

THE DAY MAY COME WHEN YOU WON'T BE QUALITY TV— *THE WALKING DEAD* AND VIEWER ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The Walking Dead (AMC, 2010-) suffered its steepest episode-to-episode decline in viewership following its season seven premiere in October 2016. This article argues that *The Walking Dead*'s decline in viewership is partially due to the show's failure to adhere to viewer expectations

of quality TV. Referring to previous studies on quality TV (Cardwell 2007, Mittell 2006), this article defines some of the key textual signifiers of this meta-genre (aesthetics, narration, complex characters) and discusses them in relation to viewer engagement. After establishing that viewers turn to quality TV for a "cognitively and affectively challenging entertainment experience" (Schlütz 2016a), the article investigates to what extent *The Walking Dead* meets viewer expectations of quality TV. Through examining the online discourse on *The Walking Dead* in relation to a close-textual analysis of the programme, this article finds that later episodes of *The Walking Dead* have caused frustration among many viewers since they do not provide them with the types of cognitive and affective engagement they expect from quality TV.

The Walking Dead (AMC, 2010-2022) suffered its steepest episode-to-episode decline in viewership following its season seven premiere in October 2016. Between the airing of episodes 7.01 and 7.02, the US viewership of the hit zombie drama dropped from 17 to 12.5 million viewers¹. In 2016, a heated debate regarding the show's quality had already been ongoing for years (Bishop and Statt 2016a, Stuever 2016). However, following the season seven premiere, which featured the gruesome deaths of two beloved characters, this debate further escalated. Not only did the steep decline in viewership indicate that many viewers had reached their limit, but the popular culture blog *The Verge* (Bishop and Statt 2016b) decided to stop covering the show and other media outlets such as *The Guardian* (Holland 2016) and *Collider* (Cotter 2016) actively encouraged viewers to stop watching *The Walking Dead*. Following its critically-acclaimed first season, the critical reception of *The Walking Dead* has turned increasingly negative over the course of its ten-season run. In contrast, the viewer reception has been more mixed. There are those viewers who side with critics who argue that *The Walking Dead* has turned 'bad', but there are also viewers who still defend the show. In the context of this article, it is particularly noteworthy that, in their negative reviews of *The Walking Dead*, viewers often refer to the programme's lack of quality. For example, one viewer summarises their decision to quit *The Walking Dead* as follows:

This show is written by talentless morons who have taken original printed source material and turned it into a blue-chip soap opera, replete with terrible acting, one-dimensional characters and a meandering, directionless narrative that looks like it's been developed by a group of drunk undergraduate students.²

This negative viewer review of *The Walking Dead* suggests that a programme's perceived level of quality is a key component of how viewers engage with contemporary television drama. While a number of studies (Mittell 2015, Schlütz 2016a) have already investigated quality TV, there has not been much

research undertaken that explores if a programme, once it has been designated quality TV, can ever lose this status and what this potential loss of status might mean for viewer engagement. This article argues that *The Walking Dead*'s inability to adhere to viewer expectations of quality TV is a crucial factor in the increasingly negative reception of the show.

After discussing some of the key characteristics of quality TV (e.g. aesthetics, narration, characters), this article contrasts a textual analysis of *The Walking Dead*'s pilot episode with a textual analysis of the show's season seven premiere and discusses the findings of these analyses in the context of the episodes' reception. I want to specify that I am not simply arguing that *The Walking Dead* has turned into 'bad' television—although on a subjective level I tend to agree with this statement. Instead, this article regards quality TV as a meta-genre (Cardwell 2005, Schlütz 2016a) with distinct textual characteristics and examines what repercussions it has for viewer engagement if a programme does not live up to the expectations that are tied to this categorisation. By providing new insights into how viewers react if a quality TV drama fails to equip viewers with the added symbolic value that the consumption of quality TV promises, this article contributes to the larger scholarly discourse on quality TV and social distinction (Schlütz et al. 2018).

1. METHODOLOGY

This article employs a methodological approach that combines a number of qualitative (e.g. textual analysis) and quantitative (e.g. netnography) research methods. The argument this article makes is primarily based on theoretical approaches to quality TV, a close-textual analysis of *The Walking Dead*, and an analysis of viewer responses to the show. The two episodes that are discussed at length in this article have primarily been chosen because they exemplify how the reception of *The Walking Dead* has changed over the years. By collecting and analysing online reactions to *The Walking Dead*, this article follows a methodological approach that Kozinets (2015) has defined as "netnography". Similar to methodological approaches from sociology and anthropology, netnography aims to study culture and community, but does so within an online environment (Kozinets 2015: 6). Netnography exists somewhere between big data analysis and the close readings of discourse analysis (Kozinets 2015: 4), but is less obtrusive than more traditional audience research methods (e.g. personal interview, surveys). It should be noted that this article only considers a limited

1 "The Walking Dead: Season Seven Ratings." *TV Series Finale*, 4 April 2017. <https://tvseriesfinale.com/tv-show/walking-dead-season-seven-ratings/> (last accessed 28-02-21).

2 "It bites: why I'm giving up on The Walking Dead." *The Guardian*, 29 November 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2016/nov/29/the-walking-dead-why-im-giving-up-on-the-zombie-apocalypse> (last accessed 11-02-21).

number of viewer responses—most of which have been gathered on popular culture websites, television blogs, and social media platforms. However, the viewer responses that are cited in this article are not to be regarded as empirical evidence for *The Walking Dead's* decline in quality. Rather, they are meant to underline that there is a correlation between *The Walking Dead's* increasingly negative reception and the show's inability to meet viewer expectations of quality TV. It should also be noted that examining the reception of *The Walking Dead* in relation to its status as quality TV is only one potential way to theorise viewer engagement with this programme. As previous studies have shown, the show's comic-book origins and its status as a transmedia storytelling (Hassler-Forest 2014), as well as its depiction of race (Rendell 2019) are other key factors of *The Walking Dead's* reception.

2. QUALITY TELEVISION AND VIEWER ENGAGEMENT

Over the course of the last two decades, American television dramas such as *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008) and *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013) have generated substantial scholarly attention. These dramas have become synonymous with a type of programme that scholars refer to as “quality television” (McCabe and Akass 2007). In the context of academia, the term quality TV does not necessarily indicate whether a programme is ‘good’ or ‘bad’, but has become a generic category that refers to a wide range of programmes that share distinct textual and extra-textual traits (Cardwell 2007). Paradoxically, this means that quality TV can be either good or bad just as ordinary TV can be good or bad (Brundson 1990). The term quality TV was first coined in the mid-1970s by US television critics who used it to refer to dramas such as *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987) and *St. Elsewhere* (NBC, 1982-1988). However, initial definitions of quality TV were somewhat elusive—“people just seemed to know it when they saw it” (Thompson 1996: 12). Within academia, it was primarily established that quality TV appeals to a sophisticated audience and operates differently than other programmes with regard to its form and content (Feuer 1984, Schlütz 2016a: 97, Thompson 1996). In the post-network era (Lotz 2014), which saw the premieres of various high-profile dramas that represented a new type of quality TV, the term was re-evaluated. Schlütz (2016a) offers a concise definition of what quality TV means in the “third golden age of television” (Martin 2013: 9) that we currently live in:

Serial quality TV is complex in terms of storytelling, cast, narrative ambiguity, and intertextuality. Due to realistic execution, controversial subjects, and ambiguous characters quality series appear authentic. Moreover, they stand out because of a signature style composed of high production values, distinctive visual style, and techniques fostering reflexivity. Quality TV addresses a special, highly autonomous audience segment. As a meta-genre it supports selection, frames comprehension, and channels interpretation. Quality serial television offers a cognitively and affectively challenging entertainment experience with added symbolic value (Schlütz 2016a: 101).

This definition highlights the inherent complexity of quality TV and makes clear that this quality TV can be studied from various perspectives (see Martin 2013, Mittell 2015, Lotz 2014, Scott 2013). In contrast to existing studies on quality TV, this article is primarily interested in exploring the ways in which a quality TV programme can fail to provide its viewers with “cognitively and affectively challenging entertainment experience” (Schlütz 2016a: 101) and how this failure can impact the symbolic added that quality TV affords to its viewers (Bourdieu 1985: 728-31, Newman and Levine 2012, Schlütz et al. 2018)

One of the principal ways in which quality TV engages its viewers on a cognitive level is its storytelling. Many quality TV dramas have adopted a storytelling mode that Mittell (2006, 2015) defines as “narrative complexity”. This storytelling mode, which can be regarded as a merger between episodic and serial narration (Mittell 2015: 18), pushes the operational aesthetic of the narration to the foreground. Taking their inspiration from “mind-game” (Elsaesser 2009) films, “narratively complex programs invite temporary disorientation and confusion, allowing viewers to build up their comprehension skills through long-term viewing and active engagement” (Mittell 2006: 37). The active engagement required by quality TV programmes is regarded as a source of pleasure for the audience. For example, Schlütz (2016b: 200) compares the pleasure that viewers gain from deciphering the narrative of a complex quality TV drama with the thrill of discovery offered by other forms of intellectual entertainment such as chess, Sudoku, or crossword puzzles. Similarly, Mittell identifies “the desire to be both actively engaged in the story and successfully surprised through storytelling manipulations” (2006: 38) as one of the key appeals of complex

television narratives. At the same time, deciphering a complex television narrative is also an investment that, at some point, has to lead to a return in the form of a preferred or satisfying narrative outcome—otherwise viewers might lose interest (Schlütz 2016b: 201, Tan 1996: 100). Many contemporary quality TV dramas have embraced narrative complexity (e.g. *Mad Men*, AMC, 2007-2015; *Westworld*, HBO, 2016-; *Twin Peaks: The Return*, Showtime, 2017). Thus, this storytelling mode does not only function as a distinct source of pleasure for the audience, but has become one of the main textual markers of quality TV.

Quality TV programmes are further defined by a distinct audio-visual style that emphasises the visual “more than what is assumed to be typical for television” (Mills 2013: 58). While the “signature style” (Schlütz 2016a: 103) of quality TV has been somewhat shaped by the aesthetics of various critically-acclaimed HBO dramas (e.g. *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Deadwood*) that premiered during the post-network era, it is also the result an evolution of the television production process (Nelson 1997: 11). Cardwell defines the “signature style” (Schlütz 2016a: 103) of quality TV as follows:

American quality television programmes tend to exhibit high production values, naturalistic performance styles, recognised and esteemed actors, a sense of visual style created through careful, even innovative camerawork and editing, and a sense of aural style created through the judicious use of appropriate, even original music (Cardwell 2007: 26).

This definition makes clear that the aesthetics of quality TV do not simply translate to high production values or spectacular imagery. Instead, they might be best thought of as complex. For example, Gorton (2009) has shown that the editing and sound design of a quality TV programme can influence the viewer's emotional engagement significantly—for example, a scene that is completely devoid of sound may encourage viewers to “enter in [their] own dialogue” (Gorton 2009: 118). Thus, the signature style of quality TV encourages affective engagement, but it also leaves viewers space to navigate what their emotional response might look like. Cardwell (2005) similarly indicates that the audio-visual style of quality TV not always works towards a moment of intense emotion. Instead, “there is a continual ‘pulling back’ from a clearly defined emotional release” (Cardwell 2005: 184). These studies suggest that quality TV dramas are informed by a sense of aesthetic complexity that is atypical for other

melodramatic forms since, instead of encouraging a specific emotional response, they set the parameters for various potential affective responses to occur. At this point, it might be necessary to clarify that I am not attempting to devalue melodrama as a mode of storytelling and agree with studies (Mittell 2015) which argue that quality TV dramas are essentially melodramas. As such, one of their main goals is to elicit affective responses in the viewer that will provide them with a sense of emotional catharsis. This means what primarily distinguishes quality TV dramas from other melodramatic television formats (e.g. soap opera, reality TV) is *how* they elicit emotional responses in the audience. For example, the aesthetics (e.g., editing, framing, cinematography) of reality TV are often arranged to elicit specific emotions (e.g. happiness, sadness) whereas quality TV dramas are characterised by a sense of aesthetic complexity that leaves viewers with more room to formulate their own affective responses.

In addition to its complex storytelling and distinct style, quality TV has become known for its “complex” (Mittell 2015: 118) characters—typically meaning those who exist in a moral grey area. Of course, morally-ambiguous characters were not invented by quality TV, however, a large number of quality TV dramas (e.g. *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*) are either led by antihero protagonists or prominently feature morally-ambiguous characters. In contrast to characters who act ‘good’ (e.g. traditional heroes), which makes it easy to sympathise with them, morally-ambiguous characters pose a challenge to the audience when it comes to viewer engagement. Of course, some viewers might still sympathise with a character like Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini, *The Sopranos*) despite his amoral behaviour (Carroll 2004, Smith 2011), but ultimately our relationship with morally ambiguous television characters might be best defined as fascination or interest (Smith 2011, Schlütz 2016b: 207). Vaage (2015: 6) regards narrative alignment, which refers to how closely a narrative is channelled through or aligned with a character (Smith 1995), as the key factor in the audience's relationship with antiheroes or villainous characters. Alignment does not automatically lead to sympathy (Vaage 2015: 6), but it can add to our fascination with a character. For example, learning more about the motivations of a morally flawed character might increase our interest in that character, but it still does not require us to sympathise with her (Mittell 2015: 163). Ultimately then, while viewers might not be able to ‘solve’ their engagement with a morally ambiguous character, it provides the sort of pleasurable cognitive and affective challenge that viewers expect from quality TV.

3. DAYS GONE BYE: THE WALKING DEAD AS QUALITY TV

The Walking Dead first premiered on AMC in October of 2010. At the time, the basic cable network AMC was in the midst of re-branding itself as a quality TV network similar to HBO. *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men*, which went on to become two of the most critically acclaimed quality television dramas of all time, were integral to AMC's effort to re-brand itself as a quality TV network (Hassler-Forest 2014). When it first premiered, *The Walking Dead* was positioned as another quality TV drama that followed in the footsteps of AMC's previous successes. *The Walking Dead* is adapted from Robert Kirkman's popular comic-book series of the same name. Both the comic book and television programme are centred around sheriff Rick Grimes and follow a group of people who, after a viral outbreak has turned a large part of the population into zombies, struggle for survival. The popularity of *The Walking Dead* comics meant that AMC could rely on a built-in fan base, but it also meant that the producers had to meet the expectations of genre fans and

quality TV viewers. The marketing of the show's first season emphasises AMC's aim to establish the show as quality genre TV. The producers signalled their commitment to quality by hiring Frank Darabont as a showrunner. As the director of the critically acclaimed Stephen King adaptations *The Green Mile* (1999), *The Mist* (2007), and *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), which still maintains the all-time highest user rating on the Internet Movie Database³, Darabont had already proven his ability to elevate source material that originates from the horror genre. Admittedly, Darabont adapted some of King's most well-received literary works. Yet these works were still associated with a genre that is commonly regarded as low-brow. During the post-network era, so-called 'showrunners', who typically take on the role of head writer, have become crucial extra-textual markers for quality. For example, David Chase (*The Sopranos*), Damon Lindelof (*Lost*, ABC, 2004-2010; *The Leftovers*, HBO, 2014-2017; *Watchmen*, HBO, 2019), and Phoebe Waller-Bridge (*Fleabag*, BBC, 2016-2019;

3 "The Shawshank Redemption (1994)—User Reviews." *IMDb*. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0111161/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_0 (last accessed 14-05-21).



FIG. 1. THE FIRST SHOT OF RICK GRIMES IN THE PILOT EPISODE OF *THE WALKING DEAD*. IMAGE CREDIT: AMC.



FIG. 2. RICK FEELS CONFLICTED AS HE IS ABOUT TO SHOOT THE ZOMBIE GIRL AT THE BEGINNING OF “DAYS GONE BYE”. IMAGE CREDIT: AMC.

Killing Eve, BBC America, 2018-) stand for the single artistic vision behind the programmes they are associated with while also raising their cultural value (Hassler-Forest 2014: 95-96, Pearson 2007: 243). In the context of this article, the hiring of Darabont is primarily noteworthy because it oriented *The Walking Dead* within the tradition of author-led quality TV.

Perhaps more than any other episode of the show, the pilot, which became AMC's highest-watched premiere at the time⁴, cemented *The Walking Dead's* quality TV ambitions on an aesthetic, narrative, and character level. “Days Gone Bye” (1.01) begins with an establishing shot of two crossroads in a rural area that is enclosed by a forest. From the distance, a police car approaches as the camera pans over to reveal another car that has been flipped upside-down. The camera slowly zooms out as the patrol car parks in the foreground next to a large truck that is lying sideways next to the road. The first cut occurs when a police officer, whom we later in the episode learn to be the show's main protagonist Rick

4 “AMC Original Series ‘The Walking Dead’ Garners Highest 18-49 Delivery for Any Cable Series Premiere for 2010.” *The Futon Critic*, 1 November 2010. <http://www.thefutoncritic.com/ratings/2010/11/01/amc-original-series-the-walking-dead-garners-highest-18-49-delivery-for-any-cable-series-premiere-for-2010-424510/20101101amc01/> (last accessed 28-02-21).

Grimes (Andrew Lincoln), exits his car and slowly walks past the wreckage with a gasoline canister in his hand.

Aside from Rick's approaching car and the chirping of birds, the scene is completely devoid of diegetic sound. Rick makes his way down a hill and eventually arrives at a gas station, but is greeted by a sign that reads “No Gas”. As Rick is about to turn back, the sound of slow, dragging footsteps begins to mix in with the diegetic noises of wind, birds, and crickets. Rick leans down next to the car to locate where the footsteps are coming from. Here, the episode cuts to Rick's POV, showing us a pair of feet in dirty bunny slippers walking slowly across the concrete. Rick looks on as the person kneels down and picks up a white teddy bear from the road. The editing of the sequence now slowly accelerates, and the scene switches back and forth between shots of Rick and the person holding the teddy bear—a little girl in a bathrobe

with long blonde hair (Addy Miller) who has her back turned to the camera. Eventually, the little girl turns to the camera and is revealed to be a zombie with a bloody, mangled face. Rick's facial expression changes from concern to shock as the zombie girl begins to run towards him. Rick nervously pulls his gun from his holster and shoots the zombie in the head. At this point, the sequence briefly switches to slow motion while the—now lifeless—body of the zombie girl and the teddy bear she was still holding drop to the ground and blood gushes out of the gunshot wound on her forehead. The sequence ends with a close-up of Rick, visibly shaken, trembling as he lowers his gun, his eyes shifting frantically.

The opening sequence of “Days Gone Bye” ultimately does not shy away from rendering Rick's killing of the zombie girl in all of its gory detail, but the sequence has not been designed as a tense or thrilling horror set-piece—thus, it establishes the show as quality TV while simultaneously adhering to *The Walking Dead's* genre roots. The slow editing, the absence of music, the sparse use of diegetic sound, and the frequent close-ups of Rick's concerned face create a contemplative and melancholic atmosphere. The sequence's deliberate use of sound is undeniably striking and invites the sort of aesthetic appreciation that is commonly associated with qual-

ity TV. More specifically, the sequence's sparse use of sound means that every sound we do hear is accentuated—from the chirping of crickets to the gurgling noises of the zombie, and the echoing sound of a gunshot. The sequence's frequent use of extended shots, the limited number of cuts, and the use of handheld camera are evocative of auteur-driven art cinema and invite viewers to take pleasure in the episode's aesthetic sophistication. When looking at reviews of the episode, it becomes clear that the episode's stylistic flourishes did not go unnoticed. For example, one viewer (Pretentiouslliterate) remarks that they were “flooded by the pilot's artistry” whereas another viewer (hanshotfirst1138) notes that it was “one of the most cinematic pieces of TV [they'd] ever seen” (comments to Murray 2017). The discussed sequence does feature an emotional climax (Gorton 2009), namely Rick's shooting of the zombie, but it leaves this act of violence open for interpretation. A likely affective response to the zombie child's death might be shock or disgust, but “Days Gone Bye” complicates such a response by cutting to a lingering medium close-up of Rick, giving viewers time to contemplate their own feelings about Rick's actions.

The pre-credit sequence of the episode is a cold open—a narrative teaser that is designed to peak the audience's interest (Coulthard 2010, Logan 2013). One key aspect of cold opens is that they are deliberately disorienting in order to engage viewers on a cognitive level. In this particular case, viewers are thrown right into *The Walking Dead's* narrative world and must quickly catch up with the show. It initially seems as if Rick is a policeman investigating a traffic accident in a rural area, but we quickly learn that the situation is more serious. One of our first clues is the fact that Rick is carrying a gasoline canister, prompting us to ask why he would need gas so desperately that he would carry an empty canister with him. Of course, the sequence ultimately reveals that Rick is moving through a post-apocalyptic world in which the dead have come back to life, but it does so by slowly adding narrative puzzle pieces (e.g. wrecked cars, dead bodies, abandoned gas station, zombie girl) that the viewer must piece together.

The cold open is a good example of how “Days Gone Bye” uses narrative complexity on micro-level, but the episode also employs narrative complexity on a macro-level. The plot of “Days Gone Bye” is not complex, but the arrangement of its narrative information is. From the cold open, which is followed by the opening credits, the episode cuts to a scene in which Rick and his partner Shane (Jon Bernthal) eat together in their patrol car while casually talking about their families. The placement of this scene within the episode is

disorienting—the tone and content signal that it must have taken place before the zombie outbreak, but there are no temporal markers to orient viewers. In a later sequence, the episode again deliberately disorients viewers, who learn at the same time as Rick that the zombie outbreak must have occurred while he was in a coma. We never learn how long Rick has been in a coma; we only get a sense of how much time has passed in the form of a time-lapse shot of a flower bouquet decaying on the table next to Rick's hospital bed. After this, the plot of the episode unfolds mostly in linear fashion, with Rick searching for his family in Atlanta and the events of the cold open finally falling into place. When Rick's patrol car runs out of gas, the episode cuts to a shot of him walking towards a farmhouse with the same gas canister in his hand that appears in the episode's cold open. The exact timeline of events remains unclear, but this shot indicates that Rick's encounter with the zombie must have occurred somewhere around the same time. As is typical for the first episode of a serialised story, the pilot poses more questions than it answers. Yet it also offers many of the narrative pleasures that are distinct for quality TV, mainly by pushing the operational aesthetics of the narration to the foreground. The episode's frequent time jumps encourage viewers to not only relate to the story that is being told, but also to marvel at *how* it is told (Mittell 2006: 36). Furthermore, by the end of the episode, viewers have been given enough information to re-arrange the events of this episode chronologically which provides them with the satisfaction of deciphering a narrative puzzle.

In contrast to other quality TV dramas, *The Walking Dead* does not feature an antihero protagonist. Instead, “Days Gone Bye” introduces Rick Grimes as an honourable family man, even going so far as to have Morgan (Lennie James), another survivor, refer to Rick as “a good man”. Essentially, Rick represents a traditional hero figure, but the episode introduces the sort of character-based moral complexity that viewers expect from quality TV by suggesting that he might struggle to hold on to his humanity as the apocalypse progresses. The scene that perhaps best summarises the sort of moral challenges that Rick will have to overcome over the course of the series occurs about three-quarters into the pilot episode. As he is preparing to leave for Atlanta to search for his family, Rick encounters a legless female zombie. For a moment, Rick watches on, then he tells her he is sorry that “this” has happened to her and kills her out of mercy. Rick's mercy killing of the female zombie is in line with the episode's depiction of him as an honourable person, but it also adds a layer of complexity to his characterisation since it indicates



FIG. 3. AFTER KILLING ABRAHAM, NEGAN DECIDES THAT GLENN WILL BE HIS NEXT VICTIM. IMAGE CREDIT: GENE PAGE/AMC.

that Rick might have to adjust his conception of what is considered morally 'good' behaviour over the course of the series. The reception of this episode underlines that viewers interpreted this scene as an indicator of the show's quality and appreciated the moral complexity it introduced to the show's universe. For example, viewers described the scene as "powerful" (El Pato), praised it for its ability to elicit "sympathy for the dead" (I and 1), and expressed hopes that Rick's empathy for the zombies would become a central theme of the show (happy jack)⁵.

4. THE DAY MAY COME WHERE YOU WON'T BE...QUALITY TV

With its critically acclaimed pilot episode, *The Walking Dead* immediately established itself as a quality genre drama. However, as early as season two, the show began to be criticised for its gratuitous depictions of violence, repetitive and predictable plotting, and one-dimensional characters. In addition, during the production of season two, AMC fired Frank Darabont over disputes of the show's production budget that later turned into a lengthy lawsuit (Masters 2011). Darabont's departure has contributed to the public perception of *The*

Walking Dead's decline in quality. As one reviewer (Mr. Pryce) states: "Darabont's vision was what was real and vital about the show, and it's been coasting on the fumes of his ideas ever since. He managed to imbue the show with some emotion and intelligence" (comment to Murray 2017). The fact that, at the time of this writing, the show has gone through four different showrunners (Frank Darabont, Glen Mazzara, Scott Gimple, Angela Kang) only adds to the impression that *The Walking Dead* does not fit in with the popular conception of quality TV as the product of a singular authorial vision.

Season seven of *The Walking Dead* picks up right where season six left off: a group of survivors, led by Rick, has been caught by a hostile group who call themselves the Saviors. They are led by the villainous but charismatic Negan (Jeffrey Dean Morgan), who announces that Rick and his friends must now answer to him. With Rick and his group bound and on their knees in a circle around him, Negan announces that he will use his barbed-wire-wrapped baseball-bat, "Lucille", to kill one group member as punishment for causing problems for the Saviors in past confrontations. "The Day Will Come When You Won't Be" (7.01) is light on plot, instead focusing on the relationship between Rick and Negan, and the question of who Negan will kill. The episode begins with an extended sequence in which Negan takes Rick in an RV to a remote location and plays a sadistic game with him to assert his dominance. This aesthetic arrangement of this sequence, which

5 Comments to Pierce 2010.

one viewer (Mini Me) describes as “a gimmicky prelude”⁶ to the episode’s two major character deaths, already provides a stark contrast to the stylistic integrity of the show’s pilot. Whereas “Days Gone Bye” frequently provides viewers with the space to navigate their own feelings about Rick and his actions, “The Day Will Come When You Won’t Be” uses an abundance of audio-visual markers (e.g. melancholy string music, black and white still images) to highlight Rick’s hopelessness, thus depriving the sequence of all subtlety.

The episode eventually cuts from Rick lying in despair on the top of the RV to a flashback sequence that reveals that Negan has used “Lucille” to kill Abraham (Michael Cudlitz) and Glenn (Steven Yeun), two of the series’ main characters. Abraham’s death is already gratuitously violent, but the subsequent killing of Glenn, a fan-favourite character who has been on the show since episode two, is even more extreme: in gory detail we see Glenn’s skull cave in and his left eye pop out as Negan bludgeons his head. With blood dripping down his face, Glenn, who is barely able to speak as a result of his head injury, professes his love for his wife Maggie (Lauren Cohan). It then cuts to a medium-wide shot of Negan repeatedly beating Glenn as an obscene amount of blood sprays everywhere while the noises of the baseball-bat hitting Glenn’s flesh fill the soundtrack. This is interspersed with close-up reaction shots of Rick and other main characters, who are either crying or watching on in horror.

While many viewers were simply shocked by the extreme violence that is on display in this scene, other viewers were offended by the depiction of Glenn and Abraham’s death because they regarded it as an indicator of the show’s decline in quality. As one viewer (anniemar 2016) states: “I am capable of understanding the weight of the deaths without needing to see their brains and skulls bashed in, without the emotional manipulation throughout the entire episode” (comment to Handlen 2016).

The episode ends with a sequence in which, after Negan and the Savivors have left, Rick’s group comes together to carry away what is left of their dead friends’ bodies. This sequence is accompanied by melancholy piano music and a booming voiceover from Negan, who explains that, in the post-apocalyptic world of *The Walking Dead*, no one gets to “grow old together” or enjoy “Sunday dinners” with their family anymore. This is followed by a brightly lit dream sequence



FIG. 4. MAGGIE REACTS TO THE BRUTAL MURDER OF GLENN. IMAGE CREDIT: GENE PAGE/AMC.

in which all of the main characters—including Abraham and Glenn—are enjoying a family dinner together outside. The camera pans across the table in slow motion and ends on the smiling faces of Abraham and Glenn, the latter of which is holding his soon-to-be born baby in his lap.

This scene is emblematic for how the season seven premiere employs an abundance of stylistic cues to dictate specific affective responses such as shock, disgust, and sadness in the viewer. Instead of giving viewers the chance to navigate their own feelings about the deaths of Abraham and Glenn, this scene guides the audience’s emotional engagement in a heavy-handed manner that clashed with viewer expectations of how the show should elicit an emotional response in the audience. For example, one viewer (TheStrange) notes that

6 <https://www.indiewire.com/2016/10/the-walking-dead-review-season-7-premiere-negan-killed-spoilers-recap-1201739537/comment-page-1/#comments> (last accessed 20-05-21).



FIG. 5. THE DREAM SEQUENCE IN WHICH RICK'S GROUP OF SURVIVORS ARE ENJOYING A SUNDAY DINNER TOGETHER. IMAGE CREDIT: GENE PAGE/AMC.

the Sunday dinner scene was “so cheesy that it should be a Cheetos flavour” while another viewer (gavin.greenwalt) states that the episode “exploited the worst of serial drama tricks and gags to juice up an empty shell” (comments to Bishop and Statt 2016).

Complex television narration invites viewers to “enjoy the machine’s results while also marvelling at how it works” (Mittell 2006: 38). “The Day Will Come When You Won’t Be” manages to surprise viewers, but does not inspire them to marvel at its storytelling since the episode’s reason for telling its story out of chronological order will be immediately obvious to most viewers. The plot of this episode is built around one central mystery: the identity of Negan’s victim. Thus, to keep viewers interested, the episode conceals this information for as long as possible. The fact that Negan ultimately does not kill one, but two main characters is a well-executed narrative surprise. However, this reveal functions more like a cliffhanger rather than providing viewers with the cognitively challenging experience they expect from quality TV. As one viewer (Rennbj4 2016) puts it: “The audience’s ‘payoff’ for this episode was seeing which beloved character would die.

What a lazy storytelling tactic, and a slap in the face to those watching”. While they are shocking, the deaths of Abraham and Glenn do not encourage viewers to reconsider past narrative events or marvel at *The Walking Dead’s* sophisticated storytelling since the plot had not been building up to their deaths. Unlike character deaths on other quality TV dramas (e.g. *Game of Thrones*), Glenn’s death was “not organic writing, or a slow-building tragedy, or even an attempt to mimic the painful suddenness of real life catastrophe” (Handlen 2016), but an obvious effort to shock viewers.

Aside from being disconnected from the programme’s serial narrative framework, the character deaths in this episode highlight *The Walking Dead’s* inability to create the sort of complex characters that viewers expect from quality TV. As *The AV Club’s* Zack Handlen puts it:

The only reason Glenn’s death meant more than Abraham’s is that Glenn has been around longer. He was a nice guy (and Steven Yeun did a fine job with the little he was given), but I’d be hard pressed to say much more about him. He earned our loyalty with longevity and not much else (Handlen 2016).

This reviewer argues that the aforementioned character deaths in the season seven premiere might primarily affect viewers as a result of their long-term engagement with these characters. Previous studies (Blanchet and Vaage 2012) confirm that viewers are more likely to sympathise with characters they have been aligned with for an extended period of time. However, feeling sympathetic towards a character is not the same as being fascinated by a character—which is what viewers expect from quality TV. As previously noted, moral ambiguity is a key ingredient for creating complex and fascinating television characters. And while *The Walking*

7 <https://www.vulture.com/2016/10/walking-dead-empty-violence.html#com-ments> (last accessed 21-05-21).

Dead has continually flirted with the idea of moral ambiguity, most of its main characters lack the moral complexities of characters such as Tony Soprano or Walter White. Although Rick Grimes is not an antihero, earlier episodes of *The Walking Dead* indicate that Rick's morals might become compromised over the course of the series. However, by the beginning of season seven, Rick's character development is primarily defined by stagnation and repetition. As critics and disgruntled viewers of *The Walking Dead* have noted, Rick seems to repeatedly go through the same cycle of character development: Rick's group moves to a new location, Rick is faced with a threat that seemingly requires him to act in a way that is morally questionable, but ultimately finds a solution that does not compromise his morals. The season seven premiere represents yet another beginning of this character cycles. Negan commands Rick to cut off his son's (Chandler Riggs) arm in order to protect the rest of the group, but stops him at the last second after he has been convinced that Rick would have followed through. Initially Rick promises to kill Negan for what he has done to him and the rest of the group, but after fighting the Saviors for two seasons, Rick changes his mind and imprisons Negan instead. This character cycle ensures that Rick's morals remain intact, which makes him a sympathetic, but not necessarily fascinating character.

Whereas Rick lacks the interior complexity of other protagonists of quality TV dramas as a result of his predictably honourable behaviour, the villains of *The Walking Dead* suffer from the opposite problem: their behaviour is frequently so morally reprehensible that it fails to inspire fascination. Hassler-Forest (2014) argues that the television version of the Governor (David Morrissey), one of *The Walking Dead's* major villains, offers a variation on "the more black-and-white morality surrounding the character in the comic" (2014: 102-3) to appeal to the tastes of quality TV audiences, but I am not convinced that the character possesses the allure or interior complexity of characters like Dexter Morgan (Michael C. Hall) or Tony Soprano. One of the main differences between these antihero characters and the villains of *The Walking Dead* is that they are the main protagonists of their respective programmes. Thus, the narrative of these programmes is closely aligned with them, which adds to the viewer's fascination with them. In addition, much of the pleasure of engaging with a complex character like Tony Soprano originates from his paradoxical nature: he is a liar, cheater, and a murderer, but he is also an anxious, vulnerable family man (Carroll 2004, Smith 2011), which makes it difficult for the audience to ever complete their moral evaluation of him. In other words,

Tony Soprano is a narrative enigma that cannot be solved. In contrast, although *The Walking Dead* tries to complicate the audience's relationship with the Governor and Negan by shedding light on their motivations ("Live Bait", 4.06; "What Comes After", 9.05), their moral transgressions always outweigh their redeeming qualities. Negan is introduced as a sadistic, totalitarian sociopath who takes pleasure in beating people to death with a barbed-wire baseball-bat, while the Governor keeps the heads of his zombie victims as trophies in jars in his basement, frequently murders and tortures innocent people (including his own henchmen), and at one point even attempts to sexually assault one of the show's main characters. The moral transgressions of these characters are so frequent and so extreme that it always remains easy for viewers to categorise them as 'evil,' even when *The Walking Dead* tries to complicate their immoral behaviour with backstories that reveal that these characters have not always been morally corrupt. As a result, engaging with these characters does not provide viewers with a cognitive challenge.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that *The Walking Dead's* inability to adhere to viewer expectations of quality TV is a key factor in the increasingly negative reception of the show. My close-textual analysis of *The Walking Dead's* pilot episode showed that the series initially established itself as a quality TV drama through its stylistic integrity, its complex narration, and its multidimensional characters. In contrast, my analysis of the season seven premiere revealed a lack of complexity with regard to its aesthetics, narration, and characters that clashes with academic definitions of quality TV. Thus, this article has shown that the sense of betrayal or disappointment that many viewers felt towards later seasons of *The Walking Dead* is closely-related to its initial categorisation as quality TV. Thus, rather than reacting negatively to the show because they felt that it had turned from 'good' to 'bad' television, viewers reacted negatively to it because they did not recognise it as quality TV. As one viewer (Billybob) puts it:

It's like if you get a tub of ice cream, and it says on the label that it's cookie dough. So you take a scoop and enjoy the delicious cookie dough. But then the next time you eat it, it's nothing but vanilla—you can't find any lumps of delicious cookie dough. And you can still enjoy it, because vanilla ice cream is

fine enough I guess, but with every mouthful you find yourself thinking: But I wanted cookie dough (comment to Murray 2017).

It should be noted that just because its season seven premiere arguably does not adhere to academic definitions of quality TV, does not mean that *The Walking Dead* can never be quality TV again—in fact, seasons nine and ten of the show have had a much more positive reception than season seven. Part of this new-found appreciation of *The Walking Dead* seems to be the result of the show's efforts to meet viewer expectations of quality TV which, together with the findings of this article, indicates that the status of quality TV should perhaps not be assigned to a programme permanently. Without undertaking more empirical research on this subject, it would be too simplistic to argue that, if a programme does not meet viewer expectations of quality TV, viewers might lose interest in it. Yet the findings of this article still suggest that the symbolic value that the consumption of quality TV promises its viewers impacts their affective response towards contemporary television drama more directly than previously assumed.

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