

New Horizons in English Studies 7/2022

CULTURE & MEDIA



Celeste Lacroix

COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON, USA

LACROIXC@COFC.EDU

[HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0002-3445-7127](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3445-7127)

Robert Westerfelhaus

COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON, USA

WESTERFELHAUSR@COFC.EDU

[HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0001-8089-7484](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8089-7484)

An Emerging New American Mythos: Post-Apocalyptic Narratives as Expressions of Rupture, Rage, Resignation, and Regret

Abstract. In our media-saturated society popular culture assumes a quasi-religious function, offering mythic narratives and associated mediated rituals that provide audiences with equipment for living. The United States has developed its own distinctive mythos, termed the *American monomyth*, which celebrates the restoration and perpetuation of social order through heroic means. This optimistic mythic narrative formula shapes storylines within a wide range of genres, such as film noir, sci-fi, and Westerns. In this study, the authors note the surging popularity of a distinctively different mythic formula: post-apocalyptic narratives. It is argued that these darkly pessimistic narratives give ritual expression to the rage, regret, and resignation prompted by a perceived or real irreparable rupture of the social order. The authors offer illustrative examples of post-apocalyptic storylines in books, films, televisions, and other media; identify some of the contemporary socio-cultural concerns addressed by these stories; and suggest that post-apocalyptic narratives pose a potential challenge to the perennial dominance of the traditional American monomyth by joining – although not displacing or replacing – it as a fixture within American popular culture.

Keywords. American monomyth, media rituals, popular culture, post-apocalyptic narratives, rhetoric

The new millennium has seen a surge in the prominence and popularity of both secular and religious texts featuring post-apocalyptic narratives. These popular culture texts enjoy much commercial success, critical acclaim, and cultural influence. Books, films, television series, and video games with post-apocalyptic content reflect current societal concerns. At times, the focus of such concern is obvious.¹ In other instances the source of concern is only obliquely referenced in ways that might not necessarily be intentional on the part of creative teams (writers, directors, producers, etc.) but which still draw upon, give expression to, and provide a means of coping with the contemporary *Zeitgeist* in much the same way 1950s sci-fi films were tied to anxieties about nuclear annihilation, potential Communist infiltration, and other Cold War era worries.² While societal concerns have changed in small ways and large since the end of the Cold War,³ the ability of popular culture narratives to reflect and respond to such concerns has not. In doing so, these narratives draw upon and contribute to the mainstream society's reservoir of mythic archetypes and the narratives in which these are featured.

One can learn a great deal about the current state of American society and the direction it is potentially heading by identifying and examining popular culture trends. A significant contemporary trend worth noting is the current growing popularity of post-apocalyptic narratives. As box office earnings, television ratings, and book and video game sales indicate, such narratives reach a large and interested consumer audience.⁴ Their popularity is magnified by blog, newspaper, magazine and other mass and

¹ Such as a potential pandemic or the possibility of a full blown nuclear war.

² Narratives featuring zombies can reflect a range of worries, from xenophobic concern about cultural or racial contamination to worries about the spread of a biological hazard of natural or human origin.

³ During the 1950s, the primary international concern was the ever-present threat of potential nuclear war with the Soviet War. Additionally, the United States was still coming to terms with its new role as the free world's hegemon. Domestically, America's growing White middle class was adjusting to their post-World War II prosperity and the rapidly evolving consumerist, conformist lifestyle of sprawling suburbs, shopping centers, freeways, etc. that prosperity made possible. (The nation did not begin to seriously grapple with its systemic racism until the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. That task remains unfinished.) Until the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, America's primary 21st century international preoccupation was the spread of terrorism perpetrated by religious fundamentalists. Domestically, contemporary concerns center upon issues of equity and inclusion related to class, ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality; the increasingly acrimonious socio-political divide between conservatives and progressives, Democrats and Republicans, etc.; and, more recently, economic worries about inflation, supply chain problems, actual and potential shortages, the decreasing GDP, the unwieldy national debt, and so on.

⁴ Statistics for book, DVD, and video game sales; box office numbers; and, television/streaming viewership are dynamic. Sales continue to mount, film attendance varies day-by-day and week-by-week, and television/streaming viewership fluctuates. Any number reported is a best a snapshot of an artifact's commercial performance at a particular point in time. However, even when seen in light of that caveat such numbers are still suggestive of popularity. Relevant to this study are the revenues generated by zombie-apocalypse films of the past two decades. According to Akil Dathorne (2021), The *Resident Evil* franchise, consisting of six films, generated total box office

social media discussions. We contend that the popularity of post-apocalyptic narratives suggests such stories speak to some deeply felt need in our society's collective psyche and, we argue, they do so through a newly emerging mythic formula that in its radical pessimism drastically differs from the hopeful optimism that has been the defining feature of American popular culture narratives ranging from the rags-to-riches stories of Horatio Alger to stories celebrating the victories of underdogs against all odds, such as the *Rocky* franchise, to tales chronicling the legal, military, political, scientific and other successes of individuals or the nation. While this new mythic formula has not displaced America's traditional monomyth, it has certainly assumed a prominent, influential, and expanding place within the discourse of popular America culture. We suggest that this new mythic turn reflects a significant cultural and psychological shift within mainstream American society for which narratives informed by myth gives ritual expression.

In this study, we identify and then examine what we see as an important mythological development within American popular culture. We begin by pointing out the connection between American popular culture and the nation's national mythology. We then contrast the traditional American monomyth with the emerging post-apocalyptic myth that is becoming an increasingly prominent fixture within American popular culture. We go on to offer illustrative examples of that myth as a shaping influence upon narratives in books, films, televisions, and other media. Next, we identify some of the socio-cultural concerns addressed by post-apocalyptic narratives. We conclude by noting that such narratives will continue to grow in popularity and influence for the foreseeable future and are therefore deserving of sustained scholarly analysis and explication.

Popular Culture and Myth

In our media-saturated society, popular culture has assumed a quasi-religious function. Indeed, in addition to entertaining and informing us, the mainstream media reaffirm, recycle, and occasionally refashion core cultural myths.⁵ Moreover, the media also

earnings of 1.2 billion dollars during its theatrical run. Dathorne also reports that the genre's top grossing film at the time (and still to this date per the IMDb Box Office Mojo listing; "Genre Keyword: Zombie)," *World War Z*, earned 540.5 million dollars during its theatrical release. This commercial success is not limited to the silver screen. As of October 2021, the 2020 *Walking Dead: Saints and Sinners Retribution* video game earned in excess of 50 million dollars (D'Angelo 2021). Due to its popularity, a sequel is due out in late 2022. There are similar statistics for the genre's top titles in other media as well.

⁵ See for example Brookey and Westerfelhaus 2001; Engnell 1995; Frentz and Rushing 2002; Jewett and Lawrence 1988; Lawrence and Jewett 2002; Rushing 1983, 1985, 1986; Rushing and Frentz 1978, 1989, 1995, 2000; Solomon 1983; Westerfelhaus and Combs 2003; and Westerfelhaus and Brookey 2004.

offer us alternatives to the conventional rituals that have traditionally expressed and perpetuated such.⁶ Reading books, viewing films and television shows, playing video games, etc. enable us to participate in mythically informed virtual pilgrimages, rites of passage, rituals of rebellion, and other patterned ritual experiences. These mediated myths and the narrative rituals in which they are embedded provide us with what Kenneth Burke (1935/1965, 1941/1967) calls “equipment for living.” As Anders (2011) explains, “Burke’s sociological criticism of literature as ‘equipment for living’ situates the work of art as a response to a situation that is essentially social; literature serves a therapeutic role insofar as it diagnoses and dissolves maladaptive social categories and orientations.” In doing so, narratives – whether written, audio, filmed, or rendered visually – offer rhetorical means of making sense of and dealing with the issues that shape the socio-cultural milieu within which we operate as individuals and collectively. For example, as Barry Brummett (1999) points out, the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* films of the 1950s and 1970s gave rhetorical expression to concerns regarding the rapid social change and political instability of those two decades. As equipment for living, these films were situated in and reflected issues related to an historically specific period while simultaneously tying the ephemeral interests of the day with more enduring cultural concerns. We suggest the same is true for post-Apocalyptic narratives.

A myth must be both enduring and flexible in order to serve the needs of the community it shapes and which in turn is shaped by it. It must, therefore, possess features that transcend specific moments and individual expressions and yet be capable of incorporating new elements and reconfiguring and/or relinquishing old ones as circumstances dictate. Lloyd Bitzer (1968) has pointed out the importance of identifying and examining exigencies that shape rhetorical expressions. Consequently, “The critic’s task then is to *link* discourse embodying the formal anecdote to an audience’s problems to show how the anecdotal form equips a culture for living in that situation” (Brummett 1999, p.482; emphasis in the original). Mythic analysis of the kind represented by this study identifies key mythic elements and ties these to relevant historico-cultural concerns. We do not propose that in doing so the creators of post-apocalyptic narratives are consciously responding in mythic form to contemporary concerns. There is no such simple cause and effect between events and the way they are addressed in mythic terms in popular culture texts. Instead, contributors to popular culture are influenced by the same *Zeitgeist* and draw from the same cultural resources as their audiences. Hence, the filmmakers who produced the sci-fi B-movies of the 1950s were not in all likelihood intentionally producing films intended to serve as political commentary regarding the pressing concerns of the nascent Atomic Age. But, like their intended audiences they were living under the cloud of possible nuclear war with the

⁶ E.g., Aden 1999; Lacroix and Westerfelhaus 2005; Vande Berg 1995; Westerfelhaus and Brookey 2004; and Westerfelhaus and Lacroix 2006).

Soviet Union, and as a result dialogue, imagery, and plotlines obliquely⁷ and at times obviously⁸ reflecting that exigent circumstance found ritualized mythic expression in their work. Today, in the United States there is a similar psychological and sociological need for popular culture texts that provide a mythically grounded rhetorical response to the troubling issues defining the new millennium.

The American Monomyth vs. Post-Apocalyptic Narratives

During the course of its relatively young history, the United States has developed its own distinctive mythos, which Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence (1988) term the *American monomyth*. This myth gives patterned expression to mainstream America's conception of its past history and its hopes for the future. The American monomyth adheres to the following formula:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity. (Lawrence & Jewett 2022, 6)

Lawrence and Jewett go on to note that, in contrast to the classical monomyth proposed by Joseph Campbell (1949), which as they observe typically reflects "rites of initiation, the American monomyth derives from tales of redemption" (p. 6). The redemptive action required to purge paradise of pollution and restore its purity very often takes the form of a rough retributive justice in which the archetypal mythic hero ritually reestablishes the superiority of socially sanctioned good over socially proscribed evil and thus restores the status quo's moral order. He/she/they do so by literally or figuratively eliminating the villains who threaten to pollute the pristine moral, natural, and social order of the communal paradise. Some are exiled or incarcerated. Very often, however, the villains are simply killed outright by the redemptive mythic hero. This solution is simple, permanent, and results in a ritually effected emotional cathar-

⁷ Examples of such films are plentiful. These include *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *The Thing from Another Planet* (1951), *Invasion from Mars* (1953), *It Came from Outer Space* (1953), *The War of the Worlds* (1953), *Godzilla* (1954), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), *The Blob* (1958), *The Brain Eaters* (1958), *It! The Terror from Beyond Space* (1958), *Invisible Invaders* (1959), and the list could go on. The then contemporary concerns expressed by such films include worry about contamination, mutation, and other enduring effects of atomic radiation; the ongoing fear of secret infiltration of American society by Communists; and, apprehension regarding outright war between the West and the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies.

⁸ A notable example is the 1959 film *On the Beach*, based upon Neville Shute's 1957 novel of the same name.

sis and a dramatically satisfying narrative closure.⁹ Such is the case, for example, with the iconic characters Clint Eastwood played in his classic spaghetti Westerns and the *Dirty Harry* film franchise, who ironically employ ultra-violent means to restore the broken peace. There is, of course, a great deal of variation in the narrative means with which the American monomyth has been expressed in popular culture. We can see it informing detective and police dramas, sci-fi adventures, superhero epics, Westerns, and other genres. But regardless of genre, monomythic narratives typically end on a positive note with communal pollution purged and purity restored. In this respect, the American monomyth is ultimately optimistic.

While the mythic formula identified by Jewett and Lawrence (1988) still plays an important role in shaping American popular culture narratives, we contend that referring to it with the prefix “mono” is now a misnomer as it has been joined, although not displaced or replaced, by another normative mythic formula, one that draws upon religious and secular conceptions of apocalyptic catastrophe. Regardless of their cause, such catastrophes result in a harsh and unforgiving world in which survivors often – although not always – must struggle merely to remain alive while striving to maintain some semblance of their human dignity. The defining elements and narrative flow of post-apocalyptic mythic narratives are as follows:

A society – or, as is very often the case with such stories, the entire human race – is struck by a catastrophic event; only a remnant survives; this remnant inhabits a diminished world in which the cultural, political, and social institutions people rely upon to create, protect, and sustain communal life are severely damaged or utterly destroyed; there is no hope for a restoration of the old order or the institution of an equal or better new order in the foreseeable future.

This mythic narrative lacks the characteristic optimism of the conventional American monomyth with its hope in the redemptive possibility of bringing about a community’s restoration via the agency of some savior. Instead, the post-apocalyptic situation

⁹ The vast majority of the protagonists of these violent narratives are males who are both exponents and saviors of the patriarchal order. In addition to the two Clint Eastwood characters cited as illustrative examples in the text, we find such protagonists featured in Alan Ladd’s classic 1953 *Shane*, Charles Bronson’s *Death Wish* film franchise and Bruce Willis’ 2018 remake, Edward Woodward’s *The Equalizer* series from the 1980s and the two Denzel Washington films based upon it, and 2021’s revenge drama *Nobody*, starring Bob Odenkirk. In admittedly very few cases, stories celebrating retributive justice feature female leads. Jody Foster’s 2007 film *The Brave One* comes to mind. Another example is Queen Latifah’s 2021 CBS reboot of *The Equalizer*. It is worth noting that the rigidly formulaic plots and stereotypical protagonists featured in Foster’s film and Queen Latifah’s TV series mimic rather than challenge the dominant hyper-masculine traits characteristic of the monomythic narrative. We should point out that while we focus upon film and television examples in this footnote, we could just as easily have concentrated upon monomythic narratives in other media. We focused upon these two media in particular because they tend to dominate contemporary American popular culture to an extent that books and other media do not.

is hopeless, with the only realistic option being recognition of an irredeemable rupture between the past and present. The emotional response elicited by this recognition ranges from rage, to regret, to resignation.¹⁰ These emotions are explicitly expressed within a post-apocalyptic narrative, which is intended in turn to elicit a similar emotional response from the narrative's audience.¹¹ Post-apocalyptic narratives do not provide cathartic closure with respect to these or other emotions. Instead, they affirm that there is good reason to rage against or resign oneself to the rupture and its aftermath, and much to regret regarding what has been lost. In this respect they are deeply pessimistic.

Key Elements of Post-Apocalyptic Narratives

Popular culture treatments of post-apocalyptic narratives are not new. Classic examples include Nevil Shute's (1957) *On the Beach* and Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s (1960) *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, both of which expressed Cold War era concerns about nuclear war. We argue, however, that what sets today's post-apocalyptic narratives apart from those of the past are their sheer number, the wide variety of such narratives and the media that feature them, and – most significantly – the major mythic shift in mainstream American popular culture these narratives represent.

Just as the American monomyth can be discerned in a wide range of genres and a variety of narratives, so too can the apocalyptic mythic formula. There are, of course, overtly religious stories informed by that mythic formula, as for example Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins' bestselling *Left Behind* book series and the films and video games

¹⁰ The consistent order of the three emotions listed is not accidental. We tentatively propose that for the bulk of any population these post-apocalyptic emotions are – for the most part – experienced sequentially, in much the same way as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' (1969) five stages of grief are experienced by those diagnosed with a terminal illness. This is not to say that these stages are mutually exclusive, but rather that one emotion is dominant during its featured stage. Because of its expansive timeframe, key characters in HBO's *The Leftovers* go through this three part cycle. In other narratives, such as the 2009 film *The Road* and the Cormack McCarthy novel upon which it is based, only one stage is featured; in this case, resignation. Some post-apocalyptic narratives also have as the first stage surprise or shock, which happens when the apocalyptic rupture is completely unexpected, as for example in Fox's *Wayward Pines* or *The Leftovers* television series. In other cases, however, as when a giant asteroid/comet/meteor is predicted to crash into the earth months in advance of impact, the rupture is known well in advance, such as 2004's *Post Impact* or 2010's *Meteor Apocalypse*.

¹¹ Some narratives filter the emotions prompted by a post-Apocalyptic rupture through a single character, others take a more diffuse approach. For example, the events of the first season of Fox's *Wayward Pines* are seen primarily, although not exclusively, through the eyes of the series' protagonist, Ethan Burke, who comes to the town as a U.S. Secret Service Agent investigating another agent's disappearance and in the process slowly learns *Wayward Pines*' shocking secret. The audience shares in his increasing discomfort, rising anger, and eventual horror as the seemingly idyllic town, depicted as a nostalgic throwback, is revealed to be a nightmarish dystopia from which there is no escape. In contrast, HBO's *The Leftovers* features multiple major characters who exhibit a wide range of post-rupture emotions, including but not limited to this study's titular rage, regret, and resignation.

based upon those books. The dispensationalist theology informing these media artifacts reflect an unapologetically Evangelical Christian worldview. Other post-apocalyptic narratives express a less sectarian religious sensibility, such as the Hughes brothers (2010) film *The Book of Eli*. Some post-apocalyptic narratives syncretistically blend beliefs and practices from various religious traditions, as is the case with HBO's *Leftovers*, which incorporates elements derived from folk religions, Christian fundamentalism, Gnosticism, the New Age movement, and other diverse and disparate sources. Still other post-apocalyptic narratives are solely secular, such as Cormac McCarthy's (2006) Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Road*, and John Hillcoat's (2009) film version of the book.

Stories featuring zombies constitute an especially popular post-apocalyptic genre. These include *The Walking Dead* franchise as well as the films *28 Days Later*, *World War Z*, and *Zombieland* and its sequel. Today's zombie films differ from their antecedents in ways that are revealing and, relevant to the present study, these differences enable us to distinguish between tales that simply feature zombies and those that are informed by the post-apocalyptic mythic formula. The earliest zombie films, such as 1932's cult classic *White Zombie*, expressed racialized worry about potential cultural and genetic contamination posed to people of European descent by the exotic Other as represented by Haitian voodoo practitioners. But, there was no irreversible rupture of the status quo. Indeed, by the film's end the White colonialist social order has been restored and reaffirmed. In contrast, contemporary zombie narratives take place within the aftermath of some rupture. These stories' human characters must not only fight for survival against the threat posed by zombies, but they also deal with a post-rupture loss of the secure social order that had provided them with a degree of comfort and stability. Of course, like those of the past many of today's zombie narratives also express concern about biological or cultural contamination of one kind or another. The scene in *World War Z* of hordes of zombies pouring over a border wall has an obvious connection to depictions of and concerns some have about the potential negative effects of unregulated large-scale immigration. These concerns are topical rather than mythic, ephemeral rather than enduring. As such, they serve as one particular means of expressing even deeper mythical concern about the passing of the familiar and the need to face an uncertain future for which there are at best only diminished expectations.

Here we draw a distinction between a story's details (its characters, its narrative stream, where it takes place, the genre to which it belongs), which we refer to as a narrative's particulars, and its mythic architecture. The particulars are often related to the topical social commentary a narrative might offer. The narrative's mythic architecture, in contrast, is comprised of elements that transcend those particulars; these include archetypal characters, patterns, and symbolism. To illustrate: the narrative particulars of the film and novel versions of *Shane* include such details as its Wyoming setting; the homesteader and the rancher who are at odds with one another; the hired thugs and mysterious loner who fight on behalf of the disputants; the Western genre to which the story belongs; the class and regional tensions represented; and, the condemnatory moral judgment the story renders regarding rapacious and predatory business practices.

Shane's mythic architecture encompasses the basic elements of the American monomyth and gives powerful expression to that myth's optimistic belief in the restoration of a threatened community through heroic intervention.

Like the American monomyth, post-apocalyptic mythic narratives are not confined to one time or place. Some post-apocalyptic tales occur in the very near-future, as is the case with HBO's *Leftovers* series. Other narratives are situated in the far distant future, such as Blake Crouch's (2012, 2013, 2014) dystopian *Wayward Pines* book trilogy and the Fox television network's series it inspired. And a very few post-apocalyptic narratives are temporally situated just prior to the cataclysmic rupture. In these more properly called pre-apocalyptic stories, the rupture and its aftermath are still central. The characters live in fearful knowledge of the upcoming event, plagued by uncertainty as to whether they and their loved ones will survive it, and weighted with worry about what kind of dangerous and difficult world they will be forced to inhabit if they do survive.

While the details of post-apocalyptic narratives differ from one story to another, they do share key common elements. The two most important defining features of the post-apocalyptic mythic formula are a rupture and its aftermath. The specific cause of the rupture does not matter much with respect to a narrative's broader mythic meaning. The important thing is that there is a catastrophic rupture that significantly disrupts the cultural, political, and social status quo, or that outright destroys it. There are a wide range of such causes, some natural (e.g., a cataclysmic solar storm, a meteor strike, a pandemic), some due to humans (e.g., nuclear war), and some the result of adverse human interaction with and influence upon the natural world (e.g., a genetically altered biological mutation or freak weather caused by climate change). Regardless of its proximate cause, the rupture results in an undesirable and irreversible aftermath. There is no return to the old order.

In contrast to the optimism expressed by the American monomyth, in which a real or imagined paradise lost can be regained, the apocalyptic mythos is instead pessimistic about the possibility of any such recovery. In some cases, those who survive the cataclysmic event that caused the rupture are condemned to live constrained lives, often with mere survival being the best they can reasonably hope for. They inhabit a post-apocalyptic world that has devolved into something resembling Thomas Hobbes' (1651/1982) disturbing version of the state of nature: a competition of each against all marked by continual fear and the constant danger of violent death, with the lives of individuals and the groups they belong rightly described as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." They lack any reasonable hope for a restoration of the relative safety of the old order. In other narratives, post-apocalyptic life is less physically dangerous and more psychologically complex, as illustrated by the existential angst afflicting the main characters of HBO's *Leftovers* series, who wonder why their family, friends, and other people disappeared during a rupture-like event while they remained behind. The search for answers, such as they are, is a painful and disappointing process. But while they differ in terms of the post-apocalyptic environment, in both of the two cases described above there is a deep sense of some significant loss, of a past that cannot be recovered.

Post-Apocalyptic Narratives and the Contemporary Zeitgeist

As is often the case with socio-cultural/communicative phenomena, there is no single cause driving the growing and intense interest of American media producers and consumers in apocalyptic narratives. But, given the key elements of the mythic formula we have outlined above it is clear that emotions tied to an actual or potential loss of cultural, political, and social instructions and the safe and secure order they make possible is a dominant if not exclusive factor. In today's complex and interconnected world, such losses are connected to both the domestic and international spheres.

Domestically, Americans are still living in the shadow of 9/11 and all that followed the tragic events that occurred that day, including wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Patriot Act, and continued terrorist attacks at home and abroad. The economy has changed in ways that exacerbates the wealth gap, diminishes the expectations of the middle-class, and substantially increases the nation's debt. There is an increase in tensions drawn along class, ethnic, political, racial, religious, and gender and sexual identity lines. In particular, there is a deep and widening divide between so-called Blue states and Red, between Democrats and Republicans, between conservatives and liberals.¹² This divide, as much cultural as political, was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the governmental measures taken to mitigate it. The deleterious economic, pedagogical, public health, psychological, and social consequences associated with these measures have caused documented short term harm and are expected to continue to adversely influence private and public life for years to come.¹³

¹² As noted previously, anger is the first dominate emotion post-rupture emotion. It seems this is the stage Americans at currently at. The deeply divided and increasingly acrimonious state of contemporary American society can be readily seen while station hopping from liberal CNN or MSNBC to conservative Fox News or the One America News Network, viewed on internet websites across the socio-political spectrum, heard when listening to partisan radio talk shows or similarly partisan streaming blogs, and personally experienced in the workplace and at family gatherings on Thanksgiving and Christmas. Anecdotal evidence of this kind is scientifically supported. The Pew Research Center, for example, conducted a series of studies that "illustrate the increasingly stark disagreement between Democrats and Republicans on the economy, racial justice, climate change, law enforcement, international engagement, and a long list of other issues" (Dimock and White 2021). The Pew study found America's political divide is measurably much greater than that of nine European peers (including post-Brexit UK) as well as Japan.

¹³ An exhaustive listing of these consequences is beyond the scope of this study. We provide two illustrative examples, the first personal and the second public. On the micro level, as reported by Jo Napolitano (2022), "Infants born during the pandemic produced significantly fewer vocalizations and had less verbal back-and-forth with their caretakers compared to those born before COVID, according to independent studies by Brown University and a national nonprofit focused on early language development"; additionally, the research found that pandemic babies were "slower to develop critical language skills." And, on the macro level, according to the New York State Restaurant Association (2020), "1 in 6 restaurants nationwide have already closed – 8,333 restaurants in New York, 4,500 in New York City alone."

For some, Obama represented a major departure from and clear danger to their conception of what the American way of life should be. For others the election of Donald Trump to the presidency posed a very real threat to the progress they believe was made during the Obama administration regarding issues of concern to them, such as the recognition and expansion of LGBT+ rights, the enlargement of economic and political opportunities for women, and just and humane treatment of immigrants regardless of how they arrived or their legal status. This socio-political divide continues during Biden's term as president. No matter where one falls on the political spectrum, there is the perception that a significant rupture has occurred in America's social fabric. Rapidly changing social mores and morals distress those who prefer the more traditional "way things were," while the seemingly slow pace of change disturbs others.

The international scene is also rife with ruptures and potential ruptures: famine, wars, natural disasters. A major land war has erupted between Russia and Ukraine. Europe as a whole is experiencing an unprecedentedly large influx of migrants and refugees who look different, speak different languages, and belong to different faith traditions than citizens of their host countries. This has caused political conflict and social unrest between those who would welcome immigrants and those who prefer to live in a demographically stable and hermetically sealed Europe. For Americans, their friends, allies, and even the nation's enemies, there is much uncertainty about the new geo-political world order that is still evolving after the demise of the fragile post-World War II world order, symbolically represented by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990. While that world order had its problems – ranging from Cold War tensions to hot proxy wars between the superpowers fought in Angola, Korea, Vietnam, and elsewhere – there was an uncomfortable but predictable stasis between the Soviet Union and the United States resulting from the fear of mutually assured nuclear destruction. And there was certainty for the most part regarding who was aligned with whom. Today, there is no such certainty and a great deal of unpredictability. One need look no further than the ongoing civil war in Syria to see the local, regional, and international powers who in various and often unlikely configurations cooperate and contest with one another. In short, domestically and internationally there is no dearth of reasons for Americans to perceive realized or potential ruptures.

Conclusion

At this point, there is no indication of any decline of interest in post-apocalyptic narratives. Indeed, the reverse seems true. The enduring popularity and seeming ubiquity of *The Walking Dead* franchise is a case in point. Based upon the popular graphic novel series by Robert Kirkman, Tony Moore, and Charlie Adlard that was introduced in 2003, the franchise now includes multiple television series, video games, and novelizations. *The Walking Dead* zombies have even found themselves featured on a pin-ball machine. And there are, of course, a wide range of ancillary products associated with the franchise, including T-shirts, coffee cups, flasks, hats, magnets, mousepads,

posters, stickers, tote bags, water bottles, etc. It is no exaggeration, then, to describe consumer interest in the franchise as intense.

The contentious events of the present, as well as the recent past, indicate that if anything the worries about actual and potential cultural, political, and social ruptures that drive interest in and the cathartic need for post-apocalyptic narratives are not going away anytime soon, and these worries will in all likelihood become more pronounced as events play out domestically and abroad. The long list of such events include the pandemic, of course; spiking homicide rates; protests and counter-protests in towns, cities, and college and university campuses across the nation; the war between Russia and Ukraine; indeterminable conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere; numerous terrorist attacks; an unusually large number of devastating natural disasters; and so on. These and other events have actually or may potentially produce irreversible ruptures and the sense of loss such ruptures foster. And, we contend, these and similar events will help to fuel the need for mythic narratives and mediated ritual expressions associated with them in the form of post-apocalyptic narratives. Given that mythic narrative formulae are dynamic, the new post-apocalyptic narratives that provide popular culture consumers with equipment for responding to perceived, potential, and realized ruptures associated with current and future events will give scholars much to study in making sense of them and their connections to our lived human experience.

References

- Aden, Roger. C. 1999. *Popular Stories and Promised Lands: Fan Cultures and Symbolic Pilgrimages*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press.
- Anders, Abram. 2011. "Pragmatisms by Incongruity: 'Equipment for Living' from Kenneth Burke to Gilles Deleuze." *KB Journal*, 7. Accessed October 9, 2022. <https://kbjournal.org/anders>
- Bitzer, Lloyd. 1968. "The Rhetorical Situation." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1: 1–14.
- Brookey, Robert. Alan and Robert Westerfelhaus. 2001. "Pistols and Petticoats, Piety and Purity: *To Wong Foo*, the Queering of the American Monomyth, and the Marginalizing Discourse of Deification." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18: 141–156.
- Brummett, Barry. 1999. "Burke's Representative Anecdote as Method in Media Criticism," *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*, eds. John Louis Lucaites, Celeste Michelle Condit and Sally Caudill, 479–493. New York: Guilford.
- Burke, Kenneth. 1965. *A Grammar of Motives*. Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. (Original work published 1935)
- Burke, Kenneth. 1967. *Philosophy of Literary Form* (Rev. ed.). Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. (Original work published 1941)
- Campbell, Joseph. 1949. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New York: Pantheon.
- Dathorne, Akil. 2011. "Approaching the End: 10 Highest-Grossing Zombie-Apocalypse Movies, Ranked." *The Richest*, December 17. Accessed October 9, 2022. <http://www.therichest.com/rich-powerful/approaching-the-end-10-highest-grossing-zombie-apocalypse-movies-ranked/>

- D'Angelo, William. 2021. "VR Game The Walking Dead: Saints and Sinner Tops \$50 Million in Revenue." *VGChartz*, 27 October. Accessed October 9, 2022. <https://www.vgchartz.com/article/451234/vr-game-the-walking-dead-saints-and-sinner-tops-50-million-in-revenue/>
- Dimock, Michael and Richard Wike. 2021. "America Is Exceptional in Its Political Divide The pandemic has revealed how pervasive the divide in American politics is relative to other nations." PEW, March 29. Accessed October 9, 2022. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trust/archive/winter-2021/america-is-exceptional-in-its-political-divide>
- Engnell, Richard A. 1995. "The Spiritual Component of Otherness in Film: The Interplay of Scene and Narrative." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12: 241–262.
- Frentz, Thomas S. and Janice Hocker Rushing. 2002. "'Mother Isn't Quite Herself Today': Myth and Spectacle in *The Matrix*." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19: 64–86.
- Hobbes, Thomas. 1982. *Leviathan* (4th ed.) New York: Penguin. (Original work published 1651)
- Jewett, Robert and John Shelton Lawrence. *The American Monomyth* (2nd ed.). Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America.
- Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. 1969. *On Death and Dying*. London: Routledge.
- Lacroix, Celeste and Robert Westerfelhaus. 2005. "From the Closet to the Loft: Liminal License and Socio-sexual Separation in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*." *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication* 6: 11–19.
- Lawrence, John Shelton and Robert Jewett. 2002. *The Myth of the American Superhero*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Napolitano, Jo. 2022. "New Research: Babies Born During COVID Talk Less with Caregivers, Slower to Develop Critical Language Skills." *The74: America's Education News Source*, April 18. Accessed October 9, 2022. <https://www.the74million.org/article/new-research-babies-born-during-covid-talk-less-with-caregivers-slower-to-develop-critical-language-skills/>
- New York State Restaurant Association. 2022. "New York's Restaurants Faring Far Worse than National Average." Accessed October 9, 2022. https://www.nysra.org/uploads/1/2/1/3/121352550/new_york_restaurants_faring_far_worse_than_national_average.pdf
- Rushing, Janice Hocker. 1983. "The Rhetoric of the American Western Myth." *Communication Monographs*, 50: 14–32.
- Rushing, Janice Hocker. 1985. "E.T. as Rhetorical Transcendence." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 71: 188–203.
- Rushing, Janice Hocker. 1986. "Mythic Evolution of 'The New Frontier' in Mass Mediated Rhetoric." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3: 265–396.
- Rushing, Janice Hocker and Thomas S. Frentz. 1978. "The Rhetoric of 'Rocky': A Social Value Model of Criticism." *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 42: 63–72.
- Rushing, Janice Hocker and Thomas S. Frentz. 1989. "The Frankenstein Myth in Contemporary Cinema." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6: 61–80.
- Rushing, Janice Hocker and Thomas S. Frentz. 1995. *Projecting the Shadow: The Cyborg Hero in America Film*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rushing, Janice Hocker and Thomas S. Frentz. 2000. "Singing Over the Bones: James Cameron's *Titanic*." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 17: 1–27.

- Solomon, Martha. 1983. "Villainless Quest: Myth, Metaphor, and Dream in *Chariots of Fire*." *Communication Quarterly* 31: 274–281.
- Vande Berg, Leah R. 1995. "Living Room Pilgrimages: Television's Cyclical Commemoration of the Assassination Anniversary of John F. Kennedy." *Communication Monographs* 62: 47–64.
- Westerfelhaus, Robert and Robert Alan Brookey. 2004. "At the Unlikely Confluence of Conservative Religion and Popular Culture: *Fight Club* as Heteronormative Ritual." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 24: 302–326.
- Westerfelhaus, Robert and Teresa A. Combs. 2004. "Criminal Investigations and Spiritual Quests: *The X-Files* as an Example of Hegemonic Concordance in a Mass-mediated Society," *Critical Approaches to Television* (2nd ed.), eds. Leah R. Vande Berg, Bruce E. Gronbeck and Lawrence A. Wenner, 472–482. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Westerfelhaus, Robert and Celeste Lacroix. 2006. "Seeing 'Straight' through *Queer Eye*: Exposing the Strategic Rhetoric of Heteronormativity in a Mediated Ritual of Gay Rebellion." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23: 426–444.
- Westerfelhaus, Robert and Celeste Lacroix. 2009. "Waiting for the Barbarians: HBO's *Deadwood* as a Post-9/11 Ritual of Disquiet." *Southern Communication Journal* 74: 18–39.