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AP Language & Composition

January 24, 2014

“Vacant, with a hint of sadness”: Satire, Monotony, and Zombies

Are obesity, laziness, and stupidity American values?

Any review of some alarming cultural trends would certainly offer a resounding “yes.”

Keeping pace with the manifold comforts of a modern industrialized lifestyle—immediate access to all of the world’s information, plentiful delicious food, physical comfort unseen throughout the span of human history—have been the equally diverse maladies of such a system. From widening girths and income gaps to political apathy and materialism, citizens of such Western nations face an odd array of sicknesses and problems unique to their era. Mike Judge’s 2006 science fiction satire *Idiocracy* comments on the long-term effects of such decadence, as its protagonist, Private Joe Bowers (played by Luke Wilson), finds himself in a dystopian future consumed by stupidity as a result of increasing birth rates among, well, idiots (and a conversely-correlated trend in the intelligent, who have opted to wait to procreate). At the start of the film, the narrator foretells the impending fate of the West: “The years passed, mankind became stupider at a frightening rate. Some had high hopes the genetic engineering would correct this trend in evolution, but sadly the greatest minds and resources were focused on conquering hair loss and prolonging erections” (*Idiocracy* Quotes). Such ludicrous, crude cinematic humor belies a sad truth about the nature the Western industrialized world: its comfort has spawned a culture of mollusks content to stay within their comfortable shells of routine and sure things.

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 1.) The strong attribution verb (foretells) after I set the stage for the quote.
 2.) This is a quote from the Internet Movie Database, not the film itself; thus, I included the first part of my Works Cited entry for this in-text citation.

Thus, how can people caught in this feedback loop of material pleasure and tedium escape this cycle? Even if they're made aware of its deleterious effects, *will they?* Aldous Huxley wrote of this predicament in *Brave New World*, his 1932 dystopia predicated on the idea that people's doom will come not in the form of an autocratic government that limits freedom (like in George Orwell's *1984*), but one that allows almost unfettered liberty for people to consume that which they find desirable, thus making them infantile, pleasure-seeking automatons. Such a view implies that Western culture, ever the bullfrog in an increasingly warming pot, will either have to realize its predicament or risk boiling to death in a self-contained bubble of stupid contentment.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LAZY

This isn't to say that the sheltering egg should take the blame for the sins of the self-indulgent chicken. Humans seek regularity in various ways to ensure that their evolutionary safety nets don't snap. Social psychologists call one such measure a schema, or, as psychologists Michener, DeLamater and Myers define the term, a "well-organized structure of cognitions about some social entity such as a person, group, role, or event" (qtd. in Collett). To stem the tide of extraneous mental, emotional, and psychological stimuli, people develop cognitive shortcuts in their perceptions of others, social roles, events, groups, and even themselves. Anyone who has studied in a conventional academic setting ascribes to the preordained expectations for teacher and student behavior, as well as the general milieu of a classroom. This, of course, saves people from being hurried and harried when the flush of outside influences hits the senses. Sadly, schemas also result in a range of misinterpretations when such roles are not fulfilled by outliers; from the humorous comedies of errors in various television sitcoms (think Michael Scott in *The Office* trying to coordinate a racial diversity workshop, playing on the very stereotypes he's

Comment [EE(5)]: I allude to something without citing it; I've read this text, and I could have mentioned that. You can mention texts that you've read; if you choose to use specific quotes, cite them.

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Also, note the multiple authors; list the names of these authors, as well as their credentials.

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trying to extricate from his employees' mindsets) to the dark corners of the past when groups and societies punished those who didn't play the part of their race, gender, or social class in the drama of everyday life (think Holocaust Germany, Jim Crow America), history is rife with the toxic effects of humans being cognitively lazy.

And the advanced, wonder-of-evolution hominid brain isn't only capable of such *mental* loafing, as Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs (fig. 1) provides a kind of ladder of human

needs that can explain people's capacity for both parochial social attitudes and comfort-induced indolence. While the American psychologist developed this metric as a way for caregivers, educators, and psychologists to better understand

and treat problems, it also serves as a sad explanation of the West's ability to ignore world

issues (like famine in Africa) or societal ills (like the aforementioned problems unique to this era). According to Maslow's scheme, people will not be motivated to fulfill higher-order desires (self-actualization, self-esteem, relationships) until simpler, more physiological needs (hunger, safety, excretion) are met. Hence, in its best form, this hierarchy posits that well-fed and housed individuals whose families and friends help to create in them a sense of self-efficacy and worth are willing and able to seek their full potential via honesty, creativity, vocation, and awareness.

At its worst, though, people seem to wallow in the slop of physical and emotional infantilism in a variety of ways. People mistake social media slacktivism for actual, purposeful social action; see *Portlandia* or Dave Eggers' *The Circle* as satire, or much of the real-life Kony 2012 campaign as an example. People seek fatter, bigger, and more food. Any mention of

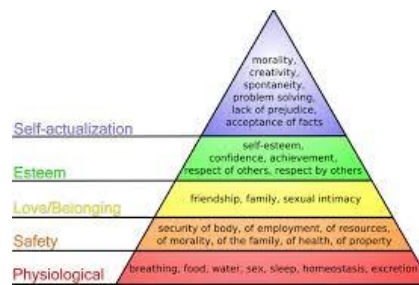


Fig. 1: Burton, Neel, M.D. "Our Hierarchy of Needs." *Hide and Seek. Psychology Today*. 23 May 2012. Web. 23 January 2014.

Comment [EE(8)]: You should include tables, figures, or examples in the body of your paper when appropriate; if a reader should see the example immediately instead of paging to an appendix, include a table (like this) in the body of the paper. In lieu of an in-text citation, include a regular series of references like this (fig. 1) or (see figure 1) wherever you'd typically include a citation. Include the Works Cited entry next to the visual, too.

You don't have to include the Works Cited entry on the Works Cited page, then.

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current obesity rates exemplifies this; see also *Idiocracy*'s vision of Carl's, Jr.'s advertisement of an "extra-big-ass fry" (or most real fast food products, like the Baconator). And society is awash with those who spend countless hours on Facebook or Twitter as a means of finding entertainment or locating self-image or esteem; any troll through a newsfeed will reveal a host of needy, self-congratulatory, or narcissistic posts that the meme "First-World Problems" (fig. 2)

mocks effectively with text depicting mundane problems (Like a Tweet being too long—"Best Tweet I Ever Wrote: 144 Characters"—or limitations to choices in beverages—"There's nothing to drink at home except a virtually unlimited supply of clean fresh drinking water") projected onto the image of a crying middle-aged Caucasian woman. These brief comments on modern life in the West demonstrate that the double-edged sword of progress, it seems, cuts both ways.

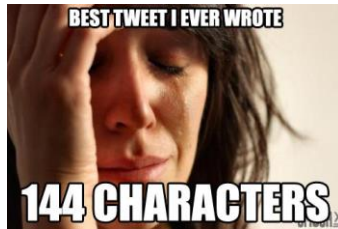


Fig 2: McCollar, Michael. "Best of the 'First-World Problems' Memes." *Smosh.com*. 2012. Web. 23 January 2014.

ZOMBIES LOVE COUCH POTATOES

So what will spur the most materially-gifted and materialistic culture in human history to change its ways? Satire...and zombies, it seems. While manifestations of the former can digress into silly YouTube and Cracked.com humor that web searchers can easily delete after a cheap, ephemeral laugh, mockery and morality teaming up takes the form of a much-needed societal and individual mirror when paired with the latter, which, unlike some of the West's other archetypal monsters—werewolves and vampires a la *Twilight* and *Vampire Diaries*—, rarely wander into the realm of fluff and silliness. The popularity of *The Walking Dead*—going

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from 5.3 million viewers for the first episode (Klosterman) to 16.1 million for the season four debut on October 13, 2013 (O’Connell)—demonstrates the mass appeal of the zombie craze.

While statistics about popularity certainly reveal the trajectory of prevailing trends, they tend to omit explicit definition of the causes (or the correlative connections) of such upswings in mass appeal. While gaining such an understanding can prove a slippery, difficult endeavor in itself, the zombie craze can be attributed to any number of sources. The statistics alone reveal the sheer entertainment value of a show like *The Walking Dead*, which has pushed undead culture past its recent adolescent cult status to a popular culture powerhouse. Yet, large-scale public mistrust of governmental and corporate institutions and fear of an impending, large-scale calamity—as evidenced by a May 2012 Reuters poll showing that “[n]early 15 percent of people worldwide believe the world will end during their lifetime and 10 percent think the Mayan calendar could signify it will happen in 2012” (Michaud)—reveals that this undead fad may be rooted in anxiety about the veneer of society being quickly and violently ripped away, leaving a less-than-pretty survivalist mentality inherent to human nature.

The Center for Disease Control has capitalized on this end of the movement; on its Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response webpage, it features a “Zombie Preparedness” tab, which links web surfers to a “Zombie Blog,” an undead invasion survival kit checklist, and a graphic novel entitled *Preparedness 101: Zombie Pandemic*. In this text, the CDC offers a hypothetical “zomb-pocalypse” that main characters Todd and Julie (along with their faithful pooch, Max) survive because of disaster preparedness and government competence. After reaching a safe zone, Todd pulls out a radio and listens to the reports of the CDC’s effectiveness: “[the] CDC shipped out its first supply of vaccine against this novel virus that has been ravaging the nation. The first round should reach safe zones as early as this evening...” (Silver, Archer, Hobbs, et. al.). Though the undead do break into the safe zone, Todd awakens from this

Comment [EE(12): Notice that I don’t attribute these statistics. I *could* have done so, but I chose not to do so because such an attribution (According to Chuck Klosterman, famed humor writer) would take away from the purpose of what I’m trying to achieve: Providing statistics. Plus, these are TV ratings, not anything incredibly controversial, like the findings of a study...

Comment [EE(13): Like in this example, in which I utilize a Reuter’s study to demonstrate a trend—a questionable one.

Comment [EE(14): Note the colon attribution here; I don’t use an attribution verb, but I set the stage for what’s to be reported.

Also note that this source has more than three authors; thus, I listed the primary authors whose names are offered first and as chief authors of the text.

nightmare—apparently brought on by a pre-bedtime horror flick—and immediately plans to put together an emergency kit. This tongue-in-cheek approach to a potential undead apocalypse takes a less-than-satirical viewpoint on governmental and individual action, as it depicts no crowds of bandits looting convenience stores, no survivalists holing up in their fortresses, no doomsayers presaging Biblical plague and god’s wrath. The CDC did release a poster (fig. 3) that cheekily exhorts the viewer, “DON’T BE A ZOMBIE: BE PREPARED.”



Fig. 3: “Zombie Preparation Poster.” U.S. Center for Disease Control. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services: Washington. Web. 24 January 2014.

But not all spins on the undead craze take such a sunny view of human disaster preparedness. In his *Zombie Survival Guide*, Max Brooks takes an entirely different tact, providing a satirical view of humans and apocalypse. In this indirect, Juvenalian how-to compendium on combating, escaping, and surviving the undead, Brooks writes in exhortative level-headedness about the reality of the existence and threat of zombies in our world. He even presents the possibility of the unthinkable—“Living in an Undead World” is the title of one of the most grave sections of the text. He bleakly appraises humanity’s collective response to such a catastrophe:

“Governments of any type are nothing more than a collection of human beings—human beings as fearful, shortsighted, arrogant, closed-minded, and generally incompetent as the rest of us. Why would they be willing to recognize and deal with an attack of walking, bloodthirsty corpses when most of humanity isn’t? Of course, one could argue that logic such as this might stand up in the face of a Class 1 or even Class 2 outbreak, but the

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threat posed by even a few hundred zombies would surely be enough to galvanize our leaders into action. How could they not? How could those in power, especially in such a modern, enlightened age as ours, ignore the spread of deadly disease until it reached plague proportions? (*Zombie Survival Guide* 154).

Utilizing a catalogue of rhetorical questions, Brooks' narrator challenges any government's ability to recognize, much less handle such a calamity, placing the onus of survival on the individual. Throughout the rest of this section, the narrator describes the goal of a human in an undead world devoid of government, order, or widespread amenities: "to create a safe little microcosm of the world, equipped with everything you will need to not only survive but maintain a modicum of civilization" (*Zombie Survival Guide* 158).

This, of course, proves more difficult than anyone can imagine, as Brooks devotes the remainder of his text (besides a sometimes humorous and cheeky, always grotesque and ominous history of zombie attacks dating back to the days of humanity's evolutionary forebears) to an exposition of the gargantuan task of preparing for the advent of a Class 3 outbreak: A world ruled by the undead. Brooks provides a near-impossible checklist of supplies and training skills, an improbably roster of requisite professional skills represented in a well-trained survival group, and a timeline that requires inhuman patience, skill, and courage to see through to the end. In the undead magnum opus in this horror / science fiction / satire genre, *World War Z*, Brooks—the "Studs Terkel of zombie journalism"—also explains the inherent difficulty of trying to wage human battles against a very inhuman enemy that engages in "Total War." At the start of the section aptly named for this brand of undead warfare, General Travis D'Ambrosia, Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in Europe during World War Z, explains this concept, demonstrating the sheer difficulty of fighting against an enemy of this scale: "For the first time in

Comment [EE(17): This is a block quote—a segment of text that I'm using because I don't want to paraphrase the author's words and lose any meaning. Any text over four typed lines should be indented fully.

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Comment [EE(18): Because I cite two of Brooks' texts—*World War Z* and *The Zombie Survival Guide*—in the in-text citation, I still include the page number, but I preface it with the title of the text instead of the author's name.

For more information, visit <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/02/> and see "Citing Multiple Works by the Same Author"

Finally, note the sexy attribution verb—appraises.

history, we faced an enemy that was actively waging total war...They would never negotiate, never surrender. They would fight until the very end because...every single one of them...was devoted to consuming all life on earth” (*World War Z* 273). Thus, the scope of this conflict—humanity facing extinction—provides the clearest glimpse into governmental and individual responsibility and reality in the case of impending apocalypse.

Of course, the sheer hypothetical weight of this universe on the reader’s vision of history and government isn’t the only effective satirical measure, as the narrative genius and beauty of *World War Z* rests in the individual accounts of the war that “goes by many names: ‘The Crisis,’ ‘the Dark Years,’ ‘The Walking Plague’” (*World War Z* 1). In the introduction, Brooks’ narrator—the author of a Commission Report on the war—explains the nature of his narration and organization of the text, speaking of the future benefit of a history based on individual stories that include “a human factor”: “the coming years will provide hindsight, adding greater wisdom to memories seen through the light of a matured, postwar world. But many of those memories may no longer exist, trapped in bodies and spirits too damaged or infirm to see the fruits of their victory harvested” (*World War Z* 2). This wide swath of experiences provides Brooks with a vast array of fictional voices to comment an equally immense bevy of social issues—like human laziness—that plague the contemporary world.

One such speaker, Mary Jo Miller, recounts in the final story of the section entitled “BLAME” her prewar indolence and adherence to schemas as a middle-class housewife. In her opening exposition, Miller recounts her laundry list of anxieties that riddled her life prior to the war:

“... I was worried about my car payments and Tim’s business loan. I was worried about that widening crack in the pool and the new nonchlorinated filter than still left an algae

Comment [EE(19): Again, I cite this with the title of the text instead of the author’s name, as I cite two works by him.

Also, note how I attribute this information to D’Ambrosia, not Brooks.

film. I was worried about our portfolio, even though my e-broker assured me this was just first-time investor jitters and that it was much more profitable than a standard 401(k). Aiden needed a math tutor, Jenna needed just the right Jamie Lynn Spears cleats for soccer camp. Tim's parents were thinking of coming to stay with us for Christmas. My brother was back in rehab. Finley had worms, one of the fish had some kind of fungus growing out of its left eye. These were just some of my worries" (*World War Z* 64).

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In having Miller open with this list, Brooks slightly caricaturizes the idea of everyday housewifery via the concrete details she mentions (from bills and stock options, pool breaks, children's educational and fashion needs to family and pet health) in a catalogue of simple sentences, providing no façade to hide the dull routine of the housewife script. And why should real-life housewives like Miller discuss such lower-level elements of Maslow's Hierarchy in a gripping, exciting fashion? Even national problems seem to lose their relevance, as Miller tells the narrator that the news of a zombie attack didn't seem to phase this dynamic of family life, that, at work, "it was a lot more fun to rehash last night's episode of *Celebrity Fat Camp* or totally bitch out whoever wasn't in the break room at that moment" (*World War Z* 65), and, at home, Zoloft, Ritalin, and Adderall can numb the anxiety of superfluous worries. Such is Brooks' comment here; that the pace and timbre of modern middle-class suburban life is certainly a mundane cycle of schema maintenance.

Comment [EE(21)]: Note the style analysis here...

That is, until zombies arrive.

Recounting the moment when the undead literally arrived at her doorstep (and window), Miller describes the sensory details of the attack: one zombie "about five foot ten, slumped, narrow shoulders with this puffy, wagging belly. It wasn't wearing a shirt and its mottled gray flesh was all torn and pockmarked. It smelled like the beach, like rotten kelp and saltwater"

(*World War Z* 67). This vivid narration demonstrates the elements of a flashback memory in a “fight or flight” response taking shape for Miller, who (in Maslow’s terms) shifts her worries from seeking esteem and self-actualization as a mother to ensuring the physiological safety of her children. Besides explaining her first experience with the undead in ironically lifelike detail, Miller’s syntax echoes her frantic scrambling to save her children: “I squeezed hard...pulled... The kids say I tore the things head off, just ripped it right out with all the flesh and muscle and whatever else hanging in tatters...Maybe with all your adrenaline pumping...I think the kids have just built it up in their memories over the years, making me into SheHulk” (*World War Z* 67). Speaking in a series of loose sentences interspersed with fragments, Miller demonstrates the hurried, harried storytelling characteristic of a normal person who has experienced a traumatic event.

Comment [EE(22): ... and here... I show the change in style with the change in plot.

This story reveals the nature of Brooks’ satire: Miller’s tale represents only one instance of a family surviving such attacks, to which they (and others in Western industrialized nations) largely blinded themselves by adherence to schemas and operation in higher levels of Maslow’s Hierarchy. Free of central governmental control or constraint, Western governments, families, and individuals in Brooks’ narrative seem blithely unaware of the threat of Armageddon. In each of these texts, then, he purposefully and gravely raises a mirror to the individuals and to Western culture, almost daring any reader to honestly challenge his implicit assertion in his texts: In the case of zombie apocalypse—or any such widespread, large scale disaster or plague—people are essentially finished if they cannot change their ways.

A LIGHTER TAKE ON THE END OF THE WORLD

Of course, the undead phenomenon doesn’t just manifest itself in such serious works that focus merely on the apocalyptic nature of the zombie popularity. In “My Zombie, Myself,”

Chuck Klosterman explores a different view of the cultural underpinnings of this popularity.

After contrasting the ratings of *Mad Men* with *The Walking Dead*, Klosterman cleverly notes,

“[T]here are at least 2.4 million cable-ready Americans who might prefer watching Christina Hendricks if she were an animated corpse” (“My Zombie, Myself”). He then explores the

connection between monsters and the societies that create and consume popular culture versions of them. He locates the anxiety evoked by the undead in an unlikely place:

This is our collective fear projection: that we will be consumed. Zombies are like the Internet and the media and every conversation we don't want to have. All of it comes at us endlessly (and thoughtlessly), and — if we surrender — we will be overtaken and absorbed. Yet this war is manageable, if not necessarily winnable. As long we keep deleting whatever's directly in front of us, we survive. We live to eliminate the zombies of tomorrow. We are able to remain human, at least for the time being. Our enemy is relentless and colossal, but also uncreative and stupid. Battling zombies is like battling anything ... or everything. (Klosterman)

Thus, according to Klosterman, this surge in the “zombification” of broad popular cultural tastes stems from fears that the pace of life in a mostly-comfortable, technologically-advanced Western industrial nation will consume people's consciousness. His lighter take on the zombie craze itself offers a hopeful conclusion in which he challenges his reader with the idea that people can “live better” by not allowing such monotony to consume them.

In *Shaun of the Dead*, a more slapstick-filled, farcical take on humanity's zombie endgame, director Edgar Wright and scriptwriter Simon Pegg mock this all-too-human capacity to value routine above all other concerns. Before battling the undead with his girlfriend, mother, and best friend, Ed (played by the hilarious Nick Frost), the titular character (portrayed by an

Comment [EE(23): I cited Klosterman earlier in the text, but this is the first time I actually attribute him. Thus, I need to explain who he is.

Notice how I mention the author's name in the attribution, so I shift to the next part of the Works Cited Entry for my citation: The title of the article.

Comment [EE(24): Hey! Another block quote.

unwitting Pegg) languishes in a cycle of beer-drinking, playing video games, laughing at Ed's dick-and-fart jokes, and wasting his talents in a retail job. At the start of the film, Shaun stumbles across the kitchen carpet, staggering and yawning in the fashion of a traditional zombie.

Wright's cinematography in this scene reflects the film's comment on everyday life: there's a mock heroism in the mundane. As Shaun brushes his teeth, butters his toast, pins his nametag to his lapel, Kung Fu sounds accompany his sped-up movements, which look more karate chic than lazy, hung-over British man.

Comment [EE(25): I'm discussing an element of film—cinematography—while also discussing an element of satire—mock heroism.

Shaun's schema maintenance provides some of the best commentary on humanity's capacity for routine. After preparing for his day, he heads to his local convenience store to grab sustenance; along his path, Shaun is hit by a soccer ball, nearly hit by a car, trips over the curb, and offers a vagrant some loose pocket change. The routine doesn't seem to faze him; he maintains it throughout the opening of the film, despite some situational irony for the audience involving some early undead attacks. Even after Liz dumps him for his habits and he and Ed spend a late night drowning his sorrows in their typical hedonistic lifestyle, Shaun awakes and heads to the mini-mart, unknowingly in the midst of a zombie infestation. Yet, his routine remains the same; he even fails to notice bloody handprints on a cooler door and speaks to the same homeless man—who is undead in this encounter—without noticing that he's a zombie. Maintaining his "walk to the store" schema/script, Shaun demonstrates this "lazy cognition" that leads so many to miss some of the most crucial moments and the most dangerous pitfalls in their lives.

Of course, by the end of Wright and Pegg's film, Shaun and his girlfriend are saved by the British military in a blunt *deus ex machina* rescue. They rekindle their relationship, and Ed, having been bitten by numerous zombies in the film's final action scene, sits in Shaun's garden

shed, where they play video games. After the apocalypse is averted, zombies find similar roles as Ed in everyday life—on scandalous reality TV and talk shows, and, as reported on the news, as employed to complete menial jobs—which demonstrate that perhaps humans aren't doomed, especially those like Shaun who can summon enough heroism within the scope of their everyday lives to survive with those they love the most—or, at least, to blend in with the undead. In a hilarious scene, Diane, a friend of Shaun's girlfriend, instructs the group on how to act like zombies to escape them: "Just look at the face: it's vacant, with a hint of sadness. Like a drunk who's lost a bet" (*Shaun of the Dead*). Oddly, her gambit works, as group members cloak themselves in the garb of the moaning, stumbling ghouls with dead eyes, showing that perhaps humans aren't so different from the monsters that inhabit one of America's most popular television shows. Such, then, is modern life: people reduced to empty heads who stumble about life like drunks. And Westerners—in Britain and America alike—are well-trained in these areas, so, naturally, they can blend in with the undead.

So where does this leave humanity, specifically the West? Is this culture doomed to a sinful, self-indulgent future in which its greatest technologies created by its most brilliant minds are used only for increasing virility and maintaining a youthful appearance? Hopefully, popular culture can serve more as an impetus to change—whether via conveying fears of zombie apocalypse or mocking the sloth and vanity of the culture—than as an agent that reinforces those simultaneously and paradoxically human and dehumanizing traits that Mike Judge, Aldous Huxley, and other modern satirists have pinpointed as potential pitfalls for the most technologically-advanced, democratic society in human history. Hopefully the voices of such satirists can be heard and understood in the din of the mundane and the sheer-entertainment-value world of internet and television culture—otherwise, individuals in the West may find

Comment [EE(26): I'm citing a quote from the film here, not from IMDB. Note the citation—the title of the film.

themselves doing what sociologist Neil Postman says in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*: not “laughing instead of thinking, but ...not know[ing] what they were laughing about and why they had stopped thinking” (163).

Comment [EE(27)]: I end with a Neil Postman quote taken from his text *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Note how I name the author in the attribution, so I omit his name from the in-text citation.

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Works Cited Page: Other Common Resources
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The format is basically the same: Author, Title, Publication Information / Medium.

In general, though ***you should only cite works in your Works Cited page that you cite in your paper.*** I cannot stress this enough—if you use a source in your paper, cite it here; if you don't use / cite a source in your paper, don't include it here.

IN GENERAL, CITE ALL SOURCES YOU USE TO AVOID PLAGIARISM.

As always, if you have any questions, please let me know.

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