

LARRY T. SHILLOCK,  
Wilson College

THE WALKING FLESH:  
ZOMBIES, NARRATIVE DESIRE, AND THE APOSTLE PAUL'S ANXIOUS  
ACCOUNT OF EMBODIMENT

Lacking the subscription revenue enjoyed by Home Box Office (HBO), the cable network American Movie Classics (AMC) is in the unenviable position of needing to support its programming with advertising revenue. Consequently, its viewers encounter commercial breaks during each of the shows they watch. For fans of *Mad Men*, such commercials are inherently interesting, a fact borne out by episodes that show ad campaigns being created alongside actual advertising. The juxtaposition of these modes of address can even produce a learned frisson, as posts in the blogosphere attest. Fans of AMC's *The Walking Dead*, by contrast, are unlikely to view its post-apocalyptic narrative and congratulate themselves on possessing a keen sense of reflexivity. Instead, they might experience something like dissonance as melodramatic encounters with zombies get disrupted by 30-second spots inciting them to apply Gold Bond lotion, eat Cajun-style at Appleby's, or drive an Audi that promotes both de-sublimation and mobility. Even such viewers' deft use of fast-forward on a universal remote might not fully defer the sense that persons with soft skin who have been fed on the *Salt Sugar Fat* diet of restaurants could, should zombies arise, be in sore need of a fast car. Two anxious insights inform the dissonance I am imagining here. The first relates to the identification that television viewing requires. The second, and more disruptive, insight is that an individual episode of *The Walking Dead* has the potential to be neither individual nor an episode but a text, in the sense Roland Barthes names as "a methodological field" whose "constitutive movement is *traversal*."<sup>1</sup> Unlike the work, which at once affirms and limits meaning, a text calls for the plural reading of its "anonymous, irrecoverable, and yet *already read*" quotations.<sup>2</sup>

To say that a television series has the potential to be a text does not make it one. For that to occur, *The Walking Dead* would need to be read in serial, not just conventional, ways. Such an approach would require a reader to demonstrate, at minimum, that an episode and its embedded commercials are less discrete than they appear. To meet this standard in part, we might note that the two narrative forms share a time slot and an audience. More tellingly, an episode's terror-inducing plot and anxious commercial appeals incite viewers to identify with the experiences of characters as if they were real. If we grant that multiple narratives traverse the series and that viewers are hailed from more than one vantage point by them, we have the beginnings of a shared, if provisional, text. As part of

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<sup>1</sup> Barthes, "From Work to Text," *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 1986), pp. 57-58.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

reading these adjacent narratives in what follows, I work to recover the “irrecoverable” quotations that contribute to the prehistory of *The Walking Dead*. In the process, I also identify a master logic—traceable to the writings of the apostle Paul—that informs the series more broadly. Zombies, in the terms of this logic, represent the flesh as they enact the most violent aspects of embodiment. Commercials do their part to foreground the flesh by inciting viewers’ desires in ways that compromise thought and choice—itsself an enduring theme in Paul’s work. As extreme representations of the flesh and desire, then, zombies assault real-life characters and compel them to forgo one resurrection—that of eternal life in death—for its opposite: an interminable, spiritless, death-in-life experienced somewhere in the rural American south.

### I.

A zombie—no matter the genre in which it appears—occupies a curious place in the onto-theological universe. To become one, a fictional character must sicken in response to a virus or wound and die. Illness and death, for such a victim, are temporary—unless that character is then overwhelmed by a zombie horde and eaten entirely. Walkers or biters, as zombies are known in *The Walking Dead*, appear to be “undead” or “not quite dead,” since they breathe and feed and move in constrained ways. And yet, zombies are quite alive, even though the capabilities that once made them human (i.e., their awareness, emotional range, reasoning capacity, and self-control) now prove dead to them. To conclude, as some critics do, that such beings exist in a disturbing, because liminal, state does not account for the last step in the (re)creation process. No longer persons as such, the former-humans turn and are resurrected. Rather than be sent to heaven or hell, as the Bible deems, the new zombies experience a fundamental break with human-life-as-it-is-lived and begin a potentially eternal existence on Earth. Thus, by their disturbing example, do they inaugurate a different endgame for humanity itself.

Once loosed upon the world, the dehumanized hordes exhibit almost a singular focus on the intact bodies of the living. They desire what men, women, and children still possess—a visible carpet of capillary-rich flesh. In the most dramatic of cases, zombies pierce their victims’ skin and go on to tear muscles, bones, and internal organs from them with such force that only a blood stain remains. Zombies’ reason for being (if the phrase still resonates) is thus unrelentingly appetitive.

Existence is difficult for zombies on *The Walking Dead* despite their considerable powers. Rarely sated, they suffer extended privation and make the most of the energy they do consume by holing up in unlit, abandoned buildings and by hunting flesh-and-blood creatures in uncoordinated mobs. Separately and together, the newly revived creatures respond to sense data by turning awkwardly in the direction of its source: their prey. Despite being known as walkers, they do not so much walk as then lurch at potential victims, led by one shoulder or the other, their legs a full beat behind. Due to such clumsiness, zombies fail in their attacks more often than they succeed. Success, when it comes, is largely a numbers game. In those instances when zombies converge on

their prey from multiple directions, the more sure-footed humans may run out of avenues of escape (or bullets) and be overwhelmed in gory fashion.

If zombies merely treated human bodies as sources of food, they would compel the uncanny revulsion in viewers that we associate with the ritual violence of cannibals. But zombies are so single-minded in their pursuit of living flesh, so singular in their own wet, soft-skulled, fleshy exteriors, that viewers equate them with the flesh itself. True to its genre, *The Walking Dead* promotes this allegorical equivalence by foregrounding the physicality of its revived creatures and by presenting them as gaunt and impervious to pain. Facial make-up accentuates the size of their mouths and the feral threat posed by their teeth; body make-up draws viewers' attention to wan skin. Other parts of zombies' bodies—dressed in the tattered clothes of their former lives—bear traces of the violence that led to their post-death transformations. In extreme cases, zombies' missing limbs and suppurating wounds indicate how, as men and women, they came to be infected. Even these most violated of figures—ones whose legs are gone, say, or who have been disemboweled—lie on the ground awaiting prey to happen by so they might hiss at it with teeth-gnashing hunger. Taken together, zombies and their bloodied traces remind viewers of the fragility of the human body and the persistence of raw need.

Humans in *The Walking Dead* have little time for such taxonomic distinctions. Often adrift and vulnerable, they must set aside their sympathy and repel the zombies that scan the countryside for sustenance. The Governor of Woodbury defines the stark conditions of existence in the finale to season three succinctly: "You kill or you die. Or you die and you kill." Untouched by remorse over the fate of the undead, the Governor offers a chiasmus that argues for seeking out and attacking zombies before being found and attacked by them. Of primary importance to him is not dying at all, since death carries with it the potential return to life as a zombie. Responding defensively to the threat of a zombie assault is at best a secondary option for him, despite how carefully he has worked to make Woodbury a small-town sanctuary for his followers.

The Governor is scarcely alone in prizing violent self-protection. Indeed, the theme of immediate rather than reflective action recurs across three seasons of *The Walking Dead* as Shane questions Rick's restrained leadership, Michonne marks her distance from Andrea's guilelessness, and Carl upbraids his father for not killing the persons from Woodbury who attack their prison home. What the Governor and Carl voice may in fact be incontrovertible, since persons risk being sickened when survivors fail to act preemptively. Having been bloodied by a zombie, moreover, the once-living often turn and join the other others in a war against their still-living friends. While multiple storylines course through *The Walking Dead* and its seasons, then, a single goal—that of protecting a tenuous existence through calculated violence—predominates. Humans must kill the zombies that would eat their flesh or risk being transformed into unthinking beings whose predations signal an immanent, and unending, desire for the flesh.

## II.

To speak of flesh, spirit, the soul, the soul-less, death, and resurrection is of course to engage in zombie-speak; but such terms also cut across the work in question and evoke the apostle Paul, whose “message,” James D. Tabor asserts, “created Christianity as we know it.”<sup>3</sup> Whether this polemical assertion is true is less important for my purposes than that Paul, a major author of the New Testament, wrote epistles that stand as a parallel exercise in urgency. Citing the death of Jesus and anticipating his promised return, Paul insists that his audiences choose between actions that lead to life in heaven and those that would consign them to hell. Informing this foundational directive is a complicated personal history and even more complicated theology. The Pauline history is marked by the fact that Paul, a Roman zealot who persecuted the Jews before undergoing a conversion experience on the road to Damascus, was not among the original apostles. Consequently, he did not meet, speak to, live with, or study under Jesus. Paul responds to what some might consider a disadvantage for a new disciple by forging ahead and distinguishing Jesus from the resurrected Christ. Because he knows both figures through revelation—experiences that he recalls often to his audiences—he maintains that his is the most accurate sense of what we are bound in life to do. That such confidence is at best counterintuitive does not detract from its considerable force.

As a Jew and a mediating figure in early Christianity, Paul conceives of what we might term “the human” as beginning with Adam and ending with Christ. He associates Adam with sin, death, and earthly corruption; he imagines Christ as being sinless, alive, and in heaven. “Far from rendering bodily existence ultimately irrelevant,” Benjamin H. Dunning explains, “the Adam-Christ typology in 1 Corinthians actually serves to *foreground* the theological urgency of questions about the body.”<sup>4</sup> Crucial to such questions is the distinction Paul makes at key points in his writings between *sarx*, a Greek word typically translated into English as “flesh,” and *pneuma* or “spirit.” His many uses of *sarx* span from nonjudgmental references to our kin and bodies to disapproving metaphors for lust and on to renunciations of our rebellious and faith-defeating behavior.

True to character, Paul begins his Epistle to the Galatians by stating that he received the gospel he will preach by revelation, not from other teachers or apostles. There is one gospel, and anyone who either preaches or listens to others could, in his view, become accursed. Specifically, Paul renounces the Galatians as being especially misguided because they knew Jesus, observed his crucifixion, and yet, “having begun in the Spirit,” they now live “by the flesh” (3:3). For Paul, the present and future are irrevocably changed by the example of Christ. As N. T. Wright observes, the “inaugurated eschatology” means that the “Messiah-people must learn the way of life that belongs to the future, and practice it even amidst the puzzles that continue” in the present.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Tabor, *Paul and Jesus: How the Apostle Transformed Christianity* (Simon and Schuster, 2012), p. xvi.

<sup>4</sup> Dunning, *Specters of Paul: Sexual Difference in Early Christian Thought* (U of Pennsylvania P, 2011), p.12.

<sup>5</sup> Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Fortress Press, 2013), p. 553.

In chapter 5 of Galatians, Paul speaks of the “works of the flesh” (5:19), a telling double-voiced metaphor that links *sarx* to particular actions even as it grants the flesh a kind of negative agency. The famous litany of flesh-wrought practices that follows includes adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, sedition, heresy, envy, murder, drunkenness, reveling and, Paul adds, other behaviors like these (5:19–21). This list alludes to commandments 6, 1, 9, 10, and 5 and then names behaviors as sinful because they show persons to be caught up in physical expression, not faith. Scarcely pausing, Paul defines *sarx* still further through its opposition with spirit. If the flesh is degenerate or impure, it follows that the spirit is pure. Flesh, in most cases, is behind dramatic but also violent actions, while spirit commonly takes passive, even ascetic forms. Among the expressions of spirit that he lists in Galatians are love, joy, peace, long suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance (5:22–23). By powerfully juxtaposing sin and love, embodied acts and purposive inaction, Paul rejects the dictates of the flesh and tells his audiences to attend to spirit, no matter how trying that course of action might prove to be.

We get a sense of just how difficult such obedience is in Paul’s magisterial Epistle to the Romans. All of us are sinners, Paul again states confrontationally; no one is righteous. Mere compliance with the commandments is insufficient. Warning to his subject, he writes that we are to be suspicious of embodiment as such, since flesh, desire, and sin are necessarily copresent: “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me: but *how* to perform that which is good I find not” (7:18). Here Paul represents the flesh as being interior to, and thus indivisible from, our bodies and—in almost the next breath—as an aspect of the will. What makes this compressed formula so compelling is that the flesh and will, working together, compromise thought as well as any competing desire to act rightly in the world. To give oneself over to the flesh/will is thus to lose self-control—to desire, envy, and become drunken, that is, rather than to persist in peace and temperance. Ultimately, it is to die twice: first, in the death associated with embodied sin; and second, in the judgment that follows immediately upon death. Fearing these possible outcomes, Paul looks at his own behavior and exclaims, “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” (7:24).

Paul’s personal lament might well be read as a response to a complicated rhetorical situation. It follows that audiences and readers are not to see his confession of weakness as being real or, if it is real, it must also be strategic. Such an outburst positions Paul as a fellow human or orator more so than as a spiritual exemplar. Consequently, audiences could be expected to feel his anguish, identify with his struggles, relate them to their own lives, and thus be amenable to a doctrinal rejection of the flesh. Such a conclusion, however, empties Paul’s ministry of much of its characteristic severity.<sup>6</sup> Here as elsewhere, he asserts that living in sin, succumbing to the power of the flesh, must be

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<sup>6</sup> Elaine Pagels observes that “Paul himself, some twenty years after Jesus’ death, urged an even more austere discipline upon his followers than Jesus had preached,” in *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent: Sex and Politics in Early Christianity* (Random House, 1988), p. xxii.

rejected outright: “For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live” (8:13). The double paradox of earning resurrection by mortifying (i.e., *self-killing*) certain behaviors, and of living eternally, despite having died, resonates more powerfully than a mere move in a language game.

If, for Paul, it is axiomatic that our “deeds [are] of the body,” he nonetheless knows that the resurrection of the spirit, following its separation from *soma*, is a difficult idea for his audiences to accept. In 1 Corinthians, he confronts those who would doubt the ascension, saying, “if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: And if Christ be not risen, then *is* our preaching vain, and your faith *is* also vain” (15:13–14). For Paul, resurrection is both an historical event and a living article of faith. So that his audiences do not miss his point, he reiterates the causal chain associated with resurrection and adds a telling link to it: “For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: And if Christ be not raised, your faith *is* vain; ye are yet in your sins” (16–17). To be “yet in your sins” is to live and believe in vain; to be resurrected is to die in the ways associated with matter and become re-embodied as spirit. Preceded by atonement, death gives way to ascension and life through a new union with God. Paul thus figures paradise as enduring paradox.

### III.

The southern landscape in which Rick and his followers live is desolate, except for the likes of Woodbury and the prison, and so the survivors on *The Walking Dead* tend to be isolated. Merely gathering food and repelling zombies take most of their daily energy. Curiously, the terrain they traverse is almost devoid of advertising. Without a reliable source of electricity, television and radio service would soon go silent; but billboards too are in short supply, and storefront signs appear to have been damaged in the chaos that occurred as zombies multiplied. For their parts, the characters wear dirty, rumpled, downscale clothing, and so any body advertising they might project is limited. Finally, the show has little or no product placement, and thus its viewers become attuned to scenes that are unmarked by advertising—until, that is, the storyline breaks, three or four times per episode, and blocks of commercials intrude upon the apocalyptic present.

Unlike the show itself, there is little about these commercials that fans of *The Walking Dead* would find to be extraordinary. Predictably, corporations seeking to expand their share of the youth market buy time on the show. So too do firms that promote safety or wish to hawk the low-cost products that are common across the mediascape. Thus trailers for *Evil Dead* and *Star Trek Into Darkness* have run on the series, since they appeal to the right demographic and evince a parallel narrative mood. As anarchy threatens Rick and his group, moreover, fans of the show have also been sold on the idea of buying an ADT Security System. It may be just as timely for them to register for a Christian dating service or engage in phone sex via 1-800-Jet-Doll. Commercials for Nugenix testosterone booster and the Pos-T-Vac, a medically approved vacuum therapy for erectile dysfunction, have announced their products’ availability (should they be needed) too.

Contributing to the incitements that mark modern advertising, Victoria's Secret weighs in with a 15-second spot for Fabulous, the latest in its line of monumental bras. To better hail its target audience, the commercial features young women whose long legs and boyish hips offer instructive contrast to their ample breasts. As they cavort before the camera, wearing no less body make-up than the average zombie, the models excite same-sex and cross-sex desire and encourage viewers to purchase lingerie that will make them desirable too. At base, the models' camera-directed smiles seduce women into femininity by holding out the elusive promise that the more avid their gender compliance, the greater will be their daily pleasures. Men are not the primary audience for the Fabulous commercials, and yet they can be expected to view the sinewy figures in bright pink, blue, or yellow underwear with the passive attentiveness that television encourages.

While commercials like these differ markedly in subject and quality, they have a common goal: to use narrative in ways that will turn spectators into spectator-buyers. Typically, such commercials begin by establishing setting, introducing characters (should there be any), and then disrupting the stasis that has been created. As part of that controlled disruption, the figures in a commercial tend to confront a problem that requires attention or a need that has gone unmet. The narrative then shifts to persuading viewers that the problem or need should matter to them. For the commercial to succeed, therefore, the emotional plight that first occupied its characters must, in a kind of metonymic slide, become available to, and be associated with, us as well. Visual and auditory appeals thus prime viewers to "take on or imitate, i.e., 'embody,' the emotional behaviors" on display.<sup>7</sup> It follows that others' fears, once excited, should become our own; that any hunger shown on screen should be felt by us too; and that risks, despite the obstacles associated with them, will eventually affect actors and viewers alike.

How a commercial addresses spectators and their bodies needs to be deftly controlled throughout a narrative, not merely during its setup and complication. Indeed, for advertising to succeed and commodity lust to find its object, viewers must agree not only that problems will be solved, desires satisfied, and emotions quieted once money is exchanged for the right new thing but that what we purchase *is* the right thing or service. Ironically, experience teaches that few purchases satisfy for long. Viewers can therefore become vulnerable to new appeals from advertisers, and thus the will-to-purchase that narratives solicit, intensify, and direct can revive. Standing in the way of compulsive buying are our finite resources and, as importantly, something like exhaustion—for advertisers and audiences alike. Because television advertising has occurred for sixty-five years, it is becoming increasingly difficult for corporations to differentiate their products from those of their competitors in ways that will have lasting appeal to viewers, many of whom are cynical, jaded, or worse. As the market for consumer goods matures, Robert Goldman and Stephen Papsen assert, advertisers are pressured "to find fresher, more desirable, and more

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<sup>7</sup> Larry Percy, "The Role of Emotion in Processing Advertising," *Advertising Theory*, ed. Shelly Rodgers and Esther Thorson (Routledge, 2012), p. 77.

spectacular images to enhance the value of products.”<sup>8</sup> Because commercials are now ubiquitous—alongside roads and waterways, above the seats on buses, across broadcast and cable television, on the face of buildings, throughout this or that webpage—“the half-life of sign values shrinks, the clutter of images accumulates, and a new kind of cultural junk heap has taken shape.”<sup>9</sup> It is unclear how we might sort this wreckage and isolate its fleshy matter from what actually matters.

Fans of *The Walking Dead* expect an episode to be interrupted by commercials at several points in its narrative. Some viewers, we may imagine, would scarcely stir on the couch in response, content to watch the advertising (or not) and wait. Other viewers would likely see the commercials as a chance to go to the kitchen or bathroom, check email or tweet a friend. Still others, having recorded the episode, could use the remote to fast-forward until the action proper resumes. What is extraordinary about these habitual responses is that they are so ordinary. We would be hard pressed, I think, to find fans who would complain that their viewing was somehow compromised or who would say that the ads made it difficult to get back into the show. Rather than protest, most of them would likely consent to the change in narrative direction without giving it much thought.

In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks famously observes that plotting shapes narrative in ways that compel us to “read forward, seeking in the unfolding of the narrative a line of intention and a portent of design that hold the promise of a progress toward meaning.”<sup>10</sup> Caught up in the dynamics of narrative, readers are thus rewarded with pleasure when they understand where a plot is going and what its end might be. So tuned in are readers to their desire to learn what awaits them that the question of why reading has become a kind of telos can go unasked. Reading either “a text” or for “the text *in* a work,” by contrast, differs from the dynamic anticipation that Brooks names by being less anticipatory. Rather than fast-forward conceptually or presume that an accredited meaning awaits, readers of a text engage several works, not one, seeking in them “associations, contiguities, cross-references” that can lead to “a liberation of symbolic energy.”<sup>11</sup> Consequently, readers play along as otherwise separate writings join, perhaps uncomfortably, into a network, tissue, weaving, or web. We collaborate, moreover, with the strands of this network, both inferring and contributing to its design as such. The resulting text can even violate the genre we would ascribe to it by being a recognizable type that is irreducible to its conventions. As a result, we may trace a contradiction one moment and turn to a different inscription the next—without reaching for the comfort that attends either synthesis or closure.

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson, *Sign Wars: The Cluttered Landscape of Advertising* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1996), p. v.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vi.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Random House, 1984), xiii.

<sup>11</sup> Barthes, p. 59.



When the producers of *The Walking Dead* defer an episode's plot and direct viewers' attention to an embedded block of commercials, they change the terms that govern reception, if only momentarily. Still, in the gap between these two narrative forms resides an opportunity for something other than compliance or distraction. Attentive viewers might find themselves startled by discordant characters, color values, dialogue, settings, and sounds. Newly alienated, they might look closely at the separate narratives and recognize that the episode and its embedded advertising converge in being outlandish. Readers already know that there are no living, much less incompletely resurrected, zombies; that the human species is cresting seven billion in population, not declining precipitously in response to a first-of-its-kind pandemic; and that advertising is almost ever-present to us, even in rural America. Moreover, few of us believe that dating a Christian is a proper stay against mortality, much less the fast track to resurrection, or that wearing a Fabulous bra could, of itself, make women and girls as sculpturally dramatic as models. If it is too much to ask that a zombie crash a Victoria's Secret set, consume some party-girl flesh, and liberate enough symbolic energy to startle viewers into an awareness of human time-boundedness, I admit to a wish that Paul, returned to life, might be revived long enough on our high-definition televisions to intone austere that "we are debtors, not to the flesh," if we are "to live after the flesh" (Romans 8:12). Barring such disruptions, let us all wait inattentively for the commercials to end, the episode to resume, and the zombies to emerge, sooner or later, out of a murky darkness.

#### IV.

Zombies, I have argued to this point, are walking allegories whose spongy, wet, easily assaulted bodies stand in for a powerful aspect of appetite that, following Paul, we may equate to "the flesh." Due to being appetite-in-action and yet dead, they complicate his account of the spirit by embodying a new kind of eternal life. In the process, zombies stake out the extreme end of what I would term a flesh-spirit continuum. Clumsiness, will, the flesh, passion, sinful unrestraint—all are copresent in their groaning, arms-outstretched, teeth-bared reincarnations.

The Governor, with his almost remorseless focus on survival, is somewhat less disposed to violence than the zombies he experiments upon and kills. Like them, he dispenses with humans so that he may live and desire anew. His purposes extend to inciting the Woodbury survivors, throughout season three, and using them instrumentally. Indeed, the Governor becomes so focused on what he wants and can make others do that he becomes controlled by narrative desire. For all his attention to plotting, then, he too becomes a sort of human zombie. Advertisers, with their crafted but specious narratives, and Victoria's Secret models, with their message that pleasure is sufficient in itself, are in the shared business of governing—so they might profit from—others' unrealized desires too. Each teaches that what should matter to consumers are those matters associated with a felt, and pliable, need. As such, the corporations that encourage brand recall and brand loyalty through televised incitements earn a place on the flesh/spirit continuum as well. Like the no-longer-humans on *The Walking Dead*—many of whom are as thin as underwear models—we too are susceptible to responding dimly to sense impressions, turning in the direction of things that

promise to satisfy our flesh, and stumbling forward until we have bought and consumed them – and they, through our distracted commodity lust, us.

Cornered by zombies and assaulted by the Governor's ragtag troops, the survivors that Rick leads stand closer to the middle of such a flesh-spirit continuum. Daily, they resist the flesh by repelling the zombie hordes that assault them. Given their perilous circumstances, they work to preserve community and can thus expend little energy, now that Lori and Shane are gone, in the abrupt expressions of desire associated with televisual sex. Also in decline is the time they have for spiritual reflection. Even Herschel, who spoke of his Christianity often in season two, shows signs of suffering from a crisis of faith. Apparently the ubiquity of zombies and the losses of family and friends have wearied his resolve. Rick alone may stand out for his capacity to resist desire and use violence selectively. Despite having lost his wife and best friend to the zombie plague, and despite suffering from dissociation, he holds on to his humanity even as those from Woodbury assault the prison-home that he and his followers occupy. By quietly preaching and embodying restraint, he rejects the doctrine of preemptive violence that Shane asserted, and that Carl now recommends, in favor of sparing the Woodbury survivors that the Governor manipulates. Indeed, having repulsed the attack, Rick treats these misguided followers as neighbors, not enemies, by granting them food and shelter. Throughout much of the ordeal, his leadership is informed by the thoughtful care, rather than the flesh/will, which Paul would have us use as we act in and on the world.

Considering *The Walking Dead* and the commercial advertising on AMC as parts of a single text, as I have begun to do here, compels a reader to move from episode to advertisement – and back again – in search of the unintentional structures that link apparently discrete works. A kind of leveling occurs as problems associated with being human occupy the characters in each of these domains. If the difference between the problems experienced by the survivors in a world overrun by zombies and those felt by characters in no-less-imaginary commercials is large, viewers may nonetheless arrive at the dissonant conclusion that they are marked by the same logic: a restless, enduring desire that is almost as powerful, in its extreme forms, as that which animates zombies.

Since there are only so many ways that the zombies can attack humans and limited ways that such creatures might be killed by them, viewers are not likely to stay fans of *The Walking Dead* because of the catharsis that results from its ultra-violence. While the Governor is evil, and while few viewers can resist the fall of such a villain, he too will die and his role assumed by new antagonists. The survivors and their resilience hold our interest now, but the zombie genre requires that whatever tenuous successes the still-living enjoy will be temporary and their numbers must dwindle. It follows that even the characters we most identify with may perish, as humans or in their humanity, and thus become zombies too. What promises not to die is anxiety. It should continue to course through stories of life in a landscape overrun by the once-dead and across the narratives of television commercials that echo and redirect our fears.

To follow *The Walking Dead* is thus to experience (or traverse) others' violent and sometimes materialistic desires from the emotional distance afforded by television. Naming the kinds of narrative anxiety at stake in these desires tells us little about actual spectatorship, beyond that felt by spectator-buyers; but it does prepare us for the unlikely recognition that, however harrowing a particular episode might be, the anxiety it incites will be felt as abstract as well. That is so because the series displaces the threat posed to our mortal bodies by the flesh, and our concerns with mortality more generally, onto zombie/characters that occupy serial narratives—onto, that is, a production that promises yet more storylines and characters to come. Thus, in its logic and effects, *The Walking Dead* is a narrative that exists to be interrupted so as to be reincarnated. As it revives, it rewards our habitual viewing by seeing to it that we do not overly personalize, for now, what cable television has created. My account of Paul's emphasis on the "works of the flesh" is itself abstract because it occurs within an interpretation of a popular television show that, being about zombies, we know to not take too seriously. The Pauline master narrative that might well preoccupy us—the one where time is finite and death certain, where the flesh gathers under one heading a compelling account of unreflective sin—is doubly elided as a result.

Watching an episode of *The Walking Dead*, I'm often struck by the fact that the apostle Paul seems everywhere present but nowhere in evidence. Ideas from his epistles align themselves with the zombies as well as with those who battle them qua flesh; and yet Paul, being lost to history for many viewers, remains effectively anonymous. We might say, following Barthes's earlier formulation, that quotations from his works are at best "*already read*" by the show and its fans. As a kind of unspoken source-text, then, Paul strikes me as being prehistorical—dead or repressed, that is, yet accessible through the unspoken quotations of the epistles that an attentive reader may revive and ascribe to characters and their predicaments. If Paul's presence is difficult to recover and apply, it may be because few of us today take Paul at his word, a claim I assert with something like Pauline intensity. Whether Paul created Christianity as we know it is debatable, but he remains a theologian whose urgency we have domesticated and would do well to consider anew.

The finale to season three suggests that the producers of *The Walking Dead* may have anticipated the criticism that the show has become too abstract and violent and so have moved to give their production an enduring gravitas. Its centerpiece is a failed attack upon the prison that houses Rick and his friends. Having breached its walls, the Governor comes upon an open King James Bible that he stops to read. The passage we see him studying in oblique close-up is from the Gospel of John. In it, John quotes Jesus who speaks of the dead and promises, in a new covenant, that they will hear the Lord's voice: "And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation" (5:29). The finale seems to suggest that the unprecedented resurrection experienced by zombies might soon, for lack of a better phrase, be completed as they die completely. We fans of *The Walking Dead*—nonbelievers and Christians alike—could do worse than respond to embodiment by recalling Paul's Epistle to the Romans, especially those verses in which he rejects living distractedly in a state of sin, echoes Jesus' covenant, and advises us to "walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (8:1). To do so, of

course, would require that we turn off cable television and its alluring incitements and replace them with the self-reflection that gets insufficient attention in these perilous times.<sup>12</sup>

LARRY T. SHILLOCK is Professor of English and Assistant Academic Dean at Wilson College. He teaches subjects that range from Homer to Homer Simpson and publishes in the areas of narrative theory, film, and the novel.

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<sup>12</sup> This essay has benefited from careful readings by John Elia, Steve Waryan, and its anonymous reviewer.