

TELEVISION

My Zombie, Myself: Why Modern Life Feels Rather Undead

By CHUCK KLOSTERMAN DEC. 3, 2010

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ZOMBIES are a value stock. They are wordless and oozing and brain dead, but they're an ever-expanding market with no glass ceiling. Zombies are a target-rich environment, literally and figuratively. The more you fill them with bullets, the more interesting they become. Roughly 5.3 million people watched the first episode of "The Walking Dead" on AMC, a stunning 83 percent more than the 2.9 million who watched the Season 4 premiere of "Mad Men." This means there are at least 2.4 million cable-ready Americans who might prefer watching Christina Hendricks if she were an animated corpse.

Statistically and aesthetically that dissonance seems perverse. But it probably shouldn't. Mainstream interest in zombies has steadily risen over the past 40 years. Zombies are a commodity that has advanced slowly and without major evolution, much like the staggering creatures George Romero popularized in the 1968 film "Night of the Living Dead." What makes that measured amplification curious is the inherent limitations of the zombie itself: You can't add much depth to a creature who can't talk, doesn't think and whose only motive is the consumption of flesh. You can't humanize a zombie, unless you make it less zombie-esque. There are slow zombies, and there are fast zombies— that's pretty much the spectrum of zombie diversity. It's not that zombies are changing to fit the world's condition; it's that the condition of the world seems more like a zombie offensive. Something

about zombies is becoming more intriguing to us. And I think I know what that something is.

Zombies are just so easy to kill.

When we think critically about monsters, we tend to classify them as personifications of what we fear. Frankenstein's monster illustrated our trepidation about untethered science; Godzilla was spawned from the fear of the atomic age; werewolves feed into an instinctual panic over predation and man's detachment from nature. Vampires and zombies share an imbedded anxiety about disease. It's easy to project a symbolic relationship between zombies and rabies (or zombies and the pitfalls of consumerism), just as it's easy to project a symbolic relationship between vampirism and AIDS (or vampirism and the loss of purity). From a creative standpoint these fear projections are narrative linchpins; they turn creatures into ideas, and that's the point.

But what if the audience infers an entirely different metaphor?

What if contemporary people are less interested in seeing depictions of their unconscious fears and more attracted to allegories of how their day-to-day existence feels? That would explain why so many people watched that first episode of "The Walking Dead": They knew they would be able to relate to it.

A lot of modern life is exactly like slaughtering zombies.

IF THERE'S ONE THING we all understand about zombie killing, it's that the act is uncomplicated: you blast one in the brain from point-blank range (preferably with a shotgun). That's Step 1. Step 2 is doing the same thing to the next zombie that takes its place. Step 3 is identical to Step 2, and Step 4 isn't any different from Step 3. Repeat this process until (a) you perish, or (b) you run out of zombies. That's really the only viable strategy.

Every zombie war is a war of attrition. It's always a numbers game. And it's more repetitive than complex. In other words, zombie killing is philosophically similar to reading and deleting 400 work e-mails on a Monday morning or filling

out paperwork that only generates more paperwork, or following Twitter gossip out of obligation, or performing tedious tasks in which the only true risk is being consumed by the avalanche. The principal downside to any zombie attack is that the zombies will never stop coming; the principal downside to life is that you will be never be finished with whatever it is you do.

The Internet reminds of us this every day.

Here's a passage from a youngish writer named Alice Gregory, taken from a recent essay on Gary Shteyngart's dystopic novel "Super Sad True Love Story" in the literary journal *n+1*: "It's hard not to think 'death drive' every time I go on the Internet," she writes. "Opening Safari is an actively destructive decision. I am asking that consciousness be taken away from me."

Ms. Gregory's self-directed fear is thematically similar to how the zombie brain is described by Max Brooks, author of the fictional oral history "World War Z" and its accompanying self-help manual, "The Zombie Survival Guide": "Imagine a computer programmed to execute one function. This function cannot be paused, modified or erased. No new data can be stored. No new commands can be installed. This computer will perform that one function, over and over, until its power source eventually shuts down."

This is our collective fear projection: that we will be consumed. Zombies are like the Internet and the media and every conversation we don't want to have. All of it comes at us endlessly (and thoughtlessly), and — if we surrender — we will be overtaken and absorbed. Yet this war is manageable, if not necessarily winnable. As long we keep deleting whatever's directly in front of us, we survive. We live to eliminate the zombies of tomorrow. We are able to remain human, at least for the time being. Our enemy is relentless and colossal, but also uncreative and stupid.

Battling zombies is like battling anything ... or everything.

BECAUSE OF THE 'TWILIGHT' series it's easy to manufacture an argument in which zombies are merely replacing vampires as the monster of the moment, a designation that is supposed to matter for metaphorical, nonmonstrous

reasons. But that kind of thinking is deceptive. The recent five-year spike in vampire interest is only about the multiplatform success of “Twilight,” a brand that isn’t about vampirism anyway. It’s mostly about nostalgia for teenage chastity, the attractiveness of its film cast and the fact that contemporary fiction consumers tend to prefer long serialized novels that can be read rapidly. But this has still created a domino effect. The 2008 Swedish vampire film “Let the Right One In” was fantastic, but it probably wouldn’t have been remade in the United States if “Twilight” had never existed. “The Gates” was an overt attempt by ABC to tap into the housebound, preteen “Twilight” audience; HBO’s “True Blood” is a camp reaction to Robert Pattinson’s flat earnestness.

The difference with zombies, of course, is that it’s possible to like a specific vampire temporarily, which isn’t really an option with the undead. Characters like Mr. Pattinson’s Edward Cullen in “Twilight” and Anne Rice’s Lestat de Lioncourt, and even boring old Count Dracula can be multidimensional and erotic; it’s possible to learn who they are and who they once were. Vampire love can be singular. Zombie love, however, is always communal. If you dig zombies, you dig the entire zombie concept. It’s never personal. You’re interested in what zombies signify, you like the way they move, and you understand what’s required to stop them. And this is a reassuring attraction, because those aspects don’t really shift. They’ve become shared archetypal knowledge.

A few days before Halloween I was in upstate New York with three other people, and we somehow ended up at the Barn of Terror, outside a town call Lake Katrine. Entering the barn was mildly disturbing, although probably not as scary as going into an actual abandoned barn that didn’t charge \$20 and doesn’t own its own domain name. Regardless, the best part was when we exited the terror barn and were promptly herded onto a school bus, which took us to a cornfield about a quarter of a mile away. The field was filled with amateur actors, some playing military personnel and others what they called the infected. We were told to run through the moonlit corn maze if we wanted to live; as we ran, armed soldiers yelled contradictory instructions while hissing zombies emerged from the corny darkness. It was designed to be fun, and it was. But just before we immersed

ourselves in the corn, one of my companions sardonically critiqued the reality of our predicament.

“I know this is supposed to be scary,” he said. “But I’m pretty confident about my ability to deal with a zombie apocalypse. I feel strangely informed about what to do in this kind of scenario.”

I could not disagree. At this point who isn’t? We all know how this goes: If you awake from a coma, and you don’t immediately see a member of the hospital staff, assume a zombie takeover has transpired during your incapacitation. Don’t travel at night and keep your drapes closed. Don’t let zombies spit on you. If you knock a zombie down, direct a second bullet into its brain stem. But above all, do not assume that the war is over, because it never is. The zombies you kill today will merely be replaced by the zombies of tomorrow. But you can do this, my friend. It’s disenchanting, but it’s not difficult. Keep your finger on the trigger. Continue the termination. Don’t stop believing. Don’t stop deleting. Return your voice mails and nod your agreements. This is the zombies’ world, and we just live in it. But we can live better.

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