

Farghaly, Nadine, ed. *Unraveling Resident Evil: Essays on the Complex Universe of the Games and Films*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014. 240 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-786-47291-8. \$40.00.

Keetley, Dawn, ed. *"We're all Infected": Essays on AMC's The Walking Dead and the Fate of the Human*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014. 245 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-0-7864-7628-2. \$35.00.

When working on mass or popular culture as a scholar, one is confronted with the same prejudices and problems that the objects of inquiry themselves are facing: Most popular culture has few merits (beyond the pleasure of consumption), repeats an awful amount of gut-wrenching stereotypes, and is produced with little eye to detail. Instead, pop culture is flooding the market with easily accessible, cheap, and commodified wares. That is how the story goes. It is most unfortunate then, that scholarship in fields such as video games, comics, television, science fiction, horror, and the fantastic suffers from the same maladies. If our fields of inquiry are viewed by those behemoths of high cultural scholarship with a feeling of pretension and superiority, it is so because popular cultural scholarship has not yet codified rigorous standards of quality. Frankly speaking, some of what is dished out as research should never have seen the light of academic day. Let me explain, making a case of the two books under review here.

Zombies are the up-and-comers of popular culture and can, at least for the moment, hardly be overlooked—so it is of little wonder that students, scholars, and institutions have taken note of the growing number of shambling undead in our cultural output and started to respond. Nadine Farghaly in *Unraveling Resident Evil: Essays on the Complex Universe of the Games and Films* rightly argues that *Resident Evil* is “one of the best known zombie representations” (1) today, and her book is the first and only of its kind to exclusively approach the franchise from a scholarly perspective. The anthology gathers research from fourteen academics on both the original video games and their adaptation to film. On a similar note, Dawn Keetley in *"We're all Infected": Essays on AMC's The Walking Dead and the Fate of the Human* engages with another multi-medial zombie franchise that has dominated popular cultural discourse in the last few years. Her study on *The Walking Dead* focuses mainly on the television series, but in its thirteen essays (plus introduction) also touches upon the series' origin in comic books. Both books emphasize the pervasiveness of the zombie in contemporary culture, its seriality (witnessed in the serialization of TV-show, video games and films), and its adaptability (as per remediation of original to new forms). But this is where the similarities stop and the books become prime examples of how differently one can approach academic interest in popular culture.

One of the major issues that complicate Farghaly's book is the apparent lack of experience in dealing with editorship of an anthology, which is not quite all her fault but also the publisher's, who clearly did not provide a support structure for their editor. Farghaly's introduction to the volume is a meager five pages, on two of which she sums up each contribution; the rest is spent expounding the origin of zombies and the success of the *Resident Evil* franchise. What is clearly lacking though is an overall thematic or frame in which to negotiate the franchise and its cultural impact. There is no interconnection between the essays; in fact, there is no superstructure at all that would provide a positioning of the different approaches in discussions of video game studies, film studies, or zombie studies for that matter. Consequently, the essays are "all over the place," oscillating chaotically between video game series and film series, without any coherent sense of order to the whole anthology. And what is irritating on a meta-level is that even though the book is billed as part of the (in parts rather surprisingly good and relevant) Contributions to Zombie Studies series at McFarland, it might be debatable if the book belongs here, as many of the essays address issues in the franchise other than its representation of zombies, such as gender, trauma, agency, and intertextuality. A strong, guiding editorship would have been able to address these questions, group them, and put them into discussion with each other; however, as it stands, the anthology is merely an assembly of possible approaches and diverging interests.

Moreover, these interests seem not to have been thoroughly vetted for publication as some of the essays feel rather more like student musings or unfinished thoughts than like academic theses or research papers. (I am not even going to address the lack of proofreading.) There is much to be said for young scholars (PhD candidates and recent doctorates) engaging in more radical and risky research; otherwise topics such as *Resident Evil* would probably never appear in print. But many of the essays in this anthology needed more work, a peer-review, additional advice on how to present a coherent argument, and above all, a grounding in existing discourses of zombie/film/games scholarship.

When Tanya Jones writes about "The Zombie Origin Shift from Supernatural to Science," her discussion touches upon zombie history and the creature's developmental stages, but then becomes a mere show-and-tell of the different types of zombies that games present. An analysis of the cultural implications or functions of the titular "shift" is lacking, as are references to contemporary zombie studies discussions of those shifts. Even more problematic in terms of academic quality is Stephen Cadwell's "Opening Doors: Art-Horror and Agency," which ignores any kind of film and video game studies discourse (and secondary literature) in favor of a private experience account of a comparison of the first zombie encounters in the first *Resident Evil* game and film respectively. Similarly problematic is Broc Holmquest's discussion

of *Resident Evil* in terms of genre constructions purely based on journalistic video game criticism, which ignores not only video game studies' approaches to genre, but also a whole canon of genre theory regarding literature and film. Overall, many of the essays shy away from existing discourses in their respective fields, be it video game theory, narratology, cultural studies theory, or even film theory, making them irrelevant if not outright aggravating to read.

The anthology's strongest parts, and actually those that provide a distinct theoretical grouping, are those that deal with issues of gender, sexuality, and identity in *Resident Evil*. Suzan Aiken's discussion of "Rhetorical Silence as Feminist Strategy" is persuasive, well-theorized, and clearly based in a larger on-going research project, offering an interesting perspective on Alice, the film series' protagonist, that might easily be overlooked in the male-dominated action genre. Further, Jenny Platz's essay on video game character Ada Wong provides an intriguing analysis of the *Femme Fatale*, and situates the games in a filmic tradition outside the horror genre. Lastly, Hannah Priest negotiates the film's Alice in terms of her "Alice-ness" as an intertextual representation of trauma, sexual abuse, and violence.

On the one hand, the anthology might prove a starting ground for scholarly interests in *Resident Evil*, and thus hopefully engender more work on this relevant franchise. On the other hand, its unreflective and uncritical discussion of a popular cultural product is a clear example of the maladies discussed above. And even though some of the essays are insightful and inquisitive, the book as a whole cannot be recommended due to its problematic academic quality.

A much better example of what is possible, when academic rigor and popular interest combine, is Dawn Keetley's anthology on *The Walking Dead*. As the title already suggests, Keetley emphasizes a specific aspect of the series, which to her marks the show as "a ground-breaking zombie narrative, most importantly because it is the first such narrative in which the survivors are already infected" (1). That "we" are already zombie, or "viral human" (1), is a key motif of the series that guides the anthology's essays and binds them in productive discourse. What unites viral humanity and undead zombies, Keetley argues, is their shared propensity for violence, the reduction of essential existence into a struggle. At the heart of the series lies the question of what it means to be human—faced with the posthumanity of viral contagion and the violent *ur*-conflict of survival. Consequently, Keetley uses this duality to structure her anthology: Seven essays address "Society's End," dealing with violence from a variety of perspectives, and five essays confront "Posthumanity" and its impact on the series—the already discussed novum of the series of humanity "already infected"; a thoughtful introduction lays out the scope of the approaches and an afterword provides closing remarks, thus bracketing the discussions nicely into a coherent whole.

In terms of the quality of the chapters, of grounding them in existing discourse, and an overall build-up of argumentation towards a thesis, Keetley's anthology also stands in stark contrast to Farghaly's. Even though contributors are mostly on the same academic level with those of the *Resident Evil* collection, the papers seem more advanced in their approaches and, most importantly, in their theoretical grounding. In the first part of the book, Philip Simpson, for example, discusses not only the leadership roles represented in *The Walking Dead* through Shane and Rick, but grounds his argument in political theory, a historical perspective of a post-9/11, post-Katrina United States. Ivan Young enhances this view of political leadership by reading the same figures against the screen of classic Hollywood representations of cowboys. And Paul Boshears deals with trauma, linking the specificity of locale, Atlanta, and historical events such as the white flight to the suburbs, the Trail of Tears, and a 1970s plane crash.

In the second part of the book, the anthology's discussion of and response to existing academic discourses becomes most apparent, addressing posthumanism as part of contemporary critical theory. Xavier Aldana Reyes, for example, refutes transhumanist notions of disembodiment by authors such as Hans Moravec and instead responds to Sarah Lauro and Juliet Embry's influential "Zombie Manifesto" by claiming the *Walking Dead*-zombies as material embodiments of human consciousness. Keetley herself returns to the idea of an existential relation between humans and zombies in that, she argues, the series allegorizes human automatisms into zombieness: "survival instinct, muscle memory, and mimetic desire" (20).

But even in a well-organized book such as *"We're all Infected"*, the problems of popular culture's corner-cutting and "good enough" mentality become apparent, something that, as discussed above, one can hold the publisher partially at fault for. When a reader finds twenty pages printed twice in the book (not a single chapter, but across the middle of two chapters), it becomes clear that the supporting structure guiding scholars with their editions and taking on the job of layout, printing, binding, etc., is, probably due to cost, somewhat lacking at a press such as McFarland. While their output in terms of popular cultural scholarship is impressive in quantity, allowing young scholars to present unusual research, their quality standards are not strict enough and thus jeopardize the idea of building a reputation for pop culture on merit of qualitative work. In all, *"We're all Infected": Essays on AMC's The Walking Dead and the Fate of the Human* shows that outstanding theoretical work can be done and published. The collection is well worth a look for anyone interested in zombie studies and a must-have for anyone teaching AMC's hit series. *Unraveling Resident Evil: Essays on the Complex Universe of the Games and Films*, to be found on the same shelf from the same publisher on the other hand, is undoubtedly problematic. In terms of popular cultural research and the mala-

dies that might befall it, both volumes together thus easily enlighten us as to why prejudices against the field remain sadly valid.

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