I was sitting with a group of historical re-enactors in front of a fire and listening to them attentively. It was during the thirteenth Meeting of the Slavic Warriors in Grzybowo (Poland) in 2012. One of the re-enactors commented that, during his day-to-day life and work, he feels like the living dead. It is only during summer weekends, when historical re-enactment events take place, that he casts off this zombie-like persona and truly feels alive. Other re-enactors present agreed with him. Historical re-enactment is not, for them, a hobby. It is their way of life.

At first, I did not pay any special attention to this comparison with zombies. However, it soon occurred to me that historical re-enactors practice a kind of “Weltgeist”, or “world spirit” when they recreate scenes from the past. According to Hegel, Weltgeist is a way of philosophizing about history and make sense of the contemporary world. It is commonly found in cinema, and increasingly in television. Could it be that Weltgeist explains why historical re-enactors only feel alive when they are enveloped in a fantasy world?

To explore this question I turned to the most appropriate television series I could think of: The Walking Dead (2010–). The Walking Dead is an American TV series, developed by Frank Darabont, about small groups of people who are attempting to survive the zombie apocalypse. In the first series, the protagonist, Rick Grimes, wakes up in a hospital and discovers that the world he knew is gone, to be replaced by a post-apocalyptic world full of zombies. He successfully locates his wife and son, and bunkers down with other survivors in a safe camp. However, the camp is attacked by zombies and the survivors have to search for another place to live. The second series consists of them finding this new, safe place, and again being attacked by the zombies. The third season focuses on the different social and moral dilemmas that the heroes face when former moral and ethical norms are no longer operative.

At first glance, The Walking Dead appears to be quite a serious story about the zombie apocalypse. But on closer examination, the series operates at a second level: it is also a story about people confronted by a global catastrophe after which a new society is slowly reconstituting itself. The title, The Walking Dead, also refers to two things: the zombies and the survivors. Everyone, even the people who survived the apocalypse, are infected by a deadly virus; hence they are living with a death sentence hanging over their heads.

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The Walking Dead is full of strange juxtapositions. It is a story about the immediate aftermath of an unimaginable catastrophe in which almost everyone died, yet people still mow their front lawns. One of the heroes loses his leg, but still he is an excellent car driver. Another hero, this time a villain, loses one of his eyes, but is always able to shoot a zombie straight in the head. The list of unlikely scenarios is endless: although one hero spent the first few months of the zombie apocalypse in prison, he always has a perfectly waxed mustache. In fact, the characters in The Walking Dead resemble the historical re-enactors I talked with in Poland: both groups exhibit the paradox that their mundane daily life takes place within a context of drama. Scenarios are mashed together in illogical ways. The re-enactment of the King’s coronation in Gniezno in June 2012 is a fine example. During the night time, all tourists had to leave the camp, and the event’s organisers delivered free beer to the historical re-enactors. The beer was for everyone, but you had to have–and I quote–a “historical-looking vessel” to get one. It did not really matter whether your vessel was a fifteenth-century glass or something else entirely. You, an historical re-enactor, were not allow to drink from a modern plastic cup. A traumatic story about a world after a total catastrophe, or serious re-enactment of a historical reality, are blended with very unserious things, like a nice lawn, or drinking quite contemporary beer from no less contemporary kegs, but necessarily in historical-looking vessels.

My hunch that The Walking Dead is similar to historical re-enactment is amplified by the series’s presentation of time. Although it is ostensibly a story about the future, it actually comes across far more as a story about the past. The apocalyptic world of The Walking Dead is deeply pre-modern: there are no mobile phones, no Internet, not even a state. In other words, it resembles a version of the past that historical re-enactors strive to create. Like the survivors of the zombie apocalypse, historical re-enactors also build their own closed communities where contemporary norms do not work. Both groups re-invent themselves. The survivors of the zombie apocalypse and historical re-enactors are small groups of people who are trying to maintain their world in the face of adversity. Whereas the characters in The Walking Dead face violence and death, historical re-enactors attempt to preserve the past in the face of mass indifference. As most people are concerned more with their daily life than with fifteenth-century battles, so are zombies unconcerned with the material culture or the lives of human beings. In both a post-apocalyptic world and in contemporary life, every piece of material culture from the past is priceless. Some of the objects that are most desired by the survivors of the apocalypse are weapons: guns, pistols, knives, etc. Of course, weapons, swords, axes, and so on are of special interest to historical re-enactment as well.

The last and the most important example which is worth approaching touches upon the very title of the series. As I have already mentioned, The Walking Dead can refer to human beings and zombies at the same time. This ambiguity is embodid in historical re-enactors as well. Historical re-enactors see themselves as zombies in ordinary life, mirroring the way in which the survivors of the zombie apocalypse are also the walking dead through being infected with a deadly virus. Both groups embody the Weltgeist–world spirit–of the long dead past (e.g., the warriors of the Early Middle Ages, or the post-apocalyptic world) which is nonetheless very alive nowadays. This is, I claim, the very reason why the title of The Walking Dead should be understood as The Walking Historical Re-enactors, because there is nothing more undead than the past itself. That is why historical re-enactment, one of the most characteristic social and cultural phenomenon of our times, can be approached through a TV series: we are all, in one sense or another, zombies.

- See more at: http://popanth.com/article/we-are-all-zombies-an-archaeology-of-the-walking-dead/#sthash.v6gOLILQ.dpuf