

TELEVISION REVIEWS

The Walking Dead

(AMC, 2010, now showing on the FX channel in the UK & Ireland)

Given the sheer ubiquity of all things zombie related in popular media over the past decade or so, it was really only a matter of time before the undead shambled on to the small screen as well. If there's anything truly surprising about *The Walking Dead*, then, it's to do with the channel that it's appearing on: the small scale but prestigious cable channel AMC, until now best known for being the home of awards-magnet *Mad Men* (2007 –).

Perhaps the biggest drawback about what might be called the current “zombie renaissance” is the fact that so many of these narratives slavishly follow the template first established by George A. Romero. The ur-text for *The Walking Dead*, as for practically every other zombie story since 1968, is of course Romero's Living Dead series, and in particular, his second and third instalments, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Day of the Dead* (1985), both of which depict a squabbling group of survivors trying to make it in a post-apocalyptic world infested with flesh-eating living corpses. We may have had fast zombies, slow zombies, zombies that weren't really dead at all but just ‘infected’ (be it with a rage virus as in *28 Days Later* [2002] or psychosis-inducing nerve gas, as in *The Crazies* [1973; remake 2010]), and several different permutations in-between (as in 2007 Spanish flick [*Rec*]) but really, formula is the order of the day here, and Romero's template – predicated as it is upon the notion that no matter how bad the dead are, it's the people that who are *still alive* you should really be scared of – has by now been used so often that it has lost much of its initial impact. One notable exception to this is John Ajvide Lindqvist's genuinely original novel *Handling the Undead* (2005), which actually tries to do something new with the notion that the dead may someday refuse to stay buried, and does so in a disturbing yet deeply humane fashion.

Lack of originality is therefore the biggest problem that I have with this series. *The Walking Dead* features fairly effective actors (including Andrew Lincoln, previously best known as weedy wannabe writer Egg in mid-90s British drama *This Life*, and here sporting a generally convincing Southern accent), excellent special effects (save for a very poorly rendered explosion at the end of the sixth episode) and evocative direction and production design. It is obvious that a great deal of time and effort has gone into this production, and it is heartening to see an American TV channel spend so much money on a show that is so unashamedly horrific – not Sci-Fi horror (as in the currently excellent *Fringe*) or horror-comedy, as in *Supernatural*. LOTS of people die in this show, as one would expect, and there are more gunshots to the head in a single episode than in a whole season of *The Sopranos*. In addition, the scenes in which our protagonists are surrounded by hordes of zombies tend to be as disturbing and as well rendered as anything found in Zack Snyder's very effective 2004 *Dawn of the Dead* remake, to which this production is clearly much indebted (as in that film, the first truly horrific zombie encounter that we see is between our hero and an undead little blonde girl).

But it's all so familiar. Even someone only half-conversant with the tropes of the modern-Zombie move would know exactly what to expect here. Like the comic book series on which it is based, *The Walking Dead* is a deeply derivative, formulaic narrative that by the end of its first six instalments has done absolutely nothing new or surprising with its well-worn premise. It doesn't help that the first episode – in which Sheriff's deputy Rick Grimes (Lincoln) is shot in the line of duty and then wakes up in the hospital several days later to find that all hell has, quite literally, broken loose – replicates exactly the opening of

28 Days Later, which was itself cribbed from John Wyndham's similarly apocalyptic 1951 novel *Day of the Triffids*.

Grimes then spends much of the rest of the episode stumbling about in a hospital gown, gradually coming to terms with the fact that civilisation has collapsed since his shooting. He is unaware that his wife, Lori (Sarah Wayne Callies), and son, Carl (Chandler Grimes), have fled their hometown and joined a small encampment of survivors in the countryside, outside of Atlanta. He is similarly ignorant of the fact that his supposed best friend (and fellow cop), Shane (John Bernthal), has become just a bit too comfortable in the role of substitute husband and father, during his brief absence. This, combined with the fact that Shane told Lori that Rick was dead without checking to see whether this was the case or not, understandably makes for some awkward character dynamics when Rick finally catches up with his family.

It's all, as I've indicated, generally quite well done, but, nonetheless, the show proceeds with such plodding inevitability that one can only anticipate the various touchstone tropes of the modern zombie narrative with resignation rather than anticipation. The initial, terrifying realisation that, yes, the dead walk (filtered through the disorientated perceptions of our hero); contact with a rag tag bunch of survivors, some of whom turn out to be decidedly unpleasant (aka Merle, the handcuffed racist and the wife-beating scumbag, who joins their quarry encampment); movement out of the infested cities and into a temporary safe place which is soon overrun by zombies; scenes concerned the acquisition of guns (a major plot point in all American zombie films); the discovery that the entire world seems to have fallen to the undead; the dangerous journey into the unknown which will hopefully lead to sanctuary, and lots of scenes in which people cry because "it's all gone – all of it". We have, quite literally, seen this all before, many times, and as yet, the show's writers – all of whom were, perhaps for this very reason, sacked a few months ago – have not shown a willingness to deviate from the Romero template, perhaps because their source material is itself so sorely indebted to what has gone before.

It may be, however, that those not quite as familiar with the conventions of the post-1968 zombie narrative will find the show more engaging than I have done thus far, or that there will be many viewers for whom its familiarity is a recommendation. Certainly, *The Walking Dead's* derivative nature has not harmed ratings, and it finished its initial 6-week run in the US as the most watched show on basic cable. What's more, the show has the look and feel of a feature film, and serves as a showcase for action sequences and make-up effects as good as anything that can be seen on the big screen. And while it unashamedly apes all things Romero, there are some undeniably thrilling and disturbing sequences – such as the sight of a corpse missing its lower half slowly pulling its way across a neat suburban lawn, or of a woman sitting by the body of her beloved sister, waiting for the moment when she reanimates so that she can shoot her in the head. Or of Grimes, in full sheriff regalia, bag of guns across his back, entering the seemingly-deserted city of Atlanta on horseback, like something out of a particularly post-modern western. It's a heroic image soon punctured by the fact that, moments later, the horse has been devoured by zombies, whilst Grimes cowers in an abandoned US army tank. It is in sequences such as this that *The Walking Dead* is most effective, and most promising, but they are still not quite enough to stem the overwhelming feeling of over familiarity evoked by the show. I will certainly tune in for the next instalment, but I will also be hoping for the show's new creative team to breathe fresh life into a premise that, like many of the undead stars of the series, has become more than a little ripe.

BERNICE M. MURPHY

Being Human

BBC Three, 2009-2010 - Series 1 and 2 box set (2 Entertain Video, 2010)

Stop me if you've heard this one: a vampire, a werewolf and a ghost walk into a house in Bristol... The central conceit of *Being Human* does sound like the kind of joke that might elicit a few groans in the pub, but the show itself is not hackneyed or formulaic.

The series' three central characters are affectionately drawn and immediately likable. Irish actor Aidan Turner (heartthrob of *Desperate Romantics*) plays Mitchell, a vampire trying to put his days of carnage behind him, and to cajole Bristol's blood-sucker population into adopting his abstemious ways. Russell Tovey plays uptight, bespectacled werewolf George, who wants to find love and learn how to manage his 'time of the month'. Leonora Crichlow plays Annie, a ghost torn between passing on and sticking by her two best friends, who obsessively makes endless cups of tea because it makes her feel 'normal' (in series two she progresses to also crumbling biscuits into the mugs, rendering the final concoction an undrinkable sludge).

Being Human can be defined, most tellingly, by what it is *not* – that is to say, a slick, sexy US production like *True Blood*. Much of the viewer's pleasure comes from the kitchen sink touches: if you like the idea of a vampire and a werewolf throwing an emotional tantrum over the changed scheduling of *The Real Hustle*, then this is the show for you ('I saw a preview, they were going to do a con about cashpoints...' 'Really? I would have loved that. You bastards! Argh!').

This insular humour and absence of Hollywood glamour is oddly reassuring. Mitchell aside (whose brand of straggly-haired brooding probably appeals to certain teenage viewers), there is remarkably little eyecandy, and most of the nudity involves George waking up in freezing forests, post-transformation. The female characters *are* characters, not two-dimensional motivations for the male leads. George's sometime girlfriend, Nina (Sinead Keenan), is a senior nurse with an acerbic sense of humour (Nina and George on lycanthropy: 'They might have a cure.' 'For what?' 'Cystitis! What do you think?'), and by the end of series one, her story develops into one of real pathos. Nina and Annie's friendship also assures that the Bechdel Test is passed with flying colours.

As the title suggests, *Being Human* is about the characters' attempt to deny their supernatural natures and take up residence in the human world. George and Mitchell muddle along on the periphery of society, renting a house and holding down minimum wage, unskilled jobs as hospital porters. Annie struggles to make herself seen and heard, as her tangibility wavers with her confidence. Humanity is, by turns, something longed for, and something abhorred; something which seems within the characters' reach, or an unsustainable charade. Echoes of *Frankenstein* can be detected in the series' treatment of the false binaries of humanity and monstrosity, particularly in an early episode where Mitchell is wrongly labelled a pedophile and hounded by an angry collective of *Daily Mail* readers – a vampire with the mob at the gate, albeit for the wrong reasons (or, at least, for reasons which twenty-first century society finds more pressing than unholy enchantment and exsanguination).

Insofar as the three types of monster go, *Being Human* treads familiar ground with the legends of the vampire (insurmountable bloodlust, existential angst) and werewolf (painful transformation, feared loss of control). It is the ghost that is given the most creative treatment. Death is presented to Annie and other ghosts she encounters as a door – yet what lies behind it is sometimes portrayed as heavenly release,

sometimes as a tedious purgatorial bureaucracy, and – most unsettling of all – sometimes as a demented, lurking funhouse, wherein ‘gatekeepers’ lie in wait with sticks and ropes. The motivations behind this varying portrayal of death, as well as Annie’s fluctuant corporeality, are only hinted at in the first two series, while the third series (currently showing on BBC Three) gives a fuller exploration of what really awaits beyond the threshold.

Being Human is a ‘dramedy’, a story having an equal balance of comic and serious elements. While the comedy rarely falters, the drama is perhaps less successful. In both series, much of the ‘serious’ material focuses on Mitchell’s difficulties in dealing with the vampire populace. These segments sometimes feel overwrought, and can drag – mainly because there are seen to be no easy answers, only the cyclical argument of ‘killing is bad; vampires want to kill’. A plot based upon an intractable problem is one which inevitably becomes static and unsatisfying.

Where *Being Human* is strongest is in its deliberate juxtaposition of the genres: the prosaic or comic elements are made to clash with moments of horror, and this can work powerfully. Herrick (Jason Watkins) from the first series is the Bristol coven’s sinister head vampire, whose position as police constable allows him to facilitate the disposal of victims’ bodies. Herrick is gleefully amoral and dangerously power hungry, yet all this comes in the form of a short, pudgy man with thinning sandy hair, and a smile that is chillingly affable – a fitting symbol of the banality of evil. The grand set piece of the second series is a train carriage which shows the aftermath of a vampire feeding frenzy – blood-spatter and prone bodies – yet there are neat comic counterpoints: commuters choked with their own copies of *Heat* magazine, a cheery engineer who says ‘who’s been playing silly buggers?’ before he turns on the lights for the final reveal. This being a BBC production, *Being Human* can even rope in real newsreaders and familiar daytime TV stars to ‘speak’ to a paranoid schizophrenic through his television set – check out the creepy cameo in episode 2 of the second series by none other than a twinkly-eyed Sir Terry Wogan.

Sharply written and well-crafted, *Being Human* stands up to repeated viewings – repeats may in fact be desired in light of the many questions that are raised by the second series finale, an ending which suggests a radical departure from previous plot arcs. The box set extras include a feature on werewolf animatronics, special effect make-up, and the 1960s set dressing of a flashback episode – all of which will particularly appeal to the technical geek viewer. Fans may also wish to preserve these original series to compare with the American remake currently showing on U.S. channel Syfy (where George, inexplicably, has been butched-up into a ‘Josh’), and which looks set to hit us in DVD format in the coming months.

KATE RODDY

**“Welcome to the Recession”:
Valemont, Season 1
(MTV, 2009)**

Almost anyone working in television looking to make money without going to too much trouble or expense would have to be profoundly unobservant not to seize upon the current teen-vampire phenomenon as the solution. And really, who could blame them? For MTV, chief purveyor of high-concept reality TV like *Scream Queens* and low-budget melodrama and comedy like *The Hard Times of RJ Berger* to the under-sixteens, it must have seemed like a moral responsibility.

But they didn't stop there. In a move which blurs the lines between programming and advertising to an extent that even the infomercial never quite attains, the now anachronistically monikered Music Television Channel screened *Valemont*, its in-house take on the adolescent blood-sucker trend (in this case, exploiting the vampires-go-to-college end of the sub-sub-genre) as a series of 33 episodes, each lasting two and a half minutes, inserted into the commercial slot between the scripted “reality” shows *The Hills* and *The City*. Following this canny 2009 stunt (for it's difficult to see it in any other light), the channel re-released the programme, first as a half-hour special, and then in November 2009 as a one-hour “Extended Edition,” which brought viewers roughly as far as Episode 20, and directed them to MTV.com, where the remaining fifteen micro-episodes and extra footage could be watched online (though not, frustratingly, outside of the US – but more on this later). Simultaneously, it established the Valemont University website (<http://www.valemontu.com/>) a pretty and not-unrealistic but somewhat sparse page, marred by whole sections which require registration to view – something those of us in the UK and Ireland are unable to do as a result of geographical restrictions. Somewhat more interesting are the websites links to related Facebook and Twitter fan pages, as well as to Valemont Commons (<http://valemontcommons.com/>), a discussion forum and web noticeboard which, along with the social networking sites, speaks loudly of a reasonably active and loyal international fanbase, all eager for news of Season 2.

If one November 2009 post “From a Show Producer” is to be believed, the second season of *Valemont* may take the form of a more traditional television dedicated series instead of a mixture of short bursts of plot and streamed content. As should be clear from the date, however, and from the lack of any sign on the internet of these plans becoming concrete, MTV does not appear to be in any hurry to satisfy enthusiastic audience demands. Nor is this entirely surprising. With the release of the less-than-lavish DVD box set in November 2010, and a screening of *Valemont: The Movie* (the “Extended Edition,” which edits so much from the original as to be all but incomprehensible) on MTV UK over Christmas 2010, along with the extras available on MTV.com (which seem to be far better and more extensive than those on the DVD), MTV is evidently cashing in on fans' desire to get their hands on something that appears to be rare, even endangered. Programmes like Joss Whedon's *Firefly* and *Angel*, or Michele Fazekas and Tara Butters' *Reaper*, all of which were axed unceremoniously in the middle of involved plot lines, have similarly come into their own through DVD sales and fan sites, not to mention YouTube uploads and illegal streaming sites.

Taking cynical advantage of the ways in which young audiences in particular have begun to use multi-media platforms, MTV has established its own visible web presence related to the show, while working hard to crush any unofficial internet dissemination. It would be inaccurate to say that sites not run directly by MTV discussing *Valemont* don't exist, but it's certainly true that it is all but impossible to watch even the briefest clip or trailer in any forum other than those under the thumb of the Viacom-owned station. The ins and outs of intellectual property laws are by no means the focus of this review, and it is

certainly understandable that MTV should want to keep so tight a rein on its productions. Both Viacom and MTV itself have been engaged in lengthy court battles against Google, accusing them of copyright infringement via YouTube. Nonetheless, by refusing to post clips or episodes (remember, a *Valemont* episode is only 150 seconds long) on YouTube themselves, and by choosing instead to restrict access to a US-only site, MTV are sending out a clear and slightly peevish message – they want us to watch their programming their way, or not at all. And while this might appear to miss out on a valuable opportunity to gain extra fans for *Valemont* and other shows via the multifarious paraphernalia of the worldwide web, it nevertheless succeeds in fuelling that atmosphere of rarity that leaves devotees clamouring for more.

So, it may be time to ask, what exactly is it that *Valemont* fans are so impatient to see more of? This, it must be admitted, is a very good question. On the one hand, it is little more than a sloppily edited, derivative, hammily acted, soulless exercise in tapping into a market left gagging for anything vaguely reminiscent of *Twilight* or, indeed, *Harry Potter*, to which I'll return in a moment. It would take little to categorise it, along with the rather similar *Satan's School for Girls*, also reviewed in this journal, as “horror lite”. On the other hand, much like the early seasons of Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (in which *Valemont* lead Eric Balfour appeared briefly before being summarily picked off by sartorially challenged fiends), it's a fairly well-informed, almost affectionate effort that, with some tweaking, might have potential. The fans certainly seem to think so, and it does feature a few genuinely jumpy moments, along with what seems to be a healthy mistrust of power and authority figures.

Briefly, the plot revolves around Sophie Gracen (Kristen Hager), real name Maggie, a self-styled tough girl and leather-clad orphan who steals and grumps her way through adolescence following a car crash which seems to have killed her parents and led to her estrangement from her only brother Eric (played by a really quite creepy Balfour). When Eric dies in mysterious and gruesome circumstances while attending the ultra-exclusive Valemont University, “Sophie” buys another girl's identity and enrolls in an effort to find out what may have happened to him (the fact that she doesn't seem especially fond of him is conveniently glossed over). Once there, she quickly learns about the four distinctly Rowling-esque “houses,” each of which is named in a vaguely Greek sort of way after a different predatory animal (Panthera, Serpentes, Crocidilia and Aotidae (the apes, in case that one was less than clear)) and the Desmodus house, named for the bat, which burnt down many moons before (cue portentous music). In a familiar development, Sophie (it's too confusing to call her Maggie) finds herself compulsively attracted to the darkly brooding Sebastian, despite being warned off him by her cheerful-if-clingy roommate Poppy (played at full tilt by an irrepressible Nikki Blonsky, who has one of the most impressive screams I've heard in a long time), while all the time trying to decipher the allusive and sometimes garbled video messages recorded by Eric on his mobile phone.

This nifty little piece of hardware, which many foretold would be the end of the horror genre, but which has been used to great effect in numerous films, from the later *Scream* films to the more recent *Buried*, acts as a framing device at the beginning of each episode, giving us access to Eric's degenerating mental state as he discovers, keeping pace with Sophie and the audience, that many of the students at Valemont are vampires. Indeed, it would seem that any of them could in fact themselves be latent fiends, but with their vampiric traits yet a secret, even to themselves. I won't go too much into the rather complex explanations that surround this, but suffice it to say that they include the appalling neologism “Haemogoblins”; the depiction of human blood to a drug, banned on campus, that is addictive to vampires and that ultimately kills them; the hereditary nature of vampirism, which links each vampire to one of the five animals after which the houses are named; and the possibility of “forcing the turn” by injecting oneself with garlic oil. This, it transpires, Eric had done prior to his disappearance (surprise surprise, he's not dead!), as does Sophie, by accident, which inevitably leads to the revelation of their shared

vampirification. Of course, it transpires that Sophie and Eric are of the elite Desmond clan, descended directly from the original vampire bat, and that their mother is still alive but (in what may be a nod to Mark Z. Danielewski's 2000 novel *House of Leaves* or possibly the American adaptation of *Ring 2* (Hideo Nakata, 2005)) utterly insane and confined to a mental institution.

There are, equally inevitably, some problems surrounding their paternity, which, I'm happy to say, remain unresolved by the end of the final episode, but which I'll leave to be discovered by those who are yet to watch *Valemont* – because I'm not above recommending it. If a very cheap, slightly disorganised and not entirely well-thought-out genre exercise that might turn into something more promising (should Season 2 go ahead) is what you're after, then *Valemont* is for you. Not least among its virtues is its refusal, as the fatherhood issue brings to the fore, to clear up uncertainty and ambiguity. This may not be especially new or radical, particular in horror, but here time gets skewed, information is withheld, falsified or lost, violent visions intrude upon normal life, “good” and “evil” characters become difficult to distinguish and death and pain are dealt out to central players. Even if all of this fails to leave the horror-hardened viewer feeling pleasantly confused, it's at least possible to imagine how it might affect a rather younger viewer only vaguely aware of genre conventions in this way.

While there isn't much gore, then, bad things do happen to (relatively) good people, and we do get one or two effective scares, along with a good few decomposing corpses flashed across the screen for longer than I'd dared to hope, while the scene with the mother in the mental facility, although clichéd, is well handled, particularly with the surprising introduction of a ginger cat into the proceedings. Though I find it difficult to warm to Tyler Hynes as Gabriel (Eric's best-friend-turned-co-vampire-hunter who clearly has a thing for Sophie, but, inevitably, may not be all he appears), as I've already indicated, Balfour and Blonsky give stonking performances as the slightly pervy vampire brother and the hysterical room-mate respectively. However, the conventions of the genre, and possibly the mis-casting of the sweetly pretty Hagar as Sophie/ Maggie, mean that our heroine's tough-girl act tends to crumbles in the face of danger – or, more frequently, in the face of Sebastain's watered-down *True Blood*-inspired charms – leaving her little more than a typical blonde, whimpering, love-struck victim.

Matters improve considerably once she's vamped – there's a highly entertaining hazing scene where she finally gets the better of the snobby Serpentes girls - though it's here that it all begins to get a bit too *Buffy* for its own good. For much of the total running time of *Valemont*, it appeared that, despite its commitment to (mild) ambiguity, rather depressingly, the University itself might be set up within the narrative as the ultimate authority, all knowing and all powerful, and just waiting smugly for Sophie and Eric to work out the truth that it, as a body, already knew. What's more, it looks very much like Prof. Nicholas Blunt, nearly the only lecturer in the whole show, may turn out to be a Dumbledore (*Harry Potter*), or, preferably, a Rupert Giles (*Buffy*) type figure, wisely dispensing information to the newly initiated. It is to be hoped that, should a second season be in the offing, his position as mentor won't reduce the uncertainties about good and evil that the show promises to render central to its aesthetic. The difficulty is that, considering its status as a cynical money-making device for MTV, such narrative doubt might be seen as too risky by nervous, post-Credit Crunch executives. What suggests that it might manage to retain some of its less tiredly conventional aspects, or at least still have some (if you'll excuse the pun) bite is moments like the one when Gabriel brings Sophie vampire watching in an “abandoned high school” – acknowledging the programme's debt of *Buffy* once again – and remarks “Welcome to the Recession.” Whether that recession proves to necessitate play-it-safe tactics, to inspire a more innovative approach to a well-worn subject, or to put *Valemont* in the grave for good, remains to be seen.

DARA DOWNEY