, therefore I am." Cultural posthumanism jibes with Rick's reconceptualization; as Kelly Hurley states: "[It is] discourse [that] theorizes the breakdown of human specificity and the erosion of human identity, embodied and otherwise" (1995). Here, the reversal is both metaphoric and literal: the supposedly free human is the prisoner of the zombie who *is not* the walking dead; the walking dead is the still living human who has not reconciled him or herself with the fact that they are merely the not-dead-yet who have not succumbed to the new natural order. As Herbrechter notes, we find Kirkman's cataloguing

> a reinscription of embodiment under new conditions, a new understanding of (post)human autobio*graphy*, in which the subject of inscription and the inscription process itself with all its forms of materiality might no longer be controllable by a 'liberal humanist subject' and instead will lead to new forms of (posthumanist) agency (2012).

Figure 2: Kirkman, Robert (w) and Charlie Adlard (a). Page from Kirkman, R. 2007. *The Walking Dead*: Book 2. © 2007 Image Comics.

The problem for humanists like Hershel is this is an unpalatable but perhaps acceptable change in worldview; to Rick, it is a possible, if distasteful, change. But to the children who grow up in the posthuman period, the transformation provides a unique set of opportunities for them to thrive without the humanist shackles that doom cultural recidivists.

When the Children Dance In the Graveyard

The emphasis on children's posthuman experience in *The Walking Dead* fits with Hurley's argument that the horror genre must: "inspire revulsion—and pleasure through representations of quasi-human figures whose effect/affect is produced by their abjection, their ambiguation, their impossible embodiment of multiple, incompatible forms" (1995). Further, she argues that "a fairly standard line on horror is that the genre enables its consumers to confront [. . .] their most basic fears and/or unconscious desires" (Hurley 1995). *The Walking Dead* questions what childhood might be in a time when presumptions about first-world civilization have lost their validity. Is there even a childhood in the posthuman moment? The AMC television adaptation denies it, except in rare, collapsing oasis communities like Alexandria. But Kirkman's comics make the question of posthuman childhood more nuanced. Standing behind the prison fence of the Meriwether County Correctional Facility, Rick's son Carl and Sophia look out at the zombies teeming at the fence:

> **Carl:** Are you still **scared** of them?
>
> **Sophia:** I was. I **used** to be. I still don't like the **sounds** they make, but I'm not **scared** of them any more. Mostly I just feel sorry for them.
>
> (**Figure 3**; Kirkman 2007 Book 2).

Figure 3: Kirkman, Robert (w) and Charlie Adlard (a). Two panels from a page Kirkman, R. 2007. *The Walking Dead*: Book 2. © 2007 Image Comics.

Maturity comes to the children in *The Walking Dead* as quick as a hiccup, but it is a component of a new kind of childhood. Carl and Sophia, for example, don't entirely discard the idylls of youth simply because the world they once knew has ended. For instance, the two play cards in the prison cafeteria while adults scramble around them, distributing firearms and melee weapons to defend their home, and the only thing to bother Carl is Sophia openly wondering if he'll be her boyfriend or not.

Childhood, in Kirkman's zombie apocalypse, questions the calloused sensibilities of the inhabitants of that world. For example, we cannot tell if the Governor, a villain and living monster, is more monstrous or less for keeping his adopted, zombified, toddler daughter in his living quarters with him and treating her as if she were still alive. This dialogue evokes Romero's "scathing critique of American consumerism" (Hurley 1995); it arises from the same sentimentality of using children to articulate the traumatization of the adult mind, but the the assault is direct and filled with those "*real* fears" Hurley mentions "that horror mediates for producer and consumer" (1995).

The living trauma the Governor endures is the loss of his "human" daughter who persists in posthuman form, as a "thing." To keep his daughter 'alive', the Governor must treat her as a pet, feeding her the remains of humans who wander into his territory. By the same token, he treats her, speaks to her, shows her affection, as if she were not a zombie (Kirkman 2007). The reader can vilify the Governor for his disgusting acts, but Kirkman returns to and complicates the human parent/ posthuman child issue when Rick and Carl revisit their hometown to check in on a father and son who gave Rick shelter after he awoke from his coma. Since Rick has left, Duane, the son, has died, and Morgan, the father, has kept him chained up in his shelter with him as a zombie, feeding him just as the Governor feeds his daughter. Morgan has lived with his zombified son like this for three months, and, when Rick forces him to leave and join his party to survive, Morgan cannot bring himself to terminate his son by gunshot to the head. Rather, he unchains the undead child and leaves. Neither situation is palatable, but Kirkman's premise maintains that there are bad situations for children in this world, and there are worse situations with the reader left holding the moral compass.

Book 5 (Kirkman 2009) offers passages where "the 'post' of posthumanism does not (and, moreover, cannot) mark or make an absolute break from the legacy of humanism" (Woolf 2010). Carl's path would seem to be clear: as a child of the post-apocalypse, he executed his own stepfather and kept running to survive without looking back after his mother and baby sister were executed. He must kill his reanimated father and only remaining guardian. It's the only solution that makes sense from a boy who venerates his father's ways and teachings. He is never depicted not wearing his father's King County Sheriff's hat after their family reunites; it's emblematic of his belief in his dad's capacity as moral and ethically-sound leader: following Rick's rules ensures survival. However, as his father crawls toward him, Carl places his father's head in his lap and says: "I can't—I just—I can't be **alone**. I'm just a kid—I can't live on my own. Oh God. Just eat me" (Kirkman 2009).

Carl would rather die, becoming the zombie he hates, than lose his father, that familiar bond being the last tether to a human life. These characters are able to survive traumatic situations that in any other form of fiction would mean death. For Rick and Carl, this is just another Tuesday.

The Walking Dead re-conceptualizes dismal horror as a more of a culturally-adroit narrative of ethics and morals of the posthuman society in the zombie apocalypse. Francesca Ferrando considers cultural posthumanism "a philosophy which provides a suitable way of departure to think in relational and multi-layered ways, expanding the focus to the non-human realm in post-dualistic, post-hierarchical modes, thus allowing one to envision post-human futures which will radically stretch the boundaries of human imagination" (2013). Using the lens of cultural posthumanism, we must examine Kirkman's survival narrative as it moves away from simpler, early-Romeroan notions of humanity's attempts to survive the zombie apocalypse and explores the idea of contemporary (in)human nature.

Since Romero, zombie portrayals have commented upon the human race as satirical commentary. Ultimately, though, they all seem to center around "consumerism," that deft portrayal of the American as materialistic, self-centered, and proprietary of the self as defined by the most basic human rights afforded a citizen. But what does consumerism mean when subjected to the apocalypse? What happens

when humans are no longer the consumers but the objects of consumption? As we have seen, in order to survive as a human being in the posthuman moment, the child must lose humanity. Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* demonstrates constructions of adolescent identity that reflect a social anxiety consistent with the failure of the human(e) family unit foisting questionably ethical development upon the comic's youthful protagonists. I argue that these constructions resist the capitalist philosophical imperative and insist that to survive children must adjust their individual, social, and ethical positioning in a posthuman world. Kirkman thus makes a bold gesture in a world where "critical and commercial success is largely contingent on a text's *support* for a liberal humanist self" (Gooding 2011). No longer does the reader see adolescence as a period of growth and maturation, but rather as one of regression to a more feral state, where the child who can attain adulthood the fastest will live on after humanity's decline as a "manchild."

I have chosen the term "manchild" specifically because the implications of such rapid psychological upheaval in a human child surviving in a posthuman world render the survivor repulsive, utterly traumatized, and permanently damaged. Kirkman's comic forces the reader to re-examine these people who, in our world, would be barely considered young adults, but, in his world, are the inheritors of the zombie apocalypse, humankind's last hope. This inheritance is horrifying because it depicts these *functional* adults as those who knew the old humanity the least. Whereas Ostry views posthumanism as a "metaphor for adolescence" (2004), Kirkman offers a contrary position that the real tragedy of this survival horror is the incongruity between the reader's accepted constructions of childhood and what the child who successfully transitions, *immediately*, into adulthood in *The Walking Dead* becomes and loses at the same time. Ironically, this child loses humanity in order to survive as a human in the posthuman moment.

It is chilling that Kirkman's psychologization of childhood and adolescence decentralizes the human by suggesting that the *survivors* of the zombie apocalypse are the actual walking dead. The comics make us ponder if these creatures not only deserve respect but also perhaps the world itself. They make us

interrogate what we become when we switch places with these fictional constructs. The point where the human race became a sprint towards its terminal expansion and ultimate extinction is difficult to determine, but these comics, as art, remind us that no matter how evolved we believe we are, no being can remove itself from the food chain.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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