

# DYSTOPIAN NARRATIVES AND HUMANISM. WHAT A ZOMBIE MAKEOVER REALLY LOOKS LIKE

JORDAN RYAN GOINGS\*

**ABSTRACT.** This paper involves an analysis of the zombie narrative sub-genre and its engagement with the philosophical paradigm of humanism. The goal is to show that contemporary zombie narratives disagree with the validity of humanism as valid prescription of anthropological ethics. This has been accomplished by examining recent works in psychological, theological, philosophical, and aesthetic studies on the literary theory of the zombie sub-genre. Upon such examinations, it is made apparent that this sub-genre offers an ontological commentary on the state of man that is in stark contrast to humanism's portrayal of man's goodness. Subsequently, this project discloses the paradigmatic differences between some zombie narratives and humanism; the former convey mankind as depraved, in a way commensurate with the Christian worldview, while the latter highlights man's self sufficiency regarding his volitional desire to correct the dystopian context in which he would be placed. Through analyzing the anthropological implications within zombie narratives, this research will highlight the philosophical value of that sub-genre, as well as use this specific dystopian medium to communicate that humanism as an inefficient paradigm for helping man thrive in an apocalyptic zombie narrative.

**KEY WORDS:** zombie, humanism, literature, philosophy, dystopian

## **Introduction**

In his short story *Dream of a Ridiculous Man* Fyodor Dostoevsky depicts a disillusioned man who is suffering from depression, and tells of his journey from this world to another. As he attempts suicide, he is plucked from his home and taken into space by an ethereal being, with the intention of bringing the man to his home world. Upon the protagonist's arrival, he discovers that this new world is perfect; it is as if it were an Eden that was left unstained as no sin had ever breached its borders. Through a series of events, he indirectly teaches the blissful race how to lie, which then quickly degrades their society. As the man looks around in horror at his corruption, he soon awakes in his home having not committed suicide, and with a new vigor for life, vows to live and do well (Dostoevsky, 2003).<sup>1</sup> In short, this

\* JORDAN RYAN GOINGS (ThM) is affiliated to Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. His main research interests cover theological aesthetics and philosophy, with a concentration in Continental theorists, German Idealism, and Russian Existentialism. E-mail: goings.jordan@gmail.com.

<sup>1</sup> Although Dostoevsky ends this story with his protagonist repenting, desiring to then live in hope and virtue, the overall tone of this work is bleak. This tone serves as a

work, as is the case with many of Dostoevsky's works, concisely communicates man's inability to innately make sense of his disordered world.

Over the past few decades a prominent genre within fiction has evolved into a global phenomenon: dystopian literature. With young adult fiction bestsellers like Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* series and Veronica Roth's *Divergent* trilogy, the post-apocalyptic dystopianism is becoming more and more accessible. Whether it's Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* or Stephen King's *The Stand*, this genre has often praised the valor of their protagonists, and lauded mankind's goodness for its resilience to see them through such bleak storylines. However, there is a sub-genre within this dystopian family that is not portraying mankind in that light: the zombie genre.

### Thesis

Ever since director George A. Romero's foundational work *Night of the Living Dead* was released in 1986, the dystopian-horror genre began to develop one of their most distinguishable and prolific sub-genres. This undeniably popular narrative has seen exponential growth over the past two and a half decades, and is currently reaching mainstream status with a myriad of evolving nuances. In other words, just as *The Hunger Games* series has its following, shows like *The Walking Dead* have their own massive fan-base.<sup>2</sup> As most literary genres follow their own distinct guidelines and customs, making them autonomous from one another, the same can be seen to occur within their subsequent sub-genres. Essentially, the issue is that not all zombie stories agree about the state of mankind; standing on the philosophical foundation of humanism, the majority believe that man is capable of restoring and reestablishing society in the wakes of a zombie dystopia. However, there are some that not only take a different angle, but that starkly disagree with the pretense of humanism's validity in such a future.

Throughout this analysis I will engage three of the most prominent zombie narratives so as to highlight that in the context of a zombie dystopia the innate goodness and self sufficiency that humanism professes are not viable, and that such a future will only show mankind as it truly is: broken. This will be accomplished by first fencing the context of what a "zombie narrative" is so as to clearly identify a philosophical and aesthetic herme-

symbol of man's immediate nature, and that without some divine, supernatural intercession, man will remain a hindered and in a bleak state. The other being—as identified as not truly human—serves as means for the man to be enlightened from without, so as to not give credit to the man.

2 On November 17, 2014 *The Washington Post* recorded that the television series *The Walking Dead* had higher ratings than NBC's *Sunday Night Football* for the third straight week (*The Washington Post*, <http://d.pr/13g6d>).

neutic. Secondly, as the Renaissance/Humanism era can be ambiguous, I will frame the context in which humanism will be applied in the final section. Thirdly and finally, this argument will conclude with an assessment of three distinct zombie narratives, disclosing their implications about mankind and humanism: *I Am Legend*, *The Walking Dead*, and *28 Days Later*. At the conclusion of this analysis it will be apparent that the zombie medium can serve the contemporary culture well by making it aware of humanism's deficiencies, in that it lacks the viability to sustain mankind in such a post-apocalyptic context.

### **The Zombie Paradigm(s)**

It should first be noted that the zombie sub-genre is not as much about the gore as it is anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. In his book *Gospel of the Living Dead* Kim Paffenroth argues that George A. Romero's foundational zombie stories are in the same vein as Poe and O' Conner, in that his horror and gore are not arbitrarily applied. Regarding Romero and like authors, Paffenroth writes, "...shocking violence and depravity are used to disorient and reorient the audience, disturbing them in order to make some unsettling point, usually a sociological, anthropological, or theological one" (Paffenroth, 2006: 2).<sup>3</sup> Although they are typically narratives containing notable amounts of gore and depravity, the zombie genre can often speak to the same profundity that philosophical and theological works often engage.

Before moving to the distinctions between contemporary styles, it is necessary to note that this sub-genre has become an eclectic niche that is accumulating a large cult following. However, as alluded to above, not all narratives within a genre share the same guidelines. Pedagogically speaking, some have taken to the genre simply because it has given them the opportunity to be redefined.<sup>4</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien assessed this misguided appropriation in stating that this level of fascination is a misapplication to "restrict...

3 Paffenroth elaborates on this by writing that "although Romero is said to eschew the idea that his movies have meaning or significance, they are widely acknowledged, by reputable critics and not just fans, to be thoughtful and serious examinations of ideas, not just exercises in shock and nausea" (see page 2).

4 A simple internet search for the phrase "end of the world peppers" will disclose blogs, TV shows, and random sites dedicated to actual stories of people focusing all of their free time to preparing for the apocalypse—whether zombie, virus, or biblical themed. In a close association, the term "G.O.O.D. bag", which is an acronym for "Get out of Dodge, has become something of trend as well. The idea is to pack a bag that would contain everything necessary to survive, and then carry it with you as often as possible—mostly left in a car—so that if the need arises, the owner would be able to leave their immediate scenario, as he or she perceived it to be culminating to an apocalyptic end.

imagination to ‘the power of giving to ideal creations the inner consistency of reality’” (Tolkien, 2006: 161).<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, this seems to be because many zombie narratives use the zombie outbreak as a *deus ex machina* that allows the characters an ontological *tabula rasa* of sorts, thus enabling them with an opportunity to rewrite their entire self-narrative. This is partially the work of most fictional stories; it is, however, a very prominent attribute for the fantasy genre.

### George A. Romero’s Legacy

As mentioned above, Romero’s original work, *Night of the Living Dead*, has been the source for many subsequent renditions of zombie narratives, and remains a staple for assessing zombie lore. However, this is not so say that he shares the same sentiments about the value of his work. Paffenroth makes note that “Although Romero is said to eschew the idea that his movies have meaning or significance, they are widely acknowledged, by reputable critics and not just fans, to be thoughtful and serious examinations of ideas, not just exercises in shock and nausea” (Paffenroth, 2006: 2). This is not to imply that Romero’s motive negates the inferences that his audience can draw from his works. Nevertheless, Romero did establish a lasting narrative sub-genre and a new fantasy syntax that cannot be eliminated from the future engagement and hermeneutics of said sub-genre. Umberto Eco balances this well explaining that “By helping create a language,” which I argue Romero prolifically has done, “literature creates a sense of identity and community” (Eco, 2002: 3). Eco proceeds,

Literary works encourage freedom of interpretation, because they offer us a discourse that has many layers of reading and place before us the ambiguities of language and of real life. But in order to play this game, which allows every generation to read literary works in a different way, we must be moved by a profound respect for what I have called elsewhere the intention of the text (Eco, 2002: 3).

In other words, as an aesthetic medium is created or added upon, there should be a balance of expecting the work in question to be interpreted with some nuances, while still appreciating the context of its origin. It is for this reason that no matter how philosophical or intentional a zombie narra-

<sup>5</sup> In his article “Discussion: Kirk on Empirical Physicalism”, Philip Goff analyzes this level of fantasy by stating that “To say that zombies are coherent is to say something about *what it is coherent for us to suppose is possible*, rather than to say something about genuine possibility” (Goff, 2007: 122-129). Many of the inconsistencies behind an overly fantastical engagement with narratives and para-social relationships can be deduced to find some similarity with what Goff and Tolkien are addressing.

tive is analyzed for paradigm building standards, George A. Romero should necessarily be in the assessment, if anything for the sole reason that most subsequent zombie stories rely on his works.

### **Novel, Graphic Novel, and Television/Film**

As alluded to above, the zombie sub-genre is a relatively new narrative, primarily spanning just two and a half decades. However, the lore that it is rooted in is not new. For this reason, I have chosen to limit the references to just three sources, each representing a popular aesthetic medium in today's culture. The references are Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*, which was a novel written in 1954, fourteen years before Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*; Robert Kirkman and Tony Moore's ongoing series *The Walking Dead*, which can be accessed in both the graphic novel and television mediums; and Danny Boyle's 2002 film *28 Days Later*.

These three unique storylines share the same common thread about humanity: mankind is not fully capable to save himself. It is important to note, though, that *The Walking Dead* is the only one of these three that deals with the Romero-imagined zombie. That is not to say that the others are out of place. Most critics, whether begrudgingly or not, situates each of these storylines under the zombie sub-genre due to their undeniably strong similarities, tones, and syntax.<sup>6</sup> It is for those reasons that I have chosen them for this argument.

The aesthetic value of the zombie narrative is that in a classical appropriation, it highlights the ugliness of life, which is to say the absence of beauty, so as to create a distinction of and want for a reinstatement of beauty. Paffenroth asserts that "Zombie movies—or, at least, good ones—seem by their very nature to offer social critique and a critical, moralizing look at human beings" (Paffenroth, 2006: 2). Though bleak and desolate, this sub-genre brings the viewer into a post-apocalyptic world that leaves them in want; in an Aristotelian aesthetic, the tragedy of this narrative causes the viewer to hope in restoration. Within this style of dystopian form, but very prominently within these three specifically, the zombie threat serves as a flood that eradicates all of mankind's works and accomplishments, thus leaving the humans with nothing but themselves. In his book *Windows to the World* Leland Ryken argues that "We are the heirs of a permissive culture, and for a critic actually to come out and assert that a given book is immoral

6 The 2014 documentary *Doc of the Dead* addresses this issue by bringing attention to the science-fiction behind what distinguishes a being "undead" and "reanimated" as opposed to simply "altered". As will be discussed in the last section, *I Am Legend* and *28 Days Later* depict a threat of either vampires (the former) or chemically altered, adrenaline-overdosed humans (the latter).

is extremely rare” (Ryken, 2000: 156). I would invert this and argue that for a contemporary mainstream narrative to claim a minority stance against such prevalent humanistic prescriptions like that of man’s innate goodness and ability is equally noteworthy.

The three mediums chosen depict how this threat speaks to the fears of mankind’s soul. The first carries the reader along in a formal narrative, letting them live the story as it unfolds; the second, whether in comic book form or television episode, portrays snapshots of the calamity, though with enough opacity to hinder the viewer’s omniscience over the situation; and the third, through following just one man, gives a full, vivid depiction of mankind’s vulnerability and weakness. Many other stories could have been selected, but for the purpose of illustrating how the zombie narrative engages the prominent philosophy of humanism that many contemporary theories base themselves within, these three speak the most concisely.

### **An Understanding of Humanism**

The immediate issue for any scholar that is engaging the idea of humanism is to read into the context of its use, past all of the terms ambiguities and vagueness, and ultimately define it for the purpose at hand. In short, the term “humanism” is found in several contexts (e.g. art, philosophy, religion, science, etc.). As Alan Lacey identifies, it has “many different connotations, which depend largely on what it is being contrasted with” (Lacey, 1995: 375). He carries on to imply its importance in such popular fields of study ranging from the Renaissance to Darwinian evolution theories. For the purpose of this analysis, however, my use of humanism will be limited to the understanding of theological and anthropological ontology.

### **An Overview of Terms**

As alluded to, humanism finds itself almost inseparable from the Renaissance era due to the shared prescription they both offered for mankind: to thrive. However, the primary concern at this point is to recognize a vital dichotomy that was developing within European humanism early in the sixteenth century. This distinction will establish the differences between classical humanism and northern humanism. Classical humanism receives its name from the care and appreciation that its proponents had in retrieving, preserving, and being instructed by the classical works of Rome and Greece. Northern humanism, which was more reactionary to the classically minded humanists in the south, was rooted in the preservation of biblical and religious beliefs, recognizing the importance of and remaining under the original languages of the Bible (Cairns, 1996). Where the latter worldview would later give rise to Protestantism, it is the former that is of

greater importance here. Philosophically speaking, classical humanism would later give rise to the *ego*.

The differentiations within humanism do not end with this original schism, however. Like most philosophical paradigms and constructs, as long as the thought continues, so does the inevitability of nuances. One such nuance is identified by Stephen R. L. Clark as post-Christian humanism, which is a perspective that recognizes that each “human being is a uniquely valuable individual to accord liberty and welfare-rights so as to cooperate in the progressive enterprise of deifying Humanity” (Clark, 2003: 21). Clark’s formulation is the precise nuance implied here in this paper; humanism for all intents and purposes is the promotion of each man to a place of absolute value ability, with the ends of each being a pertinent exponent in adding to the progression of mankind. Throughout the history and progression of humanism, especially in the context of the Renaissance, the acknowledgment of each man’s uniqueness becomes more of a lynchpin that holds the humanistic paradigm in order. History’s newfound interest in and appreciation of man’s uniqueness gave rise to a new manner of philosophical endeavors: the *self*.

### **Philosophical Influence**

It is nothing new to discover a philosopher approach the study of a person’s “uniqueness”, attempting to deduce what constitutes such a state. Such a project does not necessarily establish them as a bastion of post-Christian humanism. For example, John Locke famously wrote one of the first exhaustive works on individual cognition, epistemology, and psychological growth in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, yet, he subjected much of his paradigms and findings to the authority of the Bible, and even faith, keeping him outside of the realm of such humanism and even staunch rationalism (see Copleston, 1994; Williams, 2000). In other words, using the faculties that the thinking man has in order to further formulate speculative philosophies and thoughts does not necessarily validate one’s adoption of post-Christian humanism.

The error of this specific nuance lies within its trajectory away from accountability under an objective order and truth, and instead toward autonomy and subjectivity. As Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche, to name a few, remained fascinated with the *self*, although their systems did attempt to supplement categories for an external object, often referred to as the *thing-in-and-of-itself*, the most confirmable truth for them was the affirmation of the *id* and the *ego* (i.e. the *self*). To juxtapose this *self*-heavy outlook, twentieth century Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin applied what he found agreeable within them to a socially-dependent paradigm he began to formulate. One of Bakhtin’s definitive arguments against the dominance of an absolute

authorial control was not from some historical, philosophical, or governmental analysis, but was from studying Dostoevsky. In his work *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* he used the literary role of a protagonist/narrator to explain

Dostoevsky's novel is dialogic. It is constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other; this interaction provides no support for the viewer who would objectify an entire event according to some ordinary monologic category (thematically, lyrically and cognitively)—and this consequently makes the viewer also a participant (Bakhtin, 1984: 18).

Literary scholar M. H. Abrams takes up the task of clarifying Bakhtin's philosophical-literary hybrid paradigm, and argues it as

To Bakhtin, a literary work is not... a text whose meanings are produced by the play of impersonal linguistic or economic or cultural forces, but a site for the dialogic interaction of multiple voices, or modes of discourse, each of which is not merely a verbal but a social phenomenon, and as such is the product of manifold determinants of class, social group, and speech community (Abrams, 1993: 231).

Bakhtin proceeds to explain this importance outside of literature by claiming that, "The idea *lives* not in one person's *isolated* individual consciousness—if it remains there only, it degenerates and dies" (Bakhtin, 1984: 87-88). Bakhtin's philosophy recognizes the importance of being able to identify the *self*, yet it also recognizes the limitations of the previously mentioned philosopher's, and specifically post-Christian humanism. A culmination of this theory can be found in Bakhtin's essay *Art and Answerability*, which implies that the individual's thought is unique and relevant, but its purpose is to be brought out and given to society for the goal of aiding and refining it (Bakhtin, 1990: 1-3).

### **How Zombies Disclose the Errors of Humanism**

As mentioned earlier, I have chosen three zombie narratives whose messages speak in direct opposition to post-Christian humanism: *I Am Legend*, *The Walking Dead*, and *28 Days Later*. This last section is dedicated to analyzing each narrative's story, aesthetic, and message, juxtaposing that message to post-Christian humanism. In doing so, the approval that many apocalyptic narratives attempt to ascribe to humanism as being a satisfactory society-rebuilding paradigm will be questioned. In the process of reviewing these three works, the zombie dystopian narrative will be proven to offer a valid evaluation of mankind's ontological state and inabilities within certain contexts. Despite offering a minority view of today's culture, these works are by

no means rogue stories overwhelmed by the need to exemplify contra-normative nuance. Their medium, the fictional world, and tone are still the same.

***I Am Legend: Man Cannot Win***

The most important pre-Romero narrative to define the current zombie lore era is actually not a book about zombies, but of conscientious vampires. G. A. Waller claimed that "...by far the most important antecedent for *Night of the Living Dead* is *I am Legend*. On various occasions Romero has acknowledged that the original idea for his film was inspired by Richard Matheson's novel, and the resemblance between the two works is striking" (Waller, 1986). In his essay *Raising the Dead* Kyle Bishop notes that from the desolate world, to the nightly routines of fortifying a house, Matheson's tone can be found throughout Romero's works (Bishop, 2006: 196).<sup>7</sup> Richard Matheson's novel *I Am Legend* has seen many Hollywood renditions, and although some have come close, none quite capture the weight of dystopian monotony as his novel accomplished. The character, Robert Neville, is a common man who is the last human left on a vampiric zombie infested earth. Staving off a rising loss hope and perspective, the story progresses with Neville facing a lifetime of solitude in front of him. Recognizing that the antagonists can only come out at night, he chooses to eradicate them as he can during the day, as well as learn different skills like chemistry and anatomy by researching at the library. Discovering the cause of the disease, he begins to find hope as he starts learning from them. Despite all of Neville's efforts, since Matheson's antagonists have full awareness, they are able execute their own plan, which results in the capture of Neville, and the conclusion of the story.

Aesthetically speaking, although the backdrop, the actions, and the conclusion are all bleak, Matheson's telling is captivating, as it highlights the blunt honesty of what an existence like Neville's would be like. Matheson's roads feel long and bare, the stench of decaying bodies seems pungent, and the long drives to the library, and lonely nights at home model the daily life of the reader's existence. The subtle narration of the protagonist's thoughts concisely speaks to the psychology of the reader. Matheson most clearly

7 Despite this essay's disinterest in the technicalities of things like what fans desire and ontological laws of nature within fantasy, it should be noted that some literary theorists have considered the popular shift from vampires to zombies. Angela Tenga and Elizabeth Zimmermann are two such researchers who acknowledged that the transformation of the vampires of Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954), the film's inspiration, into flesh-eating "ghouls" was an early sign that vampires were becoming less frightening (Tenga and Zimmermann, 2013: 78).

accomplishes this by his antagonists. It can be understandably argued that since these creatures are cognizant, they are not properly zombies.<sup>8</sup> However, Neville's discoveries led him to the knowledge that the bacteria does reanimate the dead, thus giving rise to the undead—a staple trait of zombie lore. Regardless, the use of conscientious monsters allows for them to communicate with the protagonist, inevitably leading to an old best friend as well as his dead wife attempting to connect with him, engaging Neville's loneliness. Much of Matheson's artistry in this work is his use of one's loneliness and the many ways that society engages it.

The message of society's impact on a person is a major theme in *I Am Legend*. The cognition of the antagonists seems perfectly intact, which carries immense meaning. If post-Christian humanism is to offer society a Greco-Roman appreciation of citizenship, believing that mankind desires goodness for the whole of his context, Matheson's representation of societal ethos is almost the opposite. The vampire-like zombies spoke nothing but deceit regarding the desire to get Neville out of the house, despite the psychological toll and breakdown it may have caused in the protagonist. Furthermore, if the reader were to look at Neville himself, and the painstaking legend he established by way of teaching himself centuries of science in the short matter of time that he had, he or she might be tempted to agree with post-Christian humanism and profess that Neville's legendary status was his selflessness and persistence for the societal whole. However, it should be noted that the observation made is in praise of a character's motive, implying Neville's *pathos*; such a perspective does not address the efficacy of the post-Christian humanism's ethos. In other words, Neville failed. With all of his work, patience, and loss, he was unable to accomplish the sole objective that everything was attributing toward.

### ***The Walking Dead: Man is Corrupt***

It is difficult in the present culture to discuss zombie lore without mentioning AMC's *The Walking Dead*. However, before the popular television show gathered the viewers that has placed it above Sunday Night Football in rat-

8 Regarding the zombie/human distinction, some have argued that a premise built upon the physicalist notion that consciousness is an ontological necessity of humanity be mandatory. As Brian Jonathan Garrett argued in his essay *Causal Essentialism versus the Zombie Worlds*, "The 'existence' or possibility of Zombie worlds violates the physicalist demand that consciousness logically supervene upon the physical. On the assumption that the logical supervenience of consciousness upon the physical is, indeed, a necessary entailment of physicalism, the existence of zombie worlds implies the falsity of physicalism" (Garrett, 2009: 93). However, a distinction should be made between his essay and the one here: the zombie epidemic portrayed in the narratives called upon in this essay serves as a stage to perpetuate a need to act within the immediate, like Neville, regardless of his wife or friend's psychological dispositions.

ings, it was graphic novel. Both mediums offer the recipient a strong commentary on ethics, sociology, and psychology, therefore, both will be applied as the medium lends itself. The purpose for its being chosen is not because of its success, but because it is far less objective than the other two stories chosen here. This is in part due to the fact that the story, in both mediums, is still being written, therefore there is no clear purpose or end for the reader to recognize the characters working toward. This enables the story to carry on in the same likeness of *I Am Legend* and *28 Days Later*, in that these zombie narratives truly are about the characters first and foremost. However, another reason for the open-ended narrative can largely be ascribed to the nature of one of the story's primary tones: the *unknown*.

Although this story's group of survivors evolves as some die and others are discovered, the group inevitably is at a loss of what to do. An immediate inference can be made that this is due to the unprecedented nature of such a societal context. As governments and religious strongholds, schools and police stations, hospitals and grocery stores are all no longer functioning, the world's survivors are shown to be left with no order, and with no order, there is no accountability. This gives way for the characters in *The Walking Dead* to ultimately do whatever they desire. Furthermore, despite the fact that this genre as a whole portrays the zombie threat as a definable entity in and of itself—in that it is a hoard of viscerally charged villainous consumers—for the purpose of approaching *The Walking Dead*, it is more appropriate to use Andrew Bailey's use of the "philosophical zombie", to which he argues is ideally the same as a human being, though just lacking in "phenomenal states" (Bailey, 2006: 481). This distinction is important as *The Walking Dead* highlights the individuality of the autonomous survivor, freed to be whatever he or she desires, while juxtaposed with the hoard of *similarity*, represented by the zombies.

Given that this story is the most "group" oriented narrative of the three chosen for this essay, it is important to note that it depicts the most blatant struggles of man's desire to exemplify a specific autonomous image—contingent upon whatever context is at hand for the character. Subsequently, *The Walking Dead* portrays mankind as a force that will do whatever it must in order to accomplish said individuality and uniqueness, so much so that the character at hand will lie, kill, and cheat whomever they need to in order to attain it. In other words, although their appearance looks well kept (at times), the character's souls and psyche are shown to be compromised and in decay like the zombies external features. Tenga and Zimmermann illustrate this point by recalling a scene in a nursing home that portrays the elderly survivors as almost identical with the zombies, further attesting to the theme of mankind not being any better than the villainous dead antagonists (Tenga and Zimmermann, 2013: 79).

The immediate issue that *The Walking Dead* speaks to within post-Christian humanism is the selfishness that attends the desire to be unique and autonomous. The desired context is to be an individual who is free to thrive and be known. However, in order to achieve that, the person's worldview remains within the *I-for-myself*, as Bakhtin notes, which is to say that the individual's pedagogy begins and ends with himself (Bakhtin, 1990: 1-3). If this is true, then the intentionality to *be* whatever is needed for the betterment of society would not be instinctive, but acquired and learned. If then there is no desire to conform, but only the opposite—complete autonomy—then the individual would have to be instructed by something outside of himself. Concordantly, if order and organized governments (legal, religious, educational) are absent, then the primary influence upon the *self* is going to be *others*, who are simply exemplifying the very same thing: individuality. Thus, within a truly dystopian context wherein there is no ordered governments of any kind, after self preservation, autonomous uniqueness is the only thing left to strive for through, and it is perpetuated through the inevitability of a fellow individual segregating himself from the community for their his or her own personal advancement, *not* the groups.

### ***28 Days Later: Man is Worse***

The last narrative to address is Danny Boyle's film *28 Days Later*. Although this assessment will be more brief than the other two, this movie communicates some of the most accessible illustrations and formulations of mankind's nature. The story's protagonist is a character named Jim, who awakens in the middle of a hospital, unaware that just outside is a dilapidated London infested with zombies. As the narrative unfolds, Jim becomes friends with a woman and a girl along the way, who become part of his company as they search for answers. The wandering culminates to them stumbling upon a military base that is actually a depraved group of soldiers presenting the facade of order, reminiscent of some community from *The Walking Dead*. The story ends with Jim barbarously killing most of the soldiers with his bare hands in order to save the women. As the story concludes, *28 Days Later* actually offers hopeful resolution as the zombies are shown decaying from malnutrition, and a plane spots the three survivors.

However, despite the optimistic ending, and prominent theme in the film is Jim's struggle to remain mild-mannered. Aesthetically speaking, this begins with the first sequence, as the camera pans out to show Jim naked, waking up on a hospital table. From the beginning the audience is able to infer Jim to be the quintessential *tabula rasa*, or *blank slate*, in that he has no knowledge of the world, is awaking to reality, and—carrying on with the rebirth symbolism—is naked and pure. At first Jim might appear bland and empty, having nothing to really add to other survivors' parties or conversa-

tions. However, as the story progresses, with each travesty the protagonists face, Jim's reluctance begins to wane, and he begins to step into a notable identity. This is worth mentioning here because in the story's climax, Jim appears animalistic when killing the soldiers, thus leaving behind what semblance of naivety and purity he once had.

The post-Christian humanist would argue that his passion for the good of the two women is what assuaged his passivity, and therein prompted the need for immediate action. However, given the bookends of the movie—the birth and death(s) scenes—it is difficult, and even careless as an aesthete, to not take note of his lack of clothes. As the story communicates his experientially driven epistemology, with Jim creating his identity along the way, the most stark event is the climax where he appears mentally unstable and fueled by adrenaline (which is explained in the movie as being the cause for turning humans into zombies). Subsequently, this event shows Jim not killing zombies, but humans. Furthermore, during this entire sequence Jim is shirtless, which is an acknowledgment of his being naked in the beginning; this is Jim's second birth—one into a loosening of all shame and inhibitions. In short, the protagonist, though seemingly sane and stable in the end, seems to digress to such a low level of depravity that he not only resembles the zombies of this film, but seems to even concern the two women for a brief moment.

Although *28 Days Later* does offer some theories about society, the story primarily follows one specific man's encounter with the dystopian world, and communicates how he ultimately handles it. Tenga and Zimmermann identify a very common theme within this movie and others by addressing that the origin of the zombie outbreak, and by extension, the downfall of civilization, is human error (Tenga and Zimmermann, 2013: 79). Jim, though portrayed to have been a device for redemption, encapsulated how temperamental mankind can be. Moreover, if science created the zombie apocalypse in this story, the military showed the desire for unaccountable depravity, and Jim represented the fragility of the individual, this narrative represents mankind as not only incapable of solving such a dystopian context, and inclined to evil, but also disposed to be worse than the zombie antagonists. This is because the most agreed upon faculty separating the survivors from zombies in this sub-genre is cognition. Therefore, if Jim was able to apply rational thought to his options and choices, and still chose to act as he did, he communicated that mankind is capable of volitionally accepting and applying the methods of zombies.

### **Conclusions**

In summation, the zombie sub-genre serves its recipients as another medium for engaging profound ideas and concepts. Subsequently, there are

some that offer a stark contrast to the proposed innate goodness of mankind that humanism, specifically post-Christian humanism, would have its audience subscribe to. More pointedly, though, because of literature like *I Am Legend*, *The Walking Dead*, and *28 Days Later*, a recipient is made aware of certain ontological truth claims that they might not have ever considered, thus calling him or her into a conversation about who they are outside of literature. As Dostoevsky's *Dream of a Ridiculous Man* implies, it is a good thing to pursue virtue, kindness, and the betterment of one's neighbor; it is foolish, however, to believe mankind to innately be virtuous, kind, and selflessly seeking the betterment of the *other*, and not the cause of dystopian level brokenness.

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