

Revenant Landscapes in *The Walking Dead*

Abstract

This paper considers *The Walking Dead* comic (Kirkman, Moore and Adlard, Image 2003-present) and television series (AMC, 2010-present), arguing that although the two series rely on similar imagery they are distinct in their use of space. This contradicts established industry, audience and creator discourses surrounding this text and offers a counter-argument to the popular perspective that comics can be used as simple storyboards for their television adaptations.

Firstly, geographies of the urban gothic and themes such as inversion and decay are used to interrogate paratextual claims of fidelity between the two texts. The paper compares key scenes and settings and goes beyond aesthetics to show that in both versions the functions of urban spaces are inverted (the highway, prison, farm, etc). It argues that the zombies' decaying flesh echoes the disrepair of the landscape and the protagonists' own bodily fragmentation through injury and violence is mirrored in the destruction of the places they encounter.

These claims are then reconsidered using the space of the comics page, applying the work of Thierry Groensteen and critical theories of gothic narrative structure. This demonstrates that comics' mono-sensory narratives allow depictions to be thematically linked with an emotive use of space to engage readers, and that this contributes to a gothic architecture of the page. The paper concludes that the critical discourse of fidelity that surrounds *The Walking Dead* is superficial and that each version's spaces are medium-specific and distinct in their affect on the reader/viewer.

Presenter biography:

Dr Julia Round is a principal lecturer in the Faculty of Media and Communication at Bournemouth University, UK, and co-edits the academic journal *Studies in Comics* (Intellect). Her research and teaching interests include gothic, comics, adaptation and children's literature. She has recently published a monograph entitled *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels: A Critical Approach* (McFarland, 2014) and the co-edited collection *Real Lives Celebrity Stories* (Bloomsbury, 2014). For further details please visit www.juliaround.com.

Revenant Landscapes in *The Walking Dead*

This paper examines 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, with its producers often describing the comics as a storyboard or similar. This paper will look closely at the ways in which landscape and space are used in both texts (focusing on the first episode/issue) and demonstrate that, although there are superficial similarities, the two texts in fact use quite different narrative strategies to convey a sense of space and place.

This paper has three parts. First I will demonstrate what Robert Jewitt (2013) has identified as the hopelessly muddled rhetoric of fidelity that surrounded the TV show at its launch. Then I will 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. Finally I will 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

There is, of course, no doubt that the visuals of *The Walking Dead* TV show do, in many places, closely mirror those of the comic. Robert Jewitt (2013) points out the numerous times the cast and crew draw attention to the series' fidelity, as in these clips:

'The graphic novels are kind of like a rather exotic storyboard.'
(David Tattersall, Director of Photography, Episode 1)

'We had total confidence in the quality of the comics as source material [...] as a road map' (Joel Stillerman, AMC Senior VP)

'Having Robert there is so cool, because it means that someone that was a part of this amazing thing, to have him be just as excited as everybody else, makes us excited and happy that we're doing work that he thinks is going to be [a] good representation for his comic book.' (Steven Yeun, actor, played Glenn Rhee)

'The Walking Dead really looks, you know, like a storyboard. And the fans of the comic will go 'that looks just like the police station in the comic book', well we kind of did that, here and there, just to clue it in, and also because it worked. (Gregory Melton, Production Designer)

'I walked on set and it was straight out of the comic book. I mean it was like, you had the RV, you know, you had Dale's little umbrella, like, it's such a beautiful set. It really is remarkable.' (Emma Bell, actor, played Amy)

'It's a near-perfect adaptation; it's everything I would have wanted. It's definitely *The Walking Dead*, the show is completely and utterly *The Walking Dead*, it's not *The Walking Dead* light, it's not a different version of *The Walking Dead*, it's exactly what you get out of the

comic book. But it's so different that you can enjoy them both separately.' (Robert Kirkman, writer)

'I've always said that the template, the path, the breadcrumbs left by Mr Kirkman are extremely good ones, the path is a very very strong template, but I've also said, and Robert has been great about this and in fact has encouraged it, to take every interesting detour we feel like taking, you know. As long as in the long-term we're still following what Robert has done, I don't see why we shouldn't bring every other good idea to the table [uncertain applause] [...] And that's kind of an exciting thing, because we're not locked slavishly into a thing that is familiar to the fan base. They'll get that, but they're gonna get a lot of other stuff too.' (Frank Darabont, Producer)

The comics are repeatedly referred to as a 'road map', a 'template' or a 'storyboard' and fidelity is not just stressed as important, it's used as a benchmark of perfection (Kirkman, above). However in the process we also see people such as Kirkman and Darabont struggling to say something coherent about this alleged fidelity (it's exactly the same, but also totally different...). Fidelity becomes a confused issue, as also shown in actor Emma Bell's point about Dale's 'little umbrella' which in fact does not appear atop the RV in the comic (it is nearly winter when Rick finds the group outside Atlanta). The umbrella does however appear in drawn merchandise for the television show (see fig. 2) – so has been retrospectively inserted into the public consciousness.

Jewitt (2013) argues that these confused claims of faithfulness to the comics are being used to legitimate this adaptation, and to reassure fans of the comic – pointing out that alongside fidelity claims we have constant iterations of creator Robert Kirkman giving his blessing (see Darabont, Kirkman and Yeun above). He argues that the 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.

However, Jewitt also points out that *The Walking Dead* 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, giving the above examples from films such as *28 Days Later*, *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*, *I am Legend*, and *Shaun of the Dead*.

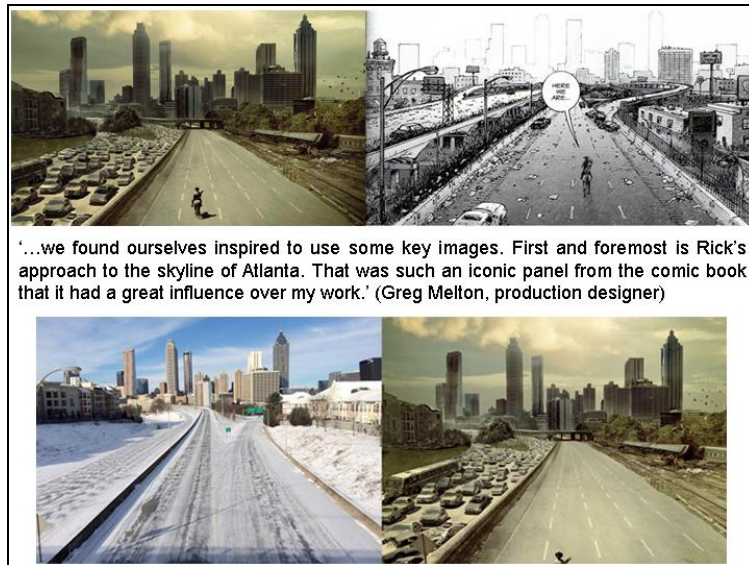


Fig 1

The city of Atlanta is an iconic example of fidelity to both the comic book and to real life (see fig. 1). 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.

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



Fig 2

This inversion extends to other locations in both the comic and television show. Not only are there strong visual similarities (see fig. 2), but 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. 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.

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 extends the idea to landscape by analysing 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 *The Walking Dead's* world are equally uncanny on both screen and page. But in the comics this affect is enhanced and achieved in different ways than the television series, and storyboard is a misnomer – both texts rely more on using their own medium's strengths.

Pascal Lefèvre (2007) says there are four key issues when adapting comics to film:

- Deletion/addition and rewriting
- Page layout to single unchangeable screen
- Stylised static art to moving photographic images
- Silent world to audible sound

I want to use these points to highlight the changes made in the following two examples from the television series, before looking closely at the use made of page space by applying other comics theory. My first example is the scene where Rick makes his way from his hospital bed to the cafeteria, staggering down a deserted corridor, and finally reaching the chained-up cafeteria door, from where we can hear moaning and see long-nailed hands reaching through the gap in the door.

Lefèvre's 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. This scene exploits Lefèvre’s third category, movement, throughout. There are a number of different camera angles used which replicate Rick’s disorientated senses – we cut from behind him to in front, and are also given a listing point of view shot as he staggers. Note that even within each of these different shots the camera never stops moving.

Regarding Lefèvre’s second category, the television screen is used to frame the shot’s content, particularly the corridor’s doorways, and the dangling cables that frame Rick’s pathway. The corridor walls are shown with diminishing perspective, creating a sense of claustrophobia.

Finally, sound. From the start of this clip 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.



Fig 3

By contrast, the cafeteria door is opened in the comic (see fig 3 above). 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.

Stephen O'Donnell (2015) compares this image to the first splash page in the comic (where Rick wakes up in hospital) and points out its use of perspective and point of view. He says that:

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)

I want to use Thierry Groensteen's system of comics to build on O'Donnell's analysis. Groensteen 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.

His theory relies on key concepts shown on this slide. 'Spatio-topia' defines and analyses panels in terms of form (the shape of the panel), area (the size), and site (the location), all of which affect how the panel relates to other panels. His notion of 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.



Fig 4

We can use Groensteen's general arthrology to analyse the first issue's four splash pages (see fig. 4 above). Both gridding and braiding are present since the pages share the same layout, and use of isolated sounds or profanity. Using his 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.

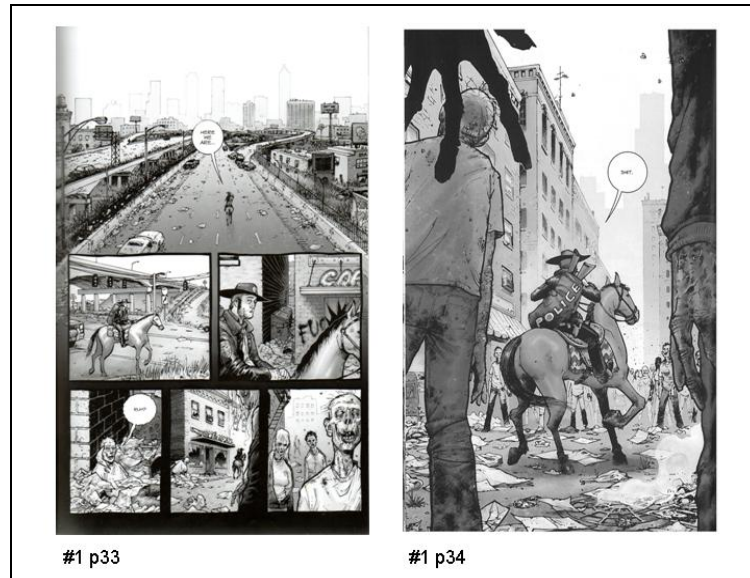


Fig 5

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, the right hand page shown in figure 5 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 the left hand page (fig 5) 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 television clip of the same sequence (58.00-1.01.20), in which the camera follows Rick's slow and silent journey into Atlanta. He passes some passive, lumbering zombies, before rounding a corner to be confronted with a horde of zombies who then chase him through the city.

Again, considering Lefèvre's categories, I want to draw attention to the use of the screen. The camera work is composed of lots of long shots within which Rick is the only moving figure. In contrast to the hospital scene, in this sequence the camera barely moves at all – it tracks Rick for one single distant shot but overall it is static and each shot lasts a long time (when delivering this paper I made a number of cuts here for reasons of time).

In terms of movement, Rick actually seems to be infectious – as where he passes the still zombies sat motionless on the bus, and as their figures coincide they move too. And then from this point onwards the camera **never** stays still. As it moves in subsequent scenes the car bonnets in the foreground seem to move, and we can see an additional female zombie appear back right.

I would also draw attention to the use of sound throughout to signify the deserted landscape – horse's hooves, crickets, distant birds, the crows – these noises are all coded signifiers of isolation. Sound is also used to modify the pace, just like the moving camera – for example the emergent sound of the helicopter, and then Rick's horse speeding up to a gallop.

As Rick rounds the corner and is confronted with zombie horde we suddenly have lots of sound, quiet and lowkey but also full and eerie. I 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 comics strategy, which has Rick suddenly surrounded.

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 already discussed. Actions like this that take place during the reading experience align the reader with characters, for example in equating a page turn with Rick's opening of the cafeteria door.

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: haunting and the architecture of the page; revenant readers, the crypt/gutter and archive; and stylistic excess, embodiment, and artifice.

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 *The Walking Dead* 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 trade paperbacks of *The Walking Dead* 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 *The Walking Dead*

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 viewpoint of the zombie cyclist in the other extract shown above. 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.

Overall, I hope this paper has shown how these two versions of *The Walking Dead* 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.

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