The "Watching Dead": Connecting through popular culture and TV series.

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The popular TV series *Game of Thrones* has warned us for many years of the dark times ahead with its famous words "Winter is coming". When we look at the current situation with the Covid-19 pandemic and the fear across the planet, it feels as if "Winter is *here*". Other post-apocalyptic shows such as *The Walking Dead, The Handmaid's Tale,* and *The Rain* echo this atmosphere. These media formats have been interpreted as a social training to synchronize collective fears (Kleiner, 2013: 225) – making us assume the role of the "watching dead". TV series provide a range of important aesthetic and emotional functions in today's uncertain times.

No management textbook has described how to get through these major crises that we are facing and we need more inspiration than ever. So why not consider popular culture and TV? Arts and culture, from the works of Shakespeare to blockbuster films, have always been a reservoir of newness and innovation and have offered inspiration for leadership and management in many ways. Popular culture has also provided instant practical opportunities when many aspects of real life in 2020 suddenly came to a halt and moved into the virtual realm. Netflix, Amazon Prime and other streaming providers have gone through the roof when outdoor opportunities closed down.

I am suggesting that this move to Netflix and similar services is more than an escape. People have never watched TV for entertainment only and why would somebody spend 146 hours (6 days, 2 hours - total runtime of *The Walking Dead* by mid 2020) if they cannot relate to it at all. Media scholar Ien Ang (1985) has coined the notion of "emotional realism", which means that audiences follow films not only on a cognitive level, but on an emotional level where they recognize affective experiences they had, then work on them, and further prepare themselves for real-life interactions.

We can assume this also happens when we watch post-apocalyptic shows in which humans are threatened by unexplainable, irrational fears that may break loose suddenly: The zombies or Walkers in *Walking Dead* that uncontrollably arise out of the ground – very symbolically – like nightmares and dark fantasies that emerge from the unconscious. An unexplainable pandemic in *The Rain*, and a global fertility crisis in *The Handmaid's Tale* easily present an emotional realism for those in real fear of, for example, a global pandemic, unpredictable politicians such as Donald Trump, and abstract fears of North Korea (the land up North beyond the wall in *Game of Thrones*), or imagined and mediatized fears of crowds of desperate refugees. In addition to fears that the coronavirus turns human beings into contaminated threats, other similarities between TV series and real life are the hostile environment, confinement, withdrawal, uncertainty, and a lack of means (from medical support to toilet paper).

TV series on the left with Atlanta in season 1 of The Walking Dead, reality on the right during the Covid-19 crisis in 2020. source: https://www.pinterest.de/pin/588212401321680450/visual-search/?x=448&y=294&w=48&h=48&cropSource=6

Watching TV series is not primarily a cognitive endeavour, but an emotional exercise and first and foremost an aesthetic experience. When we watch films, we are not passive viewers, but engage in an embodied, responsive activity with the film material. The moving image, the camera positions, the editing with its rhythm, the sound, body language and colours provide an aesthetic experience that addresses our bodies and our minds. We can thus assume that viewers are doing much more than just "Netflix & chill".

Even if viewers are not consciously framing their streaming experience around questions that may come up (e.g. which leadership style works best in extreme situations? – Buchanan and Hällgren, 2019), we still reflect on it and often negotiate meanings in popular culture. We identify cultural archetypes in TV series and relate to them (Biehl, 2020). TV and film experiences can be so memorable that their impact resonates in countless viral memes around the globe. The audience is posing their questions – many questions – and is talking about it, in a private small circle, at work, and on social media. We can assume that viewers perceive the emotional realism (Ang, 1984) and gain affective strength from the aesthetic viewing experience.

Through the aesthetic experience, we can connect to what is happening out there. Aesthetics is connection (Taylor, 2020) and aesthetic experience is "about our feelings of what it is to be part of more than ourselves" (Taylor and Hansen, 2015: 1215). We

can rarely meet for a rave (not even in the notorious techno city of Berlin from which I write, which however boasted some outdoor raves until fall 2020), or a sports match, or a theatre performance. Dispersed behind thousands of devices we still follow our aesthetic human drives in that we connect, trying to find and make meaning, belonging to an audience, a community, a fan group. Ultimately, we share realistic emotions and may gain some emotional strength and relief through this engagement.

Popular culture takes us to the space between conscious analytical work and subconscious dreams (Clapton and Shepherd, 2017: 10), it mirrors reality in abstract, emotional ways, showing our fears and possibly also tentative ideas how to deal with it. In those countless hours of the film experience we may prepare ourselves, work through many emotional states, develop them and eventually gain an upper hand.

This feeling of empowerment and transformation occurred to me when I was watching *The Walking Dead.* First of all, it took me one year to tune in after a student in Berlin had given an enthusiastic presentation on the series in one of my media studies modules. She chose the following scene (E07, S03) in which a young man, Glenn, is tied to a chair and defends himself against an attacking zombie, ultimately defeating the undead https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_gNOyE7xtlI. At the time, the projection of the scene in the classroom left behind a shocked audience because nobody was able to relate to what was going on. Several students offered to buy the presenter a coffee ("Are you okay? Do you need to talk? What's wrooong?!").

While the series started in 2010, it needed a couple of years to gain traction and reached its peak viewer ratings several years later. Then the social time was ripe, and I started watching as well although I am not "into zombie movies". I figured that some of the fascination and emotional realism revolves around these moments when humans empower themselves, stop running away ("scared") and take control of the situation ("scary").

Transformation: *Walking Dead* protagonist Rick Grimes turned from the scared runner into the scary leader that defends himself and his group.
https://m.culturaocio.com/tv/noticia-the-walking-dead-10-mejores-memes-quinta-temporada-20141113165403.html

This insight hit me in a sudden, unexpected moment when watching one of these many similar scenes of defeating and winning over zombies – and I just felt relieved! Several variations of this motif occur again and again in the series. The protagonists often are running away from the undead, then they connect via joint strategizing, socializing and friendly gaze and mimics in the very situation of danger, then turn on the threat and eliminate it. This psychoanalytical metaphor of being threatened and chased by subconscious fears evaporates in so many relieving movements, turning into a

sequence of empowerment in *The Walking Dead*. The entire series appears like a comforting exercise not in running away, but in controlling and taming fears, in channeling them (luring hordes of walkers into traps, burning them, shooting them) and, finally, coping.

The Walking Dead, like many other post-apocalyptic TV series, is not only a form of escape for us today, but can be seen as to provide emotional realism and affective training for what is going on in our lives. We are attracted to these shows because every-day experiences motivate our film reception and make it meaningful. Film experience, in turn, may modify our perception and behavior in everyday life (Stadler, 1990: 41). The reality of the filmic world may thus not only affectively prepare us for what is going on in our reality, but may suggest to us further parallels beyond the emotional realism. We should hence use the series that we are watching to help us consciously reflect on what is going on, and to connect to it critically. That means for example questioning how we perceive reality. Do those of us who currently in the global pandemic are in low-risk zones indeed have to feel "surrounded" by people from high-risk areas? Are "the undead" snarling at our gates? Are we, the "watching dead" indeed all doomed, or can we act on our fate in solidarity? Are other human beings a threat per se, or aren't they humans with a body? What happens when we get infected ourselves? When watching film, we bring in our emotions and also further prepare ourselves for our life. We should focus on this positive mechanism and consciously work with it, and not start deconstructing us emotionally, particularly in these challenging times.

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