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Foul Waters: Contemporary Zombie Apocalypse Narratives and the Elemental Turn

Abstract: The contemporary American zombie apocalypse narrative engages aspects of the elemental world, and fluid elements in particular, in ways that reshape our views of both the pre-apocalyptic worlds of zombie terror and the post-apocalyptic worlds that emerge from the ruins. Two such shows, the AMC television series *The Walking Dead* (2010–2022) and its first major spinoff, *Fear the Walking Dead* (2015–2023), circulate polyvalent images of three particular fluid substrates—blood, water, and oil—that structure the violent collapse and agonizing rebirth of the contemporary world. I argue that these fluids reshape the zombie apocalypse narrative as an elemental apocalypse that exposes certain forms of ongoing social and ecological violence. They mobilise the material realities and rigid forms that constitute our sense of a shared society and planet and transform them into a set of softened, malleable structures that make us more attentive to the uncertainties, ambiguities, and uncomfortable complicities that characterise the shows' allegorisations of global catastrophe. Contemporary zombie apocalypse narratives like *The Walking Dead* and *Fear the Walking Dead* re-establish the centrality of the fluid elements that have long structured the zombie mythos and its intersecting histories of violence toward human subjects and the nonhuman environment.
Keywords: zombie apocalypse, element, fluid, water, blood, oil.

Introductory Notes: Once More into the Wet

> "Water is the new currency now."
> (*Fear the Walking Dead* 2016)

The modern American zombie is a surprisingly wet creature. For several decades, the ghoulish cannibals, reanimated from death and compelled to roam the world, have been leaking, bleeding, festering, and putrefying before our very eyes. These monsters have also dripped their wet gore everywhere, transforming the earthen terrain into marshy substrates that absorb, release, propel, and even spray all manner of fluids, including water, blood, rot, and toxic runoff, through every crevice of the post-apocalyptic world. The landscapes that these monsters have trampled bear witness to the zombies' unprecedented ability to re-shape both the built and unbuilt environment and degrade it into an uneven and physically unstable terrain. Contemporary zombie shows like *The Walking Dead* (2010–2022) and its first major spinoff series, *Fear the Walking Dead* (2015–2023)—referred to herein as *TWD* and *Fear*, respectively—are particularly attentive to these soggy figures and their squishy grounds. During the most harrowing confrontations between human survivors and the post-human predators pursuing them, zombies have often acted in concert with the forces and movements of the larger nonhuman environment, creating a kind of quicksand of disaster upon which the dramas of human survival are now staged.

As a prolific part of both the narratives and *mise en scène* of these productions, the fluid elements that create these wet worlds—primarily water, blood, and oil—exacerbate much of the violence that leads so often in apocalyptic horror narratives to the dismantling of cultural practices, social hierarchies, institutions and infrastructures of the world we once knew. Their spillage and seepage also mark new forms of environmental devastation that allegorise certain forms of cumulative, ecological degradation that now occupy our current cultural imaginary. Consequently, these shows invite elementally forward critical readings that center the wet elements, in particular, and place them in conversation with more familiar readings of the zombie post-apocalypse genre. In this article, I argue that the zombie apocalypse narrative is, or should be seen as, an elemental apocalypse that opens us onto certain forms of socio-cultural and ecological awareness. To this end, I offer close readings of critical scenes from *TWD* and *Fear* that reveal these elemental fluids as constitutive aspects of the physical world as it appears before, during, and especially after cataclysmic change.

The Zombie Apocalypse as Elemental Apocalypse

In the large corpus of critical readings of the zombie apocalypse narrative, two schools of thought have been particularly influential. The first, inspired by the philosophy of Julia Kristeva (1982), frames the figure of the zombie Other as an allegorical figuration of our own ambivalence about death, disgust, contamination, and taboo. Kristeva's conceptualization of the abject Other as an "immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady" figure of alterity that "disturbs identity, system, [and] order" (4) turns on a dialectical interplay of forces that are unleashed at both the societal and individual levels. She enumerates several social types that are implicated in the larger processes of abjection, including the outlaw and the criminal, but she also grounds her thinking in a discussion of body fluids and their relation to our sense of an embodied and articulated self. For Kristeva, fluids like blood and waste products, which we continue to produce and expel, represent a forceful otherness within the seemingly stable boundaries of our own bodies. In the years following the publication of Kristeva's influential essay, scholars like Kyle William Bishop (2010) have built upon her concept of the abject as well as Sigmund Freud's notion of the uncanny in critical readings of the zombie as a figure of disgusting and irreducible difference that must be purged from the social order altogether (132).

The second school of thought offers the figure of the zombie as a metaphorical expression of the dehumanizing forces of market capitalism and commodity consumption. In writing about the evolution of the American zombie from its folkloric predecessor, the Haitian *zonbi*, David McNally (2017) argues that the monster has come to be associated with "crazed consumers" of contemporary American culture rather than the "zombie-laborer[s]" (128) that appear in the ethnographic account of Haitian folklore and culture by William Seabrook. McNally goes on to suggest that the fluidity of modern capitalism "[invisibilizes] the hidden world of labor and the disparities of class that make all this consumption possible" (128). Camilla Fojas (2017) extends the idea that the zombie offers sharp critiques of commodity capitalism by reinscribing the figure of the monster in contemporary debates about socio-cultural difference and the politics of identity. She describes shows like *TWD*, for instance, as reproducing some of the foundational paradoxes of a neoliberal socio-economic order:

> Zombie stories in the era of neoliberalism […] are all about a diverse group of people who must band together for mutual protection and whose lives are reduced to fighting against ravenous flesh-eating zom-

> bies for survival. Most difference—racial, ethnic, linguistic, and national origin—is subordinated and neutralized to the common cause of defense. Defensive units are based on heteropatriarchal formations and these units, though they function beyond any economic order, reproduce the symbolic equivalencies and hierarchies of capitalism (60).

While these critical accounts of the zombie Other are deeply important in highlighting the links between the rise of the zombie apocalypse narrative, on the one hand, and the turmoil of late-stage capitalism that births such monsters into existence, on the other, they use images of fluids and fluidity only as component elements in their mostly anthropocentric critiques of modernity. If we trace the circulation and vitality of actual fluids and expressions of fluidity, as they appear in *TWD* and *Fear*, we see that these fluid elements retain unprecedented agentic forces unto themselves. They call attention to the simultaneous and overlapping forms of violence that spill into both the human worlds of survivors and the nonhuman environments that individual protagonists are no longer able to master or instrumentalise.

What I propose here, consequently, is an elementally centered reading of the zombie apocalypse narrative. I understand the concept of elementality in two ways, both of which implicate distinct but interrelated dimensions of monstrosity and secular apocalypticism. The first sense of elementality that shapes these shows is through their invocations of the classic quaternity of air, water, fire, and earth. Following the work of Hegel on this topic, David Macauley (2010) proposes a detailed study of these four formative elements—what he calls a "stoicheology" of the elements—that would allow us to see the material components of the physical world as both "quite ordinary—perennial, pervasive, and commonplace to most cultures—and at the same time very extraordinary—belonging to the realm of dream, mythology, and imagination" (3). In reclaiming air, water, earth, and fire as perhaps more potently meaningful categories than nature itself, Macauley points us to an elemental reading of the contemporary zombie narrative in which air, water, earth, and fire are continually detached from their most familiar forms and recombined in unexpected ways in the speculative world to come.

The language that survivors in these shows use to refer to the monster reflects one dimension of this operation. The human protagonists of *TWD* and *Fear* rarely name the zombies as such. Instead, they refer to them by different epithets—including 'walkers,' 'roamers,' and even 'floaters.' While these nicknames do not abandon the central conceit that the monster is a figure of "ontological liminality" (Cohen 1996, 6), they do,

in fact, draw attention to their movements, capabilities, and formative and symbolic associations with the wide range of elemental environments they traverse in their unrelenting pursuits of living flesh. These landscapes include terrains that have been soaked through and rendered pliable by natural and synthetic fluid elements, including water, blood, and even oil. Through their onslaughts, furthermore, the undead harness an unusual fluidity of means as they stir the four elements of the quaternity into dangerous combinations that imperil human life and its very institutions and protective structures.

As they secure their relation to the pervasive fluid elements, the zombies of *TWD* and *Fear* elaborate certain dimensions of the zombie apocalypse as a distinctly secular apocalypse. Elizabeth McAlister (2017), for instance, helps us understand that the contemporary zombie apocalypse narrative is a secular narrative because "it has undermined the opposition of God and human" despite following the "biblical blueprint [that] underlies and informs them" (75). Released from the moral or religious dichotomy between good and evil, she adds, the true power of the zombie lies in its anonymity, its lack of distinctive superpowers, and its ability to gather into large hordes. As a result, they become a "collective of chaos monsters threatening to destroy civilization and order in a secular scenario of world destruction" (2017, 75). I would venture to add to McAlister's reading of the secular zombie apocalypse narrative that these television productions depict post-apocalyptic human life that is continually constrained and threatened not only by the zombies themselves but also by the glaring lack of certain fluid resources, like water and oil, as well as the survivor's menacing proximity to other fluid elements, including blood. Robert Folger (2022) identifies one additional key aspect of the secular apocalypse narrative that these shows reproduce. In his view, the secular apocalypse refuses to draw strict and binding distinctions between the apocalyptic, which portrays "actual or impending cataclysms, catastrophes, and crises", and the postapocalyptic, which focuses on the "aftermath" of such events (23). As serial narratives that explore both the short-term and the long-term effects of the zombie outbreak, *TWD* and *Fear* rely on a representational language of fluid elements that pre-exist the zombie apocalypse and also become the building blocks of a new and more terrifying reorganization of spaces, bodies, and futures in the post-apocalypse.

The second sense of elementality that pervades *TWD* and *Fear* is based on Timothy Morton's (2013) ecological reading of the nonhuman elements of the world, which structure collective concerns about not only the collapse of preapocalyptic socio-cultural institutions and structures,

but also the ongoing degradation of the planetary environments. Morton highlights the given interconnectedness of all objects and creaturely life forms, including the human subject, which co-exist in a delicate balance with one another. The coming perils of the Anthropocene, first announced by Nobel Prize-winning chemist Paul J. Crutzen (2006) and described as a new geological epoch of human-authored planetary changes, highlights this co-existence and also prophesies its disruption. Consequently, Morton argues that

> All humans…are now aware that they have entered a new phase of history in which nonhumans are no longer excluded or merely decorative features of their social, psychic, and philosophical space. From the most vulnerable Pacific Islander to the most hardened eliminative materialist, everyone must reckon with the power of rising waves and ultraviolet light (2013, 22).

Morton's concern about the nonhuman elements of a world in crisis is particularly helpful in exploring the ubiquity and importance of the fluid elements in *TWD* and *Fear.* These contemporary narratives, which allude in multiple ways to the concerns of the Anthropocene, allow us to see in clearer terms the ways human agents become one type of object amongst many other agentic objects in zombie fictions. Moreover, these other objects, which include the physical elements themselves as well as their figurations in zombie bodies, hordes, and threats, retain a certain dynamic power that human agents are no longer able to master or instrumentalise in their own anthropocentric forms of world-building. In this way, elementality becomes an important consideration in the zombie narrative's ability to project images of what Lars Schmeink describes as a "grey ecology" of post-apocalyptic life forms, which he reads "disanthropocentrically" (2022, 74). Like Schmeink, I want to look more closely at key scenes in *TWD* and *Fear* that allow us to read the fluid elements as conditioning forces that shape the creaturely lives of both zombies and human survivors.

In the remainder of this article, I want to chart the moments in *TWD* and *Fear* that envision both societal collapse and worldwide environmental degradation through the narrative, aesthetic, and symbolic language of the fluid elements, especially water, blood, oil, and other fuel sources. As I will demonstrate, these productions imagine a central speculative event, the zombie outbreak, as an event with a uniquely elemental power and agency that allows it to link two interpenetrating temporal realities. The first is an apocalyptic crisis that allows us to imagine the end of the socio-cultural order and the relationships and values enshrined therein.

The second is a postapocalyptic world that becomes susceptible to both engineered and spontaneous forms of ecological disaster, which offer harrowing reminders of the world of cumulative environmental degradation that we have inherited from the industrial revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Societal Collapse, Environmental Degradation, and the Fluid Elements

TWD and *Fear* reinvent the zombie apocalypse narrative by charting progressively serious forms of deterioration and collapse, not only of living patterns and social rituals, but also of material infrastructure that sustains modern conveniences and standards of living. In this landscape, whose requisite elements persist in defamiliarised form and with unprecedented forms of agency attaching to them, water becomes a resource whose value and meaning are intimately tied to its availability and absence, its purity and contamination, its depletion and misuse. As Marq de Villiers (2000) reminds us, "the trouble with water—and there *is* trouble with water—is that they're not making any more of it" (12). As *TWD* reveals, the potable water that remains behind sparks lingering concerns about uncertain hydro-futures. The episode "Cherokee Rose" (2011) illustrates this concern when a group of survivors encounter a snarling zombie caught at the bottom of a well and attempt in vain to remove it. As the group pulls the bloated corpse out of the well, they accidentally dismember it and send its putrefied legs and belly full of rot. Their failure highlights two simultaneous dangers of living in a post-apocalyptic world: the increasing likelihood that available freshwater sources are more vulnerable to contamination than ever before, as well as the growing gap in public knowledge about the zombie microbe and its modes of transmission. In this way, the image of tainted water at the bottom of the well amplifies the fears of groundwater toxification that Rachel Carson (1962) famously notes in her pioneering work about environmental pollution: "all the running water of the earth's surface was at one time groundwater. And so, in a very real and frightening sense, pollution of the groundwater is pollution of water everywhere" (42). In this scene, and indeed throughout the franchise, water is the elemental medium *par excellence* that potentially expands the scope of apocalyptic breakdown and accelerates the speed of contamination.

Unlike other shows in the franchise, however, *Fear* amplifies this particular anxiety through consistent narrative and thematic engagements

with water and other fluid elements and their implication in both present and looming ecodisaster. In its early seasons, the show frames the zombie apocalypse as an event that exacerbates certain forms of pre-existing hydro-doom, including drought and pollution. Through its various appearances, water, and its associated imagery, amplify a uniquely apocalyptic form of temporal positioning that Maral Attar-Zadeh (2022) identifies as the "already/not yet modality," that bifurcated experience of time in which "the end is already here; the end is yet to come" (55). The scarcity of water in catastrophic times reduces human survivors to desperation and exacerbates profiteering, theft, and even eco-terrorism, which form around the availability and uses of water and other liquid resources. As survivor Victor Strand explains in the third season, "water is the new currency" of this postapocalyptic landscape.

To this end, *Fear* implements narrative strategies like amplification in ways that draw attention to pending environmental collapse. In a poignant scene from the second-season episode "We All Fall Down" (2016), while on board Victor Strand's yacht 'the Abigail,' protagonist Nick Clark points out that the mass depopulation of the world in the wake of the zombie uprising incarnates a shared fantasy of environmental restoration and replenishment: "No planes, no noise pollution, no smog. Just stars." His sister Alicia responds, with affectionate humour, that "we definitely stopped the climate crisis." Their conversation is obviously in jest, but it also alludes to a pre-existing world that is already buckling under the stress of exhaustion and depletion, particularly around supplies of potable water that the zombie uprising will only strain. The show develops this theme by presenting water scarcity initially as an ambient hazard attaching to local *topoi* like the older homestead and the crowded municipality and, eventually, radiating outward into the elemental environment itself. The pilot episode inaugurates this butterfly effect by introducing protagonist Travis Manawa, a high school English teacher, as a domestic homebody whose priority is to fix the kitchen plumbing, which has backed up—not for the first time—in his home in suburban Los Angeles. As the season progresses, however, and a military unit rolls into Travis's neighborhood and imposes martial law in the newly designated safe zone, water becomes an even more critically endangered resource that they must ration and sanitise, particularly after local treatment facilities fall into disrepair. As days turn into weeks and the zombie apocalypse shows no signs of retreat, the only resources available to survivors are compromised structures like the Gonzalez Dam on the Tijuana River. As Travis's partner Madison Clark eventually discovers, the dam's subterranean passageways are plastered with human excrement and zombie bottlenecks, and its available stores of water have

already been hijacked by a local crime syndicate. The dramas of human survival unfolding around decreasing access to clean water reflect a critical nexus point between factional violence, on the one hand, and larger environmental conditions that exacerbate them, on the other.

As *Fear* unfolds, the show manifests in more localised and concrete terms the largesse of drought and climate change. After losing Travis in the third season of the show, Madison finds shelter at a survivalist compound known as Broke Jaw Ranch near San Diego, whose landscape is open, exposed, and bereft of any markers distinguishing it from other settlements save for the people themselves and their makeshift shelters. When water becomes even more dangerously scarce for members of the encampment, Madison consults a series of older ground maps of the area, which reveal that the nearby aquifer had been drying up and groundwater levels had been receding for several years before the apocalypse. This ecological revelation is part of the show's larger attempt to establish a continuum of casual perception that allows survivors within the series—not to mention the viewers of the series—to start seeing the failures of water infrastructure, appearing in local suburban and municipal contexts, as intimately connected to larger and more diffuse entities that Timothy Morton describes as hyperobjects. These objects emerge, Morton explains, when "massive entities become thinkable [...] [but] are so massively distributed we can't directly grasp them empirically" (2016, 11). He enumerates several examples of contemporary environmental hyperobjects, including global warming, climate change, and the Anthropocene itself, but the show's explorations of local manifestations of a more far-reaching, pre-apocalyptic water crisis would likewise appear as one such hyperobject that is, by definition, "real yet inaccessible" (25).

Fear thus offers an ecophobic view of certain aspects of the looming water crisis and its connection to climate stressors. Simon C. Estok (2014) characterises ecophobia as the "generalized fear or contempt for the natural world and its inhabitants" (53). Fear and contempt attach to interactions and expeditions focused around the anxious rationing of and perilous searches for water. These affective states also suffuse certain aspects of film style that the series implements in telling these stories. The notion of an all-seeing eye, for instance, is enshrined in the first season's final cinematographic gesture, as the camera tracks along the Pacific coastline in an overhead crane shot. The lingering shot of the ocean articulates a visual horizon for the characters making their way in a post-apocalyptic world. Their lives will be shaped, it seems, by boundless wandering stretching across open expanses of the elements. This parting shot also captures the painful irony of being cast adrift in an ocean of water that is

both unfit for human consumption and unevenly distributed across the ruined landscapes where they will have to take shelter.

The show's ecophobia inspires another arresting visual image, this time in the sub-nautical space beneath Victor Strand's yacht, where the Clark family takes temporary shelter in the show's second season. While on board, the survivor group discovers that the zombified casualties of a nearby plane crash have drifted along the ocean currents and become entangled in the yacht's filtration system. The series makes particularly potent use of its underwater *mise en scène* when the camera captures Travis diving under the ship and clearing the once-human remains from the craft's intake grate, all while fending off a snapping zombie as a single dollar bill floats in the columns of water nearby. All three figures—Travis, the zombie, and the material currency—appear in the visual field as part of a living tableau of an impossible and incomprehensible new world. The water in this image, rather than flowing freely, surrounds and constrains the mobility of the once-autonomous human subject. Much like the tracking shot over the ocean, this shot also marks the disappearance of liquidity; in this case, economic liquidity, as the floating dollar bill gives way to alternative means of securing goods, services, and cast-offs, including an elementary barter exchange, scavenging, and even theft. In this new world, water replaces money as the exemplary asset. Once used, or consumed, it disappears, and more is needed.

While water signals the earliest stages of an environmental crisis that slowly makes itself available to our perceptions, blood emerges as perhaps one of the most ubiquitous fluids to appear, usually in unrestrained and terrifying excess, in the physical terrains of the post-apocalypse. Modern zombie franchises like *TWD* invoke images of blood—the blood of zombies, and indeed, the blood of survivors—as a fluid element that saturates the world, physically with moisture and rot, and symbolically with evolving and paradoxical meanings. Zombie blood is the archetypal image in the series of sickness and impurity in a collapsing world. As early as the second episode of the first season, appropriately entitled "Guts" (2010), Rick Grimes suggests that zombie blood is the site of a mysterious and possibly communicable disease that he must take great care to avoid. Protecting their faces and skin with shields and coats, Grimes and fellow survivor Glenn Rhee bathe in the blood and entrails of a zombie body and walk amongst the undead, hoping to engineer an escape route back to their encampment in the Atlanta mountains without stirring the monsters' sharpened sense of olfaction. By these and other accounts, the figure of the walker in *TWD* seems just as abject as the impure cadaver that Kristeva (1982) describes. For Kristeva, we recall, the corpse repre-

sents “the utmost of abjection […] death infecting life […] something rejected from which one does not part” (4). Furthermore, Kyle William Bishop (2010) extends Kristeva’s theory of the abject to his reading of the American zombie film, which he understands as a showcase of the shared fear that “all human subjects strive to ignore or to put off [the abject] […] in an attempt to defy their own object-ness” (132).

However, the great irony of *TWD* and *Fear* is that the pathological blood element in zombies is even more abject than we might initially realise. The very fluid that human survivors have identified as threatening and have tried to purge from their world is already part of the human corpus and has already begun to soak into the tapestries of human intimacy and interconnection, forever staining them. In “TS-19” (2010), the concluding episode of the first season of *TWD*, Dr. Edwin Jenner at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta reveals privately to Grimes that the whole of humanity has already been infected with an unknown microbe that will lead to the reanimation of lower brain function following physical death. This diagnosis famously leads Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (2017) to describe the show’s human protagonists as “[inhabiting] the zombie’s juvenile form” (385).

The zombie outbreak thus projects two different visions of contaminated blood products. On the one hand, the shows circulate an image of impure zombie blood as a metonymic expression of the figure of the metamorphosed carrier implicated in the global transmission of a poorly understood virus. On the other hand, the shows also circulate an image of compromised human blood that redefines the human subject as a variation of creaturely life that has come to dominate the post-apocalypse. This second vision is particularly arresting, as this bloodborne destiny reshapes the very textures of human life in the series, creating the need for precautions in even the most intimate forms of contact, including falling asleep at night next to a partner or recovering from wounds in a designated space of medical care alongside those that may not fare so well. The latter becomes the site of unprecedented violence in *TWD* when Rick’s group takes up arms against an abusive authoritarian named Negan Smith, whose soldiers lace the tips of their projectile weapons with zombie blood. Unbeknownst to them, one of Rick’s injured soldiers, a resident of Alexandria named Tobin, dies from his knife wounds in a communal infirmary, reanimates, and wreaks havoc on the rest of the camp in the dead of night.

This scene, taken from the eighth-season episode “Do Not Send Us Astray” (2018), illustrates the show’s preoccupation with the sociophobics of both infectious disease and community formation. I use the term

"sociophobics" in the way Douglas E. Cowan (2022) understands the phenomenon: "what we fear, why we fear it, and how we manage that fear [...] is [...] as much an anthropological and sociological phenomenon as it is psychological" (115). He goes on to explain that "while certain fears have kept us alive long enough to evolve, others have evolved through a process of social construction, and often serve far different agendas than mere survival" (115). Using Cowan as a guide, then, both *TWD* and *Fear* present visions of a post-apocalyptic society that conditions its survivors into learning when, how, and why to fear foreign elements capable of breaching borders. The shows' doomsday sociophobics, furthermore, unfold at two levels. As outbreak narratives that turn around the central image of infectious fluid elements, these programmes reimagine a global pandemic from the vantage point of totalizing hopelessness, as resources and cultures of medical expertise and consensus disappear. As parables about community formation in times of collective trauma, however, the shows also present survivors learning painful lessons about the need to practice vigilant forms of self-surveillance and isolation that perhaps border on the extreme. This latter principle also guides, in turn, the shaping of community identity and camp life, whose borders must be steeled during scenarios of actual, pending, or feared attack.

Later seasons of *Fear* seize upon another distinct iteration of blood saturation, as zombie blood comes to absorb the toxic effects of environmental radiation resulting from a power plant meltdown in Texas. Here, I use the term 'saturation' to describe what Melody Jue and Rafico Ruiz (2021) describe as "sticky situations where not all agential substances or actors are known in advance" (4) and, later, as "situations that might be blurred confluences of co-saturating substances" (6). The spinoff's invocation of radiation is a familiar trope already. George A. Romero's 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*, which rewrites the history of the folkloric *zonbi* of colonised Haiti and presents a new iteration of the zombie as a flesh-eating ghoul that arises from the dead, presents a new origin story for the modern zombie that is shaped by a confluence of saturating environmental elements. A news broadcast, we recall, reports a massive radiation leak from a space probe returning to the Earth's atmosphere following an exploratory mission to Venus. This probe causes a large-scale disaster, common in science-fiction films of the so-called atomic age of the 1950s, and the high-level radiation waves alter the human genome in ways that produce the genetic mutation that now causes bodily reanimation.[1] *Fear* reworks Romero's plot device by mobilizing the invisible threat of radiation waves and concentrating them into the image of an already impure fluid, zombie blood, which then becomes co-saturated with microbes and

1 Romero's film mobilises popular concerns and anxieties about technology gone awry during the contest between Cold War superpowers to colonise the great unknown of outer space. In this way, his film joins a larger tradition within science-fiction cinema that links the activities of the scientific-military-industrial complex in post-war America to the rise of cultural paranoia and fear about "a dangerous world of fall-out, medical experiments [...] potential war [...] [and other] metaphorical embodiments of the frightening thing known as the Bomb" (Hendershot 1999, 21).

pollutants. The character of Grace Mukherjee, an operations manager at the defunct power plant, is instrumental in making ambient radiation a tangible presence on screen, walking amongst the undead and hanging small dosimeters around the necks of irradiated monsters to mark them from the rest of the madding crowd. The vials, however, strain the ability of survivors to effectively deal with the constant threat of invading hordes. The vials are almost imperceptible to the naked eye, often disappearing in a matrix of sudden movements, splattered gore, and tattered rags. As a result, survivors must frequently resort to more creative and sustainable methods of disposal, like tripping, outrunning, or redirecting the monster. The image of irradiated zombie blood, rendered visible but extremely difficult to identify in the rush of action, elicits one of the key fears of the outbreak narrative that Dahlia Schweitzer (2018) describes, namely, "the fear that what you cannot see can kill you" (51). It also restructures the very nature of apocalyptic crisis by presenting it as an entanglement of ongoing, intersecting events or "emergencies without distinct beginnings or ends" (33).

Water and blood are, of course, not the only fluids whose depletion or ubiquity can prevent survivors from securing a place for themselves in the new world. Oil and gasoline, which power the grids and mechanical technologies of the pre-apocalyptic world, are likewise in short supply due to human expenditures, misuses, and the inevitable degradation and oxidation over time of its chemical elements. Beyond its function as a source of power, however, oil is also a multivalent substance that "saturates, [...] bleeds out, gets stuck in, settles and seeps, [and] chokes and escapes containment" (267), as Marija Cetinić and Jeff Diamanti (2021) remind us. Oil possesses other material qualities in these shows as well. It is viscous, murky, slippery, and perhaps most importantly, flammable. These qualities compound the threat of zombie invasion and throw into much sharper relief the growing antagonisms between human survivor communities and the ever-present specter of individual self-interest.

The circulation of oil in the series makes the imperceptible, or slow, violence of environmental degradation, as Rob Nixon (2011) names it, more tangible to both characters and viewers. Oil first appears in *Fear* as a narrative pipe dream nursed by the leader of a criminal organization known as the Proctors. The leader of the syndicate—Proctor John, a name that recalls famous American landowner, John Proctor, who was convicted of and executed for witchcraft in the Salem trials—ignites the show's shift from the arid climes of northern Mexico to the refineries of Texas. He tells a captive Alicia Clark that he wants to grow his drug empire along the southern border of the United States, using the state of Texas, famous for

operating its own privatised electric grid without federal regulation, as a power hub in the post-apocalyptic landscape that would revitalise the world through his ambitious schemes. Madison Clark is also lured by Texas, but for different reasons. She settles in the Dell Diamond Baseball Stadium in Round Rock and implements her vision of a sustainable agrarian survivor cooperative powered by natural resources and human labor. However, Madison soon realises that the specter of oil will stain and ultimately ruin her pastoral fantasy when another rival gang, the territorial 'Vultures' who have designs on the stadium as well, unleash a horde of zombies that were stored inside crude oil tanks. Flammable under gunfire, resistant to precious stores of water, and toxic to the new crops that her community had just replanted, these oil-saturated zombies lead to the collapse of the stadium cooperative. In the episodes immediately following what appeared to have been Madison's death, furthermore, the show manipulates its own visual qualities, and specifically its color and tinting, in ways that recall the lingering effects of the crude-oil assault.[2] The show weaves back and forth in time to tell the story of the stadium society's creation and collapse, and the cinematography marks certain moments in the diegetic timeline with brown and grey tinting. As Madison's children chase the Vultures in the grip of vengeance, they traverse visual landscapes that have been edited in post-production and made to evoke the ambiance and coloration of a toxic oil spill. This is a deliberately artful gesture on the part of the show, inviting us to see the spillage of oil as a symbolic expression of the bloodlust that seeps into their thinking and clouds their vision of the world. It also stands in direct contrast to the sunlit sequences of the show, which rely on natural light sources and only minimal distortions of colour.

Crude oil also compounds its threat when the tanks that continue to store it are unmanaged or mishandled. Oil tanks are material vessels of rusting metal that likewise degrade over time in the post-apocalypse. As vestiges of a defunct fuel-based economy, they hearken back to Cetinić and Diamanti's (2021) description of the oil barrel itself as "more a fiction than a reality" (274). They argue that the image of the oil barrel persists in the petrochemical imaginary despite the rise of various structures that may render it anachronistic, including "pipelines that connected discrete sites of extraction to more centralized refineries" and "oil tankers that by the late 1960s were beginning to dominate sea routes connecting the globe's major ports" (2021, 274). The oil tanks that appear in *Fear* are more than just fictions or throwbacks to a more antique modernity. These tanks are also anachronistic storage units that have rusted into oblivion in the post-petroleum landscape and now pose great risks to both human survivors trying to reinscribe them in a collapsed world, and to the envi-

2 As later seasons of the show reveal, Madison's children believed her to have died inside the stadium, but she escapes the zombie onslaught and returns to the series.

ronment that will run slick upon the inevitable blast and spillage. This is precisely what happens when Madison and Alicia Clark rescue a new community member, a nurse named June, whom they discover in a deserted town whose other inhabitants had apparently died in an industrial oil tank explosion after its bleeder valve rusted shut. Oil's capacity to break down over time, particularly during heat waves and in storage units that are not managed carefully, create an aura of uncertain danger around this mysteriously dark fluid, much like the blood of the zombies that likewise seeps into the landscape. Also, like zombie blood, oil seems capable of leading to both immediate and unforeseen forms of personal and environmental devastation.

Madison's pastoral fantasy of maintaining a sustainable and collective lifestyle inside the protected walls of a baseball stadium is ultimately powerless over the lure of oil and other fuels capable of harnessing great reserves of power. Madison's experiment slowly gives way to a redemption narrative for her daughter Alicia, who creates a family of outcasts following her expulsion from the stadium and lays down new roots in Tank Town, a quarry in Texas where a volunteer named Clayton had set up the mechanical infrastructure to refine crude oil supplies and use it to rebuild and power a more inter-connected world in the post-apocalypse. As they restore Tank Town to its former glory, members of Alicia's network enact on a much smaller scale the mechanical operations of industrial development that lead to what sociologist Saskia Sassen (2014) describes as a systemic "expansion of prosperous and working middle classes, as happened during most of the twentieth century in the Global North, in much of Latin America, and in several African countries" (14). This sense of expansion, Sassen argues, counters the more disturbing trend in the twenty-first century of the rise of global firms and their unprecedented ability to concentrate global wealth in the twenty-first century. Although Alicia's Tank Town emerges as the more industrially oriented blueprint to rebuild the world following widespread collapse, her vision of an energy cooperative is ultimately taken over by a rival group known as the 'Pioneers' whose leader, a woman named Virginia, becomes an allegorical representation of the modern, multinational oil company that takes over supplies and technologies and exploits and divides indigenous groups. Capturing and effectively enslaving members of Alicia's group, and robbing them of their ability to reach out to strangers and grow their own community, Virginia polices the oil refinery and oversees the digging of a new well. Consequently, Virginia transforms Tank Town into what Rob Nixon (2011) might call a "resource enclave […] embedded in […] the destitution that surrounds them" (71).

Although Alicia's community resists and ultimately defeats Virginia and her group, this story arc still reflects the persistence of an exploitative tradition of societal self-organization. As Sassen (2014) explains, economic growth and development in the contemporary global landscape "still takes on distinctive formats and contents in the mix of diversely developed countries we refer to as the Global North versus the mix of less or differently developed countries we refer to as the Global South" (13). In the fifth-season episode "Leave What You Don't" (2019), two of the children rescued from the radiation hot zones devise an efficient machine that can harness biopower from the zombie's unrelenting drive to consume living flesh. They suspend a cage of mice within a larger, rotating carousel and use the rodents as bait to entice a group of shackled walkers to power the turn-style of a pump in the refinery. This particular image of zombies walking in circles and generating transferrable kinetic energy—all within the confines of a restored oil refinery—eerily recalls one of the first zombie films to be released in the United States, Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932), which invokes the folkloric figure of the Haitian *zonbi* and both the colonial history from which it emerges and the neocolonial business interests that the industrialised United States has pursued in the decades following the abolition of slavery. Released more than thirty years before Romero's genre-defining film, *White Zombie* features a sugarcane plantation and processing factory in Port-au-Prince that runs on the manual labour of enslaved workers entranced by a local planter and *bokor*, Murder Legendre, played famously by Hungarian-American actor Bela Lugosi. The children's show of industrial efficiency reads, in certain ways, as the humanist expression of a group cohesion necessary to build the reconstruction of the world after apocalypse. However, the scene also presents a self-referential moment in the evolution of the zombie mythos as it migrates from the colonised Global South to the industrialised Global North. In structuring this scene, in which a restored oil refinery literally enfolds a space of enforced (zombie) labour, *Fear* stages a palimpsestic tableau of colonial history and unwittingly reproduces some of that history's forgotten and silenced elements. The institution of slavery and the prospect of neocolonial intervention in the economies of the Global South disappear in the series, and the project of world-building is taken over in the show by human subjects working freely and cooperatively toward a greater good. McAlister (2017) traces this history of erasure back to Romero himself, whose cannibalistic ghoul merely "evokes a *spectral remainder* of the Caribbean *zonbi* by reaching back to this iconic historical figure of barbaric otherness during the age of conquest and colonialism" (77, emphasis added).[3] Virginia's plan of divide-and-conquer likewise

3 Lauro and Embry (2017) remind us that "[i]n its origins and in its folkloric incarnations, the zombi is quite literally a slave, raised by Vodou priests to labor in the fields" (397).

bears only the merest traces of this elided colonial history. After assuming control of the refinery, she sends Alicia Clark and her fellow survivor Victor Strand to the nearby town of Lawton, where they are made to clear human waste from community latrines and, later, forced to clean the undead rot from a sugar processing plant following the explosion of a molasses tank. These additional narrative invocations of indentured servitude, sugar, and power hearken back to a more complicated and pervasive matrix of social, political, and environmental forces that led to the creation of the Haitian *zonbi*, or mesmerised worker subjugated into endless labor, became a cultural archetype of the radically dehumanised subject.

Virginia's tenure as overseer of the refinery, however, is not only a self-defeating enterprise. It is also the occasion for potentially widescale ecological disaster following a final armed standoff between the Pioneers and Alicia's community. Under Virginia's watch, the operations at Tank Town become dramatically inefficient, as she switches out most of the survivors who were responsible for its initial success and leaves Luciana, Nick's girlfriend, to manage an increasing ledger of tasks, to be completed in turn by a shrinking pool of trusted and experienced workers. After another rival group attacks the refinery, the oil tanks finally explode, sending oil mixed with rain whirling through the air. The quarry is soon overrun with fires, thick smoke, and, eventually, hordes of walkers attracted by the pandemonium. This culminating sequence of events brings together the wet elements that I have been tracking throughout this essay—water, blood, and oil—as they facilitate the growing violence and factionalism in the post-apocalyptic world and open both survivors and viewers onto a view of the environment that is even more damaged than ever before. If Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, and Imre Szeman (2017) are correct in their assessment that the "importance of fossil fuels in defining modernity has stood in inverse relationship to their presence in our cultural and social imaginaries" (5), then this scene of flooding and mixing illustrates a kind of radical return of the repressed elements. These fluids rain down and create a visual spectacle of dark droplets that signify both societal collapse and environmental degradation for both survivors in the series and viewers of the series.

Conclusion

In this article, I have traced the proliferation of scenes in *TWD* and *Fear* that centre the image of fluid elements that constitute the realities and irrealities of the zombie post-apocalypse. The centrality of water, blood,

and oil in these narratives allows us to reimagine the collapse and reformation of both human societies and environmental terrains as unpredictable, and indeed fluid, operations. Moreover, through close readings of specific scenes from both shows, I model a critical reading practice that centres the elemental world as a site of apocalyptic disaster and an artful vision of our possible responses to it. This elemental world, furthermore, implicates other human and nonhuman forms of risk and peril that we have come to identify in the overlapping ages of late-stage global capitalism and anthropogenic climate change.

In this way, I hope to open the possibility of future critical inquiries into other shows within the franchise that likewise reimagine the known and unknown worlds through a careful consideration of other elements in the quaternity. This might include a critical reading of one of the franchise's more recent spinoff shows, *The Walking Dead: World Beyond* (2020–2021), which follows the movements of a group of college-aged students setting out on a journey across a ruined America for the first time in their lives, espousing many Romantic conceits and literary references along the way and opening themselves up to the world's most mystifying and dangerous aerial elements in the process. Insofar as *TWD* grounds its views of the zombie as a primarily earth-bound monster, and *Fear* projects the image of a more fluid monster, then we might look to the aerial elements of *World Beyond* to lay bare the tensions and continuities holding the various stories of this franchise together. This rings especially true in the first-season episode "The Tyger and the Lamb" (2020), whose titular invocation of William Blake's poems "The Tyger" and "The Lamb" are fitting chronicles of the children's self-appointed task of analysing the plumes of smoke from a long-burning tire fire known as the Blaze of Gory and sounding tornado sirens to relay messages to each other as they pass through such a treacherous industrial wasteland. Elementality may also warrant a second look at *Fear* itself, whose later seasons introduce a nuclear apocalypse plot in which a doomsday cult leader detonates a powerful nuclear warhead that visually obscures the sight of undead monsters and compounds their threat to include not only a mysterious microbe that is transmitted through an exchange of bodily fluids but also a series of invisible radioactivity permeating bodies, grounds, and even wind currents. Although this aerial reading of *Fear* falls outside the scope of this article, the show's continued engagement with the environmental elements, particularly as they are shuffled under the force of human-authored disasters, invite critical attention. Finally, elementality may emerge as a central category of analysis in scholarly accounts of the proliferation of the zombie mythos across

different entertainment media and social ritual, including zombie-themed video games like *Plants vs. Zombies*, which offers immersive digital experiences with other figures of nonhuman otherness, and organized zombie walks, group activities that allow participants to dress, move, and behave like zombies as they traverse public spaces. These texts and traditions center the elements of the quaternity directly and place them in conversation with other material considerations like the physical and bodily mechanics of gameplay. In this way, we become more aware of the zombie's infiltration of what Nicole Starosielski (2019) refers to as "elemental media" and the "material and conditioning substrates" required to engage these texts and traditions.

In addition, an elemental reading of the zombie apocalypse narrative gives us a new set of signifiers with which to trace the violent confrontations between the human, the inhuman, and the nonhuman, not only in canonical American texts but also in contemporary texts from different parts of the world. What, for instance, would an elemental re-reading of Romero's canonical film *Night of the Living Dead* look like? A cursory look at some of the fluid elements shaping the movements of his ghouls, as they swarm the isolated Pennsylvania farmhouse where a group of survivors have taken refuge, might incarnate extended meditations about Romero as a prophet warning us not only about socio-cultural turmoil and political and technological upheaval during the 1960s but also the pace and scale of twentieth-century ecodisaster whose acceleration begins in roughly the same time period of American history. It is hardly a surprise to discover that the rise of the post-Romero zombie coincides roughly with what environmental scientists identify as the beginning of the Great Acceleration, the period of global history in the middle of the twentieth century that is marked by unprecedented rates of industrial development and population growth. These conditions create, in turn, various forms of cumulative environmental degradation, including pollution and toxification, the rise of greenhouse gases, the loss of biodiversity, and global warming. J. R. McNeill and Peter Engelke (2016) remind us that "actions already taken, mainly between 1945 and now, assure a human imprint on the Earth, its climate, its biota, the acidity of its oceans, and much else that will linger for many millennia yet to come" (5–6). Thus, Romero's film, and indeed his entire film franchise, not only rewrites the originating figure of the modern American zombie from entranced worker to undead monster, or from chemically or spiritually compromised to virally contaminated. It also reframes the zombie apocalypse itself as an elemental post-apocalypse with lingering social and environmental aftermaths that become

a central concern in the post-Romero generation, and especially in *The Walking Dead* television franchise and the comic book series on which it is based.[4]

In their speculative visions of the apocalypse, which radically rearranges both human worlds and nonhuman environments, both *TWD* and *Fear* actively search for new representational idioms to portray the slipperiness, the unpredictable movements, and the forms of immediate and long-term contamination that mark our present epoch. The franchise, in total, offers us, in the figure of the elemental zombie, a potential archetypal response to our collective failure to imagine the environmental peril we now face. "It is not surprising," Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) explains, "that the crisis of climate change should produce anxieties precisely around futures that we cannot visualize" (211). The shows in the franchise use gothic horror, abject, and elementally informed cinematography and references to the fluid elements in order to help us visualise those futures that otherwise fail to excite our collective mind's eye. As any seasoned viewer of either show might indicate, it is next to impossible to forget the images of terror that these shows have released into our collective cultural imaginary, and perhaps for good reason too.

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