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## Dystopian Identities: Exhuming the World of Zombies through the Camera's Eye: A Documentary

Julie Kimble

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DYSTOPIAN IDENTITIES: EXHUMING THE WORLD OF ZOMBIES  
THROUGH THE CAMERA'S EYE: A DOCUMENTARY

by

JULIE KIMBLE

(Under the Direction of Daniel E. Chapman)

ABSTRACT

This research seeks to understand how engagement in zombie media culture helps its participants to navigate their everyday fears, develop identity, and form meaningful communities through this interaction. Curriculum studies enables us to see that knowledge is fluid and we often learn more from our interaction with our world outside of the expected sites of education—like schools. Media and pop culture provide a place for this knowledge to begin. Participants in zombie culture invest themselves and connect in ways that transcend entertainment and seem to become sites of transformation. Standardization and testing have become the driving force in education, creating a vacuum of creativity that pushes students outside education for meaningful learning. Zombies are popular, and horde-like groups gather in diverse places and activities to enjoy them. By examining the connections that people make through pop culture, we can better understand how to tap into this form of learning by through the intersection of culture and curriculum. This non-traditional dissertation uses documentary as a tool for inquiry for a qualitative analysis that includes not only the interviews, but also the participants' involvement in Live Action Role Playing (LARPing) activities associated with zombie culture. These interviews are viewed through the theoretical lenses of articulation and affect theories, as well as posthumanism. This research revealed that meaningful communities, rather than dystopian anti-social ideals, were prevalent for this zombie culture.

INDEX WORDS: Pop Culture, Zombies, Affect Theory, Articulation, Posthumanism, Identity, Curriculum, Documentary.

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THROUGH THE CAMERA'S EYE: A DOCUMENTARY

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

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## DEDICATION

Dedicated to my family,  
who patiently encouraged me along the way  
And to my zombie-loving students,  
who started me on this dystopian journey

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*We are obsessed with cosmic catastrophes: the whole life on earth disintegrating, because of some virus, because of an asteroid hitting the earth, and so on. So the paradox is, that it's much easier to imagine the end of all life on earth than a much more modest radical change in capitalism.*

*Žižek (2005)*

#### **Dystopian Identities: Exhuming the World of Zombies**

Zizek's suggestion that envisioning a dystopian world is a much easier task than visualizing one in which society works suggests an increased hopelessness for the future and a feeling of political powerlessness that leads to society's ultimate destruction. For many of us, the trends of education toward standardization, norming, and the homogenization of knowledge have created an atmosphere that has crushed creativity and encouraged us to seek our place elsewhere--to the world of zombies. We are fascinated by zombies and their ability to live beyond any catastrophic end: we dress up for zombie walks and stagger down the streets of Atlanta every fall for entertained tourists and passersby; we faithfully watch *The Walking Dead* both as families and also in college dorms as part of a community of ardent zombie lovers; we participate in zombie runs, not only as the undead but also those who want to be fit (just in case); we join Humans versus Zombie clubs in our universities to physically act out the zombie apocalypse during the school day and on weekends; we gather in hordes of 35,000 to visit Walker Stalker conventions at various sites in cities all over the nation. Interest in zombies in all their forms have captured not only the attention of the purists who revere *The Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968), but have also captivated representatives from all the corners of our

population. For example, according to recent Nielson ratings (Berg, 2016), the seventh season of AMC's popular zombie apocalypse series, *The Walking Dead* brought 10.7 million viewers for the first show of the season among adults ages 18-49. This fascination with zombies, or zombie love, has become what Bishop (2010) calls "the allegory of the moment" (p. 6), where in the post 9/11 era of fear and terrorism have caused us to pause and consider our future.

My research for this dissertation explores the breeding ground for the rise in popularity of this zombie pop culture, but also investigates the motivations of those who participate in the culture and how these people have adopted zombies into their own identities. Also, the tenets of curriculum studies help us to acknowledge that knowledge is fluid and we often learn more from our interaction with our world outside of the expected sites of education—like schools. Media and pop culture often presents itself as a place for this knowledge to begin, and participants in zombie culture invest themselves and connect in ways that transcend entertainment and seem to become sites of transformation. Zombies are popular, and horde-like groups gather in diverse places and activities to enjoy them. By examining the connections that people make through pop culture, we can better understand how to tap into this form of learning by through the intersection of culture and curriculum. As Garlen and Sandlin (2016) explain, "The study of popular culture helps us to understand and perhaps intervene in how we, through our interactions with popular culture, produce, reproduce, and re-imagine social life and everyday social practices and relations" (p. 2). As we seek to explore these interactions with those who love zombies, we also strive to know what effect this engagement with this media-driven culture has on its participants.

Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share (2009) explain the breadth and depth of our involvement with pop culture and media, "Media culture is a form of pedagogy that teaches proper and

improper behavior, gender roles, values, and knowledge of the world. Individuals are often not aware that they are being educated and positioned by media culture, as its pedagogy is frequently invisible and is absorbed unconsciously” (p. 4). How does the exposure to zombie media “educate and position” us? Most of what we know about zombies comes from television shows and movies, not necessarily from literature. Much of what we know as zombies comes from current movies and television programs. This media must be critically assessed in order to understand the context from which we derive our understanding of zombies. Those who use this lens assume that the audience participates in meaning-making of what they see (Hall, 1980), deciphering these images and applying them to their own audience studies. As Kellner (1995) describes, “television and other forms of media culture play key roles in the structuring of contemporary identity and shaping thought and behavior” (p. 237). Most media involving zombies involves fairly violent scenes and images, and even the Humans vs. Zombies games symbolically act out these acts of violence through less bloody means (throwing socks, Nerf guns, etc.), but still tally “kills” for their games. Even the image of the zombie itself is graphically violent: some zombies drag broken legs behind them or are missing limbs altogether; their pocked and damaged skin dangles in shreds from their faces; some crawl rather than walk; and they eat human flesh as their daily diet.

Much of my motivation as a teacher in conducting this study involves finding ways to help our students understand how the media in which they are immersed affects them so they can interact with it more critically. I explore not only the need for critical media literacy discussions in the classroom, but also ways to teach popular culture (specifically in the English classroom). As Henry Giroux (2009) describes, “Cultural studies becomes available as a resource to educators who can then teach students how to look at the media (industry and texts), analyze

audience reception, challenge rigid disciplinary boundaries, critically engage popular culture, produce critical knowledge, or use culture studies to reform the curricula and challenge disciplinary formations within public schools and higher education” (p. 89). This creativity in the classroom remains vital to engagement with the students, especially in light of the constant hammering of standardization and test preparation through which they suffer daily in their classes.

### **Contextual Beginnings**

This research does not come about because I grew up watching zombie movies or because the darker, decadent, and decaying side of our culture fascinates me. My background that leads me to this topic of research lies in the reporter side of my history: I am insatiably curious about people and what motivates them to act, think, or believe the ways that they do. My undergraduate degree was in journalism and even though my master’s degree in English Education led me to teach and love literature, I have never cured myself of the propensity to pester people with questions. This love of journalism fits my decision to integrate a documentary into this project as well, and so the marriage of my innate curiosity of people and my journalist leanings has spawned an unlikely child: a zombie project.

The idea for this research topic came to me at a stoplight one day. As background, in my little town of Conyers, Georgia, zombies walk the streets fairly often; when they appear, an electronic cry screams forward on Facebook and through text, “The zombies are here, the zombies are here!” While this is just film fiction and local excitement—since our little historic town has become a mecca for television shows and full-length films (Georgia’s tax laws make producing films here more appealing)—zombies more universally permeate other areas of life as well. As I sat at this previously mentioned stoplight, a van in front of me advertised itself as a

“Zombie Apocalypse Response Vehicle” and posted a website for “yesZombies.com,” a site where interested shoppers can prepare for a zombie apocalypse by purchasing t-shirts, signs, and targets (available now) and manuals, emergency food, and tactical gear (coming soon). I thought about how often I see zombies. Zombie lovers openly display their enthusiasm of the undead—literally—as now Boy Scouts can now earn a zombie emergency preparedness merit badge. We even participate in 5k races where zombies chase us and we run gleefully from them. This intense interest in the undead finds its way into the classroom as well. As a high school teacher, I listen to my students discuss their favorite zombie series (*The Walking Dead*, 2010), and even as I attempt to teach Shakespeare classics like *Romeo and Juliet* to my ninth graders, our conversation inevitably turns to the movie (*Warm Bodies*, 2013) where a zombie Romeo is “healed” back to his human form over the love of a less-dead Juliet. College students have added to the zombie culture by participating in Humans versus Zombie clubs, where they play a form of weeklong tag that involves keeping score with online “kill boards” and where students go on assigned “missions” until they are tagged and become zombies.

How does this interaction with zombie media help them to understand their place in the world? Our understanding of this phenomenon may aid us in understanding ourselves. My research questions include the overarching inquiry: How do we engage in popular culture to develop identity? I am also interested in the literacies gained through this interaction. What are participants gaining from this cultural experience?

More precise questions that this research could explore include:

1. How do zombies help people to navigate their everyday fears?
2. What do people learn about forming communities through engaging with zombie culture?



### **The Dystopian Effect of Standardization on Curriculum and Culture**

Little has changed in education since Paulo Freire wrote about the “banking” concept of education in 1970, describing how students passively receive the information deposited in them by teachers without critically appraising the significance of the information (Freire, 1970/1996, p. 54). During the last two decades since the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) and the Race to the Top (2009) as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, the push to standardize education has saturated every corner of our nation’s schools. Students are pushed to take increasingly more tests in order to prove their “achievement” in schools, and teachers and administrators have become targets for politicians and parents alike, who place the blame for failing students on the shoulders of those who teach them. Therefore, the names of the education reforms have changed and national standards for curriculum use the term “critical thinking” in their descriptions, but follow up with programs that only prepare students to perform on standardized tests--hardly a curriculum that encourages creative problem solving. Freire describes how this oppression of the students creates a vacuum of “authentic thinking.” In turn, students become objects as receptacles of knowledge, rather than living creatures; banking education causes a state of “necrophily,” or a love of dead things. “Based on a mechanistic, static, naturalistic, spatialized view of consciousness, it transforms students into receiving objects. It attempts to control thinking and action, leads women and men to adjust to the world, and inhibits their creative power” (1970/1996, p. 58). Freire argues here that this form of education turns men and women into “automatons--the very negation of their ontological vocation to be more fully human” (p. 55). The automatons produced by this education seem eerily similar to zombies, who travel in horde-like crowds which move without thinking, driven forward only by--ironically--the desire to consume brains. They crave the ability to create, but

are forced into the parameters that standardized education forces upon them. They study for specific tests for which the teachers create “backward planning” instruction created to increase achievement on those specific bits and pieces of information.

Still, Freire’s idea of helping our students to become more “fully human” is echoed early by Gramsci, who seemed to have envisioned the educational climate of our schools today from his prison cell in Italy, even though he specifically wrote of the educational changes imposed by a Mussolini regime in 1923. He spoke of “the living work of the teacher” becomes the responsibility to “be aware of the contrast between the type of culture and society which he represents and the type of culture and society represented by his pupils, and conscious of his obligation to accelerate and regulate the child’s formation in conformity with the former and in conflict with the latter” (p. 36).

This “living work” becomes the challenge for the teacher to understand how to reach her students through their own culture and to help them become as Freire suggests, more “fully human” in that they have more investment in their own knowledge, more choices in how and what they learn. While Gramsci in this text discusses change in his own country almost a century ago, much of the language he uses in this passage “On Education” from his prison notebooks appropriately fits today’s push for standardization. Gramsci stresses that the educational programs and reforms of his day would cause a “general lowering of the teaching profession” (p. 36) because students would be forced to memorize formulas, facts, and vocabulary that are immediately forgotten because they are not relevant to them. He speaks of the “baggage” that students bring with them from home into the classroom—the ideas, thoughts, and biases that shape their understanding of the world. If the teacher ignores this baggage and charges on with her lesson assuming that the students are all carrying the same kind of luggage

and will leave with the same interpretation of the lessons taught that day, then the teacher will be ineffective. Simply being informed, Gramsci argues, does not “make them [the students] better educated” and argues even then against the practice of examinations—that his government should have “abolished examinations entirely,” especially if all the students accomplished was memorizing facts. “A date is always a date, whoever the examiner is, and a definition is always a definition. But an aesthetic judgment or a philosophical analysis?” (p. 36). This statement seems prophetic now as our students struggle with the stress of ever-increasing exams and diminishing freedom for creative learning in the classroom.

In Freire’s (1970/1996) description of a necrophilic world where students are made to conform to a minimum standard, they lose sight of their individuality and creativity that accompanies it; in short, “standardization makes everyone stupid,” as Pinar (2012) argues (p. 55). By forcing students to fit one measure (the test), they lose that uniqueness which enables them to be creative—at least in school. Then, connections that they might have made through what Pinar describes as the “complicated conversation” (p. 44) which enables them to see the world critically through their own experiences becomes a watered-down, unsalted, mashed potato version of their learning. This mundane existence crosses over into adult life in their jobs as well. I argue that these people do not sit back and accept this passively; they find ways to create and form their own unique identities through their interaction with something spicier and therefore interesting to them—like zombie media.

### **Zombies Past and Present**

Understanding how media influences us becomes increasingly important as our world becomes more digitally driven. The fact that our interest in the zombie media has grown over recent years cannot be ignored, and as Giroux (2009) stresses, “Culture now plays a central role

in producing narratives, metaphors, and images that exercise a powerful pedagogical force over how people think of themselves and their relationship to others” (p. 91). Bishop (2015) emphasizes that the horrors that accompanied 9-11 have added to our fascination with modern zombies; they are not only subjects of interest for the entertainment industry, but also an “allegory of the moment” and a “valid subject of investigation and critical study.” Bishop attributes this fascination with their paradoxical nature: “dead but alive, conscious but lacking consciousness, animated but decaying, alive but infected” (p. 6). Zombie media and associated activities tied to this media culture have continued to increase, sometimes to the chagrin of those “purists” who feel that the sudden popularity of zombie fans has somehow polluted the group who prefer some of the original films like Romero’s (1968) *Night of the Living Dead* to the more popular *The Walking Dead* (2010-present). These activities include not only participants who are the eclectic horror-loving young philosophers, but families, college students, and other groups that would never normally find themselves associating with so many different types of people.

The concept of zombies is nothing new; we have had many forms of the undead in multiple cultures around the world for as long as we have kept records, some of the oldest stories originating in the Vodou ritual and magic culture in Haiti as soulless bodies that terrorized the living. Even in the British Literature that I teach, Mary Shelley’s (1818) creature in *Frankenstein* could be considered a zombie, as he was created by digging up dead bodies and stitching them together. This is also true for Samuel Coleridge’s (1834) sailors in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, who rose again from death to operate the ship until it reached land, looking blankly ahead and without recognition of their former friend, the mariner—very zombie-like. And even before Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* and the sequel *Dawn of the Dead* (1978),

there was the 1938 *White Zombie*, a Victor Halperin film that follows more of the Vodou traditions of Haiti. Here a white couple travel to Haiti to be married, and the town's Vodou Master sees the woman visitor and desires to add her to his zombie horde. He gives a potion that transforms her into a zombie. All ends well for the couple in the end, but not so for the zombies or the master who gave her the potion; they all stumble off a cliff. This becomes an early example of adopting another culture's traditions as our own; in this case, an early slave tradition in Haiti where those who were abducted were first introduced to the Christian idea of resurrection and combined this idea with West African myths of a soulless corpse, especially important in a colonial enslavement where autonomy was unavailable; zombies then represented "bodies lacking freedom and autonomy" (Bishop, 2015, p. 7).

What makes the more recent increased interest in zombie media and activities intriguing is the year-round love of the zombie and its attraction to a wide audience. Many academics have joined the hordes, writing theoretical articles and books which explore the cause of this increase in our culture, from zombie movies and parodies of zombie movies (Bishop, 2015; Walin, 2015;), to zombie video games (Bishop, 2015; Adams, 2015), women's place in zombie culture through makeup (Priyadharshini, 2016), and even zombie pedagogy in the classroom (Westrup, 2016; Black, Gray & Leahy, 2016; Bishop, 2015). Education seems to have an apocalyptic glow that attracts even zombie lovers to find a cure for its problems, but as one of my participants said in her interview, we don't learn everything that is important in school. This is the research that has yet to be fully investigated—what do the participants gain from this interaction with zombies? This research, following the horde metaphor, could be described as a late-coming straggler in that so much has been theorized thus far about this phenomenon; however, what has not been explored are the ethnographical accounts of zombie lovers who tell

us about their interactions and motivations for being a part of this cultural group set within the theoretical context of posthumanism, articulation, and affect theory.

### **Theoretical Framework**

*“I want to suggest a different metaphor for theoretical work: the metaphor of struggle, of wrestling with the angels. The only theory worth having is that which you have to fight off, not that which you speak with profound fluency” (Hall, 1993/2007, p. 37).*

Hall’s comments speak to the struggle that sometimes exists when attempting to understand our culture through theory, and therefore that “wrestling with the angels” can occur as we determine which lens fits our specific research interests. Since I sought to understand how this specific form of pop culture helps its participants to see themselves as well as how they find identity through association with others who also love zombie culture, a complex approach was needed. Slack (1996) also warns against relying on theory as a formal and inflexible tool, “In place of that conception of theory, cultural studies works with the notion of theory as a ‘detour’ to help ground our engagement with what newly engages us and to let that engagement provide the ground for new theorizing (p. 113). Articulation, which allows me a lens to examine how the “hordes” of people who love zombies (a widely variant group) find each other even in spite of their differences; affect theory naturally falls next in line, exploring the visceral forces behind some of these connections. While a third lens may seem cumbersome, the concepts of posthumanism and its tenets of anthropocentrism continued to emerge as my research into this culture progressed, and it became impossible to ignore even though articulation and affect theory carry the most weight in my writing here.

As we examine theory, it is also important to recognize the importance of pop culture and its effects on us; we must first recognize that media and pop culture can act as a pedagogical

force that not only informs, but aids in self-understanding. The fact that our interest in this form of entertainment has grown during recent years cannot be ignored, and as Henry Giroux (2009) stresses, “Culture now plays a central role in producing narratives, metaphors, and images that exercise a powerful pedagogical force over how people think of themselves and their relationship to others” (p. 91). These narratives attract a variety of people to them in interesting ways, and through the intertwining of articulation and affect theories we can begin to understand how zombie media can attract so many different types of people and personalities and allow them to connect with each other to form communities with which they can identify.

### **Understanding Identity Formation**

#### **Articulation Theory and Identity**

Articulation was largely developed by Stuart Hall in the 1980s and has roots in Marxist theory and his production models of class. In addition to Marx’s ideas of social class and its development, he also relied on Althusser and his theory of “complex totality structured in dominance,” as well as Gramsci’s suggestions of how a hegemonic class works to gain subconscious consent of their domination by a ruling class (Slack, 1996, p. 116). Chris Barker (2012) more simply describes the theory of articulation as one that views “the self as made up of multiple and changeable identities” (p. 231). This theory examines collective identity as well as not only a “reflection of a fixed, natural, state of being but as a process of becoming” (p. 233). This theory is vital to understanding how groups of participants make connections not only with this media but also with each other with the common interest of zombie media. Grossberg (1992) defines articulation as a study of how identity is formed in spite of the many differences that individuals bring with them:

Articulation is the production of identity on top of difference, of unities out of fragments, of structures across practices. Articulation links this practice to that effect, this text to the meaning, this meaning to that reality, this experience to those politics. And these links are themselves articulated into larger structures. (p. 54)

Articulation allows me as a researcher to examine the relationships, the threads of meaning that the participants create through their interaction with this media. This includes a historical context that must be addressed in order to understand what enabled a particular connection to exist at all: for example, determining whether or not the increase in an interest in the zombie culture is related to the 9-11 World Trade Center bombings and the associated war against terrorism and fear of an historical, political, or economic apocalypse.

Considering the historic example above, Grossberg (1992) discusses the importance of historical context informs the “emergence of the formation” of the articulation in that it comes about in a “discrete series of events” (p. 70). For example, in his study of rock music and the fan bases that were attracted to this genre, he first studied the context of the historical environment which allowed its development, its “apocalyptic rhetoric, youth, bohemianism, juvenile delinquency” (p. 70), and then analyzed the “alliances” that formed afterward. These alliances are complex and this formation is “rarely a simple matter” (p. 71). Understanding how the articulation of cultural practices--which seem to have very little connection to each other at all--work toward the development of identity can be a difficult task. In zombie culture, what is it that attracts so many different types of people together? This attraction begins with the popular zombie media and its pop culture, but does not end there. Grossberg, speaking of popular culture:

The most obvious and perhaps the most frightening thing about contemporary popular culture is that it matters so much to so many different people. The sources of its power,



whatever it may seem to say, or whatever pleasures it may offer, can be identified with its place in people's affect lives, and its ability to place other practices affectively. (p. 80).

Grossberg explains that critics often dismiss popular culture in identity formation because of its escapist nature, but asserts that “popular culture is always more than ideological, it provides sites of relaxation, privacy, pleasure, enjoyment, feeling good, fun, passion, and emotion” (p. 79). It is these unconscious, “visceral responses” that Grossberg describes that connect articulation and affect theory.

### **Zombies and Affect Theory: Feeling Good—and Disgusted**

This discussion of identity includes an understanding of how we interact with popular culture and the threads of meaning that we attach to our identity based on these desires. It is a form of escapism that appeals to our senses and to our emotions as well. What may seem externally to be simply entertainment becomes much more—often subconsciously. While many of the activities in which participants involve themselves are role-playing, the seeds for this pop culture lie in the media that precedes it, intertwining the audience and the media that serves as a model to exemplify. The environment from which the media springs should also be considered, and as Moya (2000) writes, in order to understand identity, we must explore the connections that we make between ourselves and the world around us, or at least attempt to see “the issue is at least partly an empirical one: the different identity claims cannot be examined, tested, and judged without reference to existing social and economic structures” (Moya, p. 11). In this sense, articulation and affect theory interact to not only create a clearer picture of how we connect with not only each other (sometimes diverse associations), but also the emotions that keep us coming back to the popular media and culture, which in turn binds us to the others interested in it as well. Seigworth and Gregg (2010) describe affect as one of the “visceral forces beneath, alongside, or

generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension” (p. 1). This drive toward movement, and the extension of the visceral forces that affective forces provide, might help to explain how those who invest themselves in zombie culture sometimes explore the physical side of this culture--simply being part of the audience and fan base of zombie media becomes inadequate to fully experience this culture and they seek to further experience the feelings that accompany this interaction through physically acting out their parts in zombie media. They dress up as the undead, they create intricate stories for Humans vs. Zombie games; they extend the feelings they experience as an audience into the physical world. Grossberg (1992) discusses how “popular culture, operating with an affective sensibility, is a crucial ground where people give others, whether cultural practices or social groups, the authority to shape their identity and locate them within various circuits of power.” As they discover that this culture “matters” to them, and by investing themselves in the culture, they “actively constitute places and forms of authority (both for themselves and for others) through the deployment and organization of affective investments” (p. 83). It is through this self-proclaimed authority to allow this culture to matter to them, that they seek out others who are feeling similarly; to put it into zombie terms, this phenomenon of affect seems to be the unseen driving force of the hordes of people to which the undead “matters.”

One example of the how articulation and affect work to bind unlike people together involves what some might consider a strictly leisure activity--Humans vs. Zombies. I examine the fascination that college students have in playing the game—not only on the weekends, but also during the week even as they go throughout the school day, and I also explore the range of people who are attracted to this activity. For this game, the participants have online “kill boards”

that they can check periodically throughout the day to see which team is ahead, and wear bandanas on class days as well as weekends to identify themselves to all others (who know the game) whether they have been “killed” or not. They carry ammunition (rolled up socks, Nerf bullets, etc.) in their backpacks to be ready at a moment’s notice. Each game, which can last as long as a week or ten days, transcends simple entertainment when the students, in addition to learning history and engineering, they are also plotting how to “kill” the human sitting across the room for this game. This activity extends well beyond just simply watching a zombie movie or series (such as *The Walking Dead*) when the students integrate what others consider entertainment into the daily planning of their normal activities, and it involves a range of participants from the various social groups around campus. Articulation tells us that very different individuals from various backgrounds can be integrated together through a common interest in something, even though it may be an activity that might seem to others to carry little meaning (zombies as entertainment), but experience pleasure on the affective level which gives “tone” or “texture” to their lived existence (Grossberg, 1992, p. 80). In this example, in articulation theory suggests that we look at who controls the game and its activities, as well as what forces drive that person. I interview an administrator of this game and we discuss his motivations for himself, for the people involved, and for the game itself. Whether participants are running in zombie races, transforming themselves into zombies through makeup, playing zombie nerf battles all over college campuses, or simply gathering to watch a favorite zombie program, this culture matters to them in ways that transcends mere entertainment and becomes a part of their social structures and of their identity.

## Posthumanism

Zombies might represent our fear that our superiority is waning, an attempt to see ourselves surviving even after cataclysmic events that destroy all other life and the objects that we as humans have created. Weaver (2015), speaking of the humanist desire to always be the greater species, asks “What is it that moves humans to rationalize that our exceptionality means we can exterminate species and even to proclaim superiority over many in our own species? Our equating exceptionality with superiority is short-lived and thus begins a depressed state” (p. 186). Weaver’s comments indicate that when we are prone to hold ourselves at a higher level than others simply based on our differences, what will follow is the harsh reality that this thought is in reality only a mirage. We create something of a superiority complex, where we must stand a little taller than those near us who might have differences. In our nation’s Western history have we had difficulty envisioning anything “other” on equal footing, but we have also struggled viewing anything inhuman as superior or equal.

Therefore, it makes sense that this societal fear could also be tied to current war events where one country or group struggles for domination over another; researcher Kyle Bishop (2009) linked events such as 9/11 and previous wars in our cinematic history with a rise in zombie media available and popularity:

I argue that both processes are at play today: zombie narratives have been reconditioned to satisfy a new aesthetic, but they have also returned to prominence because the social and cultural conditions of a post-9/11 world have come to match so closely those experienced by viewers during the civil unrest of the 1960s and ’70s.” (pp. 34-35)

Bishop argues that when there is war, there will be gothic zombie movies to follow. War seems to cause us to look forward--jumping almost immediately over more reasonable scenarios

(finding peace or negotiating global conflicts) to a dystopia in which humanity faces extinction from an apocalyptic event--like a disease that replaces all humanity with zombies.

Our educational trends of standardization have added to this anthropocentric desire, and Wallin (2015) speaks of how this idea of sameness creates a train of thought that omits any other reasoning other than one where humans reign supreme:

That the process of education is continually implicated in producing a representational image of the world *as it is for us* points to the circle of correlationism in which thought itself becomes habituated. It is not just that we are taught that things have proper categorical meanings or epistemic states, but, more fundamentally, that human consciousness constitutes privileged access to the world. (p. 135)

While this helps us to make sense of our world, it excludes the concept that anything else exists outside our own reality. Wallin further explains that our current pedagogy encourages the norming or categorizing of the world around us, a byproduct of colonialism that subjugated anyone who did not look European or have similar religious beliefs (p. 137). We have difficulty accepting others who are not like us or beings we didn't create by "thinking" it into a category. Zombies derive from the thought that the world, even a decaying or post-apocalyptic one, cannot exist without some form of human there and that these figures have a "special relationship with a decaying earth" (p. 138). In most of our stories, zombies only exist because of the decaying world or because of some human-caused apocalyptic event. Understanding the looming ecological problems humanity has caused may help us to understand the zombie. "A contemporary posthumanist turn in education must be one capable of thinking with death, and more specifically, the death of the anthropocentric conceit that the world is *as it is for us*" (Wallin, p. 143). We cannot envision a world without us, even if we destroy it; the idea of

zombies enables us to envision a form of immortality—even after a cataclysmic event that should have destroyed humans forever. In these terms, zombies in a way can be a fresh start, rather than an illustration of a punishment inflicted on mankind; they emerge from the earth and soil and elements from which they are created and become something new and more adaptable. Maybe zombies are not the end, but a beginning.

## **Methodology**

### **Ethnography**

While I had initially planned that the documentary portion of this project would be the most important product of the research, I realized that without the transcription and coding of the interviews, the documentary is just a video about people who love zombies. It was through this process of coding, that I was able to decipher which themes were the most important, and so this process directly informed my production of the documentary. So for this project, I employed the ethnographic capabilities that documentary affords as well as five full-length interviews that I transcribed, hand-coded and analyzed for important themes and topics. I also included my own observations in field notes as I participated in several LARPing events where I could interact with the participants as well as interview them. This included the 2015 Walker Stalker Convention in Atlanta and a Zombie Run in Gulfport, Mississippi, where I ran, filmed, and interviewed participants. Lastly, I gathered several videos from one of my participants of Humans Vs. Zombie games and include portions of these in the documentary as well as analyze them for content in the documentary chapter. The visual ethnography of this culture is invaluable because zombies in our culture are more often (but are not limited to) both film and television media, and the classic ethnographic analysis of the coded interviews support the visual analysis and commentary from the documentary and allow me to “identify, confirm and cross-

check an understanding of the societal structures, the social linkages, and the behavior patterns, beliefs and understandings of people within the culture (Grbich, 2013, p. 42). Saukko (2005) speaks to an integrative approach in cultural studies research, addressing the conflict that occurs in this discipline when the hermeneutic meets critical analysis: “How can one be true to lived experiences and, at the same time, criticize discourses that form the very stuff out of which our lived realities are made?” (p. 343). She discusses the problems of validity and defines three “methodological programs” that enable researchers to approach more accurate findings: contextual validity, dialogic validity, and self-reflexive validity (p. 344). When applied to identity research, the power behind the participants’ media is that it is critically analyzed for context, ethnographical information gathered in order to record the lived experiences of the participants for dialogic validity, and finally, the researcher must reflect on “how social discourses and processes shape or mediate how we experience ourselves and our environment” (p. 350). Saukko emphasizes that this last aspect, that of honest reflection, may be the most vital of the three in culture studies. While traditional, more accepted positivist approaches to research require definitive results, an integrated methodology requires the researcher to not only hear and see the lived experiences of the participants, but also to interpret how and why those experiences are relevant based on the context of the culture that created them.

### **Documentary as Visual Ethnography**

While my writing skills might paint an acceptable mental picture of how a zombie culture might appear, this topic lends itself to the visual elements of documentary, especially since the topic involves popular media. Renov (1993) discusses the poetics of the documentary: to record or preserve, to persuade or promote, to analyze, and to express (p. 21). While I easily see at least three of these for this documentary (preserve, analyze, and express), the advantage of this type of

film research rests with the viewer because my goal is not necessarily to persuade or promote, but to present a painting of these participants and their stories in a manner that enables the viewer to come to his own determination and thoughts about how identity could be formed through interaction with the zombie media and culture. Even so, the viewer may make connections between identity formation and interaction with this type of media as they listen to these interviews and reflections in the documentary. Renov describes the last category, which he explains as the artistic or aesthetic aspect of “artful documentary” (p. 35), explaining that while we adhere to the science of research through the interrogative or analytical view of the topic, we can still be scientific while creating an aesthetic presentation. This is my goal, to interrogate, but still be creative and artistic in my approach. Barnouw (1974/1993) describes the evolution of the documentary film as fulfilling different roles in society (explorer, prophet, advocate), and I see this film as being a blend between his “reporter” and “painter” categories. While I include interviews of participants in this film (reporter), I still see the artistic elements of not only speaking with zombie participants, but also addressing the mythical archetypes that perpetuated this pop culture.

While I initially envisioned this documentary to be more observational mode, there were times when the participants may only be vaguely aware that I was there, so I could capture them in their element. I conducted what Bill Nichols (1991) refers to as “masked interviews,” where the speaker answers questions to my unheard and off-screen questions (p. 51). While I acknowledge the limitations involved with “leading” those participants to certain topics (their motivations for participation, etc.), the participants were able to effectively tell their own stories with little interference from me. Nichols refers to this type of interview as a variation on traditional interviews in that “the interviewee no longer addresses the filmmaker off screen but



engages in conversation with another social actor” (p. 52) where we see the participants interacting with each other and discussing their motivations for inclusion in the zombie culture and how they came to be part of it. While I did not want to necessarily guide their discussion, the participants were provided with topics in which they could engage (how they came to love zombies or LARPing activities) while I recorded their conversations in a controlled environment or on location. These questions are included in the research questions section below. Of course, every good essay or argument contains counterargument, so the documentary also includes those who do not understand the fascination this group has with zombies as well as those who might disagree with the idea that some of these activities are harmless to the participants.

Nichols further explains that documentaries should not be considered an imitation of the historical world, but a text.

Documentaries direct us toward the world but they also remain texts. Hence they share all the attendant implications of fiction’s constructed, formal, ideologically inflected status.

Documentary differs, though, in asking us to consider it as a representation of the historical world rather than a likeness or imitation of it. (p. 110)

Nichol’s idea of documentary as text aligns itself with Renov’s concept of the video as essay; this is a natural fit for me as an English educator and journalist. He quotes Raymond Bellour who analyzed video artists as well as writers and poets, “Everything attests to the fact that video is more deeply rooted in writing than in cinema” (p. 184). My goal with this film was that through the masked interviews with participants, watching them transform on film through the medium of makeup, following them as they participate in LARPing activities, and concluding with their recorded reflections on this culture, that I could create a form of a video essay that is not only ethnographic, but analytic as well. Renov praises this form of documentary:

Durable, lightweight, mobile, producing instantaneous results, the video apparatus supplies a dual capability well-suited to the essayistic project: it is both screen and mirror, providing the technological grounds for the surveillance of the palpable world, as well as a reflective surface on which to register the self. (p. 186)

Documentary thus allows the viewer to determine knowledge through their own perceptions of the documentary, as well as provides a “mirror” for the participants to interrogate their own world through their own voices.

### **Participants**

The selection for participants, while originally had been intended to be very structured and organized, became more of an organic snowball selection process. I originally targeted participants ages 18+ who were primarily college students in the Atlanta area, but broadened my group to include any adult 18+ who participates in this culture when I realized that my interviewee group would be more diverse and more accurately represent the subculture as a whole. As part of the immersion for this research, I attended some of the many “undead” LARPING activities that happen throughout the year in and around Atlanta. For example, there are several zombie runs around the metro area, where participants can dress up like zombies and run or even dress up like zombies and chase runners. I also attended the Walker/Stalker Convention in October at the Georgia World Congress Center to not only take field notes and gather video, but to meet potential participants for my research. In addition, I sought out students who take part in the “Humans versus Zombie” games on campus at local universities, but eventually found someone who had been involved in the campus game in Ohio, and interviewed him through SKYPE. I explored the zombie makeup artist experience (and filmed her in this process) of one of an 18-year-old artist who lives in metro Atlanta. The majority of

the participants involved in my study were selected through a word-of-mouth selection process, where I talked about what I was doing to discover where I could find willing participants to help me learn more about those who love zombie culture, but an equal number of people that I interviewed were serendipitous meetings by simply placing myself where those in this culture gather.

While I originally thought that I would strictly focus on the younger set of the population (college age, young adults) who I incorrectly assumed would primarily be interested in this culture, I also found entire families who had been involved in some form of zombie activities for an extended period. Therefore, my pool for people to interview changed as my understanding of how diverse this group is becoming more evident. Two of the people I interviewed were former students who had graduated and gone on to college, one was a fellow employee at the school system at which I work (who I accidentally encountered at the Walker Stalker convention and who speaks of her family involvement in this media), one was a friend of the makeup artist who a friend had recommended to me, and some of the shorter, less formal and structured interviews I conducted were with participants of the various zombie activities I attended. In most cases, once people heard the topic of my research, there were multiple people who volunteered to interviewed. My willingness to immerse myself in their world helped for them to be more open to speak with me; for example, as I ran with the video camera at a zombie run in Gulfport, Mississippi, I became part of their group--rather than an outsider.

### **Justifications, Challenges, and Limitations for this Study**

I have already received some criticism for this topic: “What does this have to do with education?” and “Are you sure that zombies are a serious study?” The study of pop culture is

important; it is woven into our everyday lives—whether we think about it or not, who we consider ourselves to be often is intertwined with our leisure culture. As far as its relationship with education, I hope that this study demonstrates that our participants—especially when they cannot find anything that interests them in school with the back-to-back tests that they endure—educate themselves outside of school and interact with these leisure activities in significant ways.

I do have some concerns with this research, particularly with the challenges of documentary. Common knowledge teaches us that when people are observed, particularly with a camera, they could potentially change their behavior to fit what they perceive the interviewer wants or expects to see. While I did formal sit-down interviews, I also immersed myself in some of the LARPing activities, a zombie run, for example. I had hoped that the participants would ignore me so I could film naturally, but instead caused them--both runners and zombies--to act for the camera. Also, my personal understanding as a professional teacher of this age group has helped me recognize that the ubiquity of the camera in their lives (selfies, Snapchat, Instagram, etc.) has at least somewhat desensitized them to “acting” for the camera. My solution to this was to film as much as possible during the event in order to gather a balanced collection of moments with this group.

Lastly, and this may be less of a challenge and more of an opportunity for discovery in that I am not personally a zombie fan. In fact, as I began my background research into this topic by watching zombie movies and the television series that are available, I had to constantly set it down and have to be very careful not to watch it before I go to sleep—or I would not sleep because of the violent nightmares that ensue. I wondered if I would be able to disengage my discomfort with this media to honestly portray their stories. Part of a researcher’s validity lies in her willingness to see inherent biases and to ask the important reflexive questions: How have I

positioned my participants' stories to fit a presupposed outcome of the documentary? Have I allowed my opinions to skew the interpretations of the results of these discoveries? (Grbich, p. 11). Throughout this process, I have constantly reflected in field notes and through my writing to ensure that I maintained the ability to be surprised. My justification for this challenge lay in my sincere hope that the people I studied would help me to understand their perspective and point of view by the end of this research—that I could as Zizek described earlier, begin to understand why we cling to a dystopian society for our future rather than one less disturbing (and certainly more hopeful).

While the documentary is the product of this project and representative of all the previous work for this research, it is not completely ethnographic in itself; it relies on the other chapters in the work to paint a more coherent picture of this culture. All the pieces of this dissertation work as a whole to complete a complex puzzle; setting the stage in the first chapter, explaining the context of education as it has contributed to this culture, exploring the psychology behind the participants attraction to the culture as well as each other, and finally, the transcripts of the words and themes that they suggest to help us understand this zombie culture as it acts as a signifier for the bigger picture: How does this connection with this culture help us to see ourselves?

As a final note, I realized early on that this was an ambitious project and that it would be more complicated than other dissertations due to the documentary portion of the research. But, as Chapman (2010) reminds us, “Our social lives are complicated, and therefore social theory must push past simple answers; it is intentionally and necessarily complex and interdisciplinary” (p. xiii). Determining influences on identity *is* complex and requires a more complicated approach to unravel its mysteries.

### Organization of Dissertation

In order to get a clear picture of what I am trying to accomplish, it was necessary to watch the 30-minute documentary first, *Dystopian Identities: Zombies*; it provides an overview of this culture and the major themes and discoveries of this research, helps the reader to see and hear the participants and watch their LARPing activities. This also helps the reader to make more sense of some of the topics described in this writing. The documentary portion of this research includes the results from filming and interviewing participants in the Atlanta area and the Southeast who participate in zombie runs, human vs. zombie games (with interviews and video from universities outside the Southeast), zombie make up artists, and the walker/stalker conference in Atlanta in October 2015-16. Then, read the second chapter, “Necrophilic Education: The Deadening of Intellect,” sets a context for this research and explores how current educational practices today and the push for standardization for our schools has created an oppressive atmosphere that drives away creativity. I discuss Freire’s (1970/1996) description of this oppression as “necrophilic; it is nourished by love of death, not life” (p. 58). On the brighter side to this dead tale, I also discuss the idea that in this vacuum of creativity left from the testing environment, there exists now a fertile ground for new ways of reaching our students and one possible remedy to the necrophilic plague in education lies in what Maudlin & Sandlin (2015) call “pop culture pedagogies,” who advocate pop culture studies as a pedagogical form of “context-driven critical approaches” to empower students rather than current classroom practices that use “scripted instructional strategies based on generalized research” (p. 368). In chapter three, “The More Repulsive the Better: Affect Theory and Our Disgust-love for Zombies,” I begin the discussion of possible motivations and the connections that participants in the culture make with each other. This also incorporates the darker side of emotions, including how our

attraction to the dystopian is woven in with the disgust caused by not only the decaying zombie image, but the violence they cause as well. Chapter four, “Documentary as a Form of Exploration” begins with the analysis of the images from the documentary, explanations for its composition, and analysis of the interviews and discoveries of the words vs. images and film side-by-side comparison of the documentary and transcripts. This provided a path for me to segue to the synthesis of the ideas and findings in this research in chapter five and to discuss how documentary as a research tool has helped me to understand the participants in this study better as well as reflect on my experience as a documentary researcher. In chapter five, “The Hordes Have Arrived,” I seek to understand how these participants engage with this media in order to find their place in society through coding of five participants’ discussions in the documentary using initial coding (Saldana, 2013, p. 100). Here, they describe their experiences with developing literacies through engagement with zombie culture. These interviews speak to the motivations of the participants and shed light on their own perceptions of their interaction, enabling me to do a critical comparison of the media and to better illuminate the effect on the participants’ perceptions of identity. The final chapter six, “Identity: You May Call Me a Zombie Lover,” returns to the research questions of identity and literacies gained through interaction with this culture, and concludes with implications of and future for this research.

## CHAPTER 2

### NECROPHILIC EDUCATION: THE DEADENING OF INTELLECT

*“Oppression—overwhelming control—is necrophilic; it is nourished by love of death, not life” (Freire, 1970/1996, p. 58).*

*The zombie student shuffled down the hallway on her way to class, dragging one foot behind on one side and her backpack on the other, which contained the new laptop that the school had just provided for her. She sat down in her math class and read through glazed, drooping, oozing eyes a display on the wall: “12 Powerful Words to increase test scores and help close the achievement gap.” These words promised to help her understand the specific connotations of the testing vocabulary so she would not be confused and answer the test questions incorrectly--which would throw her into a remedial class. She wondered what these 12 words had to do with math, a language that to her was as clear as the mud hieroglyphic tablets of Mesopotamia. Her teacher told the class that they would have a pretest that day to determine which questions she would have to learn to answer, a benchmark in several weeks, and another test after that to practice for the test in December.*

*She wonders if brains will be served for lunch.*

When Freire spoke of the necrophilic nature of a “banking” education in 1970, his primary complaint against education was that teachers lectured to students in “machinistic, static” method that essentially turned their students into “receiving objects” whose “creative power” becomes inhibited. “Oppression—overwhelming control—is necrophilic; it is nourished by love of death, not life” (Freire, 1970/1996, p. 58). He reasoned that students who only listened to lecture would lose the ability to think critically, leaning heavily on the material provided by the teacher. When they would be presented with a problem on their own, they



would not be able to resolve it without help. With all of the educational reforms instituted during the decades since the time that he wrote these observations, we would assume that his words might seem outdated; instead, they are more relevant than ever.

Lecture, for many educational systems, has been replaced by increased testing and preparation for exams that includes online test preparation programs that will enable the students to deaden themselves even further than through the earlier means of banking teaching that Freire describes. With increased one-to-one technology in schools, teachers might wish that they could lecture to their students, but instead they have been instructed to increase the students' time on the computer time using test preparation programs that essentially transforms their role from educator to proctor. The students repeat these test preparation programs until they answer the questions correctly, and in most cases these software platforms just allow the students to keep guessing the multiple choice answers until they get them right. So as long as the students keep pushing answer choices, they will eventually get the right answer by process of elimination. In this scenario, the students as well as the teachers are being denied creative outlets; the students must comply with the repetition in order to move on to something else, and the teacher has lost any opportunity to communicate and to do as Freire advocated, to "abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world" (Freire, 1970/1996, p. 60).

We are preoccupied with testing and preparing for it. We do not have the time to do as Pinar (2004/2012) describes as spoke of sparking creativity through "complicated conversations," where learning does not depend on being "accessible (which often means watering down content so that students parrot it back), educators are engaged in an ongoing conversation. As in any conversation, one discerns misunderstanding, can supplement

incomplete comprehension, and support questioning” (p. 55). In this way, the teacher can balance intimacy and formality with familiarity and distancing, which creates an atmosphere conducive to creativity and self-knowledge, a “call to individuality” (p. 57). Testing calls for sameness, not individuality, and until education reverses the testing trend and seeks to aid students in critically appraising their own worlds, the deadening will continue—at least at school.

The data we gain from testing does little to “improve or democratize intelligence” for the students and later, adults, in our society (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1999, p. 239), and therefore other means need to be employed in order to awake the undead in our schools. One of the cures to the necrophilic plague in education lies in what Maudlin & Sandlin (2015) call “pop culture pedagogies,” who advocate pop culture studies as a pedagogical form of “context-driven critical approaches” to empower students rather than current classroom practices that use “scripted instructional strategies based on generalized research” (p. 368). This approach to curriculum will enable us as educators to do as Villaverde & Pinar (1999) propose, “both teacher and student become active researchers of their experience in and out of the schools” which will enable them to find “new ways of being human,” or at least, more alive in their learning.

### **The Emperor’s New Suit: An Analogy on Testing**

Hans Christian Anderson’s (1837) story of “The Emperor’s New Suit” becomes evident in our current educational environment. Anderson’s tale begins with two “swindlers” who come to the king and tell him that they can “manufacture the finest cloth to be imagined,” but that the greatest quality of the fabric is that it “possessed the wonderful quality of being invisible to any man who was unfit for his office or unpardonably stupid.” Not wanting to appear foolish, he dons the invisible outfit that the swindlers prepare for him and goes out into public. While the

public goes along with the Emperor and pretends that it truly is the finest fabric of all, it is the child in the crowd who finally says, “But he has nothing on at all!” The emperor cannot admit that he has made a mistake and encourages his men to pick up the invisible train of his outfit “with greater dignity, as if they carried the train which did not exist.”

Like the emperor, we have been “swindled” into thinking that the magic testing preparation and standardized tests will enable us to “distinguish the clever from the stupid,” as Anderson describes in his tale. Corporate online educational companies have promised great increases in reading scores for the students in many school systems. They have spent much of their system budget on programs like this which tell them that if they buy their products, they will be able to determine those who struggle and provide a magic fix for these students as well as enrich those who already read well. As an English teacher, I could gather some of the same diagnostic information by using strategies like having the children read out loud and checking them for fluency and understanding; this is something good English teachers have been trained to do for many years, but this skill has been replaced with software that supposedly will do a more accurate job—without the interaction of a human being. School systems justify this expenditure because students’ Lexile scores have improved on the standardized tests that they most recently administered; however, this becomes another form of deadening in the schools where the teachers’ skills are not trusted or valued and they have been replaced by online programs that promise better results on the standardized tests that they increasingly administer to the students. We as educators, who normally have more participatory inclinations toward education, suffer from what McClendon and Weaver (1999) call “educational schizophrenia” (p. 217), caving to the “fantasy that school curricula can be predetermined and preordained, students’ learning can be measured in a so-called quantified and objective manner.” We view the “data” provided by

the creators of the test prep or reading programs that shows our students' improvement, and then watch our systems spend even more money due to the supposed success. For example, our county approved \$1 million for curriculum software programs in the 2016-17 school year, much of which was allocated to online reading, math, and literacy programs (Stanford, 2016). This reliance on outside programs to insure success illustrates what McClendon and Weaver describe as a fear to “wander out into the uncertain, chaotic, complex, and nonlinear world of schooling where curriculum plans emerge, students become active learners, teachers are accepted as practitioners and not tellers at a bank for knowledge” (p. 218). It is this potential uncertainty of the outcome that causes angst, driving academic leaders toward corporations who promise definitive results if their programs are used correctly. They must be sure of the numbers, and they then must be certain that their students are progressing from point A to point B, and educational software companies have capitalized on that need for certainty.

### **Voices from the Crowd: The Emperor Has No Clothes**

While some may have been able to plead ignorance as to the detriments of hyper-testing practices that produce as Apple (2012) describes, “a commonsense classification of individuals” (p. 12). Testing—even in an effort to help eliminate social and education problems for them—creates a cycle of damaging cultural reproduction that results in the commodification of students at the expense of their development. “A fundamental problem facing us is the way in which systems of domination and exploitation persist and reproduce themselves without being consciously recognized by the people involved” (Apple, 2012, p. 12). We may not even recognize what we are doing as part of this reproduction; as teachers, many of us “pirate” what we perceive as good ideas to use in our own classes without considering the harmful consequences. Returning to the “12 Powerful Words” display described earlier, as I stood and

contemplated how much I did *not* want this display in my classroom, several other teachers came and took pictures of it with their cell phones so they could make copies and duplicate in their own rooms. A chasm divides the teachers' desire (and necessity) to improve their students' test scores and the reality of the stressful atmosphere that assessments create when classroom displays become testing rhetoric. It then subconsciously becomes this message to the student: "12 Stressful Words to Remind You of the Test."

We should be aware of this reproduction that Apple describes; we have discussed the dangers of too much testing on our children since *No Child Left Behind* (1982) evolved into *Race to the Top* (2009), and while some state school systems have begun to scale back the percentage of time they spend in test preparation and test-taking, the number of tests per year they many more systems still are spending at least one month a year completing and preparing for standardized tests. In my county, we administer pretests in English for reading as well as diagnostic benchmarks early in the year, then in December, March, and then spend much of April testing each of the EOCT courses (math, English, biology, U.S. History, etc.). In addition to this, we also administer both the PLAN (ACT pretest) and the PSAT (SAT pretest) to both ninth and tenth grades, shutting down all other activities and substantially arranging the school's schedule around these standardized tests.

Even President Obama admitted that testing has become a problem in an October 2015 video posted on the White House Facebook page. He began the video with a pop quiz asking parents which they would want for their students: learning to play a musical instrument, learning a new language, learning how to program a computer—or taking more tests. With a chuckle at the obvious answer to his particular multiple-choice quiz, he explained that parents had written to him imploring that he address the problems of over-testing of American students. He then

promised to tackle the situation by directing the department of education to loosen the testing requirements in schools. He said in the video that while he felt that some tests were needed as a method to assess knowledge, "tests shouldn't occupy too much classroom time or crowd out teaching and learning." In this plan, outlined by the U.S. Department of Education in October 2015, schools should only spend 2 percent of class instructional time taking tests; these guidelines also called for a halt to "drill-and-kill" test preparation strategies. Obama's instructions also included in this document a directive for schools to use multiple measures of assessments, but this has sometimes been interpreted to mean "multiple standardized assessments" rather than different kinds of assessment, like project based or even oral assessments. The rhetoric of Obama's message does not seem to have trickled down to the schools, which still spend large blocks of time preparing for and administering tests to their students. In fact, a 2015 study by the Council of Great City Schools which examined 66 school systems, found that students took an average of eight standardized tests per year, not including the system or school-required diagnostic tests (Strauss, 2015).

There have been multiple other warning voices in the emperor's crowd during the last two decades concerning this hyper-focus on testing. Pinar (2004/2012), who postulated that "standardization makes everyone stupid" (p. 55), spoke of the test/achievement indicator, that while before it was only a portion of determining student knowledge and success, it has become the dominant force in educational curriculum.

Driven by such self-enclosed rituals, educational institutions devolve into cram schools, no longer about the world, but instead, about themselves, about those tests, apparently technical but altogether ideological, as students learn to process information without

raising questions about that information or the process. *What knowledge is of most worth?* Is replaced with “*what is your test score?*” (p. 53)

Students increasingly associate their identity with the test score, rather than with more organic sources of self-understanding. Kincheloe and Steinberg (1999) add to this understanding that learning is not only complex, but also social, and that students are shaped by their communities and bring their own identities to the school atmosphere. To ignore these social foundations and to only focus on the same standard of learning for all creates a “personality vacuum” (Leistyna, 1999, p. 51) where students feel their individual stories are irrelevant in the larger picture of education. “In this psychologized, abstracted, and decontextualized state, schools do little to improve or democratize intelligence. Delivering fragmented data to students whose backgrounds are not understood accomplishes little” (Kincheloe & Steinberg, p. 239). Our understanding of students’ communities with the current thrust in testing is shallow. We look at demographics and race as we decipher the test results (and this information is now always included in our data), but knowing someone’s demographic information does not guarantee that we understand the communities from which they come or what learning experience they bring with them. Leistyna (1999) emphasizes the narrow line that we walk as teachers; we must recognize our students’ demographics without stereotyping them as individuals. “As critical educators, we need to keep a healthy tension in our understanding of the dialectical relationship between the individual and society, so as to never essentialize and objectify the individual” (p. 54). In our current testing frenzy, the number on the test objectifies and identifies the students with classifications such as “beginning learner,” “developing learner,” or “distinguished learner,” complete with color codes (red for beginner, green for developing, tan for distinguished). Schools send their students home with color-coded reports of their “achievement” as well as direct them to their online profiles so

parents can see their scores as well. Some of these classifications have followed the students from elementary school, through middle school, and then on to high school—they never seem to have a fresh start because their scores follow them.

Other voices in the crowd even decry the corporate involvement in our testing atmosphere as a threat to democracy. Giroux (2011) claims that “education is fundamental to democracy” and “no democratic society can survive without a formative culture shaped by pedagogical practices capable of creating the conditions for producing citizens who are critical, self-reflective, knowledgeable, and willing to make moral judgments and act in a socially responsible way” (p. 3). He stresses that our public education now is overly influenced by “corporate and “instrumental values” but advocates for the creation of a “democratic public sphere so committed to teaching young people about how to govern rather than merely be governed” (p. 99). The preoccupation with testing has effectively eliminated the instruction on how to be governed in that the decisions that they make as they prepare for standardized exams lie more in which multiple choice answer to choose rather than questioning larger social issues at hand. “More than any other institution, public schools serve as a dangerous reminder of both the promise and the shortcomings of the social, political, and economic forces that shape society” (Giroux, 2011, p. 51). School is where we first begin to practice and learn the tenets of democracy; this only comes through the ability for the youth to choose and make critical judgments on their own. This process of democracy also involves allowing teachers the room to creatively structure their classrooms and curriculum so that they can sculpt lessons that encourage questioning existing structures in our society. But freedom for teachers and students to freely question these processes is for the most part, currently unavailable.



## Playing the Testing Game

Recent research revealed that administrators understand that producing high achievement scores is beneficial to their students—not because they use those scores for instructional purposes, but because if their scores are high enough they will have the freedom to develop curriculum that they do feel *is* valuable to the students without interference from county and state educational hierarchy. Grinell & Rabin (2013) studied an elementary school in California that was reported to have not only high test scores on the state’s standardized test (STAR), but also a positive school culture (meaning there were generally happy teachers, students, and parents who viewed their school positively); these researchers sought to discover how they were able to achieve this. They discovered that while the school administrators and teachers said that they did not necessarily use the testing results to determine their curriculum, they did spend at least one month out of the school year preparing to take the state exam because performing well on this measure allowed them to tend to the needs of the students more holistically. Grinell & Rabin reported that the principal admitted that as long as the school’s numbers were high enough, he had the “power to do things my way, to say, ‘Hey, we’re fine here,’ but if these numbers slip . . .” (p. 764), indicating that this power was ephemeral in nature. These researchers determined that it was probable that, like Maple Elementary, in order to provide students with the socio-emotional supports they needed, administrators are “forced to game the system in order to maintain the autonomy to relate to their students as more than academic performers” (p. 764). Those who are in the classroom are well aware of how to play this game. They do what their administrators mandate, in hopes that they can return to the job of teaching children rather than the test. Playing the game is not enough, and we need to research ways to connect with students and their lives outside of school; the Emperor is not wearing clothes, and school does not possess

a magic cure-all in its test-prep programs. But there is hope to overcome the “deadness” in education, and it lies in a pedagogy that empowers rather than imprisons in multiple-choice options—like in the pop culture of zombies.

### **Bringing the Dead to Life through Pop Culture Studies**

*Ian looked over his shoulder on the way to his college American history class. He must not be caught! He had survived most of the game week without having to give up his yellow bandana that he wore around his head that announced that he was human, not zombie. He sat down in the lecture hall with 300 other students, hardly hearing his professor’s lecture on early American settlers in the West; he was mentally blazing his own new paths to move around campus without being caught and added to the online “kill board” that listed all the students who had been tagged by Nerf bullets and who were now considered zombies. He looked forward to the game later that night where more than 100 humans and zombies would gather for a great battle that would determine whether or not his skills would enable him to live one more day as a human.*

This college student’s experience illustrates that learning is a “normative way of being” (Villaverde, 2016, personal communication)—learning happens everywhere, not just in school, and not just with the zombie pop culture. This, even now as I write it, seems common sense—something that should be widely accepted. However, the education described in a standardized system assumes that learning only happens as performed in tandem using codes of knowledge that must fit prescribed patterns. However, the college student’s experience above also reveals that if we are not connecting with our students, they will find something else to teach them; often, that other source is through their popular culture. Like this zombie-loving college student above, my students are masters of multi-tasking. Since we are only asking them to do mundane

tasks in the classroom, and they now have laptops and cell phones at their disposal, it only seems common sense that we, as educators, should tap into that which they are already immersed. For example, I spent the first three weeks of school this year trying to figure out what my students were so intently searching for under my desks, behind cabinets, and up and down the halls. They would get so excited when they found what they were looking for! When they finally showed me, I discovered that I had little Pokemon characters hiding in my room and throughout the hallways at in our building. Their cell phones used the camera function to incorporate the



*Figure 1.* Pokemon Go Pidgey. This photo illustrates how students infiltrate the schoolroom with their own pop culture. The Pokemon Go character rests in my hand, invisible to me but not the student.

animated characters directly into the school. They literally became a method to dispel the boring atmosphere of their days and a method to make this public venue's environment their own (see *Figure 1*). This Pokemon GO game that lit up our students then becomes a metaphor for their desire to insert their culture into the very halls that seem to deny them the individuality and personality that they crave.

Pop culture and the idea of using it in the classroom is hardly new; Mahiri (2002) discusses “pop culture pedagogy” that included then the Internet, video games, music, and movies that while commercially motivated and reproducers of existing “cultural inequities,” they often are claimed by the young people “for pleasure, identification, and a

sense of personal power” that in his mind would determine the future of education, and even possibly its death. At this time, there was still skepticism as to the value of pop culture in education. Mahiri speaks of a James Taylor song in which a man who falls off a ship in the ocean and who is immediately frozen; Mahiri said that if that man was thawed and woke to that time (2000), everything would have changed except for school, “which would undoubtedly remind him of his own time” (p. 382). Since he wrote this article, the technologies and avenues for pop culture have exploded with the extensive digital abilities afforded our youth, but those cultures have not made it much further into the classroom.

### **Pop Culture: A Tool for the Classroom**

As standardized schooling in its rigid definitions of knowledge persist, academic knowledge appears to be what McClendon and Weaver (1999) refer to as a form of “violence and repression,” they call for the use of “alternative forms of knowledge” such as science fiction and rap in order to promote “boundless exploring” (pp. 219-220). The problem with this form of learning lies in the uncertainty of it, as mentioned earlier. In fact, many educators are not familiar with the popular culture of their students, and do not value it because they have not invested the time to understand what about it interests them. While the Internet has opened up a vast wasteland of shallow discourses on Facebook and other social media, it has also provided outlets for expression and learning that the students do not always see within the school walls. For example, this year in one of my freshman classes, I have a student who writes “fan fiction,” with which I was completely unfamiliar until he introduced me to it. He has hundreds of followers, many of them much older than him, who view him as somewhat of an expert in this genre; he is only 14 years old. Others in this same ninth grade class are artists who have created cartoon strips, and then there are those who are avid participants in “cosplay,” where they not

only dress up as their favorite pop culture characters, but also act as them—in a way, they become these characters. It seems that outside of school, they have developed their own personalities and talents that have very little to do with formal education; however, this does not negate the importance of the experience for them. When discussing all these topics of pop culture with my students in class, the noise levels rises to a roar in my classroom, a sure sign that they are very much alive and want to learn new things—even in spite of the daily mundane activities of test preparation. However, these are not topics that come with any form of official, vetted, academic structure or certainty, and as an educator I would be wise to research this pop culture to discover how I can include it in my pedagogy for these students. McClendon and Weaver (1999) speak of the need to “to be permitted to fumble and grope and work in the messy and gray. We need to be permitted to go on journeys of passionate knowing and learning even though we may not know where we are headed” (p. 222). This element of always-changing, ever-evolving new ways of looking at life through pop culture require effort to research and learn how to incorporate in the classroom; it also requires the freedom to explore as students and teachers to be effective.

In addition to the idea of exploration, Giroux (2011) advocates for the use of pop culture as a way to help students become producers of culture, rather than simply consumers of it.

By laying claim to popular media, public pedagogy not only asks important questions about how knowledge is produced and taken up, but also provides the conditions for students to become competent and critically versed in a variety of literacies (not just the literacy of print), while at the same time expanding the conditions and options for the roles they might play as cultural producers (as opposed to simply teaching them to be critical readers. (p. 103)

This fits the situation with my fan-fiction author. As an educator, I am searching for ways to incorporate his interest with writing (at which he is already successful) and his desire to produce literature with my mandated task to assess his writing. He systematically does as little as he has to that is required in my class so he can get back to what he values more—the production of his own fiction.

### **Pop Culture and Critical Pedagogy**

Giroux (2011) framed the importance of critical pedagogy this way: “Critical pedagogy becomes a project that stresses the need for teachers and students to actively transform knowledge rather than simply consume it.” That being said, he also advises that with those experiences that students bring with them into the classroom, we help them to “recognize the importance of organized collective struggles” of their society, to understand what forces and powers create the environment in which they live (p. 7). This remains a tall order for educators, who must constantly walk a line between what is expected of them inside the school where knowledge seems stagnant and outside the building where there rages a hurricane of change and storm that digital media has provided for them. Our challenge remains to bridge this gap so they can critically decipher their world, but pop culture can also act as a bridge between us and our students to help us understand them and their motivations for learning.

Maudlin & Sandlin (2015) also advocate the use of pop culture in the classroom using both the theories of culture studies and critical pedagogy: “Taking popular culture seriously means making a purposeful commitment to bring popular culture into the classroom. Rather than scripted instructional strategies based on generalized research, context-driven critical approaches are needed to empower particular learners to engage with popular culture in meaningful ways” (p. 368). They propose implementing processes for “negotiating meaning across personal and

pedagogical contexts” that are aligned several areas of research which include exploring our existing cultural texts, examining our normative beliefs about “our selves and society,” and discovering new ways to not only have our students interact with pop culture, but engage in it “to examine the performative power dynamics that regulate textual production, consumption, and interpretation.” It is through this interpretation, this critical approach to thoroughly examining their pop culture that we can exercise “guiding learners in the deconstruction of the ideologies produced by popular culture liberates them from oppressive social relations” (p. 372).

While Maudlin & Sandlin’s research specifically examined Disney and its effect on us, their comments also fit pop culture like zombie media in that as viewers, our youth connect with not only the themes but also the characters in the media; in particular, the participants interviewed for this study especially connected with television series like *The Walking Dead* and the newer *I Zombie* (The CW Network, 2015), which stars a crime-fighting zombie. These media, through their repeated episodes, allow viewers to connect and associate themselves with them in ways that they may not even understand without someone (like a teacher) drawing attention to this attraction. Using “context driven” curriculum rather than the prescriptive test preparation lessons would allow teachers to educate their students how to critically analyze their own media, to determine what purposes the show’s creators intended for this media, and to empower themselves through this analysis. This ability to determine and consciously examine the culture in which they are immersed is a life skill for which many adults who even now spend countless hours in front of computer screens could benefit.

### **Summary**

While standardized testing has created a vacuum of creativity in education, students still desire to be creative and seek it outside of school; although as detailed before with the Pokémon

Go discussion, students' multi-tasking skills allow them to engage in pop culture even while in class. While Obama's 2015 mandate that testing be reduced in education throughout the nation remains unfulfilled, and it may indeed take time for the pendulum to swing back from its high arc of mass assessments, other avenues to encourage creativity must be sought. One source that could bring effective results is for education to explore the world and culture in which our students are immersed—pop culture. As educators, we can tap into this culture and join our students in Pinar's "complicated conversation" in new ways, understanding that learning, as a "normative" event, does not only happen in school. Understanding how pop culture and media educates our students will enable us to connect with them in unconventional and previously unexplored avenues, as well as teach them critical skills that will help them examine how this participation in and consumption of the media affects them.

Another interesting concept that I explore with this zombie pop culture lies in a reclaiming of sorts. Early in my research, I assumed that those who enjoy zombie media were part of a culture that was somewhat antisocial, like the zombies so prominent in the television and movies that provide us with an image of this solitary, shuffling, mindless creature. I also assumed that the participants would be cynical of their future and of the future of mankind. However, unlike those in a dystopian society who would shun mankind and seek further isolation, the participants in this study have embraced this popular media as a tool to help *find* others, not avoid them. And while there are darker aspects of this often-violent media, their engagement with it helps them to find new communities with whom they can share this common interest. We can better understand these connections they create with others by exploring affect theory and zombie media.



**CHAPTER 3**  
**THE MORE REPULSIVE THE BETTER: AFFECT THEORY**  
**AND OUR DISGUST-LOVE FOR ZOMBIES**

In the previous chapter, I discuss the fertile ground on which a cultural interest like zombie media could propagate in the vacuum of creativity left by education and the workplace; it makes sense that we would seek something more exciting than our mundane lives. However, the zombie culture is replete with dark themes, decaying flesh, oozing wounds. Why are people attracted to these dark, gruesome visions? Consider the following scene:

This scenario is fairly common in zombie media: a decaying member of the formerly human horde staggers (sometimes quickly) to the usually dumbstruck current human and grabs an arm and begins to eat the helpless victim alive. We watch the zombie pull and strain at the sinews on the limb, expressionless as its victim screams in unbearable agony while the creature hungrily smacks and tears the flesh as we would have fried chicken. A neighboring walker is disemboweling another hapless human, and we watch as he chews mouthful after mouthful of intestine. Pan over to another scene, where a man tries to defend himself by shooting the creature attacking him, blowing away part of its face and chest in vain as the creature turns on him and thrusting his hand into the man's chest, pulling out organs and eating them while the man looks on helplessly. One more fortunate woman takes an ax and splits the attacking zombie's head down the middle all the way to the neck, finally stopping her attacker, only to be attacked from another who comes behind and to face the same fate as the others in the scene. Finally, all is quiet, except for the sound of chewing and tearing.

Yet, we watch. In fact, we watch so faithfully that zombie media permeates our society and our interest. We even mimic and role-play zombie media; we allow ourselves to be chased

by zombies for 5K “fun runs,” sometimes dressing up and acting as the zombie and other times we are the humans being chased. For six seasons, we have dedicated ourselves to *The Walking Dead* (2010-present), a program whose zombies become more disgusting and increasingly violent with every season, and even have apps on our home screens that help us to exercise faster at home because zombies are chasing us. The question remains, how do scenes that produce such revulsion and disgust in us also attract us so that we come back for more? We may begin to answer this question through the study of affect.

### **Why Disgust Matters as an Affect**

Grossberg (2005) describes affect as the key to deciphering “emotions, moods, desires, volition, attention, caring. It is about the investments we make in the world. People define themselves affectively, by what matters to them” (p. 231). He explains that affect can be organized through “mattering maps,” which help us to build our identity and decide where we belong in society. These maps help us to attach meaning to our experiences by giving us a way to classify the intensity of these events by how much they matter to us. “Mattering maps are like investment portfolios, and like any good investment portfolio, they contain different kinds and amounts of investments; investments change and can be relocated; and they can serve different functions.” So it makes sense that disgust would join the ranks of other emotions like anger and happiness, as part of a diversified portfolio of our feelings. He says that these elements of “mattering” can enable other events and also allow us to feel as though we can control our lives (p. 232). It seems difficult to imagine that zombie media would fit on our “mattering map,” but if the investment of time spent watching six seasons of the *Walking Dead* counts as “mattering,” then this idea of repeatedly exposing ourselves to the ever-increasingly violent and decaying zombies of that particular series makes more sense. Seigworth and Gregg (2010) define affect as

what is “found in those intensities that pass from body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise) in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves” (p. 1). Affect helps us to understand the ephemeral, to peel away the layers of feeling that overwhelm us when we experience the world. As we view these superlatively violent scenes in zombie media, the visceral messages that we receive are hard to interpret--sometimes representing themselves physiologically as a metallic twinge in the mouth or even in the sickening of our stomachs. We want to look away (and do, at first), but inexplicably find ourselves watching anyway, whether or not we are conscious of our purpose. These forces drive us to seek the experience again, even if it does not contain the typical feel-good and pleasant elements of other media like comedy or family “happy ending” films. All of this happens below the consciousness, out of sight but still formidable. Gregg and Seigworth speak of this force of which we are usually unaware:

Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent intractability. (p. 10)

As we peel away our outer thoughts on why we are attracted to one thing or another, few of us assess the motivations behind the magnetism of the stimulus and the effect of what “drive[s] us toward movement,” or even toward seeking out that stimulus again.

Still, Grossberg (2010), who began writing on affect more than a decade ago, cautions us to not apply everything felt to this concept. He says that “affect simply covers too much ground” in that writers have created too many variations and “apparatuses” (p. 314). He argues that simply applying affect to a bodily response is inadequate, and that more is involved.

You know, you flash these lights at people and there is some kind of bodily response. Well there isn't! Affect then becomes a magical way of bringing in the body. Certainly, there is a kind of mediation process but it is a machinic one. It goes through regimes that organize the body and the discourses of our lives, organize everyday life, and then produce specific kinds of effects. (p. 316)

He emphasizes that emotion is “the articulation of affect and ideology,” and that our perceptions of our worlds translate the resulting feelings from the stimuli we receive. He explains that we understand the stimuli we receive through “mattering maps” which help us to make sense of what we feel as we are exposed to these various elements.

### **Why We Like to Watch Them Eat—Even if We Are the Meal**

As a literature teacher, I instruct my students that meals are always important in the story—that they reflect much more than just simply breaking bread together or eating. My AP Literature students begin the year with understanding that in literature and in life, “Whenever people eat or drink together, it's communion” (Foster, 2003, p. 8). Foster reminds us that Christianity does not have a corner on communion, that most religions have some form of liturgical traditions where the faithful come together to “commune” with a common purpose and sense of belonging. If this holds true for literature, then this idea of communion (or in the zombie sense, consumption) may help us to understand about why audiences love to watch the hordes of undead commune on humans. In the initial films of zombie fame, especially in

Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), the idea that so many different kinds of people came together in the horde, as if becoming a zombie was the great equalizer during a time when civil rights for all was in question. We see housewives in curlers, nightgowns, and slippers staggering side-by-side with blue-collar laborers, businessmen in suits, and people of different races who join together to attack and "commune" on the luckless young couple who gets caught outside the safety of the house which the survivors are using as a refuge, the center of the story for this movie.

Foster discusses the idea that not all communions are holy, and that in some cases, a meal that includes "chomping, gnawing, sucking on bones, licking fingers" is more about desire than consuming a meal. "What else is the eating about in that scene except consuming the other's body?" (p. 9). For example, compare the following two images: the first involves a father, mother, grandparents, children all seated at a picnic table sharing some fried chicken, potato salad, and watermelon; they all hungrily suck the meat off the chicken bones and wipe their messy watermelon-soaked faces on their sleeves before diving in for seconds. Then, consider the second image: a mother, father, grandparents, and children consuming—another human being, maybe even someone from the same family. In analyzing fiction, we would say that nothing occurs in literature happenstance; all scenes have a hidden meaning that transcends the visual image provided. Foster emphasizes that meal scenes in particular (not that zombies are particular about *who* they eat) are difficult to create without losing the audience's attention (p. 8). This consumption for zombies is almost vampiric in nature in that for some undead, not only the life is taken but also the human's sense of self (Bishop 2015), and depending on which zombie media we are consuming, is on one hand terrifying as a potential victim, and on the other, it

almost seems as though the zombie is a cow chewing its cud, expressionless and not in any particular hurry to finish the meal.

The element of affect that the audience experiences while watching this cannibalistic meal varies. This experience can be felt as a sickening in the depths of the stomach rather than in the taste buds, almost like seeing someone eating a lemon and the mouth responding to the memory of lemon by producing increased saliva and the accompanying pucker. Highmore (2010) speaks of disgust and the bitter aftertaste that sometimes accompanies the social aesthetic of eating. “Here the bio-cultural arena of disgust (especially disgust of ingested or nearly ingested foods) simultaneously invokes a form of sensual perception, an affective register of shame and disdain, as well as bodily recoil” (p. 120). Highmore also discusses how taste and disgust interact, “In ordinary circumstances distaste is signaled through a register of affects sliding from condescension to disdain to scorn and contempt: how could you possibly have imagined that this disgusting item would be appealing to me?” (p. 120). As audiences watch the zombies communing (usually in great detail) on our counterparts they are paradoxically repulsed *and* transfixed on the act.

### **Pass the Brains, Please**

While most zombies seem to be undiscerning as to which part of the human they eat—the brain of the victim seems to be especially desirable. That particular organ in some cases serves as a symbolic representation for the theft of the victim’s self, his sense of uniqueness, something that being a member of the horde discourages. For many zombie productions, brains are the *pièce de résistance* of the meal, for various reasons. In *Warm Bodies* (2013), which serves as both a parody of zombie media as well as yet another modern version of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* tale, “R,” the zombie representing Romeo, consumes brains in order to steal his

victim's memories, thoughts, and feelings. "The brains are the best part, the part that makes me feel human again. I don't want to hurt you," R tells the audience, "I just want to feel what you felt. To feel a little better, a little less dead." In one of the first scenes, we hear his thoughts as we see him calmly thrusting his hand into the brains of Julie's (Juliet's) boyfriend. As he eats his brains, R as part of the boyfriend's memories, sees images of Julie kissing her boyfriend, her telling him that she loves him, blue sky and green grass, intermittently scattered with images of R chewing on these brains with blood dripping down his handsome-ish zombie chin. Not only does R consume this boy's flesh, he steals his life, memories, and later his girlfriend as well. He justifies his actions by saying that "If we don't remember, we'd all just be gone." R stuffs his pockets with the boyfriend's brains and then takes some of the brain matter to wipe on Julie's unknowing cheeks to disguise her smell from the other members of the horde and therefore claim her for his own. While the audience hears R's confused speculations as to how crazy it is that he is bringing home a human, Bishop reminds us that while he may seem to be a romantic hero, we should not see him in those terms, "After all, as a ravenous zombie, R is a viscerally frightening monster; as an obsessed stalker, his actions are perhaps even more terrifying" (Bishop, p. 171). We become confused at first and maybe even a little nostalgic because of our knowledge of Shakespeare's love story, but should not give R a pass at the violence he forces on Julie, a thought that brings us back to the "unholy communion" of which Foster speaks.

### **I'm Happy to Eat You**

Foster uses this title to begin his discussion of vampires (p. 16), but it also fits with the idea that even disgusting scenes such as bone-sucking zombie meals can make connections with other happy events and feelings. This visceral feeling of love-disgust seems to stray over into other affective feelings as well. Oddly enough, one of the affective neighbors of disgust—

especially when it comes to the communion of eating—is happiness. Ahmed (2010) speaks of the connection we make with objects that create a feeling of happiness and sometimes pleasure, describing happiness as “an orientation toward the objects we come into contact with. We move toward and away from objects through how we are affected by them” (p. 32). If this is so, one would think that disgust would push us further away from the media that produces this sort of visceral reaction in us, but for zombie fans, this seems to be more of an invitation for more. One of my high school students and I had a long conversation about *The Walking Dead* series. When he discovered I was writing about zombies, he decided that he would be my personal guide through the show, since I was new to it and could only watch it in small quantities at once due to its graphic nature—no matter how good the plot line was or how believable the characters—I settled into one of the groups of people who could not understand the love-disgust to which so many cling.

My student said that he had friends who dress up for the show and will each bring a dish to watch with other fans: “Carol’s Cookies” or Zombie Brains. Evidently there are multiple recipes online and on social media for delectable dishes, such as food shaped like human hearts, blood clot in brain cupcakes, brain dip, “eat my ear” cookies, pizza fingers, frozen eye balls, “flayed body,” zombie eye with nerve bundle, sausage-stuffed puff pastry (looks like intestines)—all served from a body displaying an open human chest, where the delectable dishes sit realistically in their macabre surroundings.

Ahmed (2010), in speaking of how objects such as food can make us happy or at least give us pleasure, explains that the proximity of the object does not have to be consistent. It can remind us of previous encounters with them and the feelings that we experienced initially. “But pleasures are not only directed toward objects that can be tasted, that come into a sensuous



proximity with the flesh of the body, as a meeting of flesh. We can just recall pleasure to experience pleasure even if these pleasures do not involve exactly the same sensation, even if the impressions of memory are not quite as lively” (p. 32). Does disgust work the same way? As we view zombies stretching the sinews off of the arm of a human, or like “R” in *Warm Bodies* who takes a handful of brain and stuffs it into his mouth like popcorn, does this trigger the memory of a “sensuous proximity with the flesh of the body,” somehow equating our food with theirs? It is as if the bile and revulsion that we originally experience when we watch this event becomes that which we try to recall.

It is imperative to remember that what is disgusting to some is ambrosia to others. Ahmed speaks of the judgments that people make when deciding the worth of objects and how varied people’s tastes are, and if someone disagrees with another’s tastes, they reject the object in question, “suggesting that the object in which another invest his or her happiness is unworthy. The affective differentiation is the basis of an essentially moral economy in which moral distinctions of worth are also social distinctions of value” (p. 35). Do we like to watch zombies eat humans as a matter of taste or is there more to our attraction to this affect of disgust?

I attended a Walker-Stalker convention in Atlanta in 2015 that attracted 35,000 visitors to the Georgia World Conference Center to explore the zombie side of their natures. I saw multiple families, some dressed as zombies, some as human stars of popular zombie programs. In fact, as I rode the elevator out of the parking deck, two little girls about age seven or eight sported flesh wounds on their faces and the characteristic dark circles under their eyes. By chance, I met a co-worker there, who had her whole family there dressed as characters or zombies from *The Walking Dead*. Her five-year-old daughter was dressed like a zombie, complete with flesh wound makeup, her teenage son was Rick, and her baby (held by “Rick”) represented his baby

from the show. “It’s just fun,” said my friend. “We always watch the show as a family.” This media for them was a happy, pleasurable event, even with the violent scenes where both favorite and shorter-lived characters were eliminated by the zombie hordes. Her teenage son said he loved the show *because* of the blood and gore. Ahmed explains how the happiness of people and place can intertwine with the disgust and horror of such media:

If you receive something delightful in a certain place, then the place itself is invested with happiness, as being ‘what’ good feeling is directed toward. Or if you are given something by somebody whom you love, then the object itself acquires more affective value; just seeing something can make you think of another who gave you that something. If something is close to a happy object then it can become happy by association. (p. 33)

So in a way, the family associates this media with family time and happiness. They associate the “object” of the media as a happy event that they share with those they love, their family members, and then the disgust of the show becomes something to be shared and experienced, even to the extent that they invested their time and money to attend the Walker Stalker convention together—an event that created happier associations and memories that connected them to this media even more.

The same is true for the college youth that I interviewed at a university in north Georgia who love to watch *The Walking Dead* as a group. They get together at the same time every Sunday evening to watch the show together, to be grossed out together, to experience it as fellow zombie lovers. The association of the same people, the same place, the same time, creates a happy space for them. Who wants to watch scary things alone? We want to turn to someone next to us and say, “Did you SEE that?” Ahmed explains this connection as being “sticky,” receiving

the attribution of a value of desirable or not. “Groups cohere around a shared orientation toward some things as being good, treating some things and not others as the cause of delight” (p. 35).

The irony that exists in that hordes of zombie media lovers gather to watch zombie hordes cannot be ignored.

Ahmed ties this attraction of affect between people that occurs as soon as they enter a room, a sense of shared atmosphere among people, to anxiety. “Anxiety is sticky: rather like Velcro, it tends to pick up whatever it comes near” (p. 36), and zombie media certainly could incite anxiety, not only in its origins in its fears of an apocalyptic ending for our society but also in the essence of the programs and the violence against humanity which illustrates our fear for a posthumanist existence. This anxiety for zombie fans derives from the fear that there might come a time when humans are *not* at all in the future at all. “Zombie fiction questions not only how a life might go, but also what thinks and of what things might think *where we are not*. The dark ecology of the zombie speculates on a posthuman ‘horde ontology’ in which humans are divested of their presumed status as dominant planetary actants” (Wallin, 2015, p. 139). While many zombie enthusiasts recognize that the possibility of a real being like a zombie is unlikely for our future as a planet, the idea that we as a species could eliminate our own future through a devastating war or disease due to our environmental negligence rings true. My high school *Walking Dead* guide discussed concern over world events in the near and distant future; however, when I asked him if he thought that a zombie apocalyptic state was possible, he cheerfully chided me, “Mrs. Kimble, zombies aren’t real.”

### **Violence: Rebooting a Mundane Society**

In zombie media, fans learn early to not get too attached to characters. In other media, a police drama for example, the main characters are faced with new and life-threatening events

every show and season, but we know they will never truly get hurt because the series would most likely end without the main characters. Not so with series like *The Walking Dead*. The viewers get attached to characters for several seasons and then not only do these main characters die, they expire in horrific ways that surpass the usual television violence of simply being shot and killed. These deaths, viewed from the perspective of affect, seem to surpass disgust, their tendrils grasping toward horror and dread. Events will seem to swing on the characters' side, the group will find a farm house that provides shelter and a seeming normal life again, and then the zombies suddenly show up to destroy this peace—and usually pull a favorite character down with them. Zombies pop up unexpectedly like real events in life, disease or accidents. They catch the audience by surprise, reminding them that life is not predictable. Viewers want more danger, and what is more dangerous than a zombie who refuses to die, inexplicably living even when shot, limbless, and yet is still hungry for human flesh.

This danger echoes our own real-life interactions when two different cultures (in this case, zombies and humans) collide. Highmore (2010) speaks of groups and the cultural mixing that occurs when we interact, that rather than an “cultural osmosis,” this “cultural contact is nearly always forged under conditions of violent domination,” where our differences and distinctness from each other cause conflicts and a retreating into our group even more (p. 127). Thus, the violence that we see in zombie media reminds us of the other cultural clashes in our society that occur when two factions which vary in values and mores. In fact, these deaths make Jack Nicholson and his ax-to-the-door-entry of “Here’s Johnny” in the horror movie *The Shining* (1980) seem tame in comparison. The old violence is not enough to cause us to *feel* anything when the characters die. So instead, we must watch them die slowly. Take the death of Noah in *The Walking Dead* season five (2015). Three characters are trapped in a revolving door

(symbolic for the number of characters coming and going in the show); hundreds of zombies are pushing on all sides of the doors, trapping the three men inside. Glenn, beloved character that had survived since season one, Noah (on the show a shorter time but still loved), and a less important player, Nicholas, struggle to free themselves from this seemingly impossible trap. Nicholas escapes, leaving Glenn and Noah still trapped. Noah is pulled by the zombies through the door, and is eaten while Glenn (and the audience) watches this sympathetic character torn apart by the zombies. They dismember him, but the camera focuses on his face framed by hundreds of the creatures, which tear and hungrily bite at it until only an open maw is left, squirting blood on the glass door inches away from Glenn's face. It seems that in order to *feel* the loss, we must feel the vehement horror and disgust of the death as that killing is extended and graphically portrayed. The viewer feels the pain of the character, and by so doing, feels the loss more keenly. Our level of desensitization is such that we must "reboot" with increased violence so we can shake the commonplace killings to which we seem to have become accustomed. In fact, zombie media has become a tool to reboot a mundane society, a way to feel again.

Education can take some of the blame for this feeling of a lifeless existence. While much has been written about the hazards of such hyper focus on this form of testing (Pinar, 2012; Apple, 2012), schools still seem to be deaf to these warnings. While the pendulum of social acceptance of this testing seems to have reached its peak and some systems are scaling back the number of standardized tests given during the academic year, many are still on the rising arc of the pendulum's swing. Due to the ever-expanding wave of schools jumping on the standardized testing bandwagon, our students are left with more technology and test-prep programs, but less enthusiasm for learning. Teachers too, are expected to be proctors of online learning rather than educators who can make a difference in guiding their students through interesting and more

human one-on-one and group interactions. It should be no surprise that we are bored, that we need more to “feel” anything at all. “Affect is persistent proof of a body’s never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world’s obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations” (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 1). If this is true of affect, then our immersion in the boredom of education creates a vacuum of sorts that provides “an invitation” to feelings that are more interesting, like the disgust that accompanies the violence of zombie media.

Giroux (2011) says we should not be surprised at this level of violence in media, in that “Americans had grown accustomed to luxuriating in a warm bath of cinematic blood” (p. 60) on television and video games. He says “popular culture increasingly normalizes it, often in ways that border on criminal intent” (p. 61). He lists not only popular television series like Fox TV’s *24* (2014) where the main character Jack Bauer tortures his victims and is still considered a patriot, but he also cites video games like *Grand Theft Auto* and *America’s Army* as examples, but there are many more titles than this that center on violent acts as ways of earning points or progressing to the next level. He says that we “rather than problematize violence, popular culture increasingly normalizes it” (p. 61). The line between fiction and real life quickly becomes blurred when American youth use social media to create their own version of the violence that they see digitally in their games and on their screens. Giroux specifically speaks about YouTube videos that encourage violence against the homeless from thrill-seeking young men and teenage boys, creating a “culture of cruelty.”

The ideology of hardness and cruelty runs through American culture like an electric current, sapping the strength of social relations and individual character, moral for video games and spectacularized media infotainment and constructing a culture of cruelty.” (p. 62)

This is not isolated to marginalized societies, however. In schools across the nation, Instagram “fight sights” became popular in recent years, encouraging participants to submit fight videos on the school bus, in the hallways, for on- and off-campus battles. For example, Jaglois (2014) describes a situation in Chesterfield, Virginia, where an Instagram site asked for school fight videos; while police investigated, the creators of sites like these are difficult to track and the videos can spread quickly. These social media outlets seem to pop up and disappear as soon as they emerge, and reveal how adept these teens are at using technology. In fact, Grossberg (2005) warns that we should not use media as a scapegoat, that it is an “easy target.” While he recognizes the “overrepresentation of violence,” he says our youth are “sophisticated users of the media” (p. 83). These “fight sites” beg the question, are teens mimicking what they see in the media and creating their own versions of it?

Logically, we should not be surprised that viewers need more violence to feel the loss of characters in zombie media. With *The Walking Dead* series, the more beloved the character, the more excruciating the death. A less-liked character who passes through, trying to steal the resources of the main group will be dispatched fairly quickly, but the more loved older father figure and moral guide, Dale, is disemboweled by a zombie and left in a field to die a slow and excruciating death. This becomes a more drawn-out scene where we see the pain and horror in his eyes before he finally dies from a merciful bullet shot by Daryl, ending his misery. The viewer feels the pain more deeply; it will last longer in a society that seems to need more and more to feel at all.

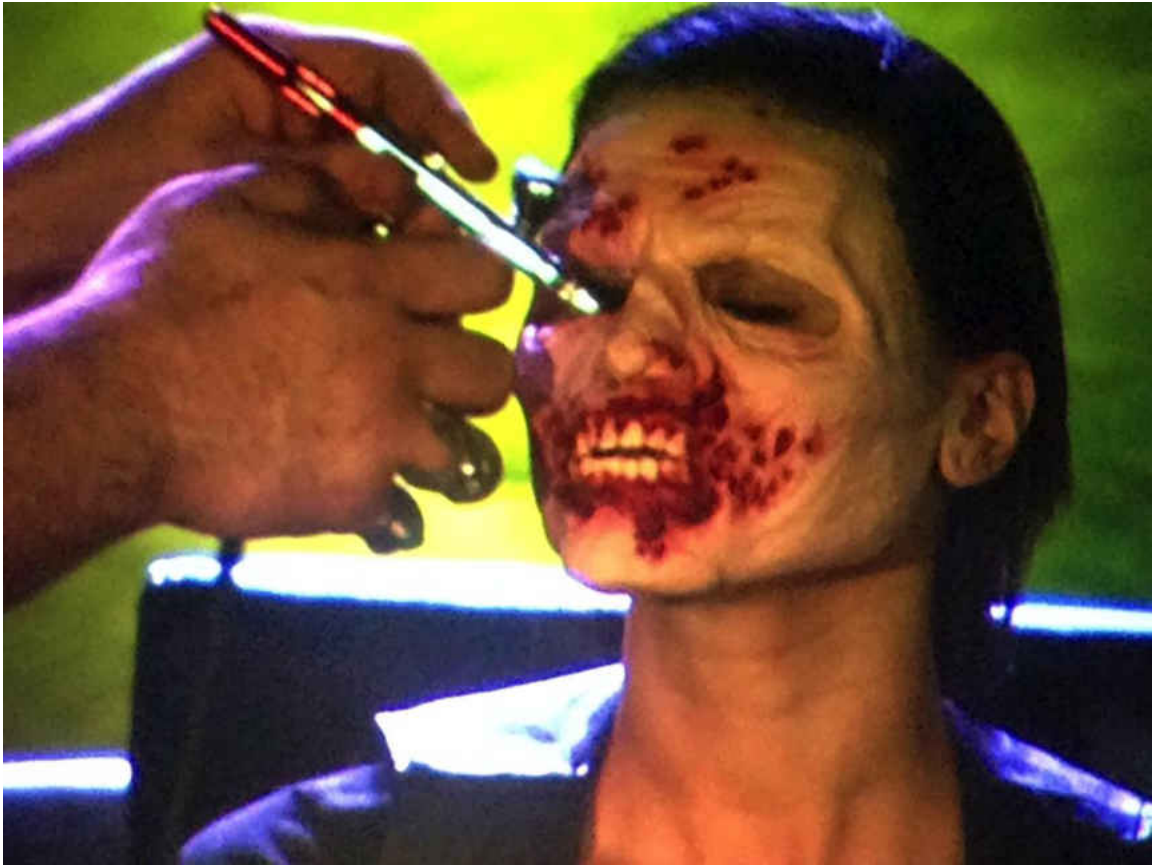
### **Decay, Disgust, and Sometimes Maggots**

At the same Walker Stalker Convention mentioned earlier, I attended a demonstration by Tate Steinsiek, make-up artist for zombie and science fiction films (*Zombie Honeymoon*, 2002;

*SyFy's reality series Face Off, 2011*) and television shows. Steinsiek transformed a pretty girl in her 20s into a zombie by applying a latex prosthesis and layers of paint and cosmetics to illustrate his techniques to an eclectic group of enthusiasts also attending the conference. Behind him on the stage a banner bearing the slogan for the conference read, "Never Again, Never Trust, We First, Always," reminiscent of the anxiety discussed earlier in this article. He spoke of his research into how to create a realistic-looking "undead" creature, how he had studied dead bodies to determine how blood and other fluids ooze from ears, eyes, and mouths after death, what wounds really look like on the human body, etc. When asked about his creative process, he explained, "There's so many ways you could mutilate a human—an infinite amount of ways to mutilate a human." He said that this was the gruesome part of the job—the research of studying pictures of corpses online—but that the directors and the audience want realism.

Steinsiek told our audience as he applied the layers of makeup to the girl on the stage, "I always ask, 'So why aren't we using maggots and flies?'" He uses glue all over the whole face to apply the mask, then follows it up with alcohol-based paint and an airbrush to create the "wounding," and adds tooth lacquers for decaying, chipped teeth. He then shows how to paint the inside of the eyelid with eyeliner, because "there's nothing worse than pink eyelids when everything else is dead." The final touch is gel and dirt to the hair for realism (*Figure 2*). Steinsiek's comment that we crave the realism and ooze of what we would look like if we were truly dead reveals how closely we observe the media—it is a primal urge to look, and we do not direct our gaze away from the spectacle of what could be.





*Figure 2. Zombie Mask. The application of a prosthetic and “wounding” process of an airbrush transforms this participant into a not-so-recent undead zombie. Photo by Julie Kimble.*

As many of the zombie media shows progress, the walkers become more and more decomposed, less like people. We cannot seem to help ourselves and do not avert our gaze away from them; they are more decayed, their incomprehensibly working tattered limbs drive these creatures forward. The hungry jaws (if present) hang in a resilient scream. Clothes are optional, and for some, limbs are not necessary either to be an ever-present menace to the survivors in this media. Long before zombie media began its climb in popularity in the early 2000’s, Grossberg (1992) wrote about our desensitization when he spoke of horror films like *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, which he said had become a “children’s story” where “reality is made up of

unpredictable and inexplicable acts of carnage, wrought by the most mundane monsters without motivation or blame upon hapless victims whose only mistake was being alive” (p. 213). He said that the line between reality and image was blurred, and this was long before reality television obfuscated those lines even further.

Bishop (2010) places the blame for this desire for hyper-reality in zombie media on television’s reality television shows and its “complicit audience members,” and “mindless audience voyeurism,” all which contribute to the onslaught of horror media that seems boundless in its gruesome detail. He compared programs like the British zombie program *Dead Set* (last aired 2008) to the Grand-Guignol theater tradition that emphasizes “in particular bodily trauma through special effects and abjection.” This “display of grotesque violence” is twofold: it is performed and simulated on the stage, but equally important is the audience’s reception of the performance. (p. 114). Reality television created an audience that seemed to reach through the screen to become one with the actors on the program. In fact, Bishop says that *Dead Set* acted as a parody not of the zombie media that exists, but more so of the fans of zombie media in a way that “draws parallels between fans and zombies” (p. 115). Bishop argues that Foucault’s suggestion that modern society is punished through surveillance rather than torture and execution can no longer be true with the creation of reality television, in that “the public exhibition and potential humiliation of reality show contestants can be read as a synoptic form of public spectacle and even torture” (p. 113). The frightening aspect of this discussion lies in our willingness to be surveilled; we offer ourselves up as lambs to the slaughter for reality television for an ephemeral experience and fleeting fame.

### Summary

How does this affect how we as audiences react to zombie media? Audiences have changed; they have become voyeuristic receptacles in which the ceiling of tolerance grows higher and higher. One day, audience's' thirst for the connections that the disgust as an affect creates through our zombie love may not be satiated with a prosthetic mask and airbrush "wounding" but may require something more. Still, returning to Grossberg's idea of "mattering maps," zombie fans are dedicated to their favorite undead; they willingly and consistently engage with this media as well as role-playing activities that do not involve as much violence and gore as recent seasons of *The Walking Dead*. This attraction, coupled with education's current policies that drive away creativity and encourage homogeneity, pulls this subculture together. Viscerally, this attraction binds them through the happy associations and shared disgust among family and friends, creating community through this engagement. While words aid in helping us to see these sometimes ephemeral responses to zombie culture, documentary helps the viewer to see, hear, and experience how these connections could be made.

## CHAPTER 4

### Documentary as Ethnographical Exploration

Since Louis Lumiere launched his first short film *Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory* in 1895, we have tried various techniques in telling our stories through film. Barnouw (1974/1993) describes the multifarious approaches of those who have practiced documentary since that time: prophet, explorer, reporter, painter, advocate, bugler, prosecutor, poet, chronicler, promoter, observer, catalyst, and even guerrilla. While each historically had its purpose, whether to coerce, educate, or even manipulate, my interest in documentary has always fallen in the explorer/reporter range of story. When I first began to discover documentary as a tool for research, one of the films that affected me most was one of the oldest, *Nanook of the North* by Robert J. Flaherty (1922). Even with its inherent problems of the explorer forcing himself into the native population and creating scenes for the sake of the film, it affected me more than any other documentary that I have studied since that time for several reasons. First, I love that he was so determined to get the story that he did not let obstacles stand in his way, even the fiery loss of his first set of film and two decades of attempts and traveling back and forth from his home to the north to get a complete documentary. I admire his work as a reporter, in that he brought us this story of one Inuit hunter with his life of building igloos and the challenges of living in the frozen north; the idea of this life is as foreign as the Mars landscape to—and Flaherty, even though he was widely criticized for his techniques, introduced us to a culture that we would have never otherwise known. With that said, I also know that this film serves as a textbook discussion of how *not* to do documentary in that his presence there in this native's community changed it forever.

Flaherty's spirit of adventure and the desire to discover new worlds still is important to

our society, even though our frontiers have changed. We may not have any parts of the globe that remain unexplored, but we can explore nonetheless—within our own changing culture. So for me, entering the world of zombie culture may not be the frozen north, but research for this documentary did take me to places I would have not normally gone and the idea of explorer should not be totally out of our reach as those who do documentaries.

Still, when researchers view documentary as a formal tool for understanding aspects of our culture, I wonder if they too think of this video portrayal of culture as Nanook in disguise, somehow more fiction and dramatic staging than legitimate research. Pink (2013) speaks of the historically controversial relationship between ethnographic video clips and documentary film footage, but that “newer work in documentary research practice has created bridges between using video as a research process, something for participants, and part of documentary making.” Initially, to be considered ethnographic film, she says that some viewed editing and selecting specific scenes from the footage to somehow taint the scientific nature of the research, but that recently, visual ethnographers have adopted more interactive methods that are accepted as legitimate (p. 186). So as we begin this discussion of documentary, it is important to understand that I approached this project as a visual ethnography with the documentary as one product of the research, not the all-inclusive representation of my whole work. In addition to the film, I also was methodical in establishing research questions, selecting participants, transcribing and coding the video recordings of the participants, and reflexively collaborating with the participants who were interviewed for the written and visual aspects of the film. Whereas documentary requires that the viewer make assumptions about the content of the film, the transcripts and themes that emerged from the entire interviews, the theoretical base of examining the social issues of this zombie culture, and the educational context in which it found fertile ground to grow—all

examined in previous chapters—place this documentary into a different and more complete form of visual ethnography.

### **Dystopian Identities: Zombie Culture**

My film is called *Dystopian Identities: Zombie Culture* and is about 30 minutes long. In the introduction, I begin with Zizek's statement about our tendency to see catastrophe and dystopia more easily than a proactive solution that requires us to act on the problems in our society. The film initially reveals footage from an October 2015 zombie walk in downtown Atlanta, and then moves to scenes from the zombie run in Mississippi, and then finally to the Walker Stalker Convention in Atlanta in October 2015, all set to eerie background music. I slow down the film in the beginning so the "walkers" walk even slower than usual, and then speed up the zombie run (set to faster music) as a contrast and to show the range of people and activities in this group. During the "walk" shown in the first part of the film, I show a mini-drama that unfolds as several walkers stumble to a restaurant window, peering in at the customers trying to eat inside. The camera's angle is from behind the walkers looking in to the astonished (mixed with some disgust as well as humor) faces of the customers. In this introduction, I use voiceover to state the research questions and set the stage for the rest of the film: Why do we love this culture so much? What attracts to it and to each other? What do we gain from this interaction with zombie culture? I then speak of my initial ideas about zombies and how they seemed to be alone in a crowd (horde), but what I learned through this project was that this culture sought sociality rather than solitude and were able to accomplish these connections through their interaction with each other.

I grouped the interview clips by themes that I had uncovered during the interviews: "transformations," where Georgiashea speaks of her experience with people as they are

transformed into zombies through makeup, and Kelly describes how she is able to transform her entire family into characters from *The Walking Dead* as a bonding event; “fear and anxiety,” where Tatianna explains her family’s long-time interaction with zombie culture and the fear she feels now as she watches her little sister’s interaction with the culture, Kelly’s defense of her small children’s viewing of violent media; “teamwork and survival,” where we meet George and his discussion of his college friends and their interaction with zombie media, and how he is able to connect not only with them, but with his love of the outdoors and survival skills; and finally, “creative zombies” where Ian describes his complicated processes of creating the Humans vs. Zombie games. Lastly, I included the identity piece, “Don’t hate us because we love zombies,” where the participants discuss the benefits and attributes associated with this interaction, and how they value the connections that they have made through this interaction. These interviews and themes were introduced by background slides with text, using a horizontal blur transition that worked well with a dystopian theme. The background slide appeared as an off-white, splattered and dirty background with blood-red letters introducing each theme. During these transitions, I tried to use as little text and voiceover as possible: first, because I wanted the participants to tell their own stories with as little interference from me as possible, reflecting Nichols’ (1991) description of masked interviews; second, because I am uncomfortable with the sound of my own recorded voice, although that discomfort lessened later as I realized that the researcher’s voice was vital to this film. The reporter side of me balked at this vocal interference from me as the narrator; I had been trained to “objectively” tell the story, leaving my own inner thoughts and opinions out of it altogether. After all, while I wanted the audience to come to their own conclusions based on the words of those interviewed and their stories, but this form of research reminded me that I do have opinions, whether or not they are voiced. Explaining my

own preset biases identified the elephant in the room and is inherently more honest to the viewers and myself.

The end of the film returns to the zombie walk again and the first song, which visually cues us back to the research questions that were initially asked earlier in the film and helps me to complete the circle and answer these initial questions more completely. The film ends with my voiced reflection—and a confession—that I had assumed incorrectly that people involved in this media culture were concerned so much for our future that they only saw a dystopian end, and therefore connected with the culture and each other because they all felt similarly hopeless. Instead, what I discovered was that this group remains hopeful that through sociality, teamwork, friendship, creativity, and through their own humanity, our society will be able to avert an apocalypse—whatever form it may take.

As I reflect on this process and the final polished product, it seems a relatively simple task. It was not. In fact, every polished minute of film required multiple hours of work to accomplish. Following are some of the highs and lows of documentary work.

### **Strengths and Limitations of Documentary**

Renov (1993) writes that there are four basic purposes of documentary: to record, reveal, or preserve; to persuade or promote; to analyze or interrogate; and to express. He offers a disclaimer as to the ability for even the best filmmakers to “strike an ideal balance” with these purposes, but instead urges their combined use to explore their “creative and rhetorical possibilities” (p. 21). He calls these tendencies “modalities of desire” which drive those who participate in documentary research to work in this field (p. 22). While my efforts were at least to approach each of these categories of purpose, my end product seeks to record and reveal the



beliefs and attitudes of the participants in this research and their desire to be a part of zombie culture, to persuade the audience that pop culture remains an untapped pedagogical force, and to analyze this culture in order to understand the “stickiness” of it (Ahmed, 2010), why people are attracted to it and to each other.

### **Documentary as an Interactive Experience**

Nichols (1991) describes four modes of documentary which are produced: expository, which uses a “voice of God” form of narration to inform the viewer of a certain historic perspective; observational, in which we observe the film’s subjects in a fly-on-the-wall portrayal with little interference from the filmmaker; reflexive, where the filmmaker not only addresses participants for the piece, but also includes a metacommentary in which the filmmaker examines his or her own process of the production itself; and finally interactive, where the filmmaker (as the name implies) interacts with the participants in the film as well as provides commentary as to the events as they unfold in the film, much in the fashion of Michael Moore’s (2002) documentaries (like *Bowling for Columbine*). Initially, I thought that this documentary would have more observational elements than it ultimately had; but my curiosity and nosiness forced me to quickly abandon this technique and moved me off the sidelines where I could unobtrusively observe to following people around and pestering them with questions. One of my first experiences occurred when filming participants at the Walker Stalker Convention in Atlanta where I continually saw entire families dressed as zombies—observing them was not enough when a few answered questions would yield so much more.

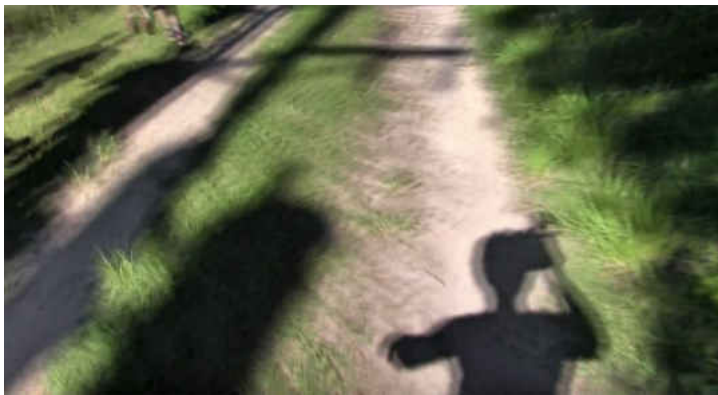
With this in mind, my approach became more interactive, which seemed to fit Barnouw’s (1974/1993) description of the reporter as documentarian where the filmmaker placed himself in the middle of the action in order to see the events as they happened as well as gathering

information from witnesses afterward. To this end, I positioned myself where people who love zombies gather (the zombie run and the previously mentioned convention) in order to not only observe them but also to meet people so I could find participants to interview. In this interactive method, Nichols (1991) writes that “textual authority shifts toward the social actors recruited: their comments and responses provide a central part of the film’s argument” (p. 44). My goal was to conduct masked interviews in which I ask questions but for the most part are unheard in the final film. It was important that the participants were able to tell their stories and to teach me about this culture about which I knew so little. In fact, my prepared questions were often insufficient to produce a productive conversation; my original suppositions were that the participants would be much more concerned about a dystopian end to our world (thus their love of zombies), but they were actually attracted to the media for much different reasons (sociability, break from the mundane, survival skills, as described in the previous chapter). So as my first questions failed, flexibility became a necessity. An important interviewing skill lies in the ability to entice information from the participant, and I had to keep “fishing” until we found common ground, and then the floodgates opened: Kelly told endless stories about her family, George described his love of the outdoors, Tatianna discussed society’s current struggles in depth, Georgiashea explained the transformative powers of zombie makeup, and Ian taught me the intricacies and complexity of the Humans vs. Zombies game.

Even so, one of the challenges of this mode as described by Nichols (1991), “How far can participation go? How are limits beyond which a filmmaker cannot go negotiated?” (p. 45). This became evident when I decided to join my participants in the zombie LARPing activities, which was a concern for me even though the interactive documentary mode is participatory in nature. While I did not use makeup to transform into a zombie, I did participate in as well as film the

zombie run. It occurred to me during the planning process that my insights as a runner could be effective and that I could provide something more than just film for this event. As a reporter, I had written several participatory-journalist articles before (mostly about flying in small aircraft, nothing as exciting as interacting with zombies) and felt that it was a natural fit for this project in that I had knowledge of how to frame the story. My field notes and impressions were included in the previous chapter. As ethnography, this participation also fits in that observing and communicating with them to make sense of a topic becomes an organic activity. As Pink (2013) describes, “I also used my own body to seek to understand these ways of knowing,” and while she recognizes that this involvement may not provide exactly the same experience as those who have more time invested in the practice, but it can aid in our understanding of “the visual and other sensory knowledge” of the participants’ experiences (p. 114). In fact, as she conducted this ethnographic video that investigated people’s identities and their housecleaning practices, the participants “worked with me to represent her or his experience of everyday life” (p. 113). For my zombie project, I wanted to experience what they did in order to better understand the participants’ interest in this activity, and this involvement in the zombie run resulted in footage that I would not have otherwise had. For example, one of the common themes that emerged in the interviews with my participants—the need for teamwork—emerged as I ran; it quickly became evident that the race was nearly impossible to complete as a human (without losing all the flags that runners wore around their waists to indicate they were still alive and not “infected”). What began as a fun activity developed into a metaphor about humanity; we need and rely on each other to succeed in our journey (in this case, a 5K journey). This understanding would not have been as poignant without the bodily experience that accompanies the teamwork that the participants had described in their interviews.

In addition to the “body” experience that Pink describes, Renov (2004) takes the discussion a step further by adding the technology of the video camera as an extension of the researcher’s body, speaking of early documentarians. “First-generation video makers adopted the tools of the new medium to pursue their prior interests as conceptual or body artists; the camera and monitor became extensions of the artists’ sensorium” (p. 182). In my case, the



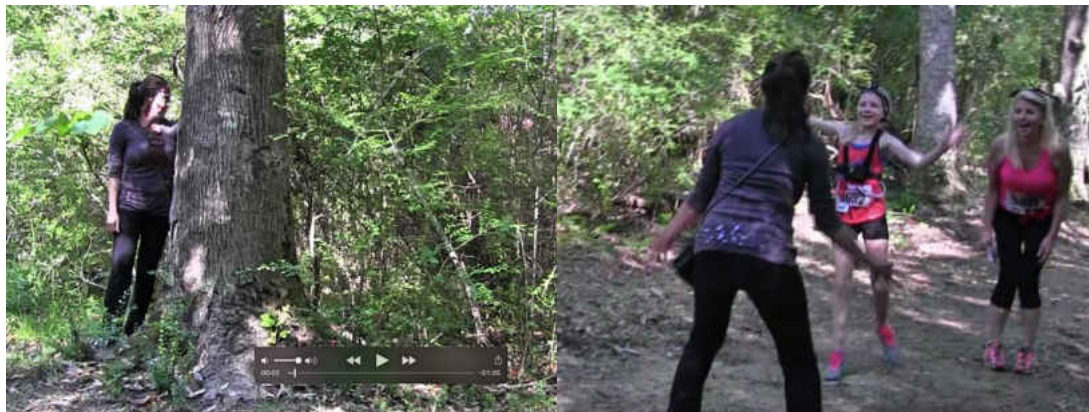
*Figure 3.* My shadow during the zombie run illustrates how the technology of my video camera becomes an extension of my body.

shadow in the picture illustrates how the camera literally became an extension of my body; we were one in purpose and with the participants in that moment (see *Figure 3*). This picture is blurry, but only because I am actually running with the video camera and

participating in this race with the participants, feeling what they felt, seeing what they saw, enabling me to understand the experience physically as well as mentally.

My interaction in this event had some unpredicted consequences, however. For example, in order to get better action shots during the race, I chose to film in the woods next to a zombie who was hiding behind a tree. My position was such that I could see and film both the runner and the zombie from my position at the top of the runner’s path. Runners had one of two responses: either they saw me and assumed that there must be a zombie near me or I would not have chosen to stand there, or they concentrated on me and seemed perplexed as to why I was filming them. The two results were that the former ran faster and kept more of their “human” flags, and the latter were slaughtered (metaphorically) because the zombie surprised them while

they were distracted by my presence (See *Figures 4 and 5*). We are distracted by the camera and the lens, since we are inundated with them every day with our cell phones, computer screens, and our narcissistic desire to see ourselves; we are subconsciously drawn to the camera.



*Figures 4, 5.* Hiding zombie and zombie run slaughter. The first photo illustrates my position between the zombie and the runner. The second reveals how the runners’ preoccupation with the camera caused their “deaths.”

Still, there remains a fine line between observing and recording others’ experiences when the researcher is also a participant; it becomes a carefully choreographed dance in which he or she must constantly reflect and review the attitudes that develop during this process. As a researcher, I sought to understand through experience, but then tried to “stand apart” in order to process what I saw as well. “If all social activity involves processes of communication and exchange that occur within culturally determined or inflected codes, frames, or contexts, then the idea of standing apart in order to represent and interpret what occurs elsewhere is not a radically distinct or peculiar activity” (Nichols, 1991, p. 191). This interactive mode, while it fit for this project, also is fraught with peril—not of actual zombie attacks, but through the illusion of objectivity.

### **The Illusion of Objectivity**

Nichols (1991) speaks of the elusive nature of bias in documentary and describes three

different modern definitions of objectivity: film as a “scientific recording of what occurred before it” or the viewer, or the authoring agent; film assumes that “some englobing framework that can subsume personal bias and self-interest”; or lastly, a definition where the viewer is free to decide for him or herself how the information portrayed will be interpreted, so the meaning of the film lies completely within the grasp of the audience. I would love to say that my film approaches all three, in that it does record actual events (like the zombie run and the Walker Stalker Convention) and the opinions and honest comments of those who I interviewed, while they were guided by my questions, were still their own thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, while the viewer must come to his or her own conclusions about the people and their stories in this documentary, I also understand that the film from which they draw meaning about the subject is limited to the choices that I made as the project was assembled. Renov (1993) discusses these decisions, “All such renderings require a series of authorial choices, none neutral, some of which may appear more ‘artful’ or purely expressive than others.” He explains that these choices, especially those included for artistic effect—depend on “protocols of reading that are historically conditioned” (p. 35), and as I drew my storyboard—and redrew my storyboard to adjust to new and unexpected material—the clips that concisely stated the ideas and themes that I had accumulated throughout the interviews stayed while others were discarded. My “reading” of what to include or omit were based on my understanding of the content of these film pieces and my aesthetic desires for the story and its message. As I made these decisions, I constantly referred back to the essay construction of the documentary; did this clip fit within the themes that the thesis of the work demanded? If not, then it was thrown into my “regret” pile.

My constant worry during this construction was that I was leaving important and telling truths on the editing floor as I made decisions about what to keep and what to cut; this process

took countless hours, and in this exhaustive exercise deciding what to keep and what to lose was a constant dilemma. In the end, I am comfortable with the choices I made, but ache for the pieces to which I had become attached but that (by necessity and time limitations) had to be left behind. For instance, as I completed the documentary, I found that there was less of Georgiashea's commentary and work in the film than originally intended; part of the reason for this lies in the fact that she was busy doing the makeup as I filmed, and had a hard time focusing on what I was asking her. My regret now is that I should have done more follow up with her so I could have more fully told her story. There were other interesting details too, from each of the participants, but I just could not fit them all in the film or it would have become like of *Lord of the Rings* four-hour sequel. So in this attempt to be completely unbiased and present a documentary that represents reality, I am doomed to fail, because as Nichols (1991) explains, "Rhetoric remains at work, even in the domain of the most intensely scientific discourse. Propaganda is not as far away as one might think: ideology is always in the air, and the 'free subject' is itself a concept of debatable soundness" (p. 197). Therefore, the concept of being objective is a mirage.

### **Documentary as Essay, Video as Corporeal Being**

Renov (2004) advocates the use of the video to better explore and understand a topic through "the electronic essay," and as an English and journalism teacher and former reporter, this approach made perfect sense to me. Initially, I had struggled with the organization: how would I synthesize all the interviews and clips I had into a cohesive whole? Shaping it as an essay was appealing in its familiarity with something I teach every day: the essay has a beginning, middle, and an end, tied together with a commanding thesis statement; the essay moves logically from one point to the next; the essay is deliberate in its structure and intent. Yet, essay as

documentary poses more complex processes for its creator. Bense as quoted in Renov (2004):

The person who writes essayistically is the one who composes as he experiments, who turns his object around, questions it, feels it, tests it, reflects on it, who attacks it from different sides and assembles what he sees in his mind's eye and puts into words what the object allows one to see under the conditions created in the course of writing.

(p. 186)

This was my process in organizing this documentary, especially since as I progressed through the interviews I did not find what I originally thought I would—people who were disillusioned by the world's state of affairs so much that they felt our world was headed toward a dystopian end. My storyboard changed multiple times, and by the time I finished the first version of the documentary, the beginning did not flow with the end. This is the joy and the frustration of



*Figure 6.* This screen shot of Kelly during the interview illustrates the intensity of her expression, visually supporting her words.

documentary making: the joy lies in the fact that we can still be surprised by the unforeseen results of the qualitative research that we do, and the frustration arrives when we have to shift our plans and understanding from what we thought we would find to what actually is revealed. I also had to refine my research questions as I was “attacking it

from different sides” as Bense describes above. The need for malleability, the ability to bend and change as the film evolves became apparent. There were times when I felt I was just following it— “it” being the film as what Renov (2004) calls a “corporeal” body—as it



meandered over, under, and around the topic that I had set to explore with zombie culture (p. 184). As a reporter, one of my frustrations with my editors came about when they would send me out on an assignment to prove a theory or tell a particular story that they wanted to see written. Often, when I returned with the story and it was not as they had expected it would turn out, my article would be rewritten to fit their former hypothesis. As tempting as this is, a documentary essayist must be a reflective representation of his or her findings.

In “The Electronic Essay” Renov (2004) also discusses the capabilities of “video’s potential for textual ‘thickness,’ its facility in shuttling between or keying in diverse image sources, can ably serve the essay’s discursive goals” (p.188). It is through these images that the viewer makes his or her own judgments, and it remains the essayist’s job to present the material in a manner than the reader (viewer) can interpret meaning independently. This, in my experience, is where the written essay becomes inferior to the video essay. Words on the page can evoke reactions or judgments, but video is superior to mere words as it synthesizes words with expressions, intonation, inflections and images of the person explaining their understanding of the world. For example, examine the difference between Kelly’s words and images on the screen. Even without the inflection of her voice, her image in this first screen shot of the film (see *Figure 6*) explains much more than simply reading the transcript of her interview, which Her words as she describes why she allows her children to watch *The Walking Dead* even though she receives criticism from extended family due to the show’s violent nature:

I want my children to grow up, and I want them to be scared of kidnappers. I want them to be scared of people breaking in their home, and mean and women physically and mentally abusing them. I want them to be scared of the devil and I want them to live by God and do right. I don’t want them to be scared of something that my husband and

myself both enjoy and have a great time with [*The Walking Dead*]. (Kelly)

As we examine this image more closely, she has taken off her glasses that she had been wearing in order to remove any physical barriers between her and me, as the researcher. Immediately after this comment, she replaces the glasses and continues on with our discussion. Her chin is down, her eyes intently examining mine (and essentially, all the viewers who see this film). Also evident in this image is that Kelly is at work. This work place has plain white walls, a clock that bears down on her from above, signifying the time spent at work away from her family, a topic that she discusses later. Outside the window are green trees and grass, walled off from the starkness of the work place. We see toy horses on the windowsill of her office, illustrating the fact that she is a mother and of her need to have a symbol of her children there in the room with



*Figure 7.* This photo illustrates the excitement and happiness as Kelly describes her family's transformation through costume at the Walker Stalker Convention in Atlanta 2015.

her as she works. In a normal written essay, none of this would be evident without a Dickensian description of every detail in the room. Video accomplishes this in an instant, beaming threads of meaning and clarity to the viewer, and even if the viewer does not pick apart this image as I have just done, the feelings and visceral emotions that the video produces

in us are almost invisible; we feel it before we think it.

In contrast to this first image, *Figure 7* reveals a much happier, relaxed Kelly as she excitedly describes how her entire family transformed themselves into characters from *The*

*Walking Dead* for the Walker Stalker Convention. The clock is still there, but her glasses are back on her face, her head is tilted back and her smile is complete. Compare the words from the transcript again to this image: “I know this may sound crazy to you guys and believe me, it does to me too because this is really out of character for me. I’m married. I’m normal. I’m not really into all of this stuff, but it’s so good. We looked so good.” In the video interview, her voice’s volume and intonation rise as she describes this even and what a happy family memory it was for her.

The “textual thickness” of video that Renov (2004) describes and the “shuttling between images” also fits what I attempted to do with this documentary. For example, as Tatianna was discussing her family and how they had participated in zombie walks since she was very young and that she was still afraid of zombies, as she speaks in the video she seems torn between being



*Figures 8, 9.* Tatianna explains her fear of zombies in the second photo, over which I “shuttled” the photo of she and her brother and sister dressed up for a zombie walk in the first photo.

“cool” about this family activity and her unhappiness that her little sister now is put in the same position as she was with exposure to what she considers “scary.” She spoke of how she and her family had attended zombie walks every year, but then suddenly interjected, “It shouldn’t be OK

for my baby sister to be able to walk through the living room while she's playing and see a zombie eating another person on the TV and be like, 'It's OK.'" This comment did not strike me fully until I asked her if she could share a picture of her sister and her made up for the zombie walk; I understood better as I saw the image of her little sister's bloody costume. So I was able to include this picture of her and her family while she was discussing her fears about zombies and her implied fear for her sister, "shuttling" back and forth between the interview and the family pictures (see *Figures 8, 9*).

I also used this technique for the interview with Georgiashea as she talked and worked on Tatianna's makeup in the documentary, which took about 90 minutes. This would be rather dead space in the film. Since I had multiple makeup sessions from different locations and makeup artists filmed over several months, I was able to show these scenes overlaying her video while she described in more general terms about the makeup process. In this way, I was able to better illustrate some of the techniques and motivations for makeup artists such as herself without solely watching her apply zombie makeup to just one person. She discussed the transformative abilities of being made up as a zombie and her experiences with creating the characters of the different people to which she had converted through makeup into zombies, I showed b-roll video of the various makeup sessions that I recorded during the preparation of the zombie cast before the zombie run in Mississippi as well as the film from the Walker Stalker Convention.

The importance of this transformation is vital to the zombie as well as the eye of the observer, whether that viewer sits in a restaurant as a zombie walk trudges by, or through the eye of my video camera. Without this viewer gaze and the effect of the makeup transformation of the human-to-zombie, we might question whether they exist at all. Take the image from this undead businessman (*Figure 10*) taken during the zombie walk in Atlanta. This zombie man had

meticulously designed this appearance for a realistic effect that as I slowed down for the video, became even more realistic in. He wears contacts that make his eyes appear dead, yet wide open in their glare, and he approaches the camera in a self-imposed close up to heighten our anxiety at his proximity. As he approaches the camera, we can see that he has two oozing wounds on his head, one on his forehead and the other on his cheek. While he accomplishes through makeup and a prosthetic wounding attached to his face, this makeup (especially in the darkness of the



*Figure 10. Zombie businessman illustrates silent scream during Atlanta zombie walk.*

night street) seems to indicate that he truly is bleeding. His tattered and bloodied suit (his own or some other human's blood?), and his splattered, white collared shirt and loosely knotted tie no longer resembles the office executive attire after which it is designed. He carries a brief case, but almost seems unaware of it as he staggers to and fro down the street. His mouth seems unable to close, so the effect here is one long, continual, silent scream. I can describe this man with words, but they pale in comparison to his image in person and on film.



*Figure 11.* Spectator fear at Atlanta zombie walk.  
Picture by Shayne Nolden.

In *Figure 11*, also from the zombie walk, we see the faces of the restaurant customers as the zombies peer into the glass of the restaurant. Observe the woman in the bottom right, at first she is laughing, but then the zombie bangs on the window to bring about a more anxious response

from her. Her male companion at the table amusedly watches her reaction. The participants I interviewed also spoke of the “fun” that accompanies being afraid, but again, they sought company when they were viewing the sometimes frightening and violent zombie media. This sociality is evident in these pictures; the zombies seek company and want to be seen in their garb by people who also appreciate zombie media and culture, thus the “stickiness” that Ahmed (2010) describes in affect theory.



*Figure 12.* Zombie Tatianna. Transformation compliments of Georgiashea’s makeup skills. This picture further illustrates the power of a visual image to convey meaning. Here, Tatianna faces her fear of zombies by becoming one.

### **Reflection: What I Learned about Learning through Documentary Research**

As I process the experience with this research, I return to the first important concept that I learned in my curriculum studies courses: Pinar's (2012) idea of the complicated conversation of currere, "a conversation with oneself (as a 'private' person) and with others threaded through academic knowledge, an ongoing project of self-understanding in which one becomes mobilized for engagement in the world" (p. 47). An essential aspect of this concept is reflection, the looking inward and taking self-assessments along the way in order to see clearly what my own preconceptions were of this media and those who engaged in it and balancing this with the stories that I discovered through the research. I'm in a constant state of reflection, where I am always thinking about the choices that I make for this documentary and why am making those choices. My field notes included not only plans (and revised plans), but also thoughts and feelings of the art of discovery. It truly is an evolution and a journey and discovering how research works – or can work. Pausing to examine the creative process does not necessarily destroy or squash it; in fact, often it allows the researcher to make corrective actions throughout the project that may help preserve it.

But this inner reflection is not enough; I also needed to do as Pinar suggests, too have conversations that are "threaded through academic knowledge." My initial approach was based on my reporter background; I would interview people and then share what they said through some form of multi media presentation. It was not until late in my research efforts that I recognized how vital the words of the theorists were in understanding how the connections between the participants were made, and how forces acted on them to develop identity in forms that they were not even aware.

For example, as George spoke about his friends and how faithfully they got together to

watch zombie media, and then spoke of his attraction to more violent media, suddenly the precepts of affect theory make sense. He and his friends share not only their space together to watch this show, but they also all like the disgusting parts, and therefore experience the visceral experience of disgust as well as the “happy objects” that Ahmed (2010) describes in that they associate the show with their sociality and the feelings they have together. Another metaphor that fits here are “mattering maps” (Grossberg, 2010) where they find common ground with something that matters to them—in this case, this particular zombie program. In addition, George’s mattering maps and his love of hunting, independence, and survival skills draw him to the program and its characters who also fit the identity of hunter, survivor. Grossberg (2005) describes these “mattering maps” as investment portfolios that “enable people to feel that they own their projects and possibilities and that they have some control over their lives and the world” (p. 232). George connects with the character in the program, and adds to his identity by practicing similar hunter/survivalist activities in his own life, like building his own bow or kayaking the length of the South River (his latest project). Through articulation, this same experience of George’s group can be viewed as multiple strands of society gathering together to do as Hall (1996) explains in producing identity in spite of differences, gathering the pieces together in a unified whole, connecting one text with a reality, which connects with something else. George connects with others who seem to be very unlike except in their desire for sociality and their liking of zombie media. They become connected, part of a cohesive set that identifies with both the viewing group as a whole and zombies. George, who loves to hunt and fish, connects with this particular zombie show (*The Walking Dead*), linking his real-world experience with the challenges that zombies present for both survival and hunting (except that they are hunting zombies). Each of the participant’s stories started to fit these patterns and



connections described in both articulation and affect theories. This helped me to begin to see how even in very different social groups (families, college students, young, older, professional, etc.) the connections became clearer and ultimately the themes discussed in both the last chapter and in the documentary emerged from both the formal and informal interviews. This understanding was vague for me at first, but became increasingly sharper as I studied these theories. Ultimately, the common thread that surfaced surprised me.

In order to understand my surprise, I had to first identify my preconceptions about those who love zombie media. It was based more on Wallin's (2015) posthumanist idea that people were worried about the future of humanity so much that they had a negative, dystopian view of their lives and worlds, and somehow watching or participating in this particular often-violent media illustrated this fear and hopelessness. I also believed that somehow, these participants were like the zombies, in a crowd but still alone, solitary. Instead, the overriding theme in my discovery was that the participants were actually gaining social skills through this interaction (Georgiashea being able to "read" people, Kelly's family experiences where they discussed the media they watched in order to have moral discussions, Ian's ability to organize large groups of people in creative story lines). This media, in Tatianna's words, allows its participants to face evil and come off victorious, to discover our own humanity. These skills that the participants gain reveal the attitudes of hope more than despair, of humanity more than depravity.

This is where theory and practical application meet; without the theoretical framework and contextual background of education's part in the development, I would simply be relying on my own knowledge and that of those I interviewed to understand the complexities of how this popular media affects how they see themselves. Similarly, without the qualitative methods that provided the structure for the interviews and coding of the transcripts, it would have been much

more difficult to come recognize the common themes that I needed to form a vocabulary to analyze the conversations. Yet, documentary provides an added element that is vital; the images, tone inflection, visages, dialect, enthusiasm, and emotions that each of the participants bring to the film balances the words and theories with their own voices. After all, the zombie must be seen and we must meet its gaze to truly understand its purposes.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE HORDES HAVE ARRIVED: INTERVIEWS AND ANALYSIS

In Chapter 3, I explored how affect theory helps us to comprehend some of the connections that could occur within this zombie culture. Then in Chapter 4, I examined how documentary and how seeing and hearing the participants helped me to look more closely at nonverbal cues and voice intonation during the interviews to help me to be more aware of the emotions that accompanied the words. In this chapter, I investigate their words on a closer level as I report on the interviews conducted with the participants as well as introduce the themes that emerged from these discussions. I discuss their fears and their posthumanist connections with their ideas of society's future. I also examine their motivations and have them describe their interaction with this zombie culture; one of the joys of this type of qualitative research occurs as the interviewees process their own thoughts in front of the camera; it becomes an act of discovery in which the researcher and the person interviewed simultaneously connect and explore new knowledge together. Even though these participants were supplied with the questions beforehand, there were times when the thought processes were evident as the interviewees considered the questions (and follow up questions) that I posed to them. This culture, in its various forms, was important to them. A common thread of conversation was that they had not considered their motives or purposes in this culture until I conducted their interviews, so some of what they came to know during the interview often seemed to surprise them. This knowledge, and the connections made through the interviews about the culture, pointed to their desire to better recognize their own involvement in it.

This chapter follows and aligns with the documentary of these people as they talk about and participate in LARPing (Live Action Role Playing) activities where they often undergo

transformations to become one of the undead or as they simply enjoy their favorite zombie movie or program. This chapter looks closely at their words as well as their actions as they discuss their feelings, while the documentary provides further visual ethnography to support their explanations. The purpose of this research in the field of culture studies is two fold: one, to better understand how Americans interact with and are affected by zombie media and activities; two, to determine what literacies (skills) they might be gaining through this interaction, and how these literacies affect their identities.

### **Methodology**

The value of ethnography for this research lies in the multiple sources of information gathered; not only did I interview the participants, I filmed them in the context for which they described in the interviews as well as gathered pictures and videos that they had produced for examination. Ethnography provides an avenue to incorporate all the pieces I have gathered into a cohesive, multimedia package and as Merriam (2009) describes, is “both a process and a product” (p. 26). Ethnography also helped me to develop the theoretical analysis, in that through the participants’ words and actions, I was better able to discern, discuss, and observe their hopes and fears as they interacted with this culture, which helped me to explore the concepts of affect theory. As this research investigates a specific culture, this method enabled me to closely examine the participants “beliefs, values, and attitudes that structure the behavior patterns of a specific group of people” (p. 26). Also important in this process is the ability for the participants’ voices to be heard, as they reflect on the questions asked and their motivations and understanding of their involvement with the zombie culture. Lastly, ethnography fits because it allows me to be more immersed in that my own field notes and participation in this world can also be documented and synthesized into the work as a whole.

## Participants

Most of the participants are both male and female adults (18+) and live in the Atlanta area. Some of them are former students who have graduated and are either preparing for or are going to local colleges or are working in the area. Others were contacted through Facebook and email located through Internet searches of university “Humans vs. Zombies” groups at colleges, but I eventually ended up interviewing through Skype a recent college graduate from Ohio who responded to my Facebook query and who had participated in the club for six years. I was searching for a range of people who regularly watch zombie media and participate in live action role-playing zombie activities. I conducted five full-length interviews (45 minutes to one hour) with participants: three women and two men, as well as several shorter (10-15-minute) interviews with participants at the zombie run in Mississippi. Of the five full-length interviews, one is a college student at a northern Georgia university, one is an unemployed recent graduate of an Ohio university, another is a woman who works as a cabinet maker, one who is an 18-year-old make-up artist, and another who works as a certification specialist for a county school system—all but the Ohio participant live in the metro Atlanta area. I also include my field notes as an observer/participant in the zombie run as part of this research, “As an outsider an observer will notice things that have become routine to the participants themselves, things that may lead to understanding the context” (Merriam, 2009, p. 119). A short description of the participants who completed full interviews follows.

## Kelly

Kelly is a suburban mother in her early 40s who works as in human resources for a public school system in the metro Atlanta area.

She and her husband have four children:

their ages are one, five, eight, and

sixteen. Kelly has lived in her

hometown her entire life, and while she

was not always interested in zombie

media, her husband is, so she and her

family began watching *The Walking*

*Dead* as a family regularly. They became so intrigued by the show they decided to dress up and

attend the Walker Stalker Convention in Atlanta in 2015. In this interview, Kelly explained her

family's involvement and reasoning behind it.



Figure 13. Kelly in her office during the interview.

## George

George is 19 and just completed his first year at a north Georgia college. He is majoring in mechanical engineering, but spends most of his leisure time camping, hiking, hunting, and in the woods. He described himself as “outdoorsy” and said he has watched zombie media



Figure 14. George at his college dorm.

for years, and likes the more violent horror shows but has this year found himself at his college with a regular group of *The Walking Dead* fans, a group that he described as eclectic—all connected because of interest in the show, but have little else in common. He explained that his interest in this media mirrors his own interests: surviving in the outdoors, hunting, engineering, and exploring the woods and rivers of Georgia.



*Figure 15.* Georgiashea, makeup artist for zombie costumes, b-grade movies

### **Georgiashea**

Georgiashea is a recent high school graduate (age 18) who has worked with professional make-up artists since she was 14 years old, not only at Halloween but also for local movies (what she describes as B-grade zombie movies), zombie walks, and other LARPing activities in the Atlanta area. She also did

makeup for drama productions at school, but most of her training came from Atlanta makeup artists and on-site horror events in the area. She spoke of the power of transformation in this interview and her observations as a makeup artist. She wants to continue this work as a hobby, but plans to study psychology in college—or mortuary arts. At this point, she is still undecided.

## Tatianna



*Figure 16.* Tatianna, set carpenter, zombie enthusiast

While Georgia is the artist, Tatianna is the recipient of her makeup skills. I interviewed these two separately and together and filmed the makeup processes and transformation as I spoke to them. They are good friends, so this influenced their interaction and responses in the interview that I conducted with them

together, in that they corrected each other's comments, and sometimes Tatianna would offer an addendum to Georgiashea's remarks, which seemed to annoy and inhibit Georgiashea at times. Tatianna (20) graduated from high school one year ago, and while she currently works as a cabinet maker, she wants to be a set maker for the movies. Tatianna has years of family experience with zombie activities and walks, and spoke in detail about what these experiences were like as a child as well as her perceptions of the zombie transformation that makeup provides. She and her family have walked in the zombie walks in Atlanta every year since she was a young girl.

## Ian

This may be the most interesting connection I made while searching for people to interview. I had tried for months to get university Zombies vs. Humans "moderators" or leaders to return my pleas for interviews, and finally Ian contacted me. We set up a time to meet and film, and realized that as we spoke more that he was located in Athens, Ohio, not Athens, Georgia. In the scheme of my research, however, he fit perfectly for this piece to my puzzle. He has been



involved with *Humans vs. Zombies* at an Ohio university for six years and knows the game



*Figure 17.* Ian, speaking to me via Skype.

intimately, as well as the motivations and philosophies of those who participate in this game, so location does not exempt him from the information I sought for this research. Ian (24) actually graduated two years ago with a master's degree in video game design and is currently unemployed, but still runs the *Humans vs. Zombies* (an elaborate game of tag) game at his alma mater. He explained

that while the group of 150 or so participants are mostly college-age students, their club allows middle and high school students to participate in this game as well; in fact, they even have parents and senior citizens participate in their games. The *Humans Vs. Zombies* game is free to those who participate and plays games several times a year, and each session lasts one week—24 hours each day, in class and out of class. This year marks the 10-year anniversary of the club for his university.

### **Julie**

I include myself as “observer as participant” (Merriam, 2009, p. 124), in that my field notes both at the Walker Stalker Convention and at the Gulfport, Mississippi zombie run help me to have access to large groups of people and information, but especially in the run, as a participant second to being observer. Since participants in the zombie run (humans) wore belts with flags that zombies would pull off to “infect” the participant, I started out infected by not having any flags at all (I did not want to be tackled with my video camera). So I was there

running with everyone else as I filmed (a feat), but everyone knew that I was gathering information since I had the camera. In fact, I caused many deaths that day as people paid an inordinate amount of attention to my camera and me and not enough to the zombies hiding behind trees and in the dark corners of the fairground where the race was held. I also am a true participant in that in the last twenty years I have run a range of races from 5Ks (which was the distance of this zombie race) to marathons in 33 states and three countries. I knew what to expect, or at least I thought I did, since it was my first zombie race. This definitely was a different group of people than those who typically runs in races; for most of them, it was their first race ever. So Julie is a 55-year-old doctoral student and high school English and journalism teacher, has been married for 32 years, is a mother of three grown daughters and two grandchildren, and maybe most important, is a woman who fears zombies.

### **Recruitment, and Incentives**

Recruitment began by word-of-mouth using former students as a starting point. I then attended the Walker-Stalker convention in October 2016 in Atlanta for field notes and observation of participants and to film background video for the documentary. With all involved, there were no incentives to participate, although most people were excited to speak to me about their love of zombies. By chance, I met a former co-worker and her family at the Walker-Stalker convention, and we set up an interview later at her office so I could talk to her. I had expected to only find younger people in their twenties and was surprised by all the families and younger children there, so I wanted to explore that aspect of this culture. I traveled to a north Georgia university to speak to students there, and then to Gulfport, Mississippi for a zombie run 5K event where I randomly picked participants who were willing to be interviewed for shorter interviews. While I incorporated these shorter conversations into my documentary,

this chapter focused on the five people interviewed as well as the integration of my own field notes as a participant/observer in the zombie run in Mississippi.

## **Research Procedures**

### **Validity, Reliability, and Biases**

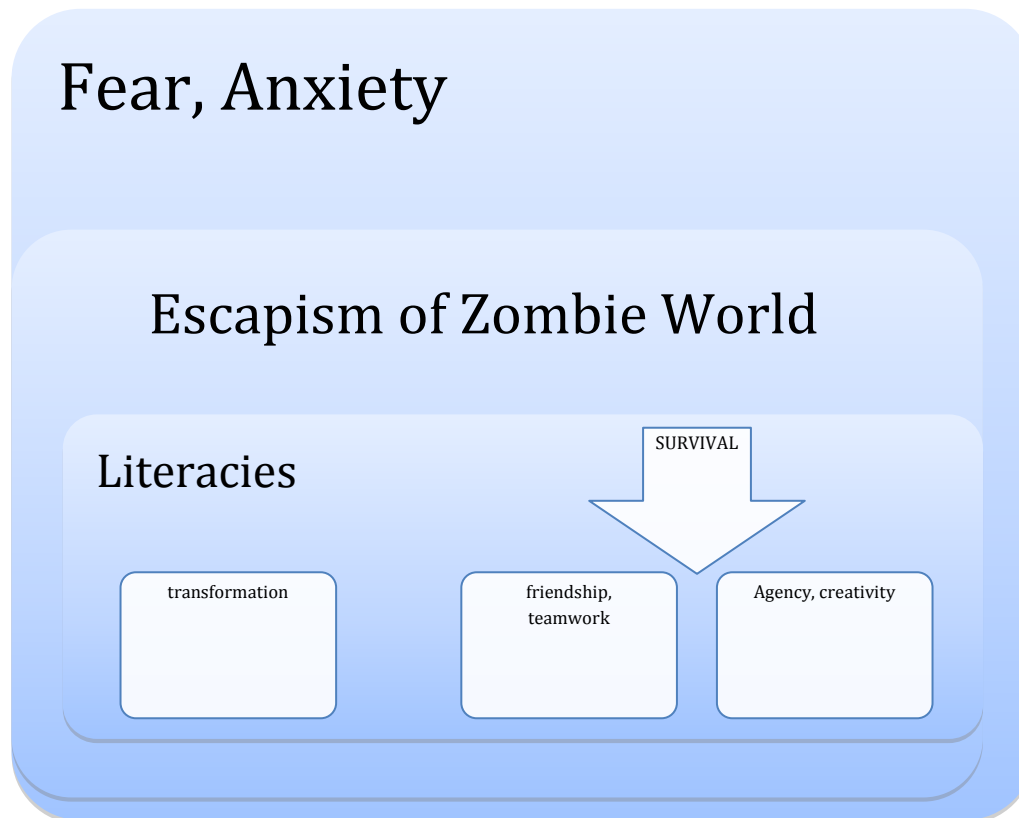
The first step was to write the interview questions for the participants. The questions followed this semi-structured framework as outlined here, but I added follow-up questions for their different roles (family participants, make-up, etc.). I also gave the participants the questions at least a day before the interview so they could feel more comfortable with the interview and answer more fully, but the semi-structured elements of the discussion allowed for true responses in a conversational atmosphere rather than a formal question/answer format (Merriam, 2009, p. 89). Also, since part of my research involves filming people who could be recognized, I wrote a consent form (Appendix B) that detailed what I was trying to accomplish through the interview, that it would last about one hour, and that the participants could choose to not participate in the research at any time, even after the interview. They also understood that their interviews (all or part) could be part of the documentary that I was creating for this dissertation. I also stated in this form that the participants would have the opportunity to view the transcript and make adjustments if they felt that their transcripts were incorrect. After transcribing the interviews, I emailed the transcripts to the participants for their approval. Other than grammatical issues and some corrections with names included their discussions, they all approved the written interviews.

I interviewed participants both at their homes and at live action role-playing events using the attached questions, as well as any follow-up questions that would be appropriate to encourage more complete responses. I also filmed these people as they participated in viewing

zombie media and their subsequent discussions, as well as their participation in live action role playing (zombies versus humans games, zombie 5K runs, etc.). The Ohio participant provided me with videos of his Humans vs. Zombies game activities, largely because of my distance from him and the difficulty of traveling there.

Since one of the reasons that I sought this research was to understand the motivations behind people's involvement in these activities, and it is important to note that I personally am not a horror or zombie fan. Another problem that could be considered with most of the people I interviewed could be that I either had taught them or worked with them at one time, and that could create familiarity that might influence the results of this research. It certainly made the interviews more comfortable for all concerned, and since we already had a friendly relationship, I feel that they could be more candid with me. Of course, they were much more forthcoming before I turned the camera on; it seemed to make them more shy, in that there was suddenly an anonymous viewer looking at them through the lens in addition to my own gaze. Still, since I carefully recorded, transcribed, and coded their interviews, I was comfortable that the methodical process of analyzing their interviews line by line created reliable results. In fact, I found myself surprised at how little I knew about them as the interviews progressed.

Another possible limitation concerns the fact that Tatianna and Georgiashea were interviewed together; on one hand it enabled me to observe the repartee and honesty from each in that they served as "fact checks" for each other, but on the other hand it could impact the content of their responses if they were concerned what the other would think of their replies to the questions. The first outweighs the latter in this situation, and I was able to gather valuable insight into the friendship that can occur in this culture.



*Figure 18.* This chart illustrates the relationships between the themes that emerged through coding the interviews as well as the field notes and researcher observations.

### **Coding the Interviews**

I used initial coding as described by Saldaño (2013) because of its versatility with a variety of sources, including not only interviews but also with field notes and video. I appreciated the organic nature of this process and the idea that I could take the interviews line by line, manually coding as I read and then go back to determine themes and fine tune theories based on the interviews, but I could also use my field notes and analytic memo writing to include my own observations in this format. Themes emerged fairly quickly and while I only conducted five full interviews, the same ideas appeared again and again. As I coded, I looked for emotions as well as recurring concepts and used In Vivo for sections that were appropriate to describe their feelings about this topic. Sub topics also emerged, such as violence and weapons, which fit into

larger themes like fear and anxiety. For example, as participants discussed their motivations for their interactions with zombie media, they spoke of fear and anxiety—not of zombies themselves, necessarily, but of world events such as pandemic disease, war, and crimes against themselves or family members. While they recognize that the dystopian world of the zombies is “far- fetched,” they did have real concerns about the world that they do live in. This brought about another important theme that was universally discussed with these people who say that the idea of zombies reinforces: survival and the need for self-reliance. Also related to this was friendship and teamwork that comes about with survival (they said in order to survive, one must not be alone), not necessarily as the desire to escape, another theme that fit within transformation of makeup and the desire to dissemble, to become something or someone else in order to “break the monotony” or “cover up” who they really are. After examining these initial codes and themes and determining how they flow into each other, I pulled literacies from these interactions and connected these skills to how the participants feel about how they identify themselves.

### **Themes**

#### **Fear, Anxiety of the Future—and the Present**

All of the participants interviewed had some concerns about the future of the world they live in, although some were more optimistic than others. George in particular maintained the anthropocentric view that humanity could solve any of its future problems, regardless of what other creature (zombie) or plague might come. He and Ian both stated that some type of apocalypse might happen, but that humans would prevail, illustrating Wallin’s (2015) posthumanist suggestion that “humanist mantras of hope and optimism remain moral mainstays, and at the end of the day it often still suffices to acquiesce that ‘we are all human’” (p. 141). The optimism of George and Ian cannot dwell in the same arena with the idea that this world could

ever exist without humanity; we do not like to think about “the death of the anthropocentric conceit that the world is *as it is for us*” (p. 143). Tatianna also discussed the perennial worries that society faces—the economy, technology out of control, terrorism, resources, nuclear disaster—and that people worry more out of habit than sincere concern. “Everybody is like, ‘Oh my goodness, we’re not going to be OK.’ Even if a zombie apocalypse did happen tomorrow, there are so many people that are so prepared for it, it would be shut down in two seconds.” Everyone is “freaking out” but does not actually think it will happen, echoing the optimism of George and Ian. Therefore, they feel that whatever comes will come, and humanity will be up to the challenge and will survive any catastrophic event. Yet, still they are attracted to zombie media, which portrays the end of humanity or the near annihilation of our species.

Still, the future of humanity was not the major concern for these people, but the present, and Kelly as a mother was much more concerned with the type of humans that her children might meet now in the world than a distant catastrophic event of the future. Kelly is not concerned not that her small children watching the violence on *The Walking Dead* would affect them or make them afraid, because she wanted them to fear what she perceived as the real dangers, “I don’t want them to be afraid of the fake zombie that’s getting zapped,” she said. “I want them to be scared of kidnappers. I want them to be scared of people breaking into their home, and men and women physically and mentally abusing them.” She also wanted them to “be scared of the devil” and “not going to heaven,” and as she began to describe these fears, she took her glasses off, leaned forward toward me in earnestness, because she said she had been criticized by others for allowing her children to watch this program. Kelly also juxtaposes fears of strangers with “being scared of the devil” and “being scared of not going to heaven.” To her, these were more real than a zombie television existence, and especially in the Bible Belted-South

where if one does not go to heaven, he or she goes to a dark, hot place to live forever with the devil. This does not appear to be so different than as Wallin describes the undead, “Wandering, digging, and occupying the sub-astral recesses of the planet, the zombie oozes melancholic black bile from its corporeal, sundered body” (p. 144). In this sense, this traditional Christian version of a devil seems zombie-like.

In this portion of the interview, Kelly’s anaphoric repetition of “I want them to be scared” struck me oddly in that the reiteration of this particular clause seemed ironic in that she *wanted* them to be afraid of the people in our society now, a group who should have been much tamer than that of a fictional zombie world.

I want them to be aware of their surroundings and what’s going on with them we’re in parking lots, and when we’re at malls, and that they don’t need to speak to strangers.

Those are the type of things I want my children to be scared of. I don’t want my children to be scared of something that we all enjoy as a family that is, in my opinion, very easy to draw the line between reality and not a reality. (Kelly)

This anxiety that Kelly feels can also be explored through affect theory; her fear for her children is evident in her repeated “I want them to be afraid” which is passed to them almost as a defense mechanism created to keep them safe, but I wonder if it also causes them to feel their mother’s angst. Ahmed (2010) says that “anxiety is sticky: rather like Velcro, it tends to pick up whatever comes near” (p. 36). Kelly is afraid for her family, and since children mimic their parents feelings and views until they are old enough to decide on their own, the parental fears are passed down from generation to generation.

Kelly’s fear that strangers would harm her children illustrates the paradox that I saw repeatedly with these participants and others I met during this research. They, like those



characters they portray in their LARPing activities, love the autonomy that human survivor characters portray in zombie media, yet still they “circle the wagons,” pulling their people close for protection from the world. They are in a horde, but somewhat still alone. When I talked to Kelly during this interview and processed this long list of fears, I remembered watching her family interact as they mingled with the 35,000 strangers who attended the Walker Stalker Convention; they stayed together as a tight group that day. She did not view this group as strangers, however. Kelly spoke of the camaraderie she experienced at the Walker Stalker convention, and how she felt that she was on the “same playing field” as everyone else there, “There was no judging . . . everyone there was there for the same reason. That day was laid back and you could chitchat with anyone.” She also spoke of how there were no cliques, no place there where she did not feel comfortable. She is able to resolve her fear of strangers being around her children with the common articulations created by their common interest, where she would not be judged for this interaction, but rather admired for it.

Tatianna also spoke of anxiety, and described how this angst is symbolized by the zombie figure. Tatianna, who was the only participant (beside me) who expressed a fear of zombies themselves, said that her early exposure to it by an uncle who sat her down to watch Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) at age eight, so she is “terrified of it, which why I’m interested in it.” In this film, a group of people takes refuge in a mall, an environment probably more known to her than previous zombie movies that might have shown settings that seemed more out of reach. She said that her anxiety now is not in physical harm from the real world, but losing interest in living at all. She said that the immediate gratification of her generation (symbolized in the consumerism and mall atmosphere of the movie that frightened her) creates an insatiable desire that refuses to die, like zombies: “That’s what zombies are. They’re trudging along waiting for

that little bit of what's going to make them happier or satisfy, or food, and then they attack it. They swarm until there's nothing left. Then, they're back to their trudging life." This particular idea emerges again in transformation and overlaps because part of the escape of this life is to become someone else through costume or makeup or even through virtual reality.

This paradox of believing, yet not believing that something unpleasant or dangerous is ahead for our society was expressed by participants in the zombie run as well. This race was different than any of the others in which I had participated before, largely because of the motivations of both the runners and the zombies for being there at all. I observed and talked to a range of people who not only believed in a dystopian-like possibility, but also had experienced something that seemed to them as surreal as a zombie apocalypse, Hurricane Katrina. This was a man, his wife, and his mother-in-law who had come to run the race more as a practice in being prepared and physically fit so as to never have to be unprepared again—like they were when the hurricane destroyed their home in New Orleans. For them, the race was not only entertaining but just as valuable as the four-day food supply they kept in their car at all times—just in case. There was also a group of military men from the nearby army base whose futures could be more dangerous as they are deported to places where war is a reality rather than theory. Facing zombies was a “fun weekend” compared to their regular activities of war preparation. The soldiers remained unscathed and “uninfected” by the zombies in this race (many who chose to dress up rather than run and were so tired that they did not even chase anyone toward the end of the race). Massumi (2010) speaks of this future fear, calling it “the future birth of the affective fact” (p. 52), explaining even if one survives a current threat, there is always the “nagging potential of the next after being even worse, and of a still worse next again after that.” So this man I met at the race survived Hurricane Katrina, but this only pushes him to always be prepared

for the possibility (or probability, based on his preparations) for something equally bad or worse in the future. As Massumi says, “The future of threat is forever” (p. 53). This threat feels real to us, he adds, and justifies our preemptive attempts to stave off the event and is “legitimated by the affective fact of fear, actual facts aside” (p. 54). Yes, zombies are fictional, but the fear of our world that they represent is real—at least to these participants.

### **Weapons, from Katana to Nerf Blasters**

Fear seems to walk hand-in-hand with weapons in this culture, and serves as a way to be ready for the “forever future” threat described by Massumi in the last section. The topic of weapons, though a subcategory of fear and anxiety, was prominent in these interviews. I was surprised as I entered the race entrance to the zombie run that a man and young volunteer were checking bags before entering the fairgrounds and as they looked through the video equipment in the bag, I asked what they were looking for. They said they were searching for weapons—both fake and real—because this particular event attracts people who bring swords, knives, and guns to “protect” themselves during the run. This kind of check point surprised me because while it may be more common in larger running events after the 2014 Boston Marathon bombing, is rare at events as common as a 5K race.

Weapons and the violence that they cause are a major part of zombie media and culture—not if one is playing the zombie, whose weapons are his bite and sheer mass of the hordes—but for the survivor, the association which most of the participants claimed. Kelly described in great detail how she had dressed like Michonne from *The Walking Dead*, a “bad ass” and “bad to the bone” woman whose story is “far-fetched” but something she could understand, the need for a mother to protect her children no matter what. This “sticky” fear for her children also bound her to this character, and in a way provided her with the comfort that if something bad happened, she

too could protect and defend her family. Kelly's hero in this show is the character Michonne, a black woman with dreads and who brandishes a Japanese katana (sword). Kelly, who is a white, southern blonde mother who works at a quiet school office 10 hours each weekday, chooses to identify with this strong woman because she takes care of her family even after they were infected and became zombies. She said that she admires this woman because of this intense dedication, and she spoke excitedly and in detail about how she searched for just the right detail in order to dress like this warrior woman for the Walker Stalker Convention. Kelly's animated explanation of how she found a katana to wear with her costume as well as a little knife strapped to her leg (which she had to remove on entering the Walker Stalker convention) demonstrates her own desire to keep her children safe from the "real" dangers discussed in the previous fear section in this chapter. "She (Michonne) loves them so much that she couldn't let go of them. The world outside of her had gone to hell," she explained. This character chained her boyfriend and son, both now zombies, to herself to protect them. Kelly, mother of four, could easily relate to this need to protect her family from a community that she said had become "dangerous." She also dressed her five-year-old son and her husband as Daryl, who is "a motorcycle riding bad ass" who wears as a trophy the ears of the zombies he kills around his neck, and both father and son carried Daryl's famous cross bow as part of their costume.

George also described Daryl as "bad ass," but valued his contributions for other reasons. George, who described himself as "outdoorsy" said that he likes how anything can become a weapon in *The Walking Dead*, and that he and his friends had created their own bows and arrows on one of their hunting trips. This show, which was in a large part filmed in Georgia, allowed him a fantasy world that he could almost go and experience as he kayaked down the South River or hunted in the Georgia woods. For George, the show created what Ahmed (2010) describes as

“happy objects” in that he sees these characters in *The Walking Dead* in the same environment as his own happy memories of the woods and hunting, and acts as motivating, affective force for him. “To be affected ‘in a good way’ involves an orientation toward something as being good. Orientations register the proximity of objects, as well as shape what is proximate to the body” (p. 32). He connects with the people in this series and is oriented toward them because they participate (even fictionally) with the activities for which he spends much of his time doing. I asked him if watching the show affected his feeling of safety in the forests—especially at night—and he laughed and said that he and his friends had joked about zombies in the woods during their camping trips. For him, the weapons involved in zombie media do not represent defense as much as they do self-reliance and hunting. Speaking of the character Daryl in *The Walking Dead*, he said that he connected with him and that he was “relatable” because he “did a lot of the things that I did prior to watching the shows,” like camping, creating lean-tos, fishing, and hunting and the show had a “primal” appeal to it. “It’s so cool seeing him do some of the same stuff we did, whether it’s hunting, or fishing, or trying to make some kind of trap to catch an animal. I think that’s just really cool, being able to make something out of scraps,” George said. He added that his study of mechanical engineering meshed with this desire to create something from available sources.

Ian and his group use Nerf Blaster guns for their game, but knowing that they are toy guns does not necessarily make their contest any less stressful. During game week, players can be “killed” at any time traveling between classes, going from dorm to work, etc. “It makes for a really intense experience, because what’s normally just you waking up at 8:00 in the morning, and walking half asleep to your early morning class turns into you having to have your Nerf gun checking over your shoulder every couple seconds, to make sure there’s no zombies sneaking up

behind you,” he said. Weapons for this game in other clubs vary; some weapons are as simple as rolled up socks.

This group’s motivations for playing the game surprised me, in that my original idea of participants being less than optimistic about their futures and that they were acting out a dystopian end proved misguided. Ian described his association with the group as a “clique” (of “nerdy types”) who were mocked by other—(he paused here) types of people on campus that said, “Ha, ha, you’re playing with kids’ toys.” In a way, Ian and his group of Humans vs. Zombies participants keep Ahmed’s “happy objects” (nerf guns from their childhood) in close proximity, connecting them with others who have similar happy memories of childhood chases. In college, especially during the last couple of years before graduation, a desire to return to childhood is a natural reaction to the fear of the world they have yet to face as adults. They then create new associations and new happy-affect moments through the college chasing game, further binding them together against their current threat—those who would mock their fun.

### **The Lure of Escape in the Zombie World**

Ian and his group reveal one element of escape from the real world, in his case, moving beyond college and onto what often proves to be a mundane job as an adult. Most of the participants I interviewed discussed the fantasy world that zombies provide and how we can not only play out our fears through interacting with this media, but can also take it a step further in the LARPing activities in which they participate; where media and video games can take the players to a virtual reality, the Humans vs. Zombies game and zombie runs allow people to physically act out their fantasies. Another form of entering this alternate world comes from the transformation of makeup and costume, where participants can leave their own persona and worries of the world behind and become someone else—often someone they view as more

interesting. The escapism of zombies provides an avenue for exploration into something more exciting, and some of the participants in this research spoke to “breaking the monotony,” and that we as a society are “numb” and like “robots,” and “trudging” in the normal world.

Grossberg (2010) speaks to this everyday life and identity:

It seems to me that this is the realm of “everyday life.” Not in the sense that there is a singular everyday life that is always the same. It is not always the same, but a historical articulation of that realm of “how one lives.” Everyday life is not simply the material relationships; it is a structure of feeling, and that is where I want to locate affect. (p. 313)

As Georgiashea describes below, people seek to shed their everyday lives in order to “feel” more, and as we look at each of these stories, we can see the need to reinvent ourselves and to reclaim autonomy as we go about our everyday existence formed by economic and society constraints of earning money to survive and overall expectations from our capitalist structures.

### **Transformation: Disassembling the Self**

While all the participants discussed the escape from the world in some form or another through transformation, Georgiashea had a unique perspective in that she saw the people that she had in her makeup chair before and after the transformation. She said she studied at and became certified from a special makeup effects school in Atlanta, where she began studying at age 16, and through this connection worked on B-grade movies and *Z Nation* on the Syfy Network. She also worked at horror fests and haunted houses during the month of October, so was more aware of the transformation processes than the other participants; she said that makeup is all covering something—not necessarily a blemish (especially since she is adding wounding for a zombie look)—but something deeper. She spoke to me as she applied zombie makeup to Tatianna.

There was a man that I met. He was so classy. He was so nice. He seemed like such a nice person. He seemed like such a cool dude. He sat down, and got in the chair, and we talked about his family. Next thing I know he's in zombie makeup and he's running around like he's lost his mind. I love it. I feel like that's what most of the people do. Once it gets on [the makeup] they don't have to be the businessman. They don't have to be the father. They don't have to be this person; they can be this other person, which what makeup lets you do. It lets you be someone that you're not. (Georgiashea)

Tatianna spoke of how this transformation can change how people act; for example, during one zombie walk in Atlanta in which she and her family were a part she saw a large group of the horde swarm a tour bus and try to tip it over. She said that her parents dressed her up like a zombie and then they all went to march in the horde. For the most recent walk, she carried her baby sister, who was a "little painted up zombie." Tatianna said that she still struggled with the fear of zombies, even after repeated exposure to them. "I've gotten so much better, but every single time I have a nightmare it's about zombies, which is a problem. I'm terrified. It's funny actually," she said. As I interviewed Georgiashea while she completed the zombie makeup on Tatianna, she remained silent. After the makeup was on and she could talk again without getting in trouble for moving around too much, Tatianna added a comment about her makeup artist and the topic of transformation:

She [Georgiashea] is one of the people that is scared to feel her emotions, and so she likes doing the gore and zombie to distract from her own life. A lot of people do makeup for those reasons, "I'm going to just disregard what's going on in my life right now, so that I can absorb myself in something else that is big, distracting, and cool."  
(Tatianna)



Georgiashea did not respond to this statement. Tatianna's comments seemed to be the most introspective and insightful of all the people I interviewed. This was especially interesting to me because as I had taught her in AP Literature several years before, I remembered that her dyslexia had caused her to be in special education to help her in her studies. I asked her permission to discuss her dyslexia as a student, and she allowed me to include it here, "Go ahead, I'm an open book," she said. She always seemed to have a sure sense of who she was even then, and always provided interesting commentary on the literature we read. She was not shy about the reading problems that she had, openly admitting during class that she needed assistance, and therefore was able to transform herself from someone in special education to a student who succeeded in what her fellow students (and her teachers) would consider to be a more cerebral course (AP Literature). She denied the societal structures imposed upon her, the idea that if one has a learning disability, she or he cannot be successful. She surprised me in class then, because I unconsciously followed the societal assumptions that if a student has a disability, then they will have difficulty understanding complex concepts. She surprised me again in these interviews, causing me to question my own preconceptions of all the students in my classroom.

Kelly's escape seemingly came from a desire to leave the rigors of work behind in order to create a world where she could be a powerful woman and protective mother. Kelly's demeanor during the interview was the most animated when she described her family's transformation into characters from *The Walking Dead*. Her transformation was described in the weapons section above, but she excitedly detailed how since her entire family was dressed up, people at the Walker Stalker convention asked her and her children for autographs and wanted to have pictures made with them. "People were looking at us. They knew who my daughter was. Somebody came up and asked my daughter for her autograph. It was so funny. They said, 'Are

you Penny?’ She goes, ‘Yes.’ She said, ‘Can I have your autograph?’ It was the coolest thing ever” (see Appendix C). She also described the virtual experience that her 16-year-old son and husband had in an RV moved into the conference center to house this attraction. When I was there, I saw several people in wheelchairs participating in this experience, indicating that anyone could play zombie hunter, escaping any physical restrictions they might have in the real world. Kelly said that she followed her son and husband into the RV to watch the virtual reality experience, “They really thought they were being attacked by zombies. They’re cussing. My son! I didn’t want him to know that I was in the room, so I kept my lips sealed. They’re like [screams]. They were really scared. They’re shooting these zombies. It was so fun. We did that.” She said that last sentence with pride.

### **Survival Skills and Agency**

Most of the participants discussed the importance of survival and that this topic was the most applicable to real life. They symbolically compared a zombie apocalypse to other current events, whether economic, terrorist, or personal hardships such as a chronic illness. As they discussed survival, however, each of them included teamwork and friendship as a necessity for survival in one form or another. They also noted that these friendships, like many included in zombie media story lines, were varied and diverse. People from all over were brought together to fight a common enemy (zombies), people who would not normally have interacted at all join for a common cause. These unlikely friendships that occurred in the zombie media was mirrored in the participants’ lives as well, and all of them spoke of new connections that they made through their interaction with the zombie culture. These collaborative groups resemble Grossberg’s (2005) alliances that exist within cultural formations (p. 71), and each of the

participants described friendships that would have not existed outside the connection with the zombie culture.

Each spoke of applicable skills or literacies that engaging with the zombie culture had produced for them. Many of them spoke about self-reliance and teamwork interchangeably, not seeming to recognize the incongruity of relying totally on one's self versus relying on others in teamwork. Again, this seems to follow the paradoxical zombie alone in a crowd. Maybe self-reliance really means agency to these participants, in that through the skills they gain (or think about gaining) as they interact with this culture, they are able to *choose* their future. Henze (2000) describes agency as “the opportunity (or the right) for an oppressed person to represent and act for herself, as opposed to simply providing the epistemic ‘grounds’ for another to represent her and act on her behalf” (p. 237). Self-reliance (agency) and the creativity required to as George said, “make something out of nothing” was dominant in the interviews, learning how to “get along” or to have “people skills” also were frequently mentioned, as well as “teamwork,” “team thing,” and “sharing.” Kelly labeled the sharing and collaborative nature she saw in *The Walking Dead* characters as family values that she wanted her children to know. All these interactions with different people also helps the participants to “read” others better, to communicate better, and learn how to work out problems with each other. Being creative and using what resources were available intrigued these participants, and they wanted to emulate what they saw the survivors do in their favorite form of zombie media. For Ian, creativity and critical thinking rated higher than survival in acquired skill sets, in that he was creating the story lines in which his players would live during the weeks of their game play.

## **Teamwork, Friendship among the Undead**

I saw firsthand during the zombie run how unlikely people can become part of the horde fairly quickly. This race was different than any other in that in order to progress, runners absolutely needed the people surrounding them to advance in the contest; in other races, runners work independently to pass or beat the other participants, not to stop and collaborate with them. My new friends from New Orleans helped me through the first wooded pass of zombies who trapped us on a narrow road. The husband, who was a Marine, distracted them so we could run around them—and we made it safely by them. He invited others to join the group, reminding them that they had better luck as a unit than individuals. He became a leader from the beginning, encouraging his group to either push ahead or slow down, going back to make sure all of his people were there. I couldn't help but reflect on that if I were in a real crisis, this is the kind of person I would want in my group.

George spoke of how his group of five or six gets together every week to watch *The Walking Dead*, and they are people from Florida, Georgia, Texas, New Jersey, and Tennessee “all sitting on the couch together,” where they meet in one of the dorm rooms to watch. The invitation came as they talked and realized each of them liked zombies and the show. In fact, the differences in George and his friends mirrored the articulations in this television series. George said that the characters in the show “develop on their own and in different ways,” and that “collectively they're independent, collecting resources, finding places to stay,” which interests him. He likes seeing how people deal with problems, working together to solve them; he describes a favorite episode where Glenn (a young character about his age) faces a problem:

They're in a camp. These bad guys are coming. They capture them, taking their resources. They have them prisoner. The whole show is about this group trying to

reconnect. My favorite episodes are the ‘people versus people,’ like how the different groups react in the zombie apocalypse. (George)

Eventually the episode ends with a “family come-together,” and the group is unified once more. He talks about how the characters on the show represent very different people, a former skinhead, an Asian, a preacher, “all from different sides of the spectrum coming together” to solve the problems that the zombies provide, which to him represent “long-term hardships.”

Tatianna spoke of the different people that she had met during the zombie walks, from “completely separate backgrounds, like doctors and teachers, random people that you would never expect to be on the level that they are.” Ian said that “80 percent” of his friends, including his current girlfriend, he met playing *Humans Vs. Zombies*, and that while they are different ages (“my first zombie kill was somebody’s grandmother”), most of them qualify as the “nerdy” type. In each case, these participants considered themselves as part of a community—that just happened to like zombies—but had deeper connections as they came to know each other better. Ian spoke of being “harassed” by other less “nerdy” students on campus, but the community that the players had created with each other trumped any judgment they received from their more traditional student body.

### **Family Values**

Kelly said that she uses the time spent watching *The Walking Dead* as a family to discuss important life lessons and family values, particularly Christian values of sharing, putting another’s needs above personal needs, and caring for others.

How are you teaching children something from zombies being killed? What I think happens is that children get a sense of family values, how to be there for one another, how important it is to be together during crisis. It’s important to pick up life skills, stuff

that you don't necessarily learn in a classroom. These characters teach my kids those things that you don't necessarily learn in your math book and in your social studies book.

(Kelly)

For instance, the characters in the show have to share food and resources and keep each other safe, to "have one another's back." In order to survive, the characters cannot be "stingy." She said that it opens up discussions with her children as to why certain characters act either in their own interest or unselfishly. "It subliminally teaches them that the strength and the importance of loving one another and all being there as a team," she said. Since she works so much, she said that she could not control everything that they watched while she was gone, whether they were on PlayStation, on YouTube, or other media. However, when they sat down and watched their favorite zombie program, she was able to "point out the positive attributes of these characters and things that they're doing and why they're doing it," reinforcing the family values that she wanted to instill in her children.

Tatianna, however, seemed bothered that her 2-year-old baby sister is exposed to the violence of zombie media, especially with her own experiences. "It shouldn't be okay for my baby sister to be able to walk through the living room while she's playing and see a zombie eating another person on the TV and be like, 'It's okay.'" Family values for Georgiashea were exhibited a little differently in that she said her parents completely supported her in her desire to be a makeup artist and would even wait up with her until 2 a.m. during the Halloween season; she said that when she was 14-16 years old and wanted to practice makeup for fright fests in Atlanta, her parents would allow her to stay there until she was done and would then take her home. They also supported her when she thought she might be interested in mortuary makeup, finding family friends who allowed her to work with them at their funeral business. Teaching

the family values of sharing, cooperation, support, and protection were dominant topics in these interviews. For example, Kelly, associated watching *The Walking Dead* with happy associations and family discussions about life, right, and wrong. These discussions became like Ahmed's (2010) happy objects:

If you receive something delightful in a certain place, then the place itself is invested with happiness, as being “what” good feeling is directed toward. Or if you are given something by somebody whom you love, then the object itself acquires more affective value: just seeing something can make you think of another who gave you that something. If something is close to a happy object then it can become happy by association. (Ahmed, 2010, p. 33)

Therefore, Kelly and her family associate this zombie media as a pleasurable activity (happy object) and a chance to be together as a family, connecting not only her family with the media, but also with each other in a way that zombies = happiness = family.

### **Creativity—and what lies beneath**

All of the participants discussed how their interaction with this culture made them more creative, whether it was Kelly brainstorming and searching for just the right touch for her family's costumes, or George's desire to go out in the woods and try and create his own weapons like the characters in *The Walking Dead*. Tatianna, who wants to go to school to learn how to design sets for movies, was interested in how the green screen and costuming created the illusion of limbless bodies crawling realistically across the ground. “There's a difference between somebody running after you and then something that looks like it will not stop running after you until it eats you,” she said. She spoke of the relationship between the makeup artist and the set designer and how important that collaboration can be.

Georgiashea, who has moved beyond the sheer makeup skills because of her professional involvement, said that the creativity she has learned from her experience is intertwined with her skills of reading people. The mortuary where she worked taught her to study faces and to apply it to her zombie makeup skills.

You do realize the way people start to look, the longer an old woman who's sat on her own bed. When you get a fresh person from a hospital, but then you get a decayed person. Someone that didn't have family that was around them very often, someone that died alone. You can tell on their face, in the expressions that they made when they died. If it was a peaceful one, you know it was. If it was a really bad horrible death, you know it too. You can tell on someone's face. It's etched in their deaths. (Georgiashea)

She said that she used this knowledge that somehow transcends simple makeup to apply it to the work with her zombie customers, saying to herself, "This is the character that you're going to be, based on what you look like right now." She said that she has learned to "read" people in order to better represent who they are. She said that this experience has enabled her to "better interact with actual, living people" from doing makeup.

Ian, in his capacity as unpaid administrator of the college Humans Vs. Zombie club, also had much to say about the satisfaction and feeling of accomplishment when he creates a "story line" for the game that really works, when all the elements of the players and the game come together well. Like Georgiashea, he spoke of being able to read people better and how a player's true colors will come out during the game. "You can kind of gauge their personality based on how they act in Humans Vs. Zombies," he said, describing the gamut of players: some will blast their Nerf guns and throw themselves in front of the zombies for their friends, while others will run and leave their teammates "for dead, more or less." He said his satisfaction is derived from



creating a good story line that “suddenly thrusts” the players into a zombie apocalypse scenario where they have to collaborate with other people around them to “survive.” He said that in order to create a good game that can survive the week, they have to consider “balance” and time management, and so his leadership skills as an administrator are necessary to get his people to show up on time and keep the game afloat. He described his creative process:

Say, we have a mission that takes place on a bridge. What if this happens? What if the humans decide to not go onto the bridge? How do we motivate them to go onto the bridge that could potentially be a very bad spot for them game-wise? We have to plan it on a spectrum because we never know the exact number of humans or zombies we’re going to have at any point in the week, so we have to design our missions and our story line around what if something happens the second night, and 30 more humans are turned into zombies than we thought there was going to be? (Ian)

Ian, like the other participants, denies societal constraints that require that he has what would be considered to be a “normal” paying job (although he intimated that a paying job was necessary to survive) to consider his own worth. He, through the administration of this game, hones his skills as a leader, problem solver, and creative force for his unique community. Ian’s story brings us full circle to Zizek’s comments about being able to see a dystopian future easier than fixing the economic problems that face us; in order to do so, we need to recognize the value of activities such as Ian’s game-playing leadership skills and incorporate opportunities for them in our economies.

### **Summary**

Maybe we too easily dismiss popular culture as entertainment, as something to distract us from the more important activities in life that we do, the money-making, grinding every-day

work that creates what participants in these interviews called a “trudging life.” We assume that because it is fantasy or play, that its value only lies in its ability to make us forget our *real* lives. This is, after all, why I began this research—I did not understand the motivation and dedication to this type of fantasy world and was amazed at its depth and variety of activities that are tied to zombie media. I was also unsure of the value of the violence in this media, and remain unconvinced that human-eating zombie media is appropriate for all ages. Some of the participants in this research are adamant that the line between reality and fantasy is clear (especially Kelly), although some current theorists would argue against this idea (Grossberg, 1992; Bishop, 2015). While participants may not recognize the connections between the fearful media they watch and the present-day anxieties that they have, the two seem to run parallel courses.

Also, it should not surprise us that we, in our mind-numbing standardized world, seek new ways to learn skills. These participants are attracted to the idea of being self-reliant, and will go to all lengths to mimic these “survivor” skills. These people have at least some understanding that zombies represent something bigger in their lives, something in the news that seems to loom over them—whether it is economic hardship, terrorist threats, disease, or personal attacks. They create games in which they can create worlds in which they can prove that they are up to the challenges that life may thrust upon them, and in this process, learn how to “read” people, how to collaborate, how to make the most of resources, to “create something from nothing.”

We also crave each other’s company—and enjoy the diverse acquaintances made in that association. These participants emphasize that the connections they made with others enriched their lives and provided a supportive network for whatever apocalypse may await them in their

uncertain futures. Come or not, they want to be ready. These skills do not seem to be available in school now; we instead are enabled and spoon-fed so we can achieve prescribed numerical “milestones” (which Georgia named their statewide standardized test). We crave knowledge and when we do not find the skills that we inherently desire to learn, we look to outside sources for this education. Grossberg (1992) discusses how this works with identity and how we constantly struggle “to win a bit a space” for ourselves in the world (p. 114), often in places other than “where, when, or how some people might want them to.” In fact, we may not even recognize that we are learning and gaining skills in the most unlikely places—even in the world of zombies. These participants are more hopeful in this role-playing, and instead of becoming more isolated; they seek bonding with others to create a team that could fight off extinction. They choose to become more skilled rather than de-skilled in a world that may be very different tomorrow, and seek to build a community where they can control the outcomes of their lives.

## CHAPTER 6

### IDENTITY: YOU MAY CALL ME A ZOMBIE LOVER

One of the aspects that I sought to know through this research is how participants explore their own identities through interaction with zombie culture. Again, what I thought I would find was people who were disillusioned with life and who believed that humanity had little future ahead—a dystopian ideal. Instead, I discovered that those participants found community and belonging in this culture; in fact, they view the zombie as a catalyst for uncovering their true selves. Kelly finds hidden strength as a mother and woman in her modeling of Michonne; Ian identifies himself as a leader in a unique community at a diverse college campus; George connects with the character Daryl as an autonomous man who can face difficult challenges; Tatianna faces her fears by becoming that which she fears (zombie); and Georgiashea uncovered a new creative existence and community in the zombie culture. Returning to my first research question, “How do zombies help people to navigate their everyday fears?” we can recognize that Bishop’s (2015) idea of zombies as an “allegory of the moment” and our fears of terrorism as the “moment” which propagated more interest in zombie media and cast us into a plethora of dystopian media with catastrophic conditions. These events have at least caused us to consider our future as the human race. As Moya (2000) reminds us, “the issue is at least partly an empirical one: the different identity claims cannot be examined, tested, and judged without reference to existing social and economic structures” (p. 11). This suggests that we should consider the world events in addition to the threatening global terrorism that drives us to examine our frail existences. On the news, we hear of the consequences of global warming; we hear of diseases that are increasingly resistant to our traditionally successful cures; we hear of wars (and wonder about the wars we know exist but do not hear about); and with all the terrifying forecasts

of the future, it would seem that a dystopian end is around the corner. But instead of feeling hopeless and seeking solitude, the participants I studied did the opposite; they sought each other and have set about to discover their strengths.

This is accomplished through affective connections with each other and the media that they love. While we could say that many pop culture avenues could bring the same result (genres of music, Pokémon, etc.), the fact that this culture is inherently non-social in content should cause some additional reflection. This media and culture, because it proposes an apocalypse that threatens our existence in every episode or movie, creates the atmosphere for the question as Ian and Tatianna posed it, what kind of person would we be under pressure? When times are bad, are we the person who abandons our friends so we can survive or will we be leaders and form communities? As these participants consider these questions, their real-life interactions reflect this desire for camaraderie and companionship, not self-survival and solitude.

However, this identity is not set; it is fluid and incomplete and is often achieved by claiming what we are *not* in order to create space for our self (Grossberg, 1996):

Identity is always a temporary and unstable effect of relations which define identities by marking differences. Thus the emphasis here is on the multiplicity of identities and differences rather than on a singular identity and the connections to articulations between the fragments or differences. (p. 89)

The participants I interviewed recognized that not everyone likes this type of media because of its dark and violent content, but found as Kelly said earlier, a feeling of belonging and acceptance that she did not always receive from the society that daily surrounds her. The same was true for Ian, who felt that his club accepted him and valued his skills where others in the college community where he lived and worked would not. If this is anti-social media, then it

creates social connections where we can face fearful things together rather than alone; there is safety in the horde.

If we consider the horde as a community, the concept of what creates this interknit group of people can be elusive. Miller (2011) describes our traditional ideas of community in idealistic, traditional terms as being individuals whose “egos are finite” where individuals come together and share their stories and myth and language, bringing “the interchanges of community” (p. 18). He supports the position that this definition is inadequate to describe community, however, and he counters this with Jean Luc-Nancy’s (1986) work on the theory of communities, (*The Inoperative Community*), where Nancy discusses not individuals, but singularities—not social bonds, but extroverted entities which in a sense cause the individual to vanish into the space between the singularities. “Singularities are extroverted, exposed to other singularities at the limit point where everything vanishes” (p. 19). These singularities, in their exposing their inner selves, “compearing” (p. 20) or appearing together with the other entities who also reach out to the space between the participants, so in a way are both singular and plural at once. In terms of zombie hordes, the participants in this research expose their feelings and fondness for zombie media, and others receive that “exposure” and add their own inner perceptions—alone, but part of a group. Miller also describes multiple groups as a “rhizomatic spatial model” of “overlapping heterogeneous communities” where singularities can belong to multiple communities (p. 21); George belongs to a college student community, but has a special group of zombie fans, and then again belongs to a community of outdoorsy, Southern woods-loving hunters. In this sense, Miller poses that community can never be singular; it is always plural and interconnected with other interlocking communities.

And yet, these communities do attract other singularities together. While Ian is proud of his accomplishments and creative games that he had created for the group, he said that not everyone appreciated his efforts, calling them childish. He said that he and his friends are “for the most part, nerdy,” which conflicts with “the normal college scene” which cannot seem to understand why they are interested in their game. Other students would make fun of them saying, “Oh-ho, you’re a kid, playing with kids’ toys.” He said that they separate themselves from those groups who “are drunk, just harassing us all the time” because his group just wants to have fun. “The main thing that I see that holds people back from playing the game is because they are worried about what other people will think of them,” he said. His group does not concern themselves with the naysayers, because “they may not enjoy doing it, but we do. That’s what separates us.” His comments echo Grossberg’s assessment that we create identity for ourselves through separating or moving away from other groups to create our own space. The players make connections within their own university, but also have games with other universities as well with like-minded people who seem to be dedicated to this activity.

Georgiashea spoke of the people she knows in the culture, from “all walks of life,” who all “got attracted” to it and “obsessed,” who “dig [their] roots in,” losing themselves in the ideas of zombies. George identifies with the skills that the characters in zombie media need to have, and can even embrace the “primal” urges of wanting to hunt, to kill, and to persevere no matter what. Tatianna identifies with it because her family has always been involved with this culture, and even though she knows that zombies are not real, she fears them and yet wants to conquer her fear. She purposefully dresses as a zombie not only to connect with her family, who she considers “strange,” but also to face her fear by becoming that creature which causes her angst. Kelly sees the culture as a form of bonding, a glue for her family for “memory making.” As a

physical reminder of this glue, she said that she made a shadow box with all the pictures and mementos from the Walker Stalker convention and gave it to her husband as a gift. Her husband told her that “it was the best gift anyone had ever given him” (a happy object), and now it is displayed on the wall of their bedroom.

The second research question pertains to social literacies gained through engaging with the zombie culture. This also speaks to the identity question, in that it is through the skills we gain that we can find our place in our communities. Through their LARPing activities, these participants were able to physically put into action some of the skills that they admired in the human survivors of zombie media, and in turn were able to add it to what Grossberg’s (2005) “mattering maps” which are “like investment portfolios” which enable those who have them to “feel that they own their projects and possibilities and that they have some control over their lives and their world” (p. 232). These portfolios of social skills gained travel with them into other aspects of their lives and—still using Grossberg’s investment metaphor—gain interest as they practice and use the new skills. The benefits for this interaction seemed significant for these participants in that the connections made given them a place, or at least the confidence, that they can have some control over their lives.

For example, Ian and Kelly both discussed leadership skills they gained through the zombie culture interaction. Ian learned how to manage dozens of people, ensuring that they took the game as seriously as he did through his example of professionalism. The moderators met for months before the actual game occurred, planning out all the details, the possible outcomes of the participants’ actions during game time, the timing and placement of players for the maximum effect, and coordinated all the dynamics that needed to occur for a successful game in which more than 100 people at one time play. These are leadership skills (organization, logistics, event



planning, publicity, teambuilding) for which most corporations would admire and seek in their employees, yet Ian does it all on a volunteer basis; and in fact, many might dismiss his skills simply because they are associated with a zombie game. Kelly talked about the parent/leadership skills she and her husband gained through discussing the events of *The Walking Dead* with their children. She uses the characters' problems on the show and transfers these episodes to possible real-life scenarios with her children, "Now why did this character do that? Do you think that was a good thing to do? Why?" She is practicing media literacy with her children and leading them to critically appraise their media under her supervision so they can develop these skills too (you might call this interest in the investment portfolio sense). As she said, she is not always with them and needs them to think independently when she is not near supervising their media consumption.

Not only did the participants here gain knowledge in how to lead, but they also developed the ability to better read the people around them. Georgiashea discussed how she had learned to study people to better transform them into other creatures. She studies faces, expressions, and seeks to mimic these in her makeup art. Those who she makes up, like Tatianna, experiment with other "selves" and use this new self to interact with others in totally new ways that are outside their usual comfort levels. I saw this repeatedly throughout this research, in that inhibitions seem to disappear when people are made up as zombies—or as the human zombie media survivors that keep the human race from becoming extinct.

Other literacies gained through this interaction include real-world applications. George watches and applies the outdoor skills he sees on *The Walking Dead* and thinks about how he can "create something from nothing," which directly informs his current training as a mechanical engineer, where creating something new from existing elements is a vital part of the field. Ian

hones his video game story skills by using the same techniques and strategies for the Humans vs. Zombie game. Georgiashea uses the creative makeup skills that has learned creating zombies for other cinematic and live role productions; whether or not she does it for a living seems to be less important to her than the ability it gives her to be innovative and creative with her art in a way that not only pleases her, but the person on whom she is applying the makeup. In fact, all of these skills have community benefits and enable the participants to better find their place in not only the communities they create but in the larger societal group as well. As a society, we value skill sets, and zombie culture provides proficiencies for those who engage in it.

### **Conclusions, Implications of this Research**

While this study of zombie culture is interesting and certainly film worthy in its visually rewarding images, the lessons learned by studying this subculture could be applied to the broader realm of pop culture as well. First, involvement in this form of pop culture matters to those who engage with it. Zombie fans (like fans in other pop cultures) are dedicated to their favorite undead; they willingly and consistently engage with this media as well as role-playing activities in order to do as Grossberg (1992) describes in our struggle “to win a bit a space” for themselves in the world. Through this interaction, they gain skills and knowledge. However, I also wondered about other pop cultures; if this zombie culture is one that invites to create communities, are there popular cultures that do the opposite, to evoke division of people rather than unity? It seems that it should be likely and would be appropriate to pursue so as to help us be more aware of both the positive and negative power of media cultures.

Also, as our everyday existence in school and at work become mundane, we learn in places other than “where, when, or how some people might want them to” (p. 114). Through

these connections with this culture, participants discover the added bonus of sociality and develop skills that enable them to identify with others who also enjoy their participation in both the media involved and the related activities. Another implication from this study lies in education and the rich opportunities we have as teachers to tap into and explore pedagogical options to endorse creativity in our classrooms, which is especially needed in the educational wasteland that standardized testing leaves behind. Understanding how pop culture and media educates our students will enable us to connect with them in unconventional and previously unexplored avenues, as well as teach them critical skills that will help them examine how this participation in and consumption of the media effects them.

Lastly, documentary, in its multi-layered form of visual ethnography, is a valuable research tool that can work in concert with traditional textually limited research methods. I was able to be creative in how I presented my research, rather than a traditionally structured dissertation. Putting together the documentary was at times painful and I had to climb an eternally long learning curve to understand the software, the video equipment, and even the narration of this piece, but it also provides a concise picture of the results of my research. This documentary also lends itself to a more participatory role in research, and the insights I gained by actively engaging with the activities that I was writing about and then filming that experience was instrumental in my understanding the motivations of the participants. Too often we seek to be objective by distancing ourselves from the people we research in order to obtain a more “true” picture of their lives; instead, a more honest approach would be to recognize the closeness of our subjects and continually reflect on our observations so we avoid the illusion of objectivity. And finally, this participatory experience has enabled me to also say this: You may call me a zombie lover.

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## Appendix A

### Questions for Zombie Documentary Interviews

1. Why do you like zombies?
2. Some would say that war games incite violence; how would you defend Humans versus Zombies (for college students involved in this club game)?
3. Is the transformation of makeup and costume important in this culture? Would you be able to participate on the same level without the transformation? Do you feel different when you put on the makeup and costume? Do you act differently?
4. What makes you unique from others who are not involved in this culture?
5. Do you feel this culture is tied to world events? Where do you think humanity will be in 100 years?
6. Can you tell us about friendships you've made? Are these people you would be friends with otherwise? What connects people who like zombies?
7. What qualities of characters in zombie media do you admire most? How would these attitudes or skills that could be useful to you today?

Some of the follow up questions were specific to the people interviewed: Georgiashea was asked about her makeup business with zombies, Kelly's questions also included questions about family involvement in the culture, Ian's questions asked about the Humans vs. Zombie group that he leads.

## Appendix B

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

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DEPARTMENT OF CURRICULUM STUDIES

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### INFORMED CONSENT

You are being asked to participate in an interview in connection with Julie Kimble's research project called *Dystopian Identities: Exhuming the World of Zombies through the Voices of American Youth*. You are being asked to participate because you are familiar with zombie culture and media. You will be asked about how you interact with zombie media, and how it affects your social and cultural life as you understand it through your own experiences.

Our interview will be videotaped and a short documentary about your experiences as well as the experiences of others will be created from the interview.

The interview will be videotaped, transcribed, and edited for the purposes of story. In other words, we may talk about many aspects of your life, but the short documentary will consist of one or two central tensions that you encountered. You will have the opportunity to look over and comment on what Julie Kimble has edited before it is exhibited. **The videotapes and transcripts will remain with Julie Kimble locked in a safe at her home office. The interview transcripts will be kept for 7 years.**

The interview will take approximately one hour. There are no anticipated risks to participation in this interview. However, you can withdraw from the interview at any time without prejudice. You will also have the opportunity to make special provisions or restrictions to suit your needs. During the interview you may request to stop the recording at any time to discuss or clarify how you wish to respond to a question or topic before proceeding. In the event that you choose to withdraw during the interview, any tape made of the interview will be either given to you or destroyed, and no transcript will be made of the interview.

Upon completion of the interview, the information in the interview can be used by Julie Kimble in any manner she will determine, including, but not limited to, future use by researchers in presentations and publications, archives, public presentations, books, magazines, and websites.

Any restrictions as to use of portions of the interview indicated by you will be handled by editing those portions out of the final copy of the transcript.

All information will be treated confidentially. There is one exception to confidentiality that we need to make you aware of. In certain research studies, it is our ethical responsibility to report situations of child or elder abuse, child or elder neglect, or any life-threatening situation to appropriate authorities. However, we are not seeking this type of information in our study nor will you be asked questions about these issues."

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to participate in this research study. If you consent to participate in this research study and to the terms above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records. This project has been reviewed and approved by the GSU Institutional Review Board under tracking number **H16299**.

Title of Project: "Dystopian Identities: Exhuming the World of Zombies through the Voices of American Youth"

Principal Investigator: Julie Kimble, 2640 Westwood Dr., Conyers, GA. (770) 856-3274,  
jk03827@georgiasouthern.edu

Faculty Advisor: Dan Chapman, P. O. Box 08144, Statesboro, GA. (912) 478-5715

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix C

## Kelly



Photo provided by Kelly

Kelly illustrates how she and her family dressed for the Walker Stalker Convention. She plays a character that chains her child to her after he turns zombie (her daughter as the zombie child).

Her husband plays Daryl, complete with a zombie ear necklace.