

Rapid #: -15945540

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TYPE: Article CC:CCL

JOURNAL TITLE: The Hedgehog review

USER JOURNAL TITLE: The Hedgehog Review: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture

ARTICLE TITLE: The Apocalyptic Strain in Popular Culture: The American Nightmare Becomes the American Dream

ARTICLE AUTHOR: Paul A. Cantor

VOLUME: Summer

ISSUE:

MONTH:

YEAR: 2013

PAGES: unknown

ISSN: 1527-9677

OCLC #:

Processed by RapidX: 3/23/2020 12:25:48 PM



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The Apocalyptic Strain in Popular Culture: The American Nightmare Becomes the American Dream

Paul A. Cantor

We seem to have survived the Mayan apocalypse predicted for December 21, 2012, but maybe we should not get too cocky. American popular culture is overflowing with doomsday prophecies and end-of-the-world scenarios. According to film and television, vampires, werewolves, and zombies are storming across our landscape, and alien invaders, asteroids, and airborne toxic events threaten us from the skies. We might as well be living in the late Middle Ages. Our films and television shows seem locked into a perpetual and ever-more-frenzied Dance of Death. Whatever happened to the popular culture that used to offer up charming images of the American dream? Where are the happy households—the Andersons, the Nelsons, the Cleavers, the Petries—when we need them? Film and television today are more likely to present images of the American nightmare: our entire civilization reduced to rubble and the few survivors forced to live a primitive existence in terror of monstrous forces unleashed throughout the land. Has the American nightmare paradoxically become the new American dream? Is there some weird kind of wish-fulfillment at work in all these visions of near-universal death and destruction?

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The Dream and the Nightmare

To explore these questions, we need to examine one standard notion of the American dream. There are, of course, as many versions of the American dream as there are Americans, but by the middle of the twentieth century, one common pattern emerged. This dream was very much embodied in material terms—a family happily ensconced in

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a spacious house, preferably in the suburbs, with the most up-to-date appliances and two or three cars in the garage. This dream was founded on faith in modern science and technology, which seemed to be continually improving the human condition. The path to achieving this American dream was clearly laid out. One got a good education in order to land a good job, which might

or might not be fulfilling in itself but would in any case provide the financial means of buying all the material components that seemed essential to the American dream. As usually envisioned, the job—in order to pay enough—would be in one of the professions, chiefly law or medicine, or in some kind of business, probably a corporate position that would provide financial security. The notion of security was integral to this version of the American dream. One would find a job for life that included solid medical and retirement benefits. This model of happiness was often on view in film and television in the 1950s and 60s, supplying the framework for television situation comedies, for example, or providing the happy endings in many Hollywood movies.

This vision of the American dream was bound up with trust in American institutions. The goal of long-term security rested on faith in financial institutions, such as banks, insurance companies, and the stock market. Medical institutions, such as hospitals, clinics, and the pharmaceutical industry, were supposed to keep extending our life expectancy. Americans also looked up to their educational institutions, from primary schools to universities. After all, they were relying on their schools to prepare them for the careers that would underwrite their financial prosperity. In short, Americans relied on their institutions to shape them properly in the first place; in many cases they looked forward to being employed by institutions such as corporations and the professions; and they trusted these institutions in turn to work for their benefit, providing, for example, health care and financial security.

Overarching all these institutions was the grandest institution of them all, American government: local, state, and above all the federal government. Especially during the Cold War era, Americans looked up to the Washington establishment because it was protecting them from foreign and domestic enemies. Given the widespread faith in technical expertise after World War II, Americans generally trusted their government to regulate the economy and produce the prosperity that would make the American dream possible. In the second half of the twentieth century, the American government kept expanding its scope as a welfare state, with the goal of insuring the security of all aspects of its citizens' lives. Moreover, the federal government steadily increased its role in financially supporting and regulating the various institutions that were woven into

the fabric of the American dream, especially educational and medical institutions. In sum, for decades the American dream came boxed in an institutional framework, and most Americans, without thinking much about it, assumed that they could not realize their dreams without these institutions.

But even at the peak of this conception of the American dream in the 1950s, this faith in institutions did not go unchallenged. Dissenting voices charged that Americans were being increasingly "institutionalized," sacrificing their freedom in their quest for comfort and security. Talk of the "organization man" (the title of a 1956 book by William Whyte) reflected fears that Americans were selling their souls to corporations, giving up their individuality and autonomy to work in bureaucratic organizations. Skeptics also voiced concerns that the standard conception of the American dream might be self-defeating. In the course of trying to provide material benefits to their families, men—and later women—were losing touch with the very spouses and children they claimed to cherish. The notion of the happy, close-knit family was at the core of the American dream, and yet career values often seemed to conflict with family values. Working hard at the office left men—and later women—with little or no time for their children. And everywhere institutions seemed to be coming between people, preventing them from interacting in face-to-face situations. The very institutions that Americans had turned to in order to achieve and secure their dreams seemed to have trapped them in a vast impersonal system that by its nature was inimical to personal fulfillment.

These anxieties about the American dream sometimes surfaced in popular culture in the middle of the twentieth century. Movies such as the 1957 *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* portrayed corporate life as empty and stultifying. And the immense popularity of Westerns during this era signaled a dissatisfaction with comfortable suburban life. Dramas set in the Wild West provided an imaginative escape from the safe and boring world of modern institutions—an image of a rugged, frontier existence, in which earlier Americans, especially men, were on their own and could act heroically in their struggle with hostile and dangerous environments.

Disenchantment with the mid-twentieth-century formulation of the American dream gradually increased and became widespread at the turn of the twenty-first century, as people lost their confidence in American institutions. A series of bubbles and meltdowns led people to doubt the fundamental honesty and integrity of financial institutions, above all, their ability to provide long-term economic security. Confidence in the competence and caring nature of the medical establishment began to erode, as witness the alternative medicine movement, the return to traditional home remedies, and skepticism about vaccination programs. Whether these doubts are scientifically justified is irrelevant to the larger cultural issue. The fact is that doctors and the medical profession in general are no longer held in the high esteem they once enjoyed in America. Educational institutions are also being challenged on a wide range of fronts, with critics complaining that they fail to deliver on their promises and charge exorbitant rates in the process. The home schooling movement offers concrete proof that many Americans have become disillusioned with the educational establishment. As for government institutions, with one "-gate" scandal after another, polling suggests that Americans' faith in institutions such as Congress and the Presidency is at an all-time

low. Looking at the world around them, Americans may be excused for concluding that the financial-medical-educational-government complex that was supposed to help them achieve their dreams has failed them. At this point, it becomes tempting for Americans to wish away their banks, their hospitals, their schools, and their government. Perhaps life might be easier and more fulfilling without them.

Popular culture has stepped forward to offer Americans a chance to explore these possibilities imaginatively and to rethink the American dream. Films and television shows have allowed Americans to imagine what life would be like without all the institutions they had been told they need, but which they now suspect may be thwarting their self-fulfillment. We are dealing with a wide variety of fantasies here, mainly in the horror or science fiction genres, but the pattern is quite consistent and striking, cutting across generic distinctions. In the television show *Revolution*, for example, some mysterious event causes all electrical devices around the world to cease functioning. The result is catastrophic and involves a huge loss of life, as airborne planes crash to earth, for example. All social institutions dissolve, and people are forced to rely only on their personal survival skills. Governments around the world collapse, and the United States divides up into a number of smaller political units. This development runs contrary to everything we have been taught to believe about “one nation, indivisible.” Yet it is characteristic of almost all these shows that the federal government is among the first casualties of the apocalyptic event, and—strange as it may at first sound—there is a strong element of wish fulfillment in this event. The thrust of these end-of-the-world scenarios is precisely for government to grow smaller or to disappear entirely. These shows seem to reflect a sense that government has grown too big and too remote from the concerns of ordinary citizens and unresponsive to their needs and demands. If Congress and the President are unable to shrink the size of government, perhaps a plague or cosmic catastrophe can do some real budget cutting for a change.

One might even describe these shows as “federalist” in spirit. The aim seems to be to reduce the size of government radically and thereby to bring it closer to the people. Cut back to regional or local units, government becomes manageable again and ordinary people get to participate in it actively, recovering a say in the decisions that affect their lives. In cases where the apocalyptic event dissolves all government, these shows in effect return people to what political theorists call the state of nature. As if we were reading Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, or Jean-Jacques Rousseau, we get to see how people form a social contract. No longer locked into institutions already in place, the public gets to assess their value and see if it really needs them or might be better off under other arrangements or perhaps no government at all.

The Return of the Minutemen

In the television show *Falling Skies*, invading aliens destroy civilization as we know it, and they are quick to eliminate governments around the world. Set in and around Boston, the show revives the tradition of the New England town meeting, as the characters get to deliberate on their own affairs and debate courses of action in the absence of

any higher political authority. The characters have been left to their own devices because, in a decisive blow to civilization, the aliens have destroyed communication circuits and in particular the internet. The internet is a perfect example of the kind of technological advance that has usually been featured in the formulation of the American dream. The characters in *Falling Skies* of course miss the internet, but they learn to live without it and develop more intimate, and perhaps more satisfactory, modes of communication. The loss of modern technology is characteristic of all these apocalyptic scenarios and reflects Americans' love-hate relationship with their machines, appliances, and devices. These shows display an ambivalent attitude toward modernity in general, perhaps a genuine disillusionment with it, a sense that all the technological progress upon which we pride ourselves has not made us happier and may, on the contrary, have made us miserable by depersonalizing our relationships and limiting our freedom.

To be sure, the characters in *Falling Skies* regret the loss of the benefits of modern civilization. Many of them wish they still had access to the advanced medical technology that used to be available in Boston's world-class hospitals. Several of the episodes take place in an abandoned school, which points to the loss of modern educational institutions. But the show portrays major compensations for the destruction of modern medical and educational facilities. The featured band of survivors includes a female pediatrician. As she herself admits, she cannot provide the services of a big-city, hospital-based physician, but she makes up for her lack of scientific expertise with her personal concern for the welfare of her patients, who are also her friends. Deprived of urban hospitals, our survivors now have access to a genuine family doctor and what is in effect home health care (their doctor lives right among them). Similarly, all the children are now home-schooled. Their teachers are their parents, and in the absence of professional educators, the students seem to thrive, actually enjoying their lessons for a change because they are now being taught by people who know them and care about them as individuals. Perhaps there is something dreamlike about this nightmare after all.

The loss of modern technology is characteristic of all these apocalyptic scenarios and reflects Americans' love-hate relationship with their machines, appliances, and devices.

The way the relationships between parents and children have changed in light of the apocalyptic events goes right to the emotional core of *Falling Skies*. The characters have lost everything that used to make up the American dream—all their material possessions, their social status, their professional careers, and of course their three-bedroom houses. But that means that they can now focus on each other. Careers no longer distract them from their family obligations. For the adults, parenting becomes their full-time job. They used to put their careers ahead of their family life; now they will sacrifice anything for the sake of their children. The main character is a father who gets to bond with his sons in a way that was not possible when he was pursuing his career as a history professor at Boston University. Now he spends all his time with his sons at his side and gets to watch them grow up under his guidance. This logic takes us to the heart of these end-of-the-world narratives. The characters have lost everything that



used to make their lives seem worthwhile, but they discover that those elements of the American dream were at best distractions from, and at worst obstacles to, their true happiness and sense of fulfillment. Liberated from material concerns and impersonal institutions, the characters have the opportunity to search for what makes life truly meaningful, and that turns out to be devotion to friends and especially family.

With its setting in Massachusetts and its main character a history professor, *Falling Skies* frequently refers to the American Revolution. The names of Lexington and Concord keep coming up, and our heroes become latter-day Minutemen. Their resistance to the alien invaders is repeatedly compared to the American colonists' resistance to British tyranny. The Spirit of '76 thus comes to prevail in *Falling Skies*. The characters have lost their material possessions and the security that institutions used to give them, but they have regained their independence and self-reliance. In the midst of a nightmarish existence, an older conception of the American dream comes back to life. The characters grow in self-respect because they learn that they can rely on their own resources

to deal with the challenges they face. They do not need a whole network of impersonal institutions to preserve their lives and to take care of their welfare—and in particular they do not need the federal government. In the spirit of the American Revolution, they form militias and become citizen-soldiers, defending themselves. As do many of these apocalyptic narratives, *Falling Skies* features boys who have to grow quickly into men, a process epitomized by their learning to use weapons and thus assuming the adult role of protecting their loved ones. Taking pride in their maturation, these boys reveal what these shows stand for—they champion people who assume responsibility for their lives, rather than passively accepting a role as wards of institutions or the state.

The Zombies Are Coming

If alien invaders are temporarily unavailable, fortunately American pop culture can supply us with all the zombies we need to re-examine the meaning of our lives. In the television show *The Walking Dead*, a zombie plague has quickly spread around the world, annihilating all but a remnant of the human population. In all these end-of-the-world scenarios, whatever triggers the apocalypse tends to affect the entire Earth more or less simultaneously. The fear of modernity in all these narratives is specifically a fear of global modernity. What upsets people is the sense that they are losing control of their lives in a world of impersonal and unresponsive institutions, and the fact that all this is happening on a global scale is especially unnerving.

Among their many meanings, zombies have come to symbolize the force of globalization. National borders cannot stop the zombie plague from spreading, and it evidently dissolves all cultural distinctions. The zombies lose their individuality, freedom of will, and everything that makes them human beings. With their herd mentality, they are precisely the kind of mass-men that impersonal institutions seek to produce, and in a curious way they represent the docile subjects that governments secretly—or not so secretly—desire. Zombification is a powerful image of what governments try to do to their citizens—to create a uniform, homogenous population, incapable of acting independently. It is no accident that zombies sometimes are portrayed as the products of scientific experiments and specifically of government projects gone awry (or gone all-too-well).

In *The Walking Dead*, it is not clear what produced the zombies, but in any event they set off the typical end-of-the-world scenario. Governments have fallen everywhere, and in the power vacuum that results, the characters are plunged back into the state of nature, with a decidedly Hobbesian emphasis on the war of all against all. Chased by relentless if plodding zombies and also by marauding gangs of the remaining humans, the main characters at first think of turning to traditional authorities to protect them. Coming from semi-rural Georgia, they head for Atlanta, assuming that a big city will have the resources to keep them safe. But the city, with its concentration of zombies, proves to be even more dangerous than the countryside. The characters keep thinking of

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the federal government as their ultimate protector. Pinning their hopes on the military, they talk about going to Fort Benning for security, although they never get there and are warned away from it by other human fugitives they encounter.

Season One of the series culminates in a quest to find safety with a famous federal agency, the Centers for Disease Control, conveniently located in Atlanta and a seemingly ideal refuge from a plague. Viewing the CDC as their salvation, our band of survivors finds instead that it is a source of destruction. The gleaming modernistic edifice is a deathtrap, run by a sole survivor, who seems borderline sane and fast approaching a pop culture stereotype of the mad scientist. Far from finding a cure for the zombie plague, the CDC may be the source of the infection. We learn in the sixth episode that the CDC weaponized smallpox. It is holding so many deadly germs and viruses that the building is programmed to self-destruct once its generators fail. Our heroes and heroines barely have time to escape before the building blows up, taking the last of the CDC scientists with it. If the CDC functions as a symbol of the federal government in *The Walking Dead*, then the medical-military-industrial complex proves to be a dangerous and self-destructive force.¹

In the second season of *The Walking Dead*, the characters find a refuge, but it is in an isolated farmhouse, presided over by a sort of Biblical patriarch. The answer seems to be to get as far away as possible from the modern world and all its complex interrelations. Retreating into the narrow realm of the nuclear family, the survivors find a momentary peace and even a degree of safety. Given the primitive conditions under which they live, it is almost as if they have journeyed back in time to the simpler and happier age of nineteenth-century America, when living on a self-contained farm was the typical way of life. As in *Falling Skies*, the characters miss modern medicine and often have to go scavenging in cities for stores of drugs and other medical supplies. But when a boy named Carl is shot, they look to the patriarch, Hershel, to save him. To their shock, Hershel turns out to be a veterinarian, not a board-certified surgeon. But as in *Falling Skies*, the fact that the old man genuinely cares about his patient and is willing to sit up with him all night by his bedside trumps his lack of medical expertise. Once again home medicine beats the big city hospital. In fact, we see in flashbacks that when the main hero, Sheriff's Deputy Rick Grimes, wakes up from a coma, he finds himself in a hospital at its most hideous, portrayed as a prison-like containment facility for zombies being slaughtered by military forces. In *The Walking Dead*, public health institutions seem to be devoted to imprisoning and annihilating their patients, not curing them.

Zombies eventually overrun the pastoral retreat at the end of Season Two of *The Walking Dead*, and in Season Three the band of survivors finds a new refuge—this time in a prison. An institution originally designed to keep criminals in turns into the best way to keep the zombies out. Season Three deals with various efforts to move beyond the nuclear family and restore order to society, but they are not portrayed in positive terms. At the end of the second season, Grimes ominously proclaims, "this isn't a democracy anymore," and the specter of autocracy haunts the third season. A prison is obviously not an attractive model of social order; it suggests that the overriding concern for security requires locking down everything and allowing no scope for freedom. Later in Season Three, we encounter an alternate model of order, the town of Woodbury,

presided over by a character named simply the Governor. At first Woodbury seems nice enough, indeed the very model of small-town America, almost a re-creation of Andy Griffith's Mayberry. In the third episode of the third season, the Governor says with some pride: "People here have homes, medical care, kids go to school.... And people here have jobs. It's a sense of purpose. We have community." It sounds as if government institutions have been reconstituted to good effect. But we soon discover that Woodbury is a gated community in the bad sense of the term, basically just a prison with a Main Street, U.S.A. façade. The armed guards posted to keep the zombies out are also tasked with keeping Woodbury's citizens in, thus maintaining their subjugation to the Governor's arbitrary commands. Once again the price of security is freedom, and the more we learn about the Governor, the more he appears to be a tyrant and a crazed one at that.

All attempts to turn to institutions to solve problems in *The Walking Dead* seem to fail. The show suggests that its characters must ultimately rely on themselves and their own resources. In various flashbacks, we learn that, prior to the zombie plague, the characters had all sorts of problems in their relationships. The husbands and wives were generally unhappy in their marriages, with soap opera consequences. Again as in *Falling Skies*, a disaster in material terms proves to have some good results in emotional terms. Under the pressure of the zombie threat, family bonds grow tighter, and people learn who their real friends are. On one level, the zombies represent the absence of true humanity, a mass of beings who are brain dead. They go through the mere motions of living, but their existence is completely meaningless. By contrast, life has become meaningful for the surviving human beings. As shown in several episodes, they have had to make conscious choices to go on living and thereby recover a strong sense of purpose in their struggle for survival.

Given the survivalist ethic in all these end-of-the-world shows, they are probably not popular with gun control advocates. One of the most striking motifs they have in common—evident in *Revolution*, *Falling Skies*, *The Walking Dead*, and many other such shows—is the loving care with which they depict an astonishing array of weaponry. *The Walking Dead* features an Amazon warrior, who is adept with a samurai sword, as well as a southern redneck, who specializes in a cross-bow. The dwindling supply of ammunition puts a premium on weapons that do not require bullets. That is not to say, however, that *The Walking Dead* has no place for modern firearms and indeed the very latest in automatic weapons. Both the heroes and the villains in the series—difficult to tell apart in this respect—are as well-armed as the typical municipal SWAT team in contemporary America.

Being able to use a weapon is the chief marker of status in *The Walking Dead*. At first the need to go armed restores the men to positions of unchallenged leadership, overcoming feminist tendencies in the pre-apocalyptic world (suggested in several flashbacks). In a throwback in human evolution, the men again become the hunter-gatherers, while the women return to household chores. But the gun is actually a great equalizer and is particularly effective in overcoming women's disadvantage in physical strength vis-à-vis men. A character named Andrea starts off as a stereotypically weak, dependent woman, but once she learns to shoot—more specifically to *kill* zombies—

she is completely transformed into a powerful figure, who can take command in difficult situations, even over aggressive males. Andrea is emblematic of the overall tendency of *The Walking Dead* to show ordinary people moving from situations of dependence (relying on institutions to save them) to genuine independence (relying only on themselves and each other).

Amazingly, this tendency applies even to children in *The Walking Dead* (as it also does in *Falling Skies*). The young boy Carl wants nothing more than to learn how to shoot a gun, and, although his mother and father are at first hesitant, they allow a family friend to initiate the young boy into the company of trained marksmen. Carl graduates from shooting zombies to taking out fellow human beings, and, in one of the more shocking developments in a series that thrives on shock value, the youngster eventually reaches an elite plateau of cold-bloodedness when he shoots his own mother, rather than let her turn into a zombie. Carl is the ultimate example of how the characters in *The Walking Dead* must toughen up or fall by the wayside.

Home on the Range

Carl's father is Rick Grimes, and earlier in the series he gives the boy his lawman's hat. In the February 17, 2013 episode of *The Talking Dead*, a fan discussion show that follows the weekly broadcasts of *The Walking Dead* on AMC, actor-director Kevin Smith cleverly referred to Carl as "Wyatt Twerp." Smith's evocation of a classic Western hero is right on the mark. Beneath all the horror-story gore in *The Walking Dead* beats

the heart of a good old-fashioned Western.² The show transposes the Wild West to a contemporary setting, reviving the spirit of rugged individualism that Westerns promoted as an antidote to the comfortable version of the American dream in the middle of the twentieth century. By stripping away all the institutions that constitute modern civilization, *The Walking Dead* gives us what the Western used to provide in American pop culture—an image of frontier existence, of living on the edge, of seeing

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what it is like to manage without a settled government, of facing the challenge of protecting oneself and one's family on one's own, of learning the meaning of independence and self-reliance.

The zombies play the role traditionally assigned to Indians in Westerns—the barbarian hordes lurking on the borders of the civilized community and threatening to annihilate it. Just like the Indians in many Westerns, the zombies are nameless and virtually faceless, they never speak, and they may be killed off indiscriminately, with their genocide being the apparent goal. The odyssey of the characters in *The Walking Dead* through the shattered landscape of Georgia resembles the wagon trains of Westerns, navigating through one danger after another, fighting or negotiating with rival groups, troubled by dwindling supplies, searching in vain for refuge in military outposts that

turn out to have been overrun and abandoned, slowed down by stragglers and delayed by searches for lost comrades, torn by disputes over their destination and other challenges to their leaders, dealing with childbirth or other medical emergencies on the fly—the list of parallels goes on and on. People have been lamenting the closing of the frontier throughout American history. Zombie tales and other apocalyptic scenarios turn out to be a way of imaginatively reopening the frontier in twenty-first century popular culture.

In general, all these end-of-the-world shows are re-creations of that most basic of American genres, the Western. A character in *Falling Skies* says of the post-apocalyptic environment: “it’s the Wild West out there.” The 2011 film *Cowboys and Aliens* explicitly unites the Western and the alien invasion narrative. Once we realize that contemporary end-of-the-world scenarios share with Westerns the goal of imaginatively returning their characters to the state of nature, we can see how the American nightmare can turn into the American dream when rampaging aliens or zombies descend upon a quiet American suburb. The dream of material prosperity and security is shattered, but a different ideal comes back to life—the all-American ideal of rugged individualism, the spirit of freedom, independence, and self-reliance.³

Endnotes

- ¹ Given the way the CDC is portrayed in *The Walking Dead*, it may be difficult to believe that the real CDC has a section called “Zombie Preparedness” on its official website, but check out <<http://www.cdc.gov/php/zombies.htm>>. According to this site, if you are “looking for an entertaining way to introduce emergency preparedness,” you should read the CDC’s own zombie novella. Unsurprisingly, in the CDC novella, the CDC responds quickly and effectively to the zombie plague, although readers might not be fully reassured by the doctors’ claim: “we’re using the same type of vaccine that we use for the seasonal flu.” In general, the CDC’s version of a zombie apocalypse is the exact opposite of what we see in popular culture—and much cheerier. In response to the plague, government institutions at all levels function perfectly and are credited with saving the ordinary Americans in the story, who would apparently be helpless if left to their own devices. And, as far as I can tell, no zombies were injured in the making of the CDC novella. Even when being overrun by zombies, the soldiers in the story say: “We can’t just shoot them. These are our fellow citizens.”
- ² It occurred to me that the way Carl is torn in the first season between his real father (a good guy) and a substitute father (a bad guy) is reminiscent of the situation of the young boy in the classic Western *Shane*. Then it occurred to me that the substitute father in *The Walking Dead* is named Shane.
- ³ In a brief essay, I have been able to discuss only a few examples of the patterns I am identifying in contemporary popular culture. In my book *The Invisible Hand in Popular Culture: Liberty vs. Authority in American Film and TV* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), I discuss *Falling Skies* at greater length (341–44) in a chapter devoted to alien invasion narratives, which includes analyses of *The X-Files*, *Invasion*, *The Event*, *V*, *Fringe*, and several other examples of the genre. I discuss the convergence of science fiction and the Western at a number of points in the book (see, for example, 87–90 and 342–44) and also the way that apocalyptic disasters propel characters back into the state of nature (see, for example, 144–45, and 423–424 n33). I devote a chapter to showing how state-of-nature thinking can be applied to understanding Westerns in the case of *Deadwood* (97–127).

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