THE CINE-FILES

Keep your demons on a leash: disgust and *The Walking Dead*

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Massacre at the Saviors Camp (*The Walking Dead*, 2016) via criticalcommons.org

Disgust is a sensation that dominates the television series, *The Walking Dead*.[1] Viewers repeatedly witness knives, bullets, swords and sticks plunge into heads that then erupt their content; heads, arms and legs cut brutally and shed from their bodies; screwdrivers and other sharp objects plunged into eye-sockets; and rotting, loose flesh sliding off the muscles and bones they were once attached to. These are some of the disgusting acts of survival that humans in the series subject on the living dead. But viewers have also seen humans perform unspeakable acts of violence on other humans. The main protagonists have brutally defended themselves in a series of killings that have escalated as the series—now into its sixth season—has progressed. Rick Grimes, ex-sheriff's deputy and leader of the "good guys" killed Shane (one of his own who became mentally unstable) (2:12) and innumerable others; Michonne killed the diabolical villain, the Governor (4:8); Carol, the abused housewife turned killing-machine, killed Karen and David—two members of Rick's group—who were infected with a virus that threatened to decimate the team (4:5); and when the group called "The Claimers" threatens to rape Michonne and Carl (Rick's son), Rick and Carl break loose and kill the entire group. This is a small percentage of the ruthless violence that *The Walking Dead* delivers, and the violence always relies on a sensory impact that's

achieved through graphic depictions of horror and bodily destruction. The disgust that accompanies most of these acts is one that usually asks the audience to affectively consider the reality of death. Simultaneously, it offers the horror fan the diabolical delight in consuming gruesome special effects that make the skin crawl.

The sixth season of *The Walking Dead* introduced a form of disgust that's been slowly brewing in the series: moral disgust. The episode, "Not Tomorrow Yet" (6:12), includes a scene that marks a shift in the series. The lead up to the scene takes place in the church in Alexandria (where Rick's group have settled). Rick, like a preacher, stands at the altar—a stained glass crucifix at his back—and asks the Alexandrian community to stand by his decision to attack the Saviors camp and kill every living being inside. His rationale is one of survival—they need supplies from other survivors in the Hilltop Colony, who are under the control of the Saviors who insist on taking half their supplies. So far the viewer has had a few introductions to the Saviors, aside from small groups of individuals they've confronted on the road while looking for supplies, and what they know via the Hilltop group: that they're a tough, violent group of individuals who have killed to get what they want. The episode has clear echoes of *The Magnificent Seven*:[2] the guns-for-hire (Rick & co) are engaged by a Mexican village (Hilltop) to protect them against Calveras and his gang of outlaws (Saviors) who are robbing the village of its supplies. However, the narrative that unravels doesn't offer our anti-heroes salvation—a fact echoed in Rick's callous parting words to the Alexandrians: "We don't shy from men. We kill. We kill them all." The Alexandrians regroup. They discuss their plan of attack and head for the Savior camp, driven by the goal of premeditated murder.

Andy (a member of the Hilltop Colony) enters the camp with the (false) head of Richard (the leader of Hilltop) and is confronted by two of the Saviors. No sooner has one of the Saviors entered the building to retrieve one of the Hilltop hostages that Richard's head was being swapped with, than Daryl grabs the other from behind and slits his throat, ear to ear, blood erupting from the wound. The other emerges with the hostage and Michonne's sword enters his body from behind, killing him instantly. The frenzy builds and accompanying our disgust as we witness the events unravel is a disturbing, repetitive tap-tap-tap sound that repeats as a motif in the soundtrack and which creates a sensation of discomfort in the pit of our stomachs in anticipation of what's to come.

Our protagonists enter the building and, walking down corridor after corridor in a convention typical of "shooter" videogames, begin to check every room for occupants. Rick and Daryl open one door. One occupant. Rick plunges his knife slowly into the stranger's head, a glimpse of momentary doubt marking his expression. Glenn and Heath enter another room. Two occupants. Glenn moves towards one, kneels before

him and an overhead shot shows his stationary knife in hand poised above the vulnerable face of his sleeping victim. Glenn plunges the knife in, and a momentary whimper escapes his lips. He turns to Heath, who approaches his victim but can't complete his task. Glenn takes over and, when the murder is complete, Heath and Glenn nod to each other acknowledging the act. Abraham and Sasha approach another door and as Sasha attempts to jimmy the locked door, one of the Saviors exits from another door and slashes Abraham in the arm. Sasha retaliates by stabbing him viciously in the chest twice but before he dies he sets off an alarm. From hereon in, all hell breaks loose. Rick, Michonne and Daryl are engaged in a shoot out with Saviors, who have now come out from behind closed doors. Aaron struggles with another, eventually plunging a knife into his heart. Doors are kicked down. Gunfire bursts out like a drum roll. Daryl pounds repeatedly through the skull of one victim with his rifle butt. And Glenn and Heath let loose their rifles on a closed door. As they swing the bullet-ridden door open, they and we see five lifeless bodies lying on the ground and drenched in blood. One of the bodies moves, and raises his gun but is almost immediately shot dead by Jesus, who has entered the room from another door. Living up to his name, Jesus verbalizes a revelation: "This is the next world."

In a montage of image collisions that are straight out of Eisenstein 101, Rick lifts his rifle and shoots, then there's a cut to Aaron who opens a door with rifle in hand. It's unclear whether they occupy the same space. There's a cut to a shot of a rugged, burly bald man who, moments later, receives a shot to the head, his blood splattering onto the camera that captures the action, shocking the viewer with its invasive presence on the screen, while simultaneously drawing attention to its status as representation. We are implicated in these acts of horror and the affective assault we experience forces us to acknowledge our implication. We've identified with these characters for six seasons, but now the rug is pulled from under us and we question the validity of that identification. The next shot is taken from behind as we watch burly-man's body fall. As his body slips from the foreground view, Rosita is revealed in the distance standing in the doorway. It's Rosita—not Rick or Aaron—who is revealed as the shooter. This montage generates a dialectic collision of character actions that force a visceral attack on the audience. The rapid juxtaposition of shots creates both an emotional and sensory assault that also triggers an ideological consciousness that asks the viewer to accept the scene—from the moment of entry in the Saviors' camp—as a massacre.

The spaces merge and our protagonists and the viewers know that what has just occurred is an ethical transition in the series. This is a moral turning point; the protagonists, led by Rick, have not killed to save themselves against attacks of the living dead, or as acts of redemption or survival against humans. This is an act of killing that is cold and calculated and which the episode presents to us as morally

questionable. It shifts the morality of the main characters into new territory. Andy's words delivered to Rick before the attack on the camp now return to haunt the characters and viewers alike: "The Saviors… they're scary, but these pricks got nothing on you!"

It's appropriate that the above scene adopts Sergei Eisenstein's famous method of the montage of attractions. While the concept was named and defined by Eisenstein in 1923, Vsevolod Meyerhold, the innovative Russian stage director—and Eisenstein's mentor—had applied the technique as early as 1913, when Meyerhold published "The Fairground Booth" or "*Balagan*". Both were captivated by how popular entertainment at fairs and circuses attracted the attention of the spectator in immediate ways that impacted the senses. Adapting the sensation of such attractions to the theatre and cinema, the attraction became an aggressive form of address that assaulted the spectator cognitively and through the senses. Eisenstein's theory of the montage of attractions was later adapted by Tom Gunning as the "cinema of attractions" and applied to the aesthetic of astonishment produced by early cinema. However, it's Eisenstein's concept that interests me here. In the essay, "The Montage of Attractions," Eisenstein explained that:

> An attraction… is any aggressive moment in theatre, i.e. any element of it that subjects the audience to emotional or psychological influence, verified by experience and mathematically calculated to produce specific emotional shocks in the spectator in their proper order within the whole. These shocks provide the only opportunity of perceiving the ideological aspect of what is being shown, the final ideological conclusion.[3]

In the montage of attractions described above, the shock produced is delivered through the sensation of disgust: through the shock of violent and brutal slayings, mutilation, erupting blood, and the destruction of human life. The rhythmic pacing of the edits, the dialectical relationship between shots, and the content of each segment work in unison to disgust the audience. In his book, *On Disgust* (originally published in the 1929), the philosopher Aurel Kolnai stated that disgust is an aversive response that functions as one of the body's protective mechanisms against objects of impurity and threat. For Kolnai, however, the sensation of disgust also serves a cognitive function that conveys information that "reveal(s) something about the complexities and shadows of our inner psychic life."[4] As I've argued elsewhere,

> Horror relies on the sensorium, an integrated unit that combines cognition and the senses, the mind and the body. The sensorium refers both to the sensory mechanics of the human body, but also to the intellectual and cognitive functions connected to it: it's integral to the process of perceiving. [5]

This episode—and particularly the scene discussed above from *The Walking Dead*—incites a sensory intelligence in the spectator. We, as viewers, engage in corporeal-thinking: our sense of disgust makes us question the morality of characters we have—more or less—unproblematically identified with and, in doing so, it implicates us directly and disturbingly in the massacre that we have just experienced. And as our "heroes" exit into the daylight, their task complete, the soundtrack that accompanies them is the Hozier song, "Arsonist's Lullabye":

When I was a child, I heard voices
Some would sing and some would scream
…All you have is your fire
And the place you need to reach.
Don't you ever tame your demons
But always keep 'em on a leash.[6]

The disgust that overpowers us in this scene drives home a viscerally produced revelation: have Rick and the team let go the leash and released their demons?

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Notes

1. *The Walking Dead,* AMC Studios, 2010—.
2. John Sturges, *The Magnificent Seven,* DVD, 1960.
3. Sergei Eisenstein, *Writings, 1922-1934: Sergei Eisenstein Selected Works*, ed. and trans. Richard Taylor, Volume 1, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 34.
4. Aurel Kolnai, *On Disgust*, eds. Barry Smith and Carolyn Korsmeyer (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), 2.
5. Angela Ndalianis, *The Horror Sensorium: Media and the Senses* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2012), 16.
6. From Hozier's album Hozier, Sony/ATV Music Publishing, 2004. Lyrics by Andrew Hozier Byrne.