

Aesthetics & Anxieties: Contemporary Dystopian Television

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Dystopian television can indeed “provide a pattern of cultural clues to our current social moment” and the series *Fear the Walking Dead* serves as a prime example. If we read its originating series *The Walking Dead* as a response to the crisis of Late Capitalism and white masculinity, *Fear the Walking Dead*, can be read as its antidote. Set in Los Angeles, Season 1 reflects tensions and anxieties regarding internal boundaries of belonging by centering characters whose identities threaten the precarity of national imaginaries privileging white masculinity (women, immigrants, racial/ethnic minorities, queer). Given that the zombie plague destroys all existing structures of order and power, the series proposes radically new configurations that reflect current internal tensions and anxieties regarding all varieties of borders that currently attempt to define and contain the U.S national imaginary.

The series begins with a contemporary blended family, the Manawa-Clarks, at the center of the narrative. It is marked by fragmentation and internal tensions, many centered on questions of belonging. Unlike *The Walking Dead*, which took some time to bring female characters to the forefront particularly in terms of leadership and strength, *Fear the walking Dead* immediately shows Madison as the focal point of the family and initial survivor group. The “other” core family in the series, the Salazars enter the narrative amid the chaos brought about by a police shooting and the authorities’ attempts to restore order. This particular scene, which centers on the gathering crowd misinterpreting the police’s reaction to a zombie as another case of police racial violence highlights current tensions and points of contested power. The Salazars, marked by accent, appearance and actions as not just Latinx but as immigrants likewise bring to the forefront anxieties regarding national identity and belonging. Notably, Daniel Salazar, who at first represents himself as a barber is eventually revealed to have been a torturer and killer in El Salvador during that country’s civil war. It goes without saying that the U.S involvement in that conflict, including the training of men like Daniel, bears relevance to the porous nature of borders. And lastly, the character of Victor Strand, a gay African-American man who is quick to realize that the rules of capitalism are inoperative in the zombie contagion, offers a contrasting view of masculinity to that proposed by Rick Grimes.

Season 2 further troubles boundaries as it moves the setting across the dissolved U.S/ Mexico border. Once the literal national boundary is shown to be inoperative, power structures and hierarchies that are dependent on the maintenance of those boundaries, however constructed and imaginary they may be, also crumble. In the new reality, being an “American” no longer endows privilege. At the beachfront hotel, for example, the patrons and the staff who were initially brought together by a wedding between a bride and groom from either side of the borde, end up forming an uneasy alliance. Likewise,

the character of Chris Manawa who begins the series as sensitive and tied to questions of social justice and his own family identity goes on to choose to align himself with a toxic white masculinity embodied by the group of white, American males he joins only to meet his end. In this new reality, hierarchies are reconfigured. White female characters such as Madison and Alicia are shown to be more resilient than their male counterparts. Latinx characters are likewise shown to survive not in spite of their identities but because of them. Other characters that prior to the contagion would be seen as either marginal to a U.S. national imaginary or as a threat to that identity likewise show aptitude for survival. Nick, for example, as a drug addict is initially seen as a burden but as the series progresses, the very qualities that are central to his addiction become those that save him as well as other members of the group.

Fear the Walking Dead thus, as a dystopian narrative, offers not only a vision of our current cultural moment but, more importantly, an alternative interpretation this moment. By positing a reality that disrupts all boundaries, not just the boundary between the living and the dead which is central to any zombie narrative, the series posits various ways that the dissolution of boundaries can lead to novel configurations.