

Revenant Landscapes in *The Walking Dead*

Today I'm going to look at the landscapes and visual narrative strategies used in the TV and comic book versions of *The Walking Dead*. Despite making significant changes, the AMC TV show has always drawn attention to the similarities between the two versions, often describing the comics as a storyboard or similar.

Look closely at the ways in which landscape and space are used in both texts and demonstrate that, although there are superficial similarities, the two texts in fact use quite different narrative strategies to convey space

- First demonstrate the hopelessly muddled rhetoric of fidelity that surrounds the show.
- Then use gothic and adaptation theory to demonstrate similarities between the comic and TV text at a deeper, more symbolic level, defining the landscapes as uncanny and revenant – like zombies themselves.
- Conclude by using a range of key theorists and my own work to analyse the ways in which the comics medium uses its unique narrative strategies

Look closely at episode 1 of the TV series and comic, bringing in key examples for close analysis – so hopefully no spoilers here!

SLIDE

No doubt that the visuals of TWD TV show do, in many places, closely mirror those of the comic. Here we can see the cast and crew claiming fidelity...

- STORYBOARD (1min)
- We'll come back to that 'little umbrella' by the way.

SLIDE

- Accuracy not just important, actually being used as benchmark of perfection...
- SAME SAME DIFF (30s)
- However what we also see here is Kirkman struggling to say something coherent about fidelity (it's exactly the same, but also different...')

SLIDE: contradictory discourse of fidelity

I think that these confused claims of faithfulness to the comics are being used to legitimate this adaptation, and to reassure fans of the comic – alongside fidelity claims we have constant iterations of creator Robert Kirkman giving his blessing.

This panel (which previewed the trailer for the very first season of the TV series) opens with the Chair describing TWD visuals as being ‘ripped straight from the comic’ however things predictably start to unravel as director Frank Darabont tries to explain...

- COMICON 00.50-02.20 (1m 30)
- Darabont ties himself up in knots trying to explain – and the applause from fans sounds quite uncertain

Various paratexts frame the comics in multiple different ways – as roadmap, template, breadcrumbs etc. But comics, of course, are much much more than this

SLIDE: Jewitt

Rob Jewitt argues that TWD’s confused rhetoric is an attempt to counter Robert Stam’s ‘elegiac discourse of loss’. This refers to the way in which critical response to adaptations often focus entirely on what is lost in the adaptive process. Given the number of weak comic book adaptations, the initial need to attract the comic book audience to the TV show, and the ambition of AMC in doing something new by bringing zombies to the small screen, the confused rhetoric is not surprising.

SLIDE However, Jewitt also points out that TWD doesn’t just draw from the comic but also uses iconic images from cinematic zombie texts to clearly signal its genre and shape audience expectations.

He gives these examples from a range of zombie films, Jewitt also notes similarities with *Shaun of the Dead* and *I am Legend*...

SLIDE: The city of Atlanta is an iconic example of fidelity to both the comic book and to real life. It is also significant thematically if we consider these empty, still roads as the arteries of the landscape-as-body. In *The Walking Dead* these pathways are frequently blocked by broken-down or abandoned vehicles, and so this embodied landscape is

depicted as a dying body, whose blocked arteries and congested cities represent society's demise. The protagonists' own bodily and moral fragmentation – as limbs and ethics are lost through injury and violence – is thus also reflected in this decay.

And inversion is also present here as what should be mobile and active is still and corroded.

SLIDE: this inversion extends to other locations in both the comic and tv show. Not only are there strong visual similarities, both texts also rely on inversion to create the uncanny by inverting the traditional functions of urban and domestic spaces.

For example, the police station, an institution of law and order, becomes the site of blatant theft as Rick helps himself and his new friend Morgan to guns, ammo and a car.

Dale's RV (a mobile home) is a key but static landmark in the first few episodes and a permanent home for the majority of the first series. [Interesting to note that the 'little umbrella' doesn't appear at the start of the comic (it's getting on for winter when Rick finds the camp in Atlanta) but does appear in drawn merchandise for the show – so seems to have been retrospectively inserted in the public consciousness]

A prison becomes one of the best potential homes, as bars keep attackers out rather than keeping prisoners in. It's also introduced in a similar sequence in both comic and TV show as the group (though unaware of its presence) are positioned in the foreground before the camera pans out to show it. In the comic it is described with surprise 'This is *nice*... with all these windows... it's not *dark* at all.' (#14). Both functions and expectations are inverted: the prison is light not dark; the freezer in the cafeteria instead serves as a toilet; and the stereotypes attached to the inmates also turn out to be false.

Hershel's farm – a simple house and adjoining barn – is again visually similar. And again, inversion is present, as the farm turns out to be a place of death rather than new life, with a barn full of undead zombies rather than new crops.

These settings are all handled in a gothic way, as the truth is revealed after a misleading introduction. Functions are thus inverted and the landscape, like the zombie, becomes revenant and uncanny.

SLIDE

We hear a lot about zombies being uncanny – Freud’s term (*Das Unheimliche*, meaning literally "the opposite of what is familiar"). Zombies are disturbing because they are not simply strange, but a mixture of the familiar and unfamiliar.

Designer Masahiro Mori uses zombies as an illustrative component of his famous concept of the uncanny valley, to explain why synthetic robots should not attempt to look too lifelike

Kyle William Bishop analyses the farmhouse scene in Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, arguing that Ben’s modifications turn it into an uncanny setting as walls are torn down and repurposed and the domestic becomes a fortification.

As I hope I have demonstrated, the spaces of TWD world are equally uncanny. BUT in the comics this affect is enhanced and achieved in different ways than the TV series, and storyboard is a misnomer – both texts rely more on using their own medium’s strengths.

SLIDE

Pascal Lefevre states there are four key issues when adapting comics to film, and I want to use these points to highlight the changes made in the following two examples, before looking closely at the use made of page space by applying other comics theory. The first point here refers to the types of changes director Frank Darabont mentioned – the need to add or delete material, and to take those ‘interesting detours’ – so I will focus here on the latter three.

SLIDE – EXAMPLE 1 – rick wakes up in hospital.

Play clip of his advance to cafeteria door and talk over top.

PLAY 18.20-19.00 (50s)

First in this scene we can see Lefevre's third category, movement, being exploited. There are a number of different camera angles used which replicate Rick's disorientated senses – we cut from behind to in front, and are also given a listing point of view shot as he staggers. Even within each of these different shots the camera never stops moving.

The framing of the TV screen is used through the doorway, dangling cables and corridor walls, creating a sense of claustrophobia.

From the start there is eerie echoing nondiegetic sound and from behind the shut cafeteria door uncanny noises such as wheezing and laughing, which build to this crescendo of banging. This is supported by the other iconic horror movie tropes used, such as deep shadows throughout and these long-nailed hands that reach out for us.

SLIDE – comic page hospital

By contrast, the cafeteria door is opened in the comic. This is the second splash page of the issue, and takes place after a page turn, to increase suspense. Thus it relies upon page layout for impact.

SLIDE – O'Donnell analysis. Stephen O'Donnell compares this image to the first splash page in the comic (where Rick wakes up in hospital).

He says that: QUOTE

'Instead of the awake and alert Rick, there is a disturbed, but functioning zombie as the off-centre focus. It subverts the image of Rick in his hospital bed not just through the opposition of life and death, and recovery and deterioration, but also through the inversion of relationships of space [...] The reader's point of view is drawn to the zombie (or is it just a corpse?) slumped over the counter at the far end of the room, through the use of ceiling tiles moving towards a vanishing point [and] the placing of straight edges and notable zombies around the room. [...] The presence of the large zombie on the left [...] outside the focus of the image makes him more terrifying [...]. As this image is from Rick's point of view, the reader is sharing Rick's experience. [The] door's opening is equated to the page turn, and both Rick and the reader are shocked by the zombie lumbering so close to the open door.' (O'Donnell 2015: 49) END QUOTE

SLIDE Thierry Groensteen's system of comics helps explain this further. He says we must not break down the panel into smaller signifying units and instead focuses on the page layouts. He argues that comics syntax relies upon three concepts: spatio-topia, arthrology and braiding, which encompass all of the visual and verbal codes that make up the comics page.

Defines and analyses panels in terms of form, area and site
form (the shape of the panel), area (the size), and site (the location), all of which affect how the panel relates to other panels.

Arthrology refers to the relationships between panels and can take two forms: restrained (the sequential relationship between panels) and general (the interrelationships between all panels).

Within a page's general arthrology, GROENSTEEN also distinguishes between gridding (*quadrillage*) and braiding (*tressage*). Gridding is the way a page is broken up spatially, while braiding refers to the supplementary relationships between panels; for example unconnected panels may still be linked through an identical construction (ie same mise en scene, with differing content), a repetition of a single motif, etc.

SLIDE

We can use Groensteen's general arthrology to analyse the first issue's four splash pages. Both gridding and braiding are present since the pages share the same layout, and use of isolated sounds or profanity. Because of this braiding link we could argue that there's a progression here as we go from a gasped intake of breath, to the unformed sound of the zombie, to profanity that increases in its intensity.

SLIDE

Gridding and braiding are used throughout *The Walking Dead* to create impact and affect. In general its panels have a standard rectangular form although their size and number varies on each page, which creates a more jagged rhythm and gives some moments more emphasis. For example, here on the right is the comic's fourth splash page of this issue; which follows the page on the left that showing Rick's entry into Atlanta.

On this left hand page the gridding mirrors Rick's journey into the city in its use of decreasing space. The widest and most empty space is that of the single panel that makes up the top horizontal row (and nearly half of this panel is white space above the city's skyline), which gives way to two panels on that second row that depict the more claustrophobic buildings, and the final row is then made up of three panels, in which we get our first glimpse of the city's zombies.

Braiding is also used within the general arthrology of the page (which links all panels) to emphasise stasis and silence. Rick's solitary speech bubble, positioned in the dead centre of the first panel, finds an echo in the 'Ruh?' of the zombie in panel 4, and the absence of any other devices to indicate sound accentuates the silence.

Rick's absence from the two framing panels in the bottom row also helps redefine the zombies pictured as a framing device (the two in the central panel literally frame his exit from it), and the two surrounding panels of the bottom row frame this central one. The following splash page (which again is placed after a page turn) continues this theme, as our view of Rick is framed by zombie bodies, and a grasping silhouetted hand.

So applying Groensteen's theory reveals how the comic's layout reinforces a reading of Kirkman's zombies as just another part of the decaying and revenant landscape. They are an aspect of this still and silent world's dangers, but seldom it's central peril. Instead, this page seems to suggest that isolation is the most dominant aspect, and the ultimate danger.

Let's compare this to the TV clip of the same scene...

SLIDE – EXAMPLE 2 – Rick entering Atlanta.

PLAY CLIP

ATLANTA 58m-1.01.20 (3m20 / 2m30)

Talk over the clip again [*wait till end of freeway*]:

Again, considering LeFevre's categories, I want to draw attention to the use of the screen – which is made up of lots of long shots within which Rick is the only moving figure. In contrast to the hospital scene, the

camera barely moves at all – it tracks Rick for one shot we’ve just seen but overall it is static and each shot lasts a long time – I made a number of cuts here for reasons of time.

In terms of movement, Rick actually seems to be infectious – as here where he passes the still zombies and as the figures coincide they move too. *[pause while Rick speaks – x 2]* And from this point onwards the camera never stays still. *[pause until longshot of zombies in background]* As it moves here the car bonnets in the foreground seem to move and we can see the additional female zombie appear back right.

[pause while crow caws at tank]

Also the use of sound to signify the deserted landscape – horse’s hooves, crickets, distant birds, the crows – these noises are all coded signifiers of isolation. *[pause as he goes round corner of tank]* Sound is also used to modify the pace, just like the moving camera – for example this emergent sound of the helicopter, and now his horse speeding up to a gallop.

[as Rick rounds the corner] And suddenly we have lots of sound, quiet and lowkey but also full and eerie. Want to stress that these altered elements (such as the sound effects and movement) are strongly coded cinematic signifiers. The unsteady, moving camera shots and use of slow motion here are disorientating and remind us of the hospital corridor. Being chased by zombies like this is also a cinematic trope, rather than the comic book (which has him suddenly surrounded).

SLIDE

We can also read this page using Charles Hatfield’s critical model (2005) which puts forward the idea that comics narratives rely upon four main tensions: between code and code (that is, word and image); single image and image-in-series; narrative sequence and page surface; and reading-as-experience versus text-as-material-object.

Can see the use of tension between the visual and verbal codes to emphasise the isolation on these same pages, where Rick’s words ‘Here we are...’ are juxtaposed against an image of an empty landscape.

The increasing sense of claustrophobia and danger as Rick enters Atlanta can also be analysed in terms of Hatfield’s tension between sequence and page surface. While space, silence and emptiness dominate the surface of the page (via the white space of the first panel and the

emphasis placed on it by the page layout), claustrophobia and danger are conveyed through the sequence, which shows an increasing number of zombies as we move from panel to panel.

Hatfield's tension between single image and image-in-series is also used here, as the alleyway Rick passes in the third panel is revealed in the fourth to contain a hidden zombie; the fifth image in turn reemphasises this by showing him continuing on his way, unaware.

Hatfield's final tension refers to the role of the reader, who creates the text-as-experience from the pages of the comic; incorporating paratextual knowledge and supplying bridging events between panels, pages, issues and so forth. We can see it in effect in the use of page turns to create suspense and shock value, as I already discussed. In addition, it's interesting to note that collected editions of TWD do not include reprinted covers between issues (and the comic in general does not use any narration). These are both unusual absences, and therefore potentially – to the experienced comics reader – add to the uncanny nature of reading the comic.

SLIDE

My own critical approach to comics tries to use gothic literary criticism to develop comics theory. I wanted to try and create a critical approach to comics that considered each text holistically, since the narrative possibilities available are so limitless. So I argue that each comic's use of particular formal narrative strategies can be analysed in line with its events and themes, linking form and content. I group the narrative strategies of comics into three main areas, as here.

Firstly I consider temporality using the metaphor of haunting and the symbol of the crypt. Echoes of past and future are used to emphasize key moments or themes, and the architecture of the page layout uses deviation from a standard grid in pursuit of ornamentation and/or function.

So (at a very basic level) in this reading, I'd argue that the four splash pages we looked at have particular significance as they break the comic's standard page layout. In addition, they all show an isolated and non-standard example of speech (i.e. unformed noises or uncivilised

swearing), stressing Rick's isolation and the silent, decaying landscape that has replaced an active functioning society.

I also consider the role of the reader and the transition between panels as an example of Derrida's crypt, *for although the reader creates and realizes the bridging events of the story these will never be viewed: their existence is known, but unseen, locked away in the gap between the explicit elements of the story*. The choice between what events to show – and not show – is therefore significant in constructing the comic. The black borders of TWD and the violence that takes place between panels in later issues are key in constructing the understated tone of the series.

The comics reader creates the text from the pages of the comic; incorporating paratextual knowledge and supplying bridging events between panels, pages, issues and so forth. We can see this in effect in the use of page turns to create suspense and shock value, as I already discussed. In addition, it's interesting to note that collected editions of TWD do not include reprinted covers between issues (and the comic in general does not use any narration). These are both unusual absences, and therefore potentially – to the experienced comics reader – add to the uncanny nature of reading the comic.

Finally, I look at the visual attributes of the comic – its use of multiple points of view, co-existing storylines, alternate realities and overtly stylized art, all of which affect the appearance and content of the page. At numerous points in TWD we hold an uncanny viewpoint. Sometimes this is a disembodied and unassigned one, such as the unnatural viewpoint looking down on Rick's hospital bed as he wakes in the issue's first splash page. Sometimes it is the potential viewpoint of a zombie character – *for example this fourth splash page, where our view could be one of a zombie just rising to its feet, or the sequence I showed earlier where we are given a perspective that might be that of the zombie cyclist Rick has just mercifully shot*. The medium thus interrogates the reader's identity by offering them multiple, mobile and frequently conflicting viewpoints throughout the series – a suitable strategy for a zombie text that seeks to explore the predicament of humanity, the real walking dead.

SLIDE Overall, I hope this paper has shown how these two versions of *TWD* use visual similarities and paratextual discourses of authenticity in pursuit of legitimation. They both contain revenant landscapes that are made uncanny in their appearance and function. However, although the two series rely on similar imagery and settings they are distinct in their use of space. Each medium enhances affect using its own distinct narrative strategies and signifiers, that rely on exploiting the space of the page versus the screen.