

After Halloween, more zombies

By [Kelly J. Baker](#)

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Last week, ghosts, superheroes and zombies walked our neighborhoods in search of treats. But the holiday for dwelling in the possibility of the spooky is a fleeting thing. Halloween has come and gone.

Yet the zombies remain. They shamble on in our popular culture all year long. These monsters are dominant figures in film, fiction and television. The season four premiere of *The Walking Dead* pulled in an impressive [16.1 million viewers](#), annihilating the entertainment competition of broadcast networks. This gritty drama about human survival in a time of zombies has a dedicated fan base that turns in every week to find out who will survive the post-apocalyptic landscape.

What appeals to viewers. Is it the escapism? The grotesque horror? Or the ubiquity of violence? What do viewers learn from zombies and *The Walking Dead*? What does this supernatural fascination suggest about American culture?

It's not surprising that Fox News finds danger in *The Walking Dead*. Columnist [Manny Alvarez](#) asked, "[Is watching 'The Walking Dead' seriously hurting America?](#)" His answer: yes. Alvarez pointed to "zombie violence" as a problem because Americans garner cheap thrills from "imagining what it would be like to participate in this new world order." For Alvarez, viewers of *The Walking Dead* imagine themselves as zombies (even though the show focuses on humans fighting the zombies and one another). The concept of zombies seems to vex Alvarez because he cannot understand how viewers don't recognize the unreality of zombies. They aren't real, he assures us, because death is permanent.

For Fox News, the real danger of zombies is that they make us ignore the supposed government push to socialism. When we "obsess over something as stupid as zombies," we might become as brainless as they are and allow socialism to overtake us.

Alvarez's critique intrigues me because he bungles all the actual, important critiques of zombie media's relationship to violence, white patriarchy and apocalypticism.

[Literary scholar Edward Ingebretsen](#) emphasizes how monsters, fictional and real, function as the boundaries for human behavior. Monsters warn us of what we could become if we somehow lost our humanity. Monster tales demonstrate how easy it is for humans to slide into the realm of the monstrous.

Take the classic zombie film [Night of the Living Dead](#) (1968). In it, space radiation (which comes to the earth from a human-launched space probe) brings corpses back to life as ravenous “things” that consume human flesh. The threat of the living dead make humans act monstrously. (Spoiler alert.) The African American protagonist Ben survives the night, but a white mob shoots and kills him. Their racism leads them to mistake Ben for a thing, and they become the real monsters.

The lines between humanity and inhumanity are quite porous, and zombies articulate what we can become: ravenous monsters bent on consuming and destroying one another. The problem is not zombie obsession but rather what *The Walking Dead* demonstrates about humans and our potential for harm and violence in the 21st century.

What I like about the show is that it emphasizes how humans are often more problematic and dangerous than the resurrected dead. Protagonist Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln) struggles to be ethical and humane. In the first and second seasons, each episode visualizes the ongoing struggle for subsistence and centers upon Rick’s ethical wrangling, which causes tension in his marriage, his friendship with his best male friend, and the larger group. In spite of the new post-apocalyptic world, Rick strives to do the right thing. He wants to somehow remain moral and humane when the world is no longer the same.

Jeffrey Goldberg [calls this](#) “Rick’s overly precious effort to stay human,” even though his actions jeopardize “the lives of his loved ones.” However, even good men like Rick bow to the pressures of the post-apocalyptic world. Rick employs violence for survival; protecting one’s group often means the death of others. In the third season, Rick drives by a hitchhiker, who frantically calls for help. Later, we see what remains of the hitchhiker’s body after the zombies found him. Humans sacrifice each other to survive.

Fellow survivor Morgan (Lennie James) tells Rick, “You will be torn apart by teeth or bullets.” This is the new world order of *The Walking Dead*: death by zombies or by humans. What we need to remember is that the zombies aren’t evil, but the humans

can be.

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