
The Other Bad Men at the Door

Ontological Spaces and the Monstrous

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WRITING ABOUT POPULAR CULTURE IS A PERILOUS TASK, as one runs the risk of either being dismissed as engaging in irrelevant pedantry or of too simply picking apart a beloved work of complex and powerful personal import. In truth, I personally lean toward the latter—as, in the spirit of full disclosure, I am a fan of the two television shows discussed here: *The Walking Dead* and *True Detective*. The temptation to write about these texts as postmodern literature or as poignant social commentary emerges and re-emerges as one reconnects with the characters and narrative, but for the purposes here, I will try to resist. Instead, the project lies in putting these texts to work in the effort of pedagogy, looking at the text as curriculum and as a way to teach curriculum theorizing through the use of popular culture. Using a cultural studies framework, this paper suggests that contemporary popular culture provides fertile ground for new understandings of the ways in which the socio-cultural context and its relation to contemporary issues in curriculum theory are entangled in the ethical and the ontological. In particular, representations of the spatial in the show/s provide an entrée into thinking about the ways in which space is increasingly politicized within contemporary conditions.

Theoretical Framework

Popular culture is a site where the construction of everyday life may be examined. The point of doing this is not only academic—that is, as an attempt to understand a process or practice—it is also political, to examine the power relations that constitute this form of everyday life and thus reveal the configurations of interests its construction serves. (Storey, 1998)

This work begins from the position that popular culture phenomena hold rich possibilities for educational researchers (Helfenbein, 2004, 2007). Stated simply: representations matter. Culture, as a process, involves the ways in which meaning is made of self, society, and the interactions that inform social practices (Fiske, 1989; Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler 1992; Storey, 1998). Therefore, the ways in which ethical choices are represented in a popular text

reflect, at least to some degree, popular conceptions of governmental institutions, changing spatial dynamics, society writ large, and the ways in which they interact. It is important to note that these texts are indeed ones of *popular culture*—a term that is problematic at best and the subject of extensive debate amongst cultural studies scholars for quite some time (for examples see Storey, 1998). However, because of the dependence on the pleasure of the reader, popular culture must necessarily be *popular*—resonating with readers in ways that may also provide a possibility for resistance. This is not to say that dominant ideologies are not at work in texts like those discussed here but rather that their dominance is in no way guaranteed. As Fiske (1989) states, “there is always an element of popular culture that lies outside social control, that escapes or opposes hegemonic forces” (p. 2). In this way, popular culture always operates on the level of the semiotic and reflects the tension between ideological forces in its production and the unpredictable possibilities in the reading of texts.

Here, I turn to a few caveats. I begin with the admonition of Stuart Hall (1997) who famously stated that he actually didn’t care about popular culture unless one explained how it is political. I would add this to aforementioned dangers of attempting to do scholarly work on popular culture. Further, Hall (1992) noted that cultural studies work on popular culture needed an attention to absence:

We had to develop a methodology that taught us to attend, not only to what people said about race but...to what people could not say about race. It was silences that told us something; it was invisible, what couldn’t be put into frame, what was apparently unsayable that we needed to attend to. (p. 15)

Horror or science fiction genres allow for authors and audiences to play with what can be thought of as absences in our contemporary sense of the world. Additionally, there are some framing comments on monsters and the monstrous that need to be laid out. Monsters are particular forms within popular culture: perhaps always a piece of the social imaginary, always representing excess in some way, and notably fluid over time (i.e., what they meant in one era may not be what they mean in another). It is their excessive nature that this paper takes up, and by this, I mean that typically monsters take some human characteristic to an excessive point and are used to highlight some human tension. We could think of humanity’s relationship with nature (e.g., werewolves, King Kong), humanity’s relationship with technology (Frankenstein’s monster), or tensions with desire and sexuality (the vampire), but it is the excess of these representations that provide the potential for their persistence and analytic usefulness. It is the tension or discomfort with something in our relationship with the world that drives how that representation is put together.

This paper contends that *discomfort*—with the ways in which global forces in the larger socio-economic order are redefining such terms as urban, the city, and social justice, and the ways they are subsequently questioning understandings of the ontological and the ethical—is driving the monstrous in the two television shows discussed here. Using Critical Geography’s insistence on the simultaneous attention to space, place, power, and identity, this paper offers an attempt at “taking space seriously” (Helfenbein & Taylor, 2009) in the study of curriculum and curriculum theorizing via analysis of popular culture texts. This geography becomes critical when the focus turns to the ways in which spaces are both constitutive and constituted by humans and the process of meaning making. McKittrick (2006) marks this distinction from traditional geography by noting:

Geography's discursive attachment to stasis and physicality, the idea that space "just is," and that space and place are merely containers for human complexities and social relations, is terribly seductive: that which "just is" not only anchors our selfhood and feet to the ground, it seemingly calibrates and normalizes where, and there who, we are. (p. xi)

Rejecting this notion and emphasizing that "we produce space, we produce its meanings, and we work very hard to make geography what it is," McKittrick's remarkable work on bringing to light both black geographies and the raced structures that obscure them provides a powerful example that takes "the language *and* the physicality of geography seriously, that is an 'imbrication of material and metaphorical space'" (emphasis in original, p. xiii).

The process of redefining/restructuring—a distinction between urbanization as process and urban as lived experience—calls into question notions of equity and social justice (particularly in seeing the urban as a part of broader moves that encompass the whole of the social fabric). In addition, a focus on the change in the urban context allows for an analysis that uncovers the ways in which the social, racial, economic, and ideological work and have historically worked on defining places and those who "belong" there or not. In other words, "practices of domination, sustained by a unitary vantage point, naturalize both identity and place, repetitively spatializing where nondominant groups 'naturally' belong" (McKittrick, 2006, p. xv). In the larger field of geography, questions have arisen in thinking through what a concept of "spatial justice" might mean; efforts at rethinking citizenship within global sets of forces gives rise to considering differing notions of democracy and identity—and even the resurgence of cosmopolitanism—as an ethical framework. In thinking in terms of globalization, we are reminded that "the social spaces of contemporary capitalism are being increasingly politicized; space is no longer merely the theatre of political conflict but its principle stake" (Brenner, 1997, p. 152). The popular culture representations offered here, however, present troubling examples of this restructuring and contested ground for ethical action.

The Walking Dead (*TWD*, Kirkman, 2010) is a U.S. produced television series that premiered on AMC in 2010 and is based on long-running comic book. References here will primarily be from the television series as opposed to the comic book as there are significant differences in plot and character development. The story takes place after a zombie apocalypse and follows the adventures of a group of survivors who quickly learn that other surviving humans come to be as threatening as the zombies. HBO's *True Detective* (Pizzolatto, 2014) premiered in 2014 as an anthology crime drama with one-season long, self-contained narratives. This paper will only focus on Season One starring Mathew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson, as there has been significant critique of the following seasons. Interesting aspects of the series include nonlinear narrative structure and multiple timelines.

I would like to argue that these two shows are primarily about ontology—what it means to be, or perhaps in the "posts," what might it mean to become. For a zombie show like *TWD*, this may seem obvious as we witness the transformation of the dead to the undead, but as has been offered all over the internet, the show is really about the human (or post-human?) characters. A key marker of this and a distinct move within the zombie genre is the revelation that "we are all infected." Instead of being bitten and transforming post-mortem, the characters in *TWD* realize that the threat is both external *and* internal. The main character, Rick, powerfully says:

You see them out there. You know that when we die—we become them. You think we hide behind walls to protect us from the walking dead! Don't you get it? We are the walking dead!

Laden with powerful tropes of contagion, apocalypse, and an ever-present Other, *TWD* does what all good science fiction/fantasy does: strips down the normative structures of contemporary existence in order to ask more fundamental questions. Žižek (although talking primarily about Hegelian habit) offers this observation:

at the most elementary level of our human identity, we are all zombies, and our “higher” and “free” human activities can only take place insofar as they are founded on the reliable functioning of our zombie-habits: being-a-zombie is a zero-level of humanity, the inhuman/mechanical core of humanity. The shock of encountering a zombie is not the shock of encountering a foreign entity, but the shock of being confronted by the disavowed foundation of our own human-ness. (Žižek. 2007, n.p.)

Shaviro (2002) also notes that the zombie has replaced the vampire as the central trope in understanding life under contemporary capitalism. Building on Marx's characterization of capitalism as vampire, Shaviro suggests that our current capitalist moment produces “dead labor” and he argues,

In contrast to the inhumanity of vampire-capital, zombies present the “human face” of capitalist monstrosity. This is precisely because they are the dregs of humanity: the zombie is all that remains of “human nature,” or even simply of human scale, in the immense and unimaginably complex network economy. (p. 288)

So then, the apocalypse brings us to an investigation of what it means to be, to become.

True Detective, at least at first glance, a more traditional, film noir, Southern gothic crime drama, buries these questions a little deeper and requires one to think through the dialogue and overall structure to push the ontological. The first marker is the way in which the show creatively shunts between two timelines (1995 and 2012) with a notable third narrative in which the 2012 characters remember/lie and narrate the scenes from 1995. While this is unquestionably innovative for television, we see that “the truth” of the story is not really the point. The other notable marker is that Mathew McConaughey's character actually talks about ontology. He states:

The ontological fallacy of expecting a light at the end of the tunnel, well, that's what the preacher sells, same as a shrink. See, the preacher, he encourages your capacity for illusion. Then he tells you it's a fucking virtue. Always a buck to be had doing that, and it's such a desperate sense of entitlement, isn't it? Surely this is all for me. Me. Me, me, me. I, I. I'm so fucking important. I'm so fucking important, then, right? Fuck you.

What's interesting about these two shows is how explicit the ethical conversation is—to be sure, it's dark, messy, and uncertain, but these characters consider and talk about it. They also do this work in ways that entangle the epistemological, the ontological, and the ethical. This entanglement represents the project of New Materialism as expressed by Karen Barad:

Ethics is about mattering, about taking account of the entangled materializations of which we are a part, including new configurations, new subjectivities, new possibilities. Even the smallest cuts matter. Responsibility, then, is a matter of the ability to respond. Listening for the response of the other and an obligation to be responsive to the other, who is not entirely separate from what we call the self. This way of thinking ontology, epistemology, and ethics together makes for a world that is always already an ethical matter. (Barad, 2012, p. 69)

Both *TWD* and *True Detective* begin with and revolve around un-interrogated representations of emplaced decay; or, put more bluntly, place itself serves as villain to these troubled characters. Places themselves are monstrous. In a Buzzfeed interview with *True Detective* show creator Nic Pizzolatto, he notes the importance of place and the landscape of one where *the apocalypse already happened*.

I think *True Detective* is portraying a world where the weak (physically or economically) are lost, ground under by perfidious wheels that lie somewhere behind the visible, wheels powered by greed, perversity, and irrational belief systems, and these lost souls dwell on an exhausted frontier, a fractured coastline beleaguered by industrial pollution and detritus, slowly sinking into the Gulf of Mexico. There's a sense here that the apocalypse already happened. (Madrigal, 2014, n.p.)

Pizzolatto highlights place in a way that fundamentally makes place a lead character in the show—place enables the writers to point to degradation, contradiction, and the monstrous as a foil to which the characters must react. In similar terms, artist and blogger Mathis Gasser (2015) states:

Crime in *True Detective* is related to landscape, to geography, territory, earth incisions. It hints at how human acts are guided, accompanied, framed by the larger environmental contexts humans are inserted in. It is not just a neighbourhood *True Detective* depicts; it's an entire haunted region unloading its weight on people's shoulders. *True Detective* is geotrauma applied to crime fiction. Geotrauma in the sense that the multilevel mutilations afflicted upon the environment are somehow reflected back to the people. (n.p.)

Here, we see not just a distressed place but an emphasis on the circuit-like understanding of places and people (i.e., the ways in which people impact and are impacted by space). These understandings of the interactions of place and people are also reflected in the opening credits where images of the main characters are overlaid with images of places in the show. It is here where the work of educational and curriculum theorizing would do well to take these processes seriously (i.e., what is it that these representations of place strive to teach us?). The intensified politicization of the spatial and how that plays out in curriculum and in popular culture now becomes the terms of our engagement. The interplay between curriculum and place serves as a locus of attention requiring a cultural studies analysis and a theorizing informed through the lens of a Critical Geography. Finally, the idea of a *dystopic curriculum* (Morris, 2001) that “allows interferences, otherness, alterity, and strangeness to emerge out of the different sites of representations” (p. 9) offers a way of understanding both of these contradictory texts and what they might mean in a larger conversation of curriculum.

In *TWD*, spaces are inverted: what once represented comfort and security now—in the time of zombie apocalypse—presents danger and vulnerability (i.e., neighborhoods have too many possible walkers, stores have too many locked doors); ominous places of constraint offer the most protection (i.e., the prison becomes the perfect shelter); but most of all, the city (or the urban) is to be avoided at all costs. Daryl, presented at least initially as stereotypical redneck, is the only character at home in the apocalyptic world. He states, “You want to know what I was before all this? I was nobody. Nothing...I have had to fight like hell...and fighting like hell made me what I am.” Poignantly, Daryl burns down the house that reminds him of the home he grew up in. The inverted place where he finds himself now allows for both a not-forgetting of who he was and a recognition that it means differently. Place matters.

In *True Detective*, space is expansive, over-grown, dark and menacing, with the sense of social decay of strip clubs and strip malls. We never see the city, only an industrial backwater, and Rust at one point states, “This place is like somebody’s memory of a town, and the memory is fading. It’s like there was never anything here but jungle.” But of course, that’s not true. The decay of old Southern homes, closed schools, and burned-out churches are evidence of a landscape in decay, one in which dark conspiracy either comes to fruition or might be perceived as such. And, in fact, people are there, at church revivals, at roadside brothels, and in police cars trying to solve a murder case. So then, the imbrication of people and place is laden with sedimented histories, desires fulfilled and unfulfilled, and interconnected networks of mattering.

I want to suggest that we can think of these spaces as “demonic grounds” via Katherine McKittrick (2006). Recognizing that McKittrick’s project firmly places the potentialities of black women’s geographies in the center of her work and that this is not the project here, I respectfully offer that thinking with this concept of the demonic holds potential for questions of the spatial in both ethical and ontological ways. McKittrick notes that beyond the supernatural origins of the term, demonic also has meanings coming from physics, mathematics, and computer science. She states, “the demonic connotes a working system that cannot have a determined, or knowable outcome and...is a process that is hinged on uncertainty and non-linearity because the organizing principle cannot predict the future” (p. xxiv). One can certainly see how uncertainty and non-linearity underlie both *TWD* and *True Detective*, but as McKittrick builds on the work of Sylvia Wynter, we see how the demonic represents both a rethinking of the human and a representation of absence.

The monstrous geographies presented in these two popular culture texts allow for an explicit exploration of the ontological and a critical re-examination of marginalization. McKittrick (2006) calls these “differential encounters with geography” and argues that “these encounters always include the underrepresented conceptions of being *in place*—the spaces of Otherness, subjective worldviews—that may not be immediately available in our geographic imaginations because Man’s sense of place is naturalized as normal” (emphasis in original, pp.132-133). Presenting places as monstrous is then a disruption of those normalized representations of place. In other words, the characters in *TWD* and *True Detective* are given the opportunity to talk about these questions because of the monstrosity of the places they find themselves in, their demonic grounds.

To close, the argument here is that popular culture itself is a curriculum—it’s trying to teach us something, but given curriculum theorizing in the posts, what lessons are learned are not guaranteed. In both cases, the places in which the narratives occur are monstrous, but so are we. We are the walking dead; we are bad men. It would seem that the ethics in the spaces these characters find themselves in are at least worth talking about because *they* do. Indeed, it is the

monstrous places themselves that set the conditions for those types of explorations. And, in many ways, I would argue that this is what sets these two shows apart from other popular dramas like *House of Cards* or *Scandal*. In those shows, the corrupt system in which we find ourselves is taken as given, un-interrogated—which, perhaps ironically for show about politics, leaves us precisely without a politics to turn to. I remind the reader here that *TWD* and *True Detective* are television shows that are wildly popular; so, some piece of the narrative must resonate with a larger set of social questions. These particular shows are far afield from answering the questions of postmodern/posthuman ethics, but they are posed in particularly postmodern ways: unsettled, unsolved, ambiguous, worth talking about. Rust notes that “the world needs bad men. We keep the other bad men from the door.” But at least he’s talking about them—and talking about them in ways that are an opportunity to engage in the entanglement of the “always already ethical” world.

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