

Living in the end times through popular culture: An ultra-realist analysis of *The Walking Dead* as popular criminology

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Abstract

This article provides an ultra-realist analysis of AMC's *The Walking Dead* as a form of 'popular criminology'. It is argued here that dystopian fiction such as *The Walking Dead* offers an opportunity for a popular criminology to address what criminologists have described as our discipline's aetiological crisis in theorizing harmful and violent subjectivities. The social relations, conditions and subjectivities displayed in dystopian fiction are in fact an exacerbation or extrapolation of our present norms, values and subjectivities, rather than a departure from them, and there are numerous real-world criminological parallels depicted within *The Walking Dead*'s postapocalyptic world. As such, the show possesses a hard kernel of Truth that is of significant utility in progressing criminological theories of violence and harmful subjectivity. The article therefore explores the ideological function of dystopian fiction as the fetishistic disavowal of the dark underbelly of liberal capitalism; and views the show as an example of the ultra-realist concepts of special liberty, the criminal undertaker and the pseudopacification process in action. In drawing on these cutting-edge criminological theories, it is argued that we can use criminological analyses of popular culture to provide incisive insights into the real-world relationship between violence and capitalism, and its proliferation of harmful subjectivities.

Keywords

Cultural criminology, dystopia, popular criminology, pseudo-pacification, ultra-realism, violence

Introduction

Late-capitalism's imagination of the future appears to be limited to a horizon of dystopia and post-apocalyptic society.¹ A brief perusal of television series and films shows that our collective cultural

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conceptions of the future are intensely nihilistic and dystopian. Films such as *Children of Men* (2006), *Mad Max* (1979), *28 Days Later* (2002), *I Am Legend* (2007), *Escape from New York* (1981), *Blade Runner* (1992), *The Matrix* (1999), *The Purge* (2013) and the *Resident Evil* series (2002, 2004, 2007, 2010) are just a small selection of dozens of examples. When one observes the social conditions and relations depicted within examples of dystopian fiction, they appear to reflect contemporary experiences of precariousness, insecurity, 'drift' and the competitive individualism and violent instrumentalism that many criminologists and sociologists have argued to be endemic to late-capitalism (Ellis, 2016; Ferrell, 2012; Hobbs, 2013; Lloyd, 2013; Parenti, 2011). Therefore, the distance between dystopia and reality is arguably far narrower than we might imagine. In many ways, as Mark Fisher (2009) observed, the social conditions and relations depicted within these dystopian fictions appear to be an exacerbation or extrapolation of our present socio-cultural norms, values and conditions rather than a disintegration or diversion from them.

This article, therefore, provides an ultra-realist criminological analysis of the acclaimed television series *The Walking Dead*² (*TWD*) as a form of 'popular criminology' (Rafter and Brown, 2011). Through its fiction, it is argued that this show possesses a 'hard kernel of the Real' (Žižek, 2002) that carries significant theoretical value and insight for criminologists, but has been systematically made unconscious within late-capitalist ideology. Therefore, reading *The Walking Dead* as a cultural text provides an ideal means to achieve three interrelated aims that are of significant utility to criminology: 1) To explain the popularity of extremely violent dystopian fiction and the ideological function of dystopia for late-capitalism; 2) To demonstrate not only the resonance between *The Walking Dead* and ultra-realist theories of violent and harmful subjectivity, but also the series as an example of Hall's (2012a) *pseudo-pacification process* in action; and 3) To utilize ultra-realist theory and psychoanalysis to advance the project of popular criminology beyond a social constructivist focus on discursive representation and language, and towards a focus on the discipline's larger 'aetiological crisis' (Young, 1987) of understanding why liberal capitalism produces subjectivities in which people are willing to harm others to benefit the self.

The article will progress by first offering an evaluation of *The Walking Dead* and its potential as a form of what Rafter and Brown (2011) term 'popular criminology'. Recent years have seen a proliferation of criminological material interested in various forms of media and their symbolic, textual and political meanings, in addition to the insights they can provide for criminological theory and criminal justice issues – ranging from theoretical discussions of violence to contemporary debates around drug policy and everything in between (Atkinson and Rodgers, 2016; Brown and Rafter, 2013; Groombridge, 2008; Linnemann, 2015; Wakeman, 2014, 2017). Twentieth-century discussions of 'crime and the media' have been extremely adept at analyzing language, discourse and the media representations of particular 'deviant' or marginalized populations. However, this section will suggest that a popular criminology of the 21st century must move beyond these pursuits and mine the field of popular culture to address criminology's aetiological crisis and return to a theorization of motivation and harmful subjectivity against a broader backdrop of late-capitalist political economy and culture. This is followed by a brief summary of *The Walking Dead*, in which we see a number of genuine criminological parallels which require complex theorization and offer significant insights into criminology's aetiological crisis.

This sets the groundwork for a discussion of ultra-realist criminological theory, specifically Steve Hall's (2012a) *pseudo-pacification process*, which offers important challenges to Elias' (2000) 'civilizing process'. Rather than becoming civilized out of violence, Hall argues that the

violence and libidinal energy that proved so destructive in Medieval pre-capitalist societies were actually pseudo-pacified and harnessed into aggressive but non-violent forms of economic and socio-symbolic competition that provided the energy which drives market societies. These theoretical advances are employed here to explain both the violence that is so expertly administered by the characters within the show, and our attraction to such forms of violent entertainment. Through shows such as *TWD* which depict the violent breakdown of the pseudo-pacification process, we can actually see the pseudo-pacification process in action as the show harnesses sublimated violent energies through these spheres of consumption.

However, if the social relations and subjectivities depicted within *The Walking Dead* do hold significant parallels with our present social condition, what is the purpose of such shows? Here, the following section goes on to outline the ideological function of dystopian fiction for late-capitalism. It explores whether we can view these cultural representations as an explicit cultural critique of the socially corrosive excesses of global capitalism. This returns us to a well-established criminological motif of 'resistance', and Stuart Hall's (1981) understanding of the 'double stake' of popular culture as a site of both containment and resistance. In order to answer these questions, it is argued that we must first confront the hard kernel of truth that lies at the heart of the social conditions and relations depicted in dystopian fictions such as *The Walking Dead*. This is the ruthless individualism and violence which underpins these post-apocalyptic worlds of scarcity and competitiveness which also constitute the dark underbelly of liberal capitalism. This is what has been described as the traumatic 'Obscene Real'³ of our way of life (Žižek, 2000) – the envy, greed and aggressive instrumentalism that drive capitalist subjectivity. However, rather than romantically viewing these shows as resistance and cultural critique, this article adopts a more critical psycho-analytical approach to the ideological function of dystopian fiction. It is argued that shows such as *TWD* serve a specific ideological function for late-capitalism, not by acknowledging or critiquing capitalism's Obscene Real but by systematically making it *unconscious* by casting it into a fictional 'other space' of dystopia. This is the psychosocial process of *fetishistic disavowal*, in which capitalism's everyday reality is sustained by the suppressive transformation of its 'hard kernel of Truth' into the structure of an impossible fiction. Finally, the article will conclude by considering the extent to which *TWD* offers an eerily prophetic depiction of what many esteemed academics anticipate will be the lived reality of how capitalism will end (Streeck, 2016; Žižek, 2010).

What follows in this article is predicated on reading *The Walking Dead* as a cultural text and form of 'popular criminology'. It should be stated at the outset that this article is not underpinned by any systematic content analysis or methodological approach to the show. Rather, the article should be read as a theoretical thought-piece that explores the broader behavioural trends, values and tropes in *TWD*, and speculates on how they reflect and mirror the underlying barbarism of our everyday reality, social relationships and political-economic system.

***The Walking Dead* as popular criminology**

As the likes of Rafter (2007) and Carrabine (2008) have argued, insights into criminology are not the mere preserve of academic researchers, but are constantly produced and reproduced within the vast mediascape of news and popular culture. Ideology surrounds us and is subtly embedded into every sphere of our everyday lives. Thus these forms of 'popular criminology' are not to be viewed as alternative forms of knowledge but rather as complementary, providing opportunities

for criminologists to tease out core truths about crime, justice and, in the case of this article, capitalism and violent subjectivity. This is not to say that the intellectually and politically attuned eye is anything new for criminology, as the project of 'popular criminology' arguably stretches back much further than Rafter's (2007) coining of the term. Indeed, discussions of crime and the media are one of the most well-rehearsed subjects in criminology, providing some of the most influential texts in the criminological canon (for example, Cohen, 1972), and have been a core facet of more contemporary theoretical projects such as cultural criminology (Ferrell et al., 2008; Hayward and Presdee, 2010; Hayward and Young, 2004: 259).

However, in recent years, ultra-realist criminological theorists have argued that while we have become highly skilled at analyzing discourses and media representations of gender, race, sexuality and so forth (Cohen and Young, 1973), or offering descriptive accounts of data through the approved lenses of symbolic interactionism and phenomenology, we have not been nearly as effective at penetrating the sedimentary layers of reality and addressing what Young (1987) has described as criminology's 'aetiological crisis' (see Winlow, 2014). This is the task of 'returning to motivation' (Hall et al., 2008), and explaining why people behave the way they do, think the way they think and interact with one another in an increasingly competitive-individualistic and asocial manner located against a broader historical political, economic and cultural backdrop (see Ellis, 2016; Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016; Smith, 2014; Winlow et al., 2017 for notable exceptions). For too long, Winlow (2014) argues, our discipline has become distracted from these central issues, resulting in a disciplinary dialectic that is at a standstill with a dearth of new ideas to explain the present reality of post-crash capitalism. The 'popular criminology' of the 20th century witnessed an intense focus on how crime is socially constructed as a moral panic through news media (Cohen, 1972), or how particular behaviours or groups are discursively framed, inaccurately represented and demonized (Barak, 1995; Chesney-Lind, 1999; Cohen and Young, 1973). However, it is argued here that the task of a 21st-century 'popular criminology' is to not just produce new theoretical ideas or findings but indeed work towards a *different goal entirely* – one that is less concerned with discursive representation and language, and more geared towards mining the field of popular culture to confront our disciplinary aetiological crisis and understand contemporary modes of harmful subjectivity and our present social condition more broadly. The recent work of Wakeman (2017) provides just one example,⁴ drawing upon the TV series *Breaking Bad* as an opportunity to elucidate and explain a transcendental materialist conception of violent criminal entrepreneurialism as a complex ontological process of *becoming*. By fusing recent advances in biosocial theories of crime with cutting-edge continental philosophy, Wakeman provided a theoretical model to explain how and why people *become* violent by positioning the show's protagonist, Walter White, as the quintessential transcendental materialist subject.

Undeniably, it is far from novel to look at how forms of mass media and popular culture serve as a vital ideological apparatus for the capitalist state, particularly as it pertains to issues of crime and justice (Althusser, 1994; Hall et al., 1978; Quinney, 1979). This body of work has looked at how those in control of the relations of production and the mass media structure our common-sense understandings about crime, justice and who is most dangerous, thereby preserving their own ends and position in the class structure. However, as Jacobs (2017) has recently noted, such approaches view the perpetuation of capitalist ideology through the apparatus of mass media as forcibly imposed upon a reluctant subject. Happy to view the hegemony of contemporary capitalism as something exclusively concocted by the neoliberal 'other', we also need to recognize and

theorize our own solicitation and complicity in these ideological messages. In this sense, the present article builds upon these traditional Marxist analyses and, consistent with the intellectual influences of ultra-realism, moves towards a psychoanalytic approach to the consumption of dystopian violence. Psychoanalysis has always been involved in revealing the various ways we unconsciously dissociate from that which is too *real*, too traumatically excessive for us to integrate into our own self-image and understanding of everyday reality. It is argued that *The Walking Dead* reveals to us the dark underbelly not only of liberal capitalism but, more uncomfortably, of ourselves as well. Therefore, in consuming and enjoying shows such as *The Walking Dead*, it is suggested that we are collectively complicit in the reproduction of liberal capitalism's ruthless individualism by unconsciously repressing and banishing its Obscene Real and barbarism into a fictional other-space of dystopian fiction.

In this regard, *The Walking Dead* provides an exciting opportunity to advance popular criminology beyond the general epistemic binary of viewing media representations as mere vehicles for the transmission of ideological meaning versus the more postmodern view of media as bound-up with meaning-making (Yar, 2010). Instead, it is argued that by adopting a more critical psychoanalytical approach to dystopian fiction we can address criminology's aetiological crisis by exploring how we collectively sustain our immersion in present reality by both harnessing and *fetishistically disavowing* the violent core of capitalist subjectivity within a fictional Other space of dystopia. This encourages an analysis of how *The Walking Dead* both conveys and denies latent socio-cultural norms and values of aggressive individualism, instrumental relationships and violence in the name of 'getting things done'.

***The Walking Dead*: A brief summary and criminological parallels**

Before progressing further with this analysis, a brief summary of AMC's *The Walking Dead* and *Fear the Walking Dead* is necessary for those who are unfamiliar with the series.⁵ Initially set in Atlanta, Georgia, the show follows the trials and tribulations of the main protagonist Rick Grimes (played by Andrew Lincoln), a local county sheriff's deputy. The show begins prior to the zombie apocalypse, as we witness Rick Grimes wounded by a gun shot as he attempts to apprehend a criminal suspect. When he awakes from his coma, he discovers a deserted world overrun by flesh-eating zombies commonly referred to as 'walkers'. In slight contrast, *Fear the Walking Dead* serves as a prequel to *The Walking Dead*. It shows what happens during the apocalyptic breakdown of society, those days that are crucially omitted from *TWD* as a consequence of Rick's coma.

As Grimes finds other survivors and reunites with his family, he assumes leadership of the group as they attempt to survive and navigate life in a new post-apocalyptic reality. Cast into a precarious existence, they fight off walkers, search tirelessly for the scarce yet vital resources of weapons and supplies, and drift between various camps and settlements as they attempt to find permanent shelter and recapture a semblance of stability and civilized existence. As the series progresses, conflicts emerge within the group, in addition to being confronted with other rival groups who often pose an even greater mortal threat as they battle one another for safety, shelter and resources. Violence against the living quickly becomes an established and unremarkable way of life. The protagonists engage in violence not only as a defensive last resort, but as a pre-emptive course of action in which they are justified in transcending any remaining ethical order in the

name of 'keeping people safe'. As depicted by season three's slogan 'fight the dead, fear the living', the inter-human conflict rapidly becomes the core storyline of the series, featuring various antagonists such as 'The Governor', the cannibalistic Terminus community, 'The Wolves' and 'The Saviours', led by Negan, all of whom pose a mortal threat to the protagonists and their community of survivors.

The post-apocalyptic world depicted in *TWD* is typified by extreme violence, competitiveness and aggressive individualism. Violence, looting, theft and inter-group conflict is committed frequently by both protagonists and antagonists throughout the series in the name of undertaking what is necessary to preserve the safety or affluence of the individual and their particular community of survivors. This world demands a broader 'retreat from the social' (Raymen, 2016). While existing research on *The Walking Dead* comic series has made this observation, it has viewed this as a symbolic reversal of the prison-industrial complex (Canavan, 2010), as white police officer Rick Grimes becomes trapped and contained within particular communities and fortresses – one of which is a prison. However, besides the loose criminal justice irony of a white police officer taking refuge inside a prison, the fragmentation of individuals and communities who live within exclusive 'colonies'⁶ is more akin to the 'domestic fortresses' and exclusive gated communities that populate the suburbs and cities of contemporary society against the unruly outside Other (Atkinson, 2006). This cultivates and intensifies a broader fear and stance of aggressiveness not only towards the 'walkers' but towards other survivors as well, who are cast as 'outsiders', viewed not as people but as abstract threats and invaders seeking to aggressively plunder resources and disrupt the protagonists' way of life – as depicted by an exchange between Rick Grimes and the leader of another group who considers taking them in:

Rick Grimes: You should keep your gates closed.

Deanna Moore: Why?

Rick Grimes: Because it's all about survival now. At any cost. People out there are always looking for an angle. Looking to play on your weakness. They measure you by what they can take from you. By how they can use you to live. (*The Walking Dead*, S5 E12)

One can certainly see the post-apocalyptic parallels with contemporary gated communities and subjectivities of retreat into a 'capsular civilization' (Atkinson and Smith, 2012). However, this is also a particularly salient parallel in the more immediate context of a renewed nationalist fervour in the UK, Europe and the USA. The recent Brexit vote, the election of Donald Trump, a statistical rise in hate crime and the broader 'rise of the right' (Winlow et al., 2017) all reflect a broader shift towards protective nationalism in conditions of austerity, extreme competitiveness, a scarcity of stable employment and a systemically engendered sense of insecurity. It is worth mentioning that Donald Trump's presidential campaign attempted a more targeted television advertising campaign by placing advertisements during the commercial breaks of particular shows such as *The Walking Dead* (Bradshaw, 2016). It is not difficult to see the resemblance between Trump's campaign on immigration and the depiction of the terrorist Other, and marauding sub-human walkers who threaten destruction and chaos. Throughout much of the series the characters can be described as existing in a whirling state of uncertainty and vertigo. Here, the world seems to operate and move around them as they are besieged by forces external to their own control. In many ways,

their existence mirrors the sense of 'vertigo' that Jock Young (2007: 12) posited as the 'malaise of late modernity'. Young's consistent discussion of ontological security, disembeddedness, chaos and a sociology of vindictiveness are all pertinent here.

Therefore, while depicted within the ludicrous example of a zombie apocalypse, the social relations and conditions of *TWD* actually possess what Žižek (2002) describes as a 'hard kernel of truth'. As already suggested, these social relations of intense competitiveness and ruthless individualism appear to be a mere exacerbation of liberal capitalism's socio-cultural norms and present reality rather than a deviation from them, and there are plenty of other serious criminological parallels to be drawn. Throughout the series, the various characters and groups live under constant precarious conditions, with the perpetual threat of displacement by forces external to their control. Characters on the show have lived at dozens of potentially permanent and sustainable settlements which the characters are eventually forced to vacate as they are destroyed, overrun by 'walkers' or ruined by other rival groups. This casts them into a life of drift, with interspersed periods of 'homelessness' that the likes of Jeff Ferrell (2012) have argued are an all-too-present reality for many global populations in late-capitalism, be it Syrian refugees or those being systematically evicted from their homes as working-class neighbourhoods become increasingly gentrified (Smith, 1996).

There is intense and often violent competition over an increasing scarcity of life-sustaining resources such as guns, food or land, reminiscent of Parenti's (2011) observation that global resource wars are going to be the new challenge of the 21st century – particularly with climate change and seismic migration flows. In *Tropic of Chaos*, Parenti (2011) draws the links between violence in East Africa and climate change, as global warming and increasingly unpredictable weather is creating conditions in which there is an increasing scarcity of water and fertile land which has prompted intense and ongoing violence within local populations. This is not to mention the broader geopolitical conflict over vital natural resources and minerals which, over the last couple of decades, has been a constant source of global violence.

Much like in real life, groups compete intensely over the prime post-apocalyptic real estate. In a strange twist of criminological fate which reflects cultural criminology's 'spirals and loops of cultural meaning' (Ferrell et al., 2008), a prison in seasons three and four becomes a valued residential asset that provides safety for Rick's group behind the numerous gates and walls. This prompts 'The Governor' – a primeval Messianic demagogue of the neighbouring 'idyllic' community of Woodbury, who commits obscene violence in the name of 'keeping his people safe' – to attempt a forcible takeover of the prison from Rick's group by invading it with an Army tank.⁷ The libidinal violence and competitive individualism in the name of 'getting things done', irrespective of the harms caused, is a core facet of entrepreneurial criminality which ultra-realist criminologists suggest is a metastasized microcosm of late-capitalist subjectivity more broadly (Hall et al., 2008; Winlow, 2001), represented in the harmful financial and geopolitical practices of Western states and corporations.

In many ways, what we can arguably see in *The Walking Dead* is a fantasy sphere in which the core energies at the heart of liberal capitalist subjectivity can be played out and enacted with impunity. Therefore, the following section will progress onto a more specific criminological theorization of *The Walking Dead* that can help explain not only the violence displayed by the characters within the series' fictional realm, but also the popularity of such shows and the desire to watch and consume such violence. Drawing heavily upon Steve Hall's (2012a) theoretical concept of the *pseudo-pacification process*, it is suggested that shows such as *TWD* simultaneously

harness and sublimate the violent libidinal human energies that have served as the fuel in the 'engine room' of the market system since the earliest days of capitalist and even pre-capitalist societies (Horsley et al., 2015). As such, we can think of *TWD* as an example of the pseudo-pacification process in action through the depiction of its *breakdown*.

'The end times made us gods': Ultra-realism and pseudo-pacification in late-capitalism

What is perhaps most remarkable about *TWD* is how rapidly the characters adjust to the new violent reality of the post-apocalyptic world. Characters quickly become skilled at (and emotionally detached from) dispatching multiple 'walkers' with ease, in addition to an escalating willingness to kill the living. While both series attempt to raise ethical conundrums for their protagonists, such as what to do about loved ones who have 'turned' or when it is acceptable and unacceptable to kill the living, these wrestling matches with morality diminish quickly as each of the series progresses. The first 'human kill' in *TWD* occurs in season 2 episode 3, while in *Fear the Walking Dead* the first human kill takes place in the pilot episode. How can we theorize this transformation using criminological theory, and what does it say about the underlying subjectivities, human drives and energies that are cultivated at the heart of capitalism? Here, I argue that Hall's (2012a) *Theorising Crime and Deviance* is a useful starting place, specifically his core theoretical concept of the *pseudo-pacification process* in addition to his other secondary concepts of special liberty and the criminal undertaker.

Other academic work on violent subjectivities in popular TV series, such as Steve Wakeman's (2017) erudite analysis of Walter White in *Breaking Bad*, has seen this as a *process of becoming*. Here, Wakeman draws upon transcendental materialist⁸ notions of a malleable subjectivity to understand how individuals *become* violent. He argues that as Walter becomes increasingly enmeshed within the violent world of criminality, in addition to rejecting his previously passive and meek existence as an underpaid and overqualified high school chemistry teacher, he undergoes a change and *becomes* Heisenberg, his criminal persona. One could equally apply such arguments to a multitude of characters within *TWD*. For example, how Rick Grimes and Shane Walsh transform from noble police officers to violent and autocratic leaders, culminating in Rick's threatening proclamation to his group that 'this isn't a democracy anymore' (S2 E13). Or how one of the show's more memorable villains, 'The Governor', transforms from a loving father and anonymous office worker before 'the turn' to become a maniacally violent man known only by his self-appointed title and revered for his repressive brand of government, massacring large numbers of people, with a perverse enjoyment in administering torturous punishments to those who displease him.

However, drawing upon Hall's (2012a) prescient theoretical analysis, perhaps we need to reverse the sequence of Wakeman's argument. It could be argued that this evolution is less a process of becoming and more a *process of reversion*, a *devolution* to the pseudo-pacified core of thymotic human drives and energies that have been harnessed for the advancement of capitalist economies throughout history. It is here, in the primitive, competitive individualistic and violent post-apocalyptic world where many of the show's characters can be their *true* selves, released from the ethico-social constraints of a pseudo-pacified social order which simultaneously cultivated and regulated these subjectivities into the economically productive spheres of work and consumption. It should be emphasized here that this article is not suggesting that human beings

possess a basic 'state of nature' inherently geared to violence. Rather, reference is being made to a more fundamentally violent mode of *early capitalist subjectivity* that pre-dates the sublimation of such violence into pseudo-pacified forms of market and socio-symbolic competition.

In order to expand upon this argument, we must first offer a brief overview of Hall's pseudo-pacification process. Hall's starting point is to distinguish his notion of pseudo-pacification with Norbert Elias' (2000) famous 'civilizing process'. Here, Elias explores the remarkable decline in violence throughout history since the Medieval period. He explains this decline by arguing that the centralization of power and the more complex political, economic and social interdependencies that this created resulted in an increasingly non-violent society that metastasized to fundamentally alter the general disposition of the population to the extent that we increasingly 'civilized out' of violence. Hall (2012a) argues to the contrary, suggesting that the violent subjectivities and relations of pre-capitalist societies were not fully pacified and grown out of, but instead were preserved, *pseudo-pacified* and put to work by the early capitalist system as the underlying energy upon which market societies would be built. The violent and thymotic energies that disrupted trade routes and private property rights were sublimated into aggressive but non-violent activities and forms of socio-symbolic competition in the modes of work and consumption. As Hall observes, capitalist societies cannot properly function in either extreme of indiscriminate violence or entire pacification, but rather rely upon the perpetual cultivation of a dynamic tension between the poles of pacification and stimulation:

The historical evidence does not point to a general 'civilizing process' ... but a complex psycho-social process in which direct and unashamed violence and intimidation were gradually sublimated into a multitude of criminalized and legalized forms of exploitation, deception, and appropriation, which ran alongside and in tension with what can only be described as a sort of insulating sleeve of ethico-legal restraints, like the thick but flexible insulation around an electrical wire carrying a powerful current. (Hall, 2012a: 32)

Thus, outbursts of physical violence can be seen as a *breakdown* of the pseudo-pacification process; a situation in which the stimulation of these violent desires and energies come to the surface, breaking through the 'electrical wire' which provides the ethico-legal restraints which harness and direct such energies. We can see the violence and disorder displayed within *TWD* and *FTWD* as a totalizing breakdown of the pseudo-pacification process. This argument is actually strengthened by observing the different timelines in *FTWD* and *TWD*. Unlike *TWD*, which jumps straight ahead to the *post-apocalyptic* world, *FTWD* documents the rapid apocalyptic breakdown of civilization. As the symbolic order disintegrates and the productive modes of economic and consumer behaviour and competition evaporate, all that is left are the elementary modes of violent behaviour that have been pseudo-pacified since the earliest days of market societies. This is most evident in the quotes from *FTWD* characters Victor Strand and Tobias, who evaluate the 'rules' of the new apocalyptic world in the following quote: 'The game has changed. We return to the old rules. And the people who won the last round with their Grande Lattes and their frequent flyer miles are about to become the buffet' (Victor Strand in *Fear the Walking Dead*, S1 E5).

Therefore, the characters' adaptation to their violent reality after 'the turn' is not a process of *becoming* something they previously were not, but rather a stripping away of the ethico-legal restraints and modes of socio-symbolic competition to the traumatic and primitive void of the Real

that lies at the base of subjectivity (Johnston, 2008). What is most intriguing here is how both Strand and Tobias draw specific attention to the practices of consumerism and the technological hallmarks of civilization which previously offered and facilitated the aggressive but non-violent modes of socio-symbolic competition which Hall (2012a) argues to be a feature of capitalism's pseudo-pacification process. We can see parallels here with Treadwell et al.'s (2013) discussion of the 2011 English riots. While some have argued that we saw an abandonment of and resistance to society norms and values, arguably what we saw was an over-identification and *intensified* form of normative behavior, as the aggressive individualism and instrumentalism of late-modern consumer capitalism became deprived of all its ethico-legal and normative restraints. In season 1 episode 3 of *FTWD*, we see eerily similar scenes of looting, arson and violence that were witnessed in the temporary breakdown of the pseudo-pacification process on the streets of the UK in 2011. As Tobias remarks in his observation of the apocalyptic breakdown:

Things will fall apart now. No satellites, no internet, no cell phones. Communications will fail 'cause there's no one there to manage the servers. The electrical grid will collapse. It's all gonna go to hell. And that's what they don't get. *When civilisation ends, it ends fast.* (Tobias in *Fear the Walking Dead*, S1 E3)

Arguably then, in the immense popularity of shows such as *TWD* and *FTWD*, we can observe the pseudo-pacification process in action *through the depiction of its breakdown*. The entertainment industry simultaneously stimulates and sublimates violence into an economically productive form of consumption through the portrayal of a breakdown in the symbolic order and the emergence of previously pseudo-pacified violence.

Hall (2012a) also provides us with two other interconnected secondary concepts in exploring the violence in *TWD* and its relevance for contemporary society, namely that of *special liberty* and the *criminal undertaker*. This is the notion that one has the right to legitimately transcend the rules and the Big Other's socio-ethical norms in the name of wealth creation and freely expressing one's desires. The financial and political elites of a global capitalist society are freed from the external control systems, free to bend the rules, evade taxes, destroy the environment, systemically harm and marginalize the lower classes and even to advocate violence and global conflict with impunity – all in the name of accumulating and circulating wealth and commodities and dispersing liberal parliamentary democracy and free-market capitalism across the globe. We need to step back and allow the entrepreneurial and financial ingenuity of these individuals to flourish in order for it to trickle down and benefit those less ruthless and talented in the form of jobs in the real economy and wealth to particular regions. Donald Trump, even prior to his presidency, is a prime example, sacrificing a huge stretch of the Aberdeenshire coastline for a 'world-best' US\$1.5 billion golf course and country club. Here, Trump significantly damaged the local environment and ecosystems, left local residents with an interrupted water supply for several years, and bullied those who protested against his plans. Of course, Trump, in his role as a neoliberal 'undertaker' (Hall, 2012a), has argued that he is simply doing what has to be done in order to revitalize the economy of the region, providing jobs and attracting tourism, notwithstanding vocal opposition. Despite promises of 6000 jobs, only 200 were created (Baxter, 2012), with Trump exemplifying the 'special liberty' to transcend the ethical codes of the symbolic order in order to achieve his aims, irrespective of the effect it has on people.

Arguably, then, this *special liberty* has become an embedded cultural norm within late-capitalism, with other criminologists exploring how this mode of subjectivity has spread into more basic forms of entrepreneurial criminality within the post-industrial wastelands of late-modern Western societies. Work by Ancrum and Treadwell (2016), Contreras (2013), Hall et al. (2008) and Treadwell et al. (2013) displays individuals engaging in extreme forms of violence, criminality and harm in the name of wealth creation and with a self-image as a pragmatic realist who undertakes what is necessary in order to get things done.⁹ While Hall discusses special liberty in terms of wealth creation, we could arguably apply this same mode of subjectivity and these same methods of rationalization to numerous characters' violence in *TWD*. In fact, if we replace the justification of 'wealth creation' with the justification of 'safety', the concept of special liberty and 'the undertaker' works perfectly. Both protagonists and antagonists frequently transcend ethical and moral norms through killing, looting and invading other groups' communities and compounds, all in the name of 'keeping their people safe'. Rick – who is the main protagonist and often acts as the guiding moral compass of the show – often justifies pre-emptive violence in the name of safety. Rick's violence gradually shifts from a last resort – such as his first 'human kill' in self-defense – to a first port of call, e.g. when ambushing the outpost of rival group 'The Saviours'. However, with the introduction of Negan, the series' most recent villain in season 7, the distinction between the special liberty displayed in *TWD* and the special liberty in real life appears to have disappeared altogether. Here, Negan appears as something akin to a feudal lord, taking half the supplies of numerous colonies who 'work for him', as he robs, plunders and kills with impunity, all in the name of his own wealth creation and power.

In this regard, we could read *TWD* as the ultimate liberal capitalist fantasy of the abolition of institutional authority and regulation,¹⁰ in which one can transcend all of society's ethico-legal constraints and act out one's deepest fantasies and desires without any risk of punishment or judgment. Perhaps this could account for the fan-base's identification with some of *TWD*'s most ruthless characters who exemplify *special liberty* most closely – such as Negan who, despite violently killing off several key protagonists, has emerged on fan forums as one of the show's most popular characters, culminating in a wide range of memorabilia emblazoned with 'Team Negan'. Indeed, one does not have to look far within the series to find romantic descriptions of this new world which is entirely absent of legitimized authority or symbolic order. To provide just one example, Brandon Luke – a young and violent antagonist in *Fear the Walking Dead* – revels in the opportunity to elevate himself to a God-like status and escape the previous anonymity and legal restraints which repressed the expression of his internal drives and desires:

This? This is awesome. We got no speed limits, no cops, no money, no work, no bills no bullshit. We're just living ... This is more than living man, this is supernatural. We were nothing before this, man. We were less than. But now? *The end times made us Gods.* (Brandon Luke in *Fear the Walking Dead*, S2 E10)

Indeed, if we look more broadly throughout contemporary forms of entertainment, we can see an expression of special liberty within violent video games as well, with Atkinson and Rodgers (2016: 1299) describing these ludic spaces as 'zones of cultural exception'. *The Walking Dead* series has not failed to capitalize on this opportunity either, creating a critically acclaimed video game that allows viewers to go beyond a passive consumption and instead to enact this seductive *special*

liberty throughout gameplay. Žižek (2006) has suggested that it is this transcendental fantasy which lies at the heart of the attraction to violent forms of entertainment such as films and video games:

Consider the interactive computer games some of us play compulsively, games which enable a neurotic weakling to adopt the screen persona of a macho aggressor, beating up other men and violently enjoying women. It's all too easy to assume that this weakling takes refuge in cyberspace in order to escape from a dull, impotent reality. But perhaps the games are more telling than that. What if, in playing them, I articulate the perverse core of my personality which, because of ethico-social constraints, I am not able to act out in real life? Isn't my virtual persona in a way 'more real than reality'? Isn't it precisely because I am aware that this is 'just a game' that in it I can do what I would never be able to in the real world? (Žižek, 2006: 32)

In reading *TWD* as a form of 'popular criminology', we can develop significant criminological insights which can explain not only the characters' violence within the show, but the economic function of violence as a mode of consumption and its role within the pseudo-pacification process that is vital to providing the ongoing energy for capitalist economies. We should avoid dismissing a critical analysis of such shows as an unnecessary 'moral panic' or 'moral crusading', or limiting ourselves to the rather simplistic 'media effects' discussion that exposure to violent images has a direct causative relationship with real world violence. Instead, we must enquire as to *why* these shows prove so popular, and the extent to which we can learn something about the dark underbelly of real criminal subjectivity and its relationship with late-capitalism in a way which endeavours to address criminology's aetiological crisis. Consequently, the following section explores the ideological function of dystopian fiction, considering the extent to which this genre also aids in sustaining the systemic violence on which capitalism's everyday reality depends by casting its 'Obscene Real' into an impossible fictional other space of dystopia.

The ideological function of dystopian fiction

Sociologists and criminologists have often discussed the political potential and ideological function of popular culture. Stuart Hall (1981), for example, adopts a middle-ground approach which suggests that forms of popular culture can be seen as sites of both 'containment' and 'resistance' in which hegemonic ideals related to gender, race, inequality or political projects are both maintained and critiqued or resisted. This is a line of thought that Wakeman (2014, 2017) has been keen to pursue in his discussion of TV series such as *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*. This argument has been implicitly used in specific analyses of *The Walking Dead*. Wadsworth (2016), for example, has suggested that *TWD* could be conceived of as a form of 'emancipatory art', reflecting a disillusionment with neoliberal America and acknowledging the fissures and tensions in contemporary society which offer vibrant political potential. Similarly, Sharrett (1996) views dystopian fictions as representing an acknowledgment and critique of capitalist ideology. Conversely, Garland et al. (2016) have looked at how *TWD* preserves patriarchal social and gender relations, representing the inescapable ubiquity of patriarchy that exists 'beyond society' in the post-apocalyptic world.

However, *The Walking Dead* reflects a more complex and insidious operation of ideology that goes beyond capitalism's usual tactic of incorporating self-critique into its own logic (Heath and

Potter, 2006). It is not hard to find blockbuster films which position the big bad corporation or the entrepreneur into the role of villain, producing what Winlow (2012) describes as a 'soporific effect' which douses the subject's sense of political urgency by offering the consumer a sense of activism or rebellion within the act of consumption. Arguably, *The Walking Dead* goes beyond this, serving a specific ideological function for late-capitalism not by critiquing itself, but allowing the viewer to *fetishistically disavow* the most socially corrosive aspects of late-capitalism by hiding them in plain sight. Here, the traumatic 'Obscene Real' on which capitalism depends – the violence, envy, greed and individualism – is ideologically exiled from our everyday reality and way of life by placing it within the impossible fictional realm of dystopia. However, in order to extend this argument, we must first explore the motivations and desire for consuming such forms of violent entertainment.

The recent revival of psychoanalytic accounts of capitalism is particularly useful here (McGowan, 2016; Žižek, 1989, 2002, 2010), specifically Badiou's (2007: 48) notion of 'the passion for the Real'. In contemporary society, we live in artificial and sanitized non-places of consumption which attempt to cultivate a diverse array of cultural atmospheres through artificial decor. Our social relations are often mediated via virtual platforms of social media, eviscerated of their quality and substance. In Western society, we are generally insulated from the traumas of violence and suffering, and, as Gerhardt (2010) has suggested, we are arguably a society that is 'labouring to feel'. Žižek (2002) appropriates Badiou's original concept to suggest that this has prompted a yearning 'passion for the Real', intensified by the postmodern 'passion for the semblance':

On today's market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant properties: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol ... the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration, that is, a politics without politics, up to today's tolerant liberal multi-culturalism as an experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness. (Žižek, 2002: 11–12)

The 'Real' in this sense does not refer to what we experience as 'reality' on a daily basis, which is mediated through symbols, signs and language. Rather, the Real refers to a psychological experience that exists prior to all symbolism. It is an intense psychological experience of something authentic and more 'real' than the reality of our social world. Aspects of the Real are therefore sought after through a variety of mechanisms, all in a pursuit of pushing beyond the banal, toned-down monotony of the consumer spectacle and an increasingly artificial world. Of course, as Smith (2014) observes, the subject in search of the Real often finds themselves caught in consumerism's trap. Desperate to experience genuine existential passion, they find themselves trapped within the artificiality of the consumer spectacle, "forced to find traces of the Real within our artificial world" (Smith, 2014: 46).

Dystopian fiction such as *TWD* ostensibly appears to be a perfect example of how the postmodern passion for the semblance cultivates an urgent 'passion for the Real'. Indeed, the disintegration of any symbolic order throws the show's characters back into a traumatic encounter with the Real. As we follow the various members of Rick's group, they experience an authentic flirtation with the edge between life and death, whilst developing seemingly deep emotional bonds with one another throughout the show. However, we should avoid the rather simplistic line of thought that the sanitization and artificial nature of our daily lives drives the return of the Real in popular culture. The 'return of the Real' within these shows in fact takes the form of just another *semblance*; and it is precisely this process which serves the ideological function of dystopian fiction for late-capitalism.

Slavoj Žižek has written that fragments of the future lie scattered around in the present. However, it could equally be argued that when thinking about shows such as *The Walking Dead*, fragments of truth lie scattered among our dystopian fictions. This underlying subjectivity, conditions and set of social relations constitutes what Žižek (2002) describes as ‘the hard kernel of the Real’ that is all too present in our everyday reality, politics and social relations. However, on account of its traumatic and excessive character (how can a system as allegedly wonderful as capitalism be so socially corrosive?), it is transformed into a distant, ridiculous and alternative reality of fiction. It is experienced by the viewer as just another semblance. Manifestations of capitalism’s ‘obscene Real’ on which our everyday reality is contingent happens *there*, in the fictional other-world of *TWD*, rather than here:

The Real which returns has the status of a(nother) semblance: *precisely because it is real*, that is, on account of its traumatic/excessive character, we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition. (Žižek, 2002: 22; emphasis added)

This is the ultimate form of *fetishistic disavowal*: a psychosocial process in which what we know to be true is systematically made unconscious, with its basic formula being: ‘I know, but I do not want to know, therefore I don’t know’. Consequently, the dystopian fiction of *TWD* constitutes the core Truth, the ‘dark matter’ of liberal capitalism whose unconscious suppression sustains the everyday reality of the late-capitalist order.

Concluding remarks: *The Walking Dead* as a window to the future?

It is my hope that this article strengthens the assertion that the field of popular culture is of significant relevance to criminology. Through the above analysis, it is clear that ‘popular criminology’ can do more than explore symbolic meanings and media representations of particular cultural groups or forms of deviance. By confronting the core harms, energies and subjectivities which are embedded within TV shows such as *TWD* and which underpin our political-economic arrangements and forms of cultural and social engagement, analyses of popular culture can actively combat criminology’s aetiological crisis by using popular culture as an opportunity to contribute and elucidate complex theorizations of harmful subjectivities. Indeed, armed with such intellectual tools, critical analyses of dystopian fiction can do more than clarify our present condition, and in fact offer a predictive window into the *future*. By way of concluding, then, it is interesting to consider the extent to which *The Walking Dead* constitutes an eerily prophetic depiction of a post-capitalist society which many esteemed academics suggest is certainly on the way (Streeck, 2016; Wallerstein et al., 2013, Žižek, 2010).

Following the likes of Immanuel Wallerstein et al. (2013) and Slavoj Žižek (2010), Wolfgang Streeck is in agreement that capitalism is certainly approaching a zero-point. Other scholars have predicted revolution, artificial intelligence or ecological catastrophe as the ultimate nail in capitalism’s coffin. Streeck, on the other hand, suggests that in the absence of an alternative politics waiting in the wings, what is more likely is for capitalism to collapse as a result of its own

structural contradictions. What will follow after capitalism in its final crisis is not some other well-defined new world order, but instead an *interregnum*. For Streeck, this will be a prolonged state of social entropy, a post-social interregnum. In the wake of economic collapse, Streeck foresees us living in a deinstitutionalized or under-institutionalized society. Under-governed and under-managed, Streeck anticipates a period of intensified individualism and a society dependent on tenuous, instrumental and fragile interdependencies:

With individuals deprived of collective defences and left to their own devices, what remains of a social order hinges on a motivation of individuals to cooperate with other individuals on an ad hoc basis, driven by fear and greed and by elementary interests in individual survival. (Streeck, 2016: 14)

What Streeck is describing is, in many ways, the situation faced by the likes of Rick Grimes and his group in *The Walking Dead*. As an intensified extrapolation of our present social conditions and subjectivities, individuals are thrown together with their actions and violence driven by the fear, greed and elementary quest of survival described by Streeck above. One need only look to the super-rich of the Silicon Valley to find people preparing for the collapse of society through 'doomsday consumption' (see Osnos, 2017). While undeniably driven by the socio-symbolic competitiveness of consumer culture, CEOs, venture capitalists and managing directors are building nuclear-hardened bunkers, buying up islands and keeping helicopters which are fuelled-up year-round (Osnos, 2017). Elsewhere, we can observe the rise of survivalist militia movements in the US since the 1990s, who stockpile arms and supplies and attempt to reclaim public land in preparation for immanent societal collapse (Lamy, 1996).

Dystopia as a genre of fiction has much deeper historical roots that stretch back many centuries.¹¹ But its popularity in the contemporary context cannot be divorced from the present late-capitalist condition and the broader political climate. As liberal capitalism has emerged as 'the ideology that won', the likes of Francis Fukuyama (1992) declared 'the End of History', suggesting that Western liberal democracy constitutes the endpoint of humanity's social, cultural and political-economic evolution. The absence of genuine political opposition and mainstream politics' 30-year consensus that liberal capitalism is the least-worst of all systems has prompted the likes of Frederic Jameson (2003) and Mark Fisher (2009) to suggest that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Dystopia and science fiction have always been collective practices in future imagination. In this regard, perhaps Jameson (2003) was right to suggest that we are witnessing 'the attempt to imagine the end of capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world' (Jameson, 2003: 76).

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Notes

1. There are noted differences between dystopian and post-apocalyptic societies. Dystopian societies are often seen as the *inverse* of utopia, concerned with oppressive and unjust societies (such as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) or some other social malaise or problem (such as the chronic infertility in *Children of Men*). Post-apocalyptic worlds relate to the universal breakdown or destruction of any semblance of society. Therefore, while post-apocalyptic worlds will certainly be dystopian, dystopian societies are not always post-apocalyptic. It is for these reasons that I use the terms dystopian and post-apocalyptic interchangeably.
2. This article will also draw pertinent quotes and examples from *The Walking Dead's* prequel spin-off series *Fear the Walking Dead* for the purposes of argumentation. These shows are part of the same post-apocalyptic world and series of events, but simply follow different characters and plot lines.
3. This article uses terminology from Lacanian psychoanalysis and ultra-realist literature that is perhaps unfamiliar to the reader. For guidance on this terminology, see the glossary of Winlow and Hall's (2013) *Rethinking Social Exclusion*.
4. Other recent exemplary works which achieve this goal would be Linnemann's (2016) *Meth Wars* or Atkinson and Rodgers' (2016) exploration of why the late-capitalist subject is so drawn to the violent and degrading ludic spaces of video games which provide cultural zones of exception.
5. It is worth noting that the TV series is an adaptation of the long-running comic book series of the same name by Robert Kirkman. Many prior analyses of *The Walking Dead* are in fact based upon the comic book, rather than the TV series (see for example Canavan, 2010).
6. There are numerous communities and colonies throughout the show, such as the prison, Woodbury, Terminus, Alexandria, Hilltop colony and the Sanctuary, to name a few.
7. While this is a perfect illustration of Steve Hall's (2012) notion of 'special liberty' which is discussed in more depth later in this article, the relevance of the subtle references to an American military-industrial complex in the name of 'keeping our people safe' proved too tantalizing to ignore.
8. For more on transcendental materialism, see the work of Johnston (2008), Hall (2012a, 2012b), Hall and Winlow (2015) and Žižek (1989).
9. Hall's (2012a) notion of the 'criminal undertaker' is a direct appropriation of Sombart's (1998) notion of 'the undertaker' in *The Quintessence of Capitalism*.
10. This is despite the fact that capitalism's survival is reliant upon institutional authority to regulate it. As Wolfgang Streeck (2016) has suggested in discussing how capitalism will end, it is arguably capitalism's unmitigated success in abolishing all genuine political opposition and regulation of its accumulative drive that will be the greatest consequence in its demise. According to the likes of Harvey (2007) and Streeck, an unregulated and unopposed capitalism will accelerate the speed of its collapse due to its own internal contradictions.
11. It could be argued that the Bible bears witness to the earliest examples of dystopia, with the Book of Revelation being widely accepted as apocalyptic and frequently referred to as 'the Apocalypse of John' (Lamy, 1996).

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Author biography

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